

FREE THINKERS AND DOERS

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CHAPTER 1

The town of Pineridge Falls didn't have any pine trees in it, nor were there any waterfalls, and, to be honest, it was more of a collection of small squeezed together hamlets than a town. A town, even by 1850s West Texas standards, had to have a saloon, a general store and a spare building that could be converted into a storefront that sold whatever was wanted or needed by the townsfolks. As for said folk, they were kind folks. Hard working people. Caring human beings who gave a shit about whoever walked on two legs or trotted on four. They were intelligent as well. Smart enough to know that if they didn't leave what in future generations would be called Germany after the failed 1848 rebellions against the Kings and Capitalists, they would be slaves to new and even more powerful masters.

These Freethinkers, as they chose to call themselves, didn't choose to live in Texas. But when the boat you smuggled yourself and your family on in in Amsterdam decided that it was profitable to bring Slaves to Houston rather than ragamuffin rebel immigrants who spoke as much accentless English as the White slavers had compassion for their Black cargo, you set up camp where you were thrown ashore.

It was like that for this, initially anyway, collection of Freethinkers families. Family being defined as a man, woman, and various number of offspring from them (or other partners they didn't talk about) who needed more than loved or liked each other. As for particulars, you probably expect me to give you the essentials.

There was Hans J.S. Muller, a master carpenter, passable printer, and prolific scholar in the arts as well as sciences in print. He ate less than anyone else in the community and worked even harder at his printing press and carpentry shop. Yet he still looked more portly with his double chinned prematurely puffed out face and torso than anyone else in the photographs of the citizenry of transplanted

Freethinkers he insisted taking for the day when the collective hamlet would become a major city. Elsa, his mistress back in the old country, accompanied him to the new one. His wife Lisa had turned against the Revolution back in Hamburg, then against her husband Hans when the Police came in to arrest the rabblerousers.

Elsa wasn't much to look at. Her scrawny body lacked any feminine definition on the hips or the chest. Her featureless plain brown hair made her nose seem two times bigger than its actual size. But Hans made her think she was beautiful. Or tried to anyway, referring to her as 'the Aspasia to the Socrates inside of me that you bring out'.

Elsa had been Hans' favorite student when he was still allowed to teach in the university back home. She knew more than Hans did about the philosopher-courtesan Mistress who Socrates found refuge with after having to spend any time with his unappreciative, social-climber wife. Or so she convinced him anyway. Applying Socratic theoretical principles to a world where few people read or cared about philosophy texts was another matter.

There was the idea that democracy was the most enlightened form of government. It was a social experiment that Socrates neither liked nor trusted, particularly because he was put to death by a show of hands from the general citizenry for corrupting the youth. Those same schleps of course erected a statue in his honor 2 weeks after the execution. But Professor Doctor Muller told himself as well as the students who he tried to change into his kind of revolutionaries that such behavior was the typical way Greeks oscillated between ideological extremes. Of course, it was an irrefutable law of Nature that was not-so-shabby ideology A doesn't give 100 percent results, naturally the cure is go to ideology B or Anti-A.

Then there was the credo that Socrates said, and Plato wrote down, that the ultimate result of intelligence is virtue. And that the only precursor of cruelty was ignorance. It was that latter 'truth' that Hans held onto most. Perhaps it was because he, as his ex-wife Lisa claimed, cared with his head rather than felt compassion with his heart. And, in theory as well as Hans' projection of it into reality, advancing intelligence always does result in the realization that what goes around comes around. What you give is what you eventually get back, somehow.

It was Elsa who pointed out, as a joke, at a Texas barbecue between semesters in the 'all are welcomed' Pinegrove schoolhouse (which Hans tried to convert into an innovative frontier university for the literate, functionally-illiterate and pathologically-literate) that 'do unto others how you would like them to do to you' worked for anyone who wasn't a masochist. She knew more about herbs and medicine than most doctors. But Elsa was smart enough to not let them know that when treating human or animal patients, as she continued to make more witticisms that stimulated thought as well as laughter. But Hans didn't get her jokes at that event, concentrating instead on educating his dinner guests about the use of German and Commanche spices to make Texas beef taste like manna from the gods rather than ribeye just off the hoof.

Carl Richter, a generously follicled, slender, tastefully muscled man who was 'easy on the eyes' for whoever glanced his way, be they male or female, had been a master navigator when working on the ships in the North Sea. He had an instinct for knowing exactly where the craft he was on was. By any means possible, he had the annoying habit of suggesting the best course to every overbearing Captain by looking at the stars rather than the compass. But when on land, Carl's complete lack of talent managing farm animals and black thumb with regard to growing anything except weeds in the garden and blisters on his fingers were in direct contrast to his ability to fix any machinery made of metal and wood. As for how he instinctively knew how to fix mechanical 'beasts' with broken many parts using very few tools and even fewer improvised spare parts, it was due to 'something that I was told when looking at the stars.' Of course, when the Pastor or Doctor came around to ask for more particulars, Richter said he was 'consulting

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with the heavenly Father' or 'memories that were stored in my strangely wired brain from when I was a child'.

Carl Richer's wife Nadia, a forty-years still vibrant woman whose black hair flowed down to her slender waist which was complimented by shapely hips and generous mammary tissue above her super healthy (in more ways than one) heart, didn't understand any of the gibberish coming out of her husband's mouth when he was consulting with 'visitors from the stars'. But she knew the most important two skills for eccentrics who wanted to stay alive, be fed and not be burnt at the stake by commoner villagers. Keep the masses technically hostage, which Carl did every day with his wizardry. Or keep the townsfolk entertained, which she did every night with her gift of converting sound from violin strings and air going though vocal cords into music.

Nadia and Carl had three children, a boy, George, a girl, Louisa and someone who didn't seem to belong exclusively to either gender between the ears, who they named Sasha. None of them were exceptionally talented in the arts or sciences. But they were far more skilled at interhuman communication than their parents. Somehow when any one of the children said 'please don't fight' or 'most people like people who are more interesting than different' to their parents, the other two joined in with particulars about such that kept the family intact. When those children were not able to nurture each other, they sought the aid and guidance they needed from Aunt Sarah Weissman and Uncle Solomon Schaumburg.

Sarah and Solomon were very dedicated to their own children. In Sarah's case it was her violin and for Solomon it was his guitar. Each of them in their younger years sought marital partners who would be their equals as music composers and performers, but they soon realized that creativity is a solitary endeavor. Such was true particularly when you wanted to give the world music that would enlighten rather than please the listener, like their mutually admired bachelor for life muse and mentor, Beethoven. A rule of this world, and maybe most of the others, was

that someONE composed or sung the melody, and someone, or someones, provided the harmony.

Sarah and Solomon grew up in the same mostly Jewish village which was pillaged and repopulated by Gentiles who kept conquering each other . According to everyone, most importantly Sarah's parents on the industrious side of Telenkefka and Solomon's mother and father from the colorful district of that over-populated village, they would be a perfect match. Every other member of the exclusively (officially anyway) Jewish community and, according to the gypsy mystic, dog, cat and mule seemed to agree. Rightly or wrongly, Sarah and Solomon chose to disagree with that mandate, leaving Telenkefka in different directions geographically, politically and psychologically as soon as they were able to.

By the time Sarah and Solomon somehow survived to the half century mark, their hair grew longer and thicker than in their youth with just a touch of grey on the temples, the crow's feet around their eyes making them seem younger than their age, somehow. Rumor had it that each of them had a special talent of stealing energy, hopes and youthful looks from the 'non-touched commoners' they had jumped into relationships with. Both Sarah and Solomon had outgrown or miscalculated what they anticipated getting from no less than three potential 'soulmates'. Those 'victims' whose lives were made more painful and/or interesting than they should have, with greying hair, wrinkle been as a result of Sarah and Solomon's 'experiments in interspecies relationships', were from many different religious faiths, very much including religious believers in atheism. The lessons learned, or not learned, found their way into their music. Music that, for five years after they separated as musicians due to 'creative differences', was not nearly as good as when they separated, as artists anyway.

Sarah and Solomon performed for each other as much as for the (as they called them, in private of course) 'earthlings' who hired them for weddings, funerals, baptisms and brisques. It did seem like a prophesy fulfilled, as their Orthodox Jewish parents had told them that one day they would finally settle down to

create the next generation of 'assets rather than liabilities to the world' from within their Hebrew roots. And that their more often than not unpopular music would be blessed, fueled and inspired if they wrote the lyrics in Yiddish or Hebrew.

The latter did happen after Sarah's mother was rendered a cripple following multiple rapes and Solomon's father was sent to, I hope anyway, a blissful afterlife or next life without 'loving' Christians after a series of Pogroms that swept through Prussian-controlled Poland. Childhood friends, but not lovers, Sarah and Solomon hardly recognized each other at Solomon's funeral, aka Shiva. The religiously anti-science rabbi and the now atheist overworked doctor in attendance suggested that Solomon and Sarah play a song together. Both claimed that it would stimulate the neuronal circuits in Sarah's mother's traumatized mind so that they would not only bring enough strength to her legs to be able to not only walk again, but to dance. She did. And according to the conversation Ida Weissman was having with was none other than, officially anyway, platonic lover Jacob Schaumburg's ghost. At least according to the Kabala gypsy mystic in attendance.

Yes, in the non-Pale regions of old country populated by believers in Jesus or Modern Science, Solomon and Sarah learned how to compose and perform love songs to pay for their supper as a non-married couple who kept many couples who were married together, at least for another night, week or year. A coda, would offer the crowd something that would feed their souls, and free their tyrant or self-oppressed souls. The penalty of course was having to move to the next town. Sometimes it was because the crowd, and those who ruled them, smelled 'Jew' in their demeanor and music. Sometimes it was because the 'find your own relationship with God' message in their music scared those who were afraid to die or consider that God was not an anthropomorphized replica of a father they never had, or lost too early in their childhood. Sometimes it was about just suggesting that things can and should be changed politically, socially and relationally. Most of their audience of course had the 'good sense' to live behind prison walls of their own construction. Or they entrusted their lives and those of their beloved

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offspring which were the devil they know rather than the God that was probably out there, somewhere.

Solomon and Sarah found their tribe when they offered to entertain the non-uniformed 'troops' who had no rank, and no loyalty to any one country, or religion just prior to the 1848 revolutions. They provided custom-made anthems for the Revolutionaries from no less than 20 ethnic backgrounds, bringing them together in common cause. Songs that, of course, became perverted, misunderstood or banned as soon as they became popular. Such was an occupation that provided Solomon and Sarah no time to create little revolutionaries of their own. And that required them to proudly proclaim one fateful night in Hamburg, due to the desire to be honest with themselves, and others, that they were dedicated Jews liberated from dogmatic Judaism.

Soon afterward, they were framed for mass murder of three Russian Counts, two Prussian Duchesses and ten British Industrialists at a party they had crashed after they were accused of poisoning the punch and cajoling ten future kings, queens and capitalistic moguls into singing Satanic verses which led them to take a jump off a cliff together so they could become united with their New Master in the Underworld. No one exactly knew who set up Solomon and Sarah for being behind the infamous 'night of murder and demonically-inspired death' in Dusseldorf Castle. But there was a mixed motive in the eyes of the rabbi from their home village who gave them 'donated from the congregation' tickets for passage to Texas a day before they were to be hanged for high and Holy treason back home. Two days before their planned execution, the Rabbi from back home, who was both bald and wrinkled long before his time, was allowed visitation rights into their cell. He was surprisingly far better fed and clothed than any other Jew from back home. He snuck a key into the loaf of bread which was to be Sol and Sarah's last meal, along with two tickets for a steamer. Also included was a note to the over half century old musicians who grew more vibrant and attractive to the eye with each passing year that 'when God give good looks of the young in your old age, he assigns you other agendas in other places, a curse and a blessing.'

Solomon and Sarah figured out upon arriving in Texas that though there was official separation of Church and State, it was best to not tell people what you believed regarding what could be felt with the heart but not confirmed by the brain. Actually, after a while, they didn't really know what they believed. But they adopted 'provisional hypotheses' to make life meaningful, survivable and less lonely. Particularly when being adopted as aunt and uncle by the children in Pinegrove Falls, knowing that biology said that they would never be able to have their own.

While most of the 'White' population in Pinegrove Falls was born on the other side of the Pond, the 'almost White' proportion of citizens were Tejanos. Spanish-speaking Catholics who, for the most part, supported the 'Revolution for Independence and Freedom' led by White Americans who came into Texas before 1834, and decided it was time to rebel against the oppressive yolk of Mexican Dictator-President Santa Anna. Of course, the fact that they were Americans did give them the divine right to settle and steal the vast expanses of what at that time was still Mexico. And they had the God given right to not have to convert to Catholicism. And, most importantly, they had the Congressionally-guaranteed right to bring their own Black Slaves into a country that, officially anyway, banned slavery.

In exchange for helping the Americans to establish the Free Republic of Texas, the Hispanic Tejanos were pushed down the totem pole nearly to the level of the Black Slaves. It was an unpleasant job of course, but after all, if the Will of God is for White American males to own all the land and people in North America, such was the Natural Order of things. Then, in 1846, when it was time for Texas to officially become part of America, some Tejanos turned against their White 'comrades' who boasted the 'remember the Alamo' battlecry when drunk with nationalism or rockgut whiskey. A small detail of that agenda was, of course, for Americans to invade Mexico.

Victor Gonzalez, sporting with more hair on his upper lip than his prematurely balding head, had lost his left leg fighting for Texan independence to Santa Anna's cannon fire. His reward for that service was to lose ownership of most of his ranch to a Mississippian judge who was put in charge of land allocations after the Texan republic was founded in 1836. But unlike second cousin Juan Seguin and half brother Carlos de la Garza, Tejanos who fought under and for General Sam Houston, Victor didn't don a Mexican Army uniform when the call of his home country of Mexico sounded the call to arms to defend itself.

Victor Gonzales also refused to put on an American Army uniform to defend the new state and country of Texas. It cost him the rest of his land and an all expense paid vacation in a military prison twenty miles outside of Austin. But, it spared him the burden of having to take care of his needy wife and spoiled children so that he would not be harassed by the Gringo immigrants who made up the majority of the population in his once Spanish speaking town. With the aid of Comanches who were in need of horses to ride and white soldiers to torture, Gonzales was liberated from 'duty' as a protect trustee in Jaconia Prison. Gonzales did find his wife, daughter and two sons, They were scraping living, or rather an existence, in a boom town that had no name yet, but did contain posters of himself as a wanted fugitive. His wife Maria suggested that Victor join the Americans in the war against his fellow Mexicans, but Gonzales refused to follow her advise. 'I will fight no more forever', he pledged to Maria, his daughter and his two sons, Carlos and Diego. Carlos, who joined the Mexican Army, considered his father a coward. Diego, whose liking for blonde haired Southern belles rather than home grown senioritas, enlisted with the Americans. Victor's daughter, Victoria, who aspired to be a learned Nun or a scholarly Journalist, thought her father to be a saint. Maria considered her husband Victor to be an idealistic fully grown 'problem child' who was going through a phase who needed protection from his erratic passion for unpopular ideologies. Such led Maria, Victoria and Victor them eventually to Pinegrove Falls, an isolated town filled with people who were rumored to be the most closed mouth, best secret keeping immigrants in Texas, or Mexico. Secrets that they kept from each other as well, with walls to protect anyone from finding them out that were constructed with materials far

more impregnable than wire, wood or stone. Victor recognized this as an asset, a gift. Maria thought it to be a problem, and a curse, particularly when her husband shared less and less of his real thoughts with her other than how many ears of corn he had harvested or how many of their cows were still on the open range. Fifteen year old Victoria found the whole thing fascinating, writing accounts of such in her daily diary in mirror-writing mixed Spanish and English that she would translate into German. Or perhaps Russian one day, to be published in Europe, of course.

Munich born Lydia Schwartz and Georgia-raised Lizzy Ann Johnson were the most voluptuous women in town. Every man in town gazed at them for three seconds more than was socially appropriate, or noticed by their wives. Those involuntarily, biologically-based captured stares were returned with a smile and a 'we both have to get back to business' subtle nod from the two ladies. Both of them had a way of deflecting any small town gossip delivered their way by other citizens bearing vaginas rather than penises. In conversations with citizens of Pinegrove Falls of either gender, the 'L' ladies somehow elevate them to 'ethereal' levels. Indeed, these two women of intellect as well as beauty displayed and encouraged us, me anyway, to appreciate the truism that those of the highest intelligence talked about ideas and ideals. Those of lesser intellect yapped about events, sports and politics. And those who actively embraced the comfort and security of ignorance bantered about who did what to who, and what they were wearing at the time. But when things got personal regarding why they were sharing a house as Comrades and not as biologically related siblings, they avoided the temptation to go into any truthful details. Though, as far as the quality and sanity of the love they had for each other, it beat any dynamic that I saw, or felt, in anyone else in town.

There was one population of people who were not in our fair 'city'. People of color. It was thought that the ban of slavery that was the first and fifth of the ten 'civil rather than religious' commandments which were our only laws would invite Africans and African Americans to come live with us. But those Colored folk who were emancipated chose to live with others of the same hue.

There were other families who wound up settling in Pinegrove Falls after Hans placed a stake into the short-grass-and sagebrush covered ground, naming it such prior to constructing the first structure with timber that had to be floated down the river. Some were other Freethinkers from other German speaking kingdoms overseas. Some were Quakers. Some were American born Texans who heard that Comanches left 'Dutchie-eggheads' alone when going on raids because those German speaking immigrants were the only Whites who actually kept their word to the Indians after an agreement for who could own (or more accurately, use on Nature's terms) land was reached.

And then there's me. Stefan to my friends in Russia. Steven or just 'Steve' to my Comrades here. I was born a Cossack in the Don River region of Ukraine, the oldest of three brothers, who had the 'honor' of serving in the Czar's Imperial Army in Siberia, so that the rest of my family would be able to rule themselves on the Steppes. The fee for the Czar minding his own business and letting us screw up our own was a duty which involved educating stone age Pagan Yakuts in Siberia about the benefits of 19th century technology. And the perks one gets in the afterlife if you live your life as an obedient, tax paying Eastern. And, as an unofficial officer in the Czar's Imperial Army, my offering them protection from renegade non-military Cossack marauders, my other role with a change of wardrobe, being one of those marauders. My wanting to inform the surrendering, defeated and humiliated Chief of the Yakut tribe that it was a set up used since the 16th century was halted by my high ranking commanding Imperial Army officer, and my well paid fellow Cossack comrades putting a price on my head. When I went to the Chief to seek shelter with his tribe, he blamed me for being part of the problem, which, truth be told, I was.

Eventually I headed West, finding that my Cossack village in Ukraine was burnt to the ground for an offense against the Czar that only the ghosts of the slain knew. Then, after cutting off my warlock, I worked my way to what had been Poland 50 years earlier, and finally Munich where I met Hans, Carl et al and the hope of a

revolution that would save the world from itself. But, like the Pugachev revolt on the Steppes that my Grandfather believed would solidify a homeland for Cossacks, the best laid and most bravely carried out plans of men, and women, were quenched by European versions of Czars and an even more dangerous ruler---business moguls who rose to power by cleverly accumulating wealth and power rather than inheriting it. But when we Revolutionaries took over the halls of government for the brief time that we did, it was our ignorance, arrogance and perhaps greed that caused we 1848'ers everywhere in Europe to be defeated by the kings and capitalists. Those of us who weren't killed were tossed into jail, or exile. Or, subjugation.

It is 'rationally based' subjugation to oppression that is the most dangerous for well intended souls dedicated to making a positive difference in the world. That 'pick your battles carefully' and 'retreat or submit so you can fight another day' strategy for survival which leads to living. And there was no shortage of that when we finally got to Texas. Particularly on the most glorious day in the history of our town which turned into the most tragic days to follow, for which we were responsible. Or were we?

CHAPTER 2

It was Christmas, a celebration that devout Jewish agnostics Uncle Solomon and Aunt Sarah said HAD to be observed. It was Aunt Sarah who placed a hand carved baby Jesus into a rocking manger in the middle of the town square on a specially prepared crib with the cleanest straw available. "Let these Christians, and atheists who used to be Christians, think that you really are the son of God," I heard her say.

"And don't tell them that it was a humanoid traveller from a more sane planet than this one who got you knocked up," Carl Richter continued to the wooden likeness of the Virgin Mary, or as he said 'raped by ETs masquerading as angels' Mary. After feeling once again nothing coming out of the masterfully carved likeness of the mother most boys, and girls wish they had. He had such discourses with two and three dimensional images of the Mother of God before. But this one bore a striking resemblance to its carver, his wife Nadia, the carver of such still unknown to him. This Mary had the young face that Nadia had three childbirths ago rather than the enlarged, hyper-nostripped, crow's feet infested mug she had now. Such were features that he was noticing more than usual these daze

To hide those features from any other onlooker with a long black mane which was never tied back, accompanies by bangs that grew past her eyebrows. But for the moment, she expressed the plethora of emotions running through her mind as the calendar brought us all to that 'so, what have you done since last year?' holiday through her violin with a rendition of Silent Night. The stillness of the night air was given even a louder quality of Silence by soft singing and loud whisper to that tune in German, Spanish and English, all at once.

Everyone in town brought something for the baby Jesus, laying their offerings at his four and a half-toed feet. Hans Mueller brought the manuscript of his newest

book for good luck, his uncommonly common law wife Elsa whispering into the Savior's ears that it was a first draft, which will be edited by New Years...THIS year.

Maria Gonzales knelt before the savior, crossed herself in the Catholic manner. She then placed a beaded Crucifix that took a week and six inches of her hair to make at baby Jesus' feet, unaware that if the Jesus spirit was in this likeness of the Lord that it would be a painful reminder of what his final act as a grown man would be. She prayed for the soul of her neo-Atheist husband, then her absent from Pinegrove Falls still stuck in two warring armies two sons, asking that they never had to face each other in battle in yet another war between Mexico and the US.. She begged the Creator to see to it that her inquisitive writer daughter Victoria (who was at the time, taking notes on the event for her newest novel) would not have her mind corrupted by a Socialist Anarchist on her upcoming 'all expenses paid by some Suffragette organisation in New Jersey' trip to New York. And most importantly, Maria prayed that Victoria would not return home pregnant. Or worse, become a suffragette who would, as a result of her being true to her convictions, be un-marriable to any man. Or even worse, that she not be a perfect match for another woman like the Lizzy and Lydia.

Those women, Lizzy and Lydia, prepared the Christmas eve feast, stirring a pot of stew that released a different aroma with every turn of their Texas sized spatula. Setting the assembly of small tables arranged in a large circle was George, Louisa and Sasha, Richter, Carl Richter. They felt very much at ease with, as Maria Gonzales called them, 'the two white for now witches' whose effectiveness in treating ailments that baffled any male doctor came from, according to the Mexican woman who feared God more than she ever could love him, 'Doctor Satan'.

I looked on as the other residents of our community presented offerings to the baby Jesus as part of a tradition that, no matter how illogical it was, became a necessity for believers, agnostics and atheists alike. It was also an offering to the Lord, or the gods, who enabled us to grow corn, raise cattle and build houses

without insurmountable opposition from Mother Nature or any creature walking on two or four legs. We lacked for nothing when it came to our biological needs, and a fair number of wants, of the body. Such enabled our minds to become hungrier for gifts from the Creator that could not be touched by fingers or seen by the human eye. "It's going to be a good year," I said to Victor Gonazales as we treated ourselves to Nadia Richter's violin playing our auditory main course. Meanwhile, the head of every household, be they bearers of penises or vaginas, brought entrees they liked to the community dining tables, and naturally thought everyone else would and should have the same tastes in foot that they did. Dessert for the feast entering my ears and homesick Slavic soul came in the form of Sarah and Soloman. They added their musical accompaniment to Nadia's medley of Christmas songs, serving the melody but never overshadowing it in volume or style. The feast for the ears moved into something...different, as Nadia decided that the music needed to be expanded in style and expression. The melody of each tune was inferred rather than played according to the musical notes with the improvised riffs around it.

Yes, it was a noisy Silent Night, in which Divine Quiet and Fire Inspired Thunder somehow merged together. Until the clip clop of horses from the North, East, South, then West end of town came into both of my ears. It silenced the sound of all musical instruments, singing voices and pleasant conversation. Upon looking up and into the waves of dust entering our town, I saw horses ridden by riders with bandanas covering their mouths and noses. I felt like one of the Jews in villages where Cossacks hired by the Czar, which included me, came to tear apart what hard work and good luck had pulled together. The head rider stopped in front of me, singling me out for reasons I did not know. He motioned for his men to halt their horses, and to pull out their rifles. They were aimed them at every Pinegrovian man, and woman, who happened to have a gun on hand. He pulled off his mask, giving me a look at the meanest eyes and most devilishly handsome face I had seen since arriving in this still hopeful New County as a refugee from the ruined Old Countries. Which, truth be told, I had just as much a part of ruining as anyone else back 'home'.

“You came here for...a meal for your bellies, and some....Christmas gifts?” I said to the head rider as an on the spot appointed by life sheriff. I pointed to the offerings to the baby Jesus, which included a variety of watches, money, jewelry and clothing, as well as locks of hair plentiful enough to make at least three multi-colored wigs. “But...taking candy from THAT baby in the manger comes with big retribution from his Father,” I continued, pointing up to the sky. “So, how are we to serve and please our new guests?” I said to the sky, pretending to be an escaped patient from an asylum. “Yes, I got that...and that...and that...” I added, leaving to the imagination of the mounted listener and his now terrified, confused or ridiculing subordinates what was about to come down from the sky to smite them. The portion of ghost riders who laughing at me, particularly when I started talking in made up tongues, soon to became cautious of me. The rest of the town residents went along with my ruse as fellow mental patients.

“The air and water here is good, and great!” I said to the Judge or all judges above me. “You breath it in and you become empowered!” I declared, in Texan-accented English. “Is that not right?” I inquired to the sky again. The rest of the conversation with the Lord who I invented, then started to believe in, was in Russian. It drove terror into all of the devilish leader’s men, and even a few of their horses. Until their leader answered me, and God, in Russian. “An old trick that won’t work,” he said, putting accents on the wrong syllables but using the right words. “And if ya don’t stop this charade, I will shoot everyone in this town, with you bein’ the last one to be sent to heaven, or hell,” he continued, in English

The head rider pointed the, as was becoming fashionable to say, business end of his Colt pistol at Victoria, who was writing down the events as they were occurring. His first shot put a large hole into the book she was writing. The second round grazed her writing hand. “The third goes into her literary head!” he told everyone regarding the most brilliant and beloved citizen in our town. A somehow mature woman who has not yet celebrated her 15th birthday who, if protected from her own over adventurous soul, would put into print for posterity everything we were doing, and not doing, in the present in this enlightened community.

“What do you want?” I asked the head rider, in Russian, of course not correcting him for his defective knowledge of Slavic grammar and pronunciation. In a language which is ten times harder to speak properly, I suppose so that we Slavs feel obligated to suffer between the ears more than any other ethnic group I encountered. “What do you REALLY want?” I pressed.

