

COSSACK IDEALIST

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CHAPTER 1

So, why should you read the story I want, and need, to tell you about Stefan Denosevich, a lovable, kind and idealistic Ukrainian Cossack private who was transformed into something else by his own hand, and mine, in World War I and in many other forgotten wars that happened soon after it was over? Because you want to know about what really happened to the Cossacks who allowed Mother Russia to become a world power under the Czars then the Red Commissars later? Because the Cossacks, named such after the Turkish word 'kazak' meaning 'free man', represent the boldest, most noble and expressive nature of the Slavic people when sober and on occasion when drunk? Or because you wish YOU could get on a horse and gallop across the Steppes liberating hard working and oppressed people while singing and dancing in the saddle? Or you heard stories about how they lived by their own rules, democratically, and in the service of God, in their own villages in their heyday? Or you're interested in what happened to Stefan Denosevich when he underwent his own experiment with different moralities during an immoral time as an idealist who always saw the best in people, and animals, in the worst of times?

But, first, let me introduce myself, partially anyway, as it connects to the story. A tale which, in YOUR century and continent, has more relevancy than you think, or can easily imagine. As for who I was to Stefan, well, various descriptors can be said. They are, in some way, all true and accurate. I was, and perhaps still am, his teacher and student. His master and servant. Some would say an elderly ancestor born of the once Cossack-run Steppes and a freak of nature whose origins were never known to Ukrainians, Russians or anyone else in his time. Some would speculate that I was a magician who was, and maybe still is, a master healer, torturer and (some say anyway) savior. More about me later.

But first, when you read the word 'Cossack' the image that first comes to mind is a man and his horse, the latter willing to do anything for that man, including galloping into cannon fire. But only at the request of the right Cossack who plunked his ass on top of the saddle. The 37 years still young between the ears Stefan knew so little about people, but he knew horses.

This main character in our story set in the first quarter of the twentieth century was more accurately a small framed but adequately muscular boy in a man's body who could still not grow more than a thin mustache on his angelic face. It was topped off with a cropped head between his elephant ears which featured a non-regulation Ukrainian Cossack warlock that he hid under his tall fur hat when the Imperial Russian inspectors came to inspect the 'Little Russians'. He was an 18th century horseman daydreamer born into the late rapidly mechanizing 19th century who had Cossack roots and inclinations to be as free as his ancestors had been. His blue eyes complimented his smiling face. His compulsion to serve exhausted him as he didn't know the difference between serving and pleasing. The 30 something 'lad' considered it an honor to serve the Lord while being underserved, and abused, by his fellow soldiers, childhood friends, wife and children.

It is appropriate to begin his story in 1916, while he was serving (and trying to overplease) his fellow Conscripts and 'his Excellency' the Czar, in a Ukrainian Cossack Cavalry unit commanded, of course, by Russian officers.

In his capacity of conscripting unwilling stray or captured horses to join the Imperial Army at the Front, Stefan tried to 'reach an agreement with' rather than 'beat into submission' the steeds. In a war more deadly to four legged equines than two legged humans. Which specific technique would work best to train the newest equine arrival to the corral was up for grabs at the transit Camp half a day's ride on horse, a full day's march by foot and a one hour truck ride from the Austrian lines on a muddy and cold March in 1916. "An Arab head, with Thourobred legs and Quarterhorse feet, who is trying to figure out who he is and where he came from like the rest of us... who is in conflict with himself, no doubt," Stefan commented to his fellow conscripts regarding the latest horse captured from the Austrians in the last '(as the newspaper reporters wrote anyway) 'light skirmish',' Where a quarter of the men on both sides were given the opportunity to see first hand if the heaven the priests said admitted bold soldiers fighting for their country with open arms really did exist. The most virtuous of the dead would be reunited with previously departed relatives who made it past the Pearly Gates for a forever joyous Christmas dinner that lasted all year long. Or if the recently dead soldiers had been born into abusive families or had nagging wives, they would be spared that dreaded fate.

But for the moment, Stefan's attention was on the horse with enlarged eyes and a massive space between them where the gelding could do a lot of thinking, and feeling. "He has a head that thinks for himself, and eyes that have taken in a lot," the master horse trainer and self taught practitioner of veterinary as well as human medicine commented as he gently stroked the mostly healed wounds on the side of the Austrian steed's neck. He blew into the steed's nostrils, singing between breaths a German nursery song which was always a sure fire way to begin a dialogue in verbal commands, or rather 'requests'. Only to have his hairless chin wacked by the horse's snout, with open teeth that he avoided by quickly pulling back. Stefan's subsequent fall was broken by a pile of straw on which there was a generous layer of excrement from the last horses he had brought back into service by ministering to their wounds and their frightened minds. "So, this one can detect my Ukrainian accent," Stefan said by way of explanation as a chorus of laughs came in from his fellow conscripts safely OUTside the round pen.

Wiping what he could from his now brown ass, Stefan leaped back on his feet. He grabbed hold of the rope connected to the horse's bridle. After some tugs and releases, the horse finally stopped trying to take Stefan for a ride through the muck. The proud cut gelding's ears went forward, his front foot lashed at the overgrown Cossack lad, nailing him in his left calf.

"He's a mean one," Seargent Petro Boyko grumbled from the safe side of the hastily built round pen though his oversized cheeks covered with a straggly beard, the air emanating from his somehow always over-fed mouth stinking of an extra ration of breakfast vodka. "That proud cut gelding is more valuable to us as stew than as a saddle or draft horse." He pulled his rifle away from his gigantic over-haired shoulders, aiming its barrel at the thus far, and for good reason, uncooperative horse's head.

"No!" Stefan yelled out, putting himself between the horse who was trying to kick some sense into him and the trigger happy Seargent's bullet. "This horse is shell shocked, or trained to hate people who look like us, talk like us or smell like us," Stefan proposed with the utmost sense of urgency. "I know that we're in more need of food than the officers are in need of horses, but..." he pleaded with the supply Seargent who doubled as a cook. Who was rumored to put human flesh into his 'Austrian stew' which

he sold on the black market for money he put in his own pocket. Of course, such was only a rumor, to Stefan anyway. "Please, let me show you how useful this horse could be to all of us alive," Stefan pleaded. "If treated with kindness, any mean man or beast will become kind, good and useful in good ways, right?"

The Ukrainian Seargent left the decision regarding that to the men under him. like the horse, "So, what do you say regarding the medicine BOY'S' claim regarding human and animal nature? Should we give him the chance to test his theory? A show of hands!"

Ten of the twelve human right arms present went up. Some had been injured by Austrian bullets and others by fist fights with their fellow soldiers during the long periods of boredom between 'noble battles', All of them had been stitched up or otherwise mended by Stefan. A conscript whose flesh was, somehow, never pierced any bullet, bayonet, or shrapnel in any skirmish. Begrudgingly, the supply Seargent lowered his rifle. "Proceed with the experiment then, Private Denosevich," he instructed Stefan. "But if this horse sends you to the Lord in Heaven---"

"---It's because it is God's Will, and you can feed my body to whatever creature needs it," Stefan said taking off his Imperial Russian Army coat, tunic, then his hat, shaking his Cossack warlock at the horse. Bare chested against an early winter wind, he pulled out a carrot from under his sash, offering it to the new equine 'prisoner of war'. It was accepted, but with caution.

"Better to scare or punish that wildie with a shashka," Ukrainian born and bred Corporal Olek Koval said, pulling out his sword. It was a single blade weapon his grandfather obtained from a Tatar freedom fighter in the Caucasus when in the service of the Imperial Army sent by the Czar to liberate the Georgian Islamic 'pagans' so they could be saved by the Russian Orthodox Jesus. "A weapon you only use when charging 'imaginary enemies', 'Doctor' Stefan!" the thin faced, naturally balding overly mustached thirty year old 'can fix anything you can break, but you owe me a big favor' mechanic continued. "A sword which---"

"---Is still strapped to my side, and which I use to scare the enemy so they run away, or surrender, for their own good so we can advance our noble

causes to liberate the oppressed,” Stefan shot back. “Like my noble ancestors, Stenka Razin, Kandrady Rulavin, Bohhdan Khemennytsdy and--”

“---Maybe Yemelyan Pugachev, still PRIVATE Stefan Denosivich?” Imperial Captain Nicholi Ivanov shouted as he strode to the coral, his back arched like a White Russian officer from Moscow, in keeping with his aristocratic roots. “A pretender who claimed he was an incarnation of Peter the second, murdered by his wife, Czarina Catherine the Great?”

“And who inspired Cossacks, serfs, peasants, Old Believer priests and enlightened Slavs AND Tatars to rise up against Catherine’s oppressive reign!” Stefan proclaimed, proudly.

“And lost, at the cost of his followers’ lopped off day dreaming heads,” Ivanov reminded the lad. “Yes, Pugachev, a Cossack who was considered a thief, scoundrel and mentally deranged lunatic by many of his own people. Who was as deluded as you are about your blood lines and what the noble grandfathers of yours really did. The factual books say that your Ukrainian and Russian Cossack ancestors actually---”..

“----Did what they had to do under the circumstances, Your Honor, Sir,” Stefan shot back while edging a blanket towards the horse, laying it gently on its back. Hiding, or perhaps not believing, the fact that many of his noble ancestors were no strangers to massacring countless numbers of Indigenous pagans while ‘civilizing’ Yakuts in Siberia and Moslems in the Caucasus if they resisted Russian Orthodox Christianity or paying taxes to the Czar. And putting aside the fact that Cossacks were assigned the special duties of burning live bodies and still populated buildings in Jewish villages. “The books in Moscow are WRONG!” Stefan squeaked out, hoping it was perceived as a bark. “We were fighting for our freedom. And the right to rule our own land in the Steppes!” Stefan continued as he eased a blanket then saddle onto the steed trained by his Austrian masters to attack Russian soldiers, and conditioned by gunfire to not trust ANYone in uniform. “We Cossacks fought for special favors and freedoms the Czar gave us, yes. But mostly for the honor of serving Christ, Mother Russia and humanity.”

“For which you Cossacks were, and are now, well paid in MONEY!” the White Russian Captain from Moscow added. “And once the money stops, all of you Cossacks will desert and get a better deal from the other side,” the anti-Cossack and even more so anti-Ukrainian officer continued, raising up his clean shaven chin, looking downward at the enlisted Ukrainian ‘Little Russians’.

“No we won’t! desert!” Stefan insisted, after which he sang a Cossack love song to the horse, in Ukrainian in notes that were more off than on key. “Cossacks fight for honor. Not money,” he then proclaimed after having inflicted auditory pain on the horse and humans within range of his voice. “Yes, the Czar is giving special favors to our families back home in Ukraine. Which very soon will be an independent country again. Run by democratic rule in the service of its own people. And in the service of the Russian Czar. Who will bless our independence as Slavs in the service of one God, one world and one common vision for humanity where each gives according to his, or her, abilities, and takes according to his, or her, needs.”

“Of course, you men will not desert,” the Aristocratic-born and conditioned Russian Captain said with a smirk at the Socialist pipe dream which was adopted by an unanticipated number of women as well as penis-bearing ‘commoners’. He looked behind him to the Ukrainian Cossack conscripts, laying his hand on the handle of his revolver. “Right?”

“Yes Sir. Yes, Your Honor,” the unarmed enlisted men answered with bowed heads and forced smiles to the Russian Captain who was known to be the fastest draw in the East AND West. And who had the reputation of being able to put a bullet into the head of any man who even thought differently than he did before that thought could be converted to voice. Captain Ivanov had put bullets into the backs of more than a handful of recruits who knew that it was a smarter military decision to survive a losing a battle by retreating rather than continuing a futile attack. “But for the moment, let’s all enjoy a joke together,” the Imperial Army officer continued. “Including the ‘good doctor’ who sees the good in everything and everyone who---”

“---Is about to get on this horse and prove to you that even in a demon horse there is an angel who is stronger, Sir, who---” Stefan said, pushing his belly onto, then his ass into the saddle. The horse took three strong

strides at a walk, then eased into a collected trot. Just as 'an agreement' was in the works, Stefan heard something click under the horse's feet. "A snake!" he whispered to the frightened horse regarding the legless creature which had been thrown into pen by one of the conscripts, or (according to Stefan, anyway) the whims and Will of the Deity Who created them. "It's a snake that won't hurt you," he assured the steed, after which the Austrian gelding reared up, throwing Stefan on the muddy ground, his head landing in a wad of frozen manure.

A thunderous liberating laughter blasted into the air, shared equally by all ranks. While handing over money from wagers made regarding the outcome of the angelic doc vs the demonic beast 'showdown', the Cossack recruits and the Russian Captain made jokes, as equals. Each dig at Stefan was wittier than the last. They included "Shit for brains meets more shit". "A new method to turn dumb angels into smart devils". "Sometimes brains need to be shaken up, like borsh". "A sure fire way to shake some brains into an empty headed day dreamer". And, from the Captain, "So, you see, our court jester does know how to brighten up our day".

As Stefan regained full consciousness, he recalled something from his childhood as the butt of everyone else's jokes in the village he grew up in where he was always injuring or embarrassing himself somehow. It was an instinct and assigned job granted to him as a Blessing by God. Such made everyone laugh, providing badly needed humor for everyone. Yes, here he was to be a 'morale officer' in the same way. Though the insignia of that rank was something only he could see. And the horse who threw him off might see as well. As long as the rebellious Austrian steed negotiated his relationship with his Slavic captors, and feeders, carefully.

"Yeah, I know," Stefan said, his ass still on the ground, when looking into the eyes of the steed as the horse stood still, staring down at him as if to say, 'ok, we both aren't where we want to be, so do you have any solutions for this?'.

Stefan smiled at the beast, addressing him with direct eye contact "You, my friend, are like Hershal Kominski, the Jewish tailor and comic who kept us Christian soldiers entertained back where I grew up..The schlammele, which is you, spills the soup on the schlimazel, which is me." He took in a deep breath under his hurting and possibly broken ribs as he edged his

way onto his aching feet. “And as for that snake the captain put under your feet, well, that’s just a prop the audience put onto the stage. In the service of all of us, including YOU,” he continued looking up at the Heavenly Father. “You can use a good laugh too,” he said, wiping his aching and even more odorous ass. Enjoying the pain, somehow.

CHAPTER 2

You may be asking, how was I able to see, hear and smell what was going on around Stefan as well as what was going on between his ‘selective hearing’ ears and behind his ‘seeing but not seeing’ eyes? Well, I had many spies in his vicinity when I was not able to be physically present, particularly after he joined up to fight for a democracy-promoting Czar against the evil German Kaiser and partner in slime, the Emperor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. But who was I really working for? And why? Well, maybe you can figure it out as you keep reading. And if you find out, please tell me. But let us save such mysteries for a later time.

For the moment, suffice it to say that I was the most needed and therefore unnoticed member of Stefan’s small company of Cossacks that had been decimated into an oversized platoon due to ‘heroic actions’ they had undertaken during the first two years of this war to end all wars.

After Stefan reached an agreement involving the horse, which was favorable to both parties, his unit was ordered to move West towards the Front lines and encountered en route refugees going in the other direction. These displaced civilians were carried by horseback, their own tired feet, or each other. Those unable to stand were cargo in wagons pulled by both men and beast.

Stefan thought about the men he was serving in his capacity as a medic, horse doctor, scout, and butt of jokes which needed to be amplified to keep up the spirits of his comrades. While mounted on the proud cut Austrian gelding, he looked at the men he was serving with, struggling with squinted eyes and a pounding head to figure out why they became who they seemed to be, to him anyway.

“Yes, Seargent Boyko is giving meat to Elena, the young gypsy widow refugee who is now responsible for three children, one that looks like her and one who looks very much like him, by sheer coincidence of course,” Stefan said to the Austrian equine ‘mutt’ between his legs, in broken Ukrainian and as well as much accentless German he could muster. “And the bread he is requesting in return is most probably loaded with more mold than barley or wheat. Saving her children from a stomach ache and her children from seeing nightmares while they are still awake. Is that not so, Achilles?”

“As Stefan perceived it, the horse snorted in approval to his new name, and Stefan’s attempt to convert the wildy Austrian beast into a bilingual steed. The horse took note of the generosity of Boyko to Elena and the mixed family he had presumably never met, and would never see again. Meanwhile, Stefan went on to relate stories to Achillies’, or more accurately, ME, MY in Ukrainian which translated into English were....

As for Corporal Kiral, the fees he was requesting, and getting, for fixing a truck filled with wounded civilians stuck on the side of the road were no doubt for supplies he would buy in the next village. To be returned by him as soon as he could race back to them with equipment to fix the truck, and medical supplies to repair the broken human flesh inside of it. And besides, Kiral had lost his hair way too early. Or course he deserved payment in the form of a two foot lock of hair from a moderately wounded and penniless mother who voluntarily cut it off, giving it to him as pre-payment for coming back to cure her badly wounded child.

Regarding Captain Nicholi Ivanov, yes he was an arrogant Russian Officer from Moscow, but his riding in front of the column on the tamest and whitest horse in the company was needed for morale. And since he was the brains of the outfit, it was appropriate for him to have gotten triple rations of breakfast a few hours earlier. After all, a full belly is required for a healthy mind.

There were others in the company which was now reduced to being a platoon and a half. Vlodymir Melnyk was entitled to wear the heaviest and oversized coat available since he was a thin man under it. And of course the medals overloading his chest were well earned, despite the fact that

when he was drunk the stories about how he got each of them kept changing. They couldn't have been stolen from dead or wounded comrades in battle, or those who had lost them in a card game.

And that good luck necklace of ears around Dimitri Sokolov's neck had to be from pigs rather than Austrians slain in battle, or fellow Slavs who he had knocked senseless in the taverns he had liberated from the enemy.

At a rest stop, Stefan looked at the hopeful external presentation of the 'camp' that had been set up by the meeting of soldiers going to the Front and civilians retreating from it. I of course was cursed, or blessed, with seeing the worms and putrid fruit underneath that bright red apple offered to me. Breaking the reflective silence, or deadly quiet, was a rendition of a folk song I recalled from my own childhood played on a refugee's violin, Olek's mandolin, and then the most ancient and expressive musical instrument, a young girl's human voice. Stefan smiled, as did, eventually, in one way or the other, the men serving with him. They felt every bit of the music as if it was gourmet cooked stew laden with medicinals send by the Almighty to nurture body, mind and soul. To me, that song which emanating through and converting the blood and smoke tinged ethers into a clear blue spring sky was just...notes. Sounds emitted into the air. That by sheer chance changed their pitch and volume as the wind changed direction.

I looked at the distant hills to the right and the left, noting the leaf bearing trees that that had not yet been turned into charred sticks. My ears detected birds within those trees adding something that could double as harmony to the song created by two legged musicians in the all too temporary rest camp. To which a few of the soldiers and the still ambulating refugees danced. I felt the earth under my feet undergo a certain vibration, feeling a wave of unexpected approval meandering up my spine. If allowed to let my perception of the present drift into the past, it felt like a hopeful future was upon all of us. Until the birds stopped singing, and then those in the forest to the right fled with alacrity eastward towards the Motherland we were, theoretically, protecting. It was followed by the avian chorus from the left forest taking to winged flight towards the same destination. Every horse with half a brain still left in their skulls pointed

their ears towards the Front. Such was followed by thunder, first from the sky in that direction, then from human sources.

“Big guns from the Austrians this time,” I heard from Seargent Boyko as the clear blue sky at the Front were penetrated by clouds of black soot . “Forty millimeter shells,” he said, sniffing the air with his oversized nostrils. “Which smell like--”

“---Victory for us after we overrun them! Sneaking our way towards them, undetected under the fog rolling into what is left of the forest, to their weakest point. Then and only then, we attack them!” Captain Ivanov asserted. Half of the men under his command began to slither away and join the refugees as they began their retreat Eastward towards fellow still-home-owning Slavs or strangers who perhaps would welcome them, or perhaps would not. “And if anyone has any other thoughts that are different,” Ivanov said as he quickly pulled out his revolver. He fired a round at the feet of Corporal Olek just before the latter was about to put a bullet into his Commander’s back.

From what I could surmise from the grumblings amongst the enlisted men, Olek’s desire to send his Commander to his just or unjust reward in retribution for said commander having shot three of Olek’s former comrades for retreating from a losing battle before the official command for ‘pull back’ was given. “We WILL be victorious against the Austrians,” Ivanov said to the soldiers still under his command on this not so fine day. “Because....” he blasted out, his non-shooting hand up in the air. He flickered his fingers so as to signal his men to bellow out a thunderous battlecry that would scare the Austrians back to Vienna. “Because!” he repeated, having gotten no reply from his men who were contemplating how to initiate the long needed mutiny and consequences of following through with it. “Because!!?” Ivanov repeated again and again, pointing his revolver at the men with the angry and vengeful blue eyes. His stare shifted from one potential leader of the mutiny to the next. The message spread like a wave through each of them, discouraging even the thought of mutiny in all of them.

All of the potential mutineers remained silent, their thoughts and plans of liberating themselves buried under fear. Until Stefan, whose kind face remained hopeful and obedient, spoke up, questioning the Captain’s

message. "We will be victorious, because we are in this together?" he both proposed and asked. "And because we are fighting for a just cause?" the child in the man's body asserted, framing the statement as a question. "And because right will be converted into might, with the help of the Almighty?" he went on, after which he gazed up and into the sky. "Right?" he asked the God who he never lost faith in.

Another moment of collective reflection swarmed over the men. Each of them looking at each other, and into themselves, somehow both at the same time. It was as if Stefan had really connected to the Deity above the shrapnel filled clouds and inside all of the living and the dead below them. Stefan finally lowered his head, providing the men with an answer. "Yes!" he declared, hugging each man in what was left of the Company. "God, who created the fog up ahead, IS with us. I know it. And we all should know it. As we work to save each other. And to win this next battle, destroying more of the Austrians' weapons and sparing the men who operate them. Sending as many Austrians home in retreat, or taking ALL of them as prisoners this time, so we all can be brothers after this war is over!" In a world where "

"...There are no Aristocratic Ivanov's in Russia or Austria," I heard from Olek, the peasant enlisted man staring at and into the Imperial Army Captains face.

"And the Czars are in service of the people rather than the other way around?" the once anti-Socialist Melnik offered.

"And we compete for national superiority with cooking contests rather than wars where we kill each other and put the meat we gather up into our own stew?" Seargent Boyco speculated.

"And these medals we get are for saving men, women and children rather than killing or re-locating them?" Melnick asked as he juggled the medals on his chest, some of which he actually did earn rather than stole.

"And I can go home to my wife and mistresses, who I love in different ways, with none of them finding out about the other?" Sokolov let flow through a warm smile, rather than a sadistic grin of delight which came to his face whenever lopping off an ear, finger or nose from a dead, or dying, enemy

combatant. Or rivalry over a bar wench a fellow Cossack fell in love with after ingesting too much vodka.

“Yes, and I can go back to studying philosophy and music at Saint Petersburg, rather than War and Politics at the University of Moscow,” Captain Ivanov related, after which he voiced a very on key rendition of an aria from ‘Boris Gudinov’.

“Yes!” Stafan said, exclaimed, then proclaimed to the sky. Which cleared up, miraculously. And then turned silent. Followed by mocking laughter from the men around him.

“Fool!” “Idiot” “A day dreamer” “Wishful thinker who can’t think at all”. Echoed through Stafan’s elephant ears.

“Except when he’s taking bullets out of you, stitching up your wounds, or somehow keeping the horses you overuse in rideable rather than eatable shape!” I said to the laughing men regarding the one who was not laughing at all which fell on deaf ears, once again.

Just as there is an inequality of wealth in the world that will always be around, no matter what compassionate theology or democratic form of government exists, the gap between the respected and non-respected widened that moment. Until it was interrupted by a cloud of dust approaching from the West. Followed by a rumbling of the earth under all of our feet. Followed then by an army of Austrians who only saw in front of them Russian Soldiers who had to be eliminated. In the service, of course, of Selective Compassion. Caring for one’s family and countrymen first, second, and last, leaving no consideration for the welfare of a stranger or foreigner. Justifying starving ‘others’ of bread and water so that ‘your own’ could dine with filet mignon and champagne. After all, the death of a Russian Soldier, who has a family back home on Moscow or Kiev, secures the safety and well being of an Austrian family in Vienna.

CHAPTER 3

It is said that in the heat of battle, combatants become who they never were. Or perhaps they become who they always have been, as survival is

what is at stake, not social status or likability. Unless you are a Russian aristocratic Captain leading Ukrainian recruits from behind. And would soon be pulled into making decisions that would affect everybody, and even more notably, himself.

The trenches where Stefan, his comrades and their horses took shelter, presumably without the Austrians knowing they had arrived, were deep enough to protect them from the machine gun fire thanks to the Hungarian Peasants working as labor battalions for the Austrian High Command two months earlier. When they were overrun by the Russian Army, the sandbag wall had been increased by two feet in height, complimented by dug outs resembling caves which primitive men, and women, had dug into the ground 10,000 years ago. Topped off with remnants of a roof added by political prisoners with the last of the trees which had been the thickest forest in Western Ukraine. As usual, there were more equine bones embedded in the muck than human ones, the rats being the only well fed still breathing life forms. Something most of the military photographers from Vienna or Moscow didn't take pictures of, of course.

"So," Stefan said when glancing at a petrified wooden slab surface which had imprinted on it 'fuck the Czar', 'damn the Kaiser' and 'for a good time call...' with names of a number of women, and men, in the back lines. "It's good to be home again," he said, recalling his last two shifts in that same trench.. "Even if we're allowed to be here for only half of this War to end all Wars."

"A line that President Wilson will be using to get the Americans doughboys into the War," Corporal Kiral grunted as he scratched out the name of the pleasure woman in Kiev on the slab, the rocks, edging in another woman's name that Stefan didn't recognize. "Yes, the Doughboys who Wilson promised would come here, very soon."

"Named Doughboys because they make great white bread that beats our brown bread?" Stefan inquired, feeling the rumbling of his empty belly, his nostrils imagining the aroma of fresh baked rolls.

"Because the American doughboys collect the dough, meaning money, from selling weapons, oil and equipment to us, and them, Stefan," the childless Captain Ivanov noted while pointing to the Austrians huddled

behind a well built trench 2 hundred yards to the West. Addressing the most entertaining Cossack and useful medic under his command by his first name, a form of address he never gave to anyone else. This time his paternal instinct had a kind, bordering on envying expression, rather than being ashamed of and angered at Stefan's ignorance of the world as it is, and hard core belief Stefan had in how it should be. Again, Ivanov reflected on how the militarily inept private whose bullets never hit their target had acquired medical skills in taking out bullets from mutilated flesh that outclassed any medical officer in the Army. Still, Ivanov couldn't determine why both Stefan and himself had never been wounded, with regard to flesh anyway.

Ivanov took in a deep breath into his pushed out chest, adjusting his mind to the situation at hand. He wondered how, this time, he could keep Private Denosevic out of harm's way. Then, abruptly, he turned into a raging animal after he noted the name of the 'wonderful wench' named on the advertisement written in Russian Cyrillic as well as Austrian German. "Who put my beloved's first name and maiden name on this 'advertisement' for the 'best whore in Moscow?'" he demanded as he stared at Corporal Sokolov while the latter continued to busy himself collecting teeth, ears and scalps of dead Austrians.

After getting an 'how the hell should I, a commoner Cossack, know, your Excellency?' shrug as an answer, Ivanov pushed the inquiry into Sergeant Boyko. Ivanov grabbed him by the his tunic, and beard, pulling out a fistful of lice infested mud soaked hair.

"God knows, and, since He is not answering any of our questions about why we are here, I suppose we will never know, Sir," Boyko replied with a humble bow.

"But maybe YOU do?" Ivanov yelled into Corporal Kiral's face.

Putting on the poker face that won him extra rations of food, drink and a warm blanket on cold moonlit nights made bearable by card playing, Kiral pointed to the Austrians on the other side of the charred, sulfurous rat infested no-man's land in front of the trench through holes in the thick fog.

“And they will pay for defaming my beloved!” Ivanov pushed through gritted teeth, whipping out his sword with his slashing right fist, and his revolver with his left. “We are going over the top, lads! Now!” he yelled to the men, this time with the intent of leading the charge. “And all of you are DEAD!” he grunted to the Austrians in his best German. “You perverts, demented demons and bastards will pay for violating Elena Putinov’s honor!”

“We’re right behind you, Sir!” Corporal Kolov assured his superior, placing his assuring bear like hand on his Captain’s shaking shoulder. After which he slowly shifted his gaze to fellow conscripts Sokolov, Boyco and Melnik.

“I will lead the charge this time! . To demand satisfaction!” Ivanov ordered and pledged. “We have the element of surprise, since, I am certain that they can’t see us, but we can see them, because they have not fired at us yet.”

“As you wish, Sir,” Boyco replied, snapping a filled magazine of bullets of his rifle.

“For Mother Russia!” Melnik, a Ukrainian Nationalist who hated the Czar more than dysentery, rats and trenchfoot, yelled out, adjusting the bayonet on his rifle. “And Elena!” he added.

All of the enlisted Cossacks, with the exception of Stefan, shared all knowing smiles and winks of the eye behind their commanding officer’s back. All the while, blind rage took over Ivanov’s ocular portholes and the overeducated brain behind them. It was enhanced five fold when he looked at the locket hung around his neck.

Any fool could see that putting the Aristocratic and somehow never even wounded Captain’s ‘beloved’s’ name (that he muttered with affection in his sleep while sporting a wide smile and ejaculation of sperm from his crotch) on the posterboard was a shared endeavor led by Boyco, Melnick and Koval. Designed to get their ‘beloved commander’ to lead the next deadly charge instead of orchestrating it from behind, because of his ‘genius as a military strategist’ of course. Was Elena Ivanov’s wife, mistress, daughter or the always well groomed Captain’s transvestite male’s lover? And whose idea was it to be sure that Ivanov saw that name on the slab of

wood? Such didn't seem to matter. At least to the Cossack who decided to take matters into his own hands."

"I will lead the charge this time!" Stefan exclaimed, grabbing a submachine gun buried in the mud under the front half of a dead Austrian soldier. He slung it around his shoulders with one hand, while pulling out his sainted and always victorious Grandfather's sabre with the other. He hopped on me. "Are you prepared to do the honorable thing? God will protect us if we do! I promise you that!"

"Better use the machine gun rather than your sword," Boyco yelled out as Stefan inserted both of his feet into the stirrups.

"And take cover behind your soon to be dead horse!" Koval warned Stefan as his I started to buck, after a mortar blew a hole no less than 20 feet in front of him. Stefan requested me to move in a choppy gallop, breaking through the coral holding the other Russian horses, sending all of them in separate directions before they could be caught. Ivanov ordered the men to catch the horses, but neither he nor Cossacks had any success at such.

"So," I thought as more mortars blew up around the trenches, causing no harm to man or beast. "Warning shots," I thought, having been through this situation many times before. "The Austrians are more interested in live horses, and interrogatable prisoners than regained real estate," I said to myself. Stefan's machine gun dropped from his shoulders. He pulled out a sword, swinging it in the air in a motion that was both heroic and artistically breathtaking.."

"Achilles, forward!" Stefan both asked and commanded. "God is with us!"

It is said that horses do not have a belief in any God except compassion for those who have been kind to us, our herd, and the world. Why I let Stefan be the 'boss' and take me into a charge of the Austrians I, to this day, do not know. But there was something about his conviction, the situation and the need for me to go back to the Austrians who claimed to be my owners, who I actually owned. Stefan did a Cossack acrobatic dance on my back to avoid the onslaught of bullets and, sometimes with his commands and sometimes on my own. I eased into equine ballet movements I learned while being trained to be an Austrian Lipizzaner to avoid mortars. It was a

colorful way to commit suicide for both of us. But as the American cowboys in the Western novels and silent pictures said, 'ya gotta die of somethin'.

I had died before, and incarnated into different forms. And as for being assigned to the body of a horse with mismatched breeding, placed into a war where the first casualties are both innocence of men and death of horse, maybe it was time to 'soul jump' into another life form? Hopefully as a general with a humanoid body who would have the common sense to surrender. Or an "Elena" who could, with her feminine charms, convince generals from both sides of this war to decide to do business together to obtain more colonies, wealth and political positions rather than to build empires by depopulate and demolish the countries who you want to acquire.

But, as it turned out, me and the naïve lad-man on my back wound up entertaining the Austrians. With acrobatic leaps that nearly tore our legs out of their sockets as we both dodged directed mortar and small arms fire from BOTH sides of no man's land. Then, abruptly, the shooting and mini-bombardment stopped. The Austrian commanding officer yelled something to his men, raising up a white flag. The enlisted men on 'our' side of the trench halted firing.

I locked my legs in place, refusing to let Stefan do any other maneuvers with me. Boyco forced the business end of Ivanov's pistol down toward the so far bloodless dirt as he prepared to take down the Austrians who, so he imagined anyway, had had their way with Elena.

The Austrian commander, a Major by the looks of the intact half of his overcoat, applauded Stefan and me with the enthusiasm of an audience in prime balcony seats at his favorite opera. He then led his still crouching men in a round of applause. Ivanov picked up a rifle, preparing to shoot the Austrian officer in the testicles, then the head, but was halted from doing so by Boyco, with a swift kick into his family jewels.

"A smart Sergeant you have there, Captain," the still alive Austrian commander yelled out to Ivanov in grammatically correct nearly accentless Russian. "As you can see we are more than you are," continued, ordering his men to stand up and be counted.. "But you're crazier than us, so we will let all go you go back to the asylum you escaped from."

“Which weeee wwwill!” Boyco slurred out of the left side of his mouth as an escaped inmate from a mental asylum with jerky movements of his head. All the while putting his hand over Ivanov’s mouth. imitating Stefan when his brain was flustered. “I ppprrrommisse. Thhhannk Yyyouu foor lllletting us gggooo home.””

“Which we are defending, as is our God given right, honor and duty!” Stefan proclaimed. “A place of justice, freedom and beauty, and...”

Before Stefan could relate any more descriptors of a Motherland that gave no large portion of those three qualities to any of her ‘children’ except for the rich, powerful or manipulative, I took HIM on another equine-human dance. I adjusted my hindlimbs with each buck so as to have him land back in the saddle rather than on his deluded head. Eventually, Stefan anticipated where I was taking him and enjoyed the ride.

“You know,” the Austrian major said to Boyco while some of the men “Your day dreaming circus performer on that crazy horse gave away your position. If not under strict control, he could be very dangerous, to, as you have heard.”

“Himmmself and ootherrrss,” Boyco replied in his best ‘retarded’ voice. “Lllikkeee the rest off usss, right?” he asked the platoon which was now officially under his command, since Ivanov’s mouth was still ‘incapacitated’ by Boyco’s strong and now bitten bear like hand.

His fellow conscripts agreed with ‘yes’s’ pushed out of drooling and deformed lips.

“Hmmm”, I heard the Austrian officer say to his second in command as I took the ‘dance’ towards him. “God protects fools and drunks. I pray to the God that I hope hasn’t completely abandoned all of us that these fools didn’t steal any vodka from the dead soldiers they got those guns and uniforms from.”

With that, the Austrian officer received a message from a runner. After reading it, he motioned for his men to pack their belongings to move on to the next destination. As they filtered with their equipment to the North and

South, I carried the more heart than brains 'rider' on my back towards 'home'. His home anyway. With a well designed buck, I threw Stefan onto the ground in a roll that landed his head on a pile of manure caked mud rather than hard rock, rendering him in more unconscious than conscious state, but still breathing.

“

While Stefan's fellow saner-than-they-ever-wanted-to-be fellow conscripts gathered around him, I gathered my equine brothers and sisters, returning them to their two legged 'owners'. It took a lot to convince them to go back to the humans who romanticized about riding them to victory after they had been worn down by long rides, pulling heavy wagons and being deprived of lush grasses to keep their tired muscles from atrophying. But most of their owners were Cossacks who, for the most part, did not consider a horse as a four legged, non-petrol requiring transport machine or a source of portable food. Meanwhile, I watched from the corner of my eye and listened with my overly sensitive ears to what was occurring on what still was for the moment, 'our side of the line.

“Stefan almost got us all killed by giving away our position,” Boyco reminded his subordinates. Ivanov helped my new 'master' to his feet, helping him drag his feet, then limp back to his Comrades, regaining more consciousness with each step.

Stefan was loaded up on a cart which I, the least muscled in the herd, was assigned to pull. A choice I allowed to be made by reaching the wagon first. Melnik hopped into the driver's seat. “So, where to, Corporal Denosevic?” he asked Stefan.

“Seargent Denosevic, you mean,” Corporal Koval said with a congratulatory smile through his overgrown mustache.

‘Lieutenant,’ Seargent Boyco exclaimed, as he mounted his horse. “After he has a long, happy furlough at home, right Captain.”

“A very long furlough indeed,” Ivanov said as he looked into Stefan's confused eyes. “A very long furlough, my brave son, and comrade,” he said, pulling two medals off Melnick's tunic. He pinned them securely to the bewildered lad-in-a-man's-body chest.

Melnick clenched his teeth in anger, with a forced smile. Particularly as one of those two medals were those that he had earned rather than stole, one way or another. After the congregation had mounted up, or jumped into a wagon, they exited the trench just before a group of Austrian replacements moved into the already overmanned trench on the opposite side of no man's land. Then made their way on foot, slowly, to the back lines, doing their best to act like the mental patients they ridiculed and, truth be told, feared they might become one day.

"So, Achilles. One of these medals go to you," now 'Seargent soon to be Lieutenant Denosoic said in a loud voice. "We're both being promoted!"

"I snortled, agreeing with my 'master' who was too relieved and virtuous to believe the truth. That he was being sent back home so that he wouldn't endanger his Comrades anymore by charging an enemy who was too strong, numerous, armed and smart to defeat. And for thinking with his heart rather than his head. Perhaps because of me or a soul a lot smarter than me manipulating and monitoring MY thoughts, he was able to THIS time turn a suicidal charge into a sacrificial dance. But the next 'song' in Stefan's opera would be experiencing an even more complicated libretto. His beloved family.

CHAPTER 4

Stefan's next assignment was to go to Iankovia. . A village hundreds of miles behind the Front where he was commanded, by royal decree and put into printed orders by Captain Ivanov, to see that the Iankovians 'be who they are and do what they do'. A village where Seargent Stefan Denosovic's job was to facilitate 'profitable ventures for all concerned' on his way to becoming 'an officer. Maintaining the status quo till he was ready to be transferred to an even more important assignment'. A village where, upon his arrival, Stefan noted that there were no other soldiers to command or be commanded by. A village which, according to the letter from High Command given to him after his delayed discharge from the field hospital, he had been elected 'mayor' in absentia by every one of its citizens. A village that was the 'pillar of stability, harmony and happiness' which was required to continue to be so to 'save Mother Russia from itself'. A village where Seargent Stefan Denosovic was born, raised and dreamt

about coming back to as a decorated Slavic soldier and accomplished Cossack.

Indeed, by the way he leaned back on the saddle when riding in to Iankovia as Sergeant Denosovic with a third medal given to him to join the two Ivanovs had pinned to his chest, he made ME feel like I was the lead horse in a parade. And maybe I was. Even though the only followers to the future Lieutenant or Captain Mayor were mice, crows and two stray dogs keeping their distance. "Nicholi!" Stefan barked to a black and white mangy male hound trying to bite at my heels with each step I took. "Good to see you again, and that you have a girlfriend who respects as well as likes you," Stefan continued to the hound, throwing him pieces of beef jerky, noting a female dog behind him. "Best be careful about nipping at your new brother's heels," he said pointing to my sweaty neck. "He doesn't mean to hurt you, but he might, by accident of course. Because, Nicholi, I'm home for a while, finally."

Of course, I DID want to kick the aggressive and cowardly hound who was more interested in the jerky Stefan was throwing him than the 'man' who probably had raised him as a pup. Knowing my own strength and assessing the border collie-coyote cross's ignorance, I decided to merely postpone rather than cancel giving the canine menace a lesson with my hoofs. But I suppose that Nicholi, who by the conversation Stefan still had with him, and the canine speak the dog was having with him, needed me to be 'Achilles' for a little while longer. While Sergeant Denosovic could continue to be Stefan for as long as he still could.

I let Stefan 'steer' me past houses built with old wood and slightly caved in straw roofs housing animals, to one and two story structures constructed with what looked and smelled like new lumber. With roofs covered with modern metal shingles rather than slabs of wood, smoke coming out of their brick chimneys. Telephone wires emerged from freshly planted poles, connecting each of the 31 houses occupied by two legged mammals. The smells coming out of the partially opened kitchen windows, real ones made of glass, were from culinary delights far more exotic than borscht, porridge and bread. Aromas that I recognized from the Austrian officers' club in the rear when I was in their service as a beast of burden for the enlisted men and sign of social status for their commanders. I never tasted French quiche, Belgian croissants or Italian sausage but I did vicariously enjoy

seeing my 'masters' enjoy them and recall being given Swiss chocolate and apple strudel on more than one occasion. But, that was another assignment. I hoped, and prayed, that this one would not wind up the same way.

"So, it looks like everyone here is doing far better than when I left, Achilles" Stefan commented while stroking my tense neck. "Proving that if you live honorably, give more than take, and serve the Deity within everyone, that Deity will give you back ten fold!" Stefan informed me as he continued prodding me onward, not stopping to let me have more than a mouthful of green grass, freshly harvested hay or water. Against the audio back drop of Stefan's empty stomach grumblings, accompanied by the acetone from his breath, my 'master' related the names and occupations of the beloved villagers. They all chose to stay in their houses, closing the blinds over their windows once we were spotted. A good, kind and honest this and that, Stefan said regarding the occupants of his family's 'welcoming' neighbors.

This 'common' village did have, according to Stefan anyway, a complete collection of commoner occupations. Baker, carpenter, blacksmith, woodsman, butcher, seamstress and a new one, machine mechanic. All of which of course served needs of the body and not the mind in a newly expanding town that included everything except a book store.

"And that is our church," Stefan proudly exclaimed as he, THANK GOD (who we horses seek to know and know about), brought me to a halt, allowing me to fill my belly with grass and water in front of still the tallest building in the village. "And inside, Father Basili, writing a sermon, negotiating with God on our behalf," he continued, pointing to a window behind which the Good Father was seated at his desk, agonizing over a paper in front of his tired eyes. "And that's his secretary, Nadia Petrovitch, who helps him with the grammatical details and translations," he said as a woman with long, brown hair put her hands on Father Basili's shoulders, taking away the paper, then turning to him and edging her young face towards his. She then rubbed with her smiling chin his nearly all white beard, her hand moving downward between his legs as he laid down his pen and paper. He opened his mouth, the smile on it indicating that he was experiencing the kind of Bliss he would never describe in any sermon. Upon being spotted by us, Father Basili looked towards Stefan, or maybe

to me. But before he could provide any comment, Nadia pulled down the window shade.

“Nadie speaks French and adds, as they say, ‘spice to the sermon’ that is tasteful and appropriate.” Stefan said of the woman who I heard whisper words of love of body rather than Soul or Spirit to the Good Father. The Good Father exhaled moans of delight, mixed in with ‘yes, mistress, yes’ which Stefan, of course, didn’t or wouldn’t hear. “Father Basili and Nadia have very profound conversations about how to serve the Lord,” he informed me.

Ironically, Stefan was a master of putting together flesh that disease or trauma had torn apart. But he knew so little about the anatomy between the legs. It’s use for pleasure anyway. I thought about making a noise, to disrupt the ‘theological discourse’ between Basili and Nadia, but before I could say anything, Stefan pulled me onward to the last and most pothole laden road in the village. “It’s finally time to go home,” Stefan informed me. “No, time for US to go home,” he repeated patting me on the neck exuding a smile whose warmth and assurance was irresistible. And with a gentle prod of his boots on my flank, we proceeded forward at a trot,

The new Seargent and soon to be Lieutenant Cossack sang ‘The Cossack Rode over the Danube’, the battlecry of the Cossacks when they went to war and the victory song they emitted with parched voices upon their return, no matter what the outcome of the battle.

When rounding each of the curves in the winding road, I envisioned at ‘our’ final destination, fields of wild grass. With even wilder horses grazing on them, kicking their heels up in the snow that defiantly lingered until the coming of summer. With old men sporting white warlocks teaching their grandsons how to shoot an arrow. While those grandson’s fathers practiced their swordsmanship in mock duels which were more about dance than combat. And women with long braids washing clothes in the river, providing inspiring colorful insults to their husbands when their beloveds’ asses fell into the mud. And praises when they outwitted their opponents with sword or acrobatics. And elders arguing politics with their rock hard asses glued to tree stumps, debating as to whether the Orthodox Christian Cossacks should side with the Czar and Imperialists in the new revolution coming up, or the ‘godless Communists’. Whose ideology and

activities were far more Christ-like and Christian than that of the old Aristocratic order that still treated commoners, and Cossacks who were not powerful enough, like serfs.

My eyes were kept hostage by other things. The field was plowed with symmetrical rows, sprouting plants designed to feed humans rather than free grazing livestock. And there were tractors with fresh dirt on their rotors instead of plows usually pulled by horses or, on occasion, Cossack men or women who had committed too many transgressions against their community. Those ancient plows which had sustained human and animals for centuries had been broken into unusable debris, their rusted elements blending in with the dirt. And there were dragons on the unfarmed regions of the meadow eating holes into the earth with their extended mouths, surrounded by black soot.

“Oil,” Stefan explained to me regarding the rigs. “Which we do need, so that we can fuel trucks, tractors and carts so that no one has to put any one of your equine brethren into harness, ever again!”

“And the streets will smell of black soot, and the sky can become a lovely shade of grey,” I felt like saying. “And those streets instead of having occasional piles of droppings from our asses will be ‘graced’ by fecal material from people who can’t afford to live in houses? People who forgot that if you put any of OUR horse manure onto any arid land, it will turn even sand into a soil enriched garden?” My still not completely repaired shoulder from being overused in military harness and the memory of seeing my equine Comrades develop sweeny so bad that they had to be turned into meat came to mind. But, looking at the house Stefan was bringing me to put an even more toxic aroma into my nostrils. It was nothing that I could recall biologically, but I feared that I would be able to define it very very soon.

The walls of the house were constructed of freshly painted wood, brown with white trimmings around the windows. Appliances requiring electricity were in every corner of the recently built dwelling, lamps, stoves and a machine that was used for washing clothes. The sink in the kitchen featured water coming out of a pipe when the ‘woman of the house’ pushed the lever up and down. Her artificially curled blonde hair was neatly trimmed to just below her shoulders. Her dress was red, its hem falling just

below the knee. Her size 6 feet were adorned with French made pumps rather than Cossack crafted boots. Stefan, still mounted, knocked three times on the kitchen window. "I'm home, Svetlana! My love!" he declared, whipping his tall Cossack hat in the air.

"Yes, I can see that," his wife impersonally spat out from the side of her mouth having seen us through the reflection in the mirror as she continued to wash dishes made of China rather than hand flattened metal or clay.

"And I brought a friend with me," Stefan exclaimed with glee, more as a boy half his age than a man who had been, from his perspective anyway, half way around the world since enlisting in the Army

"As I can also see, my dear Stefan," her reply, smiling to our reflection in the mirror rather than to us.

"And I'm stationed here indefinitely, as a decorated Seargent about to be promoted to...Lieutenant!" he boasted, He pulled out the officer insignia from his breast pocket that he was permitted to sew onto his uniform after arriving at his 'post', placing it on his shoulders, securing it with gum.

"So I've heard," Svetlana said. She finally turned to us, her smile becoming more 'classy' than common.

"I'm waiting for other soldiers to command, and, so I'm told, no one to command me! Imagine that! A Don River Cossack commanding White Russians from Moscow, Petersburg and Minsk!" he boasted. "Can you imagine that!?"

"Yes, I think I can," she replied with an all knowing nod of her rounded chin and beautiful face. "Suppose that when life gives us what we want, we need to honor its request," she said, after which she approached the window. Stefan leaped off my back and gave her an enthusiastic over the top hug, which she received with civility and grace. She kissed him on the lips, then pulled back. She sniffed the air and winced her thin, perfectly shaped nose, finding the aroma near Stefan distasteful. Then she sampled the air near me, pulling her dainty teeth backward into an even more disgruntled expression.

“I know, we both have been on the road for a long time, and a husband should greet his wife with a more presentable aromatic presence,” Stefan said to his wife. A wife who had no wedding ring on her finger. The one on Stefan’s right hand was still on so tightly that it had penetrated into the bone.

Before I could nudge Stefan’s puppy love eyes away from Svetlana’s deceptive ocular portholes, and towards her ringless right hand, the new ‘Commander’s’ wife gave me a dirty look. The kind that said ‘do what I say or it’s the butcher for your flesh and the glue factory for your hoofs’. Knowing that she had the authority to make such happen, I nudged her left hand, trying to gain her affection. Then her right, so that Stefan could notice that she had declared herself ‘unmarried’ in his absence.

“We found each other,” Stefan said by way of explanation regarding me. “His name is Achillies. He is fluent in Austrian German, Continental Italian, Cossack Ukrainian and even Russian,” he boasted. “And I think he likes you.”

“Yes, I think he can be...useful,” she replied, pretending to like me.

What kind of useful, I was not sure of. But I knew I had to be useful to Stefan. Part of my job of being assigned to look after him by my bosses, who, well, I will tell you more about later.

“But in the meantime,” Svetlana said with a welcoming smile, “Our children will be pleased to see you! They are very proud of you, you know.”

“As I am proud of them,” Stefan replied. “As they know.”

“Which they need to be reminded of, Stefan?” came from Svetlana. They were the first honest words to come out of her angelic lips.

CHAPTER 5

Svetlana requested that Stefan bathe before supper. After looking inside to the bed he would finally share with his wife, he asked if she had a bathtub he could fill with hot water. She pointed to the river, saying to her

husband, with a warm smile, “There is more water in the river than in my bathtub, and it’s a lot colder, which is good for your health and a remedy for inappropriate urges you may be thinking about. And besides, that’s what your ancestors did after coming home victoriously from a War. With...how much compensation are you getting as a Seargent and how much will you get paid as a Lieutenant?”

“The honor of serving the Lord through serving more of His people,” Stefan replied, with pride.

Even a dog after being kicked in the head by a horse would have picked up the true meaning of Svetlana’s words. But it was the smile she put on her face that Stefan chose to fix upon as he led me to the river. And, to be fair, Svetlana had probably been in love with Stefan in SOME way. Until she saw that he was more easily pitied than loved, or understood. Why else would she have two children with him?

Stefan spoke to me about them often, recalling who they were when he departed to fight in the War that would keep them safe, secure and happy. Sasha, a strapping lad of 15 years and almost as much height as Stefan. And Tanya, a young woman of 13 years who danced more than walked or ran when moving from barn to the house. Or the house to any other houses.

Those offspring bearing Stefan’s name appeared, dropped off by an Asian driver, in a car. Unlike when Stefan left, their clothing was clean, containing no holes, and not smelling of farm or wild animals. They looked at Stefan as if he was from another planet.

Stefan brought his children into a three-person hug, their arms rigidly on their upper legs. He kissed them both on the cheek. “I know, it’s been three long years. But I thought of you everyday. And if you don’t recognize me, well, the War changes everyone on the inside and the outside,” he said by way of explanation.

“Yes, I heard,” Tanya said, averting her eyes.

“And as I read, in the uncensored books in the library,” Sasha added, looking at and into Stefan’s life tired but still wide open ocular portholes.

“And the soldiers who ran away from the war, or were lucky enough to have an injury that justified their discharge.”

“Who really weren’t able to carry a weapon, or charge at the Hun’s line,” Stefan’s brother Andrei said as he limped his way from the woods, a snared rabbit flung over his shoulder. “I really wanted to enlist when you did in 1914, Stefan, but...” he pointed to his left leg. “The doctors say it’s incurable.”

“Which THIS boy, no MAN, will be able to make functional again!” Stefan said, trapping his 15 year old son into even tighter into his bear hug. A son who looked more like Stefan’s brother than Stefan himself. “When Sasha becomes the youngest doctor on the Steppes, he will undo whatever that accident did to your leg, Andre, and right arm three years ago. He’s still getting great grades toward that end,” Stefan said to his non-biological son. “Right?” he continued, looking at the lad with more pride than in his voice than I ever heard from him, or any other human.”

“I’m getting the best grades that I can buy or steal,” Sasha replied to his father, who pulled back his head in something resembling shock. “A joke of course,” the lad smiled into his father’s still village idiot brain, after which he looked at his sister. “Right, Tanya?”

“Of course. Sasha’s is to be the best medical scientist in Ukraine. My fate and calling is to become the best dancer.” Tanya assured her, (due to her resembling Andre more than Stefan) non-biological dad. “A dancer who, of course, shares the stage with everyone else instead of hogging it all for herself, because, as you, and Mama taught us...”

“Great work only happens when you are humble, giving more than you take” father and daughter said, in unison.

“And, as every Cossack knows or should know,” Andrei interjected. “Great work always requires everyone giving according to their abilities and taking ONLY according to their needs. According to the Communists.”

“Who, I know, most Cossacks refuse to join,” Stefan said. “Or maybe will join when this War is over. On their own terms. Because as we know, you can lead an Islamic Cossack to vodka you can’t make him drink it.”

Stefan's son, daughter and brother put forced smiles on their faces, chucking with strained voices. Stefan of course believed their laughter at his joke was real. And so did I, until I noted Andrei placing his crutch over his shoulder and trotted towards the town tavern as sound as any new born colt or well conditioned stallion.

CHAPTER 6

The newest and busiest business in Iankovia was a set of peers at the river which had been turned into a harbor. Or as I remember seeing on my many boat journeys that made life easy for the feet, but hard on the belly and putrid for the nostrils for fellow transported equines, and humans, a port. "You should have seen it in the old days, just...well two and a half long years and fifteen hundred and ten four and two legged patients I stitched up ago," Stefan related to me as he did his daily 'inspection' of the town on my back. "Furs and meat from old and sick animals we hunted or slaughtered to end their suffering and wheat that grew in our rich soil would go out to cities where people had forgotten how to hunt and didn't own land to grow food." He leaned back, arching his back as if to boast the accomplishments that were now rewarded by the medals on his uniform given to him by Ivanov. And on top of that, he was now an officer who still had no Sergeants, Corporals or Privates to command, or look after, or be talked back from. Surrendering his current sense of time and place to the river as it captured his gaze yet again, he continued. "When the wind was good, we used sail. When the wind was hiding, or wanted to work against us, we rowed our solid hand built wooden boats to where our goods were supposed to go. Yes, we complained about our muscles hurting, but it made us stronger. All in the service of others, who give according to our abilities, and take according to our needs, and NOT our or their wants". He then recited some idealistic words from the Communist Manifesto, in original German, sharing its magic with a smile as he patted my neck.

Though Stefan's German was still poorly accented, missing the articles which are part of the language of Marx and Engels but not in his own Slavic tongue, they did make sense to me. I let his sincerity, optimism and firm trust in right ruling over might come into me. "Yes, our Motherland, Russia,

is our Master and it is our honor to serve her during these perilous times,” he said to me in Ukrainian, a tongue I had become functionally fluent in, at least as a listener, in a voice that was kind and gentle. Until we, I anyway, heard Austrian German from the skipper of an incoming oversized steel boat driven by an engine directing his crew. As soon as he was within hearing range of Slavic workers on shore, he commanded Ilya Vladivich, a one armed Ukrainian foreman, to prepare the dock for his landing in Ukrainian. . . .

Ilya was a fellow Cossack and boyhood friend of Stefan who, according to a one way conversation Stefan had with me earlier that day, had been honorably discharged from the Imperial Russian Army. Ilya had cut off his Cossack warlock and now had grown a ‘respectable’ worker’s disheveled mop of hair on his head, with a now neatly trimmed rather than boldly displayed overgrown mustache. Ilya asked the Captain who he was, in German.

“Someone who is paying your boss with this!” the Austrian Captain growled at Ilya in Ukrainian, as he pulled out a fistful of money, waving it in the air. Deutschmarks, Rubbles, Dollars and Pounds. “And if you do it faster, this as a personal tip!” He pulled opened his weather-beaten civilian coat, revealing an Austrian Army uniform under it, something the ‘enemy’ did so that they would not be shot as a spy when stepping ‘outside’ of the lines, showing Ilya even more currency, waving it like a carrot. “For everything you have in that wagon!” The captain commanded, pointing to an overloaded cart at the doc covered with a tarp. “And already loaded into that other ship,” he said of a smaller unmanned boat docked next to his bearing a Russian flag, being loaded up with grain, meat and more importantly, barrels of oil. “And I have even more money for your crew,” the Austrian Captain said regarding the two armed workers who stopped working.

“But,” Ilya protested. “The crew for that other ship is in the tavern, and if they come back and find out that I didn’t deliver what they came for.”

“So, you give them more vodka, more food, and more women to play with. And when they sober up and, maybe shower, you will give them this!” he continued throwing Ilya a bag of money. Looking at the amount inside, Ilya threw the Captain’s ‘civilian merchant’ a rope. The engine on the

Austrian 'merchant ship' was silenced, its bow pulled into the pole. Its deck was filled with alacrity with the most recent delivery of goods that had arrived at the port, as well as the lion's share of the cargo in the Russian ship by Slavic dock hands who were thrown small but still ample bags of coin by the Captain.

"But," Iliya asked the Austrian Captain, as his 'loyal' fellow Slavs men ran over him while obeying their new foreman. "What will I tell the Russian soldiers who I'm supposed to give this to when they discover that we under delivered to them?"

"Or as your boss knows, may not be Russian soldiers at all. Or perhaps Russian soldiers who maybe have become deserters, Reds, or...one of us?" the Captain proposed. "Or pirates in the service of our wives and children at home, or our mistresses and adopted offspring in other lands? It's every MAN for himself. Every MAN if he is going to take care of his family, or himself, has to now be a pirate who cares for no one who isn't family, God help us," He crossed himself in a manner of the Catholics, differently than the Eastern Orthodox with respect to the right vs the left shoulder being touched first.

"And what do we tell God when we face our final judgement?" Iliya challenged.