“What’s in there, for now,” he said, pointing to the bank. “Not all of it, but enough so that you can keep filling it with money for the next times we come back.” The chief bandit-captain opened up his coat, revealing a badge under it. He motioned for his men to do the same, badges of different designs on each of their chests. “Ya want protection from the Injuns, and REAL bandits from South AND North of the Rio Grande out there, it comes with a price. Security ain’t free out here,” he proclaimed with a piercing good old boy Texan accent in the manner of the American born farmers who came to the now Lone Star State to become slave owning ranchers on lands taken from Mexican Tejanos.

“The only enemies we have here are ignorance, anger and greed,” Scholar Mayor Hans Mueller proclaimed, proudly with a heavy Bavarian accent.

“Well, Dutchie,” the Protection selling most probably legally appointed Ranger pushed out of the trimmed goatee around his mocking, smiling lips. “You foreigners got new enemies now. Rustlers, half-breed renegades, outlaws, and...”

“...Bandits who found their way into becoming State Assembly Representatives?” Carl Richter speculated, and gave voice to.

“Who think there is gold, silver or some other valuable resources under the dirt here, or in the hills around us?” Lydia put forth without holding back any of her foreign diction.

“Which there ain’t,” Lizzy added, in her own homegrown Texan twang, in a voice that was more masculine than feminine, her head bowed, her face hidden by a wide-brimmed hat. “We’re rich in things you and yer men, or men like you anywhere else ain’t interested in. Unless yer talkin about what’s in here, Jake,” she said, pulling a philosophy book out of her coat pocket.

“Y’all forgettin what a man can get behind that book, and under that dress,” ‘Sheriff Jake’ shot back at her. “And you will address me as Ranger Jackson. ”

How and why Lizzy knew Ranger Jackson or Jake I didn’t know. It was a secret they both wanted and probably needed to keep private.

Jackson looked around town, assessing the stored supplies we had for winter. He started with focusing on the corals, then moved on to the general store and finally, the bank. He reached into his pocket. “I got here a list. A Christmas list that me, Ranger Santa, came here to collect to give to all of children of REAL Texans. Your contribution as....guests in this country. Think of it as rent. And protection from others who will do a whole lot more to you than me and my men ever could, if we were so inclined. Hand to God.” He raised his hand up, in a solemn pledge. “And, hand to baby Jesus there. Time ta put those Christian thoughts inta charitable deeds. With...say, ten percent of what you newcomers ta Texas got, which you got from Texan land.”

Santa Jake, our new landlord and tax collector, gave me the list. I shared it with Hans Mueller, Carl Richter, Victor Gonzales and three other men who dared to come join us. Hans, recalling his own experiences in the old country said the first

‘aye, for now’ in German. The others in our group agreed, then turned to me. “It has to be unanimous,” Hans said.

Reluctantly, I agreed. It would insure that we would still be around for the New Year. Though it would be a less happy one than we anticipated.

CHAPTER 3

We celebrated Christmas with less food in our bellies than the previous one, but, as we told ourselves, other Texans needed the dried meat, flour, beans, blankets, coats and money we had excess amounts of more. That is if we believed what Ranger Captain and Sheriff Jake Jackson said as he loaded a wagon with our editable and some non-edible valuables he collected as our taxes to bring to 'those in greater need' than us, those wagons belonging to us. But, such was, we told ourselves, the price of living as immigrants in a new country where one needed protection from the kind of bandits and desperados who were far more vicious, and elusive, than the tax collectors in the Old Countries we came from. Who took away our children to be raised by 'loving' parents with better food, better housing, better education and better religions. Children who, particularly if your country was occupied by the Ottomans, despite promises given by the Sultan, never came home again. Unless it was as a proud soldier enthusiastically fighting under a foreign flag under the command of generals whose mandate was to acquire even more of our land, crops and grandchildren.

I recall what Hans Meuller, whose will to fight kings and capitalists had disappeared nearly as fast as the hair on his old before his time head, said to me a week after the tax collectors galloped back into the desert with as much speed as they had arrived. It was New Years day, 1850, while placing his large bearlike foreclaw on my shaking shoulder. "Each gives according to their ability," he told me as we both looked behind us at the 10 percent loss of food and externally worn jewelry, which on my count was more like 20 percent. "And takes according to their needs," he noted, as I observed the half filled bowls of the adequately fed and Spartanly clothed but not freezing fellow diners at the New Year's Day celebration which was now just another meal.

"But there is still one thing that we still have in excess which they did not take, or destroy," Unofficially Mayor Mueller said pointing to the bookstore and library, still overloaded with books. "And they didn't destroy that!" the normally

overweight Mayor noted while I could hear his underfed stomach bellow out an 'I'm still empty, feed me already' growl. It was loud enough for even my thankfully still well fed horse to hear. The Utopian Offerings Press was still actively in business, printing English, Spanish and German new Works for a New World as fast as our community of readers became writers, very much including aspiring novelist Victoria Gonzales. It also pumped out prints made from drawings and paintings made by those Pinegrove Fallians who expressed their thoughts, ideas and aspirations in images rather than words. "Yes, a free press and free access to everything and anything is something to be valued," Mayor, Professor and, only when he HAD to be, Editor Hans boasted proudly.

"Until you print something that offends someone with more guns and a different morality construct than you, or us," I replied. I pointed to the window of the shop the prominently prominently-displaying a satire-infused short story collection entitled 'Why Shit Still Floats to The Top'. It mocked slave owners and critically attacked the institution they economically and psychologically depended on. It was penned written by 15 year old Victoria Gozales, the source of inspiration and, truth be told again if you don't mind me pestering you with it, envy of ever adult who chose to speak to the world through the written word.

Each of Victoria's masterful stories, along with humble offerings from everyone else, were now printed in the now 6 page weekly literary AND events newspaper. Hans distributed them freely in our town. He sent mostly me to other communities with a 'pay what you want to' price on the newspapers and books he publishes to maintain our shared town budget. I glanced over the most recent edition of 'The Pinegrove Falls Free Press' sticking out of the pocket in Hans' weatherworn coat, which prompted him to give me this latest edition to read, and if I liked what I read, offer him the price of 'whatever you can afford or have in excess'. In it were the most recent heartfelt and humor infused stories from the teenaged protégé about the evils of slavery and the burdens that came with freedom and intelligence. Such forced me to ponder the 'real life' dangers of establishing a Utopian community in a state that valued the rights of White people to own Colored ones. And a country in which native born White American males

were blessed and cursed with the obligation to be paternal masters for everyone else from 'sea to shining (until it is polluted it with more industrial wastes) sea'. As I pleasured my mind and soul with the first line of Victoria's latest, greatest and most honest essay, Hans reminded me that anything in excess, even Pacifist Enlightenment, could kill you and everyone else with a thinking brain and open heart around you. "This will offend many people, particularly the slave owners who make a good living for their American White families by enslaving and breaking up Black families," I said to Hans.

"Which Victoria, whose name I purposely didn't put in as the author, at her mother's request, understood, when she wrote about how White slave owners could be richer in pocket, and in Vision, if they treated the Black slaves and so called free Negroes as partners, and equals," Hans replied back to me with a wide, proud smile as he looked at the article. But one which had even more envy of the 15 year old brilliant novelist who wrote more poetically than Hans ever did, or perhaps still could.

"But," I countered, looking at and into Hans' ocular portholes as I stroked my overgrown mustache. By cultural necessity I made it look more 'Texan' than 'Cossack' by extending it to the bottom of my jaw, waxing the ends of it. I then removed my weatherworn Stetson, stroking my four inch long moplike topknot, having learned that having a shaved head with a Cossack warlock in this new land with my easily sunburnt skin would make me look like a vicious Injun to the Whites. Or a pathetic wannabe Noble savage who would be shunned by the REAL Indigenous Indians. "Didn't you, Hans, write that those rich in pocket could never be rich in Vision, and those rich in Vision to remain so should never be rich in pocket?"

"Not TOO rich in pocket," Mayor Mueller, or as he preferred to be called, 'Comrade Professor Hans', clarified, waving his extended index finger and third finger at me in the cooler than normal Texas air. On a year when we actually DID get a springling of snow for Christmas. Of course, to our not completely

unexpected disappointment, it did melt into mud on the morning of Dec 26th. Then it got swallowed up by the sunbaked ground by high noon. “But, you can’t have everything, and maybe you shouldn’t,” Hans went on in his thicker than ever Bavarian accent. “And if you are very good at doing six things life assigns you to do, you’ll be horrible at doing six hundred things you want to do,” he continued, gazing at the Richter kids, George, Louisa and Sasha. On musical instruments specifically made to match their small finger, they that ‘Young Richter trio’ played a newly composed tune composed by ‘Aunt’ Sarah conducted by common law childless hubby ‘Solomon’ in an open aired chamber orchestra with offspring from other proud parents. The featured soloist was Nadia Richter, initiating a ‘musical conversation’ with her husband Carl which seemed to be resolving the issue about which they had a screaming match the night before. Lizzy and Lydia danced to the tune, inviting men to come share their warmth, musicality and intelligence with them. But those men kept themselves at a distance for when holding the two ladies during the dance, who allowed those love starved, or perhaps lust seeking, men no more than ten stanzas of dance, an agreement that Lizzy and Lydia had, or hoped they had, with those men’s wives.

I remember from that day not asking Hans Mueller if those 600 things he was ‘bad’ at included composing music, playing it or being able to effectively establish a relationship which provided children and the elusive musicality of love.

But those ‘I wish I was good at something other than what life assigned me to be good at’ issues that New Years day disappeared as quickly as the Christmas snowfall melted into dry dust under the sunbaking and mind-numbing Texas sun when one of Jake Jackson’s men hand galloped into town.

The rider abruptly brought his horse to a halt in front of me, Hans and my horse, Sventlana. I named that beautiful and intelligent mare after the woman I wanted but could never have as a boy, young man, then old before his time one upon returning home to the Steppes. Sventlana was a runaway horse who found ME after coming to Texas. I learned to love her more than I could ever love the

presumed dead (or perhaps in reality, married to someone better than me) human woman after whom I named her.

I recall on that day that Svetlana put her ears back at the sight of the still wet behind the ears badge bearing peachfuss-mustached Texas Ranger who rode in at a leisurely trot, alone and unmasked. Or perhaps Svetlana was angry, or scared of, his proud cut horse. "Our representative in the newly freely, democratically elected legislature in Austin, Councilman Jackson, got a new list fer ya'll. Contribution request, made on a' count of bad things happenin' ta good people West of the Pecos," the no more than twenty five year old messenger said, with a kind voice and 'down home country friendly' eyes handing Hans.

After Hans looked at the neatly folded mandate. "I was told that we paid our yearly taxes, Son" he informed the messenger, doing his best to hide his Bavarian accent, but being worse at it than ever. "We will deal with this as soon as we can," he said, with mixed feelings and emotions.

"Better that ya'll deal with it now. It's a new year, Herr Mueller. New rules. From a new country. With new enemies, requirin' new alliances." the retort, delivered though the mouth of a viscous demon who seemed to possess the lad. .

"New enemies being who?" I asked in my, for better or worse, easily slipped into accent-less pathetically boring generic English. "We haven't had any problems with American bandits, Mexicans, or Indians. Or anyone else. And the towns I've been making deliveries to haven't reported anything unusual either," I gave voice to. "And as for the rumor about runaway slaves forming gangs with Northern Abolitionist Yankees that rob White ranches, banks and plantations..." I advanced, despite the whispering voice in my head advising me not to.

The messenger took in a deep, reflective breath, then stared at and into me. "Ya'll got new enemies now," he said, pointing to the hills behind me. Emerging into the view of me, Hans, and Svetlana were no less than 30 riders, brandishing weapons ranging from spears to sabers to rifles. They kept their distance, preventing me with my defective oculars or Hans' sharp hawk-eye ones, even when aided by field glasses, from discerning who they were. Meanwhile the New Years family banquet of sufficient food and excessive music continued, uninterrupted.

"Some of the items on that list are for them, so my family can go to sleep at night and wake up alive the next mornin'," the messenger informed me, reading it from a slip of paper, this time in grammatically correct Russian. "Translate that to him," he commanded me, pointing to Professor Hans with the most condescending nod of the head I had seen in a dog's or horse's age.

I started to relate in my best German what this ominously bilingual Texan good ole boy said to me. But before I could finish, Hans put up his hand. "Stop! We'll give you what you want, and need," Hans said to the messenger as he looked at the second then third page of the list.

"We should vote on this," I said.

"Yeah, it is a free country," the messenger noted. "But in the meantime..." he continued, pulling a pocket-watch from his vest pocket. "Tempus Figit" he related, not knowing or caring that his Latin diction was as bad as his Russian.

"You don't want horses," Hans noted. "They're more valuable than people here."

“For now,” I thought, but did not give voice to. I looked into Svetlana’s eyes, assuring her that over my dead body would she be given to anyone else as a means of transportation, enslaved farm laborer, wagon puller or food. As to what to say to the messenger....that was interrupted by a barrage of gunfire from the riders above, the bullets making a semi-circle of dust around me, Hans and Svetlana.

The music from the town square came to a halt. Every man and woman armed themselves with a firearm, aiming it at the still distant and un identifiable intruders. Victor Gonzales clenched his fist in at the potential invaders. His daughter Victoria held out her pencil and notepad in defiance of them.

“They have more guns than you do, or we do back home,” the messenger informed me, Hans then the rest of our town of freedom fighters after the barrage of bullets stopped. Neglecting of course to say where that ‘home’ was.

I pulled out my revolver, aiming it at the head of the messenger. “Your people from those hills fire one more shot, and it’s your brains on the ground!” I warned.

“They ain’t my people,” he replied, with....yes, terror in his voice.

“Then who are they?” I demanded to know, through gritted teeth.

“The recipient of what’s on this list?” Hans gently put forth, putting brains before brawn.

“Da,” the messenger replied, averting his eyes. “Ya, Si and YES!!!!” he whispered, each word tinged and infused with escalating portions of fear and....yes, shame.

While I kept the gun on the now trilingual young messenger who seemed to be the keeper of secrets from many old, distant and dangerous souls, Hans conferred with the assembly. The reply, after intense debate, the details of which I didn't hear, was a 'yes, ya , si and da.' A wagon was loaded with more supplies. More 'taxes'. Hans personally pulled the wagon forward.

"A horse will get the goods to where they are supposed to go faster," the messenger said, looking at Svetlana.

"Yes, it will," I said, pulling him off his horse. As he moaned in pain in the dirt, much more than I anticipated he would, I hitched his horse to the wagon. Seeing that I was excessively rough on his body and ego, I gently helped him to the driver's seat of the buckboard. "One more thing I need to know, and demand that you tell me!" I requested with quiet determination.

"What!" he exclaimed, desperate.

"Your name, your real name!" I demanded, in my native tongue.

"Ely Dennis. Ely Dennis...Ivanov," replied the young, scrawny messenger three sizes too small for his clothing, and most probably social position 'bac home'. Upon hearing his Surname, my jaw dropped. The armed masked riders surrounding us atop of the hills edged closer. Shots from sharpshooters behind the bushes made a semi-circle around my feet. The head rider sporting a six sided badge over his no doubt cold towards me at a slow, deliberate walk, lowering the bandana covering his nose and mouth. His overgrown more grey than brown mustache hid any view of his facial expression, any view of his eyes hidden by a wide brimmed hat that cast shadows on his unrecognizable face. He stopped to throw the young messenger an angry grunt, followed by spitting

tobacco stained mucous at the lad. A then pointed to me, then Svetlanta, beckoning me to the buckboard and Svetlana to the harness.

“Their idea, not mine,” the young messenger stated as he jumped off the wagon, unhitching his horse from the wagon with shaking hands. “My first time you been a deliver boy. Or man, Sir,” the apprentice Ranger, identified by a badge that was visible to me. Added. Not out of fear of further punishment, but with respect.

The young apprentice’s boss, and perhaps role model, commanded with his index finger for me to get on the buckboard and Svetlana to be put in harness.

I stood my ground, discretely edging my hand towards the handle of my revolver, waiting to see what the head rider would do. Though my marksmanship was below average with firearms, on both sides of the Ocean to anyone who knew me was that I was ‘the fastest gun’ around. Truth be told, it was more because I devised a holster for my handgun which broke away along the side, not requiring me to pull my weapon out. The ability for me to cheat my way in the ‘quick draw’ contest which seemed to be the most favorite past-time for gun bearing ‘manly men’ with excessive love for liquor and even more emotional need to be the top of the totem pole did save lives. Specifically my “opponents”, particularly after I took an oath upon reaching the New World that I would not take another human life. There were enough ghosts of those who I did kill back home, directly and indirectly, who visited me in dreams every night.

I allowed the head rider a good look into my expressionless ‘poker face’, while I stared at the black shadow that allowed only a partial view of his determined eyes. But the silently delivered ‘conversation’ between myself and this ‘lawman’, a voice came into my ears regarding the ‘law’.

“Stefan,” Hans said to me as I stared down the man who I would send to the afterlife in ten seconds, or the one who would send me to my just reward and punishment. “Render unto Caesar that which is Caeser’s,” the Comrade-Mayor of our town, because he worked with rather than against the law said to me in German.

“And render unto God that which is God’s,” I added, in English, still gazing at and, to the extend I could, the Stetson Texan ‘Caesar’ in front of me.

Hans took in a deep breath, then placed his tired oversized feet and portly torso between me and the head Ranger, sheriff or aged Deputy.

“Sir,” he said to our visitor with a slight bow. “How bad off are the people who need what’s on this list of goods? he asked.

“Bad enough. Worse than bad enough,” the reply in a gruff voice. “And it looks like you guests to our country. Doin’ a whole lot better than you were doin’ back in your country. thanks to luckin’ into the fertile farmland, grass-filled grazing pastures and being spared, so far anyway, from being wiped out by Mexican bandits, Comanches or half-breed renegades.”

“True enough,” Hans replied. He turned to me. “Rendor unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s,” credo which Jesus told his disciples and followers regarding the Roman tax collectors,” he said, in German.. “And everyone gives according to his, OR HER, abilities,” the Communist credo championed by Democratic Socialists who agreed with Jesus, but didn’t accept or condone what the Messiah’s Father did to his son, and continued to inflict on humanity.

“What did he say?” the young messenger asked his boss.

Hans, for reasons he didn't say with his mouth or eyes, removed himself from the path of the bullet I would fire into the lawman, and he was probably very able to put into me.

Circumstance pushed to my consciousness an idea, which was not yet ready to be shared by I took it as not an obstacle to doing the Right thing, but an....opportunity to do the...necessary thing.

I removed my hand from the handle of my easily withdrawn revolver, as did the senior badge wearing invader to the community that felt more like home than any other I could remember. A community where people served each other as well as strangers that are not countrymen, family or friends. A community of, for the most part 'givers' rather than 'takers'. Who, if encountered by any more unidentifiable takers, would lose everything they needed, and deserved.

I asked Hans to show me the list of 'contributions' to the common good.

"You can deliver all of these goods?" the Texan 'Caesar' asked Hans.

"Yes, and eh..." Hans said.

"The most reliable of deliverers," I interjected, pointing to myself, and Svetlana.

"Are you sure, Stephan?" Hans asked.

"Yes," I said to Hans. "Of course," I offered to the head rider. "With some help from you, Sir," I continued to the young messenger who, was startled, then proud, having probably never been addressed by that title of respect.

"And be quick about it, boy," the messenger's superior spat into the lad's face, putting him in his place. While I was trying to figure out the particulars of a secret Mission which I assigned myself to. One that I would share with Hans, when the time was right. Which, just then, it wasn't.

CHAPTER 4

It wasn't the first time I volunteered to be the driver of the wagon loaded with 'goods for good people' who dwelled or merely existed in less enlightened and less fortunate communities of the Lone Star state, which considered itself still to be its own country. Was it because my English was less accented than any other man's diction in Pinegrove Falls, peppered with enough dropping of 'g's and non-rolling of 'r's' to make me sound like I was born and bred south of the Mason Dixon Line and West of the Mississippi? Was it due to an involuntarily accepted virtue called 'courage', which overcomes those who were chosen by Fate or Whatever to guide the world to become a place? Or was perhaps Deputy, perhaps Ranger or perhaps common outlaw imposter Ivanov's face which when supplemented by my imagination with a fully grown mustache, a few scars over the left cheek and topped off with a Cossack warlock on top, was identical to that of Dimitri Ivanov. My commanding officer on the expeditions we took into Siberia to save the Yakut natives from a life where they lived according to the Mandates of Mother Earth rather than enforced their own rules over Her?

"Stop starin' at me like that!" my 'guide' to the 'distribution center' snarled at me for the third time. "Unless ya wanna lose or both a' yer eyes, or the brain box

behind it," Ely Dennis Ivanov continued from the back of his horse, pulling out his Colt Revolver, aiming it at my forehead. Which, unlike his, was not covered with fear produced sweat.

"It's just that, you look familiar," I related and confessed, and NOT in the manner that I used when addressing women who aroused my carnal and intellectual interest after I was caught in the act of letting my eyes linger on anatomical features between the ears as well as below their swanlike narrow necks. "And, I like to know who I'm doing business with. The business of...." I continued in what I perceived was Texan English. "...takin' care of others, everyone givin' according to their abilities, and takin' according to their needs," I continued, in Russian, then German.

"The business of what?" my 'guide' barked out, in English.

"Workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose except your chains," I offered, in English.

"That don't make no sense neither," Deputy Ely replied.

"Suppose so, until someone puts it into print, somewhere," I thought, but did not give voice to. "Not everything between business partners and fellow Texans is supposed to make sense," I offered instead, having figured out that Ivanov's Russian answers to my questions before we departed were rehearsed and planned. And that he had no knowledge, or appreciation, of the Democratic Socialism Revolutions me and my fellow Pinegrove Falls Freethinkers fought in and lost on the other side of the Atlantic. But Ivanov was intrigued, and assured, by my using the 'b' word, business, something embraced by Capitalists and scorned (or re-defined when needed) by Socialists.

"What kind a business ya'll in?" he asked me, taking the bait. "Or had, or left, before comin' here, Mister---"

"---Stone," I proclaimed, quickly, searching my shaken-up brain for a handle that would be convincing, but not traceable to anyone else. "Steve Stone."

"Changed it from Stefan Stein or Steinevski?" Ivanov challenged.

"A man has the right to change his name when he changes his life, and line of work he's in, so he can do something more...honorable," I offered. "And profitable," I added noting disappointment as well as having seen disapproval in Deputy Dennis' face when I said 'honorable'.

"Sound wisdom," Ranger Ely replied, in Russian. A smile overcame his life tired long before his time face.

I tried to hide my emotions, and real reason for going with him to the 'distribution center' behind what was called in Texas a 'poker face'. Named after a card game I always lost, particularly when it was played on a Texan table.

Upon arriving at the Distribution Center, my eyes were overcome with the sight of many people in need. Malnourished families in need of food. Lame, coughing and lethargic children in need of the hope of growing to become healthy adults. Regretful elders in need of some happy memories which they could go back to living in. Their skin colors ranged from black as coal to white as snow, with all manner of hues in between. Some of those tones were a result of being exposed to too much sunlight when harvesting crops, and some due to having been shut away from the light of day having spent most of their lives in underground mines.

Adorned in clothing that was more rips and tears than intact cloth, their garments three sizes larger than their 'trim but not fit bodies, they lined the streets, gazing at the supplies on my wagon with blank stares. Several of them reached out their blister covered open palms to me. They were slapped back into their appropriated places by well clad and even better armed roaming Rangers. Some of those deformed, blistered and often digit-missing hands were transformed into clenched fists, the bearers of such converted into hunchbacked balls of im-measurable pain after feeling the butt of the Rangers' rifle butts into their bellies.

"Jesus said the meek shall inherit the earth, but in the meantime, it's survival of the fittest," my 'guide', Ely said to me by way of explanation.

"And the cleverest," I added, as I noted the outer margins of his lips lifting up. That smile made him seem handsome to those who considered beauty as something skin deep, and ugly to those who were blessed, or cursed, to peer deeper. "But," I added. "Like hungry dogs and horses, feed these unfortunates and they'll do what you want them to do. But if you starve them, they have nothing to lose and they'll indulge in revolution rather than merely mischief," I gave voice to. "Keep hungry people entertained or preoccupied with mischief and they won't think about revolution," I thought, but did not say, realising that I had fallen into once more my habit of feeding the enemy information they could used against us.

"Mischief....hmmmm," Ranger Ely volleyed back, incubating the first elements of an idea brewing in his head that I inadvertently planted into it. "Ya mean, that if we feed, cloth and doctor these defective pieces of walkin' meat with just the basics, keep them entertained or let them entertain each other, they'll become even more useful idiots. That's somethin' we already thought about."

Ely brought his horse to a halt, then signalled with his outstretched bear-like foreclaw for me to stop the wagon. He let out a loud whistle, summoning a roving military band to approach from an alley, playing happy tunes. They were joined by scantily clad women and handsomely dressed men walk-dancing their way to and into the crowd of 'defectives'. They handed out bottles of moonshine and vials of opium, which were accepted with eagerness and desperation.

I looked behind me at the goods in the wagon being taken away by well fed and handsomely clothed Rangers for, according to Ely anyway, 'people elsewhere who were in REALLY bad condition'. My stare was held hostage on the books remaining on the re-enforced enlarged cart which I insisted on putting into the package for 'those in need elsewhere' which were not on the list of required or desired items.

"Won't be needin' those," Ely said of the idea and ideal-packed volumes written by authors who had died in previous centuries, and those born (or perhaps reincarnated) into the current one. "Unless we run outta asswipe, of course," he smirked.

"Which, maybe will be read before someone whose mind and soul are full of shit before they wipe their asses with it," I advanced.

"Yeah," Ely said. "Yer right." With that, Ely leaped off his horse, took the bag books into his hand, and dumped them onto a pile of logs. "Better that they make good kindlin'. It's gonna be a long winter."

Something overtook my consciousness. No, it wasn't a new set of self-given instructions to use to trick these 'Good Will Rangers' into thinking I was a fellow outlaw working within and outside of the law. It was that...I felt myself envisioning joining them. Becoming one of the winners in the game of life where,

particularly here in Texas, there was always someone on top and always someone on the bottom. And that this construct of the world did go beyond the shifting positions of a hard-working whore and a love starved 'gentleman'. Or an honest woman and a hard working man indulging in activities which would create more children for a world in need of a new definition of equality that considered the differences in potential and worth of adults.

We proceeded onward, past the crowd of have nots to a town square occupied by haves, guarded by deputies with badges that, when reflected by the sun, blinded my eyes. Wide brimmed Stetsons and bonnets prevented me from seeing the faces of the well to do inhabitants of this 'Distribution Center', but I was able to ascertain that they were all White men, and women. Below their pale necks they were clad in clothing which contained no dust, tears or stains, the fashion of such reminding me of what was in vogue in Europe. Like those dukes and duchesses, they spoke softly to each other in obnoxiously pleasant banter, their hand and body movements minimal. But there was one loud voice which had both definition and volume, directed at me.