"For Father Basili," the Austrian Captain said, sneaking into Iliya's pocket a fistful of mixed currency. "And as for God, we tell the Almighty whatever He wants to hear. Through, if necessary, we hire His most valued intermediaries, which of course are..."

"...Jewish lawyers," Both men said in unison, sharing a joke, Vision and new agenda for a new century.

With that, Iliya joined in the loading operation, the Austrian cruiser sinking three feet deeper into the water with barrels of oil destined for destination points to be determined. Points no doubt where there would be another transaction which would profit neither Czar nor Kaiser, Emperor nor peasants. Peasants who, along with many others, were becoming homeless, limbless and lifeless in the service of God and Country.

“Did you hear any of that?” I tried to communicate to Stefan, in horse language, then in the human voice I once had before taking on my current life form.’ He merely looked on at the loaded Austrian ship leaving with the oil and other booty, a Russian flag hoisted on its mast. Which he saluted after he prodded me forward, closer to the dock

“We have to do something about this!?” I blasted out through engorged nostrils. “YOU have to do something about this. Find this ‘boss pirate’. And...”

My voice was shut down by the Austrian Army Officer, or perhaps German Pirate Captain, looking at me. He ran his index finger across his neck. Then, while still staring at me, he tapped the handle of the revolver strapped to his fat waist, giving me the option as to how I would be released from my present body so I could use, or abuse, another one should I get in his way. But he seemed to recognize me as his prize horse who deserted not only himself, but the Army I was conscripted to join.

Thinking with my feet, as we horses are said to do, I jolted to the left and thunderbolted Stefan back to town, toward and into the tavern where the (most probably anyway) REAL Russian ship operators were being ‘entertained’ while the goods they were supposed to bring back to the front were being sent, most probably, to the enemy.

CHAPTER. 7

Faking being scared of a wolf in the woods, I detoured Stefan towards the tavern, the last known whereabouts of the Russian soldiers who were, or maybe now had been, members of his Army charged with bringing goods back to their commanders from Iankovia. It took longer than I thought. Part of the reason for such was that I myself got lost amidst the wagons and trucks carting large barrels of crude ‘black gold’ from what used to be farm fields to the docks. And some of the delay was due to Stefan himself, who tried to pull me back to the river. It was the first real argument I had with Stefan, but one I could not lose for either of us. Or for the horses that were now being overworked hauling wagonloads of crude oil rather than being given a break due to the emergence of trucks and mechanized tractors.

By the time we finally arrived at the village tavern, Stefan had exhausted all of expletives he knew in at least five languages, damning me and the beasts he thought were causing me to spook. I reared up, landing his ass as close to a pile of straw bails as I could. Then, I nudged at the door, finding it locked, a 'closed for lunch' sign on it. With a swift kick nearly as intense as I gave the Austrian Captain before I resigned my commission in his Army, I kicked the door open and entered, on my own accord, bringing Stefan with me, then dumping him on his ass. Behind the door was none other than Andrei, Stefan's brother, fresh blood on his apron. "That's it for you!" Andrei yelled as he aimed his sawed off shotgun at my head.

"No!" Stefan screamed back, kicking the business end of the weapon upward. It fired into the roof of the establishment, causing the chandelier to crash to the floor. I lingered to see what the two brothers would do with, for or to each other. "What's with the blood?" Stefan asked.

"An accident in the kitchen," Andrei replied. "We have it under control."

"And 'we' is who?" Stefan...yes...pressed.

Andrei pulled back his lips, his smile warm and supportive. "Someone you don't need to know about. And don't want to know, little brother," he continued bringing Stefan into a hug. "And as for your equine friend there," he said as I remained in the vestibule of the establishment.

"And as for whose blood is on the floor?" Stefan asked, noting several piles of bright red fluid, scrapings of them oozing in from the kitchen and out the back door.

"Some butchering had to be done in the dining room," the explanation. "And the meat is.... processed."

Amidst the two blood pockets were buttons from enlisted men in the Czar's army and a broken insignia from a Russian Lieutenant's uniform. I pushed Stefan towards them, causing him to fall down to be sure he would see them as he got up.

“What’s this?” Stefan asked, politely, holding the buttons and insignia in his still uninjured hand.

“Something that has been taken care of,” Andrei said as he limped towards his brother, then lifting him up off the floor. “And there is something that you, and that horse of yours, should know. A proverb that has served us all very well.”

“Which is?” Stefan inquired.

“He who...well...” Andrei clapped his hands together, summoning to the customer lacking tavern drinking and dining room his wife Svetlana, his son Sasha, his daughter Tanya and no less than five underdressed young women he didn’t recognize. And a band of gypsies bearing musical instruments and bloody boots. “All together now!” he announced.

“He who asks too many questions gets too many answers!” the congregation declared, after which the gypsies struck a folk tune from Stefan’s youth. The five whores, two of which Stefan did recognize, sang in three part harmony to the song of celebration. Tanya’s feet absorbed the music, inspiring a dance that everyone joined in. Including Andrei, whose gimped feet has no shortage of vitality, strength and musicality, most particularly when he grabbed hold of his most favored partner in dance, Svetlana, who he kissed passionately on the lips. The vision of such entered Stefan’s eyes. But before it could enter his brain one of the whores who had no doubt ‘pleasured’ the Russian soldiers with a few minutes of earthly carnal bliss before being given free ‘you dare not decline this offer’ tickets to enter Heaven or Purgatory, pulled Stefan into the dance. Then his angelic purer than any other virgin daughter, Tanya, whose dress was spotted with blood and whose crotch smelled like fresh semen, cut in, requesting a private dance with her father. As an obedient ‘protector of the people’ Stefan honored her wishes, or had none of his own left. He let her do all the thinking, and the dancing, leading with every step of her slender ballerina feet and lily white arms.

Stefan’s thoughts faded into a blank stare. Finally, his wall of idealism was in the first stage of being shattered with knowledge he, maybe, could comprehend. An understanding of world as it is.

Burley, well fed dock workers entered the establishment, with their fists and pockets flushed with money showing it off to Andrei. “Your best vodka!” one of them said. “And your best women?” another one demanded showing off his ill-gotten booty. “And not your wife or daughter this time!” a third requested. “And some equine stew,” a fourth said after smelling my sweat, finding it offensive. “To add to the two legged meat you already put into the daily special,” a fifth added.

So that I would still be around to help him ride into it as an effective agent of Truth, and effective compassion, I backed away, then ran into the woods. Two of the newly arrived burly male patrons bearing sabres and pistols ran after me. I couldn’t see what Stefan saw about my demise. Of course he would have intervened if he knew I was in danger. Such was my hope anyway.

CHAPTER 8

I needed some time alone, so I hid from every living thing except the flies, frogs, foxes and whatever wild geese that had decided to come home to mate and lay their eggs. They all had their conflicting purpose and personal agendas, of course. Predators had to eat prey to stay alive, and one way or another, all of the prey fed on something lower on the food chain.

There was some healing I had to do myself as well. A villager’s bullet grazed me in the left hip, and a wolf decided that God had created me to be meat for his family, leaving claw marks on my neck prior to me kicking him in the teeth. It was payback, of course, perhaps for having been a skilled marksman and hunter in my last body possession. And a successful one at that, as measured by wealth seeking and valuing humans anyway.

But I was also a self-taught philosopher, having attended my own university after learning how to read and finding out I enjoyed it. While munching on a patch of grass between piles of forage which had been blackened by oil, my thoughts went to Socrates., who after his state mandated suicide

perhaps did come back as a ghost to instruct his favorite student, Plato, to quote what he had said while alive and to do it accurately. The ghost of the bodiless Athenian professor in the school of Life lamenting that he never wrote down his messages to the world, due to his being dyslexic. Whether Socrates' inability to read or write was a blessing or a curse, that was another matter. But some things that came out of his ass, or mouth, came to my mind as I felt a need to do something more with a new body.

I shared my thoughts with a field mouse whose brain seemed to be big for his body size. Whether said rodent was using his brain to secure a more influential incarnation after his inevitable demise by foxes, hounds or annoyed horses, I didn't know. But he or, as I suspected as possible, she was a good listener.

"So, it is said that ignorance is the sole reason for cruelty. Is that not so?" I telepathed to the rodents in the manner that Socrates invited open dialog with his students, friend or anyone in the streets who would listen to him.

With her big eyes, she winked said 'yes' to that Socratic quote.

"And by inference, is it not so that intelligence inevitably produces compassion?" I inquired of the mouse.

"She said 'yes' to that with a chirp and a nod.

"But!" I continued, feeling a new thought, a new idea, a practical ideal entering my cerebral cortex courtesy of the third brain that had emerged between me and the rodent. Something that happened with many animals in my current life form, and, on special moments anyway, even with less cerebrally effective creatures such as Stefan. A human who had magical skills as a healer of disease and traumatized biological flesh who, by logic anyway, might one day be a healer of the human mind who would enlighten, inspire and liberate the collective human soul.

I held on to this new idea floating in my mind, trying to grab it, capture it and own it before it slipped away into the ethers, as innovative thoughts so often do, for reasons probably based in some way the brain was designed so that it would not become 'too big for its britches'. Finally, I gave voice to it, with my eyes, and with 'horse speak', both of which my new rodent

‘girlfriend’ seemed to be interested in. “If intelligence produces compassion, is it intelligence with regard to how the world SHOULD BE or intelligence regarding the world as it IS which is the kind of intelligence that leads to EFFECTIVE compassion?” I offered for assessment.

I proposed to her, myself and the third brain floating around us (which some say is God, as when two or more of you are gathered in my name, I’m there also) the idea that intelligence of an idealist living in or aspiring to a ‘Higher Plane’ of consciousness produces the most effective brand of compassion. The mouse, who seemed more like Aspasia, Socrates’ Platonic courtesan mistress rather than his bitchy, unappreciative, social climbing wife, shook her head with a ‘no’. When proposing that being a cynic, who sees all the dirt in the world and none of the virtue humans stumble into, makes one a channel for maximal effective compassion, she nodded an assuring ‘yes’. But with a coda to that finale.

“Yes, I know,” I replied feeling then recognizing that thought, and strategy. “One has to be a well-informed cynic who still has hope that there IS virtue, beauty and love as the ultimate goal. And that the destiny for all creatures, including humans, is to experience and be channels for...Goodness.”

‘Aspasia’, as I named her, brought me some berries, laying them in front of my mouth. I smelled them, recalling portions of a distant memory. When I started to help myself to the sweet tasting forage, she bit my face.

“Yes,” I said to her, the pieces of that memory pieced together. “Too much of a good and needed thing can cause more problems than cures,” I thought, and gave voice to.

Indeed, these berries were the ones I ate when a stupid and, yes, happy because of such, human before I had to switch bodies. “Maybe there is something in these berries that fits better into Stefan’s biology than mine?” I said. “Or yours?” I asked Aspasia.

She said yes in many different animal and human languages. As I heard it anyway. Then ran away, leaving me the responsibility, and perhaps glory, of turning a pathological idealist savant ‘village idiot’ who provides ridicule, entertainment and services to the flesh into well something more effective. Without, of course, the protection conferred by God from physical harm or

mental anguish. After all, the 'Heavenly Father' protects fools, drunks and idealists who saw every circle of hell on earth as a subdivision of Heaven. But not Truth seeking questioners. The price of eating of the tree of knowledge in the garden of Eden, according to the fables humans are taught at an early age which, truth be told, seldom leave the belief systems, they carry to the grave in old age. And by 'coincidence' these apple tasting berries I indulged in by 'coincidence' still grew in Iankovia, one of the many towns in isolated areas in isolated countries which at one time or another were 'Edens'.

CHAPTER 9

It wasn't hard to find *scientifica fructum afferentem* (as it was called in my time anyway) around Iankovia. Just look around where the oil rigs that were not in commission that had been dismantled or turned into distilleries. But barely one in ten twigs bore the apple tasting berry now. And ingestion of three "swallowfuls" from the low growing bush that disguised itself as a weed smelling of skunk produced no more than a fourth of its usual effect on the 'assessment of raw reality' machine between the ears, on me or (as I was painfully able to assess it) the other 'subhuman' creatures around me.

Who was eating the herb which lowered activity in the 'feeling' portion of the brain and activated it in the 'seeing as it really is' centers? Or what environmental toxin was driving *scientifica fructum afferentem* into extinction, modifying some of the plants into something as ineffective as the apples growing from a tree that sprouted fruits above our heads? I didn't know. But this now necessary experiment involving the 'more heart than brains' Cossack who was on my back 6 hours a day had to be launched. The fate of Stefan's village, the world around it and the, as I saw it anyway, continuing life experiments of the self-interest driven creatures who had two, four, six or no legs inhabiting this planet depended on Stefan dining on the appropriate dose of *scientifica*..

"So, when I ask what kind of grass you want to eat, you come here to where it's low lying brown instead of high growing green?" Stefan said to me on a half cloudy and half sunny day in the oil fields after I obeyed HIS travel route on the daily inspection of the town he was supposed to

administer. For weeks he had found nothing out of order anywhere. And believed every lie, be it white or black, he was told by his well fed and (for appearances sake to outsiders) poorly clothed 'Comrade Citizens'. "I don't know what you want to eat, but you know best, I suppose," he continued to me as his eyelids grew heavy and I ate whatever grass I could get that wasn't coated with oil, or stained with 'scientifica' berry juice.

Stefan faded into another one of his ten second 'sleeps', the smile on his face saying that he was dreaming about something magnificent and, in his mind, inevitable. 'In the Heavenly Father's time' of course. That Heavenly Father being God, or perhaps his new Prophet, Vladimir Lenin. Stefan, really did believe that the Bolshevik leader was not really an atheist, but someone who was secretly working with the Eastern Orthodox Church with the aim of infusing more humanistic Spirituality than traditional Theology into its mandates. "Yes, Comrade Lenin, you are right about that, right about that, right about that..." Stefan, periodically muttered more than usually on this trip to the woods when reading Das Capital and the Communist Manifesto. Of course, if one was a true Christian or Cossack, you were disallowed to be a Communist. According to most of the Christians, Cossacks or Communists I had met, or had the 'pleasure' of being a beast of burden to.

Stefan's smile during his dream naps were bigger than normal today and he smelt of alcohol today more than most days along with something else I couldn't identify. Of course he, knowingly anyway, never drank anything that came from a distillery. Someone was feeding him 'happy juice' without his knowing it, most likely. Something those on top who 'know' do to, or for, those on the bottom who 'don't' know. Another 'constant' that kept the world going so that it would keep the 'good ship earth' sailing in waters that, more than ever now, were plagued with icebergs of many varieties and appearances. Yes, it was time that SOMEone did something about the world, and...the Stefans.

Stefan maintained a loose rein on me as it was 'ice cream time'. That half hour a day when he allowed me to eat the grass I wanted to, while I decided on whether I go right or left, walk on or linger, look out into the woods or point my ears to the ground.

My nose smelt the scientifica plants in abundance amidst weeds which were now spouting burdock, thus keeping humans and most animals away from the 'forbidden plant'. Below my feet I felt vibration from the earth. An electrical jolt of sorts which increased in intensity as I mossed along to the center of the 'power spot'. This one NOT outlined by a circle of rocks as was the case with most 'medicine wheels'.

I recalled with glee and excitement times of old when lightening from the sky shook the stagnant consciousness of common earth bound creatures who walked on and four legs into being....different. Different than their friends, family and even mentors. Turning them into creatures who could teach so much and who, as a reward for that curse and blessing, would be actively ignored for the rest of their lives. But that was then and this was now. An evolving 'now'. With an unevolved Stefan on my back who took in a deep breath, looked up to the sky, then said, as he patted my back, "Is it not a great thing that God made the world so great and wonderful! And left us with the most important job of all! To celebrate all of the goodness around us!"

I rolled my eyes once again, in the manner of a human soul utilizing an equine body, Stefan not seeing it of course. I treated myself to vicariously enjoying the wide, contented happy smile on Stefan's face. Something he would never experience again, according to my experience and knowledge of what would happen to and for him.

I allowed him one last breath of putrid petroleum infused air tinged with the scent of the flowers from weeds that flourished with the newly transformed profitable ground that he considered heavenly, then kicked my rear fetlocks up above my head, tossing his ass into the air. Then I turned abruptly to the left. Then rolled into his back, directing his fall so that it would preserve his head but make his face land into collection of ripe, bright red scientifica berries growing in the middle of what probably at one time was, or maybe in the future would be, a medicine wheel. A power spot. At least one 'gulpful' of 'scientifica' found its way into his open mouth. An unexpected jolt of felt but not seen lightening from the earth penetrated into his belly, sending jolts of shakes up his spine and down into his toes.

"Ah!!" Stefan moaned in pain as no less than ten waves of electrification went up and down his spine, his eyelids shut hard. Maybe due to

lightening from the earth, or maybe from some devise that was built by hands other than Mother Nature buried in the ground. I feared that if the latter was the case, I had stumbled onto someone else's experiment which had an aim different than the one assigned to me.

I edged my way towards Stefan, moving my snout to push him away from the jolt which seemed to be more powerful than the one I anticipated. But he declined than refused my instruction. "Ahhh!!!!" he said by way of explanation, the grimace on his lips turning into a shit eating grin of discovery. His eyes open, wide. He assured me that 'the light coming in is setting fire to my (his) brain'. He cleaned the excess berry fragments from his face with his finger and ingested it. "Mmmmm." He said with delight. 'Mmmm' he exclaimed as he helped himself to the lion's share of the crushed berries on the ground, finding them as tasty to the palate as it was enriching to his belly, and brain. "And" he exclaimed as he injected the remainder of the fruit on the low-lying bush I had chosen for him.

I tried to stop him from dining on an adjacent bush which would have turned his first scientific meal into a glutinous orgy. This time by nudging his hand, asking to share in the feast. He complied, thankfully. "Mmm...." he kept saying to himself, and me, regarding the taste of the residual fruit lingering on his lips and hands. With smiles that somehow made his aura, something which I didn't think I imagined this time, become larger, and whiter. Then it emerged into rhythmic fire.

Upon holding the last berry in his hand, the joy of discovery on his face turned into a grimace of concern. "Mmmm," Stefan said, reflectively, nodding his head, then scratching his hairless chin in professorial manner, something he had never done. After several 'hmmms' of internal reflection, seeing things behind the blank stares in his eyes that were images that only he could see, a wall put up against them, to me anyway, he looked up to the sky. 'Hmmm' he said to the God in the sky who he always trusted, liked and loved. "Hmm?" he continued, asking the Divinity, picking up a bone from a child near the power spot that I had not seen. A cancerous bone, covered with black spurs and cracks exposing foul smelling marrow.

"Hmm..." he said to the bone, trying to ascertain the significance of such. "Why?" he asked God the Father holding it up. "An eight year old child! Why?". He waited for an answer. "Of course, because it was your Will,

you sadistic bastard. Who....” He finally said. He looked to me, “doesn’t know he is a sadist or....maybe doesn’t exist at all,” he assured me. “But we do exist, and have to keep on living,” the idealistic boy who I had been training said to me as a mature man. A good man, by the way he seemed be according to the gentle yet firm way adjusted my bridle. A determined one, as assessed by the abrupt, firm and necessary tightening of the girth securing the saddle. An effective one, I hoped, as he dumped his ass on my tired back, dispassionately, without song and without explanation, directing our movements back to town.

CHAPTER 10

That traditional victory Cossack song, ‘The Cossack Rode Beyond the Danube’, reached our ears from the village square long before we saw any buildings. It was nothing unusual. But what was unusual was that it was sung by men, women and children. “What are they celebrating?” I asked myself out-loud with whatever inflections in the mouth and tongue a horse can do.

“A dream that will become a nightmare soon enough,” Stefan answered, reading my thoughts. Something he was not able to do in his pre-scientific state so clearly and literally. “It is true and will be reality, despite what the newspaper the wind ‘coincidentally’ blew into my face, and yours, says.”

“But,” I projected to him in ‘horse talk’ which he was able to understand. “You read the headlines in those newspapers that somehow reached the general store, then were surrendered to the wind, as clearly as I did. The Czar is stepping down from the throne without anyone firing a shot, and the Socialist Mensheviks are designing a democratic government that serves rather than exploits the people.”

“Yes, while they still intend to not pull out of the War with the Austrians and Germans, a war to keep the Kings, Kaisers and Capitalists in power at the expense of their people,” Stefan related to me. “Anyone with any horse or common human sense should know that, but, tragically, don’t. Or choose to stay ignorant about because it is more profitable and socially comfortable to do so. And as for democracy, Socrates was put to death by a show of

hands for corrupting the youth, and that same assembly erected a statue in his honor two weeks later.”

I halted my forward progress, locking my legs in place. “My still, I think, good friend Stefan, I thought that you welcomed the Socialists taking power. Socialists who believe in God and the power of basic goodness like you still believe in God,” I was about to say.

“Like I DID!” Stefan related to me, prior me to giving voice to that thought, ashamed of his past ignorance of the way things really were. “And those idiots and assholes in town, and occupying the house I still call home, do. But some things have to be corrected, NOW! Now that I’m just another asshole, but not an idiot anymore!” he growled, appended by kicking my groin with the spurs he normally only used on reluctant horses, and with the most gentle of touches. “I remind you that I’m the head asshole here!” he added, holding up a stick he was prepared to use as a whip. “Now. MOVE!” he commanded me, as if I was an idiot. Maybe I was. Or had to be, for what was to happen.

I edged ahead at a walk, then, at Stefan’s ‘all business and no pleasure or passion’ vocal command, at a trot.

When we arrived at the village square, it was a festive occasion. I had never seen such wide, and heartfelt smiles on humans. The air smelled of four varieties of freshly cooked meat, three times that number of legumes and of course vodka. “Come, my brother, join the feast!” Andrei, the head chef exclaimed.

“No, join the dance, Papa!” Stefan’s daughter Tanya insisted as she danced her way around me in circles. “And your horse too!” she added. “I heard about how you and him danced the Austrians into submission at the front! Putting a mirror in their faces so looked inside themselves and laid down their arms”

“Yes, I suppose we did,” I reminded Stefan. “That got us sent here, walking on our feet instead of being wheeled in as corpses.”

“It was a different time, different place and...” Stefan said to Tanya, giving the appearance of ignoring me. He sniffed the air. “What is that smell?” he intuited.

“Food, drink, happiness?” Tanya answered, still dancing.

“And gratitude to the Lord,” came from behind us as Father Basili approached. With the same odor on him as was lingering on Stefan’s daughter.

Yes it was the aroma of ejaculate. Sperm juice. Which to my equine olfactory senses was all alike no matter what man it came from. But Stefan sensed, intuited and somehow knew something different. Or maybe it was something he saw in the way the good 50 year old Holy Father with the best fed belly and finest clothes in the village danced with the soon to be ‘sent to Moscow as a star dancer’ Tanya that cued him into it. An assessment of ‘data’ when he had attended Mass that finally registered in the thinking rather than believing portion of his now (according to some measures anyway) ‘advanced’ brain.

“Come, join us in the dance, Papa!” Tanya beckoned Stefan, yet again. ‘You deserve some happiness!’

Stefan dismounted. A still limping Andrei approaching him, offering to take the reins. “The next time I smell horsemeat in your stew, it will be your genuinely broken leg that winds up in the cooking pot,” Stefan whispered to his draft dodging brother. “And if there is any more human meat in your delicacies that I don’t approve of first, as Commandant of town, your testicles, eyeballs and tongue will become the delicacies that are sent out of here for sale. Got it?”

Andrei DID ‘get it’. He handled me with the utmost respect, gentleness and fear. Yes, I did take advantage of such by nibbling at his pants and shirt, and taking all of the carrots and apples in his pockets, and leaving a large hole exposing his naked ass in my wake.

Stefan, sporting a shit eating grin on his (as assessed only by the truly blind, which now included everybody else) ‘happy’ face joined the now circle dance, villagers linking arms and hearts. He whispered into the

Good Father's ear something. that sounded and with my lip-reading eyes looked like 'I know you have your own private secretary and the occasionally sexually confused altar boy to give you pleasures, but even if my daughter comes to you for special favors with your contacts in Kiev, you will refuse her.' I can't swear to that being the exact words but after Stefan nodded in satisfaction when the Good Father lowered his eyes when a shocked Tanya looked at him. Stefan added something else to his new directives to the Father Basili, which 'encouraged him to leave the dance, spinning his way to a stoop, then emptying the contents of his pants pockets into the collection box. Stefan yelled out something to him in Greek, which that I didn't understand. It must have meant 'and the rest of what you stole from these people and others', appended by Stefan gently placing his fingers on the handle of his revolver between 'twirls' with his daughter. The Good Father emptied the remainder of coins, jewels and paper money what was in his many deep pockets then his shirt and cross into the collection pot. He then headed off into the woods, alone, shuffling his feet, his arched back now hunched in despair. No one followed him.

The dancers released their hold on each other, each couple or single dancer doing their own steps.

"One down, many more to go," Stefan said to himself, and I think me, with a satisfied voice and dispassionate smile as he looked at the priest who was not in his employee rather than in the service of himself. This time his daughter heard him.

"What did you say, Papa?" Tanya asked, after which she displayed her skill as a dancer with acrobatics that impressed the men in the village. Such intimidated her fellow teenager 'girlfriends' into attempting to do the same, resulting in them stumbling onto each other, and their eyerolling dancing partners.

"You SHARE the stage with others, and don't take it all for yourself," Stefan said, picking up his daughter's hand as she reached it out to him. "Or, accidents of lack of talent or lack of appropriate professional contacts can come your way." With a twist of her arm that only I could see, Stefan catapulted his star dancing daughter into a fall that forced her into a roll that muddled her clean white, and sperm smelling, dress. Appended by her clean lily white face landing in a pile of horse shit. My shit, interestingly

enough. The musicians stopped playing. The gorgers stopped eating. The merchant oil and who knows what else 'buyers' from foreign lands not identified by their commoner clothing (most of them having over their unidentified military tunics under them) stopped chatting in their native tongues.

Tanya's subordinate girlfriends, her 'back up dancers' as Stefan recalled knowing them as, laughed at her. The penis bearing villagers of power, influence or good looks gazed upon her as a deposed queen who finally was sentenced to be what a monarch fears most---becoming a commoner. Tanya's mother and his son marched up to Stefan, firing blasts of disapproval into his eyes.

"What did you do?" Stefan's wife Svetlana demanded to know.

"And why did you come back here?" Sasha, her son and second in command, sporting a new suit, blasted out to his father.

Stefan took in a deep breath, looked at and into his 'good wife' and more clever than wise son, letting them try to guess what he would come back with. After several volleys of anger, confusion then fear overtook their faces, and everyone else who was watching him, he pushed his outer lips into an understanding smile.

"I'm here to teach you all this!" Stefan proclaimed, as a true Commander and perhaps Comrade. He whipped out a mirror from the cart of wares, paying for the purchase of such, avoiding his usual and once beloved habit of overpaying for goods he wanted or needed. Then he confidently strode over to his daughter, and gently Tanya lifted her up from the ground. As he did, she spit into his face. He wiped the phlegm from his cheeks, pulled open his sash and wiped off his distraught daughter's chin, forehead and eyes. He cajoled then forced his daughter to look at her reflection. "Look at it. Look!" he commanded. "Until you see that the view is not so bad," he continued with a gentle voice. A gentility based in knowledge rather than ignorance. "Or irreversible," he added. "If you, me and everyone here has anything to say about it."

He looked at the faces of his new 'command'. They were civilians, yes, but he was in charge now. "Everyone gives according to their abilities and

takes according to their needs. In the service of....us all, and not ourselves.” As for what that ‘us all’ meant, a deeper definition found its way into Stefan’s soul than I imagined possible for any man, horse or Deity.

CHAPTER 11

“You are what you wear,” I’ve heard said. Stefan was still wearing his Russian Imperial Army uniform. But it lacked the two headed eagle which signified alliance with the Czar and the ‘White Russians who opposed the Reds. His attire also did not display the Red Star indicating affiliation with the Bolshevik. But now, he wore his ‘Russia whatever it will become’ uniform with more intensity than before his ingestion of scientific fructum afferentem. In one way conversations with me, and two way exchanges with people who could tolerate his being emotionally distanced from, Stefan criticized the Reds and the Whites, because neither side would consider a ‘pink’ government which combined the best elements of each of their ideologies. And with that same intensity he offered ‘yes, but’ to everyone’s optimism that Ukraine is, and now officially should be, its own country, pointing out that of Nationalist dictators in Kiev were just as corrupt as any commissar in Moscow.

“It is a basic rule of physics, shit rises to the top masquerading as Shinola. We Slavs are so used to being shit on that we prefer manure to be dumped on our heads from anyone, particularly one of ‘our own’, Stefan reminded Eva Lubinska over a meal of goulash and well cooked pork at the tavern. “And let us not forget that a year after we Slavs finally threw Ivan the Terrible off his throne, we invited and begged him to come back to it,” he continued to the scrawny 70 year old Polish schoolteacher across the blood stained wooden table from him. ‘

Professor Lubinska’s’ hair was white and thinning, but her bright blue eyes were still as defiant and kind as they were when she had left her hopefully soon to be recognized as a country again homeland thirty years and five failed revolutions ago.