"Hold it right there!" Jake Jackson, in clothing that was adapted to working on the range rather than managing legalities in town, bellowed out as he pushed open the swinging doors of the saloon, the only establishment in the town square which did not appear to be freshly constructed. In his wake, the off tune but expressive piano and loud Texan banter of the customers went from a loud thunderous sound defying the ever present desert wind to a dull roar that surrendered to its surroundings.

I complied with the command to remain at 'attention', as if it was a mutually agreed upon request. Captain Jackson ambled his way towards me, the pounding of his scuffed boots on the hard, dust covered ground emitting the loud jingle of his blood stained Mexican spurs. After sizing me over, from my weatherworn Cossack boots to the upwardly folded front wing of my hat, his stare locked in place upon my best 'poker' face for what seemed like at least ten seconds.

“You have something to ask me?...With words?” I asked, holding my ground without retreating from or aggressively answering his unspoken challenge. “State your question, and maybe I’ll have an answer to it.”

“Lizzy,” he finally said through his now neatly trimmed mustache, after which he drew out his revolver, pointing it at my head. I froze every muscle in my face so as to put up a wall to any fear or anger behind it that may have been developing. “I requested that Lizzy do this delivery,” Ranger Captain, Sheriff and perhaps Mayor Jake Jackson said, aiming his voice then business end of his other revolver at Ranger Private and Deputy Ely Ivanov.

“She was...eh....eh...” Deputy Ely mumbled, his legs shaking, a trickle then river of urine staining his britches.

“Lizzy was...unavailable,” I interjected, recalling how Lizzy slipped away when Jake arrived on the previous visit with the full tax-collecting posse on Christmas Eve. “She sent me instead.”

“You, who came here because you’re...?” Jake challenged

“Someone who can make your job of tax collecting more...profitable,” I advanced, considering the idea that Lizzy’s avoidance of Jake had something to do with something she told no one, perhaps not even her ‘roommate’ Lydia, about. “And, between deliveries, I can make your life more pleasurable,” I put forth, postulating there was the element of pleasure culminating in pain with regard to their ‘business’ relationship. “Of course, I’m talking about the pleasure of....doing the right kind of sustainable business with guaranteed booms in profits that are more plentiful than any busts or stagnations,” I added, feeling the need to assure

the Ranger Captain that I was not one of those 'girly men' who, yes, truth be told, could be found in remote, sparsely populated and under policed towns in Texas. "Sustainable and profitable business that I'd like to discuss with your boss. OUR boss."

Instead of being insulted by asking to speak to his superior, Captain Jackson was pleased with my manner of speech, and the unspoken agenda behind the words. He holstered the gun pointing at me, then let out a shot from his other pistol that landed two inches in front of Ely's urine soaked feet,. It caused the lad's bowels to make an abrupt exit into his britches.

The sight of the humiliated and foul smelling Deputy cursing at himself, slithering away as quickly as he could into an alley, away from eyerolls of the lawyers and bankers, and the ridiculing laughter of their young and beautify wives, mistresses and 'nieces', evoked a satisfied smile from Jackson's thick lips and overfed belly. "Sometimes ya gotta cull the herd," the probably low born farm-boy but now upper class outlaw/lawman said to me, as a comrade who both enjoyed and saw it as fashionable to be cruel.

"Yeah," I said, appended by spitting on the ground. I hopped off the now emptied wagon. "Only the smart and strong deserve to live," I affirmed, lying between my gritted teeth. The better part of me tried to convince the rest of me that the only way to stop these well organized thugs from destroying Pinegrove Falls and the countless other truly, or once independent towns independent was to 'change the system from within'. A strategy that, to be truthful, failed so often in the many places I had fled to as a refugee. "Everyone besides the strong and smart, if they're lucky, just survive," I proposed.

"IF we let them survive, that is," Captain Jackson added as he led the way to the back door of the saloon, handing me a cigar en route. "But the trick is to milk the cow dry rather than killing her, till one day, she kills herself," he offered as I

allowed a seemingly harmless Meloto stableboy lead Svetlana to a luxury stall in the livery stable. “Can never have enough useful idiots,” Jackson added, gazing at the alley where the ‘less fortunate’ men were being offered the chance to become ‘Rangers’ and the serviceable women concubines.

I recognized that phrase, ‘never enough useful idiots’, from a land as far away from Texas as the most probably ‘model American Christian’ Jake Jackson was from the REAL Jesus. Where I was an effective part of the problem rather than the, on a good day anyway, kindness and caring solution. One look through the window of the room above the ‘drinking and dance hall’ at the face looking down at me brought it all back.

CHAPTER 5

I was led up to 'the boss's' room above the saloon by Captain Jackson. 'Encouraging' me from behind were two Rangers with sloped foreheads and crooked noses who, by their demeanor, limps and more weatherworn trousers, were Sergeants in this 'army'. Or perhaps they were Corporals who had lost more fist fights than they won. Jackson closed the door, remaining in front of it, then folded his arms as he leaned against the bullet hole ridden wall. His non-military subordinates remained at attention with the bearing of so many well-trained but still illiterate soldiers I had seen, and avoided, in Europe and Asia.

"So, you would like to make us a business proposition?" asked the man behind the enlarged oak desk, his back towards me, cigar smoke circles pushed up towards the ceiling. His accent was Slavic, as was the up and down rhythm of his speech. "Offering us more than just...cooperation with our legal mandates."

"Da," I said. "I mean, yes. I have something to sell, no...something to offer you."

"Which would be what?" the still unidentified man behind the desk said, after which he blew up three symmetrical circles of smoke above him. The wind promptly entered through the open window blowing those boluses of smoke into my face, landing on such as a blob of toxic air rather than heavenly shaped halos. "What do you have to offer us?" the head 'whatever' enquired. "You are offering...what, specifically?"

"For me to...serve, assist, respect and....yes, like you," I replied, turning to Jackson. He nodded his head in gleeful comradery affirmative, as if I gave him and his boss not only the correct, but the Right answer. The bait I put out was acknowledged by the man behind the desk with no less than five 'yes's', the enthusiasm of such escalating. He leaned down, still averting his face from me. Me motioned for

Jackson's deputies to leave the room, which of course the 'no one bosses ME around' Texans did like a trained dogs or hard-broke horses. The boss paced around the room, his hands clasped to each other in aristocratic manner.

"Something wrong, Sir?" Jackson enquired, thinking that he was at fault for something he couldn't help doing, or perhaps never did.

The new world Baron behind the desk shouted out to his high ranking serf. "Please, Jake, would you be so kind as to, before you tend to your duties outside, fetch me my....." he added, knocking a pen from his desk onto the floor. Captain Jackson became 'Just Jake' when the Baron accidentally tripped him on the way to picking up the pen, causing his hat to come off. Upon rising up with the pen, he put his hat back firmly on his head. His reward was to be dismissed for good by the most minimal flicker possible from the Baron's hand.

I counted four steps on the other side of the door, a second apart, as Jackson left me alone with a man who I dared to recognize by voice. Upon the door closing behind me, then locked from the outside, the balding overweight mogul cigar smoker turned around. It confirmed the suspicions I bravely reached while trying to hide my fear.

"So, how where have you been, Stefan?" Dmitri Ivanov said to me, in Russian, then my even more native Ukrainian, handing me a glass of vodka. "And HOW have you been?" he continued as he allowed me to assess his appearance. My boyhood rival, and manhood comrade looked twenty years older than I did, but he wore the deep wrinkles on his clean shaven face with pride. "And how are you now?"

"How were and are you?"...It was a question that Slavs asked only when they were prepared for a real, honest and, if necessary, elongated answer. "It's been many

battles, with some victories and some defeats, but much...learning about the way one has to keep fighting," I replied, having taken on the Texan habit of improvising a different answer to every 'how are you?'. A question which, in Eastern and Northern America, Britain and Western Europe was answered with a 'fine' or 'good' offered with a faked smile. "And...eh..." I continued, as my eyeline was taken hostage by the appearance of living on my boyhood Comrade Cossack, who seemed to be as old as any of my uncles.

"Yes," Dmitri said, stroking the bald crown of his head appended by a thin rim of white hair under it, the paucity of hair on the top of his head made more noticeable by long sideburns in the manner of Sam Houston. "Life stole my Cossack warlock, perhaps because I stole too much from others," he confessed and related. "But it makes me look more distinguished. Which goes with this," he continued, patting his fat belly. "An enlarged gut is required to have more gut instinct, in the manner of Outlaws like Pancho Villa and every US president, and, now anyway, our legally elected governor, General Sam Houston," he informed me. "And as for battle scars for bravely fought wars," he said, stroking the scar on his left cheek and four fingered left hand. "I have more scars on the rest of my body, but NONE on my back!" he proclaimed proudly. "Except for a few that were put there by those disloyal traitors and turncoat friends who stabbed me in the back," he said by way of warning, reminding me of the last 'argument' we had in Siberia. When I refused to give him, my fellow Cossacks and the Imperial Army the location of a Native Tribe whose independence I was trying to defend, despite the fact that they wanted my scalp as much as any other White skinned invader from the 'civilized' regions of Russia. "

Dmitri aka 'Cossack Jimmy' Ivanov as the nametag on his desk read, appended by letters of education and legal status I didn't recognize, held his face in a threatening posture, like a wild cougar did just before you became its lunch. How long it was, I didn't know. But just as I mounted a defense against it, my boyhood friend and, after I turned away from our assigned Mission in Siberia, manhood enemy broke into a warm smile. "But I can see that you are now one of us," he

said. "Which will be good for you, and your new tribe of misfits that you feel you have to serve, protect and seem to like," he continued. A

I heard my empty stomach rumbling. Cossack Jimmy pulled out from the top drawer of his desk a sandwich containing some kind of meat in it. He offered the lion's share of it to me. "It would be a shame if they found out that you, on more than one occasion, participated in expeditions that appropriately educated deluded 'freethinking' misfits in Siberia. But then again, useful idiots come in many skin colors."

I hesitated to answer, or to take a bite of the sandwich. Anticipating my hesitation, my host took a bite out of his portion of it. "Texas barbecue. A meat lover's sandwich, which tastes better if you, you know,....."

"---Do not ask what kind of sauce is in it, or what kind of meat it is?" I said, repeating what we underpaid Cossacks said to each other after the Imperial Army had eliminated a tribe of free, or wrong, thinking Siberian Natives and we got served a 'well deserved' feast by the campfire. "Or if it was walking on two legs and upright, or covered with fur roaming around the woods on four legs," I recalled, but didn't say.

I ate the sandwich, with vigor, thinking about whatever or whoever it was before being slaughtered. But I was confident that now, for the moment anyway, I was predator rather than prey. The latter seemed to be in front of me now, in the form of Dmiitri. His hair had turned white and was on its way to falling out completely, my mane not yet grey and still attached to my scalp.

In the play behind my poker face eyes, I decided to knock on God's office door, hoping He, or as Lizzy and Lydia said, SHE was open for business. Yes, this was a chance to prove to Dmitri that his days of outsmarting me at every game,

endeavor and battle were over. Yes, this was an opportunity God had given me to prove that I was as smart, brave and clever as he was. But, as Paul threatened and promised in the biblical passages that he wrote about Jesus without ever meeting him, pride cometh before the fall.

I heard a knock on the door. Perhaps it was God on the other side of His office door, inviting me in. But, alas, it was Sheriff Jackson. "A message for you, Hetmen Ivanov," the Sheriff said to his boss, addressing him by his Cossack title, as a subservient servant.

"I'm busy!" Ivanov yelled back. "I'm doing business here. Making my old friend an offer he will not refuse."

"Itttt's urrrrgent!" Sheriff Jackson stuttered with....fear, something no man who wants to remain standing showed anyone else. He slipped a note under the door.

Hetmen Ivanoff bowed to me, then hobbled to the door, as if proud of having one leg that was hurting and another that wanted to go forward as fast as possible. "It better be important this time!" he blurted out to his subordinate. "A matter of life or..."

With his knarled and hurting fingers, Hetmen Ivan picked up the note. Upon reading it, aided by spectacles he discretely removed from his left breast pocket, his confident tone dropped to and into the floor, spreading itself like urine from a man who had lost control of not only his fate but his bladder as well.

"The Big Boss set in motion plans that none of my men or you didn't anticipate," Sheriff Jackson said. "And we have to..."

“---Yes,”: Hetman Dmitri interjected before Jackson could provide any details. He looked up to the sky. “There are some things we can’t control, Stefan. And as we all know, when the Big Boss closes one door, he opens another for us.” Dmitri then turned to me, smiling with the kind of approval that I yearned to get from him. But only after a job I did that met his and God’s expectations. “Yes, Stefan. Or rather Captain Stefan,” Dimitri said, as if reading my mind, something that maybe everyone could do, a curse as well as a blessing according to my grandmother, and Cossack grandpa. “We have to know which door to recognize when it is delivered to us.”

“Yes,” I said to myself, to the God I envisioned as being ‘up there’. A Deity which somehow became possible due to us mortals doing His work without his without his, or (according to Lizzy and Lydia anyway) her, guidance or permission. Knowing that above all, no good deed goes unpunished.

It would be easier for me than my old before his time rival, and role model I was younger than Dimitri now not by a year but by several decades. I was in better shape than the white haired, arthritic Hetman who I once worshipped, and wanted to become. I could outsmart him and his underlings, very fast. But there was one problem---Dmitri actively did not believe in God. Whoever the Almighty he was addressing, it was a mortal. No doubt one who was more skilled with demonic cleverness than angelic smarts.

CHAPTER 6

“So, where have you been?” Now official Mayor Hans Mueller said to me when I arrived back at Pinegrove Falls, with the supply wagon refilled with twice as many goods as when I left.

“And where did you get these?” Sheriff without a badge Carl Richter asked, sniffing the sacks of flour, beans and corn as if to affirm that the contents of those bags matched the printed labels.

“And what have you become? What did they see or didn’t see behind your eyes?” came from the mouth of 15 years curious Victoria Gonzales. She sized me up head to toe, and then from the outer surface of my eyes to the conflicted brain behind them.

“And at what cost?” Victoria’s religiously pacifist but refusing to be pastor father inquired. He gazed at the two new pistols strapped to my usually utility knife bearing waist, two brand new Henry rifles strapped to my back.

“And those new boots on your feet,” Lydia noted as she came by, carting a pile of new books from her house en route to the new library, the latter being the most solidly built shack in town. “They look..hmmm,” the normally prolific letter writer commented, searching for the words to describe the new leather footwear given to me by Cossack Jimmy, whose soles were slabs of leather rather than wood.
“They look very....traditional.”

“Traditionally Cossack,” Lizzy noted as she carted another load of literature to be shared by all citizens and visitors alike. “And ya know what they say ‘bout Cossacks,” said the Texan born former Southern belle who had only visited my

homeland through books written by those who heard stories about it third hand. And with a particular opinion about them that was not complimentary.

“What do they say, or KNOW about Cossacks?” Victoria asked, seeing the need and the want of avoiding one of those conflicts that would never be resolved.

“Problems always happen when you try to mix business with friendship,” I replied to the aspiring journalist. Victoria was one more answer away from ‘curiousing’ her way into more danger than she could handle or write about. Particularly with the complex within simple or simple within complex relationship I re-established with Dmitri Ivanov.

“Huh?” emerged from the small mouth and oversized brain of Victor Gonzales’ only daughter, and blood relation who respected and admired his fierce dedication to Pacifism. Indeed, it was the first time I saw that precocious ‘Wunderkind’ confounded and confused.

I thought about describing to Victoria the past history between me and Dmitri now ‘Jimmy Cossack’ Ivanov. Yes, I could relate a few facts about what Dimitri and I experienced did together, but there were complex, yet to be clearly defined realities behind and within them. But...perhaps Victoria could tell me what feelings and meanings were behind the things that happened to me and my surrogate older brother as we grew into, then got worn down by, ‘manhood’. How we forged our way through the mosquito loaded swamps, frozen shortgrass plains and bone dry deserts that on a map was merely described as ‘Siberia’. Or, according to the peasants who left their masters to become kings themselves, ‘Yakutia’. A vast land named after the dark skinned, slanty eyed inhabitants who thrived on rather than were defeated by landscape that obeyed the laws of Nature rather than the wants of man, or womankind. How Dimitri and I were paid to raid Yakut villages who did not meet their quota of furs, dried meat and able bodied young men ‘donated’ to the Priest building a church where they could be saved by

Jesus. So whoever was killed by the pox we most probably bought to them would have a far better life in Heaven than they endured on earth.

How we, as wild renegade Cossacks, did just enough damage to the Natives' bodies, belongings and self-confidence so that that they would welcome intervention by Imperial Army troops. Troops led by our commander, Major Petrovitch, along coming in to chase us wild Cossacks off. How we were well paid by Petrovitch to not tell anyone about our rouse. Especially the reporters in the Major's army who were well paid to put into magnificent prose the heroic exploits of the mostly illiterate Imperial Army troops and, of course, the Major. How we fired blanks at the soldiers, while they fired the same at us. Until, of course, a real bullet from the Major's pistol nearly ended my life. After which I had a 'heart to mind' discussion with the Shamen/Chief of the tribe to inform him about the evil within Orthodox Christianity and to seek the Spirituality within his 'religion'. A religion which saw, appreciated and served Life in every living thing.

My attempts to 'go Native' were halted by my 'friend' Dmitri informing the Chief that his daughter becoming pregnant was due to my sperm impregnating her when she was blindfolded and raped rather than his. Reporting Dmitri to Major Petrovitch, who paid us in opportunities to loot the natives, since he was in the same position, resulted in being on that Imperial Commander's 'must be turned into stew' list. My fellow Cossacks sought the reward put on my head by the Major, but they were totally justified in trying to collect it. After all, they were compassionate minions of evil, stealing everything from strangers and foreigners so that their families back home can have the best of everything...as well AS everything.

Now, Dmitri Ivanov was about to set up the same scam in Texas. And this time, he was not going to get away with poisoning the reputation I so hard and deceptively earned among my fellow revolutionary 48er. Or was he? Only Svetlana, my horse, who made it out of Dmitri's camp alive. knew for sure. And she wasn't telling me.

"So, how many more times before Spring are the tax collectors going to come around again for their third once a year collection payment this year?" Solomon Schamburg asked me.

"Paying a dollar for protection beats having all of our dollars stolen by the last round of bandits, who, according to the reports I heard, are getting stronger every day," Mayor Hans interjected. "And our protectors still want us to be well fed," he said regarding the overloaded cartload of food Dmitri gave me as a parting gift for the 'good citizens' and 'useful idiots' who had given him half a cartload of jewelry, money and furs 'requested' by Ivanov's deputy. The Bavarian born journalist who, after writing about too many wars, was becoming a Pacifist, looked to each of the four directions, nodding in agreement with whatever the desert hills were telling him. He then turned to me, and everyone else who had gathered around me. "You know what Jesus said," Hans proclaimed. "Render unto Caesar that which is Ceasar's."

"And render unto God that which is God's," shot back Solomon's presumably now happily common law married wife Sarah, who demanded that everyone call her Miss Weissman rather than Mrs. Schamburg. "And besides, maybe we should define who is God and who is Caesar," she continued, staring at and into me. "Tell me, and tell everyone else here, why you came here looking and feeling different than when you left?"

"A question I'd kill to have an honest answer to," confirmed Pacifist Victor Gonzales added, showing me and only me a pistol he had inserted under his coat, allowing his fingers to fondle its handle.

"An answer all of us NEED to know!" Maria Gonzales threw into the mix, taking hold of her husband's shooting arm, placing it under her flexed elbow. "An honest

answer this time, Stefan," she said, pronouncing my name in its Slavic vs. the Americanized version of SteVen I had been using since arriving in Texas, and got used to be addressed as.

Before I could formulate a lie formulated in the service of Truth, a bright light came into my eyes. This time it was from a representative of the Creator rather than him, or her, in person. Sunlight hit my eyes, not making them open but rather closing them. A reminder that it soon would be time to find out who the Major Petrovitch was behind, and above, Dimitri. The manipulator of what future centuries would call a state wide gangster protection racket that never made it into any dime novel sold to anyone in the 19th century, or perhaps the two or three to follow.

Before anyone else came by to see if I was alright after volunteering to visit the 'tax collectors', or to justifiably banish me for seeming to become one of them, I excused myself. I took my tired body, disturbed mind and thankfully still personally valued horse away from the wagon to head to my cabin. When walking away from that overloaded three and half wheeled cart which nearly broke under the weight of the goods it carried, I dared to turn back to see how the abundant edible goods were being distributed. Under the watchful aged before their time eye of Professor-Mayor Hans, everyone did take according to their needs, though what those needs were did spill into the realm of 'wants'. Or perhaps it was that (according to more than one Indian or Siberian shamen, healer or chief I encountered) primal sin of the White Race--- collecting in excess. That forgivable but contagious malady of anticipating a more pessimistic future for themselves than their Comrades who, theoretically, was everyone else in our, all things considered, still more successful than failed Democratic Socialist Community.

To prevent that community from becoming a Capitalist nightmare, Victoria Gonzales assisted in distributing the beans, meat, flour and other goods. She did such with a firm, slowly moving hand, delivering words to the recipients of such. They were no doubt tailor made political and moral slogans which were given

strength with her own brand of humor. I didn't hear the words spoken by Victoria, but I did see nods of 'yeah, yer right' or 'hey, hunger is good for the creative soul' coming from citizens who put portions of the rations given to them back to the cart or to the next person in line.

No one looked back at me, despite the fact that I had more firearms and rounds of ammunition strapped to my torso and under my shirt than any five men or twenty women combined. I felt like an outsider yet again. Yet it brought to me a sense of relief as to what I was planning and thinking. After putting my trusted and, God help her, trusting mare back into the fenced field behind the enclosed dwelling where I felt 'safe' and 'free' at the same time, I reached for the latch on my door. I juggled it in the specific manner that was required to open it. But, someone else had figured out how to open the door which I had designed to prevent 'curious foxes and brave coyotes' from gaining access to my valued personal belongings. Who that was now became a question that had to be answered. Along with other questions that emerged in my head that were on their way to becoming....understood.

Upon entering the cabin and taking a quick inventory, nothing seemed to have been disturbed. Everything was as I left it one day and a thousand new experiences ago. My dishes were in the same random places I had left them, reeking of remnants of barely edible stew I had prepared which only the most hungry dogs in town saw fit for consumption. The three marked poker decks I had used in Bavarian taverns, English pubs and Texan 'gentlemen's' clubs to fleece the rich from money they had stolen from the poor were still neatly stacked in the slots carved into the slab of wood I used as a dining table, writing desk and 'bed' to plop my head on when I had consumed more vodka than potatoes from which it was made. The sketches of my Cossack ancestors, the men portrayed as perhaps braver than they probably were, their wives looking more like women they imagined they had married rather than those who they accidentally got pregnant, were still in place. The single small mirror that I occasionally looked into if I was curious as to how I would appear to other people was covered with the same amount of caked on dust as the last time I dared to stare into it.

But the top layer of clothing and what were now considered antique pistols and sabres in my trunk had been rearranged. Yet, all those reminders of the past and necessities for the present were present and accounted for. Thankfully, what lay under the sheets in the lower compartment of the trunk seemed to be undisturbed, for now. For whatever reason, God or whoever else was in charge of dispensing good, bad and to-be-defined fortune, had seen fit to keep from public knowledge the Siberian dress and wig still in my possession. It had been worn by the male Shamen who healed me from wounds inflicted on me by the tribe's Chief. Said healer, whose name I never asked and probably could never pronounce, begged me with his last breaths to take them to 'better places', as wearing his feminine attire would grant any brave man insights that were not obtainable any other way. Indeed, when touching or wearing those garments and headpiece, in private of course, I could feel his spirit and hear his voice advising me about many things, including how to convert the potatoes rationed to me from our Community Farm into vodka that was safe to drink.

I wondered if the punishment for being 'exploratory' with regard to gender was equal to being prosecuted for joining overzealous 'tax collectors'. It was the latter that I had to deal with now. Most particularly, I had to find and cut off the head of the snake which would devour even more cities, towns or hamlets. Selfishly, I hoped that the scales under my own skin would not be detected, or expressed.

After covering the windows in all Four Directions, I laid the Siberian shaman's garments and long haired 'hat' on my aching body. It eased my mind and invigorated my soul. Through the Silence which was louder than normal, I felt the voice of the old Shamen who, until his death, grew younger each year, give two commands, in his native tongue. The same words he said to me as he died, courtesy or arrows and bullets that were meant for me as I tried to make my getaway from Siberia. Loosely but responsibly translated, they were 'be careful' and 'trust no one, even yourself.'

"Does that second commandment also refer to you?" I whispered as loudly as I dared to the ghost of Shamen whose presence was a palpable as anything or anyone in the 'real' world. 'Trust no one including you?' I asked him, in a voice directed at all of the four directions. I got no answer, as usual. "So was it you who opened my door?" I pressed. Still no answer.

After rubbing my fingers on the dress I had just put on which made the Shaman look more beautiful than any woman in his tribe, and feel more empowered than any man, I sat down on the single chair at the table. I looked at my collection of plates, pots and cutlery, all designed for feeding one diner. Then I heard children playing outside, accompanied by their parents in yet another game which required one team to move a ball to the other side of a field while the opposing team stood in their way. It was then that my eye was drawn to a poorly rendered sketch of a beautiful young woman on the Eastern wall of my haven, and/or coffin. "Elena, what do you say of all of this?" I asked the woman I left behind in the Don River valley of the Steppes. The only woman who was a mother, wife, lover mistress and friend, somehow being any one of those when the need, or want, warranted. The standard that I tried to find in every woman I met after leaving the last place I called home but never found, or never was worthy of. "They say you died, Elena, but I still see you in my dreams. Where you tell me you are still alive. And...." I said, after which I did catch a glimpse of my face in the mirror. I beheld seeing all the marks of old age that no beard of any color could hide. Lines seeming to be deep crevices. Eyes with so many crow's feet that they made the image a depressive shade of black. "Why, Elena, did you marry Dimitri instead of me? And....why did he not talk about you when we finally met here, by a coincidence that everything in my logical mind says was not a coincidence?"

No answer came from her, or the Shaman's ghost. But there was an answer from the 'real world'. A knock on the wall of the cabin. "You're going back to work in ten minutes," a hoarse voice which could have been a man, woman or ghost caught between those two gender assignments said. "So you and me can finally..." I heard with my inner and outer ear. The rest of the explanation as to why fate put me here, and why I chose a life as a celibate monk without a religion,

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or Abbott, was silenced by a loud cannon burst. It shook the ground under my shaking feet, but thankfully not urine soaked calves. This time anyway.

I quickly slipped off the Shamen's dress that felt so familiar, stepped into trousers which felt foreign slipped into my boots and grabbed hold of my weapons. A rifle to fight off any enemy from a distance and two pistols to fend off any adversary who dared to come into the community that I, on a few days anyway, did feel was my new, and perhaps final, home. Upon exiting the cabin, I clearly saw on the Eastern hills a squad of soldiers clad in red robes which covered them from head to their blood stained black booted feet, manning a cannon. Two more weapons of mass destruction were being wheeled up either side of it. Behind them, two rows of red-robed cavalry marched their horses with what seemed to be synchronized steps.

"Just like the good old days in the old country when we defended the barricades of the city we liberated from the European Kings, Capitalists and soon to be Kaisers," Hans Mueller said as he approached me from the back. "Which we will defeat this time with..THIS!" he yelled out to the masked landlocked Armada, waving his grandfather's sword in his left hand. "And this!!!" he bolted out as loud as he could through his hoarse throat, pulling out his leather bound, personally signed copy of Karl Marx's 'Das Kapital' containing the Communist Manifesto.

"Yes!" Lydia added, running in behind Hans. Her torso was wrapped up in a red, yellow and black flag, the banner of the revolutionaries from no less than ten German kingdoms who came together in 1848 to form a single country to be ruled by 'professors and peasants'. "Yes!" she repeated in German, Spanish and French as she pulled out a sawed off shotgun from under her coat. Lizzy, in a blouse that fell just short of her nipples and a kilt whose hem was just above the knee, ran up behind Lydia, helping herself to one of my pistols, shooting it towards the still stationary marauders.

Behind the duo of revolutionary maidens came every man in Pinegrove Falls, armed with weapons ranging from pitchforks stained with manure to pistols loaded with lead. Their wives kept their sons, and daughters, from joining the line of defenders, placing their children, then themselves, behind a hastily constructed barricade. It consisted of pushed over wagons, water barrels or walls of half-built dwellings, or whatever door to an intact building was most quickly available.

I found myself wondering why and how a collection of penis owning citizens who had hair growing on their scrotum who had valued brains over balls suddenly had formed a united militia against impossible odds in as vulnerable position imaginable. Some no doubt came to impress the Lizzy and/or Lydia. Some to prevent getting a beating from their wives if they decided to hide behind some sensible shelter. Some to die knowing that their sons would see them as dead heroes rather than live cowards. And some because, perhaps, that elusive state of consciousness, or unconsciousness, known as 'courage' had overtaken them.

"We stand united against you!" Hans yelled up to the heavily armed cavalry and artillery unit above him. "Whoever you are, we are..." Before Hans could redefine this new Revolutionary Army of 1848ers, whatever wit was forcing its way up from his gut to his fire breathing mouth, was pushed aside by a cough. It was followed by his upright arched back wavering like a leaf in a brisk early winter wind. "We are...we are..." his blurted from his lips as his feet gave way. "We arrree..." he spat out, louder than I ever heard him.

--United!" Lizzy blasted out, letting her frail, delicately feminine arms come between Hans oversized torso and the hard ground. "Come down here like MEN, if you fucking dare to. And just try get this!" Lydia screamed at the army of perhaps other 'tax collectors' savoring the spoils they would get from a final raid. She threw me her rifle, then the flag she had wrapped around herself. "We may be naked but we are not afraid!" she screamed at the men up top.

I was not surprised at, nor aroused by, Lydia exposing her naked chest and size perfect breast to this new band of masked 'tax collectors' clothed in an upgraded uniform. I recalled that the many piles of red 'table cloths' I had seen when given the tour of Hetman Dmitri's Army's warehouse were meant to be put over the bodies and heads of low down men than the tables of upscale poker and dining tables. A collection which I should have paid more attention to at the time of seeing them.

"First man who shows his face gets the first tickets to the kind of show only I can provide!" Lydia yelled up at the men about to demolish or enslave us. "And hers, too," she screamed out again, pulling Nurse Lizzy off the ground, showing her off to the crowd as a better catch. Lizzy froze in terror, her body shaking. It was the kind of paralysis of all faculties which happens to some when they are confronted with combat for the first time, no matter how often they pass the 'terror test' during training. Lydia whispered something to her lover, friend and frontier roommate that put Lizzy's shaking arms into doing something constructive. Lydia unbuttoned her blouse with steady hand made so by Lydia holding onto her forearm.

The soldiers above us in the poorest fitting red robes lowered their masks. Those with more weaponry and tailor fit attire pointed their pistols at them.

"So," Lydia whispered to me, and Lizzy. "We now know who the officers are in this army. And if you shoot the officers first, the rest will---".

"---Not go away," I interjected. "They want..."

"---More entertainment?" Lydia suggested to me.

“To distract them,” Hans said, finally catching his breath. He pushed his overweight by biological design rather than being overfed torso up from the ground. Lydia and Lizzy grabbed an arm each, pulling him up to his feet. “Distractions are the most effective weapon against an Un-Enlightened enemy. Keep them laughing at you, like you’re crazy, then. Like I wrote in Cossack Idealist, a book I wrote which is....”

“Yes, a more readable and inspiring account than I could write,” I said to Hans, recalling the novel he wrote about my confidentially related experiences as an unofficial and official soldier in the Czar’s Army. An Army which I joined only because they promised that they would leave my village, and my Elena, alone while they were choosing ‘at random’ other Cossack communities to “tame, civilize and educate, or eradicate.”

With that I strolled back to my cabin, put on the traditional shirt and sash my grandfather left me, and saddled my mare Svetlana faster than I ever had before. I then galloped out in front of my Pinegrovian Comrades, stopping abruptly within pistol range of the Marauders. I opened my mouth as wide as I could, spilling out of it ‘The Yellow Rose of Texas’. This time I did not keep it behind my lips or in my head as I did to convey the cadence to the mare through me motionless calves to put musicality into her stride, with a steady beat that SHE provided. No, this time I sang it, out loud. Improvising the lyrics of the song which, originally, was about a Negro cowboy yearning to go back home to his part Asian, part white and part ‘darkie’ sweetheart. My lyrics of course, which I initially wrote about Elena, wherever she was now, were poetic as well as assertive. But it came out in this case as...

‘I’m the messed up Slav from Russia, who’s crazy in the head.
I should have stayed home where it’s safe, but came to Texas instead.

I'm a drunken fool who left behind the only one I loved,
A goat who Fate had sent to me from heaven way above.

The rhythm sent Svetlana into a series of circles, leaps over non-existent fences, and abrupt turns that was as musical as any ballet I saw in America, or experienced in Berlin and Paris. It was accompanied by me turning around in the saddle, standing up, then landing on my ass on the horn of the saddle. It hurt as intensely as the marauding army ridiculing laughter was loud. The next set of lyrics dealt how my caprine love taught me how to laugh like a mule at any joke that I was the butt of. Beg those who kicked me in the ass to punch me in the mouth. And feel better and better each time I rammed a metal spike into my head. Then, thoughts of Elena, and Dmitri, came yet again into my consciousness.

Coming back to reality, I eased my mare into a screeching halt, then looked to the hills that to those of us growing up on the Steppes would be mountains. "Yes, you have to do what you have to do," the trees, and even the rocks, said to me.

With that, I turned to my comrades below in what was still Pinegrove Falls, waving them a fond farewell. Then I turned to the red-robed 'visitors', focusing on the one who did not laugh at my making myself look, and feel, like a fool. I gazed at the opening in his red hood, sensing but not seeing the eyes behind it. In the matter of gunslingers in dime novels who I never met in the real West, I whipped out my revolver and shot a hole into the top of his conelike 'hat'. Then three rounds in front of his horse's feet.

The horse spooked, reared up, dumping its rider on the ground, leaving him motionless. Then with reins in my teeth, both hands on twin revolvers, I aimed at the other marauders, focusing on the ones Lydia enabled me to identify as the mounted 'officers'. Upon seeing their leader motionless on the ground, they

made a hasty retreat. The mounted enlisted men and mercenaries followed them.

As for the crews manning the three cannons, they held their ground. One of them lit a match, showing it to me, moving it toward the fuse on the barrel which was aimed at the village. My warning shot hit the fuselage. He abandoned the cannon. His men hitched the artillery to mules. I motioned 'no' to him, ordering him to push the cannons down the hill, appending that request with a 'please, do it now' with a shot from my spare revolver at his feet. Two cannons were thrust down the hill, breaking apart along the way. The third cannon was pulled away back into the woods, with the help of his men, hitching that last piece of armaments to a mule.

I turned around, hearing applause from below from my Comrades. . Both me and Svetlana took a bow.

"We have to finish them off now," Hans said to his people, clutching onto his heart as he grabbed hold of the reins of his hastily tacked up horse. "Which way did they go?" he yelled out to me as every spare horse in Pinegrove was saddled, every able-bodied man, now including a heavily armed Pacifist Victor Gonzales, plopping his ass atop them.

I pointed to the cloud of dust left behind by the presumably leaderless Army, sending the Pinegrove Posse in that direction. "There's some ONE I have to catch while you all catch or scare off the others," I yelled to Professor Mayor and now General Hans as I saw the leader crawl up from the ground, edge his way to his horse, and push himself on top of it. The horse took him into the woods at slow trot.

But before going my way to find, capture or kill the tax collectors' leader, I treated myself to a look at each one of the men in the Pinegrove Posse. Though their faces had not changed, what was behind their eyes had. Each one of them, including Hans, trusted their own strength and tenacity above everything else. Not one of them were the 'freethinkers' who had previously asked God, Jesus, or Indefinable Spirit big S to grant His creation to be on his side in the fight to come.

No...they were empowered by a contagious self confidence that translated into courage. With the weapons I had been given by Dmitri to arm them against Indians, or other bands of 'tax collectors', all of the free thinkers, be they Mexicans, ancestors of Africans of refugees from Europe these Freethinkers were now Free Doers. Upon hearing what they would do to the red-hooded Marauders, even those who would surrender and had families of their own, the fellow citizens of our small new country without a name were free to invent and apply new rules of morality. They had become, I suppose...American. Or more effectively, and dangerously, Texan Americans. Liberated from the restraints of every religion they were brought up with, fearing neither God nor the devil for any consequences of their action.

Then I felt something happening in ME. I so wanted to return to Pinegrove Falls after my 'audience' with Dimitri and be greeted as a genius and a hero. Most particularly to the women who remained behind after the Posse left, including Lizzy and Lydia. Perhaps finally now I was worthy of having an 'Elena' of my own. Me choosing the woman who would be honored by me choosing her to take to bed. Who I would make love to in the ways that I specified. But, as my saintly grandfather who, on his deathbed, confessed to me his many sins which were not told to the priest, his wife or his son, there were 'have to's' to be dealt with before 'want to's'.

The Pinegrove Posse's job was to catch up to and disable the Army of red robed Mauraders who fled to the South like scared rabbits to save their mercenary

hides. My CALLING was to follow their leader, headed West like a sly fox, with an agenda that went well beyond biological survival .

CHAPTER 7

"You didn't have to shoot me so close to whatever hair I still have left," Dmitri Ivanov said to me when I finally caught up with him at the 'distribution center' getting a scalp wound sewn up at his office. "And that fall you made me take from my horse," he said, moving his shaking leg under the table loaded with culinary delights. His hands, which seemed to be darker than the last time I saw him, shook.

"We had to make the whole thing look good, in case any of my people or your people saw you being 'taken' by your horse in the direction your Army didn't take. And saw us having a conversation before I headed back home, and you headed out to join what was left of your men," I told him, helping myself to a hefty portion of meat, potatoes and beans from his plate rather than the serving bowls. "And, who is...'John'"? I inquired gazing out the mostly closed window at the opposite side of the sign at the entrance of town marked 'Leaving Johnstown,' with fresh paint.

"Most Texans are illiterate, and horrible spellers," he said, angrily pushing the doctor away, pounding the five foot nothing Chinese physician into the wall.

"Take away the s and w from 'Johnstown' and you have 'Johnson'. A common name for a common town, which we NON-commoners will not accept."

"We being?" I asked, this time refusing to take an elusive reply as an answer. "Something bigger than just you, me and the Texas Rangers you've hired as legally sanctioned outlaws?"

"Which you can make bigger if you know more about?" he pressed.

“And better,” I shot back with an assured smirk. “Better than any Major Petrovitch,” I added, bringing back memories of our funder, protector and inspiration when we sold ‘protection’ to Siberian Pagans. “Who, well....I heard was hung in Moscow.”

“Our commanding officer, hung like a common thief?” Dmitri asked, seeming to feel a noose around his own neck. “Who told you the Major was hung?”

Yes, God had delivered to me a gift I could use to fight the devil. The ability to lie and be convincing at it. The skill to be considered an outlaw by outlaws in ‘Johnstown’. And a hero to fellow Comrades in Pinegrove Falls, where so many intelligent souls had recently been taught by life, or cajoled by Dmitri and my rouse, to become as skilled with guns as they were with a pen.

“You heard about Major Petrovitch, your and MY commanding officer and off duty boss from who!?” Dmitri pressed, grabbing my by the collar. “WHO!” he demanded to know.

“Elena,” I said with not an ounce of fear inside my soul. But pounds of another emotion I had yet to identify. “Elena, your wife, who, well...”

“Well what? Well what!!!!” Dmitri yelled, again and again, while I retained my calm poker face. And his was contorted into a thousand different emotions which no Hetman could ever reveal to the men under him.

“You want me continue sew up wound, Hetman Ivanov?” The Chinese doctor asked his patient, with a humble bow.

“Go!” Dmitri screamed at the best and lowest paid physician in ‘Johnstown’. “And if you tell anyone what you saw or heard here!” he continued, grabbing a knife from the good doctor’s kit, holding it to HIS throat. “You’ll wind up being food for the pigs! By my own hand!”

“And mine,” I added, fondling the handle of my revolver. Another promise and, I hoped, a lie, which scared the Asian doctor more than his patient did.

Dimitri let the doctor go. The underappreciated but still giving as much as he could to his racial superiors physician hurriedly collected his medical instruments and scurried out the door.

“Thank you,” Dmitri said to me, relieved for reasons I still was not able to ascertain.

“For what?” I enquired.

“Finally becoming a man!” Dmitri exclaimed, providing me with a congratulatory hug as a father, brother and friend. “One whose services I now know I can use, and trust. For a common purpose. A common cause.”

What Dmitri meant by being a ‘man’. Where Elena really was. These were questions I had to put on the, as the Texans said, back burner. The key question was whether a boss named ‘John’, the founder, patron or king of ‘Johnstown’ really existed. And what were his real intentions and Nature. Indeed I had asked that question regarding someone else I hadn’t met, but heard about---“God”. Wondering if it would be any easier to find, assess, make an agreement with or destroy this Boss big B called ‘John’.

"It was smart of you to follow me back here, Stefan," Dmitri asked me. He reached behind him for a brown tinted bottle of Texas moonshine with no name on an impressively drawn label showing a distorted five pointed star. Or maybe it Scotch whisky. Or maybe it was apple cider mixed with Russian vodka. He poured a generous portion into one glass, a moderate one in the other, offering me the former. I took the latter. "And it was wiser of you to let your...no, OUR new Pinegrovian 'tax collectors' follow the men with me. And it will be 'interesting' to see which group comes home. Your Army or mine."

"And what do you mean by 'interesting'?" I asked, pretending to sip from the glass while Dmitri swallowed a 'man's' size gulp of the elixir from his. It seemed to calm his nerves and fire up his courage, both at the same time.

"Survival of the fittest," my former mentor in the old country and now, as he thought anyway, business partner in this new one said. "Orders from up top," he related, yet again, pointing the sky. "Survival of---"

Dmitri's always tailor made and never repeated descriptors of the strong, worthy and smart on top and the 'useful idiots' on the bottom got caught in a cough that projected out of his throat, tinged with foam and blood. Tears streamed down his pale face. The mild shaking of his hands turned into blown out tremors. He clenched his chest. His right, then left leg went into spasms. With whatever strength was left in his disobedient body, he opened up a drawer on his desk on his way to the ground. He muttered a prayer to Jesus, begging for mercy and forgiveness in the manner of one of the 'useful idiots' who he so many times in Russia had personally sent to the bottom of the totem pole, the heavenly clouds or the pit of hell.

Why and how my arms decided to intercept his fall to the floor, sparing him a hard hit on the wood with his head, I still do not know. He pointed up to an open drawer, then to himself. Unable to figure out what he wanted, or needed, from that drawer, I pulled it out, laying it before him.

The contents of the drawer included no less than twenty blank letters bearing of the address of the Governor of Texas, signed by 'General Sam' Houston himself, most likely forged—I hoped anyway. A two barreled derringer. A picture of Elena in a wedding dress, her sad, tortured eyes, only slightly older than I remember her being. And two bottles of medicine, one being a liquid in a brown tinted jar, the other a powder in a clear thick glass container. At Dmitri's desperate non-verbal instruction, I opened both of them. According to the instructions on the bottles, I gave the Hetman who had never so much as grunted when confronted with assaults on his body that would turn anyone else I knew into a folded up ball of helplessness, two pinches of the powder, mixed into a quarter of a shot-glass of the sweet liquid

I treated myself to a look at Dmitri being at the sharp end of the spear, lance and stick with the first swallow from the liquid, and a pinch of the powder under his tongue. His face seemed to regain some color, the puffs coming from his mouth reeked of...garlic. A bit more color came to his eyes. He was somehow able to push his head, then torso upward. But his calves and thighs still seemed to be glued to the ground no matter how hard he tried to punch them into submission. I took hold of the elixirs, smelling their components. It smelled like the madness producing aroma emitted when mining for copper or gold in Siberia. That aroma I smelled next to the corpses of adventurous runaway serfs turned prospectors seeking to buy their owner's estates or free their own abandoned families. And in the temporary forbidden campgrounds of Indigenous once independent Yakuts who were promised riches in this life by mine owners and a 'blessed afterlife in the happy hunting grounds heaven' by priests who thought they had been converted to Christianity.

"Mmmmorre," Dmitri said to me, pointing with shaking hands to the two jars of 'magical' potions. I took note of the instructions for use--- 'take as needed or wanted'. 'Or wanted' was written in fresh rather than faded ink. Allowing Dmitri to follow the unnamed physician's instructions, I watched him grab the jars. I

watched him pour at least five spoonfuls of the powder into a full shot-glass of the liquid. I watched him whisking me aw stay with each attempt I made to take the jars back. Yes, I kept...watching.

I watched....as Dmitri took one step towards remaining in the realm of the living, then three steps back into whatever lay beyond it. His body went into convulsions. With what seemed like the last ounce of voluntary movement of his muscular, he grabbed hold of the sword strapped to my waist which my grandfather, against my grandmother's wishes. He attempted to pull it out. With the most minimal of efforts I prevented him from doing so.

"You ingrateful fool! Help me, please, help me...to..." he pleaded with me. His grip on the handle of that weapon that was my most powerful tool in disputes with fellow men, and women, in both war and peace, weakened..

I didn't know what he wanted with my sword, and who he wanted to wield it against. Himself, me, God or the ghosts of the men and women he had slayed who seemed to be hovering around him. But curiosity got the better of me. Guiding Dmitri's hand upward, I pushed his fingers into as tight a fist as they could muster around the sword's handle, then pulled it out of its scabbard. We both held it up the sky. I aimed it at enemies in my past who I had seen, and adversaries in the present who Life was still hiding me from. Dmitri aimed it at... well, I didn't care anymore. Until he mouthed 'John you bastard, you...' in a whisper that was as hushed as it was intensely delivered.

And with that, Dmitri passed into whatever lay beyond for the realm where, as I was told as a child, 'those who stopped breathing' went. It denied me the chance, opportunity and joy of outsmarting my always better at worldly skills than I was 'friend'. The chance to find out through force or manipulation (both of which was bad at) finding who 'John', the 'bosses of bosses' was. The man in charge of the 'tax collecting' system whose capital and treasury was neither Austin, Texas, Washington DC or Moscow.

Infiltrating into soul the fact that I let allowed Dmitri to kill himself with too much 'magic medicine', and the feeling that I did so due to intentional self sabotage. But, as my good friend the cross dressing Shaman who befriended and saved me after being shot with both Yakut arrows and Russian bullets meant for me. 'Nature never gives you a problem without a solution'. The question was....what was Mother, Brother or Father Nature going to give it to me.

I looked out the window for an answer, hiding my presence and face behind a curtain, and a bandana edged up above my nose. A badly injured Captain Jake Jackson rode into town, falling off his horse upon arrival. His red robe was stained with his own blood, his hood falling off. Such revealed a haircut made by a razor that went an inch below the scalp. On his bruised body was a note. From his mouth came words that made the message of the note readable to all concerned. That message said to the well dressed, well fed, and 'well to do anything they wanted' citizenry of Johnstown that it was time to relocate. As if a hurricane of marauders was over the hill, the citizenry took every wagon, horse or mule available, vacating the town in all of the Four Directions.

As soon as the 'have's' left town, the have nots moved in, edging their way from the shanty portion of Johnstown, signalled in to do so by parties I didn't see or hear. Poorly clad, scantily shoed laborers who had maintained the town bakery and feed stores, paid breadcrumbs took over the shops reserved for the rich, emerging in new hats, coats and boots, stuffing their emaciated faces with gourmet food. Laundry women whose wardrobe had been rags rushed in after them, donning the Parisian designed dresses accessorised by excess amounts of mismatched jewelry. Black slaves and indentured Whites who had sold themselves into that caste to pay their debts who had hauled water, built houses and tilled the fields from which they were not allowed to feed themselves over-took possession of the offices and homes of their masters. Mine workers with faces covered soot, making even the most white skinned of them look to be darker than any Negro, emerged from the tunnels they had dug, raiding the

jewelry store of the gold, silver and diamonds that they dug up from the earth. Disobedient servants locked in the jailhouse were released, celebrating their liberation with hugs from their wives, husbands, children and parents.

Sheriffs and deputies bearing Ranger badges and armed with revolvers called for order, in the name of the law, common decency, and finally Jesus. They faced angry crowds armed with shaking fists, pitchforks, stones and, most importantly, determined eyes connected to souls that had, as Carl Marx said, 'nothing to lose but their chains.' Terrified of becoming one of the have nots, most of the deputies and a few of the sheriffs hopped on a rescue wagon driven by a woman whose face could have been Elena's, but...wasn't. Once overloaded, the driver shot at the feet of an encroaching mob, then whipped the horses into a full gallop getaway out of town.

Remaining in the middle of the town square were eight well armed 'law' men, who couldn't or wouldn't leave. They formed a circle much akin to what I was told the Romans did when surrounded by barbarians. They fired into the crowd, miraculously, or perhaps purposely, shooting their bullets into the ground in front of the mob rather than into human flesh. When these barbarians pulled out revolvers, rifles and swords they had stolen from the town's gunshop after the secured metal door was blown into blown to pieces to pieces of shrapnel, the head 'Texan Centurian' ordered his men to hold their fire.

A middle aged woman laundry woman frail of body but strong in spirit with an uneven mane of brown hair with a feeble voice yelled out to the Centurian. "Join us or die," she proclaimed, voicing, according to the banter of the men and women around her, the general consensus of the congregation.

"And if we don't?" a small-framed deputy in the middle of the 'formation' whose face neither I nor the crowd could see yelled out. Silence overtook the crowd.

The middle aged prematurely arthritic woman smiled. She motioned for a man and woman to emerge from the general store, both walking with limps, scars on their exposed arms. They were accompanied by a young girl, whose face and eyes reminded me of Victoria Gonzales. Her hair had been cropped into something that looked like a grown out Cossack warlock. The man had in his scared hand a bucket of tar. The woman carted with her feather loaded pillows. The girl wielded a large pair of sewing scissors, opening and closing it as she edged her way forward. The steps of the three 'assailants' were in unison, in rhythm with a song, 'Go Down Moses' that emerged from an operatic voice of a tall Black Man with whip marks who perhaps had seen operas, or perhaps was not allowed to be told about their existence. His perfectly pitched rendition of that Negro Spiritual was joined in by off tuned voiced from red, white and finally yellow skinned 'serfs' who were now servants of each other rather than their rich, clever and heavily armed former masters.

Out of fear of being tarred, feathered or sheered, one by one, the last defenders of Johstown threw down their weapons, raised their hand in the air, joined in the song, then walked into and was absorbed in the approaching mob. One Ranger remained, a muscular 'defender' of this 'Alamo' with a chiseled chin sporting a handlebar mustache, clad in clean trousers and spit polished boots. Though, according to the size of the badge on his chest and lack of insignia on his military style shirt, his rank was that of a junior deputy, a first class private of advanced age at most in an army overloaded with Sergeants and Captains, he wore his rank and affiliation with dignity. It was the kind of dignity in the face of adversity I had not seen since when I saw Major Petrovitch assaulted by Yakuts he had cheated out of house and home, and drunk Imperial Army soldiers whose wages he 'saved' for them in places that he never revealed. But unlike Petrovitch, who crossed himself before facing his potential executioners, disarming them with his determined eyes (and, yes, clever lies that he invented on the spot) this buck private Ranger spit on the ground. He cursed each of the fellow lawmen who had resigned their position to save their hided by name and with a tailor made punishment he predicted they would encounter in hell or while still walking on

this side of the dirt. At the conclusion of his rant, he pulled out his revolver, and shot himself. Silence overtook the crowd as he fell to the ground.

Then something strange and wonderful happened. Yes, the looting of the stores, buildings and finally the bank resumed. But all of the liberated serfs, slaves and servants took according to their needs, getting more satisfaction from giving wares to their fellow liberated citizens than pocketing them for themselves. With instruments left behind by the military band, the new civilian orchestra played on as a five foot nothing half breed former serf stacked apple crates under the sign reading 'Entering Johnstown' and smashed it on the ground. Taking turns, under the direction of the middle-aged laundry woman, liberated citizen and former law enforcer who didn't want to be scalped, tarred and feathered took turns spitting on the sign or deposited urinary and fecal excretions on it.

"So, 'John', whoever you are, guess this means you'll have to find another town to be named after you," I whispered to myself from my still undiscovered vantage point in Dmitri's office, hoping that no one heard me. But someone did. Svetlana, my mare, had somehow avoided becoming a mode of transportation for runaway tyrants and their well fed minions. She was waiting for me in the alley below. "Yes, it's time to go home," I said in Russian, a language the Texan born mustang learned far quicker than I thought possible. She seemed to whiney back, "indeed, but better be quick about ."

I quickly grabbed a poncho from Dmitri's closet, cut it into rags, then slipped it over me. I threw away my 'upscale Texas cowhand' hat, finding, by accident or perhaps intent, a brand new Mexican sombrero, folding it up as much as possible to make it look worn. After chopping down, but not off, my trademark overgrown Cossack mustache, I did a quick mirror check. Svetlana whinnied at me again.

"Yes," I told Svetlana. She was looking on at the other horses in the town square where there emerged a celebration of another Democratic Revolution . Before

she would liberate herself from me, I leaped down from the two story window and grabbed hold of the reins, and swung myself upon the saddle which, thankfully, had not yet been confiscated at 'the people's property'. "Democracy. Rule of the people," I told her. "Which we both, if we are being who we really are, can make possible for others, while we become, by our nature and Spirit assigned job, the minority," I reminded the mustang who chose to come to me when I went out into the wilderness to find a horse rather than stay with her herd. Maybe because of the grain in the bucket I carried or her longing to be with another loner.