“This is very interesting, Stefan,” she replied with a calm demeanor and the slightest of affirmative nods, struggling to swallow the half chewed hard bread soaked in soup in her nearly toothless mouth. “You refer to the

people here as 'we Slavs' rather than 'native Ukrainians' or 'overstaying their welcome Russians' or...refugees like me who will have the chance to go home again after the Germans surrender in this War to End All Wars."

"Mrs. Lubinska, there is no such thing as a War to end All wars," Stefan replied to the now old woman who, when younger and with a body as beautiful as her mind was intelligent, had taught him to read and write. And, to critically think about what was said, written and believed. With the kind of respect and comradery that Iankovia's 'in residence for good' schoolteacher expressed to no one else. The depth of understanding in Stefan's eyes that I observed through the window clearly indicated that he was feeling the excessive power possible with his advanced intelligence due to, perhaps, ingestion of too much scientia fructum afferentem berries for his first meal of such. And, I suspected, subsequent snacks of the fruit when he left me in the coral at home. "Humans are selfish, sadistic and masochistic creatures who---" the Cossack Einstein continued, smoking his pipe like Old before his time Albert. "Yes, humans are self-destructive creatures who---"

"---Are created in the image of God," Mrs. Lubinska interjected', after which she blew apart the rings of putrid smoke he had set into the humid air before they found their way to the hole in the roof "Thank Christ, we are made in the image of Ultimate Effective Goodness" she continued, crossing herself in the Catholic rather than Eastern Orthodox manner. A gesture that if done by anyone else in the Don River Tavern would be met with a request from the management to leave the establishment. "We have to believe in the power of good if we are to eliminate evil, my dear Stefan. Even in a village where you were the only student I had who truly learned what I was trying to teach. To teach you to be kind...and, if you survive as long as I did, wise."

"Yes," Stefan considered, stroking his chin in professorial manner under his, perhaps because of the berries he had overdosed on, or perhaps because of the rapid aging it caused, overgrown thick greying mustache, just like Captain Ivanoff's. Stefan hid his thoughts well behind his very... 'different' eyes. Finally he concluded, then proclaimed, "But, my still highly respected Mrs Lubinska, it's more effective to be clever than wise. Because, after all...."

He hesitated, 'felting' the thoughts and feelings going around the room and coming in from the open window. Then he stamped his boots on the floor three times, 'inviting' everyone in the tavern to have in on his conversation, an invitation that no one dared refuse. "Heaven watches and earth works! Which all of us should be doing!," Stefan pontificated, with the same voice that he had used when substituting for a 'convalescing in an undisclosed location' Father Basili last Sunday at the Good (and absent) Father;s pulpit. . "And as for deception, laziness or greed, or being anything except humble!" Stefan declared as an all powerful god. "Revenge will come swiftly from events, new governments, mother nature or..." Stefan spotted in the darkest corner of the tavern, Ilya Vladovitch, the foreman who had seen to it to it that the highest bidder always got all of the best goods at the river dock, at the expense of the low bidders leaving Iankovia with empty pockets or as ghosts.

Fear now overtook Iliya's eyes, allowing entry of Stefan's words to penetrate through them to the exact place in his brain, mind and soul my once friend and, to him anyway, now boss, aimed at.

"Ghosts will have their revenge!" Stefan declared. "Ghosts of dead soldiers, whose blood stained this table I am sitting at, and the floor where you are hiding, Iliya Vladovitch. Who are defending this country. Or civilians who died because of the oil you, and your associates, and bosses, whoever they are, sold to the enemy," Stefan blasted into the most superstitious or perhaps most open to new experiences 'mobster' in the hard working Cossack village that had turned into a pirates' den during Stefan's absence since the Great War began. Or, as Stefan now knew more and more with each recollection of rosy colored memories from his past, since before he was born.

"And remember, there is no honor amongst thieves," 'Father Stefan' reminded the congregation. "Even less honor and more horrible consequences for those who turn in thieves for personal profit, although..." He removed envelopes from his pocket. "Special pardons are available for those who are instrumental in confessing what they have done and relating what is being done, before anyone else does. So you can have a fresh start. Just like the thief on the cross who Jesus forgave after said thief accepted his punishment. That thief is in Paradise as we speak, forgiven for his sins." Stefan took in a deep breath that penetrated down to his gut,

then redirected his next blast of primal fire. "And as for what is the worst of all sins, yes, it is cowardice," Stefan went on, looking at and into his draft dodging brother Andrei. "Such is redeemable with brave acts on earth, Corporal Denosevic."

With that Stefan tossed a badge to Andrei, who accepted it with gratitude. "Yes, Sir," Stefan's older and more clever brother said with a courtly bow as he pinned it on his chest. "I will---"

"---Refrain from certain pleasures as well," Stefan said, his eyeline moving over towards his wife Svetlana. "Despite past transgressions which resulted in events and genetics which we all have to work with now..." he continued, looking with disappointment at his son and daughter, whose noses, eyes and chins looked more like their uncle than himself "..."Together!" Stefan then declared in the manner of a Cossack Hetmen. inspiring his clan to join in holy battle against oppression and evil. In the Cause of...well...a God that Stefan still wanted to believe in, but now had to become himself. "When we serve each other, and our fellow citizens of the world, we serve ourselves, Each gives according to their abilities, and takes according to their needs and...a modest amounts of wants. Wants and needs becoming the same thing. Right?"

After a round of 'yeses' 'so true' and 'hurrahs', initiated by Corporal Andrei, Stefan requested the musical instrument bearing patrons to begin playing, starting with the mandolin player, and two other musicians who played with too much heart to be professionally paid. Mandolin, harmonica, tambourine and fiddle somehow found their way into becoming one sound. Chatter around the room commenced. Positive chatter, so I heard. Which Stefan was able to decipher.

Stefan was served a large bottle of brandy, "On the house, Captain Hetman Denosevic", the wife of the owner said in Ukrainian, after getting permission from her usually miserly husband. For which Stefan paid her in American greenbacks and German deutschmarks. How he obtained them, I didn't know. And knew enough to not ask. But Mrs. Lubinska DID prepare to ask as Stefan poured a generous portion of the most expensive brew in the house into her glass.

“He, or she, who asks too many questions gets too many answers.”
Stefan’s reply, anticipating the words about to come out of her mouth.

“What kind of answers” she requested, after sniffing the elixor, finding it to her liking, but refraining from experiencing its aroma with her parched tongue. .

“Irrelevant ones, for now,” Stefan replied. “But necessary towards a commonly agreed upon destiny and solution.”

“Which is what?” the woman who had been Stefan’s teacher, mentor, surrogate mother and protector pressed, gently.

“A free Poland, a free Ukraine, a free world,” the reply..

“Freedom being...what, Hetman Captain Stefan?”

Stefan had to think about this one. After deep reflection, considering his advanced intelligence about the way things were and his hopefully still lingering wisdom about how they should be, he withdrew his stare from looking behind his eyes, to directing his answer in a forward direction. “Freedom is the ability to choose what Mission you are owned by, often without knowing the rules of the road you progress onto, which is called...hmmm...”

“Life,” Professor (as she had been called in her homeland anyway) Lubinska replied, leading Stefan into an even more challenging forest containing foliage he had to use without identifying it. “To which we will drink!” she said to Stefan with her hoarse, baritone-like voice. Then to me, with her still, for reasons I couldn’t ascertain, hopeful eyes.

CHAPTER 12

As the cold spring of 1918 gave way to a muddy summer, and yet another poor national harvest in the fall, desertions from the Russian Army at the front outnumbered the conscriptions. The Kaiser and Austrian Emperor were winning more battles than they lost, at least on their Eastern Front. The Korinsky government in Petersburg and Moscow was unable to repair

in a few short months the damage done to the 95 percent of Russians who possessed barely 5 percent of the wealth by Czar Nicholas III and his predecessors for three centuries.

Why history had chosen Russia, the most backward country in Europe, to be transformed into a Worker's Paradise while the countries West of her borders still rigidly held on to Capitalism, I did not know. But, as kings and kaisers know, or should know anyway, keep the masses a bit hungry and you can buy them off with bread, cake and the occasional taste of baklava. Starve them, and they will rebel. Such was the fuel that was bringing the Bolsheviks into power in Russia. And as for what Russia was, that was changing as well. And who was in charge, that became a 'local' affair. As for the village, soon to be city, of Ivankovia, Stefan retained his position as Czar, President, Philosopher King and Comrade Commander. His ability to read minds, and sometimes hearts, resulted in few of the citizens of Ivankovia looking him in the eye when addressing their grievances. Yes, he did appear to listen to others, but did he merely hear them? He seemed to know more than he shared with me, or even Mrs. Lubinska.

Word spread rapidly about the new rules for buying oil, wheat and non-human meat from Ivankovia at the port. Those who needed it most were at the top of the list, something Stefan rigidly enforced. And for prices they could afford to pay, that was taken into active consideration, need for supplies taking precedence over the ability to pay for them. Local black market opportunists were quickly found out by Stefan, and they were intimidated or cajoled them into doing the right thing with the kind of efficiency I seldom saw in herds of humans. As to what civilians or soldiers got oil, wheat, furs, meat and other of Ivankovia's exports, national affiliations mattered less and less as the Summer merged into an uneasy Fall.

As the "War to end all Wars" was about to conclude its fifth and final act, a multitude of 'little wars' sprouted like toxic weeds as the revenge fest redefined international borders every week. It was not unusual for children to wake up in the morning and ask their mother 'what country do we live in now?', 'Are the new generals in charge of our town wanting us to stay or making us leave?' or 'what languages should we speak when we're in the streets so they let us stay here?' Fleeing bullets, tanks and artillery shells was hard. Running away from the Spanish flu and famine was harder.

More people in need of medical services found their way to Ivankovia than ever, drawn by rumors that there was free health care, new medicines and miracle doctors who knew how to administer them.

Thankfully, scientific berries didn't affect Stefan's exceptional, and now godlike, ability to put together flesh that war and disease had torn apart. The only fee Stefan demanded for making you healthy again was that you 'give according to your abilities and take according to your needs'. Payment for those with or without money started with a mandatory 2 week tour of community service duty in Ivanovia, to be continued with a two year assignment to do the same wherever you went afterwards. And if you didn't, the 'Santa Stefan' would use his clandestine connects elsewhere to be sure that life would be both miserable and horrible. Such was made believable to incoming patients by fellow patients who had returned to Ivankovia after neglecting his advice. .

To extend his Mission of saving lives so they could carry on the Vision of a world utopia, Stefan established a medical school in Ivankovia, converting the town hall into a hospital for wounded soldiers, nameless deserters and civilians in need, irrespective of the patients' religion, national affiliations, or political beliefs. Said patients were forbidden to give voice to them while conscious.

"But what about when they're under anesthesia?" 'Comrade Doctor Stefan's most valued medical student asked his boss as a wounded Ukrainian Socialist Nationalist damned the Bolsheviks to hell for excluding God and Jesus from their Revolution while fighting to repel the ether mask over his enlarged, recently broken nose. "And what happens if this rabid dog bites me with whatever teeth he still has?" the student grunted through a forced whisper while trying to use his 150 pound body to restrain the 250 pound bear on the still absentee former mayor's oversized desk, now converted into operating table.

"You don't bite him back, like you did the last patient, WE saved, Sasha," Stefan whispered to his son, while assisting him in restraining the abruptly reluctant patient.

“Which YOU saved, when....” Sasha replied to his father, after which he got a glimpse of the patient’s intestines spewing out of his abdomen. The 17 going on 7 lad then spilt his own guts out on the floor.

““Doctor Sasha, here is fully qualified to save your leg and what is left of your left arm,” Stefan assured the patient, taking over holding the mask covering his mouth and nose. “He has a stomach bug, is all.” Stefan tried to assure the patient under his struggling arms, which were one more push away from being thrown out of their sockets.

“All you doctors are liars!” came through bouts of blood covering the overgrown beard of the passion driven person who had become a patient, yet again, due to an escalated political dispute at the dock with a still Czar supporting (now called ‘White Russian’) blacksmith. “I want a real doctor!”

“Which I am,” Stefan assured him, somehow finding a way to use his 160 pound exhausted body to keep the nearly 300 pound bear on his back. “And with my best doctor,” he continued, motioning with his chin and penetrating eyes for Sasha to get his ass off the floor, and opinion of himself out of the dumpster, and take the thankfully unbroken bottle of ether and mask into his shaking hand. “And best nurse, Tanya!” Stefan yelled out, summoning his daughter clad in blood soaked ‘commoner’ smock, her long, blonde hair neatly tucked into a scarf. He directed her to gently take hold of the angry maybe Red or maybe White officer’s hand.

A smile came to the patient’s face as he looked into Tanya’s eyes, his own vision blurred. “Mother?” he said.

“Yes, indeed,” Stefan assured the exhausted soldier who most probably was on the run as a deserter from three different armies, having seen too many men on the battlefield see their most beloved women when they were deciding to live or die. “Mother who wants and needs you to relax, trust her,” Comrade Doctor Stefan added regarding Tanya, playing the role her father had assigned to her, with an unexpected sincerity. “And Sasha.” Stefan continued, cranking his head towards his son.

Yes, Sasha, his son, who would earn his way to becoming a doctor with all the prestige that goes with it rather than buy and fake his way into that, for the right reasons, position of social stature in any political system.

Tanya sang the ex-soldier looking for the right army to voluntarily join while Sasha used the ether to send him into hopefully a blissful dream state.

“And now?” Sasha asked his father. “Are you going to save him?”

“WE are going to save him,” Stefan asserted to his son. He instructed Mrs. (now head nurse) Lubinska to wheel in a tray of medical supplies to the table. They included scalpels, 20th and 18th century instruments soaked in grain alcohol, herbs, modern cleansing equipment and something from the modern world that seemed odd to most of even the most highly educated surgeons. Surgical gloves, which were purchased with either sale of petrol or by threatening the well being of a well fed crew manning an overstocked boat en route to an aristocrat’s estate, or a general’s private quarters. Neither I, nor Mrs. Lubinska got a straight answer when we asked questions regarding such.

“Are you sure he’s going to make it?” Sasha asked his father as the latter made him wash his hands in the newly installed sink, then glove up. .

“Yes,” Tanya said, while prepping the patient’s belly and arm, her recently blister-containing fingers shaking while doing such,. “You make all of these guarantees to everyone.and---”

“---So far, have delivered on,” Stefan interjected, taking scalpel in hand. He forced his eyes into a maximally wide position, letting in everything they could send to his brain so that all of the ‘data’ could connect in ways that only the intuitive soul can understand, or implement. “I promise that all that I say we can do, we will do. Including saving this man’s life, even though God and Mother Nature say it’s our place to let him go to his final resting place.”

“But how?” Sasha demanded to know. “Just a few month ago, and before you left for the War, you were so, you know---,”

“---Happy?” Stefan replied. He let out a reflective sigh, then focused those oculars on the patient’s flesh, and his own, for better or worse, ‘brilliant in the ways of the world’ soul. “Yes, I know...Now more than ever,” the hyper intelligent cynic added as he dared fate again. Knowing that the patient’s

condition was more bad than good. As was the world around him. But still, somehow, believing that one could make it good again. As long as you understood enough about the bad.”

CHAPTER 13

The grass behind Stefan’s house was less green and more scrawny than in the pastures owned by everyone else, but he insisted on me being there. “Because if you get too rich in the belly, you get poorer between the ears,” he told me. But both of us knew that it was the best way to see that no one would take revenge on him by doing harm to or stealing me. And, he needed to have some company after a long day of creating an independent, honorable and sustainable Camelot, its borders extending beyond the village borders under the noses of larger countries which had been established before the Great War. And those that were emerging as that War was coming to an end.

Inside the shack that had been converted to a house in her legal husband’s absence, Svetlana read the newspaper in her bedroom. “So,” I heard her say to Stefan as he strode into the room, taking off his boots, caked with a new layer of frozen late November muck.. “The Bolsheviks have officially taken over the Russian government, declaring that Russia is no more at War with Germany, giving to the Kaiser a third of European Russian land.”

“Which doesn’t include the People’s Democratic Kingdom of Ivankovia!” Stefan declared, with kingly pride, slipping out of his frost covered coat.

“And the Reds, as they now like to be called, have given away a third of the Russian and Ukrainian speaking people in Euro-Russia,” she noted. “Which we still are.”

“And will remain so,” he assured her in Ukrainian, and Russian, removing his tunic.

“And that Comrade Lenin will be restructuring the Army and the new Soviet society placing Good Communists on top. And selfish Capitalists on the bottom, along with Cossacks who lament the abdication of the still living

Czars,” she continued. “With power now being centralized in Moscow, where you have not been.”

“In body, yes,” Stefan replied, glancing in the mirror, combing the loose hairs on his enlarged Stalinesce mustache with a trace of a Leninesce goutee under it.

“So,” Svetlana said, playing down the newspaper. “How is it that you still wield as much power with judges, politicians and generals in Moscow now as you did when the aristocratic Czar was in charge, then the Moderate Socialist Mensheviks, and then, as you and they say, due to justice serving necessity, radical Revolutionary Bolsheviks?”

Stefan looked to me as to how to answer his still, for reasons I didn’t understand, beloved wife’s question. A wife who he used to share all of his secrets with. Who he now related less of his thoughts, feelings and plans to.

“You know, or should know, Stefan,” Svetlana interjected to break the ‘more not said than said’ conversation going on between me and the pathologically idealist Cossack I had converted into a cynic who kept more secrets than I, or Mrs Libniska, did. “For everything you say to me, there are ten things you don’t, my dear Stefan””

“Just returning the favor, my, for reasons I don’t understand, more dear Svetlana,” Stefan said to her reflection in the mirror. “And, as there are favors we can do for each other, and the world, perhaps we should get to...hmmm...business,” he stated, after which he unbuttoned his trousers, taking them off, then faced his wife, naked. “Now you, please,” he asked, gently.

“And if I don’t strip down and let you have your way with me, you’ll use your connections with Comrade Lenin to have me send to a Gulag, like, so it is said anyway, you did with other ‘criminals to the People’s Revolution’?” she barked back.

“People say things that, sometimes aren’t true,” he assured her. “But, could be true, out of necessity.”

“The necessity for you to be king of this ‘people’s paradise’ you say you are building here?” she challenged.

“Yes, to the motive, but not the office,” his reply. “Since, those who want to be king, president or prime minister shouldn’t be trusted with the job,” he mused. “And, as for my position here, I’m just as the Capitalistic Americans, who are about to abolish the Socialist experiment as part of an Imperialist expeditionary force, would say...a temp.”

Svetlana pretended to laugh.

“I’m only here now to see who was and still is the boss of a crooked, dishonest and people-harming ‘mafia’ that took over our town, our lives and your soul,” he explained. “And see that he, or she, will be....inactivated. Or, if possible, converted to a Higher Cause.”

“And fucking me you’ll be doing that job?” Svetlana shot back, folding her still clothes bearing arms.

“In the long run, maybe,” Stefan replied. “Since....I would like to leave this planet with children of my own. Whose genetics combine the best elements from you, Sventlana, and me and....”

“---That horse you keep talking to like he’s your lover, wife, mistress and mentor!” Svetlana barked back.

“He’s something else,” Stefan’s reply.

“Or ‘Professor’ Lubinska, whose reproductive system which---”

“---Was underused when she was young, and is now non-functional now that she is old,” Stefan interjected, with regret. “But, as for us...”

“Yes, we did love each other once, a long time ago,” Svetlana’s reply,

“And still can, and have to, please,” his reply, delivered with desperation and passion.

What Stefan said to Sventlana with his mouth or eyes after that, I didn't know. All I saw was the curtains on the windows being closed, by Sventlana, affording my only a view of their silhouettes. Her exposed breasts edged their way to Stefan's chest. Their lips merged into something...special, that I thought was gone from Stefan's emotional vocabulary. Or maybe he had found a way to trick less intelligent humans like Svetlana. Or 'dumb' animals like me.

CHAPTER 14

I've heard it said that just because everyone is out to get you, that is no reason to be paranoid. And there was no shortage of "Cossack Comrades" in Iankovia who wanted to 'get' Stefan. Most particularly his brother, Andrei. Who Captain Stefan, who had taken now to wearing Cossack warrior attire fashioned after the uniform of 17th century rebel Taras Bulba, had conscripted as a deputy corporal in his 'ARMY'. An Army which, in reality, numbered one masochist officer in search of masochistic Truth. And a conscript who passed along lies and a few truths from his now smarter brother, more interested in the money he got for delivering envelopes to people of power and influence outside of Iankovia than their contents, which he was unable to read anyway, given that he was dyslexic .

"So, who are we going to side with, Comrade Stefan?" Andrei, clad in more contemporary 'assimilated Cossack; civilian attire, asked his brother from atop his favorite horse, Natasha, while perusing the lowlands below the highest point in Iankovia. "The Reds from Moscow who want to invite us into their 'give according to your ability and take according to their needs' Socialist Experiment," he said looking to the clouds gathering under the Northern sky. "The Whites and their supporters from the West who want to welcome us into their 'free market' world where anyone can get as rich as he, or she, can," he noted glancing to the sun setting over the Steppes, conferring a golden hue over the horizon and the abundant fields of wheat and still pumping oil rigs. "Then there are the Blacks, as they call themselves," he continued looking to the West. "Anarchists who say that Democratic Socialism should have no rules, but each of their commanders will slit your throat if anyone violates or criticizes their 'suggested ways' to manage a village, city or town, or country." Looking further Westward he

continued, “Then there is the ‘Expeditionary forces’. The ‘good guys’ in the War against the ‘evil’ axis powers of Germany, Austria and Turkey. American, British, French, Czech, Greek and even some Japanese soldiers who are being informed that they have to neutralize the Reds and colonize Russia as well as Poland into ‘free states’ who will serve the Capitalists in Washington, London, Paris, Athens and Tokyo. Or,” he went on, looking southward, “The Ukrainian nationalists who see us as the petrol station and breadbasket of a THEIR new country. With its capital in Kiev. Which has changed hands six times in as many months, and no doubt will have six changes of flags flying over its Parliament Building before all of this is over. But...” he continued, looking at and, to the extent he could, into Stefan’s hyperactive brain through his now very open eyes. “You know that.”

“Yes, I do,” Stefan said, wishing he was still a naive Christian, Democratic, Socialist, Nationalist, Internationalist, Anarchist, and, if the dead Czars could be replaced, Benign Monarchist. ..

“So,” Andrei inquired of his brother as the latter nearly lost himself in reminiscent reflection. “What are you, or rather, ‘we’ trying to establish here?”

Stefan took in a deep breath lamenting, as I did, the ‘you have to go with ONE ideological option at the exclusion of all the others’ situation going on everywhere else in what used to be the Russian Empire. After coming to yet another conclusion he was keeping to himself, he allowed his pursed lips to merge into a smile. One that was kind and gentle, yet firm in its compassionate convictions. “What we are trying to build here is a democratic, Spiritual rather than Orthodox Christian Cossack village that combines the most effective and kindest elements of all ideologies,” he said, looking at his brother, while stroking my neck, as he knew I did have eyes that could see everything behind my head. “Which will bring back the traditional Cossack life to all Ukrainians, and Russians, if they want to come here.. And even Tatar Turks or Catholic Poles. And even, as we used to call them, ‘Christ Killer’ Jews. Who would not have to convert to being Orthodox Christians to stay here, establish their own businesses here, or marry one of ‘ours’ “.

“Including your daughter?” Andrei challenged. “While you give an interfaith sermon from the alter of your church, quoting the Koran, Torah, Bible and

Das Capital? And the US Constitution which guarantees the right to pursuit of happiness AND separation of Church and state?"

Stefan reflected on the challenge. Impressed that his anti-literate brother had actually learned how to read, or was being read to by someone other than himself. Maybe Mrs Lubinska. Or his (theoretically anyway) ex-mistress, Svetlana. Or someone else. Perhaps the real 'boss' of the Ivankovian mafia who was secretly waiting to retake Stefan's place as 'king' in a village that, in reality, had never had a fairly and freely elected leader, since the (theoretically, anyway) 'golden' Cossack days a hundred years ago.

"So, who do we sell our oil, wheat, livestock, horses and, if it comes to it, young boys who want to become soldiers to?" Andrei inquired. "The Whites, the Reds, the Anarchists, the Ukrainian Nationalists, or the even better armed victorious Expeditionary Forces who will soon discover that the stories about there being contagious plague, quicksand, boat swallowing undercurrents in the river and poisonous plants around this 'kingdom' of, as you say 'ours', are as false as the ability of that horse of yours to talk with you in 'human speak'?"

"We are untouched by the outside world as long as you keep spreading my messages to the people of power and influence," the Philosopher King of the newly established country of Utopia said to Andrei.

"And how are going to get what we really need when what we have runs out? With food we can't grow, machines we can't build, and books that you say we should all read?" the next challenge to Stefan's agenda.

'By you delivering my messages to those in need,' Stefan said. "Or those who are smart enough to NOT be nationalists, or any other kind of 'ist'. Those who have universal compassion for all in need, and not just to family, friends and fellow countrymen. And who will hold fair elections where whoever counts the votes does not want or need to be in power," the reply, delivered into Andrei's angry face.

Andrei's grimace turned into a smile, one that ridiculed Stefan's idealistic beliefs, and firmly held convictions. "You know," Andrei said with a surrogate paternal tone after a chuckle which his 'younger and formerly

dumber' brother ignored. "God protects fools. You are not a fool anymore," he said with a congratulatory tone, which abruptly turned into a challenging one. "And every time you go off to 'the wilderness to hear the voice of God without the chatter of his most frustrating and beloved creation' you come back more....distanced from the rest of us."

"Yes, I know," Stefan said, his head turned downward, with a sorrowful tone.

"The Lord above, for reasons I still don't understand, also protect drunks," Andrei said with breath reeking of vodka, offering his brother a swig from his canteen which was supposed to be filled with water.

"Yes, I remember being told that by our father, who lived longer than he deserved to," Stefan's reply as he refused the elixir that would make his brain stop thinking so fast and intensely, giving his soul a much desired rest.

"But as, for you, and maybe all of us, God is doing more watching than doing these days, I will take his place and protect you," Corporal Andrei said, placing his bear like paws on Stefans' shaking shoulders. "If that is alright with you, Comrade Captain."

"Yes, of course, Lieutenant Andrei," Stefan said to his brother. After which he pinned on his hand-made non-White and non-Red Russian Army tunic one of the medals given to him by Captain Ivanov. Stefan gave his brother a brisk salute, which was returned in kind.

"And, the next set of messages to deliver to the outside world, with a map as to where the recipient might be," Stefan said, giving his brother an envelope. "And..." he continued, taking a small vial of powder from his pocket, handing it to his brother.

"Someone who, perhaps, gave you this medal?" Andrei's reply.

I wondered how and why Andrei 'guessed' that it was inevitable for Captain Ivanov, and his former comrades in his Platoon from the great war to get access to the cloistered and resource rich village-kingdom of Iankovia. But

Stefan was sure that the answer was not something that I needed to know, especially because I wanted to know.

“You know,” Stefan said, placing his hand on Andrei’s shaking shoulder. “There is a reason why I asked you to contact the representatives from the Blacks, Reds, Whites, Nationalists and Expeditionaries who were my comrades in the Great War. Who, according to your information, are fighting each other now, right?”

“A strange coincidence, yes, but such is true,” Andrei said to his brother, truthfully this time.

“And that you,” Stefan replied, staring at and into the terrified sibling master who he now owned, “my once cruel but not by necessity kind brother guide them, and only them, to find their way here. Blindfolded”.

“So you can open their eyes?” Andrei inquired.

“Or shoot a bullet into them, if necessary. If what I, and only I, see what is behind them, because they are, now anyway...” Stefan replied.

“..Useful idiots?” Andrei inquired. “Like you used to be?”

“And am not anymore, thank, well...” Stefan said, removing his hand from Andrei’s shoulder, raising it up to the sky. “Whatever might be up there,” he continued. “Or, in here,” he added, placing his hand on his heart. “Or here,” he went on, tapping Andrei’s chest.

With that, Stefan trotted me down to the village square over dirt roads that finally were covered with easily breakable melting ice, while Lieutenant Andrei galloped his horse North by Northwest through the sufficiently but not excessively snow covered grasslands. The sun finally set, darkness coming over the Steppes faster than normal. The moon was determined to shine its way through the clouds over it. Which it did, thankfully for those under it. Some of those under it anyway.

CHAPTER 15

Order One, issued by the Petrograd Issue of Soviet Workers and Soldiers with the boldest of signatures back in March, 1917, did more than disallow officers to punish enlisted men if they didn't address them as 'Your Excellency'. It opened the door for every man, and woman, in uniform or standardized working attire, to think for themselves., Or be free to have their thinking changed by propaganda from officers and bosses from other than the Czar's Imperial Army, or the Czar. But when the last of the Romanov Dynasty abdicated, there was no common enemy for everyone in Russia to hate, fear or worship. It was now about ideologies based on what was written in books to be adopted by 'liberated' populations who, to an underestimated extent, didn't know how to read. In a war between at least four different sides that allowed NO one to be neutral. Anyone who dared to incorporate the best elements of different ideologies would be misunderstood, marginalized or shot.

Stefan, clad as an 18th century warrior Cossack doing summer haying, carried an extra bail of hay into the coral outside the tavern, which was officially closed to all but his specially invited guests for a post Christmas gathering. "It's a bit much, I know," he said to me as the weight of the square bail clogged whatever musicality in his voice still remained after his Scientifica-induced opening of the brain tissue that allowed him to see the dirt in people rather than the false rosy colored exterior. "But you aren't going to be the only horse in this coral soon," he continued after dumping the bail in front of my feet, then shaking his now foot long warlock in the middle of his freshly shaved head. "Andrei, who for reasons of practicality, is not allowed to sport a Cossack warlock because he has to seem to be an equal to non-Cossacks outside of our small and growing kingdom, will soon be bringing in the men who called me a hard working Comrade but who considered me an entertaining and medically necessary fool. And as is so often the case, you are what you ride. Therefore I apologize for the kind of equine company you'll have to keep when Andrei brings them here. I'll leave the window open so I can hear any problems you have with them. But, at least they are company. And for a horse, bad or boring company is better than no company, right?"

"I snorted a 'no, not in my case anyway,' to Stefan that he misinterpreted it as a 'yes'. Despite his He became more alone with every rising of an IQ point he grew in his rapidly thinking brain. Since he had taken it upon himself to make his home village of Iankovia a model independent state

that would eventually spread its Enlightenment to every other region of the now disintegrating Imperial Russian Empire, he was misinterpreting a lot I was trying to say to him, and show him. But there was one thing he did still understand. That the ideal feed for body, mind and spirit of any country was a mixture of Bolshevik corn, Christian Socialist molasses, White Russian barley, Anarchist oats and a generous proportion of Ukrainian Internationalism bran.

When indulging in a generous portion of such from the grain barrel he gave to me, a gentle flow of snowflakes fell from the grey sky. I wondered if the horses I would 'be in charge of would have the same kind of connection with their riders that I had with Stefan. As for that Connection, we were still Comrades in a very (to the world anyway) uncommon Cause with, for the moment anyway, enough common goals to keep us going, but with different strategies as to how to obtain those lofty yet globally necessary goals.

"I know," Stefan said to me as he patted me on the newly grown winter coat on my neck regarding what I was thinking and feeling. An idealistic smile abruptly came upon his face, the kind he had before I turned him into an altruistic and intelligence burdened cynic. "It's just you and me now, not against, but FOR the world!" he declared. "Starting with..." he pointed towards the first dinner guest emerging on horseback through a well wooded trail to the North of us. A blindfolded mounted Colonel wearing an Imperial Russian Army uniform with white bandages over the sleeves and several decals showing the double eagle coat of arms championing the Czar and his divine Right to rule, complimented by an Eastern Orthodox crucifix around his neck. A garment he wore with pride, perhaps because of its affiliation, or the medals pinned to his chest which blinded my eyes when the sun decided penetrate its rays through the clouds.

"You can take your blindfold off, Captain Ivanov, which I know you tried to take off before, despite your pledge not to," Stefan yelled out to the Colonel in a friendly tone to his former boss, superior and, sometimes anyway, protector. "And, as promised," he continued as he pulled out a large leather pouch from under his sash. "The gold, jewels and coins you were promised by my brother is yours to keep for yourself or share to your new superiors.""

“Which I will,” Ivanov said as he removed the blindfold. “Hand to God, Lieutenant Denosevic,” he said, raising his right hand in a pledge, his left angrily pulling away the reins of his horse away from Andrei’s grip.

“It’s HETMAN Denosevic!” Stefan exclaimed, with no shortage of pride or dedication, for the first time adopting the title of his revered Cossack ancestors. “Welcome to the free and international state of Iankovia, which I regret to inform you was not named after you, Nicholi Iankovia” he continued, after which he threw the overloaded purse to the promoted officer in the White Army officer.

Though the throw was catchable by any half blind boy, Ivanov’s thinly gloved hand could not hold onto the purse. Seeing the riches in jewels, nuggets and coin spread over the snow covered ground, Ivanov dismounted with a firm action of his right leg, then a painful extraction of his left from the stirrup, his horse seeing the opportunity to escape from rider. On his aching knees, the aristocratic born White Army Colonel who refused to bend down to pick up a kopek that had fallen to the floor when at headquarters or a chunk of stew meat that had dropped to the ground when at the front in (what would certainly be called) First World War desperately gathered the contents of the reward for coming for re-union dinner like a man who had not eaten anything other than weeds and leaves for weeks. And by the fresh wounds on arms, and way his tunic hung loose over his thin waist, he had indeed finally paid the price for his promotion and military honors. Was the always cool and collected aristocrat in such a state from having fighting Bolsheviks who stole from, acquired and burnt down the estates he had boasted about? Were his wounds incurred from fighting against the ‘godless communists’ who were burning down and looting churches his family had worshipped in and contributed to? Such was immaterial. It was no surprise that Ivanov had sided with the Whites when the Red Army declared itself the guardian of what had been the Imperial Russian Empire.

“So, what are we going to do with him?” I thought, and Stefan gave voice to, at the same time, regarding the militarily inept Imperial Army Captain who had rose up the ranks in the White Army to nearly the position of General so quickly, for reasons which, for now, were irrelevant. “I’m offering you a post as a General in the Army of the Republic of Ivankovia, ‘Comrade Colonel,’” Stefan said with a confident grin and upturned chin,

having put an angry grimace on Ivanov's for the first time in Stefan's memory, stubble covered face. "A joke, your Excellency' Hetman Stefan continued with a courtly bow.

"Will I get another bag of these?" Ivanov asked regarding the wealth in his pocket which, maybe he would take back for his fellow Whites, or keep for himself due to the fact that now most Armies were paid more in loot than monetary pay promised by their idealistic commanders. As for monetary currency, with the exception of American dollars or British Pounds, such was becoming more worthless each day due to runaway and intentionally created inflation. But there was another brand of currency other than food which was becoming more valuable each day. "And if I decide to join this Iankovian Army of yours," Ivanov pressed. "Will I get a horse who knows that his place is between my legs and not three feet away from me whenever I try to catch him," he continued as he futilely tried to catch the black mare he rode in on. An overworked, in season Morgan with granulated wounds on her left hip and right neck, who seemed to be more interested in me than any conversation between her 'master'.

I didn't have the heart to tell the mare that my breeding days were over, voluntarily. I'd find out later what she heard, or understood, from her most recent master about the War going on outside of Ivankovia which had taken the lives of so many people, and horses.

"Private, I mean, Hetman Stefan," Ivanov begged of my 'master' after four failed tries to grab the black mare's reins, the fifth landing Ivanov's ass then face in the mud and manure soaked snow in the coral. "How did you find me? And why did you find me!?" he demanded. "And tell me a few magic words that can make this horse listen to me, please."

"I will," Stefan said, with more arrogance than pride. "But first you have to reach an agreement," he continued. "With him."

"YOUR horse? Achilles?" Ivanov asked.

"No, him!" the new Hetman said, pointing the decorated White Army Colonel to a plainly clad blindfolded ride of the same rank in a uniform identical to his, with the exception of the lack of epilates on the shoulder,

medals on the chest and double eagle insignia, on his cap, the latter replaced by a Red Star.

With quick reflexes, fueled by alacrity you could see and fear you could smell, Ivanov pulled out his revolver, pointing it at the next blindfolded guest Andrei escorted in from another holding area beyond a cluster of snow covered pine trees. Ivanov's use of his weapon was halted by a slap of Stefan's fist on his former commander's wrist. Ivanov's weaponless hand turned into a clenched fist.

"Any thoughts of using that pistol or any other weapon against Achilles, and the next slap will be done with this, Comrade Excellency Sir!", Stefan barked out, whipping out his sabre.

"Fine," Ivanov blurted out as the blindfolded Red Army officer's horse was led into another coral. "But his Bolshevik Devils burnt down my estate. And took into custody any servant who wouldn't join their Army. An estate which my father built with his own hands from the ground up!"

"Hands that had no blisters on them, while supervising servants who did the work!" the rider screamed as he was guided in towards the tavern, then helped off his horse. "And those servants are being re-educated to serve themselves and the Collective rather than an aristocratic class of bourgeoisie capitalists who owned 95 percent of the wealth and land! Aristocrats who when asked if they could share just half of what they stole from the people said they wouldn't! And when you Whites came to MY village to try to own it and its people again, at the point of a gun, and to burn it to the ground if we didn't tell you where the Christian Socialists were, we----"

"Seargent Boyco?" Ivanov gasped, finally recalling where he had heard the voice before.

"Comrade Colonel Boyco," the former Seargent under Ivanov's command boasted, allowing Andrei the honor of pulling off his blindfold. "Who didn't have to take off this blindfold to see where we were heading."

"Because you could see through it?" Ivanov grunted. "And because well...maybe you were promised a private reward if you came here alone,"

he continued as Boyco was given his 'post Christmas dinner' giftbag. Upon seeing it, Boyco's eyes opened wider than any time he had 'stumbled' onto booty in the Great War as a supply Sergeant who kept a generous 'finder's fees' for himself before sharing it with the men he was charged to keep fed, clothed and sheltered. "I'm sure being a man of wealth now, you'll share it with the Collective."

"Yes, he will," Stefan interjected.

"No, he won't," Ivanov shot back. "The Marxist Credo that even you, Hetman Denosevic, kept saying is 'each gives according to his abilities and takes according to their needs'. An ideal that doesn't take place outside of the library. The person who works harder and smarter deserves to have more than the person who is lazy or stupid"

"Stupid according to your definition of it, still 'Captain' Ivanov?" Boyco shot back. "You keep the working men tired, overworked and illiterate by denying them the time, money and dignity to read, Or to think for themselves. And when they start to think for themselves, because of finally getting fed up with being under fed, and seeing their children starve, while yours dine on gourmet meals we cook, we prepare and we clean up afterward, those working men, and women---"

"Destroy everything Holy and Righteous!" Ivanov screamed out. "Like this!" he continued, grabbing hold of the crucifix around his neck.

"Jesus was a Communist!" Boyco pointed out.

"Said by a godless Communist wants to ban all religion,"

"Because religion as it is practiced now by the rich priests is toxic! The poor are supposed to suffer here on earth, while you rich are allowed to enslave and steal from them, so that the poor and enslaved will get their reward in Heaven?" Boyco blasted out. He took in a deep breath, then fired out another round. "YOUR Jesus said that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into Heaven. Unless of course, that rich man gives a small 'gift' to the Church in exchange for the priest giving him a special ticket to enter Paradise, while that rich man continues to steal from anyone he can. Because he is a caring man of

course. Caring for the needs and wants of his own family at the expense of everyone else's!" No....what we need is universal compassion for everyone. That everyone is the collective. Which is served by---

"---Freedom," came from a voice of another blindfolded rider escorted to another corner of the coral. "Freedom from oppression from EVERYONE. Freedom from ALL government and rule made by government. Including Bolshevicks, Socialists and Libertarians who think we need a rule book to rule ourselves fairly and compassionately."

"Vlodmir Melmyk!" Boyco and Ivanov blurted out of the dropped jaws in unison upon seeing the third guided rider taking off his blindfold.

"Anarchy is the only solution, with ALL men, and women being free to do and say what they want," Melmyk said as he leaped off his horse, every stitch of his clothing, including his medal free leather coat, pitch black. "I suggested to a Red Army 'morale' officer that even though religion is the opiod of the masses, everyone has the right to privately overdose on the toxin of their choice. As a suggestion cloaked as a joke. Which got me this!" he said of a fresh red scar on his forehead. "And when I went behind the back of the new White Russian Mayor after his goons took over my village, to give the food they stole from the Reds to the people who are starving most first, I got this," he continued, laying his finger on and into a slash on his cheek which extended into his mouth. "After which he said that the Russian Empire can only be restored to its former greatness, which in reality was anything but great by---

"---Foreign intervention," came from another escorted rider and dinner guest, in a refined businessman's accent. He was dressed in a three piece tweed European suit with a tie, much like that of pictures I saw of Vladimir Lenin when he was giving speeches to workers clad in factory overalls. "From foreign investors and benefactors, who some say are invading our country but who we need to save it from itself" he continued, pointing miniature flags of the US, Great Britain, France and Japan on his lapel. The crown of his head was bald as a lemon, reflecting the sunlight that shone upon it with a painful to look at glare, much like the Lenin's. But when his larger than his full faced blindfold was taken off there was no moustache and goatee under it. Only the fair, unwrinkled skin of a man no more than thirty years old.

“Corporal Olek Koval?” Ivanov blurted out.

“Who finally lost all of his hair,” Boyco added, with a chuckle.

“And the brains under it,” Melmyk added with a laugh. “You really think that the Americans, Brits, French, Japanese and the ‘we established democracy first’ Greeks are invading our country to save us from the Red Terror so they can establish Free Market Capitalism that serves US? Whatever they set up will serve THEM, not us. And we’ll become chopped up into colonies of their countries like China was. Fifty years ago, baldy?”

“My people can fix this!” Koval protested. He pointed to his head after gaining control of his feet on the mud, snow and manure covered ground with his newly shined Italian leather shoes. “And as for my hair, no grass grows on busy streets.”

“That can use some overpasses,” came from another rider. “I can loan you one of these,”: Dimitri Sokolov said, pointing to a collection of scalps on a necklace he pulled out from under his shirt once he was relieved of his horse and blindfold. This time by Sasha, Stefan’s son. Whose authentic Cossack clothing was starting to fit his eyes. “Scalps from, well, all of you deluded idealists,” Sokolov continued. “Which keep me warm in winter. Taken from dead people only, since I DO have a moral code.”

“That you can take whatever you want from anyone else, Dmitiri?” Melmyk barked into the exchange of ideals and ideas.

“Which you are free to do also,” Sokolov, the former collector of ears, eyes and other body parts from Austrian soldiers during the last War to end all wars, pointed out. “Including, citizen Melmyk, you taking over the leadership of the Anarchist Movement which, on paper, says there should be no leaders. But in reality is---”

“---Part but not all of the solution we all will come up with, and implement, here and everywhere else,” Stefan offered, and affirmed. “And, ‘gentlemen’, are you part of the solution, or do you want to continue to be part of the problem?”

Something in what Stefan said, or didn't say, resonated with his guests, all of whom were given purses of equal size and content as a 'thank you' for coming. They looked at, then into, each other. Somehow finding again the people they were when they were fighting in the Great War against a common enemy. For a common Cause---survival. Men who had saved each other's lives for a reason that had nothing to do with the ideologies they had now pledged exclusive loyalty to.

"Now then," Stefan said. "The pouches you have been given are yours to keep, and share. The only thing I ask of you is to share a meal with me."

"And if we're not hungry?" Ivanov, emaciated from grief as well as hardship, proposed.

"Or we have other places to liberate, conquer or loot?" Boyco added.

"Then, hmmm," Stefan said putting his hand over his mouth, averting his eyes. He whistled. Behind each of the visitors stood ten armed Iankovians. Some clad as Cossacks, Some as 'assimilated' Ukrainian villagers. All armed with guns, bows, swords and determined eyes.

"You're bluffing, still Private Denosevic,," Boyco sneered at Stefan, representing the group's mutually arrived at opinion on the matter.

"Maybe I am, or maybe I'm not, but....maybe you can ask them," Stefan said, as his daughter Tanya, pulling in a light cart upon which was a pot of freshly prepared stew with five plates and bowls. She offered a taste of it to Boyco, being sure that his bowl was contained a generous portion of meat.

"Ask him or them if I'm bluffing," Stefan calmly related, pointing to the pieces of meat in the stew.

Boyco didn't have to taste the meat to determine it was of human origin. He allowed himself to be guided into the private dining hall by Stefan's wife, Svetlana. The rest of the politically mixed congregation followed, the door closing behind them.

How Stefan had made chicken meal smell like human meatballs, I didn't know. Maybe the stew meat really was chicken. I didn't know what he was prepared to do for, with, or to his dinner 'guests'. But, as in all marriages, friendships or mortal-Deity relationships, each party had their secrets. Some of which, dangerously, they didn't know they had. Maybe one of the other now riderless horses in the coral would give me a clue. Or, maybe not.

CHAPTER 16

As promised, Stefan did leave the window open to the main room of the tavern converted into a royal dining hall providing the attendants to imbibe in authentic deluxe Cossack cuisine along with no shortage of other dishes that represented the best culinary accomplishments of no less than six Western European countries. . He left the curtains open so I could see everything as well. Every one of the special guests were relieved of every weapon they came in with, except their mouths. The most effective instrument to secure peace or implement war for humans, as I recall lifetimes in that, theoretically anyway, most perfect of biological bodies.

The most intelligent people talk about ideas and ideals, those of lesser intellectual development rant about events (politics and sports) and those with least mental abilities or moral fiber blabber about who did what to who and what they were wearing at the time.

Though Stefan tried to keep the conversation about ideals and ideas, such got perverted into rigid political ideologies. Then downgraded into a plethora of 'who did what to who' reasons for Stefan's old Army 'buddies' to have chosen different sides in what was now a Civil War. With each side fighting for superiority as to whose political experiment would be tested first. As for what they were wearing at the time, that was the determining factor as to WHY each of the five comrades who kept each other alive during the (as it was being named now) Great War, were honor and contract bound to convert, subjugate or kill each other. If a platoon of Whites burnt down your farm, you enlisted into the first Company of Red Soldiers that came your way while carting away your remaining belongings. If the Reds killed your son, you joined the Whites. If you were imprisoned by the Whites and the Reds, you became an Anarchist or Ukrainian Nationalists. If you were too Christian for the Reds, you joined the

Expeditionary forces from other countries who wanted to colonize the Russian Empire. If you lost faith in God and all of the well intended but badly executed Political Causes, the Party of your choice was you. The only mandate being to steal from whoever you could without getting caught, and kill or be killed no matter who came into your domain. Most tragically, and most often, if an army decided to conscript you into its ranks, even though your ideology and former affiliation was not theirs, it was an offer you couldn't refuse. But the terms of the deal were that if you deserted, the reward for such bravery, or common sense, was a bullet to the back or a noose around your neck. Or worse, those 'gifts' being bestowed on members of your family.

The idea of combining political ideologies and applying them on a case by case basis made sense to me, as well as Stefan. How to make that happen....well, that was the beginning of the difference between us that creative a Civil War of wits and wills between us, and within each of us.. And it started with Stefan closing the windows to the tavern, as well as the curtains. Leaving me in charge of the dinner guests' horses. And all of the belongings on them.

CHAPTER 17

As far as I could tell, the other horses in the coral were more interested in food than conversation. In the language of my present body, I asked them where they came from and what they thought of their human masters, but got nothing back. They seemed to be conversing with each other in another language. One that maybe I would be able to understand if I was smarter. So, just like when your belly is empty, you feed it with hay, when your mind is in need of more abilities to understand itself and the minds of others, you get more Scientifica.

The fence around the coral was tall enough to keep even an 18 hand Thorobred within its perimeter. And solid enough so that a donkey would have to develop the ability to dig a tunnel to get out. But there was one thing that the humans who spoke only the languages of their own species didn't figure on. The ability of a horse to use its mouth to grab hold of a latch to open the gate. When it was my turn to 'stay awake' and stand guard for my assigned herd against wolves or pesky humans, it was around midnight. I used the opportunity to open the gate. It took far less effort than

I thought was necessary. Noting that my equine companions had their feet locked into slumbering positions, or were laying on the soft ground after filling their bellies with hay, I snuck out and made my way to the Scientifica pasture, closing the gate behind me. Past drunken people, and slumbering animals under the light of a moon that showed me the way for ten strides, then hid behind the clouds requiring me to smell the path forward for the next 30. Eventually, after only circling three times, I found the oil rich pasture and electrified ground where Scientifica grew. Not sure if it was north of where I had left, or south, east or west of such, as the four directions become more like 16.

Yes, I did find Scientifica in abundance there. But not in the ground. Every berry and branch was now in a sac carried by one man. "It's up to me to control this plant and what it does," this time," Stefan said to me. "With small portions to people I don't mind, bigger portions to those who I like, and NONE of it to anyone else, including you."

"Why?" I asked him, in Equinese.

"Because a political system is only as good as the people, or person, in charge of it," his reply as he stepped towards me, his boots creating a bigger footprint somehow with each stride. "And that person is me," he declared, stroking me on the neck with a hand that felt like it belonged to someone else. "Us if you do as I command, ask and request from now on."

"Absolute power corrupts, absolutely," I thought and had experienced on more than one occasion as the strongest and healthiest horse in at least five herds after my human soul had incarnated into the womb of the pregnant mare I had been riding, and to be truthful, abusing, as a human. I wanted to scream it at Stefan, but, after ingesting an elephant size portion of Scientifica, he said it for me,

"Yes, absolute power corrupts absolutely," he declared. "But someone has to be on top, and someone on the bottom. And, you may ask, what determines in a noble society who is on top and who is on the bottom?"

"The cruel hand of Mother Nature or the merciful intervention of Spirit big S?" I snorted back.

“No!” Stefan screamed into my face, in the manner that his fellow lankonians who didn’t know my human origins did. . “The person on top, or just below being on top, is measured by how effectively he unites those below him against a common enemy! That common enemy being....” .

“Who?” I snortled.

Lord and possibly executioner Stefan broke into mad laughter which become a belly laugh that landed him on the ground, then catapulted him to his feet. After which, before I could anticipate his actions, he slipped a halter on me, jumped on my back and kicked on my flanks. ‘Forward!’ he commanded.

This time, I didn’t obey. I reared up, landing on my feet to find Philosopher-King Denosevic still on my back. My attempt to run with a ducked down head resulted in Stefan anticipating such. He pulled my head upward, then turned me painfully to the left, into a circle that made my feet throb with pain, exhausting my lungs till I finally came to a stop. “Like I said,” the man who was nothing like the one who I had mentored, and loved, whispered softly, pointing his pistol at me head. “Forward, please.”

I obeyed him this time, moving forward at a collected trot. Thinking with each step how I could set right the experiment I set in motion. Hoping that the new puppeteer on my back was not reading my thoughts. And collecting them into a plan of action before I could.

CHAPTER 18

“The rules in this game are simple,” Stefan said to his hungover reunited dinner guests after waking them up from their beds with a breakfast of cold winter air on their naked chests, stripped of the tunics and coats that defined their political affiliation, along with and the medals and insignia which determined how valued they were by their bosses in Moscow, Washington, London, New York and Paris. “To your right, wolves in a cage are armed with sharp teeth and a healthy appetite for human meat,” he said moving towards an enclosure on the North side of the tavern. “To your left, up a steep hill, buried under a rock that no one man can uncover, your firearms, which you can use to kill these old and sick rabid wolves, each other or, if you want to---”

“---You?” Boyco blurted out, through the frost on his overgrown mustache. “Who stole our weapons and uniforms after putting something in the vodka other than alcohol?”

“You...still PRIVATE Denosevic, who insisted we toast each other for surviving the War,” former Captain Ivanov spat out of his mouth, doing his best to not show how cold and scared he was.

“And who locked us in the dining room, ordering us to put together a constitution that contradicted itself every other paragraph?” Melnyk grumbled.

“Then tricked us into signing ‘birthday cards’ that were actually papers that said we disagree with everything the Army we were in stood for?” Koval stuttered from lips shaking with fear as well as cold.

“Which you said your brother will take to our leaders if we don’t freely embrace your brand of government, Democratic Socialist-Christian-Libertarian King-Stefan,” Sokolov pointed out, his hot rage making him oblivious to the cold. “Which is...”

“Something I haven’t completely figured out yet,” Stefan related, and confessed. “But I’m not a King, my potential friends, I am...”

“...a God now?” Boyco blasted back. “Who promised to give ‘the most worthy’ of us Godlike powers? In a world where God doesn’t exist anymore.”

“But those who have guns do exist, Petrov,” former Captain, now White Army Colonel Ivanov said, pointing the ex-Seargent and now Red Army Colonel to a row of Iankovian citizens of all ages and both genders appearing on the roofs around them As well as spectating from their balcony seats in the trees between the starting point of the race from the wolves, and the weapons under the heavy rocks.

“And maybe don’t want to kill us, Boris?” Koval said, referring to his former commanding officer and now enemy combatant by his Christian name.

“But will,” Melnyk added. “If their duly NON-elected President Denosevic says so. For...what, national security, Stefan?”

“Yes,” Stefan replied, calmly. “A former village idiot who turned into something else has to do what he has to do.”

“And how did that happen, Stefan?” Melnyk asked. “None of us will move from this spot in this gladiator game until you tell us, right?”

Four heads nodded ‘yes’ to the assertion, all at once. Such pleased Stefan, putting a smile on his face. A kind one. But it seemed too kind.

“So?” Melnyk pressed. “If we play this game, you’ll tell the survivors how and why you became who you are?”

“Yes, at the right time,” Stefan said. “My hand to God!” he asserted lifting his hand up. Of course I didn’t believe him. “And on the eyes of my closest friend, and comrade,” he said as he stroked my neck. I let myself believe that. Part of it anyway. “But, we’re wasting time,” he continued, after which he requested his son Sasha to hand him a stopwatch. On the count of ten, you, gentleman, run,” the once young man said to the men who had been his superiors in command and worldly abilities. “And on the count of three, by necessity, they will,” Stefan continued, pointing to the cage of growling wolves. “Fellow Citizens! From twenty!” Servant of the People Stefan yelled to his loyal, and I hoped not drugged, blackmailed or manipulated by fear or greed, fellow Iankovians.

The countdown echoed from one side of the village, each of the numbers melting into the other. On the count of ten, the gate holding in the five captive men was opened. With still unwet trousers, they ran into the woods, each slipping on the mud, the ones standing helping each other get up. Running towards the weapons with speed and determination as a team. As the countdown came to five four then...

On the count of three, Stefan let the wolves out of their cage. On top of the hill, five men bare to the waist, covered with mud which made them all look like the same grunts in one army held their weapons, aiming it at the wolves as they approached the woods. The men fired, their rounds replaced by blanks. Stefan whistled, causing the wolves to stop dead in

their tracks. He said something in 'wolf' that seemed to be 'lunch time'. The wild wolves turned into passive dogs, trotting back to Stefan, who rewarded them with chunks of dried beef from the saddlebag that was strapped on my back.

"You all passed, for now," Stefan announced to his dinner guests. "Andrei led a contingent of still armed Iankovians to the shivering compadres, bringing them their clothing. Insisting that each man wear an ensemble of wardrobe representing all of the ideologies.

"What if you didn't whistle to the wolves in time, and if they didn't help each other from the muck?" I thought and was about to give voice to into Stefan's ear.

"Any objections to anything else I do, and it will be your meat in their mouths, by necessity" Stefan calmly whispered to me regarding the wolves who, prior to Stefan's 'education', indulged in a diet consisted of domestic human and horse meat more than wild rabbit. "All by necessity, my friend" he continued. Making me think that it was safer being King Stefan's enemy than his friend. As I realized that if advancement of mind is faster than that of heart, the result is NOT effective compassion but something else.

CHAPTER 19

Stefan kept the last supply of Scientifica, (that I knew about anyway) in Ukraine, Russia and most of the rest of Eastern Europe in a locked box in the Presidential Cabin build behind his house. To keep the elixir within the berries and leaves from breaking down, he devised a way to convert it to a powder which, when he tested it on himself, was even more potent than when it was found in its natural state. Through an open window in his cabin, which was viewable by only me and a few curious four legged onlookers in the woods behind me, I noted him putting the powder into neatly portioned bags labelled according to their weight, then placing them as if it was volatile dynamite, into what looked like a worn out treasure chest from the outside, secured with a padlock. One which was coated with a substance I could not identify but, as tested by Stefan, would burnt

the hands of anyone who dared try to figure out the combination without gloves, or a lot of time. The steel walls to the treasure chest were impenetrable by any weapon I knew about. And as for the toxin he put in various compartments around the combination lock, well, more than one rat who decided to much on it wound up as coyote meat with an exit from life with seizures that lasted an hour before it separated everything above the neck from below it.

Stefan kept secret an ever changing list as to who would be given Scientifica and in what doses. A key element in determining who got what involved setting up more various 'games' with the citizenry of his kingdom and the five soldiers from his past. One was to see who would be more humane and effective at leading a coup against Stefan, setting himself up to be the common enemy. And of course there were others equally as intricate as the one he played on, and for, his five old Army buddies, the result being that they became Stefan's best friends. One of the people on the list of non-recipients of Scientifica was, as I expected, Svetlana. His wife who, for reasons I could not understand, came to love Stefan more each day, while he fell into indifference to her with equal intensity at the same rate.

It wasn't that Stefan hated his wife, or considered Svetlana 'inferior'. Indeed, when I did see her making love to him, be it in bed with her still youthful and alluring body or with a special dish she had prepared, (the magical ingredient of 'love') converting even the simplest dishes she prepared into a gourmet meal worthy of any five star restaurant in Paris, or even with a smile after kissing him on the cheek, or lips, his 'thank you' smile was always forced. And, for all the wrong reasons, convincing to her. Perhaps he had outgrown the endorphin of love and was not addicted to the naturally manufactured, and highly addictive 'joy of discovery'. A 'joy' which had no element of happiness to it but..something else. Such is what I know happened to me after ingesting too much Scientifica in both human and animal form. Practicality trumped sentimentality, thinking loomed over feeling. Have to's became infused into want to's such that one could not tell the difference between the two. Made even more challenging when progressively higher 'Callings' came into the mix..