On the way out of town, hopefully not being recognised by anyone, I recalled as well, the many, many times during the golden times of being a young Cossack and a prematurely older one. After we achieved a hard earned victory against a human foe or the vicious assaults on us by Mother nature, celebration overtook us, with unbridled song, music and...laughter. That was when I decided it was time for me to retreat from my Comrades, and lovers, including Elena. My self assigned, or perhaps Life mandated, job was to be vigilant rather than celebratory. To watc the horizon for more Turks, Tatars or Imperial Russian Army troops who were assigned the task of putting us under the ground or throwing chains upon our ankles and wrists. Or I would just gaze out at the horizon in all four directions to see if another storm was on its way to destroy or 'challenge' us. I'd watch, from a distance, my fellow comrades being Comrades, every man a king, but no one wearing a crown. And every woman a queen. I recalled that that Elena's most enjoyed activity in life was to dance and laugh at such occasions, and others as well. This had been, and still was, something that I was unable to do. To have fun and therefore allow others to have such was something I was unwilling to experiment with. But Dimitri was so....good, nay, GREAT at. Which I suppose made her good, or great for Elena in some ways. But not so good in other ways, of course, perhaps

CHAPTER 8

Captain Jake Jackson was known for many things when being the top sheriff under Hetman Dmitri Ivanov. He could shoot the eyes off of a rattlesnake at twenty paces, look at a pair of deuces at the poker table like it was a royal flush, and was known to never take his hat off. Perhaps it was because what was under it, a streak of straight white down the middle surrounded by brown curly lockes that made him look like the skunk that some say he really was. After Dmitri had tripped him in his office during his last meeting, causing his hat to fall off, I was one of the few people still alive who saw that streak of white that no amount of shoe polish could cover up. Lizzy Johnson was apparently another one, as she wore that 'hat' of skunk looking and skunk smelling scalp as a well armed sentry guarding the Eastern approach to Pinegrove, on a lunch break, eating stew from a metal bowl. It was complimented by a necklace containing no less than 8 ears from as many different men.

"I woulda cut Captain Jake's balls as well, " Lizzy boasted with a shit eating grin between bites of the stew containing meat of an origin I could not ascertain. "But after chasing him down, when I grabbed him by the short and curlies, them family jewels was barely big enough to make earrings. " Having heard the grumbling of my empty stomach, she halted her eating, then offered me of her bountiful portion of stew. "But, I'm fergettin' my manners Comrade, and Commander Muller's orders. Ya look hungry."

"I am," I replied, not saying that I was hungry for the truth about why Pinegrove Falls was becoming rich in material goods and poorer in virtuous attributes. But Lizzy took pity on me, handing me her bowl, insisting that I fill my pie hole. To keep the conversation going I, of course, complied with her assertive and perhaps compassionate request. I found the stew bitter, my mouth becoming numb as I chewed it.

"It's an acquired taste," she said of the mixture of meat, vegetables and spices of unknown origin.

After four bites which did satisfy my belly, I gave the bowl back to her, requesting that she feed my ears with exploits of her recent activities to bring justice to her world.

Between bites of the stew which empowered her with every swallow, she went on to describe the joy experienced when she and everyone else in town pursued the red hooded marauders on their retreat from Pinegrove Falls. A retreat which, according to what I thought was Dmitri's plan, would have been fast enough so that the fleeing 'tax collectors' would never be caught, killed or scalped. Behind Lizzy's eyes and in the wake of every intentionally grammatically incorrect word spewing out of her mouth was something she never was. It felt to be a demon of sorts who had convinced her that it was fashionable to be cruel. To those who had been merely bad to you and especially to those who had been, in some way, good to you. "Ya knows the new rules. They take a finger, you takes an arm. They take an arm you takes everything below his neck, then dine on his eyeballs before the crows can," the woman who loved peace, harmony and intelligent conversation almost as much as other women spat back at me.

I found myself taking note of her black trousers and an even darker colored coat, sharp blood stained spurs strapped to her boots, accompanied by no less than four pistols strapped to her waist. They were Colt and Navy revolvers that I recognized as the 'superweapons' worn by the 'Rangers' in Johnstown. Those former masters on top, or useful idiots elevated to positions of power, were now who were now refugees on the bottom. I found myself thinking about those who were de-throned. I was not sure yet if I felt pity for them or the desire to extract more justice upon their wretched souls. No doubt some were now slaves to the newly freed citizens of what had been Johnstown if they disobeyed the new set of laws governing that settlement. Others would be stray, possession-less saddle tramps hiding out in the bush. Those who could find their way back to 'their own

kind' would have to explain how and why a group of Pacifist foreigners or American-misfits were able to get the better of them. They would have to explain why they ran from a fight with their social inferiors as cowards. But by the way the normally self-effacing Lizzy (this time with blood between her teeth and under her fingernails that was NOT her own) told me her latest Wild West tall tale, which indeed was fact, she was one of the heroes.

My attempts to keep her talking about events I never saw, but needed to know about were halted by her turning around to me, firing an inquiry into my mind and soul, bypassing all of the walls I was, up till now, very good at keeping intact.

"So, where was you when we was out puttin' them red-robb'd 'Rangers' inta the ground before they was able ta put' us in the poor house?" she inquired., with more manly assertion than Major Petrovitch or any other Commissar in Russia, prison guard in Berlin or Immigration Inspector in New York I had the pleasure of experiencing.

"I was...eh...doing what I could, with eh... some unforeseen circumstances," I explained, with downturned eyes. "Following who I thought was the ringleader who abandoned his troops," I continued, facing her and the Creator who made both of us straight on. "I thought I found him, then....I...eh..."

"Well, I hope yer comin' with us to collect taxes from towns that's been livin' high on the hog fer way too long," she interjected. It prevented me from telling another lie I would be caught in, or truth I would be shot for by one of the four Colt revolvers strapped to her waist that had belonged to the Rangers who she had 'relieved' of those weapons, and their hard working jobs as legalized thieves. . "Should be easy takin', since livin' high off the hog slows down yer reflexes once the bullets start flyin," she chuckled.

I held back challenging 'the new math' of 'a head for an eye, and a limb or two for a tooth' that seemed to have overtaken most every citizen in what had been my favorite place to call home one raid gone sideways ago. A town that had been an 'everyone takes according to their needs', which was now about 'everyone has the right to take what they want', by the looks of the overstuffed pockets in new coats worn by the Pinegrove citizenry overflowing with jewelry and cash.

"So," Lizzy barked at me like a rabid dog trying to teach its human master a lesson. "What're ya'll gawking at?"

"Justice," she wanted to hear. So, that is what I said.

It seemed to satisfy the needs of the demon inside of her, and the wants of her as a now very worldly woman.

"And the whereabouts of Hans?" I said, pretending to be one of 'them' instead of one of the 'us' that seemed to be absent from my view. "Yes, Professor-Mayor Hans."

"Ya mean General J.S. Hans Muller," she replied, lowering her head, firing an angry schoolmarm look into my perhaps too open eyes.

"J.S.?" I said. "I didn't know he had any Christian name other than just Hans."

"None of use knew it neither," Lizzy volleyed back. "Turns out that he's related to J.S. Bach. So he says. And so, after he made better music pouring out of the saloon piano than anyone else could make."

“Johan Sebastian Bach?” I answered, ignoring for the moment that the tavern in Pinegrove Falls was now upgraded to a saloon. Concentrating on the fact that Johan was German for...‘John’.

A man concerned with a woman gone sideways rather than a world gone wrong would have stayed with Lizzy to hear her out till he was able to figure out where she was coming from. Treating the most wounded combatant close to you before heading off to have a talk with her commander was the logical choice. But there was an emotional dynamic that made me more concerned with clearly identifying and neutralizing the ‘John’ who was in charge of the Texan ‘Johnnys’, ‘John boys’ and “Jakes’.

I excused myself from the one way conversation with Lizzy by pledging that I would participate in the next raid on towns that had more wealth than they deserved with as much fake enthusiasm as she had real crusader zeal. I boldly strutted straight to Professor Mayor John Hans Muller’s print shop, book store, and private office where (according to his now old before her time wife’s usually pleasant description) ‘he was negotiated with God for a better deal for His, or Her, Creations’. I approached the door slowly and deliberately, finding it locked. No amount of juggling allowed me entry. The small needle I used to pick locks so successfully everywhere else broke in two. My attempt to use brute force (when no one else was looking of course) resulted in foot meeting door, the latter remaining intact, the former registering extreme pain.

Just at the moment when I reflected on the failure of using brute force instead of brains, the door opened. Who or what was behind it I didn’t know. Gushing into my flared nostrils was a massive wave of bitter garlic. Its source was not Hans’ hallmark ‘mixed meat’ sausage but vials of medicine, each with the name of a specific Pinegrove citizen. The handwriting was identical to that on jars of medicine that were in Dmitri’s private desk drawer. The one bearing my name, upon opening it, emitted the strongest aroma, reminiscent of the magic potion that empowered then did in Dimitri. I put a drop of the elixir on my tongue. It

was metallic, identical to the 'healing elixir' I gave to Dmitri, at his request. Of particular note were another set of vials containing a white powder I didn't recognize by smell, taste or texture with the names of the most prominent citizens of Pinegrove, including mine, . I did recognize, though, mercury and arsenic in some of the vials, chemicals which were collected with extracting gold and copper from common rocks.

Why Doctor Johan Sebastian Hans Muller had formulated potential medicinals and known toxins for all of us I didn't know. As for the latter, I recalled the theory that the magic in Beethoven's music and the madness in his mind that made such possible were, according to some biographers, due to mercury, lead and small doses of arsenic. As I was in a room populated only by ghosts, I gave voice to those hypotheses. They didn't answer of course, at least in a language I could understand. A few creaks, wind gusts and 'accidental' droppings of books on the floor were all that they said to me.

But one of the books had as its title something in a language I could not decipher, until I noted a dedication in the book to Leonardo da Vinci. Who, as I recalled, wrote in mirrored writing so his contemporaries and rivals who wanted him dead and his messages considered nonsense could not read it. When placing the book in my chest, and looking in a mirror, pretending that I was worthy of writing books that would live far longer than me, I could clearly read the cover.—'Communism in the Wild West: A Social Experiment'. Listed as the author was John Sebastian Muller. The first few pages were written in Latin, a tongue I recognized, but could never read, and detested due to it considering its logical correctness more important than the musical expression in Slavic tongues.

I recalled that Hans, when accidentally drunk or when jabbering out of his mouth, related tales to me about him being sent as a young man to a Catholic Seminary by his father and a Criminal Court judge so that 'his intelligence would be used in the service of God rather than be utilized by the Socialist devil inside of him'. I so yearned to want to know what was in that book of his. A voice answered me as

soon as I could formulate a question. A ghostly voice which, to my horror, was not from the depths of hell but a place I remembered as the most heavenly place on earth.

"So," Hans said to me as he walked into the center of his workplace. "It seems that the experimentor and the experimentee have stumbled into each other," he stated. "Which requires that you take a man's portion of THIS elixir," he said, after which pulled out his revolver. "Starting with an injected bolus of lead. Then a cocktail of my choice down the hatch. All at once!" he insisted.

"My drinking an excessive amount of the medicine you provided to Hetman Dmitri Ivanov?" I said. "Killing myself, like Socrates did," I said. "I'll just pretend that it's medicine that gives you strength and good health? Both of those in excess, of course, being deadly. But...what was the other ingredient in it that made Dmitri Ivanov smarter, stronger and more politically powerful than anyone else, if taken in the prescribed doses, Professor DOCTOR JOHN Muller? Or does something in here if taken in small doses allow the patient who takes it survive a plague that, maybe, you anticipate coming here? Or have plans to create so you can observe the dynamics of human survival and expansion?"

"Which unfortunately, you won't be around to experience," Mueller said. "Unless you....hmm." he lowered his revolver but not his guard.

"Unless I do what?" I dared to ask.

"Become a fellow experimentor with me," he said with a welcoming smile, holstering his Colt. The closest person I had only a few days earlier as a friend, and brother, pulled out a bottle of vodka which I had made in my still, that he had put into his private stock. With his back turned to me, he poured the firewater

into two glasses. He offered me a choice as to which drinking container I would take.

I considered the consequences of drinking the 'superpower medicine' elixir in my hand or the contents of the glass containing my own home brewed vodka. Either way, I would be the object of the experiment as well as the experimentor. In an investigation which had to be continued with as sober a mind as possible.

CHAPTER 9

The law of the jungle was easily adopted to the bone dry Texas prairies. After all, in Nature the strong always ate, demolished or enslaved the weak. And if strength is measured by the muscles between the ears rather than below the neck, it was our turn to be on top of the new pyramid evolving in the Lone Star State. After all, who were we to challenge that God given right, and obligation, we now had to rob and steal what we needed, and wanted? We drew lots as to which one of us would pose as invaders out to burn any structure built by man, or woman in no less than 10 towns around us, along with turning those builders into food for the buzzards. And which one of us were cast as the 'saviors' who boldly, and dramatically, drove them away before they could do their dirty work. As for who would be the one to negotiate with the mayors elected by vote or circumstance as to the fee for that protection we provided for them, I always drew the short straw.

I was given several protective deputies to be sure that no harm came to me while I delivered the script Hans wrote. The penalty for missing a beat or improvising was to be removed from the stage with a deadly hook grabbing me by, as my perhaps inferiors or superiors say, 'short and curlies'. Why did I participate in it? Why didn't I inform the 'protected townsfolk' that their 'tax dollars and donations to the poor elsewhere' bought nothing for the less fortunate? Maybe I thought that we, as Freethinkers had inherited the right to do so. After all, we had fought and survived failed revolutions in the countries we came from. And it was our destiny as the most learned, literate and 'written' to finally find ourselves 'on top' of the new political structure in the latest State to be admitted to the American Union. Or perhaps, we could wind up being on top of the pyramid in EVERY state of the American Union.

After all, the way you change corrupt systems is to infiltrate as an asshole, then change it as...someone else. Introduce such things as abolishing slavery and guaranteeing the rights of those born with vaginas rather than penises. Or even,

if Lizzy and Lydia had anything to do with it, allowing those bearing the same reproductive parts as they were born, burdened or blessed with to be free to marry, and have families of their own.

But, absolute power corrupts absolutely, particularly when our clandestine leader, His Excellency Johan Sebastian Hans Muller, decided to regain control of Johnstown. My advanced knowledge of that 'to be named something different someday' settlement was that everyone there disagreed with everyone else on SOMETHING. But there was one thing they were united by---Refusal to rename their town after Professor Doctor 'John', or Hetman 'Dmitri', or self styled revolutionary-scholar 'Stefan', i.e., me. And the determination to remain an independent town in, presumably, an independent state in a presumably independent country. So, what do you do to break up the most independent of souls whose strength, intelligence and resolve grew every day? Divide and conquer, of course.

There was a lot to divide and much to conquer, particularly in Johnstown, which finally came up on Hans' list of 'wayward and mis-directed political systems' that could use 'an education in practical ethics'. And, hey, Hans would know. His system of government in Pinegrove Falls and the growing number of colonies it acquired was a democracy. Democracy being rule of the majority, the majority being the least smart, wise or compassionate portion of the populus.

But, as I knew, and I hoped and prayed other Pinegrovians realized, it isn't the structure, rules and dynamics of decision making which determines how right, or wrong a political system, but how human the people are who are on top, and the bottom. Socrates was put to death in the 'democracy' that was ancient Greece. And, so I heard, enlightened kingdoms north of India such as Tibet were officially run by philosopher-priests on top who really did listen to people on the bottom and even more so to Spirit, big S, which infiltrated their intelligence infused consciences.

Such was my thinking, and feeling, when the new 'ambassador' of what used to be Johnstown came to Pinegrove, loaded up with supplies to pay the town's taxes to distribute to 'those in more need' elsewhere. As my town's ambassador, I greeted the wagon master. He seemed to be a man of many ages, all at the same time. His wrinkle-free face was that of a middle aged pioneer who would determine the fate of his life on the frontier on his own terms, and nobody else's. His nose had that enlargement which accompanied old men who sought refuge at the bottom of a whisky bottle after they were unable to find refuge with any of his children, grandchildren or wife. Under his hat lay a thick mane of shoulder length black hair which was so abundant that it had to be rooted in every surface of his scalp. His brown eyes shot out defiant fire or welcoming warmth, depending on how you looked at them. "You brought three times more supplies and wagons than you were requested to provide to the collectives elsewhere," I said to him as he halted the horses hauling the ten foot high load of tarp covered 'tribute' which was to protect his home town from marauders bearing red, white or black skins under their priestly garb.

"That's because three times more people voted to NOT name our town Johnstown again now, in the future, or in any afterlife!" he barked, directing his voice to me. He then threw an angry rebel's stare into Hans, clad in a new Presidential suit more suited for doing battle with pens, emerged from his newly enlarged print shop. It was now referred to as 'The Capital Building' of the 'Pinegrove Republic'.

"So," I asked the messenger from what had been Johnstown, not knowing how deeply I was speaking and thinking from, out of range from Hans' hearing. "What do you value most? Security or freedom?"

"An interesting question," Hans said with a confident all is beyond fine smile, having read my lips or my mind. He peered under the tarp of the wagon, pleased with what lay there. "You can find temporary security within freedom. And you

can find sustainable freedom within security," he informed the messenger as well as me.

"Which means what?!" I shot back at Hans, unable to reinforce the crumbling wall between what others see and what I feel, or know..

"He can tell you," Hans said to me with a chuckle, pointing the seemingly semi-literate wagonmaster. "If he wants to, which he probably won't," he continued as he closed the tarp. He gave the driver a thumbs up.

Hans strolled back to his office with his head held high and an arch in his back that made him seem to be more of a Monarchy than a Mayor. I noted that he was now uglier than usual, not one of his body parts or face being handsome or bearable to the eyes. Yet he was not only admired by men, but lusted for by women. Including the women who loved women more than men, very much including Lydia.

I felt...demoted. Or maybe I was just excluded from the inner circle of my tribe, something one should expect if the tribe becomes something it never was. I was reduced to having to get what I want, or need, by the most crude methods available- physical force or viciously fueled manipulation.

No, I didn't draw my revolver, pointing it at the wagonmaster's head, demanding to know the thoughts and feelings inside of it. Instead, I pulled out all the coins from my pocket, offering them to him, having calculated that they would be enough for him to trade in the under and oversized rags he was wearing for something far more respectable, and tailor made. "Pennies for your thoughts?" I inquired, thinking myself his moral equal but literary superior.

From the knower of what I needed to find out what Hans was really up to, a chuckle emerged.

I dug deeper and retrieved paper money from my pocket for more money to buy the wagonmaster's trust. I was somehow hit with the realization that money was just paper with as much value as asswipe, or the pages of the books I had written when I thought I knew about the world I was describing and trying to heal.

"Dollars for your relatable secrets?" I proposed, with a whisper, having confirmed that none of my fellow former 'Comrades' were watching, or at least hearing me.

The driver took the money, then shook his head in an affirmative 'no, you deluded idiot' shake.

I repeated my proposition, adding more money with each offer. When I had emptied my pockets, my face showing that I had, he counted what I had given him. "Almost enough," he said. "But with..." he pointed to my boots, then up to my hat, then back to the boots, then back up, centering on something under the left side of my upper chest. "I want whatever is under there," he said to me, as I felt a ray of hot fire aimed at my heart.

"You mean, this?" I said, retrieving a pocketwatch from my breast pocket. It was the timepiece my grandfather gave to me on his deathbed, without his wife or his son's knowledge. He made me promise that I would never tell anyone that I had it. "It doesn't work anymore. Decided to stop ticking decades ago because it was uncomfortable with modern times," I related "But..." The rest of the quips from my mouth were held hostage at my throat as I heard, then saw, then felt the watch tickling---two minutes to 'high noon'.

Seeing as I didn't want to be a part of whoever or whatever got it started, even or especially if it was grandpa Sasha's ghost, I handed the watch to the wagon master. He pocketed it, and the money.

"Now that I made you and whoever you call family safer, more comfortable and, if at all possible, happier...you have something to share with me?" I asked.

"About..." I continued, pointing to Hans. He was sitting in front of the Presidential Palace, reading out of his book to the Pinegrovian children. Their parents stood by his side, armed with weapons that fired out lead rather than pages that emitted ideas and ideals.

"Hmmm, like the good book says," the wagon master said with a prophetic tone, stroking his beard in a professorial manner, like Hans used to do when he was a Professor. "Render unto Ceasar that which is Caesar."

"And," I reminded him as the insolent student I was when dealing with my father, and (when drunk, anyway) grandfather, "Render unto God that which is---"

--Worthless, in the real world," the wagonmaster interjected. "I thought you agnostics already knew that," he added. He then assertively whipped the two half-foundered horses in front of him into a trot. Both were lame but refused to stop, knowing somehow that if they were deemed useless to this new Caesar, they would become lion's meat for the Colosseum.

A sensible man, or woman, would join the children who were now being taught to be good capitalists rather than effective socialists by President Hans. Or would gather whatever was left of his dignity and look for another town to be adopted by, or to adapt to my needs, and wants. No, I stayed on, hoping that I could reach the part of Hans that was an aspiring artistic humanist rather than a social scientist. I felt...confused, and alone. Until I got a nudge on my coat from behind.

“Ok, Grandpa Sasha,” I said, in Russian. “I know. You said to keep that pocketwatch at all costs, even if it doesn’t work. But, it did work. So does that mean that it was activated by the devil?”

“The devil doesn’t exist,” I heard from a hoarse voice behind me, in my native tongue. “But he does, if you believe he does,” the ghost behind me continued in Texan English gently peppered with a Mexican accent.

I dared to turn around to view my hallucination. It wasn’t the first time that such visitors from the ‘other side’ decided to visit me so that I could be sent to hell to join them. Maybe it was my father, maybe my mother. Or maybe, perhaps, possibly, I hoped and prayed, it was Elena. A thousand years with her in hell with her would be far more fulfilling than ten minutes in Heaven with the Old Believer priests who maintained Churches in every Cossack village I lived in or visited. Yes, it HAD to be Elena. Perhaps there to scold me for having given in to hunger when I got back to Pine Grove with jerky from the General Store, in a town where Professor Doctor Hans seemed to now control anything that went into people’s mouths, and what came out of them.

“So, Elena,” I said, after which I took in a deep breath. I requested my heart, mind and soul to somehow work together rather than continue with cross purposes regarding would come out of my mouth. Upon seeing the love of my life that I threw away, or didn’t have to courage to accept, I was rewarded with something else. Out of my yapper and dropped lower jaw came a “Huh”.

“So, you’re wondering why I know Russian?” Victoria Gonzales said from a mouth that had been battered and bruised. Over her head she wore a child’s blanket fashioned as a shawl. It was accompanied by a fringed leather dress from a tribe I didn’t recognise over her once thin and now scrawny torso. Putting aside that

Victoria did indeed absorb every Russian book I brought with me from the old country (and probably read with interest all of the writings I did when in this new one) I gently pulled down her shawl. Her head nodded downward, with a mixture of anger and shame. "Punishment for trying to rob from the new rich to the new poor," she said regarding the bruises on her face. "And something I had to do to become...someone else," she said regarding her chopped up red dyed Indigenous mop which now replaced her long, black mane. "I had to become someone who....was waiting for you to come back 'home'. Here, where...the water under our feet has turned into black poison," she said, pointing to a dark ooze coming up from the ground.

I tasted the ooze coming out of the hard dirt. Perhaps it would taste like the sulferous fires of Hell that the priests in the old country and the preachers in this new one promised we would be enveloped by if we violated the Ten Commandments send to us by God or the Criminal Code Laws provided by our worldly Masters. But it was...something else, with a taste that was both strange but yet somehow familiar.

"Toxic poison," Victoria explained to me. "Which kills anyone who drinks it. And ignites on fire if a match comes too close to it."

"But makes anyone who can sell it, because it can create big fires and big explosions...very rich," I said, recognizing the aroma of what my grandfather, a Cossack who was better at inventing things than destroying them, called...'oil'. "A blessing and a curse," he had said, which is what I passed on to Victoria.

"Like what we both have between our ears?" she enquired, afraid of a positive answer to that question.

That promotion given to me by this 15 year old girl made me feel more accomplished than any compliment or elevation in rank conferred upon me by any man, or woman. Including Elena. I dared to look into Victoria's bloodshot yet still wide open eyes, allowing myself to see Elena behind them. Victoria didn't seem to mind me doing so. But I had to remember that whatever I and the formerly most valued young mind in Pinegrove would do together, it would have to be in the service of people and animals in the real world, rather than my more often than not defective imagination or selfish dreams.

Victoria apparently didn't know about the discovery and uses for of oil coming from the ground versus boiled down whale fat was immaterial. Why I happened to be in Lake Baikil just outside of Moscow when oil from the ground was used to make kerosine that could keep a lantern lit for an entire night, whereas even the best made candles would fade out after a few hour, I didn't know. Why Hans didn't tell me or anyone else about oil under the ground in a town that he 'accidently' founded, I didn't know. Perhaps he didn't know himself, being a man with advanced knowledge of politics and (so he poetically boasted) arts rather than hard core science. Or...perhaps he DID know that there was far more wealth under the ground under our feet than could ever be above it. He HAD to know that kerosine, made so much more easily from petroleum than other sources, would light up more lamps very soon in Texas than any of his books, or speeches.

But there was one person who I didn't see anywhere within the public eye after Hans has liberated his flock of independent thinkers from the constraints of pacifism-inspired morality---Elsa. The plain looking woman who was Hans' favorite student, then mistress in the old country, and common law wife in Pinegrove who, until now, was always by his side. She knew how to vanish into the background, with her mouth anyway, when issues of import were discussed in Pinegrove Falls. Now, she was nowhere to be found in body or voice.

"Hell hath no fury like, ya know...?" I asked Victoria, in Russian.

“Yes, a woman scorned,” the 15 going on 50 protégée said to me, in my native tongue regarding who I should try to find, and if possible save. And who I would have to put into harm’s way to end the harmful experiment Hans had initiated.

CHAPTER 10

My inquiries into where Elsa was, or if she was even still alive, went unanswered by everyone, even when I was able to pull them away from anyone else's ears except their own.

"Had an argument with her husband Hans about if God really existed and decided to become a Nun, so she could be a bride of Christ, who thank God would not require her to laugh at any man's jokes, so I hope anyway," Carl Richter told me with a chuckle.

"Elsa's soul, mind and body had different agendas, all three of them losing the fight," Soloman Schaumburg speculated. "Whatever happens between a man and his wife, or a woman and her wife is between them!" Lydia spat back at me, putting up yet another wall to people who could help her, while having new holes in it for those who would do her harm, perhaps now including her beloved Lizzy.

"Elsa believed too many of my daughter's stories," Victor Gonzales related with shame and admiration for the daughter he raised to be an independent woman, as long as, of course, she was dependent on him.

"Kidnapped by bandits who asked for a ransom that no one in this town could afford. Or, maybe Hans was in love with another woman, which could be me, or another man, who could be any bearer of a penis in this town who boasts too much about his manhood," Solomon's best friend (because they were not married) Sarah offered.

The rest of the speculations from my, as I hoped anyway, trusted fellow Pinegrovians included "eaten by a bear" and "becoming as crazy as a rabid bear.

From Victoria, “maybe decided to take an exit from a life of too much comfort, not enough challenge and offers of love that she DID decide to refuse.”

Such led me to believe that there were two other options. First, Elsa Mueller decided that death provided more answers to her problems than life. Second, as was the case in so many who in the habit feeling most at home only when they left the place they had called such, “She’s gone Native, to be rid of the collective here that’s become more cruel than cooperative, ” I said to Victoria as we rode down the barely discernable trail in the rocky bad lands leading from Pinegrove to Indian territory. Thankfully, we had a trail to follow that, I hoped, only I knew how to follow.

One of the many trades I was marginally good enough at to be kept alive, and on occasion paid, was as a maker of boots for people and shoes for horses. Due to one having a left leg that was three inches longer than her right, she required special lifts on her boots on the latter, which I fashioned for her. Her horse had a deformity on its right front hoof which made it turn outward as much as forward with every stride. Elsa asked me to not tell anyone that I tell no one about the ‘lifts’ in the footwear for herself and her favorite horse because she would be pitied as an invalid which, without those lifts, both her and the horse were. The impressions of the horse and her on the ground were easy to follow. Such Victoria and myself to a hidden valley amidst the hills half a day’s ride West of town. A place where....

“....Cruelty is an art form rather than the only alternative left to those excessively injured or offended,” Victoria replied, pointing my attention to three human corpses that had been eaten down the bone by scavengers, with clean cuts in the muscle made by human hands. “And when we find Elsa---”

“---Which maybe we already have,” I said, guiding my horse towards the corpse that bore large half eaten breasts, nearly thrown off it when my mare Svetlana

nearly bucked me off after getting a whiff of the rotting flesh. Upon examining the body that had become a 'carcass', I ascertained that it was not the right height, weight and complexion to have been Elsa Mueller. Shock came into Victoria when her ocular portholes beheld the terrified eyes of the slain woman, followed by fear, something the child who could always control her environment and the people in it was a novice at handling. For me, neither the body of that unfortunate woman nor the ghost that seemed to be hovering above it, caused---- any kind of reaction. Neither did seeing what remained of her male, and white, companions. I was numb. Some would say 'functionally de-sensitized'. Others could call that state of nothingness being dead.

But I was alive, as was Victoria. And the path that Victoria saw Elsa take on her exit from town, confirmed by imprints of her specially made right boot for her and right shoe for her horse led further into the badlands. Straight towards the site of the last Commanche raid on a small wagon train moving through country too big for its members to comprehend. Then beyond it towards sacred burial grounds we were told by Commanche and other Red Skinned visitors to Pinegrove to not go through, or even look at. And beyond that to where the Indians, as even us Pinegrove citizenry called them all without an appreciation for their differences, practiced secret sacred rituals which they were determined to keep secret. Which, of course, drew more than one Eastern or European anthropologists who discovered that, like in the places they came from and measured their worth with, curiosity kills not only cats but inquisitive for the wrong reason humans.

A dangerous but unavoidable thought entered my consciousness and infiltrated my soul. Whatever Johan Sebastian Hans Mueller was going to do next to invert the pyramids of power in Texas was known by Elsa. And as long as Victoria, she and me were not bitten by the 'fashionable to be Fascist cruel' virus that had infected Pinegrove, we could turn things around to the way things used to be. Knowing of course that we should consider other more enlightened options.

CHAPTER 11

Thank whoever or whatever is in charge of the world, our horse's feet were not swallowed up by the soggy ground and quicksand on the badlands, finally finding firm footing at the other side of the 'desert swamp'. It was actually more hard than firm, the floor under us being hard rock which clicked a loud noise when our horses, and then our feet, negotiated our way up through the small hills that felt like mountains. When looking downward, I wondered what kind of black gold or any other material useful only to the industrial world lingered under it. When raising my head up and glaring at the black clouds accumulated over our head, I listened for any thunder, thinking that the lightening to follow would find its way to us, as we were the tallest target available on the treeless slopes. But the shortest distance to the Commanche camp still had to be taken, even though perhaps the gods who those Indians created and thus empowered seemed to want us to not reach it.

When travelling over the vast distances my feet had taken over the last 20 years trying to get from point A to B, Mother Nature usually presented me with challenges regarding when I would get to my destination and what time I would arrive there. As for the time, my grandfather's watch, when it did work, was always my means of measurement. The location of the sun above me informed me as to where North was. Both were inaccessible now. As for the compass I took to keeping with me three exits from places I wanted to call home ago, it seemed confused as I was. The needle that had so faithfully pointed to North changed direction each time I consulted it. My only guide to finding the Commanche camp, and hopefully an alive, un-scalped and un-enslaved Elsa, was Victoria. How and why she knew the way to their current camp, on land that they ruled over but didn't own, I didn't ask. Why they didn't kidnap her and take her in as one of their own geniuses, as a permanent resident, could be for any reason. She knew their language, and gave me a quick course in the key words to say to them. From atop her horse, she shouted out words I should repeat, correcting my pronunciation for such. I repeated those words which she, with her young mind, had memorized after only one hearing. Me, with my aging faster than I

wanted it to brain, forgot the Commanche phrases she had said within two minutes of hearing it.

I did remind her, in Russian, English and my pathetically incorrectly pronounced Spanish, that speaking too loudly would draw attention of two AND four legged onlookers who did not have our best welfare in mind. But she intended to be an expressively loud teacher of a tongue she embraced so proudly. Perhaps one that she would convert into a written alphabet and put into print as the first novel written about White men and women from a Native voice, or vice versa. Every time she turned to look at me, her smile became bigger, her skin more red. Indeed, she seemed to know more about Indian culture than I ever knew, or appreciated, of the Natives in Siberia, who shared internal as well as external similarities to the 'pagan savages' on this continent. But Victoria was more of a kind than intelligent soul, the excesses of the former feeding the latter. Though this special gift came with a special kind of vulnerability.

Victoria was a solitary soul who somehow invited you, me anyway, to interact with her as whatever you wanted or needed her to be. With each look at her rapidly less white face, I saw someone else. A mother, a daughter, a friend, and a mistress. And, I speculated....Elena, the woman who I felt unworthy of marrying back on the Steppes. It was a miscalculation, nay, SIN, that enabled Dmitri to take her hand in marriage as a protective husband. Or as it probably turned out, he became a sadistic Aristocrat who 'took care of' a masochistic serf. A serf who, though rumor, I heard met an early death, directly or indirectly through her own hand.

I allowed myself to consider the possibility that Elena has returned to me through Victoria. either by renting her soul to the young Mexican protégée, or reincarnating as her. After all, I told others, and myself, that if your best horse or dog dies before you, their souls come back to you in the colt, fillie or pup who 'finds' you soon afterwards. It was a belief that kept me going, and the Native Yakuts in Siberia as well.. They had the same ancestral roots way back when as

these Indians here in America, so the scholars believed, and I embraced. BUT, matters of the world as it is interfered with what I was thinking, and yearning for.

Just as we made our way to a valley where dirt replaced rock, then grass replaced dirt, then knarled bushes replaced upright trees, my horse's ears went forward. "Yes, I know, after you told me of course," I whispered to Svetlana, noting that she was shying to the left. Having Arab blood in her, she stopped following the quarterhorse Victoria was riding. I nudged Svetlana towards the source of what she was afraid of, pulled out my revolver and aimed it towards something moving in the brush. "Don't shoot!" I heard from the bush to the right.

"So I can," came from behind cluster of small baby willows to my left, after which shots were fired at me and Victoria. Both of our horses reared up, throwing us onto the ground before running away at full speed, then downward towards what I hoped was safety. A barrage of gunfire from the right and the left surrounded us. I crawled my way to Victoria, shooting to both sides so that I could give myself cover. When I finally reached her, she was alive, but hurting.

"What happened?" she asked me as I looked for where the blood on the ground was coming from. It turned out that it was from me, and not her. It came from a bullet that had passed through flesh without, so I hoped anyway, shattering bone or twisting up nerves and tendons. I quickly removed the bandana from my neck and tied it around the wound. Then I threw my spare revolver to Victoria. She caught it, with hands that shook once she grabbed the handle. Her mouth shook, muttering incoherent prayers generously peppered with unintelligible syllables and stutters.

"We are friends," I said to the still unseen gunmen, or women, behind the bullets in English, then Commanche, then German. "Deutche Leuten!" I continued, knowing that the Germans were the only intruders with white skin who honored their treaties with their tribes and others they had traded with or 'encouraged' to

relocate to other locations. Such stopped the bullets from flying. "Freethinkers!" I exclaimed with pride, feeling and thinking that it would encourage the guardians of this unmarked hyway to show themselves and give us road directions that would work. "Yes, Freethinker Revolutionaries!" I repeated.

"Then in that case, you Yankee Abolitionist Lincoln lover Anarchists...!" I heard from the bushes to my left, after which a barrage of bullets flew over and behind us adding to the inaccurate insults thrown our way. I did my best to push Victoria into the small trench she had accidentally fell into, then fired at where I intuited was coming from. Two Dixie dough-heads on my right screamed in agony on their way to the ground. Three behemoth beasts in grey uniforms I didn't recognize with bandanas over their faces emerged from the left. One of them grabbed hold of my shooting arm, twisting it, throwing me into the dirt in a muscle hold. The other showed me a rope fashioned into a noose. The third 'good ole boy' pulled Victoria over, preparing with his knife to cut her throat. Upon seeing that she was a woman, with ample and exposed breast, he rammed his knee into her chest, then unbuttoned his trousers. "Easy there, squaw bitch. We're both going to enjoy this, right?" he said to her with a face featuring every ugly feature known to man or women, with the exception of a beautifully big handlebar mustache.

I do not know what happened to, or for, me after than moment of sheer terror and rage. Though each of these 'men' had twice my muscle mass and were at least five inches taller than me, I somehow found, or rented, the strength of a hundred of these behemoths. This time with strength that emerged below the neck rather than between the ears. A kick into the groin of the man holding me down converted his sadistic laugh into a loud scream of pain. Helping myself to his knife, I stabbed him in his overfed belly. With my other hand I grabbed hold of the hangman's rope, throwing it around his neck, then pulled it hard, snapping his neck. Rolling over, I grabbed hold of my gun, then shot the man about to become Victoria's 'first love' in his fat, ugly head. The first shot blinded him, causing him to no doubt see what he had done in life and what was waiting for him after inevitable departure from the world of the living. After pushing him off Victoria, I grabbed his exposed scrotum, cutting them away from his fat body, then sticking

into his mouth. With a spare revolver, I shot the hangman, then pulled out my grandfather's sabre and gutted his buddy. He was still alive, screaming out for his mother while his intestines fell into his blood soaked and shaking hands.

I looked behind me to see if Victoria was still alive, realizing that the pleasure of killing and mutilating her assailants overtook my, truth be told, love and admiration for her. "Victoria! Where are you?" I said to the woods to my right, left, then behind me. Upon looking to the remaining direction, I felt something grab me from behind. A ghost, or another assailant from this world. I drew up my dagger, prepared to stab it in back, after seeing the fear of death in its face. "It's me," I heard, from Victoria, as her arms wrapped around me. It was with more tightness than I ever experienced from anyone else and, I hoped anyway, I inflicted on anyone else.

"It's me..." she said, looking into my eyes. "And you...you...." Victoria pushed her head into my face, putting a kiss on my lips. Not letting go. I hugged her back, thinking and feeling that she needed it. But knowing that I could never let her know what I was really thinking. And keeping what was between MY legs away from her. Perhaps the hardening of my extended penis was due to her kiss, or perhaps it emerged because of how I disabled her assailants. The first men who I, truth be told, enjoyed killing. "A gift, that enables you to be an effective Hetman," as Dimitri described it to me. "A curse," I recalled from what my grandfather said to me as a boy when relating, finally, to me, what he did in the War of liberation against the Czarina Katherine the Great, who became a vicious dictator only after she had accidentally stumbled into power, during the failed Pugachev Revolution. It was the biggest and most confounding revolution by 'freethinker Slavs' against the Imperialist pre-Industrial machine which sought to colonize us Cossacks into serfs. Or worse, mercenaries who would kill any serf or commoner who stood up for his or her God given rights.

Where life went from there...such is not important to relate. Me and Victoria, who I both loved and found myself wanting to enslave, continued looking for Elsa

Mueller. The woman who, according to Victoria and all elements of reason and hard earned intuition, could provide the reason why Pinegrove Falls was converted into a Mini-Moscow ruled by a Comrade Muller who now Czar John the First. And hopefully the last.

CHAPTER 12

The encounter with death, which I inflicted on others with a viciousness that now came into me, was, truth be told, not the first time I ‘disabled’ an enemy. Why I turned into someone who enjoyed killing rather than someone who did it according to the necessity of the moment, I didn’t know. I also didn’t know which of those motivations was most effective. According to the evidence, my 15 year old Mexican ward and, according to her anyway, savior and soul mate, made me face the issue.

We proceeded down the ‘trail’ taken by Elsa Mueller outlined by Victoria’s map and sometimes by the depressed grass and indentations into the hard sand ahead of us, riding side by side.

“You fought like ten men, with your brawn as well as your brain,” she said to me regarding my last fight against impossible odds for her survival, and perhaps mine. “Empowered by love, I think,” the still virgin in more than one way Victoria smiled at me from atop her horse, a safe distance away from her embrace, for me anyway.

“Or maybe empowered by something I ate, or was given to me,” I thought, but didn’t give voice to. “Maybe so,” I said, finding it easier to lie than hurt someone who I was responsible for.

“I hope you didn’t get the disease that got into everyone in Pinegrove Falls. That turned them into killing rather than thinking machines,” she said, extending her hand to me. “As a kind man, can you tell me what turned thinking people into killing machines?” she asked, requiring an answer. A truthful one this time.

"Something that Elsa may be able to tell us, or direct us to," I replied, taking her hand into mine. A not so smart thing to do in case I had to use it to draw my revolver from its holster, rifle from the scabbard or sword from its Siberian made sheath. "What do you know about Czar John Hans Muller's wife?" I inquired, thinking and hoping that she would be more generous with her secrets. Or smarter than me with regard to figuring out what and who Elsa really was, or wanted to be.

"Nothing more than I told you before," Victoria answered. She went on to relate information she had already given me, with the same words, and same emotions until the stare into my eyes was diverted to something behind me, appended by dropping of her jaw. Her breath turned heavy. Her body, the attractive aspects of it becoming more and more apparent to me as if the devil was using all of his tricks to damn me and her to hell, froze. Out of her mouth came..."Eeelllsssa H!"

Indeed it was Elsa, her eyes staring at and into me without blinking. Her skin was pale. The remnants of an Apache dress covered her from her thighs up to her neck. A neck that was adorned by the necklace of a hangman's noose. The sight of a woman I knew and enjoyed talking to on many occasions about the meaning of life with insights that made me think, feel and laugh, made me feel...nothing. Not so for Victoria's horse who backed up from Elsa's dead corpse, having smelled death on it. I dismounted, quickly grabbing hold of the reins of Victoria's horse with my left hand, easing her down from the saddle with my right. I laid Victoria on the ground, withdrew my sword from its sheath and cut the rope above Elsa's neck. Elsa's lifeless body fell to the ground, causing Victoria to scream in terror, that sound causing...nothing in me. Somehow I felt that this abrupt and unexpected rash of 'practicality under fire' angered Elsa's ghost. I could feel it hovering over her body. It then grabbing my feet, stomach and chest. I averted my stare, which led, by instinct, divine intervention or unconsciously listening to the ghost's orders, complimented by the position of Elsa's lifeless index finger. Both led me to two papers which hanging from the European garters under her New World fringed dress. They were folded and sealed by a mixture of wax and

cow dung. The first one had a message written in red ink which upon further examination was blood. 'The problem', it read, with a leaf I had never seen.

"Caca plant leaves?" I heard from her ghost, who turned out to be Victoria, having somehow gained composure. "To make cocaine. Or something more powerful. And the solution? she continued, reading my mind and soul, even better than Elena did.

I gave Victoria the honor of opening up the next envelope. "The solution," it read, a map under it.

Below the map was a recipe of sorts, in two languages. Half of it was written as a baker, which I could follow. The other half was penned as a chemist, which Victoria could relate to as well as understand. As for the map, it indicated a location I was all too familiar with, Gabriel's Bluff. "Ah yes, I know where that is," Victoria said, with optimistic assurance.

"I do too," I replied, hiding my apprehension, and fear...as best as I could anyway.

CHAPTER 13

Gabriel's Bluff was named after Gabriel LaBlanc. He was a gambler from New Orleans who was very good at poker, winning hand after hand while playing the richest and most mathematically smart (at least with finances) citizens of the town when it was named 'Providence'. On the final hand, on the table was the key to the city, ownership of the mine and the hand of the most eligible daughter in marriage (or whatever arrangement he wanted). Gabriel was delivered a royal flush by divine providence. As soon as he collected the winnings, declining ownership of the Mayor's daughter, Lorena, he was delivered a bullet into the head by said mayor's bodyguard.

LaBlanc survived the shooting, keeping all of his faculties except that of sight. He also lost the ability to make sane decisions based on morality, as he was one of the only honest gamblers in Texas. He was a hard working jiggalo of Lady Luck if there ever was one. But Lorena, having heard that her father had put her virtue on the gambling table, wanted to be sure that she would be owned by a husband of her own choosing. Posing as a nurse, she worked her way into the Presidential suite in the hotel LaBlanc now legally owned and snuck peyote into LaBlanc's meds, promising him that he will gain a new kind of vision with it.

Instead of a journey to Paradise, the surreal trip Gabriel pulled him into hell. En route, to use fire against the devil, he chanted his Haitian Mother's incantations which, to Lorena's ear, sounded like Satanic verses. It drove her mad, causing her to kill LaBlanc, then herself. She then burnt down the hotel, with her father and his buds downstairs. Miraculously remaining in the ashes were the belongings LaBlanc brought into town anticipating that he would finally settle there, and take up an honest profession where good fortune comes from hard work rather than random luck. Amongst them were pictures of Gabriel's mother, along with her address in the French Quarter. It was said that she or her ghost came to Providence to avenge her son's death, materializing in the smoke of the fire that enveloped most of the rest of the town of Providence. At her beckoning, Mother

Nature took over the rest of the job, sending winds that blew the worst outlaws and most corrupt lawmen the Texas frontier could produce. After five years of bad luck for the good people, and good luck for the bad ones, Providence was renamed Gabriel's Bluff. It became the kind of town where many people came in, but few came out. Death by natural causes consumed no more than ten percent of the new 'citizenry'.

Such was what I heard about Gabriel's Bluff from my travels to other Texas towns, gathering stories based in reality. Meanwhile, while Victoria's tales were based in memories and extrapolations of 'normal' towns that were described in dime and literary novels, or magical kingdoms she envisioned in her head. I dared not tell her my real stories about Gabriel's Bluff. Not that I was able to remember them as they actually happened. My mind, brain and soul were never the same after the night I spent in the LaBlanc Hotel when I was on business delivering goods for Hans Mueller. Books that would bring intelligence and therefore compassion to that lost community, so I was told. I never did open them to see what they contained, or what they didn't contain, about how to become Enlightened, Empowered and Educated in ways that matter. Just the mention of Gabriel's Bluff made my stomach churn.

The ride to Gabriel's Bluff was not difficult to follow from the map Elsa provided for us posthumously. It was even easier to find our way there, for me anyway, by smell. The depressions of wagon wheels in the short-grassed ground marked the way for the eyes. Upon seeing the town from the hill overlooking the valley, I noticed that all of the buildings were now intact. The one story residential buildings I remembered now had a second floor to them, all freshly painted. The two story commercial establishments had grown up into ornately decorated structures that rose higher than the steeple of the church. As for the church, its once proudly erect steeple leaned to the North at its tip, and the South at its base, as if begging a wind to blow it off, putting it out of its misery.

The wind that accompanied us en route to here came to an abrupt halt. The hot sun pouring down on my face felt cold. But I heard nothing from the town below.

Strange for a re-built community which boasted itself as a busy, overly expressive industrial city-in-the-making which 'you could hear before you could see'.

"A quiet town," Victoria commented, her outer ears better than mine, her inner hearing in the process of development. "I can hear the Silence. Big S!" she proclaimed, proud of her ability hear and feel that 'sound' which is felt only by Souls who are listening.

"No," I told her, looking down at the white speckled prairie below us. "That's not silence. It's...quiet. Dead quiet."

It took three prods with my legs, and two snaps of my reins on Svetlana's back to get my mare to proceed forward. Such, rightly or wrongly, encouraged Victoria's horse to follow. The white speckles amidst the brown, sunbaked grass outside of town were real. Ghosts seemed to emerge from skeletal remains of cows, horses, dogs and people. They spoke to my inner ears at full volume, saying 'I've already been eaten, no meat left'. They did not tell me who or what had devoured them after, or perhaps before, their death. The ground around them was littered with freshly dug holes deeper than the eye could see.

"What happened here?" Victoria asked me, having never seen so many bones in one place. I couldn't tell if she was fascinated or scared. I know I was feeling the latter.

"There's one man, or woman, who can tell us," I said, pointing her attention to a sign that popped into my view before hers. "Welcome to Gabriel's Bluff. Population...one," I gave voice to. "Which is..." I continued, feeling, then seeing, a five foot shadow behind me emerging from one of the larger holes, with a sawed off shotgun in hand. "You?" I turned around, raising my hands in the air.

Victoria froze in the saddle, shaking in the manner of so many men new to combat, as well as worn our veterans, on the verge of being assaulted by an enemy combatant. A reflex that, I hoped and prayed, she would lose someday, as I did, for now anyway.

"Who are you?" an old frail man clad in a weatherbeaten black boot and an oversized brown one topped off with a been a hole free tailor made Eastern businessman's suit demanded of me in a raspy high pitched voice, his shotgun pointed at me. "And who is that squaw?" he pressed, nodding his oversized head towards Victoria. "Who just wetted her britches," he continued with a laugh that came out of the right side of his stubble bearing face, the muscles and skin on the left remaining fixed in place.

"We're friends of Elsa," I replied, getting off my horse. "Elsa.."

"Mueller" Victoria somehow spat out of her quivering lips. "Elsa Muller!" she repeated, again and again,. "Whhoo..."

"Left here without sayin' goodbye to me," the old man said, laying down his weapon. "After I proposed ta her, and she proposed ta me, and we was..." He fondled a ring on the fourth digit on his left hand, tears slowly then quickly emerging from his bloodshot eyes. "I built a home fer her, and us, here. She left a note sayin' she'd be back, soon, but...." The rest of his thoughts and feelings halted in the knot that appeared on his wrinkled, sunburned thin neck. "You know what happened to Elsa...out there?" he inquired of us. He pointed to the desert hills with that 'look' of those who if he had been miserably comfortable in Gabriel's Bluff for so long that he was afraid to leave it. "How is she?"

"She's...happy," I replied, trying to stay on course with our reason for coming here.

"And she's...with God," my agnostic Companion and Comrade in Common Cause added, perhaps believing it, as she dismounted her steed.

"Beats being with that Dutchie bastard she was common law married to," the old man blasted out. "Or owned by," he continued, his grief turned into anger. "She sent ya here ta finish what she started?" he went on, that anger turned into action. Indeed, it was the fastest adjustment to grief, in humans anyway, that I ever saw. "The cabin I built fer her, and me, is still standin'. Unlike everyone else in this town. Who laughed at me fer bein'...hmmm...."

"Different?" Victoria pronounced, reading my mind and soul, better than Elena did.

"Yeah...fer bein' different!" our welcoming host said, and finally realized, seeing no shame in that descriptor. "Ya hear that, Sheriff Williamson?" he said with calm resolve to a mound of dirt with no marker on it. "Ya hears that! All that was wrong with me was that I was and still am 'different'." He then proceeded to similarly yell 'different' at and into ten more mounds of dirt, addressing those under it by name and profession, appending each tailor made insult to them with expletive-laced curses that would damn him to hell himself.

I finally recalled that I was not blameless with regard to dismissing or ridiculing this White 'village idiot' who no doubt was a communally owned slave by everyone, of both genders and in all social classes, in Gabriel's Bluff. No bag of grain, bucket of water or boulder to move would be too heavy for him to be asked to carry. No insult when he dropped any load, or was tripped on the ground when doing his labors, was too vicious to be delivered. Indeed, he was, for

reasons no one bothered to ask, a masochist shit shoveling soul who was convinced that he was what he shoveled.

He had muttered to me when I asked him why his head was always bowed and why he never looked anyone in the eye with “mastery in servitude”, confirming my assessment of his tortured yet noble past . But...he seemed to be smart and virtuous enough to survive whatever had decimated the population of this boom town. And to earn the affections, and trust, of Elsa Muller. Indeed I recalled that I chuckled at the witty puns directed at him by Sheriff Williamson et al on one of my previous ‘delivery runs’ through here. My heart wanted to know the part of this old man who somehow was able to connect to the young soul Elsa was. But my mind, and the mission we were on, said that other inquiries had to be made regarding this the ‘fool on the hill’ who preached now from the flatland of the valley.

“What happened to the people you buried here?” I asked the old man after he had regained his youth and breath following delivering insults to the people who he served as a willing masochist when they were alive. I named those who the old man had not addressed whose names or ‘professions’ I remembered. “And everyone else in town?” I offered the, I presumed, weary grave digger with the lion’s share of my beef jerky and biscuits, the ones I did NOT get in Pinegrove Falls.

“Gone,” the old man said regarding the entire citizenry of Gabriel’s Bluff, gobbling down what was left of my food, and Victoria’s.

“Dead or gone?” I enquired, trying to not listen to the part of my mind that said that this old man had something to do with their demise. I also ignored the probability that he may have been responsible for Elsa’s fleeing from her, according to him anyway, second home and sanctuary here. “Is everyone else dead or gone?”

“Dead!” the sole survivor said, with a shit eating happy grin on his face.

“How?” Victoria asked, offering him a touch of her hand on his shivering forearm.

“Riders?” I enquired. “With hoods on their heads or bandanas on their faces? Who were preceded by someone, who wasn’t me, who put something to dull their reflexes or destroy their will to live?”

“Messengers of the Lord,” he said. “Who, well, didn’t see me because...” The half ghost and half mortal sank into a pit of remorse. He pulled out my knife, then fell to his knees. He edged the blade of the knife along his left wrist. “Lord!” he said, screaming to the sky. “And you, Elsa!” he proclaimed. “It’s time for me to join you. I do this, for you! And I do it NOW!”

I made a quick grab of the old man’s knife holding hand, only to have Victoria push me away, nearly landing me into a hole in the ground with no bottom to it.

With the kind of wisdom and understanding only present in an old woman, the still young Victoria gently wrapped her fingers around the shaking fist that held the old man’s knife. “No, please,” she said to him. “You are still needed by the living.”