"A proper Cossack woman is a loving mother who will give us many sons and daughters," he would say of Svetlana as well as no less than 20 other

Iankovian women who smiled 'good morning' to him while making the rounds in the village which was as rich as any city in Europe. And more secure from invasion by any of the warring parties who wanted to inflict their ideology in the Russian Civil War than any county in the wilds of Siberia or canton in Switzerland. The physical fences around Iankovia involved everything from a network of deep pits covered with a thin layer of what seemed to be solid ground, to quicksand containing swamps provided by mother nature, to electrified wire that send a bolt of lightening into the brains of those who touched it, causing them to forget where they were, and who they were, as well as of course snipers hidden in trees who fired warning shots at unwelcomed intruders. Then there were also the stories about Swiss-trained Professor Doctor Petrovitch and his students who used lie detector machines to interview all refugees in need of shelter, medical aid or food who electrocuted anyone whose bleeding heart stories were found out to be false, their bodies fed to his lab rats. But, I getting back to the story that I intended to tell you, kind, gentle and I hope honest reader.

No one seemed to mind Stefan having several wives, and if they did, no one said anything about it. The many women in his life as a 'mature' adult, complete with pre-maturing grey hair in his warlock and overgrown mustache, who shunned him as an inferior lad five years ago all seemed to love him. But, who wouldn't love being made love to by a god? And one who somehow was able to give his flock everything they needed and wanted. Except for one thing...

"Free choice and an equal opportunity to be as intelligent and powerful as you can be, and deserve to be, you are thinking and are about to say, Achilles?" Stefan said to me on a 'pleasure ride' around the expanded borders of still oil, mineral, wheat and livestock rich Iankovia inspecting the various new gates, fences, traps and manufactured quicksand keeping dangerous people from coming in, and useful ones from getting out. "Yes, I can read your thoughts now as well as or better than you were able to read mine," he continued, leaning down over the right side of my neck when he brought me to an abrupt halt after finishing his rounds.. . .

True, I did weight five times more than Stefan did and was ten times more muscular, but it was him in (for the moment anyway) human form who had the most powerful of weapons. Hands that were able to grab things with an apposable thumb. An appendage that horses had lost as they evolved.

Each time I figured out a way to toss him off my back, to take him on a run to where I thought he should go, his human hand pulled on the reins. Gone were the days when he would ask me at a fork in the road whether to go right or left. But gone would be Stefan and his dream for an Enlightened Iankovia, and by extension an Enlightened world if I didn't do SOMETHING. Particularly at this moment.

With eyes that could still see behind me, I noted something in his ocular portholes. A blank stare. Somehow the visionary who said, most particularly to stagnant souls, 'the only real rest is in motion itself' froze. His breathing was so faint that the cool air leaving his dropped jaw hadn't enough breath in it to turn into fog. .

I snortled, in the attempt to wake him up from whatever nightmare or demonic vision he was experiencing while still awake.

"I know," he replied. "Time to go home, or what used to be such anyway." With the lightest of touches, he nudged my flank. Letting me choose the course back to the windowless 'Presidential cabin' in back of his family's house."

For the first time since we met, Stefan was not a rider, but a passenger on my back. Passively letting me pick the route and the pace. I ambled along at a slow trot, sensing that he did have enough active brains in his ass to stay seated in the saddle. He muttered incoherent words and expletives that were not in any language I had spoken as a human or heard as horse. Until I, and (in body anyway) he arrived at our final destination.

A crowd was gathered there to greet Stefan. Every Iankovian who could emit a melodic note or blast out an off-key refrain from a wide smile sang Happy Birthday to Stefan, feeling happy, secure and fulfilled. In love with each other, and even more so with Stefan. Perhaps they had a meeting and figured out that the games me played with and on them were FOR them. Their benefit, that is. Such now included all of his 'last war buddies and 'current war adversaries' who by some miracle had not yet killed each other due to their previous political affiliations. In response to such, Stefan woke up from his nightmare, and smiled in a way that convinced everyone walking on two rather than four legs that he was one of them. When he never could be one of them ever again.

I could, in that moment, feel and read his thoughts as he and I assessed where he was prior to the scientifica induced transformation I inflicted on him, and afterwards. His vigilant gaze scanned every face in the singing, dancing and adoring Iankovian crowd, which included of course many more 'immigrants' who considered themselves Iankoians. All sharing the Bliss of the Eternal Now. He worried about how this volcanic miraculous eruption of laughter and mirth could be sustained in the future.

I could hear his thoughts, which he gave voice to as well, one matching the other word for word. "All I wanted when I was the village idiot, kept alive because I was a master surgeon and animal trainer who they needed for their material needs, was to be part of this magnificent family. I was banished then because of my never seeing the 'bad' in people. And now that I can see all the potential bad in people, and am their leader, I am banished from being part of their family yet again." After a solemn deep breath of painful self-appraisal, he went on, still mounted, while looking at the corner of my eye. "Something that perhaps you, Achilles, experienced with every horse herd you joined or was conscripted to be in," came from his lips as he stroked my tired neck. "And maybe experienced as a human soul before you were forced into an animal body?"

I snortled back an affirmative and comradery 'yes' to all of the above. A bonding moment which was interrupted by Stefan diverting his gaze to something on the other side of an opened window in his Presidential cabin..

"The lock on the most important treasure chest is on the floor now!" he grunted to me, restraining his voice. "Who opened it?"

His perusal of the faces in the adoring collection of citizenry turned sinister. His attention went on and into every soul present, the accusatory thoughts behind his mind-reading brain remaining hidden to everyone present. As, no doubt, he considered who was absent. Or who had become a better mind reader and 'bad thought' reader than he was, courtesy of what had been in the old treasure chest reinforced to become a small vault. The one containing not gold, silver, coins or diamonds but Scientifica,, The last supply of such that was present in Ukraine and the rest of what had been the Russian Empire, to the best of my knowledge and experience anyway.

“Stefan, come join the dance in your honor, my love!” his wife Svetlana exclaimed. She meant every word of it, despite the fact that she noubt knew that at least ten other women had shared their bed, and heart, with him.

“Yes! Join the dance!” everyone else gave voice to.

Stefan faked his most convincing smile, saying to the crowd, “Yes, after I take evacuate my bowels and bladder. And change my boots so I don’t step on everyone’s feet! And retrieve the gift that I prepared for all of YOU on this special day!” he proclaimed. He dismounted, then strolled with wide strides, being sure to not let anyone see him run in desperation towards the cabin. His back turned to the adoring crowd, but not me, his smile turning into hate infused grimace. Primal rage entered his entire being after he opened the door and entered the ‘office’ which no one was allowed entry to, gently closing the door behind him.

I remained outside of course, edging my way to an open window, discretely looking at Stefan when he didn’t think I had eyes on him. After putting on a pair of gloves, he picked up the padlock from the floor. Then opened the chest that was unopenable.

It was gone! All of the Scientifica that Stefan had collected. His bridled rage turned into primal fear.

It is said that the response to a wild animal, or worse, ferocious fellow human, when your inner or outer life is threatened is fight or flight. Wolves do the former. We horses usually do the latter. What Stefan did next was a terrifying combination of both.

CHAPTER 20

Wearing new boots that would not injure any feet he accidentally stepped on with his now completely music-less feet, Stefan filled a ‘Santa bag’ with money, jewels and sellable for top dollar ancient ‘trinkets’ along with exotic foods, placing them in the communal pot for the fund to ‘Enrich, Enlighten and Educate Iankovia now and the rest of the World very very soon’. He was offered and shared hugs while watching and hearing, but not listening

to, the orchestra of fiddles, mandolins and drums with so many people that their faces to him became blurred. Declaring that it was a surprise boost for the local economy that was unexpected, an early 'tax refund', Stefan, and I, watched to see how hungry the citizens who, for real, had given what they could in service, were taking from the communal pot for their needs, and a few allowable wants. Theoretically, those who took small portions from the pot were already super rich between their ears, courtesy of the scientifica they had, on purpose, or by accident, ingested. Such was our working hypothesis anyway.

There was no shortage of suspects as to who broke into or indulged in what was in Stefan's most valued treasure chest. There wasn't one person in Ivankovia who 'Citizen Comrade President' Stefan didn't intimidate, trick or blackmail into being better people. Theoretically it was only me, a few well fed frogs, birds and field mice and Stefan who knew Scientifica's powers to catapult anyone who was at the bottom of the social pyramid up to and beyond the top of it. But as we all know, or should know, the most obvious theories are the ones that prove themselves to be wrong, particularly at the wrong times.

From the various vantage points I observed my still somehow best friend celebrate the first annual (as it was deemed now) 'Feast of Saint Stefan'. I saw something in Stefan's face that I didn't before. Fear,, or rather paranoia, of being topped by someone who had indulged in too much Scientifica. Enough so that he, she or they could 'see' Stefan's darkest secrets and thoughts. The ones he was hiding from everyone else, and most particularly, the ones he was hiding from himself.

Every citizen was a suspect now. And if word got out as to scientifica did, Ivankovia was in danger. The isolated village in the middle of what most of the world would call nowhere was now a small country given its escalation of population of refugees from the rest of Ukraine, as well as Poland, Russia and Turkey as well as expanded borders. But...maybe everyone in Ivankovia had partaken of the elixir and had been converted into being super geniuses. Such would plummet Stefan to the bottom of the totem pole, once again as merely an 'average' genius. And if the rest of the horses had some thrown into their hay nets, I would be on the bottom too.

But, feeling the same thing as my fellow 'soon to be village idiot again' Comrade, no one in the congregation of potential suspects displayed the rapid shifting of eyes or light-emitting aura that happened when you indulged in scientifica. Perhaps it wasn't about who was at the Feast, but who was who was missing from it. And who would have been closest to Stefan when he was doing his rounds, and his bidding outside of Iankovia.

"Yes, I know. My brother Andre," Stefan said to me as the main populus had drunken or danced themselves into blissful exhaustion. "Who I sent out on an assignment, who is late. My older and, when we were growing up, smarter and more clever brother who---"

"Is not here," I snortled.

"And he was clever enough to say to me, on more than one occasion, but in different ways," Stefan went on, to me only. "'Every time you go on a private walkabout to your favorite secret place in the woods, you come back more distanced from the rest of us'. And when he saw the list of people who I was thinking of promoting to official positions of power and influence, he wanted to know why he wasn't on the list. To which I said, 'I don't want you to be burdened and cursed with what has happened to me,' Along with a proverb masqueraded as a joke saying that 'anyone who wants to be President of any country shouldn't be trusted with the job.'"

With that, Stefan took in a deep breath, lifted his shaking chin upward, and placed a bridle on me. He Led me to the coral where his Army buddies horses were finishing the remainder of the special rum Mrs. Lubinska had reserved to be opened upon return to her now free again Native Poland. A buzzed but not yet drunk Boyco passed the jug to a still tea-totaling Stefan, enticing him to drink it as it was a special occasion and pointing out that even Jesus drank wine on special occasions. Stefan smelled then took a small sip of the rum, then three hefty gulps, evoking applause and ata-boys from the rest of his Army buds.

Stefan then whispered to me that "Doctor Lubinska gave them a placebo. They think they are drunk, but thankfully, particularly today, they aren't". He summoned his thankfully sober son, Sasha to put down his head chef apron at the 'all your body needs but not what your palate wants' outdoor kitchen.

“So, you’re finally going to let me see, experience and transform the world?” Sasha inquired of his father. “I’m ready for it!” he proclaimed, taking off his apron, then cap, revealing a freshly shaved head bearing a Cossack warlock identical to his father’s with the exception of its length and lack of grey hairs.

“You’re not quite ready for the world, Sasha,” Stefan said to his son, laying his hand on the lad’s shoulders. “And maybe the world isn’t ready for you as you are yet,” he went on.

Sasha growled, about to, according to my best assessment, blast his father for accounts of how he had become as good a surgeon as his dad, as adept a horse trainer and his equal in seeing that the ‘orders delivered by benevolent providence’ were carried out in his town. But before he could open his mouth, Stefan interrupted him.

“Yes, I know what you’re thinking even feeling, but I need a second in command here who I can trust, and in my own distorted way, love, my dear Sasha,” Stefan said. “And what I do need from you, quickly, is to temporarily re-activate the skills that you used to get top grades in your previous schooling.”

“Which are?” Sasha inquired, accepting of his position once again.

“Forging papers,” Stefan related. “Five sets of them. Written with the help of my Army Comrades, who you will inform should present themselves here, in three hours, looking like they were when they arrived here on the outside, but of course now, are nothing like they were on the inside, Because...”

“Of what you did to, and for them, of course,” Sasha interjected. “Why?”

“So we can trade places as prisoners and captors, of course,” Stefan said. He looked to the North, South, East, then West, and to the North again, his eyes downward on the ground then at impressions left in the bush, Finally he turned back to his son. “I think I know where your uncle Andrei is. Where he started to go anyway. But I don’t know who else is around him. Or who is encroaching on our borders because of or despite him. And....”

“....Sometimes we have to pretend to be who we are not so we can become, in the long term, who we really are?” Sasha recited back to his philosopher father as if it was yet another oral exam that Professor designed for his most favorite student.

“Yes!” Stefan replied with a joyous smile. “Yes, my finally true Cossack son!”

Stefan threw a bear like hug on Sasha faster and more intensely than it could be returned. “Now!” the Old Professor said to the young Warrior-Healer. “Inform my War Buddies that they are to tell no one about this Mission they are about to go on. I need you to be...”

“....the man of the house,” father and son said together, but with very different voices.

“I’ll be back in an hour,” he said looking down at the horse tracks of Andre’s specially shoed mare, Natasha, as I tried to smell her ‘come hither, worm, and service me’ Equinos Elusiva ‘perfume’ with my nostrils rather than my imagination. “I’ll check the perimeter of our still not destroyed country. And if I’m not back in an hour, send the guys after me, son.” my ‘master’ said as we trotted on.

CHAPTER 21

I didn’t know if it was Andrei or Stefan who insisted that Natasha had been given specially designed shoes which were equipped to grip ice without snow accumulating in her hoofs. It was easy for Stefan and his Great War Army Comrades to follow her footsteps after we passed through the northern border of Iankovia. It had in the past month been expanded into another two villages which had been burned out of existence by the roaming armies chasing each other, killing more civilians than enemy combatants. Natasha’s tracks led us on the road towards the sign saying ‘Welcome to Ivankoia. Where you must leave political ideology, personal greed and tortured past behind’, a large garbage bin next to the sign containing scraps of propaganda leaflets, a few crucifixes and several torn up marriage photographs.

Mother Nature provided heavily treed patches and swamps on some of the terrain which were still unpassable in deep winter. The 'security department' in the new Iankovian Republic had provided new fences and booby trapped holes to discourage any unwelcomed trespassers, and they were still intact. And of course, there were the sharp shooters living in tree houses who had orders to shoot at the feet of any intruders or at the tires of any motorized vehicles on the few 'roads' that connected Iankovia to the rest of the world. Today, being another one of 'high security alert' days, a hundred yards behind the 'Welcome' sign and two hundred in front of the oil fields, bountiful farmland and mines brightly painted signs read 'Spanish Flu Epidemic- Enter at Your Own Risk' along with black flags for the still plentiful illiterate pirates, soldiers and provisional generals. The plethora of boot prints marching in formation leading to those signs and the massive amounts of impressions of that military footwear spread all over the ground in chaotic patterns clearly indicated that inflicting terror in unwelcomed 'immigrants' was more effective than shooting them.

Stefan gave a thank you bow to the tree house snipers as we ventured past the borders of still rich in pocket, soul and Vision Iankovia. 'We' being Stefan, clad in loose blue trousers, hand-sewn leather boots his grandfather's black cherkaska coat, his overgrown mustache and footlong warlock colorfully representing the free spirited Cossack Armies of antiquity. Behind him, his Great War Comrades dressed from head to toe in the drab, 'functional' uniforms associated with the political affiliations they had dedicated themselves to prior to being wooed into coming to Iankovia by Andrei's invitation. They proudly rode atop the same horses they came on during their first entry into Ivankovia, equine beasts whose 'chit chat' about eating, sleeping and fucking turned into concerns about what their misinformed riders were really thinking and leading them to.

"Remember, lads, if you see anyone else wearing the freshly cleaned and pressed soldier suits you have on," Stefan said as we followed the footprints left behind by Natasha, the border of Iankovia out of sight of man and beast. "You will be welcomed back into the Armies you 'deserted' by bringing the rest of us in as prisoners. Prisoners who you convinced to join your cause. With valuable information with special orders to go to central command. If it is a Captain we encounter, the information needs to go to a Major. If a Major, a Colonel has to be contacted. If we run into a Colonel,

we're on the way to a General, and if a General...you're bringing in special prisoners----””

“---God, Hetman Denosevic?” ‘Ivanov interjected, looking at the cross around his neck, a White Army uniform under it.

“Who MAY exist,” ‘officially dead or deserted’ Red Army Major Boyco said, re-thinking his religiously atheist position that had diffused into him after joining the Bolsheviks.

“And who did suggest one Golden Rule that works,” ‘Anarchist Melmyk, added, his white face in marked contrast to his all black ‘we are all individuals’ paramilitary attire. “Do unto others as you want them to do unto you.”

“Which doesn’t work so well world wide if you are a masochist,” mused Koval, in his civilian business suit with flags on his lapel representing all of the countries who wanted to ‘cure’ Russia of its ills in exchange for being colonized, the Stars and Stripes of America being most prominent.

“You’re all wrong,” former ‘in it for whatever he could get freelance Partisan’ Sokolov added, gazing down at the necklace of scalps, ears and eyes under his coat he had initially brought into Iankovia that no one there wanted to or, truth be told, was allowed to buy... “The real power is in the hands of the man or woman who has the biggest gun. Or the craftiest mind. Survival and well being of the fittest is the rule of the jungle, and the Steppes. The rule we all obey. What’s in it for ME, not ‘us’.,” he proclaimed. “And what’s to prevent any of us from turning YOU, ‘Hetman Denosivic’, from shooting you in the back and taking everything you’ve got and built?”

“Your disbelief in what you just said,” Stefan stated. “And during the Great War, you saving the lives of each of us, including me, at the risk of being shot yourself, at least five times.”

“Yes, but you all were family then,” Sokolov rebuked

“And, according to everything you did as a, well, at first anyway, captured and blackmailed guest, in Iankovia. Iankovians and those who believe in

what Iankovia is are your family now,” Stefan related. “And speaking of family, I did see how you looked at my daughter Tanya, and the way she keeps smiling when she looks at you!”

“I know,” Sokolov said, with downturned and, in the right way, loving eyes. “But I know she is too young for me. So I will---”

“---Propose to her in a few years, when she is of the right age to tell the difference between love and infatuation, valuing the former over the latter,” Stefan said, as a command.

“And when you very well may need one of those scalps to cover your now balding head,” Koval interjected.

“I’m not...” Sokolov gasped, feeling the back of his head. “I can’t be...”

“But maybe you will be, given your father’s and grandfather’s genetics,” Koval added as the presumably well follicled Sokolov worried about what was happening or will happen to his most attractive feature as a middle aged man who was determined to not become an ugly old one.

Nicholi, Petro, Vladmir!”, Sokolov said to Ivanov, Boyco and Melmyk, showing them the back of his head after breaking ranks. “It’s all still there...Right?”

Guided by a wink from Koval, Sokolov’s three well follicled companions responding with negative responses to his desperately asked question. Sokolov then turned to Stefan.

“You, Hetman Denosevic. Stefan. Who I know I ridiculed way back when. But who never lied to me, even when I lied to you. What do you see?” Sokolov inquired, positioning himself in front of me, showing his head to our seemingly fearless but underneath terrified leader. “What do YOU see?” Sokolov begged of Stefan regarding the back of his uncapped head.

“Someone who’s in front of my horse on a Mission we have to keep moving forward or we all will fall backwards into a deep abyss,” my master-friend-leader’s reply. “But, I will tell you a secret that no one else in Ivankovia knows yet.”

“Which is what?” Solokov asked.

“Yes, what?” Boyco pressed, putting his hand on the handle of his pistol.
“Tell us,”

Melmyk, Koval and Ivanov nodded their heads, indicating equal urgency, their fingers on the triggers of the weapons in service of world reconstruction which first required some more destruction.

Stefan looked at and into each of the men, seeing things that apparently he hadn't before. Just as I was able to read his mind amidst a constellation of mixed emotions, he broke out into mad laughter. Followed by laying his hand on Sokolov's shoulder. “My most beloved and trusted son in law. My daughter Tanya is most attracted to, and loves, this!” he proclaimed flaying his warlock around. “And especially this!!!” he added, messaging the remainder of his freshly shaven head.”

“Really?” Sokolov asked.

“Really, Dmitri,” Stefan warmly said as a friend, comrade and father. A father who, biologically, was 5 years younger than his future son in law. And who now looked 20 years older. The thirty year old ‘20th century Cossack ‘Hetman’ with the wrinkling face and now nearly all white warlock nodded to a relieved Sokolov. “But now, I will ASK you to take your place in line so we can proceed.”

“Yes, Stefan,” Sokolov said. “I mean...Hetman...”

“Dad,” Stefan said. “Very soon.” Stefan hugged Sokolov, then kissed him on both cheeks.

I asked the horse under Sokolov's ass what he felt about what was going on. The answer came back. “Something very good, for now.” As I was reminded of something I rarely shared with anyone else. “Sometimes purposely not looking deep into some else's mind and soul allows you to, rightly or wrongly, work and certainly play with them more effectively.

Sokolov took his place in line and we proceeded onward. What Stefan and the others would do to Andrei, who interestingly was not on Stefan's final list of selected people to get Scientifica, didn't know. Perhaps, as Stalin put it, Andrei was on his way to becoming a 'useful idiot' in Stefan's Cause. And as we know, idiots who are given even a small amount of power or smarts stop become destructive rather than useful. But, as I recall the three second glance at the list that met my eyes by accident, the five men behind me were on the list to be promoted in earthly rank with a ration of Scientica. As long as they didn't know it, I suppose it was a good plan.

CHAPTER 22

Andrei's exit from Iankovia with a horse carrying his overly fed fat ass and the sac of Scientifica led us through territories of all colors. In the Red controlled zones, Boyko proudly proclaimed that he had captured Whites and Anarachists, along with a demented old Quixotiic Cossack mental patient, an incoherent babbling Stefan, who knew the terrain far better than he knew how to communicate with any human on it.

The bald before his time Western businessman clad Koval was able to pass himself off as Vladimir Lenin's semi-legitimate son not old enough to grow a proper man-size goutee yet when we were intercepted in Bolshevik country. There, he received letters from loyal and disgruntled Red Army soldiers containing suggestions as to how to make the transition of power to Bolshevik Communism more appealing to the counter-revolutionary masses, one of them containing the suggestion to allow Spirituality to remain in Russia but without organized, dictatorial religion. A view that Stefan championed long before the Revolution of Feb 1917 or the second one in November of that, all things considered, yearned for again year.

In regions controlled by the Whites, 'captured after deserting and seeing a Vision of the Virgin Mary' born again Christian Red Army Major Boyco, with Ivanov's cross around his neck, sang praises to Jesus along with curses directed at Lenin for being the anti-Christ.

When passing through country controlled by the mostly American Expeditionary Forces, The Star Spangled Banner was sung in Russian and accent laden English by Koval, on his way to Poland with prisoners he had single handedly captured, and converted to being 'grateful servants of

Yankee Capitalism', in the Red, White and Black controlled country. Delivered with convincing success to extremely well armed but pathetically inexperienced American Doughboys who lingered on in Europe after the Armistice on November 11 of 1918 for more pay, enhanced adventure, patriot zeal to stop the Red Terror, or to delay going back to boring lives as farmer or factory workers and 'wholesome family life' across the Atlantic.

Melmyk, having received the rank of Anarchist Captain in the, theoretically, unranked Anarchist Army, explained to the black clad guards at the checkpoint that since each anarchist had the right to make up his own mind about anything, he had the right to 'experiment' with methods of deprogramming captured Reds, Whites and Expeditionary Force serving prisoners as well as civilians who were afraid of a world without pre-written laws, statues and civic orders. Him being allowed to pass was, for the most part, due to throwing the squad of well armed black shirted guards a contribution of coins, jewels and gold nuggets to advance the cause of 'honorable elimination of rigid, unfair laws and oppressive order' be they from Reds, Whites, Expeditionary Forces or land roving Pirates who called themselves Ukrainian Nationalists when and as the name suited their purpose, and immediate path to personal advantage.

By the end of the day where we covered at least 50 miles, according to the odometer in my tired feet. The trail of footprints from Andrei's mare became more distinctive after trudging up a steep hill. It then eased out into a high country meadow of brown grass struggling to push its way through frozen mud.. For each three superficial imprints of Natasha's hoofs there was one that was deep. Our Hetman brought me to an abrupt halt, assessing what was on the ground more closely. "Natasha's lame on the left front," Stefan noted, referring to Andrei's horse with as much compassion as he showed towards any other, including me. "And when she was running for the last three miles, Natasha was working with her right lead, instead of her left. Which means..."

"We're finally closing on your once trusted Andrei?" Boyco said, exhaustion in his voice.

"Yes, there is that," Stefan noted, as a secondary point of importance.. "But it means that Andrei is not who he was a few days ago. Or a year

ago. He'd never push Natasha or for that matter any horse beyond its limits. Unless...hmmm."

"He's desperate?" Boyco interjected.

"He's drunk?" Koval suggested.

"He's possessed by the Devil," Ivanov offered crossing himself. "A devil that does exist. For reasons that only God knows,"

"A God who maybe still wants us to follow SOME rules so we can be free of being ruled by others?" Melmyk added, looking up to the sky. "Including liberators who think they are God?" he shot at and into Stefan.

"Who promised us positions of worldly power and influence if we came with him on a wild goose chase to find his older and more likable brother?" Solokov pressed. "A brother who---"

"--Maybe has been...transformed into being less likable by, hmmm." Stefan allowed himself to give voice to.

"Something he ate, maybe?" Boyco added.

Stefan froze. He had told no one but me about Scientifica, or the list of who would get that 'potion from the gods' which allowed mortals to become clairvoyant cynics in small doses, rulers in larger doses, and kings with an extra helping of such.

"Yes," Stefan finally stated, preparing how he would tell these once again trusted War Buddies that he was about to give all of them a promotion in the to be established Iankovian Parliament and, to protect the existence of such, Army. "Something that..."

"---Came from Oksana's magic bag of potions," Boyco stated. "" Oksana the---"

"----Gypsy mandolin player and singer. A refugee from Lithuania who found a home Iankovia all too easily and quickly," Koval added.

“Whose ‘home’ is visited by deserving men in search of affections and love they can’t get from their wives, children, dogs or horses, so they don’t leave their families or eat their stubborn animals,” Sokolov noted. “Yes, dear Oksana, who for a price can---”

“---Use the devil’s witchcraft to put mind altering herbs in their tea after those weak and unfaithful men put their sperm into her private parts,” Ivanov asserted, yet again. “A witch who can turn saint into a sinner, then into an instrument of cruelty with the special cherry flavored brandy she secretly shares with special guests next to her bed that smells like lilac and feels like silk.”

“Which you know about, former Captain, then Major and now running for Mayor in Moscow Ivanov when the Whites take over?” Boyco shot at and into his former commanding officer in the Great War, enemy in the field in the ongoing Civil War and potential rival for a seat of power and influence in Iankovia.

Stefan’s army buddies from the Great War shared secrets about ‘Director of Music and Dance’ Oksana. In a kind hearted exchange of stories that were part fact, part fiction and part personal experience. Stefan, who despite or perhaps because of his advanced mind and escalating political power, had not slept with Oksana. Upon hearing stories about the woman he admired from a distance, he indulged in big breaths of relief. His original plan to sneak carefully rationed doses Scientifica into the tea of the militarily most experienced men in Iankovia without them knowing it was still intact.

Yes, the five men laughing at and with each other was a welcome sight. And they deserved such moments of levity, Stefan of course had to forfeit laughter, fun and happiness for a Higher reward. Accomplishment, tainted with Inner privately enjoyed Bliss. “Gentlemen?” Hetman Stefan said, after he and I had vicariously enjoyed the fun our subordinates (and maybe their horses as well) experienced. “It is time to proceed, so we can catch Andrei before he does any more damage to himself, his horse or the world,” he said, careful to yet again not use the imperative tense, inviting those under him to share his Vision, but of course on his terms. It was the last ‘order’ Stefan gave until....

CHAPTER 23

Natasha's hoofprints became buried by low lying brush that covered the only trail through woods too thick to enable man or beast to traverse in a direction of their choosing. But the winding path where she was driven was obvious to the eye by impressions made through the displaced twigs and branches coated with stray brown hairs from Natasha's extra-wide hips, long mane and (when trotting, showing off her part Arab pedigree) stuck up tail, tinged with blood and reeking of sweat. Whether those fluids were of human or equine origin, I couldn't tell, as my nostrils were occupied with the aroma of my own sweat, as well as that of the horses behind me tramping through the path in single file.

As if she wanted to be followed, or rescued, Natasha on occasion did lay down a trail of manure. I recalled having some conversations with her when Andrei and Stefan got off our backs, in which she turned her ass with an open vagina to me, laid down some manure and with her most musical voice said, 'No pain, No gain. Walk through the path I'm laying down. What you are looking for and yearning to have will be found.' Yes, so equine poetry does have its irregularities to it.

We couldn't see the sky, and progressively lost the warmth and light of the bright sun attempting to penetrate through the seemingly impenetrable roof of pine needle branches over our aching heads. Stefan yet again snatched his compass from his pocket, noting to me, and no one else in a soft voice, "North keeps changing direction on us" regarding the needle that said North was this way, then when you looked back at it, said it was the other way. "If we are going in circles, so is Andrei and if you..." , he informed me in a whisper that abruptly stopped when Boyco's horse bumped up against my ass, perhaps at the insistence of his rider, or one of the field mouse sized flies taking a bite out of the gelding's ass .

"I didn't hear what you said, Hetman Comrade President," Boyco gave voice to. 'Maybe the rest of us can...'

Stefan shhhd Boyco with his blistered finger laid on the tip of his nose, then motioned in hand signal language the platoon invented during the

Great War to move forward as quickly as possible, and with quietly. Boyco passed it down the line.

The goat path with one seemingly easy entrance, did, after five more minutes of the darkest and most exhausting fast walk through the forest I could remember, have an end. Finally we could feel the sun on our backs, and see the sky. The grass in the secluded meadow was green. The water in the stream clear. The alluring invitation of 'come hither, stud and proud cut gelding' on Natasha's riderless ass as she was grazing was wide open. For a few moments I did consider taking her up on the invitation to satisfy her lust to get impregnated, even if the sperm sac in the horse my soul had inhabited had been removed and served up as prairie oysters to hungry veterinarians or as steak tater to their dogs. But my daydream was brought to a close by five thunderous bolts behind me. Stefan turned my neck around to them as quickly as I, (as a horse whose job was to go towards rather than flee from danger) did so voluntarily. Before Stefan's terrified and my disbelieving eyes, the horses behind us were riderless, fleeing from the site where four of the five riders lay dead, Boyco next to them, writhing with pain, screaming for his mother.

"Damn it, I hate it when I miss," I heard from atop a tree branch. "Maybe you should finish him off?" Sasha said to his father, laying a rifle, custom made for Andrei, into his shaking hands.

"Help me, please! I can't see! I can't feel my legs and arms," Boyco yelled out.

"So I DID hit the optic chiasm, then the ventral thalamic nucleus, Professor Doctor Denosivic," Sasha boasted. "Giving you, father fearest, the honor of shooting him in centromedian thalamus, respiratory control center and...."

Stefan grabbed hold of the rifle from Sasha's hands and opened fire on Boyco, making his misery worse with the first shot, ending it all with the second. A third went into the heart.

"Three shots where someone with your biologically enhanced intelligence should have done it in one," Sasha smirked. "Very disappointing, Stefan," he said, addressing his father by his first name for the first time

that I recalled, using the same words that Stefan had used on him during the many times when he under-delivered in the operating room or the library.

The pupils of Stefan's eyes rotated around in circles, as he looked at Boyco, then into himself, then up to the God in heaven, then the devil below in hell, then finally to Sasha's smug face. The latter was accompanied by Stefan pointing the business end of the rifle at his once beloved son.

"Yes, very predictable," Sasha added, with a condescending tone.

His intelligently bolstered brain, courtesy of Scientifica, stuck in dry dock, Stefan pulled the trigger on the rifle. Releasing...nothing into Sasha's forehead. Such gave permission for his son to laugh, something I never saw Sasha do. Stefan's reply was to load rounds from own gunbelt into Andrei's rifle. Futily trying to forcing them into the chamber with his shaking hands, jamming it.

"And very impossible..." Sasha said with mocking laughter, his mouth reeking of freshly ingested Scientifica. "Since Andrei's guns was...altered by...me."

Sasha grabbed hold of the weapon, flicked some hidden switches, and shot three rounds into the air. Preparing to finish me off with the fourth.

"No!" Stefan pleaded, putting himself in harm's way. "Achilles didn't do anything to you!"

"But he did something to you," Sasha said. "I don't know how, yet, but I did see him lead YOU to the patch of that magic berry patch that, well..."

"Andrei told you about?"

"After some...persuasion," Sasha said. "After which I had to put him out of his misery."

"Like you're going to do to me, Sasha?"

“Me, who...you didn’t include on your list of recipients of those magic berries which can turn a pathologically optimistic fool who sees only the good in people,” Sasha volleyed back, confidently strolling around the dead bodies which did not yet give up their ghosts. “To become a Philosopher King who sees all of the bad in people, so he can fix it. And in higher doses, turns a master such as you, into a slave, and a protected obedient son into...yeah, I’ll say it...a god! A god that is served by humanity instead of the other way around.”

“What do you want from me?” Stefan inquired. “And why are you doing this?”

After a tense delay during which Sasha was incubating thoughts I could not read, he ceased his ‘victory walk’, then finally answered his father’s inquiries. “To the first question, I will let you know what I want when I want it. And for the second? Well, maybe one day you may be able to understand the why of it. But...” Sasha threw his father a heavy backpack, and me an even larger duffle bag to be mounted on my back. “You two walk. I ride,” he continued, mounting Natasha. Kicking her into obedience with the spurs on what had been Andrei’s boots.

CHAPTER 24

I didn’t know where we were going, except that it was the direction determined by Sasha. He pushed me and Stefan around warring parties of Reds, Whites, Anarchists, Nationalists and Expeditionary Forces, evidence of their presence being burning villages, rotting corpses, refugees who had blank stares on their faces and a new situation the Civil War had introduced---buried unused artillery shells which when stepped on the wrong way would explode. No doubt to be refined for the next war to end all wars.

“A shame you didn’t put those land mines into your defense system around Ivankovia, but which I will put into mine,” Sasha said when encountering the fourth field containing the latter, nearly setting off an explosion that would all of my problems and Stefan’s current dilemma. “”Mine fields’, MINE field, MINE, a joke,” the new King of our new country informed us. “You’re supposed to laugh at my jokes, like you expected me to laugh at yours, Stefan,” the son reminded the father.

“Yes, it is a clever witticism,” the deposed Hetman said to the new one. To which Sasha pulled his whip and snapped it onto Stefan’s back. The third lash was painful enough to convince Stefan to force a chuckle at Sasha’s joke. To which Sasha implanted another scar onto his father’s back, commanding him to laugh louder. The request was obeyed. The pain of the whip halted, replaced by the agony of defeat, and surrender. “That’s being a good lad,” Sasha offered by way of a compliment. “To be rewarded by----”

Sasha threw his father an apple, which Stefan’s growling empty stomach begged to be filled with. Whether out of defiance or compassion, Stefan offered it to me. Why I took it, I don’t know. Maybe it was to prevent Stefan from, ironically, eating an apple offered to him by a demon, as was the case in the story about Eden. Or it was my place to let Stefan suffer more to atone for his many recent sins, or as a non-believer in God would say, ‘miscalculations.’ Such included considering entrusting Andrei with the ‘extra benefits’ of Scientifica berries, assuming his brother could be cajoled or intimidated into keeping his word about keeping it secret. The second miscalculation being the exclusion of Sasha from being in the ranks of the roster of ‘the chosen’ who would be secretly given rationed amounts of Scientifica so they could use that intelligence to guide the ‘non-chosen’ into being effectively compassionate. A third for thinking Sasha inherited a strong, kind heart from his father, rather than a weak and therefore potentially evil one from his mother. There were other ‘miscalculations’ as well, but the last one on the list was violating the most sacred and important law that he insisted on all Ivankovians obey---To listen to others with an open heart and thinking mind, and to put yourself in their place when deciding to do anything to or for them.

Of course, unknown to Stefan, and until now, me, was the fact that those with the kind of advanced intelligence scientifica produced considered themselves, and perhaps even were, a different species than the average or even above average human. But such was not a sin or miscalculation of intention. After all a human being who has a bigger brain and a more adapted appposable thumb containing hand with four fingers to change his/her environment than an ‘animal’, by Nature’s design loses the ability to ‘get into the head’, or heart, of a dog, mouse or cockroach. At least most of the time.

CHAPTER 25

Sasha, comfortably seated on an abandoned cart, his horse Natasha comfortably behind it and looking every inch the new Hetman of our fledgling country, took his time pushing Stefan and myself forward, keeping us both in harness. A rifle was aimed at our backs, ready to unload a torrent of lead into our backs as well as darts containing 'special medication' if we decided to break free of them. Promising to cause more harm to whoever of us was running the slowest.

The road home was eight times longer in time and distance than the one that led us to the father and son reunion, as measured by the pain in my legs and the holes that found their way into the soles of Stefan's boots.. Sasha said that the reason for the 'curves that are the shortest distance between two points' was to avoid being imprisoned, killed or conscripted by the Red, White and Black Armies and the mixed population of the Expeditionary Forces. That he did deliver on. How he knew where those warring factions were, I didn't know. And neither did Stefan. And when father asked son how he knew where not to go, the answer, "You'll find out when you get home. Where you will have an uneventful retirement. A well fed retirement where you will eat what I give you, and you will like it." . "

Whether that meant that Stefan was to be retired before the age of forty as Sasha's prisoner in confinement with stale bread and stagnant water, or house arrest with an unlimited amount of stew containing prime cuts of horsemeat made from the flesh of yours truly, I was not sure. But I was sure that something had gone very wrong with regard to my theories regarding Scientifica. According to Socrates, ignorance was the sole source of cruelty so therefore, advanced intelligence always led to effective compassion. But perhaps it's not the seed that determines what kind of tree grows from it but the ground it finds itself in. And the genetics of the seed. Genetics which most probably involved half of the genes from Svetlana, Stefan's deceptive when she wanted to be wife, and Andrei, Stefan's brother. A man who, truth be told, was moral and kind only when blackmailed into doing so by Stefan, or threatened by the God who post-Scientifica Stefan reminded his brother of so convincingly. A God that Stefan stopped believing in after an overdose of Scientifica,, but who he

now prayed to with more fervor and remorse than I had seen any human exhibit.

“You are now a servant of me, not God,” Sasha reminded his father whenever Stefan’s mutterings even through the tailor made bit in his mouth got loud enough to be audible, making his point made by a crack of his whip on the now deposed Hetman’s back. Or on my ass if Stefan defiantly refused to obey Sasha’s request to keep his ‘immature’ rantings or his hopes of living a meaningful life or ending it all with an honorable death down.

Finally, we reached the Northern perimeter of Iankovia. Sasha pulled back the reins on our mouths and the harnesses on our chests. “The guards in the trees who give out warning shots? Where are they?” Stefan boldly asked Sasha.

“In town, getting paid with money, vodka and cheap whores instead of admiration and respect that you think they wanted,” Sasha shot back, proudly.

“There are no whores in Iankovia, not the kind that give an ounce of satisfaction without a pound or genuine love, anyway,” Stefan noted. “And vodka is forbidden. And as for money, everyone in our country gets according to their abilities and takes according to their needs, and morally-sound wants that don’t hurt anyone else, and I set up---”

“---A country that doesn’t exist any more. Not the way you built it,” Sasha said. “Or intended to build it by giving specifically rationed amounts of Scientifica to loving people you chose on that special list you made. Who are now....well...”

“The ones who are not getting Scientifica, while those who have black hearts like you, are getting all of it!?” Stefan grunted.

“Only what I want them to have, and need them to have. With the selected help of, well, someone you don’t have to know about. So they are intelligent enough to do what they are told but, relative to me and, for a little while you and that horse of yours, are useful idiots. And by the way, the name you gave me when I was born was Alexander, a conqueror’s name.

Which you shall call me now. Professor Doctor Emperor Alexander the Greatest! Not Sasha, the most heartfelt, introspective and obedient.”

“And your horse, Natasha, Alexander?” Stefan inquired looking at the mare who thankfully didn’t have to endure Sasha on her back. “Andrei’s horse, who he loved, and who would and did anything for him, under the hardest of circumstances, up and down the harshest terrain and climates, who. ...”

“...Is serving me now. And if she doesn’t,” Alexander said, turning to the mare, pointing to his knife, then to her, then to his belly, rubbing it while he smacked his lips. “Who is too stupid to even know what I am talking about!” he mused, breaking out into mad laughter.

Natasha, who had no shortage of whip wounds on her, seemed to not know what her new master was talking about. But the usually independent, self-reliant mare who would never be bossed around by any stallion, and often bossed them around when left in pasture or a coral, was worried about something. She looked at me, asking me to rescue her from her present fate. I said ‘yes, of course, I have a plan’ to her request in ‘horse talk’ as well as telepathy, hoping that she would not be able to tell that I was lying.

CHAPTER 26

In our absence, Iankovia turned into what it used to be, and according to the laws of natural selection, what it is destined and appropriate to be. A ‘simple’ place where oil rigs were pumping out black gold at full speed turning the blue sky into black putrid fog. The mountains raped of their gold, silver coal and copper without any regard for what lived on top of them. The wheat fields stripped of anything growing from the ground.

The expanded hospital and university was converted into a slaughterhouse where anything with any ‘defect’ or of immediate use walking on four, or perhaps two legs, was being processed as sausages, spiced so that the source of the meat was indistinguishable. The newly built and generously supplied library had in our absence been turned into a brothel. The madam in charge was Svetlana, Stefan’s wife. Her most prized and genuinely willing (as well as most attractive) ‘pleasure provider’ was Tanya, ‘Prime Minister Alexander’s’ sister. Upon our arrival ‘home’. Mother and

daughter were clad in the latest Parisian fashion with no shortage of jewels around their necks and wrists.

A new laundry shop was established across the street from the always filled tavern, where the lowest person on the totem pole was struggling to wash blood from military uniforms worn by (because they bid the lowest for goods) slain Red, White and Black Army soldiers, along with the garments of Expeditionary Forces and their 'civilian' advisors. The hardest working cleaning woman was of course the oldest and weakest in town, none other than...

"Mrs. Lubinska?" Stefan said to white haired woman whose white skin were covered with patches of red, black and blue bruises, with downturned eyes.

"The ex-Professor of 'Ethics, Morals and Literature', who was stupid enough to consider you her favorite student, who is learning a new craft as, she always said..." Alexander interjected, after which he turned to the old and broken before her time woman who did her utmost to teach him while he was Sasha. "...Every scientist should know how to be a shoemaker and every egotistical scholar should learn how to be a laundress. So she can earn the right to be called my her last name. Right, 'Evey', he said, referring to the bastardised first name that Eva was called behind her back by class clowns during her tenure as teacher of the mostly unteachable.

"The ghosts of the men who you eliminated because they bid lower than their ideological enemies at the Peer by the river for the goods you are raping from the land, and the 'special medications' that you claim will make them superior in the battlefield will have their revenge on you, 'Sasha'," she informed the new head of the Blacker than Black market Ivankovia had become through a mouth half filled with teeth.

She was rewarded for her honesty, mental discipline and bravery by more dental extractions, inflicted by the butt of Alexander's vintage revolver.

"What did you do that for, Sasha!" Stefan grunted at his son, as he pulled off the muddy ground his beloved teacher when he was a child and most trusted, when he was on mild doses of Scientifica, mentor as Philosopher King of our fledgling country.

“She called me Sasha,” Alexander replied, glibly. “And if you call me that pet name you gave me as a harmless boy you wanted to turn into you...” he continued, pressing the business end of the revolver into my forehead.

“Whatever you say, Alexander,” my former ward, friend, master and now fellow prisoner said to his son with a courtly bow. With that, Alexander mounted Natasha and trotted her towards the Presidential Cabin which had been his father’s. Father Basili approached, arm in arm with his secretary, both smelling of semen. His pockets clinking with coins, overflowing with paper money from seven countries. From underneath his Cossack, he pulled out a shovel, handing it to Stefan. “Your turn to dig your way out of the mess you made, and which benefits us now, thank God.” he informed the man who had taken away his post as ‘Minister of morality’, crossing himself. The not-so-good Father then pointing to a feces covered coral filled with Red, White, Black and Expeditionary brands on the horses which laid down said bedding, A ‘For Sale’ sign on the fence regarding the equines whose riders had ‘disappeared’. “I will pray for you, of course,” Basili said to Stefan. “Intercede to the Lord on your behalf as you do your penance as a shit shoveler rather than a shit distributor.”

“For a fee, of course,” Stefan said to the corrupt Priest who he had exposed to his flock and drove out Ivakovia after the first dose of Scientifica.

“Of course,” Basili replied, apparently not picking up on Stefan’s anger, or giving it any legitimacy. As if drugged, afflicted with a disease which forced the soul, brain and mind believe that bad is good, greed is great and honesty is the lowest form of interpersonal communication. Perhaps having to do with what might have been Scientifica coming out of his mouth, or perhaps not.

As for me, I was able to follow Stefan to the coral. Then made a quick getaway into the woods before the guard, who I didn’t recognize, was about to stick a label with a price on my ear. I kicked him in the knee en route to my escape, landing his fat ass into manure. Stefan smirked with satisfaction. After which the price tag destined for my forehead was glued onto his.

CHAPTER 27

There are many differences between humans, presumably the most advanced species on land, and the rest of the mammals. The appposable thumb which primates and humans are able to use to pick up objects from the ground, or steal such from others. Skin that sticks close to the body underneath it, which humans share with pigs. And the eyes. In humans, half of the information from the right eye goes to the left brain, and from the left eye to the right brain. But there is something which we 'lower' mammals have that humans don't have. The tapetum lucidum, a layer in back of the eyes that allows us to be seen at night. And which humans don't have. And in the dark of night, they scare the shit out of humans, who only see two fluorescent eyes in the dark, with no idea what kind of beast is behind them.

I used such to scare Iankovians and their 'invited' guests away from seeing me when I spied on them after the sun went down. As long as I moved like a rabid moose, or a man eating cougar, no one pursued me. Such allowed me to see what was going on. How the first became last and the last became first. But more importantly---where the stash of Scientifica was stored. Perhaps an extra dose for Stefan could enable him to get the intelligence edge on 'Alexander'. Though, perhaps it would change Stefan into something worse. But one thing I did know---if Alexander was to give anymore of the intelligence-producing potion to his minions, it would be the end of Iankovia as an independent country. And if he was selling it to the highest bidder, the rich would get even richer, the powerful even more powerful, the haves taking ALL of what the have nots still had, resulting in a continent and planet which was uninhabitable by caring and sharing humans, or animals.

Despite my naturally auburn hair coat, my keen sense of hearing, a warmer than usual month (allowing for more windows to be open) and the grace of the astronomical gods to provide clouds over the moon and a few nights, no moon at all, I was unable to figure out where the stash of Scientifica was, or who was in charge of its distribution. Even 'Alexander' didn't say anything to anyone else about it, nor did he talk to himself about it when babbling out policy particulars as the new King. And as for him talking in his sleep or having auditory-enhanced dreams, all my ears heard was snoring after he went to bed in his new abode, his father's private cabin behind the house he grew up in. That formerly rustic Cossack abode had

been upgraded to a cottage with ornaments and furnishings worthy of Dukes and Duchesses during Czarist times .

During the day I hid in the woods, peaking out between thick brush to see how Stefan was experiencing being at the bottom of the totem pole, farmed out to all of the elites of the new lankovian as a chronically dirty, foul smelling, blistered, aching and exhausted servant to be spit on, overworked and laughed at. But this time, due to his feeling the pain of knowing he was smarter, and as the abuse continued, wiser, than any of his new masters, the agony was worse than imaginable. Compounded by his not buying into the still used 'motto' that God rewards you in Heaven according to how much suffering you encountered on earth. Something that we horses, some of us anyway, understood all too well.

But speaking of horses, yes, I did witness more than a few good saddle horses be turfed to the slaughterhouse to feed invited dignitaries horse meat. Or sold to the highest bidder which, more often than not, were the invited guests from different armies, and countries, who were most cruel and least knowledgeable about the kind of work they could be put to without breaking their bones, or spirits. My heart ached for each one of them. But not so much as for Natasha, the new Emperor's favorite horse who he rode with a tight rein which pushed her neck into her fly-bitten chest, spurs that dug holes into her flank and silver coated saddles which were five times heavier than they should have been, even without the overloaded saddlebags and satchels on her rump which got larger each day. Still, out of habit or fear of being sent to the slaughterhouse, she did Alexander's bidding, knowing that if she allowed anyone to see that she was lame on her right front and left hindlimbs, the Emperor would choose another white horse to show off his acrobatic skills as a Cossack King. A title that no true Cossack would respect, or take on.

Yes, there were horses worse off than Natasha but, as she became 'family' to me, my selective compassion for her got the best of me. The 'dance' Alexander made her do on a particularly cold day for an entourage of high rolling civilian (and apparently unarmed) bidders from (as I could tell from the flags on the lapels of their tailor made business suits) Red, White, Black and Expeditionary Force Armies had accentuated her lameness, the sweat on her chest dripping to the ground, blood oozing from her mouth. "Welcome, gentlemen, to my country," he proclaimed to them as his

soldiers discretely circled around the buyers. “Before the bidding starts for our oil, wheat, horses, valuable miners and special medicinals that make us invincible, a song from my beloved mother and a dance from my talented sister.”

Svetlana sashed from the tavern in a traditional Cossack dress that eased its way down to her ankles, her song performed in a dialect of Cossack Ukrainian none of the buyers understood, or cared to understand, a feast to the uniformed as well as black suited businessmen’s ears.. Tanya, with considerably less clothing covering her body, danced her way out, attracting the buyers’ eyes, particularly when she moved the dance closer to them, stroking each of their cheeks with a smile that said ‘I like you the best’ to each of them.

While the buyers were developing third legs between the ones they are born with, Alexander trotted Natasha to the corral. After colorfully leaping off the saddle, he held on to her reins just as she was preparing to enter the pen to the right reserved for riding horses with high price tags glued to their foreheads and ears. “No, bitch!” he grunted at the horse, out of range from the buyers’ ears of course. “You go into that pen!” he commanded, pulling her to the left, designated ‘for meat sale due to being old, diseased or infirmed’.

He opened the gate, pulling her inside. The mostly healthy looking horses behind him backed up rather than taking the opportunity to make a run for it. After pushing Natasha into the corral, Alexander closed the gate. But before he could lock it shut, he felt a hard object from a powerful place landing on his left leg. I adjusted my so far non-lame right leg to give him another ‘reminder of his mortality’ into his ass, pushing him into a pile of manure. Then pulled the gate open with my mouth, allowing Natasha and the others to make a run for it.

Laughter emerged from the buyers. I had to look, to reward myself with something. The sight of top buyers laughing at the new Mob boss of Iankovia was too much to resist. Oh how wondrous to feast on the look on Alexander the Great’s face as he was demoted to Sasha the Slob in front of the buyers as well as his fellow citizens. I whinnied a smile of accomplishment, looking at the buyers, motioning with my head for them to

leave town ASAP if they bid too low, or they would become ingredients of stew rather than buyers of it.

“A show, put on for your amusement, gentlemen,” Tanya interjected to buyers after which she resumed the dance. “Right, Svetana?” she said to her mother, as if the latter was her subordinate.

“Yes, indeed, a show,” Svetlana confirmed, her eyes fearful as to what her son would do to her for not being quicker on the draw than her daughter was. “Arranged by all of us, who--”

“---Will be providing you with the best of carnal entertainment upstairs in the tavern by the most entertaining women East of the Caucuses, before the bidding starts, as a customary service,” Sasha said as Alexander. “Our best provider being Svetlana of course,” he said, pointing to his mother. Who, for reasons I didn’t get forced into her new profession as a sperm recipient. Fearful of, no doubt, the two worse consequences of being an employee in a brothel rather than an operator of such. God’s wrath if the abortionist nurse Sasha had hired did her job effectively. Or the look she would get in a decade or so from give her next son or daughter as to who her father was.

Which of the buyers believed that all of it was a show, and which believed the release of horses from the ‘to be turned into stew’ corral was what it really was, I didn’t know. But what I do painfully recall is the smallest of the gentlemen, with an accent that sounded ominously like the Austrian Officer who conscripted me into the Austrian Cavalry in the last war did. A war that nearly did me in when I had to obey the men in his army as a beast of burden and the first horse to be in the front lines of a charge against tanks and machine guns “I would like to buy that horse,” he said, pointing at me. “I bid five hundred American dollars!”

“Sold!” Alexander announced, no doubt knowing how much five hundred American dollars, and that unlike Deutchmarks, Rubbles or the French Francs, it would not devalue to half its worth in the marketplace after the next fortnight.” “He’s yours!”

“If you can catch him,” the Red Army representative noted with a mocking smirk, immediately after I started to bolt out of town, fearing for what would

happen to me with that Germanic owner just as much as I feared for what would happen to Iankovia if I didn't somehow find Stefan. He who was, luckily for him, off shoveling shit for another one of Sasha's cronies on the other side of the river.

"A hundred dollars to anyone who can catch that performance horse!" the German accented gentleman announced regarding my capture and sale, holding up another C note to the general populus.

There followed a massive manhunt for me from citizens mounted on horses or the seat of cars and motorcycles who wanted a quick hundred dollars. Luckily, I evaded them, with the help of thick brush keeping out some of the pursuit horses. Mud which slowed down any vehicle, or cart, containing that miracle of human ingenuity, the wheel. As for the entourage of money hungry, soul dead but still clever enough to catch freedom loving creatures (or people) following us, the main body of the 'to be made into- hamburger' herd lingered behind the posse, eating patches of luscious grass. Which they were no doubt denied after being designated to become meat, as they were worth more dead than alive to millions of civilians and soldiers in most of the rest of Russia at the time.

I finally caught up with Natasha. She was out of breath but not out of purpose. I could feel her say to me 'Andrei would never put me through all of this. He has to be here somewhere.' "So", I telepathed back to her. "We should try to find Andrei. If he is still alive." I knew that I was lying again, giving her false hopes. 'I think I know where we can find someone who can help us,' I continued, motioning to a small hamlet which was now an emerging town across the river.

Yes, I was trying to find and rescue Stefan, and as for finding Andrei, throwing herself off a cliff along with reincarnating into the right body at the right time was Natasha's only hope of re-uniting with her most probably dead human master, and friend. As, so you see, there was the reality that the horse buyers from all of the Armies from non-Cossack regions didn't know, or want to know. A Cossack horse will do anything his or her owner asks, including charging into cannon fire. Such is what I was hoping, and praying, was still true.

CHAPTER 28

One thing I did observe during the day from my various hiding places within Iankovia was that in the morning Stefan took his first class medical kit with him to every non-medical lowest class job he was assigned to since he was the wisest man in the country. Such was a fate he shared with Mrs Lubinska, who was an even wiser woman. I didn't see what he did with each visit, but he came back each evening from every shit job assigned to him with less medical supplies than he left with. Then the next morning, from the shack behind the former hospital, now slaughter house and tannery, he emerged somehow with a refilled pack on his shoulders. How many animals or people he treated during his internal exile I didn't know. What kind of gratitude they had for his service was most probably the same as the pre-scientific days during the Great War when being a great doctor was something that was just expected. As well as someone gifted in putting together flesh that had been torn apart by trauma or disease, because the Good Lord neglected to provide him with the smarts required to be an effective manipulator of people.

Such was the case when I observed him from across the river just before sundown walking home from cleaning the Kornikov's pig pen, horse stalls, newly installed indoor toilets and filled up outside septic tanks. The small rowboat he had left on the bank of the river that morning still laid next to the water. With shotgun blasts on the bottom of it, which he discovered when he cast anchor to go 'home'. I whinnied to him. He waved back to me. Then I walked, and then swam, across the river to meet him, meeting a layer of oil that had spilled from one of the transport boats. After shaking off the water from my back, attempting unsuccessfully to get off the oil underneath it, I turned around, laid down in the water, and let Doctor Stefan step over me with his tired feet. He fashioned a rope into a bridle, putting it on me as a hackamore, then secured the medical kit, throwing it on his back. "Thank you," he said to me, stroking my neck with the affection and respect he had when the 'platoon clown'. 'You're very welcomed' I snorted back, after which we made our way across the shallow portion of river by foot, then paddled towards Natasha whinnying a 'hey I'm here, don't leave me like this' on the other side.

Upon reaching the other side of what, two weeks earlier, was a clean stream of flowing water, Stefan slithered off my naked back, wiping the film of oil from my torso. He relieved Natasha of the saddle and associated

accessories Sasha had burdened her with, putting the essential ingredients of the saddle onto my back. He removed the bit in Natasha's mouth, noting the blood that bled out of her gums and threw it into the water. As soon as the sun retired to its resting place over the now discolored smog fill horizon, the moon took center stage in the sky,, illuminating the ground so that we could see every pebble around us. And, be seen by anyone looking for us of course. Perhaps bounty hunters assigned to catch me and Natasha who were better armed than any of the three of us, lurking in the woods.

Upon sensing such Stefan pulled out the traditional Cossack battleaxe from under his belt, which had been pounded into dullness as a result of being used to chop yet another pile of firewood into kindling for fires he would never get the chance to be warmed by. He observed the path of a single bounty hunter, with his ears. Then, guided by movements of the brush, Stefan leaped ahead of the intruder, his back turned to him, preparing a snare to grab his feet. He then saw what I smelled. Traces of blood and putrid flesh on the branches. Such caused concern for me. And panic in Natasha.