“Who says so?” he asked, desperate for an answer. “WHO the HELL says so!”

“Elsa,” Victoria answered. “And me?” she offered.

“Who are...the same person?” he inquired. His grip on the knife eased up.

Victoria nodded her head in the affirmative, then took hold of the knife, throwing it my way, along with an ‘I know some things you don’t know and can’t know yet’ stare. She then turned to the village idiot, or perhaps genius savant, helping but not forcing him up on his feet. “Now, take us to your cabin. Elsa’s cabin. We have work to do there.”

“And we is?” the over experienced old man asked as an innocent young child.

“You,” Victoria affirmed. “Me,” she assured him. “The Lord and Elsa,” she continued. “And,” she went on, pointing to me. “This useful idiot behind me who has something to offer. Like everyone else.”

“Yes,” the old geezer said, looking at me like I was his village idiot. But with more compassion than I showed to anyone of that description on three continents. “Even a village idiot has something to offer. And this idiot’s name is...”.

“Stefan,” I said with pride. “Dimitrovich” I continued. “Grandson of Vladmir Demotritch, Hetman of the Don Cossacks in my village. And you are?”

“Henry,” the old man’s reply. “Just Henry. Henry Jacob Elseworth that is,” he continued, with pride. “Grandson of the first White man to settle these parts.”

With that, Henry, while sharing with us tall tales about his pioneer ancestors which were probably more true than embellished, led us towards what I hoped would be Elsa’s laboratory. The place where she, according to her ‘baking recipe’, formulated an herbal cure for cruelty and ignorance from plants grown in her

garden, or gathered from sacred places in the hills that only the most enlightened Indians knew about. Concoctions which we needed to reverse whatever Hans J.S. Muller had fed his peaceful pacifist fellow Freethinkers so they could become assertive, vicious instruments to Enlighten the world in his image with the sword as well as the pen.

CHAPTER 14

What do you call a shack built with a mixture of logs, mismatched lumber and rocks plastered into a wall? “Her mansion, where she does the kind of science that the world thinks only men are qualified to do,” Henry said regarding the domicile which he shared with Elsa, or perhaps she shared with him. “My castle, which I built, rebuilt and rebuilt again!” he exclaimed with pride. “A haven for you if you’re smart enough to not go back to wherever you came from,” said the frail old man, with a smile showing off the few teeth he had left in his mouth from, as I ascertained anyway, scurvy, neglect or boxing matches he felt that he won by NOT fighting back. He appended his welcome by setting two plates on a three and a half legged table. He insisted that we ‘fill out piehole’ with oversized portions of cold beans he retrieved from a rusty pot before getting down to business.

I gobbled the entrée, appetizer and dessert with quick swallows so as to proceed to the business we came to do. I let my tongue and stomach did their best to throw up the boluses of crunchy gruel I inflicted on them. Victoria did the same.

“Good eatin’, aye?” he said with a generous portion of Maritime accent, indicating that some of his roots were from North of the Forty-ninth parallel. He then sang for us a seafaring ballad celebrating kissing the cod at the bar with a bottle of Screech before his lips met those of his new bride after docking into port with a boatload of squid.

“So, you’re from the Rock?” I surmised, and gave voice to. “NEWfoundland!”

“NewfoundLAND, don’t ya know!” he answered, his Irish-like diction infiltrating every syllable. He continued to relate stories about his MOTHER’S side of the family who came across the waters from the Emerald Isle. They were mixed with stories about ‘forming an agreement’ with the Natives in that British Colony which

involved far less bloodshed and scalping than that of his father's ancestors in 'U.S. of A, for assholes'. "But, there was more mosquitoes and 'blackflies big as a sparrow' in Newfoundland than in the States, everyone hatin' them more than they could hate each other in summer, and Old Man Winter was a hard ticket fer them with white or red complexion, don't ya know," he told me by way of an explanation for why history in the Canadas wasn't as violent or colorful as how the West was 'won', or soon will be, in America.

Meanwhile, Victoria thumbed through Elsa's notebooks. They were stuffed into boxes which had been stored under the table so as to protect them from rain, when it did come, which would leak through the roof. According to the notes, Elsa had discovered, and produced, an antidote to whatever Hans had put into the food chain of Pinegrovian Freethinkers that turned them into non-thinkers and aggressive doers. Lovers of competition rather than champions of cooperation who, theoretically, would soon turn against each other. Such would not be acceptable. Or survivable.

My listening to the fifth round of repeated stories about Paleface Fishermen fighting Red skinned Hunters, the elements, or each other was also something that would not be acceptable. Or survivable. At least for Henry, who finally allowed the rum he had ingested (and thought I was drinking with him) to send him into a deep slumber. His snores were so loaded with firewater that you could use Henry's mouth as a blow torch.

"So, do we have enough of Elsa's antidote here?" I asked Victoria, noting that she had filled three saddlebags with what I hoped was, as Elsa's notes say regarding the test animals she tried it in, a wonder drug for defusing aggressive rage without devitalizing the patient.

"We do have enough antidote to Doctor Hans' toxin, along with raw materials to make more of it," she said, with affirmation, looking proudly at the bag of powder

next to the nearly depleted bowl of leaves I didn't recognize from which it was derived. "But there is one problem," she continued. She licked her finger, stuck it into Elsa's magic powder and placed it in front of my mouth.

Taking the lead, I licked Victoria's finger. I tried my best to concentrate on the powder on it, and not the 'love juices' pouring out of it, which perhaps Victoria was not aware of. Or maybe she was.

In any case, the bitter taste of Elsa's herbal concoction made me pull my lips, and face, away from Victoria.

"Yes, like most good medicines, it does taste horrible," she said. I hoped she was referring to the Elsa's powder and not the 'vibrations' fluctuating from her heart to the tip of her tender, electrifying fingers. "So how do get anyone to eat this? In the doses that Elsa, based on what she tested on three species of animals here, recommended?" she said, referring my attention to cages containing droppings from rabbits, rats and field mice.

I placed my hand over my mouth. I messaged my chin in that aristocratic professorial manner that I saw so many smart professors do in Europe, and wise Cossacks in my first homeland. Maybe the Yakut medicine man who had saved my life, in repaying for me saving his, was right. Maybe by messaging some magical points on one's chin fired up the muscle between the ears. Or perhaps it was just a way to force you to think before sending a stupid or inappropriate solution to a proposed problem from your mouth. In any case, something did come to mind, and heart.

I recalled what my Grandfather said was the best quality of my grandmother. It wasn't how beautiful she looked. Or how she made him feel like a happy man under a warm fur blanket on a cold winter night. She certainly didn't share his

sense of humor. She never laughed at his jokes and her witticisms never evoked a chuckle in her husband's mouth. But...she sure could cook. It was a skill that she had passed on to me, along with a love of reading and exceptional ability to write. All of those skills, truth be told, were considered by most of my fellow Cossacks to be less important or useful than the ability to wield a sword, shoot an arrow or place a bullet into the most painful portion of your adversary.

Turning raw ingredients into gustatory delights was a skill that Victoria didn't have, according to her mother, father and victims who she ever prepared a meal for. Indeed, on more than one occasion when Victor Gonzales brought home a potential suitor for dinner from a well established family, one bite of Victoria's culinary 'experiments' sent him packing, even when she actually liked the prospect. The Gonzales dogs turned their nose up at Victoria's food. Her pigs were the only diners who nodded approvingly to her after swallowing her special delights, but only when she remained at the pen. Maybe Victoria wanted everybody to know that she was NOT looking for a 'normal' husband, since any normal man believed that the way to a man's heart it through his stomach. Or, maybe she really thought that her real skill as a biochemist was translatable to cooking.

In any case, I looked around the cabin. I noted that there was no shortage of ingredients my grandmother could use to create seven course meals which would be pleasingly devoured by hungry Cossacks or even overfed Aristocrats. Aristocrats from Moscow and St. Petersburg who, on more than one occasion, she drugged with elixirs that allowed them to be talked into agreeing to things that benefited Cossacks rather than themselves. Or, if said Aristocrats came to pillage her village, barf up their brains within an hour, or fall asleep in the saddle to die in the snow two hours later.

"Whatever you're thinking, we have to move fast," Victoria said to me by way of reminder. "And that plan you have---?"

"---Didn't involve seeing Henry dying in his sleep," my reply, having heard the last five snores of our host turn into a death rattle. But at least there was a smile on his face with his last breath. Was I because he was dreaming about our failing, or succeeding? We would find out soon enough.

CHAPTER 15

After giving out now departed host Henry a quickly improvised funeral and burial, we set out to make more of Elsa's 'de-demonizing' elixir with the thankfully plentiful and clearly labelled ingredients in the cabin. Victoria assured me that the powder made from the plants Elsa had been growing, a green weed that mellowed out angry, dedicated to destruction Indians into conquerable, hungry and content-about-everything redskins, could handle being baked. She called it 'E'. Ironically it was dedicated to its posthumous creator.

It was Victoria's job to produce as much E powder as possible. It was my honor, pleasure and albatross to bake it into something that would be devoured by overfed 'subjects' who no longer ate what they needed to stay alive, as they now had access to whatever gourmet delights they wanted.. Yes, 'subjects' was what I now called the citizenry in Pinegrove with whom I had, in the recent past which felt like a distant one, participated with in an experimental enlightened democracy. That town was now something else.

Before we set out to go back 'home', Victoria insisted that I imbibe at least three healthy bites of the E containing-apple cakes I had baked. When I asked why, the 15 year old protegee who was experiencing her first exile from the community that conferred that title on her, she replied "Physician Heal thyself."

"I'm fine, very fine, very empowered!" I boasted.

"Empowered to enjoy killing those people we met on the way here," she offered, gently.

"Who were about to kill YOU!" I blasted back, feeling liberated by the anger behind that reminder.

Victoria answered with silence, her strong, self assured eyes becoming a mirror. They reminded me that, yes, I did enjoy 'disabling' those bandits who probably killed Elsa, and certainly would 'disable' Victoria and me. I relished pulling the guts out of one of them while he was dying, feeling those organs slide along my grubby fingers. I broke into a shit-eating happy smile when feasting myself on the eyes of his buddy when he turned from being a mean bastard in this world to a terrified child anticipating what was waiting for him in the next one. And, yes, I did get a hard on when slaying their leader, wishing that I could have raped him first with that projectile.

"Yes," Victoria said to me. "It wasn't you who did all of that, but someone else. Someone under the influence of a derivative of cocaine that Professor Doctor Hans 'John' Muller put in that stew which you said tasted so good when you saw Lizzy, who had gobbled down three bowlfuls? Is that not so?"

"Yes, it is so," I replied to that Socratic method of 'teaching' which, in the wrong hands, required the student to agree with the teacher rather than challenge him. Or for that student to think for himself.

Victoria then went on to a few more statements about what we had to do. She appended them with 'Is that not so' in a manner that I HOPED was an imitation of Socrates' manner of speaking, according to his first posthumous biographer, Plato. I replied with more, 'yes that is so,' without adding any 'buts'. Hoping that Victoria had not tasted too much stew spiked with a type of cocaine that was extremely potent before she realized what Uncle Doctor Hans was doing.

"I'm eating some of Elsa's cure to the conscience killing toxin her husband made, to be sure I am me and not what Hans wants or needs us to be," Victoria said as her final command on the matter. "Because a wise chemist takes her own medicine before inflicting it on anyone else. Is that not so?"

"Yes, very so," I replied, feeling the matter closed, for now anyway.

And with that, Victoria removed a small apple cake containing E, insisting that I eat the lion's share of it. I did so----after she put her share into her mouth, and I heard her swallow it.

"Pleasing enough to the tongue. Nothing wrong detected by to the mouth or stomach," I said after experiencing it myself, having tasted nothing but apple cake.
"Is that so?"

"So...enough," her reply, offering me a mere passing grade to my attempts to cook as effectively as my grandmother did, despite my following the recipe she used to the letter. Then again, Grandmother also added a secret ingredient to everything she cooked for us Cossacks---love. Something that I was becoming less and less familiar with each decade, year and day.

We rode at a brisk trot punctuated by as much hand galloping as the horses could handle. After consulting a map on Henry's wall, we chose a longer route than the one we took on our arrival, as it was covered with grass and sand rather than rock and quicksand. When we reached our destination, we were as shocked as we were tired. Pinegrove Falls reeked of opulence, as detected by the nose and the eyes. Armed with nothing except bread, cakes and pies loaded with E, Victoria and me were greeted by dragons, as seen by Svetlana and the quarterhorse she still refused to name. Both of us leaped off our mounts, holding their reins with as tight a grip as we could. Whether it was to save the baked goods or our only means of getting out of town quickly, I didn't know. I suppose they were related.

"Something wrong with yer horses?" eleven year old George Richter said to us as he proudly trotted his Appaloosa up to us. The once playful, barefoot lad sported

a suit and knee high leather boots worthy of a prince, wearing them with a demeanor of arrogance of a king.

“They’re just oil wells,” his mounted younger sister, Louisa, clad in a dress worth of a Duchess, complimented by a store-full of jewelry around her neck and wrists added.

“Who say to anyone who listens to them---- YAHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!” 9 year old Sasha screamed out from atop his still steady steed, waving his hands up in the air, scaring our horses into running away from us at a full gallop. The child who had the best elements of being a young girl and growing boy was now possessed by a ghost. A ghost who made him smile with delight at the horses’ fear, and our pain at being kicked by them as they fled. His two older siblings, who had been Sasha’s most respected teachers, laughed along with their now superior, and empowered, younger brother.

The three siblings leaped off their mounts. Their horses remained in position, their heads down, tied to the ground due to sheer exhaustion or perhaps heavy weights at the end of their reins.

Our horses, who had the good sense to leave Pinegrove, left behind the bags of baked E-containing (hopefully) gustatory delights on the foul smelling blackened ground. Victoria ran off to gather what had fallen off the horses behind us. Meanwhile, I grabbed hold of what was in my vicinity, sinking to my knees.

“So, begging for bread when you can have cake?” Carl Richter, the kids’ father, boasted as he galloped in from the bush, halting his horse into a sliding stop. He was clad in a tailor made military uniform laden with insignias and medals with a design I never saw, but in a perverted way found myself admiring. “We missed you, sort of.”

“Nice horse, Captain Carl” I said to the resident of Pinegrove whose previous fear of ‘equine beasts’ was equalled only by my hatred of Hetman Dimitri and love I still had for Elena.

“Empowered rider,” his wife Nadia said, trotting in on a Paint. She proudly wore a female version of her husband’s uniform, with tight fitting trousers rather than a skirt. “George, Sasha, Louisa, time for community dinner, and a new grab-bag we got from tax collecting.”

“Which you aren’t entitled to, since the rule here now is ‘ya don’t work, ya don’t fight, ya don’t win, ya don’t eat,’” Carl informed me as his very well fed kids gathered around him for the ride back home. “And neither does that squaw you came in with. Neither of you will get any of what I earned for my family,” he asserted, pointing to his chest with pride.

“What I earned,” Nadia blasted back at her husband. She pulled a revolver out from under her coat, fondling the multiple scratches in its barrel. “How many notches do YOU have on your gun?” she blasted at Carl. “I got seven on my shooting iron!” she boasted.

“And none on your knife, like I have!” Carl barked back. “Right kids?”

All of Carl’s offspring nodded in approval.

“Aiming with a gun requires more skill than stabbing with a knife,” Nadia pointed out. “Right?” she said to the three children who had once enjoyed a safe and loving shelter within her womb. She held out two fistfuls of money to them.

“Sure,” George replied, grabbing the cash from left hand.

“You bet,” Louisa smiled, taking the bribe for affection and/or social respect from the right one.

“Whatever you say,” young Sasha said to his mother. Before anyone can say ‘what the fuck is going on here?’ he planted his hard bootheel on his brother’s left foot. Not losing a beat, he punched his sister in the belly, then delivered three blows below the stomach into her most tender parts. With his siblings thinking more about their physical pain than financial gains, Sasha grabbed hold of the money they dropped on the ground. “Whatever you grab, yer allowed to keep, right Dad, Mom?”

“That’s my boy,” Nadia boasted with a proud smile.

“And that’s my...well, whatever Sasha wants to be,” Carl added as Sasha shooed away George and Louisa’s horses, then mounted his own.

Nadia and George Richter, and their new most favorite child turned around and started to trot towards Hans’ humble cabin. It was now a three story structure that was anything but humble, a select crowd of citizenry entering its open door. “Dinner. Now! Come on. Now, losers,” Nadia said to George and Louisa, those two siblings still lying in the blackened mud.

“Now!” Carl added. “Survival of the fittest.”

“Which is ME!” Louisa screamed out. “See!” she added, forcing her way to her knees, punching her brother George in his emerging testicular tissue.

George turned his pain into rage. He grabbed his sister’s hair., pulling her back into the black muck.

Victoria, who thankfully was not recognized by any of the Richters, emerged from the bush. “I got them all, I think,” she said, overloaded with baked goods containing the magical ingredient provided by Mother Earth and Father Science that would turn the biology of my fellow citizens into something that served rather than destroyed life.

I wondered what would happen to any coyotes, or horses, who got into any of the drugged bread. But our concern now was seeing that enough of it got into the new ‘tax collectors’. And before their leader figured it out.

As for that leader, Hans Mueller, in a professorial suit appended with a physician’s white lab coat, emerged from his new palace. He waved Carl, Nadia and Sasha Richter in towards him, pointing to his watch indicating that he was less than tolerant about their tardiness. Several more citizens struggled to gain entry, but they were whisked away by Hans. They were dragged away by armed guards, in insignia and medal lacking military uniforms of what seemed to indicate a lower rank than the ‘salad’ on Captains Carl and Nadia’s.

Good fortune, or dumb luck left Victoria and me with two test subjects. George and Louisa Richter finally wore themselves out trying to disable each other. I helped George up with an outstretched hand, which he accepted. Victoria pulled Louisa up from the ground with her thin arms, enforcing a hug on her which was accepted due to nothing else but sheer exhaustion. But still, both siblings had

that look of 'possession' in their eyes. Their souls manipulated or perhaps owned by demons who valued cruelty over compassion.

"You kids hungry?" Victoria asked them as the kind, overworked but still optimistic mother she would become someday with the right man. Who, despite what I yearned for, should not be me.

"I'm hungry for a chunk of Sasha's tongue!" George growled out of mouth clenched teeth.

"And a bite-full of his balls!" Louisa, who had, to my knowledge, never seen a man or boy's testicles sneered.

The third brain that had emerged between Victoria and me instructed us as to what to do next. We looked at and into each other, nodding in unison, guided by my hidden fingers on a countdown from three. On the count of zero, I rammed a generous portion of an E spiked biscuit down George's throat. Victoria did the same with an E infused ginger cookie into Louisa's yapper, while the not young any more girl tried to pushed out expletives that would be worthy of the most drunken sailor or life embittered cattleman.

Ten minutes after we older souls restrained the seemingly more muscular, and smaller, younger ones, the demon manipulating the two Richter siblings had left them, fleeing for another one of their ethereal hiding places. The intelligent and (as a result of such) kind souls of the Richter kids were now connected to and in control of their bodies. George held his belly, burping some gas out of his mouth. Louisa, with a portion of the respect she usually had for her elders, requested some water, to get the foul taste from her yapper.

They were not yet the children who had known how to so effectively stop their parents from turning small disputes into life-threatening bigger ones. But they seemed to be on their way to becoming such again.

“Yes,” I thought. “Inequality of empowerment does lead to someone on top and someone on the bottom. And the most powerful enemy of any kingdom is those who have been banished from it.” And as for who was on the bottom, they would become our first test subjects. In MY experiment!!!”

CHAPTER 16

Was it Victoria or E that brought me back from being someone who enjoys killing, dominating and conquering to one who uses a combination and brains AND heart to get things done? Maybe it was a combination of such. But, a compassion-driven thinker against passion-driven doers results in the former always winning, long term. As for short term...that's always another story. I did find myself relishing being written up as a martyr who stopped whatever experiment Hans Muller seemed to be succeeding at. But only Victoria could write the truth about the matter. That is if she survived what we had to do without being killed. Or worse, turned into someone she wasn't and didn't want to be.

We rode, then walked into Pinegrove Falls under cover of night, just after the streetlamps were turned off. I allowed my thoughts about Victoria Gonzales, who I insisted stay behind me, to infiltrate my mind as well as heart. Was I protecting her as a surrogate daughter, a wife or a young Comrade in arms who had more years ahead of her whereas most of my years were behind me? Or was she protecting me? Were we protecting each other? And from what?

There was a lot to be protected from, of course, in the realm that could be touched with the fingers, heard with the ears and seen with the eyes. Armed sentries with faces I didn't recognise were posted every 50 yard. Next to them were posts, some of them connected to wire that had sharp barbs woven into it. Thankfully, not all of that wall was intact...yet.

The next guardians of the prairie town that had been converted into an industrial age city were dragons. They pounded their extended noses into the ground every ten seconds, enforcing their will and clocklike regularity into the once white virgin earth below them. At the other end of the dragon was a tank which was emptied by men as black as the bottom of the tank, filling barrels which were later loaded on wagons. Those wagons were pulled by horses and other black men, disappearing into the night to the backstreets of town. When one of the black men wiped his brow, I could see white skin. And a face that belonged to someone I once feared.

Indeed it was Jake Jackson, one of the first 'tax collectors' to raid my town when it was my town. The top of his head was as bald as a white mellon, courtesy of Lizzy having scalped him. Of course, according to what Victoria had told me about his kind, he had it coming. After all, the Enlightened Code in this Enlightened country and Enlightened capital of such was a hand for a finger, both eyes for a punch into one ocular porthole. I wondered. what else Victoria knew about what happened in Pinegrove when I was not there. But I had to concern myself with what happened under my own pre-occupied nose when I was there.

Our Mission, as our simple minds understood that complex issue, was to spike 'President' Hans' supply of his conscience killing elixir with what Else said was the antidote. Where it was stored, we didn't know. Logic said it was in Hans' private humble cabin which was now a mansion. Intuition told me that he had moved all of his important papers and activities to the new hotel in town, dubbed 'The Republic', its title gleaming out of the darkness with pain that reflected the light from a half moon that darked in and out of cloud cover. It was named of course after the book written by Plato about how to run an effective and enlightened society. One which was ruled by a Philosopher King rather than the mob, or majority rule of the people.

The flour bins at the Republic kitchen were filled to the brim. A whiff of the one labelled 'for special guests' smelled different than the others. The small field mice around it were feeding on the carcasses of rats, badgers and goffers three times their size, some of those larger 'prey' still breathing. The super-charge mice tried to dine on our flesh as well, finding Victoria's ankles more tasty then mine, but I insisted that we didn't kill them.

"We have to see if Elsa's E works," I told her.

"It worked on you," she said.

How and why Victoria got E into me, I didn't know. I didn't remember anything she cooked for breakfast at Elsa and Henry's shack that tasted different than it usually did when prepared by her hand when I went to the Gonzales house for breakfast. The salted pork jerky conferred on my tongue the same stimulus to swallow it fast so that my survival reflexes to vomit it out didn't kick in. The beans tasted and felt like rabbit turds. And her biscuits seemed to be made of more sawdust than flour. But then again, when partaking of food, my stomach wanted to be filled too quickly for my tongue to discern what was being sent to it.

"Yes," I said, agreeing to her claim that E did indeed work. "But I wouldn't want us to leave this life having made mice more empowered than Nature intended them to be. And let them continue to reek havoc on bigger and perhaps more innocent animals who can't speak for themselves," I continued, looking with pity on the terrified faces on the larger dead and dying rats and badgers who were, according to some Yakuts in Siberia and Indians here, trying to find another womb to reincarnate into.

Victoria consented to the test. She springled a small fistful of E onto the floor, mixing it with flour raisons and sugar from the bins labelled, in mirrored written German, 'for commoners'. She then sprinkled the concoction onto the corpse of the largest and badger, who was still breathing. The larger mice who gobbled up the concoction stopped dining on the badger, laying down in deep slumber. Some of smaller mice who were kept out of the feast decided to dine on their larger brethren. Most of the mice, the ones who had the largest portion of E, gave up wanting to eat anything, or if they did eat, chose to dine on another creature who was dead rather than dying.

"So, the slow ones now will later be fast," she said, feeling more like a goddess than a mortal trying to do God's work on earth in the absence of His, or Her, or It's

palpable presence. “Subjects with bigger bellies eat bigger biscuits. Smaller subjects eat less,” she said. She then calculated with her fingers on an invisible blackboard in front of her hand the dosage of E that should go into the flour which would be baked into tomorrow’s breakfast. I neglected to tell her that those ‘subjects’ were people. People she and (theoretically anyway) I knew, and would like to know again in the same way. Or some of the same ways anyway.

“And what about what I brought, and we baked?” I asked Victoria regarding the pastries which I KNEW people would eat, which contained ample samples of E. “We can’t trust the bakers here,” I pointed out. “And I know that apple strudel is Hans Mueller’s favorite appetizer, main course and desert,” I said, showing off the E cakes I baked specifically for him. Big belly, big ego, big appetite, right? Particularly for President Philosopher King Professor Doctors who don’t partake of the medicine they sneak to their patients.”

“Absolutely,” Victoria said. “Probably. Perhaps...Possibly,” she continued, averting her eyes, staring into space.

My attempts to ask Victoria what she was seeing, or being seen by, were unsuccessful. She turned catatonic. Like I did, so Dimitri told me, when our village was host to ambassadors of culture from Moscow rather than recruitment officers from the Imperial Army. When I finally got the chance to demonstrate how my fingers could make magical notes come from the strings of my balaclava. And my voice could translate them into words to the Moscow, Parisian and London operatic Company when they came to the Don River settlements to choose Cossacks who represent our culture to the world. It was my golden opportunity to have a career as an artist rather than a job as a warrior, so Dimitri told me. Where Elena was in the audience, along with my family, cheering me on, so Dimitri told me. Where my half open mouth froze in place with slobber rather than notes coming out of it, the picking fingers shaking three inches above the strings of my baklava, my body rocking back and forth fingers shaking, my eyes fixed in a blank stare, so Dimitri told me.

Victoria did exactly what I did on that night when I was called on to show the world what I could really do, and still wanted to do. The night where I destroyed any hope of being something other than a slayer of deer during hunting season and slayer of enemy combatants during every other season. So Dimitri told me anyway. But, maybe Dmitri wasn't lying. Maybe I did go into a state of catatonic fueled by fear, terror and the urge for the most dangerous enemy any combatant in peace or wartime could encounter---self sabotage.

In any case, I tried to talk a catatonic Victoria back to consciousness, then shake her back from the world her soul was trapped in, with no results. When I tossed water onto her frigid face, Life rewarded my efforts with a wet floor, and soaking of my trousers where, so Dimitri told me, urine flowed freely with an odor that didn't go away.