"A dying animal. Who we have to put out of its misery, and ours," Stefan whispered to us as he lifted his axe up, hiding behind a fallen tree, ready to disable the elusive intruder who seemed to be stalking us. Finally, the beast fell down onto the riverbank. Its flesh was raw. Its entrails hung out from its belly. Its fur was covered with cloth. Its blood and dirt covered face was so indistinguishable that it was hard to say if it was a dying and half scalped man or woman. "Hide me, help me," 'it' said through a very human death rattle that scared away the birds and field mice in its vicinity, pointing upward to the higher ground on the riverbank.

"Whoever you are, I will do my best to help you," Stefan said, knowing fully well the danger he was in if the patrol of Alexander's soldier citizens on top of the ridge found the wounded soul, whoever he or she was. He frantically went through his medical kit, grabbing hold of a loaded vial of opium. Then another three, once he assessed what he couldn't repair, even with his exceptional abilities during the 'old days' as a healer and amplified by scientifica to godlike proportions. "No! Not yet!" the patient under doctor Stefan's care said, with the voice I recognized. And Natasha snorted

relieve after identifying. She nuzzled his face. With all the strength in his skinned alive arm, he stroked the mare on her neck.

“Andrei?” Stefan asked, afraid of an affirmative answer.

“I had to come back, to warn you about...” The rest of the words were absorbed into incomprehensive babble with blood emerging from his cut open lips.

“Sasha, who---” Stefan had enough heart and intelligence to not tell Andrei that his crawling back to warn him was in vain, or unnecessary.

“--Is someone else, because he got into.....” Andrei forced out of his nearly toothless mouth.

“Something that he shouldn’t have?” Stefan stated, as a question.

“Yeah. Something I suspected but never...” this time the exudate from his mouth contained more froth than blood, with chunks of lung tissue.

“I know,” Stefan said. “Or surmised, now that he...”

“Mrs Lubinska,” Andrei spat out. “The teacher you valued and I took for granted. Who said that God never gives you a problem without...a....”

“Solution,” Stefan added. “But since God is...”

“On a long supper break, it is Nature now that never gives you a problem without a solution,” Andrei muttered as his face turned into an even whiter shade of pale under the cake of dirty blood.

“And she also said,” Andre went on, pointing to a piece of paper in his pocket.

“Beware of gardens of toxic happiness and effortless success,” Stefan read.

“Which I rode through, by accident...Where she warned us to never go to, but which now....” He pointed to his breast pocket.

“Is where we have to go?” Stefan surmised, smelling flakes of leaves from that pocket. “This herb which is...”

“The antidote to, maybe, what you got into and were going to give me?”

“Yes, you were on the list. A privileged list that I.eh...” Stefan said, kicking himself in the ass and his over-fed head for putting off sharing scientifica with the right lankovians. “Andre, I’m sorry that I...”

Stefan’s older and usually less morally evolved brother grabbed his younger brother’s arm. “North by Northwest,” he said, pointing in that direction. “Follow the trail of happy wolves who lost their ambition to hunt. To where the animals that were their clever dead pray with happy eyes who maybe ate too much of that,” he continued, pointing to the leaves. “Maybe God or Nature provided that as the solution to....”

With that Andre, whose breath smelled of the ‘loco’ leaves broke into a smile, then eased into drawing his last breath.

It all made sense to me just as it made sense to Stefan. We knew what had to be done now. But how to do it? And how to find the storage place for Scientifica so we could neutralize it with what Mrs. Lubinska called ‘toxic happy weed’? Or somehow get that toxic happy weed into those who were intoxicating our town, country and and Vision. But first, we had to take a journey to the happy valley, undetected by the posse that was about to find us.

CHAPTER 29

I recall from when I was in a body that was expected to be able to read that people judge a book by its cover. Racists, which we all are one way or another, judge someone by the color of their skin. And figuring out what to say by how thick a skin the ‘talked to’ person has. And on top of that skin is hair. Its pattern, color and quantity is the part of the picture that we use to define who we are, or hide behind so others can’t see who and what we are.

I heard Stefan say to more than one curious child, superior officer or intrigued woman that if he were to take off the hair on his upper lip which grew in when he was 16, that there would be puddles of blood on the floor. As for the closely cropped hair on his head around his thick Cossack warlock, his reason for not growing the rest of his follicles into a thick, long mane was that it would prevent him from absorbing the suggestions from Heaven above from reaching his brain. It was therefore surprising for me to see my new master as a mistress so that he could see where Sasha had stored Scientifica powder. And so that he could spike it with the cannabis leaves, aka 'toxic happy weeds' so that implementation of evil plans envisioned by the new recipients of scientifica would be held in abeyance due to the weed's ability to make anyone procrastinate most everything.

Stefan would have to use something other than balls to accomplish both tasks. I never knew the female equivalent for 'balls', but 'with some hair from my tail glued into the inside of a hat, and some blood from his fingers on his lips, and removal of his mustache, Stefan easily passed as a 40 going on 80 year old cleaning woman.

As for me not being detected as enemy number one in the New Lankovian Republic, Stefan rubbed my skin with black coal and brown sand, turning me into a common horse who could roam around our not not so fair community without being shot, or kidnapped. It worked as long as I shuffled around with my feet and kept my head bowed enough so that I could see what upturned chinne'd people were doing without them paying me any attention. The same worked for 'Stefani'.

A horse's eye can't make out anything clearly that's more than 50 feet in front of me, but our noses are far more able to 'see' what is luring around in the forest before any two legged human could detect. Such worked for smelling bears, wolves or (said between us, kind reader) drunk hunters who can't tell the difference between a horse, elk or deer. As such, I could smell where scientifica was stored.

It was a logical place where very few Lankovians would voluntarily go while under 'Alexander's' rule. But where believers and disbelievers lost their sense of reason most quickly. And where they would not dare to look for anything.

Yes, it was the back room of the Church, the 'holy place' where Father Basili would be talking to God, or sweet talking vulnerable boys, girls or Nuns. It was the smell that drew me to it. It was confirmed more logically by the gossip 'Stefanie' heard while cleaning the houses of the new elite class that emerged in Iankovia.

As to when to take action on Stefan's and my plans, a day to do so finally emerged. Father Basili was blessing a new set of oil wells poking yet another hole into Mother Nature's sacred ground on a Sunday afternoon where anyone who was anyone, or didn't want to remain nobody, was required to attend.

"So," Stefan, as Stefanie, said to me with a voice that was easily two octaves higher than his normal baritones voice as he, with little effort, unlocked the door to the back room of the church. "Maybe Sasha is making an offer to God, or the gods, with what he considers more valuable. And when put into the bread that Father Basili selectively gives out at communion," he speculated. "But," he said after entering into the private chambers that presumably contained angels who would steal the eyes of any commoner who wandered into it. Just like the priest chambers in the Acropolis maintained by the Ancient Pagan Greeks prior to them becoming 'Christianized'. "How does Sasha figure out, with Basili, who is worthy of obtaining the 'blessings' of advanced intelligence courtesy of scientifica?"

The answer was clear to me, and I couldn't resist trotting to the side window, then nickering to Stefan, to consider the conversations taking place in the clerical "the interrogation room."

"Of course!" Stefan said to me, viewing the newly built confessional booths. A 'Catholic' thing that Basili put into his (in name at least) Eastern Orthodox church. Allowing, and encouraging, believers to confess their sins to God so they would be forgiven. And non-believers to confess their moral 'miscalculations' without consequence. Only unlike Orthodox and Catholic Churches, along with Oksana, the gypsy whore who could cajol secrets men (and women) revealed when the lights were low, it was the most evil and clever rather than the most repentant who were granted promotion into the 'intelligensia' caste with scientifica. As long as they were smart enough to be loyal to Pope Alexander, of course. "I wonder

who is on the listening side of these confession booths,” Stefan speculated, opening the clergyman’s side to see if these intel gatherers left anything behind indicating their identity. He didn’t find anything, cursing with all manner of expletives’ that would give him enough ‘demerits’ to earn him a one way ticket to hell. Which would happen quickly if I didn’t smell, then hear, Basili, with four heavily armed guards in Alexander’s new Iankovian uniforms, marching in from the front door along with their new Master.

I nickered a warning to Stefan, who instantly bowed his head, knelt, and crossed himself. After which he commenced cleaning the floor with a rag stuffed under the belt of his dress.

Basili directed the guards to the listening chambers of the confessionals while Sasha entered the backroom. Where, ironically, he was an alter boy five years earlier. He opened the lock on the most weather beaten chest in the back room, reciting the numbers as he dialed them. Yes, they were 6 to the right, 6 to the left, and 6 to the left. Just as I saw through a window when I heard Sasha mumble with when he thought neither God nor man nor horse was listening. I signaled the combination to Stefan with my hoofs, alternating which foot I used. To which he said, “What I surmised already,” crossing himself.

Sasha counted the bags of powdered scientifica. He helped himself to a fist size bag into a bowl of Holy Water, swallowing the contents with a well satisfied gulp. He then opened a gold plated Bible, retrieving a list, crossing off some names, adding some others. He took out three smaller bags, placing them under his coat. Then locked the chest again. After which he marched out of the chamber, stopping in the main room of the church to look at a likeness of Jesus on the cross. Hand carved in wood, expressing more humanity in his eyes than I saw in any living man, or woman. Including the sculpture who made it. “Hmm,” Sasha said to the image of the Savior that Stefan had carved from a tree that he said, prior to his leaving for the Great War, had the Holy Spirit inside of it more any other tree in the forest. “You know you were a sucker,” Sasha said to Jesus, or perhaps to the man who carved the image. “And still are,” he smirked, helping himself to a few more coins from the poor box, after which he led the entourage out of the church. Passing by the kneeling cleaning woman as if she wasn’t there.

“Now, it’s our turn,” Stefan whispered to me while I observed from the window. Removing three large bags of ‘locoweed’ powder from under his dress, he snuck into the sacred chamber. Then unlocked the chest, and placed portions of the high test marijuana into the bags in proportion to the size of the scientifica bags. A very precise procedure. After which he looked at the carving of Jesus that he had made, saying to it. “Yes, I was a sucker. And maybe you were too. But, as you found out way too late, Heaven watches and earth works.”

CHAPTER 30

Stefan and I lingered in the woods, hiding in caves by day and roaming around at night. I was, between owners anyway, a wild horse used to smelling out forageable grass. Stefan, thanks to his departed Grandfather, was a skilled hunter, fisherman and gatherer of eatable herbs. As for my supply of such provided by mother nature, the lush grasslands of the Steppes in and around Iankovia had been converted into oil fields, mineral mines or agricultural land which were carefully guarded, night and day. Stefan was unable to snare rabbits, catch fish or bring down even the slowest elderly elk due to their being unfindable. Or perhaps they had somehow developed the kind of intelligence that enabled them to hide from us.

By the fifth day of our waiting just outside of Iankovia to see what cannabis spiked scientifica would produce in those partaking of it, both of our stomachs were growling loud enough for any prey to hear us. “Time to get what we need from the granary and slaughterhouses,” Stefan said to me as the sun rose above the soot-laden horizon. I nickered that it wasn’t a bad idea, in part because even the mention of the word ‘grain’ reminded me of better fed times, despite the danger of eating too much and getting foundered.

What we saw from our high vantage points above the center of Iankovia’s capital ‘city’ was a granary which had been overfilled to the brim now nearly empty. And as for the meat hanging on the hooks in the slaughterhouse, empty hooks. The usually overloaded shelves in the general stores were nearly empty. Bakeries featured crumbs as the special of the day. Well fed upper crust citizens chosen to be so by Sasha and his special guests

lumbered from one shop to another had fat bellies, getting more drunk with every step. They strolled about on their supervisory duties like happy zombies lacking any sense of urgency, or purpose. The 'happily ineffective' citizenry included Stefan's daughter and wife, as they roamed around aimlessly thinking they were on stage, dancing to a tune of their own making. The excessively homophobic Father Basili strolled about in his secretary's dress and petticoats, happily singing praises to Jesus as his bridegroom, with him as the bride. His female secretary donned the 'good Father's' robes, blessing rats, mice and insects in a tongue I didn't recognize. And as for every other lieutenant in General Sasha's Army....rather than working together to maximize profits for themselves and their bosses elsewhere, they bumped into each other like balls on a billiard table, finding themselves after a few too many 'excuse me, Comrade Asshole' accidental clashes with each other. Then sinking down onto the ground, falling into a deep sleep.

"The more they eat the happy-weed spiked scientifica given to them selectively by Sasha, the less energy they have," Stefan noted. "Maybe we should have also spiked the grain and meat supply, to coax the well-fed fed bastards into being overfed slumberers. Or corpses. But..."

The long silence worried me. Following Stefan's eyeline as well as I could, I perused the oil rigs pumping out more black gold from the earth, sending black soot to the sky. The mines extracting minerals useful to people at record rates at the expense of the fauna and flora living on top of them.

The new foreman at the dock was collecting satchelfuls of money from no less than three Captains of overloaded ships bearing no flags. The foreman and the Captains saluting each other in military fashion after a handshake. That new foreman turned around, bearing the smirking face of none other than Sasha.

After counting the money, the Emperor disguised as a commoner in rags looked up to our position, pointing us to the village square. Where women I didn't recognize were berating the laundry ladies for not cleaning the blood stains from the various uniforms that had been worn by buyers who did not bid high enough for goods they came to buy. And very sober men, most probably due to their lower station under Stefan's rule as well as Sasha's stealing from their former bosses as they fell to the ground. And

from the sidelines, Mrs. Lubinska seeing us, shrugging her shoulders with an 'I don't know why' gesture

"So, Sasha is making another list of those who, according to his Imperial Code, deserve to get Scientifica to keep his Empire going," Stefan related to me. "With, no doubt, scientifica that didn't get mixed in with locoweed. Or he's found another source of scientifica that's..."

As if reading his father's thoughts, Sasha pointed to him, summoning Stefan to come down the hill as the ship leaving port hoisted up the Red Army flag.

"I thought you would agree," Sasha yelled up to both of us. Motioning again with the slightest movement of his fingers for us to come down from our sheltered position. An offer that couldn't be refused, thanks to three new well armed New Lankovian Republic soldiers behind us, pointing the business ends of their rifles at both me and Stefan. "Everyone gives according to their abilities and takes according to their needs, according to Marx and Engels," Stefan's son continued in the voice of his father. "A spiritual mandate that you said Jesus would agree with, while...to the Whites I gave, after I discovered what was in it, a generous portion of scientifica that you altered."

"And as for the Anarchists and Expeditionary Forces?" Stefan inquired while being escorted down the hill. "A knife in the back after they're treated to vodka at the tavern and a night of passion with the women you turned into whores? Who made sure they never left their beds alive with a knife through their broken hearts?"

"They always were whores," Sasha related with an arrogance smirk. "And, it was a bullet through the head. Allows us to sell the rest of body parts for meat. And makes for less cleaning of the floors. Bullets that were..."

"Shot by your sister and mother?" Stefan dared to ask as we finally found our feet within a yard of the still in power Emperor.

"Do you really want me to answer that question?" Sasha inquired of his once beloved son.

“Yes,” Stefan replied, pulling up whatever courage he still had under his fear-smothered gut.

“Which is why, I...will not answer that question,” the Emperor smirked. “But you have some other questions, no doubt. Which I will answer before you ask them from your quivering lips,” Sasha continued as he paced around us as the primary general in the current battle between heart and brain., reading his father’s mind, and mine.

“How did I find out what scientifica, as you called it, does? Andrei noticed that when you go on your solitary rides with this ‘assistant’ of yours,” Sasha said, pointing to me, then conferring me with a firm whipping with his crop on my neck.. “To hear the voice of God more clearly, and you come back more distanced from us... you get more distanced. Then I followed you to the fields where Scientifica grew AND...in answer to your next question, How I got into the safe where you stored it, without my hands getting burned or coming down with ricin, that kills on contact?. On a chest which you labelled ‘private, please’? Answer---I was one of the creatures in the woods outside your private cabin who saw the combination you used on the lock, and that you handled it with gloves.”

“And where is the rest of the scientifica?” Stefan pressed, this time refusing to accept a vague answer, and prepared to be sent to his Creator for getting an honest one.

Sasha pulled back his lips, chuckled, reflected on his own mortality, then stared at and into his father. “At the time of dying,” he related with the absence of any emotion in his tone or face. “Yours of mine,” he continued, after which he nodded to his second in command carrying a small suitcase. A Lieutenant twice as muscular and by the look in his drugged eyes, half as smart. Or clever. A useful idiot, or perhaps marginally useful half and therefore loyal genius. Who opened up the case, revealing to Stefan, two authentic 19th century Cossack swords. “A duel between intelligence linked to heart,” he said, pointing to Stefan, then to the men behind him. “And intelligence linked to---

“---practicality?” Stefan interjected, no doubt wanting to say evil. But smart enough, for now, to not reveal to the demon in front of him that he recognized his Satanic affiliations.

Yes, I did say 'Satan'. Who, if he is real, is the 'left turn' on the forks ahead of us that cues us to take the right road. Or a figment of our imaginations that keeps us thinking that Life is about a battle between good and evil, rather than a search for the Truth and Spirit. The former being absolute. The latter beyond any human attribute. But, that was something which would be dealt with later. For the survivors of a 'game' between father and son that was determined by the latter, and, in ways Stefan didn't want to face, created by the former. Which not only put father against son, but Natasha against me. Natasha having been fed an extra ration of locoweed free scientifica.

"Bring it on," the kind mare who had been converted into a vicious bitch snortled at me as she was brought in to Sasha's side, fed a carrot from his pocket. Emanating a strange odor I did not recognize.

CHAPTER 31

There were many things that concerned me about a duel to the death between Stefan and his son. The most important one was the fact that despite Stefan's worship of Cossack ancestors, he had never killed a man, or even ordered anyone's death. Conversations I heard from his now slain Great War buddies confirmed that the most harm Stefan ever did to another soldier in the Great War was a bullet to the fleshy part of his leg so the shot enemy would have a chance to be sent home.

His son Sasha allowed and most probably took part in the killing of 'buyers' who came to Ivanovia who underbid for the goods they came to purchase after his intelligence had been boosted by Scientifica. And perhaps he was directly involved with the same activity prior to Stefan's arrival back home and transformation by the 'magic' (or perhaps cursed) plant.

Why did Sasha, as King Alexander, consent to have a duel with the Philosopher King he had deposed, I didn't know. Maybe it was something he wanted to prove to his father, or to himself. Post-Scientifica Stefan did still remind his son that 'it is a poor student who doesn't excel his teacher'. Though Stefan intended for this to refer to Sasha's non-scientifica-created

abilities as a healer of fresh rather than the taker of life. And a server of humanity rather than a conqueror of it.

But more immediately important, to you most valued reader who endured my babbling for so long, or have cheated to read the ending first--- You are probably expecting me to tell you about a duel between father and son for everyone to see in which the Stefan was given a wound no one could see by Sasha so the duel would be 'fixed'. And, well, you're part right in that prediction.

As a self-taught physician-healer Stefan should have known that if the effective dose of an herb is 10 units, 20 doesn't always make for double benefit. Scientifica did make the muscles between his ears move faster, deeper and even wiser. But as for the muscles below his neck, they deteriorated to 'commoner' strength after the first administration which I supervised. Stefan's independent supplementation with scientifica caused his legs to shrivel into appendages that could barely hold onto the trunk of a saddleless horse, his arms unable to carry a heavy saddle more than ten feet, his lungs going into heavy breathing if he dared to run anywhere or climb a hill without taking a break every ten paces. In addition, his thick brown hair warlock becoming a thin white mane on its way to falling off his scalp. Some of this was due to his allowing, then requiring, his beloved fellow citizens, who he worried about more than they worried about themselves, to do the physical work that he was able to do as a young man barely 2 years previously.

Still, that didn't stop Sasha from allowing his guards to use Stefan's body as a punching bag in an area of the woods that was cleared of all witnesses, human or animal. Then clothing his barely alive father in newly fashioned 18th century Cossack garb which made his emaciated body seem to be Herlcean in the shoulders, arms and legs. Sasha then donned a military outfit that featured the most handsome qualities of the German, American, French and British military generals designed for the next War to End All Wars. Then he announced that there would be a duel between the 'old and new' as well as 'noble and comfortable' for the citizenry of Iankovia, letting them 'decide which century they decided to live in'.

The audience for the match between father and son was the center of town, used in times of old for outdoor group meetings called by the elected

Hetman, or deposing of such. Lining the rope fence were observers who were rich in comfort or rich in soul, none of them being both at the same time. On the center stage, none other than Father Basili, giving his blessing to the affair, announcing that the outcome will be decided by God, of course. The loser being sent to 'his just reward'. "Heaven", he said, looking to Sasha. "Or hell," he declared, staring at Stefan, and, interestingly, at me.

I couldn't help looking at Natasha, her belly squeezed between Sasha's shiny boots and sharp spurs. I tried to tell her that it could be US that determines this match, not the humans on top of us or the Deity up above whose attributes and Will were more invented than Real. But who seemed to be more present than usual, with a Plan of His, or Her, own for man and beast. "Heaven watches and earth works," I snorted to her. "It's you who will be horsemeat by the end of this day, not me," she seemed to nicker back, a glaze over her eyes which I could best described, for lack of a better word, as demonic.

"On the count of three, draw sabres!" Basili commanded the pugilists as a referee in a dispute between two Cossacks over who had the right to have the hand of a woman who wandered into the wrong bar after ingestion of too much vodka. On the count of three, my eyes were blinded by the shiny surface of Sasha's no doubt freshly sharpened blade, pulled out with pride and purpose, holding it up. I could hear the thud of Stefan's edgeless sword being reluctantly pulled out of its sheath.

"Into your black demonically possessed heart," Sasha screamed at his father, the implement he would use in his hand. "Which I must do to save everyone here from the evil you brought to us," he proclaimed. "Justice delivered quickly to put you out of your misery, and our misery."

"Slapped onto your backside, for a needed spanking," Stefan declared with a smile regarding his 'butterknife'. "Which will hurt me more than you, son" he confessed and related with utmost sincerity. "A gift to you that out of ignorance and cowardice I never gave you."

The crowd provided no audible commentary to either pledge or reason to implement it. Perhaps it was because of presence of soldiers in uniforms similar to Sasha's behind them, or something in the air which smelled like a

new 'medicinal', its source being smoke emanating smudges behind the spectators. Very similar to the incense Basili and other priests burnt at church to keep the congregation obedient, and to remind them of their sins, but....with something else added to it.

Father and son looked at and into each other, engaged in conversations about past, present and possible futures that were private. Which I did not endeavor to figure out. Perhaps out of respect for what Sasha could have been, and what Stefan finally was. Or because Natasha stared at me, ears aimed at my eyes, stomping her feet as if her hoofs would go into me even harder than they would land into the despondent passenger on my back.

"And on the count of ten," Basili announced, as ten seconds felt like as many hours. To show off his very partial knowledge of three languages, he began the countdown in badly pronounced French, then German, then English, the finally Ukrainian, with a Russian accent. Sasha charged ahead at full speed, spurring Natasha forward, the sharp point of his sabre forward, his ass out of the saddle. Thinking with the same brain, as in the old days, Stefan and me galloped ahead then just before the moment of impact, made an abrupt left turn.

Sasha lost his balance as Natasha lowered her head. Amidst loudly expressed expletives damning his horse, Stefan and even Jesus to hell, he somehow managed to get himself back on the saddle and pulled Natasha to an abrupt halt one stride in front of the crowd.. "Coward!" he yelled at Stefan. "Face me!" he commanded his father.

"You have to catch me first," Stefan shot back with a confident smile, and, somehow, regaining the strength in his legs and arms that excess scientifica and the loss of musculature below his wrinkled neck produced. Reading and sharing each other's thoughts, we did an evasive dance which drew Sasha to charge at us again and again, missing us each time. Stefan whipped his sword around with as much flair and energy as he did when we did the Cossack dance together for the Austrians in the Great War, impressing, intimidating and entertaining them into thinking we were both harmless. Half of the rich in comfort spectators nodded with interest. All of the rich in soul smiled.

“Alright, let’s have done with it then,” Stefan said from the far end of the ‘arena’ after driving his son into well deserved frustration and embarrassment for nearly falling off his horse. We charged at Sasha, Stefan preparing to knock him off the saddle with the edgeless blade of his sword. Then, two strides before impact, Stefan somehow found the strength to turn his torso, his body parallel to the not-yet-blood-soaked ground, forcing his son to swing the sabre at him.. All of the rich in comfort onlookers broke into smiles they tried to hide from each other. All of the rich in soul spectators broke out in applause.

Sasha, who even as a boy preferred to get around in motorized vehicles rather than fast moving vehicles bearing legs, and souls, repeatedly charged at us, exhausting himself with swings that tore Stefan’s clothing and nearly sliced portions of my flesh. It went on like that for what seemed like ten minutes. The most magnificent ten minutes of my life. Until finally, Sasha threw away his sabre and pulled out his pistol. Pointing it at him, then me. Stefan brought me to an abrupt halt.

“Alright, if that’s how you want it,” Stefan said, after which he leaped off me, the impact of the ground making his feet ache with intense pain. “It’s between us, not the animals who will do whatever we ask or force them to do, Sasha. He removed the saddle from my back, motioned for the crowd to disperse in front of us and hit me in the ass, “Be well, my friend,” he said to me with a sense of finality. I ran a few strides away, the stopped, wanting and needing to know what would happen next.

Stefan picked up Sasha’s sword, handed it back to him, and motioned for his son to dismount Natasha. Intimidated and encouraged by the crowd, he consented to it. He removed his saddle, and gave Natasha a send off. “Go!” he yelled at her, but she wouldn’t move. “Now!” he commanded, still getting no response.

“Please,” Stefan said to her, softly. “This is between us, the lower species, not you,” he whispered into her ears. Natasha walked, trotted, then ran toward me. After which we had an intense conversation that, well, I will share with you later. We both ran into the woods, stopping to look back at the humans who fed us from a safe distance.

I couldn't see what happened next. Sasha fought bravely against his father, inflicting no less than five wounds that cut into his clothing and flesh. His father defended himself and struck Sasha with the blunt blade many times, half of them in his maybe not so accidentally arrogant ass, injuring his son with wounds between his non-listening ears that were even more severe. .

The fight between Sasha and Stefan went on for what seemed forever, exhausting the polarized crowd and finally the father and the son. They stared at each other, kneeling on the ground, holding onto their sabres with their right hand, their lefts clenched in a fist. Fists that opened up, for reasons that astounded me, they extended their left hands toward each other, their fingers engaged in what appeared to be a handshake. The fingers on their right hand let go of the sabres. A hush came over the crowd as to what would happen next. Yes, it was a magical moment where old and new, spiritual and material, as well as masochistic noble and worldly practical reached an agreement. Just in time for me to hear a death rattle come out of both father and son.

As I could still read lips, I eaves dropped into the conversation

Yes, it was the time of dying, when Sasha, true to his word, did remember his promise to tell his father where the remaining portion of scientifica was stored. "He was an artist in his youth, Too enthusiastic to be appreciated by the critics. Too dedicated to his craft to be accepted by the elite artists who rejected his application to art school. Too realistic in his paintings regarding their meaning to be accepted by painters and art gallery owners who wanted 'emotional subtly' on canvas. And too determined to make a difference in the world to accept his fate as well fed housepainter who aspired to nothing more than a contented wife and happy children. Some of his artwork found its way to me, here. Though I don't know how," Sasha said to his father through spews of blood emanating from his mouth.

"And the 'housepainter's name?" Stefan inquired.

"Adolf," Sasha answered. "An Austrian who is in Germany now. Trying to...change the world."

“Through being a successful artist, I hope,” Stefan noted. “Too much passion and power makes someone an ineffective politician, king or leader. As...well...we both know, now.”

“Yes,” the self-dethroned Emperor of Iankovia replied, looking at the citizenry he and his father had betrayed, tricked and forced into Visions that were not their own. “Yes, maybe intelligence isn’t the only things one needs to be effectively...” Sasha fell into his father’s arms.

“Compassionate?” Stefan said to his son, as he drew his last breath.

With that, Mother Nature had to contribute her say into the ‘conversations’ that had taken place. “Mighty Ivan’, the oil rig which had produced the most black gold sunk into the ground under an earthquake it has apparently caused. The tremor disabled all the ‘little Ivans’ around it, then worked its way toward the center of town. Everyone fled for safety, some to the woods, some to the river, some to the arms of loved ones. One man remained in the center of it all.

“Father, forgive us! Please!” Basili said on his knees to the sky. He recited the Lord’s prayer, finally saying ‘thy Will be done on earth as it is...”

Did Father Basili go to Heaven after being swallowed up by the earth below him, or did he have to do a sabbatical in Hell first? It isn’t my place to know, but maybe my place to pray for him and all the other souls in Iankovia. And to pray that some of the remaining Scientifica was sent to England, where a deposed Secretary of the Navy named Winston was warning his people that stopping Fascism should be their first order of business, and Passion.