I found myself becoming light headed, wanting or perhaps needing to go to the painless realm of Catatonia. But one thought preventing me from giving in to that most dangerous and comfortable of reflexes---Victoria could not be seen in her current state by those who had once been her greatest fans and admirers, particularly the ones who envies her intellect and artistry of expression

Meanwhile the cookoo bird in the Bavarian made clock on the wall emerged from his house, cawing three times, then disappearing back into his nest. Realizing that the communal breakfast in Pinegrove commenced at 7 AM, it gave me four hours to get breakfast prepared. A count of the number of chairs in the dining hall outside the kitchen door told me how many were coming for the breakfast meeting. Who those people were, that was another question. Who would emerge as their former selves (as I did), who would become prey, and who would become predator, I didn't know.

I scribbled a sign for the kitchen staff in Hans' unique colligraphy, placing it on the back door. "Holiday today, for the primary kitchen staff" it said. "Worker's Appreciation Day." And with that, I threw a pitcher of water onto Victoria's face, waking her up from a nightmare she was about to be devoured by. "I'm the baker, you're the biochemist. Deal?" I asserted as a father to a terrified child. "Deal...Deal!!!" I demanded.

Said child, who was not nearly as terrified as I was, agreed with a slight nod.

"So we get to work?" I said, handing her an apron. She tied it securely around her head, then fell into the corner of the room, hiding under it. Luckily I recalled her calculations of how many table spoons of E go into how many cups of flour from the instructions she dictated to me in Elsa and Henry's shack. And the supply of such was enough to accommodate the number of breakfast eaters I anticipated.

A mirror on the wall caught, then held, my glance hostage. I asked my own grandmother's ghost, who I DID see in the reflection, to advise me as to how to make the selected breakfast diners as hungry for E-spiked grub as they were for Professor President Muller's elixir containing 'delights'.

A wave of confidence overtook me, along with a solution to the problem at hand. One that would require being....someone else. Powerful in the ways that I never was, or envisioned I could be.

CHAPTER 17

This was now the kind of war I had never fought, nor had been caught in the middle of. One where deception was more important than a courageous mind of strong arms. Getting the right food into the mouths of those diners who were well armed and now seemed to enjoy the power they possessed had to be accomplished required, of course, servers. A secondary staff which was so 'common' as to be un-noticed by Hans and the Pinegrovians who he had chosen to be his muscle men, and women. A staff of two.

Half an hour before first light Victoria awakened from her catatonic haven. Upon assessing the situation at hand, she blackened her face with a black spice which not only made her look Negroid but somehow 'smell' as such. As for myself, it is said that the most powerful weapons a Cossack has are his sword, pistol and overgrown mustache. The latter reflected and projected the most assertive kind of manhood, both with Cossacks on the Steppes and Texas Rangers on the prairie.

"No, it won't make you bleed," Victoria said as I held the sharpest knife I could find just below my nostrils. "And manhood is between the ears, not the legs."

She was right about the first contention. After the first stroke of the blade from the nostrils to my upper lip, my exposed tongue did not taste blood. But as the latter claim that manhood being between the ears rather than the legs, I felt naked skin under my nose for the first time, I had my doubts. Particularly when she presented to me a matron's dress from the closet containing uniforms for the servers, all of which were for female servants. Then she put into my hands a matching bonnet, one that would hide my face more effectively than any hat worn by any man in any culture.

"We gots ta makes this convincin'," she informed me in her best 'Niggerese' diction. "Best ways ta take down head honcho on the totem pole is ta scootch yer way up from the bottom. Right, Uncle Steven...I means Auntie Stefanie," she continued. "But for now, close yer eyes."

I did so, after which I felt Victoria's fingers caressing my forehead and upper cheeks, then placing the bonnet on my aching head.

"Now, open your eyes, all three of them," she said, laying her finger on my forehead.

Upon opening the two ocular portholes I relied on most to negotiate my way through the world, my stare was held captive by a mirror she had placed in front of me. My skin was as black as coal, with the exception of my upper lip and stubble lingering on my chin and lower cheeks.

Being Victoria's black Uncle would have presented an interesting opportunity to become someone else who would be more effective in Pinegrove Falls than me, or Dimitri. Becoming her Negroid aunt, that was another matter.

I pondered the matter, recalling that the punishment inflicted for any man, or boy, to consider experience being a member of the 'inferior gender' by the Hetman, Old Believer Priest, fellow Cossacks and himself was far worse than being tied to a rock and thrown into the river. After life went out of the body, an even harsher sentence would be given to the 'experimentor' when he was sent to serve the devil in hell.

"Even your grandmother would understand you having to do this," Victoria said, as herself. A girl of 15 years in body but an elder who had already lived an entire life in her mind, and soul. "An act of courage and necessity that she will be proud of you for doing," my young and old colleague assured me. "With, of course, emotional detachment."

"Yes," I told 'darkie' Victoria, and myself, as I scrapped the rest of my male identity from my upper lip, and the rest of my face, and hands, and forearms. I hoped that the required kind of 'emotional detachment' for this war (to maybe end all wars) was as easily accessed as the detachment from feeling the misery of friend as well as foe in the aftermath of a bloody battle.

CHAPTER 18

An hour after dawn, Hans Mueller's most trusted enforcers and (so they thought anyway) advisors sat down for, as he called it, a 'breakfast to feed the body, mind
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and Cause of Common Revolutionary Purpose' They included Carl Richter and his wife Nadia, Lizzy, Lydia, Victor and Maria Gonzales, as well as 'Uncle' Solomon and 'Aunt' Sarah. They were all wearing the new 'enlightenment brigades' uniform. It bore a frightening likeness to the attire of Armies who defeated our revolutions in our 'old countries'. And those bright red, brilliant blue and anything but virgin white garments were tailor made for their bodies as well as their cold, heartless eyes. I hardly recognized them, their backs erect, their hair neatly combed or clipped, their bodies smelling of cologne affordable by the rich rather than sweat produced by honest, struggle embracing work. Their one to one conversations ended not in the usual heated differences of opinion with regard to fine points of political realities and ideas, but with everyone agreeing with each other from the start to the finish of their 'discourses'.

As we served the congregation the breakfast pastries containing E rather than whatever Hans had instructed the kitchen to place into them, Victoria and I were unrecognized. Perhaps it was because we belonged, to those whose vision was only skin deep, to a different race AND inferior gender. Or we had learned the art of becoming 'invisible', to our adversaries, a skill which so many 'not much more evolved than animals' Siberian Natives learned when infiltrating Russian forts, trading posts and Churches when stealing goods, or taking lives of White demons.

But everyone in the dining hall was different on the inside, and now on the outside. Not at all the same people who, in the golden days when we were all fighting the erratic Texas weather and even more easily inflamed, irritated or were laughed at by American born residents of that Lone Star State.

Our 'test subjects' (formerly Comrades in Arms) at first ate the food we gave them with voracity, engaging in their own brands of conversation between gulps of E-containing delights passing over their tongues. But the noises made by their gullets and vocal cords were silenced by Chairman Hans shooting his gun into the ceiling. "We are not sheep! Or common hogs! We're the vanguard of a New Revolution! Refined, dignified, and assertive! Above the needs and wants of..." he exclaimed, after which he took in a deep breath. '*The needs and wants of God*

fearing, selfish, stupid by choice peasants!" he blasted out. He had eaten no more than three small bites from his specially formulated breakfast, the dose of E in the specially spiced apple cakes calculated to be equivalent to his body weight. The master of ceremonies and the minds of those in his ceremony took in a deep breath, seeing what me and him witnessed in 1848, so many times. "Like the peasants in France and other places, who who WE fought and died and died for, so they would have gave the right to vote! Freeing them from their oppressive masters living on earth and who, as the corrupt Priests said, 'art in heaven'. Remember how they voted to bring the oppressive kings and rich capitalists who then came to imprison, kill or corrupt US! Professors, scholars and philosophers who were trying to give the ungrateful commoners what they needed! As well as what they, out of ignorance, still wanted!"

Philosopher-King Mueller's determined face was abruptly overtaken by a wave of sadness. Greif for those who he had given everything to and returned his dedication to their cause with betrayal. Then, fire came out of his eyes, so intense that it dried up any tears that were trying to be shed for those he failed back in the old country, and here. "As we now painfully know, or should know, Enlightenment and Liberation have to be forced on rather than offered to the world! And NO aristocrat will willingly give away to his or her peasants ANYthing of REAL value unless it is at the point of a gun. Or after, when we enslave him, or her, they know what it is like to be enslaved!"

After Philosopher King Hans delivered his message to his princes, dukes and countesses, he stared at, and into, me. I do not know if he recognize me, but he seemed to somehow read my agenda. After holding my glance hostage for ten seconds that felt like ten years, he broke into a smile warm smile. "Miss," he said to me, maybe seeing a woman in front of his eyes or the woman in me who I, as a man, was forced to have to hide. "Please see that all of your masters and mistresses here eat everything you have served them. By any means necessary."

And with that, Hans got up from his chair at the head of the table and strolled with an arched back and upheld chin toward the door of the common meeting place which was now decorated and treated as 'the grand hall'. En route he said something to Victoria in a language I didn't recognize. Whatever it was, it put the fear of God, Nature and man into her. She walked at a slow, deliberate pace to the kitchen door, closing it behind her. Not three seconds later I heard a gunshot.

Fearing the worst, I ran to the kitchen door, finding that it was locked. With all of the force left in my body, and soul, I somehow kicked the door open. Lying in front of me was a dead corpse, its unrecognizable face embedded into the floor, blood emitting from the head forming a stream, pond then then lake of sanguineous fluid. Above it stood Victoria, holding the weapon that did the deed, her back to me.

"It was him or me, and against orders, it was him," she said by way of explanation, keeping her face hidden from me, her voice cold, procedure and emotionless. When I took steps towards her, the floor under me seemed to turn into splinters of kindling. "No! I go, you stay," she commanded, still averting here eyes. "Please, some orders have to be obeyed," she said, as herself. And with that she walked out the dark kitchen into the blinding sunlight, locking the back door of the 'gustatory laboratory' behind her.

Through the window, I saw my Comrade in Arms, surrogate daughter and love interest slowly walk, then run with a speed of a horse out of town, disappearing into the desert hills surrounding it, her route hidden by black smoke emerging from the oil wells. Those metal dragons drilling into the ground threw me a 'come hither' wink, or so it seemed. "No," I told them, after which my stare was held hostage by an old black woman on the other side of the mirror. "No", I said as I tore off the bonnet. "No," I repeated, washing the black paste of my face. "And!" I screamed out, tearing off her the maid's dress. "And..." I said, looking at

my Cossack Cowboy attire hidden between the pots and pans Victoria and I used to make a 'wake up to who you really were and should be' E-containing breakfast.

Before I could say "yes" to becoming myself again, a voice behind me echoed between both of my ears, calling me by my Cossack name, "Stefan Dimitrovitch". Upon turning around, the speaker held up a red, white and blue Pinegrove Falls officer's uniform the rank of Major by the insignia. Behind it was a General. Philosopher General, that is. "It's time for you to be the experimentor and not the experiment," Hans informed me with an ominous calm in his voice. "An offer you know, or should know, that you can't refuse."

CHAPTER 19

Hans, in his Philosopher General uniform, and me, decked out in my perfectly tailored Pinegrovian Army Major outfit rode to the outskirts of town. En route we passed armies of American born and bred Texans clad as lowly German peasants constructing new buildings in the style of old ones in his homeland, and mine. I recognized most of these demoted in stature souls, but they didn't seem to recognize me, even the ones whose stare I held hostage for as long as their foremen, and forewomen, allowed them to. The white and black skinned laborers enthusiastically swung their hammers, pulled their saws and toted the large sacs on their broken back to the rhythm of three oil wells behind them pounding into the ground. Upon closer examination with my two seeable eyes and the third one that I dared not tell anyone about, I noted that those metallic dragons smiled with gleeful sadism as the sweat-soaked workers who pushed the wheels that operated them sung upbeat marching songs. They seemed like musical offerings from demonic sources that reeked of the same toxic and contagious optimism that soldiers in legally sanctioned armies yelled out during basic training and, if they survived such, 'we are the best and most deserving' songs belted out after looting and pillaging a village, town or country.

"They and everyone else you see are going to be richer than they once were," Hans told me by way of explanation to what I was thinking, and feeling, with a smile of inner satisfaction. "Because---"

"---you put something into their breakfast?" I interjected, as rudely as I was able to.

Hans' smile turned into a frown of indignation, holding back the words expressing what he really wanted to blast out at me. After a deep breath of 'collection', his outer lips turned upward again. "We put something into SOME of their breakfasts," General Hans related. "Those who deserved and needed to be in charge of the others. Because, as you knew, and I still hope you know, everyone gives according to their abilities and takes according to their needs. And to build

a town, county and country where everyone is equal, there is a stage at which there are some...temporary inequalities.”

I didn't question what the timetable was for Hans' temporary state of inequalities. Nor did I challenge him by saying that though all men, and women, were born equal, nature or the slings and arrows of life outside the womb allowed some to become 'better' than others at some things and doomed some to become less able, or deserving. I didn't press him as to why he didn't have me shot or be tied to the rotating wheels that powered the oil wells, or have me assigned to work details to construct buildings for his new Empire. The lingering question in my soul was to why Hans allowed his enlightened wife to be exiled, then probably hung. The question in my mind was something else.

“What did you do to, or with, Victoria Gonzales?” I asked, Hans, the part of him I used to know anyway. “The bright girl who was a better writer than you or I could ever be,” I reminded him. “The young woman who we BOTH wanted to marry as soon as she became of age. The receiver of the kind of wisdom, and knowledge, and optimism that only the Sages who we aspire to be have. The special soul with special abilities who could be a Philosopher Queen one day who finally abolishes the rule of greedy, vicious and self-sabotaging Kings and Capitalists. The...” I took in a deep breath, hoping that the next words coming out of my mouth would be in terms that ALL 'men and women who were born equal' could understand, and agree with. But as always, the clever move more swiftly than the wise.

“She's the prize you can get or I can keep, depending on who wins in our next battle,” Philosopher General Hans said, laying his hand on the handle of his sabre.

“Battle with who?” I pressed, hoping to maybe make a getaway to warn the next Texan town run by good ole boy Texans or Eastern based business tycoons about an attack from the tax collecting branch of the new Pinegrovian People's Army’.

Or perhaps another town like Pinegrove Falls used to be, run by Freethinkers who wanted to be Free doers.

Hans abruptly pulled his horse into a halt. He stared into somewhere inside his own swelled head. Then up to the sky, then at me. His mouth broke into laughter which echoes off the cliffs around us as well as between my ears.

CHAPTER 20

On the way to what seemed to be the top of a small hill, then a big hill, then a small mountain, I thought about having a conversation with Hans. One in which I could identify, and possibly neutralize, the demons or angels had possessed his mind, and soul. Like my conversations with him during the 'good old days' when we Pinegrovians were paying rather than collecting taxes, which were much like those I had with anyone else.

After the end of each topic, be it about the weather, who did what to someone else or where a log I was hauling should go while building another house whose use would be determined later, I would offer a philosophical comment about life. Actually, I had the nasty, and according to some, obnoxious habit of inventing or recycling a one line Socratic like observation about the laws of the universe as they pertained to human nature and the laws of nature that we had to obey, or defy. But at the end of the interchange of words, ideas and observations, I'd do my best to come up with another quip, which I stole from someone else or invented on the spot. The aim of such was to evoke a smile or laugh from whoever else had the misfortune of having more conversation with me than he or she anticipated. With me being, of course, the entertainer in the spotlight, or the professor who summarized 'the lesson'

Then again, Hans was better at that 'game' than I ever was. So, I thought it best that we didn't speak what was in our minds, or hearts. I don't know if it was mind, heart or just necessity that made me follow Hans upward onto a plateau lined with short, brown winter grass. Each blade was coated with a thin layer of frost. The air was brisk, penetrating into my bones in ways that sub-zero temperatures never did. The wind seemed to take on a somehow familiar human voice, its origin unknown to my conscious mind. It was neither male, nor female. Not angelic, or demonic. Not friend or foe.

I could hear the dialogue between the trees as they seemed to be speaking about us. Me and Hans. Or me and...someone else. But who? As I wondered what

voice I was imagining in my oxygen deprived head, I found myself in an even bigger dilemma.

For the first time, when sober anyway, I lost sense of the Four Directions, unable to tell where North, East, West or South were. The fog got thicker. I heard mad laughter. Looking ahead of me, while still atop my horse, who had the courage or functional stupidity to not be spooked, I noted its source.

“Funny, isn’t it?” the demon inside of Hans yelled out to me. “It’s up to both of us, now,” came out of my old friend’s mouth in a voice that was not his own. “Or one of us,” he continued, dismounting from his horse. With two feet firmly embedded on the ground, he said something in a foreign tongue that caused his horse to flee. Then something else that summoned my horse to rear up, throwing me on the ground.

That ground felt hard as a rock, yet it somehow felt like soft glue. Upon reconnecting consciousness to my arms, then legs, I pushed myself up on those two feet. In front of me, no less than 20 yards away, was Hans. Strapped to his waist was a gun belt with a single Colt revolver in it. He threw a bag my way, which upon opening, contained a similar gunbelt, but a different weapon..

“Strap it on,” Hans commanded, pointing to the Old World double barrelled hand gunholstered in the new world holster. . “Don’t worry, it’s loaded,” he said regarding the two shot Cossack pistol bearing the insignia of my grandfather. “Old World Cossack hand musket against New World...whatever. A duel which you will accept.”

“And if I don’t?” I self observed myself asking.

“You will,” he assured me, and himself.

“On the count or ten,” Hans said, turning his back to me. “Agreed?”

“Agreed,” my soul observed my mind saying, taking my spot, turning my back on him.

I don’t recall the exact events beyond that. But I do recall counting to seven, then turning around. In front of me, already turned, was Hans. His pistol was aimed at my head. He fired, but he missed.

“Now, you!” he commanded. “Please,” he said by way of a plea. “A test of... determination, and your love for humanity. And your dedication to a people’s revolution instead of mine, which---”

Before Hans could describe his vision for a New Order, and state and country which prided itself on creating Disorder for the sake of the few, I aimed my pistol, or rather my grandfather’s hand musket, at his feet. The buckshot inside its large, un-spiralled barrel sprayed out a large fan rather than a single shot, a significant portion of buckshot founding its way into Hans’ chest.

“Yes!” Hans said. “God, or whoever else is in charge of the universe has spoken.” He fell his knees, clenching his bleeding chest. “Now, it’s time for YOU to speak. To put me out of my misery, as the new...Hetman, or whoever you want and need to be to take care of my people.”

Hans’ death rattle turned into mad laughter. I ran to him, pulling him up to my chest before he could fall to the ground.

“Why?” I asked him. “Why did you do all of this to your own people?. And why did you do this to ME?” I demanded to know.

“Cancer,” he related, and confessed. “And I needed my replacement to be a good man who is willing to do bad things when necessary. Like...” He pulled my knife out of its sheath, placing it into my hand, closing my shaking fingers into a fist around its handle. “One slice across my throat,” he requested. “Because...you will enjoy it.”

I told myself that what I had to do for Hans, my own people, and the new country I was about to inherit was necessary. But, truth be told, I did what...necessity dictated. And, truth be told, I did enjoy, or at least felt fulfilled by, sending Hans to his just reward, or punishment.

As Hans left the land of the living for the realm of someplace else he seemed to know and be at peace with, his pointed to a note in his pocket. It was a map, an X marking a hill where I recalled seeing ghosts. I felt something under the ground with my feet though my leather Cossack boots rather than wooden souled Texan cowboy footwear.

“A place we have to protect, before it’s too late,” I heard from a familiar voice from THIS world. Victoria Gonzales emerged from the low lying bush around the mountain meadow which was now covered with Hans’ blood. “Before it’s too late,” she warned me.

Logic said that I should ask Victoria what made her leave me down below after we administered the first antidote to Hans’ empowerment potions. Good sense told me to inquire about how she found me now, and how she regained a deeper

wisdom regarding the eternities and the knowledge about the finite world we were assigned to endure or transform. The urgency of the moment, along with the whinnying of the two horses she brought with her, said that I should comply with her request.

CHAPTER 21

Upon arriving at the capital of the 'kingdom' which Hans, and perhaps life itself, assigned me to take charge of, Victoria and I took note of the location Hans had marked on his map. It was a small, insignificant meadow which I had crossed a thousand time. From a distance, I noted that in the middle of it, there was a circle of rocks. Seeing them now was possible due to the grass around it behind mowed down. Or perhaps pulled out. "A medicine wheel?" I asked Victoria who, by the authenticity of her native wardrobe and the fresh markings on her face which she had obtained when visiting them, would be able to answer that question.

"A place of healing and power to some," she said. "But to those who are more interested in power that is accompanied by force, rather than an Energy than needs no power to be expressed, is slated to be..."

I heard a blast of a cannon, or maybe it was thunder. Whatever it was, and who sent it, I didn't know. Whatever it was, it shot a hole directly into the wheel. A volcanic burst of fire emerged from the center of that power spot, lasting no more than five seconds. It was followed by a burst of gas and shaking of the ground around it.

The epicenter where the earth was violated spread to the oil wells, chopping down the legs of those mechanical dragons, sending the rest of their body parts up into the air, then onto the ground. The workers operating them tried to run for cover, but instead fell to the ground. The barely visible cloud of foul smelling gas spread to town, pushed towards there by a wind that, so it seemed, wanted to reclaim the valley. Everyone and everything that had legs collapsed to the ground. Then that ground shook the buildings above them, converting them into rubble.

Dust covered Pinegrove like a blanket, blocking our view of what was happening under it. When it finally cleared, fragments of dead bodies and soon to be

recycled lumber lay like a..yes----large potato and raison pancake over the place that I, and Victoria, and perhaps some Indigenous tribes, once called home.

“So,” Victoria asked me after everything and everyone we knew was reclaimed by the earth.

“What do we do now?”

She was open to any and all suggestions I could offer. There was only one option which was viable, and necessary.

CHAPTER 22

I do not recall how many weeks, months or years it was, and I suppose it doesn’t matter. Time is measured by the intensity and quality of experience anyway. I was cursed as well as blessed with good health in all of my body systems, with the exception of the reproductive organs. “A boy isn’t a man until he fathers a son, or, if God decides to challenge him, a daughter,” I recall my father telling me after spouting pubic hair and the urge to use the flesh under it to keep the family name alive for the next generation. But what I can tell you for certain is that another kind of war between countrymen in America was just over the horizon. The call to arms would be different for each deluded or virtuous soul who would join in, of course. But as for me----I had to change myself before thinking about how to change the world. And even if in print or with voice, I was able to come up with a solution that would meet the needs and wants of Northerners, Southerner and Westerners, it would probably be ignored. Or if my suggestions were implemented politically or theologically, they would perverted into something I never intended.

But what I do know is that to be useful in the world as it is, you had to offer someone else what they needed, or wanted, while you silently tried to obtain from them what you needed, or wanted. The logical thing to do was to set up a trading post, a location where goods for the body, ideas for the mind and inspiration for the Soul could be exchanged. Elsa's cabin seemed to be the right place to achieve locally as well as globally oriented goals. The routes for the wagon trains taking idealistic pioneers heading West, and worn out, cynical souls going East, put us in the center of all of that traffic. Two years after the wagon trains successfully made their journeys, most of them going West, a stagecoach company operator stopped in, informing me that I could 'stay on' as the owner of the store to manage it as I see fit. He informed me that he had acquired the land in a poker game in New Orleans, and was generous enough to Lady Luck, or the Good Lord, to let me stay on as manager of the trading post if I gave him 10 percent of the money I collected. In exchange, he would supply me with goods beyond what I could get from the local Indians, displaced Tejanos and white saddle tramps. I would be serving a 'richer, safer and more refined' cliental. Such was an offer that due to the requirement to be in a system operated by money, I provisionally accepted. After all, even the Indians now seemed to value wampum more than barter of goods.

It was somewhere to start fresh. Of course, no Cossack would aspire to open a General Store anywhere in the Old Country, as such was reserved for Jews. A people who were very good with finances, and didn't believe in heaven. Perhaps that was why so many of these 'Christ killers' put Jesus' commandments into practice on earth and did so with their, in some areas anyway, more advanced brains and {because they were not constantly being instructed by 'guardian angels' or intimidated by domineering Priests) liberated minds. Of course, they would pay for such in a century or so in the old country, and this new one.

But to be a man of any value, one had to have a code to live by. Of course, such leads to establishing a country around you consisting of those who you influence, and those with other codes who you co-exist with. The name of my new country was Klinstichti, a Siberian Yakut word in a language from a tribe which hopefully

would not conquered into extinction by my former Russian and Cossack 'associates', which meant "Life". The flag I designed for it consisted of four circles of different colors, each hue representing a different race, as defined by skin color anyway. Each circle intersected with but was not surrounded by another one. It flew proudly and defiantly on the roof of the two story log cabin which hosted travellers clad in far more intact and fashionable clothing than its operators.

I recall one conversation with a newspaper reporter from Boston heading West who aspired to be a novelist. 'William Robertson Wentworth, the third', he proclaimed loudly when I asked his name, his clean shaven chin upright, his handlebar mustache perfectly trimmed, his clothing that of an aristocrat from Moscow.

"So, what is the motto and mission of this new country of yours?" Bill, 'Lord' Wentworth asked me.

"Everyone gives more than their abilities and takes less than their needs," my reply. I appended that new credo with a translation of the price tag in written in Spanish which I put on a weather worn but still functional saddle that Wentworth seemed interested in. "It means, 'the price for this is whatever you can honestly afford'," I proclaimed.

"A hell of a way to work yourself out of business," 'Lord' William said, in keeping with his inherited social station.

"But, right now, a necessary survival tool, since, as we know, absolute power corrupts absolutely," I replied proudly."

After selling Bill what he needed at a reduced price, and Lord Wentworth what he needed at market value, we bid him and his fellow upscale passengers a safe, interesting and 'enlightening' trip on their way Westward. Bill seemed intrigued in the books Victoria had written which were on sale 'for whatever you can afford'. Lord Wentworth noted that they were 'too human and truthful' to be sellable to publishers, the ones he was trying to connect to anyway.

Wentworth and his fellow passengers took us up on our offer for a meal, which I cooked, allowing Victoria to take credit for making. We asked them when they thought the War between the States, which I heard had just started, would end. Those with Northern and Southern accents proudly replied 'longer than expected'. No one dared to predict who would win the war, and, most importantly, who eventually would win the peace. Victoria had written, in one of her novels, that the Indians and displaced Mexicans took over the now dis-United States, turning what was left of it after a bloody civil war into a far more civilized country than was envisioned in Richmond or Washington. Yes, it was fiction, but sometimes life imitated art, or at least learned something from it. Such was our hope.

After the stagecoach passengers left, their stomachs full, we hoped that their minds a bit more opened, we both lamented the fate of these well off pilgrims. Like everyone else from points East, rich or poor, they were looking to set up in points West what they had back home, but with them on top. Unless they stumbled into the wisdom that everyone IS connected to everyone else, like a circle. No one on top of another. And no deluded sadistic old bastard up in the sky, or in your town hall, having everyone by the balls. Then again, as virtue valuing souls eventually learn, heaven watches, and earth works.