

THAT'S THE WAY THE FORTUNE COOKIE CRUMBLES

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Please, note: The chapters in this book count down from 60, as would a ticking clock.

EPILOGUE

At his feet there lay a body.

It had been there long enough to be covered with a light dusting of snow. Though the flakes on the exposed skin of the face were fewer, wetter, melting with each slow and shallow exhale of warm air from the nostrils.

He knew a storm was on the air the same way a bear knows that it must soon hibernate. If he did not act at once, the snow would fall until this body was buried in it. It seemed that he had arrived just in time.

There was no hesitation, not even for a second.

He turned around and he walked away.

60. DESTINY BE DAMNED – 1943

Death pressed herself up against Yegor from behind, pinning him to the door that would lead to his inevitable end.

He had sensed her from the moment he woke that morning, waiting beside his shaking bunk. Death had watched him pull on his Red Army-issued boots and attempt to tie them with trembling hands, finally giving up and shoving the laces inside the tops of his socks. She'd shadowed him as he was slotted into the last remaining standing space of a packed canvas-covered truck, the tip of his nose grazed by the rusty metal door as it was slammed closed in his face. The rust smelled like blood, and he breathed it in knowing that his own would be the last thing that he would smell, see, feel, taste. So trapped between Death and the door was he that Yegor could not so much as turn his head when someone behind him began to speak.

It was Commander Boy, or so he called him. A year older in school. Seventeen. His previous commanders collected one by one by the cold breath now sending drops of icy sweat down his spine. Commander Boy had been next in the chain of command. Every last man and boy in this troop would have to die before Yegor would be. "Commander of the Dead," he would call himself, as he ordered around an army of brittle bones and bits of jaw and teeth.

The boy—now his commander—bellowed above the rattle of gravel pinging metal in a practiced low voice. When he died, would he beg for his life in that voice, or his own? Words like "duty" and "sons of whores" fell upon Yegor's ears with equal lack of gravitas. Death didn't listen to pep talks, and so neither did he.

The truck slammed its brakes and forty bodies slammed into each other. Yegor would have lost his balance had there been room to fall. Bullets and bombs beyond the door. The sound of shouting. Someone was shouting behind him. Commander Boy. His Comrades. All shouting. All shouting at him.

"Open the door!"

"Open the goddamned door!"

But Death, in eager expectation, was leaning into him so hard that Yegor could not move even his fingers to the latch. Skin tore from the tip of his nose as he was shoved aside—shuffled, really; men moving in sync like a morbid game of musical chairs.

Snow and smoke surged into the truck as his comrades rushed toward battle, crying absurd things like “For the Motherland!” and “Die, Nazis, die!” and the ever popular “This one’s for you, *Dorogaya!*”

As the men poured out, Yegor felt himself get caught in the undercurrent, sucked to the back of the pack, until it was only him and Commander Boy who had been gruffing one last word of encouragement to his men as he thrust them out and toward their likely end.

Commander Boy glanced back to be sure the truck was empty. He looked Yegor straight in the eye and said matter-of-factly, “It’s time.”

Yegor was suddenly reminded of his father speaking those same two words to the pigs.

“It’s time,” he’d say as he shepherded them out of the farm truck and into the slaughterhouse corrals. Most of the pigs were nervous but with nowhere else to go they let themselves be led, never having known how to lead. But sometimes there’d be a stubborn one, back of the truck, refusing to come out. His father taught him that there was no use trying to convince that one. No use trying to soothe it with gentle words or trick it with a big juicy radish. That one already knew that it was time and was damned if it was going to make it easy for Death, or them.

“The stubborn ones,” his father used to say, “they’re really the smartest.”

Those he’d have to get out with a metal noose that cut into their chubby necks while beating on them from behind with prodding rods, bruising their thick pink skin until beads of blood erupted from beneath. Yegor could still hear the ear-shattering squeals. He wasn’t sure which was worse, the sound of a grown man sobbing somewhere outside the safety of this truck or those squeals at the unjustness of a life being brought to an unwilling end.

Once there was a pig so stubborn that three grown men beating and pushing and pulling couldn’t get the sow to move. She had left piglets behind on the farm. The slaughterhouse foreman offered to slit her throat in the truck, if they didn’t mind the blood; he could spray it out for them afterwards. But his father said that the other pigs would smell it and not want to get in the truck anymore. Animals could smell death, and “Death,” he said, “could not be so easily washed away.”

So, they brought the pig back to the farm and named her *Czarina of the Stubborn Ones*, *Czarina* for short. When her time finally came from old age and she was no longer able to hold her weight, his father could not bring himself to do the deed, instead, exchanging the butchering and prepping of the neighbor’s old milking cow for that of the endearingly stubborn sow. He ate her because times were hard but said that it ruined the taste of pork for him forever. He told Yegor, much later when he was sending him off to fight for the Motherland in her *Great Patriotic War*, that the real

reason he hadn't slaughtered her in the truck that day was because, "Anyone who battles death that hard, deserves to live."

Now here he was being pushed and pulled to the door of the truck by Commander Boy who was spouting some inspirational nonsense, "Your comrades need you. Your country needs you," that the stupid pigs may have bought, but not the stubborn ones, not the Czar of the Stubborn Ones. When the battle was over, and both sides decimated, they'd find him still sitting in the back of this truck and they'd say, "The stubborn one, he was really the smartest."

But there was no use struggling. Commander Boy was stronger, and as he pulled, Death pushed, and before Yegor could protest they were at the door and he could feel the snow and smell the smoke and see the shadow of Death dancing in anticipation out of the corner of his eye. He was going to die. It was his time.

"We all make our own destiny," Commander Boy was saying as he stood behind him, blocking his path of retreat. "You don't have to die today."

Yegor spotted the man in the foreign uniform across the battlefield just as he pulled the trigger of the gun aimed right at his head. Yegor hurled himself out of the way. The bullet grazed the top of his head as he fell, and Commander Boy's face blew off instead.

His landing was softened by a pile of bodies just below the truck door, his comrades shot dead as they'd leaped forth to promised victory with visions of glory and celebratory girls. The boy on top Yegor recognized as Muscle Boy, or so he called him. He had lifted cases of ammo every day for hours so that he could bulk up and "rip the limbs clean off those Nazi fuckers." He may have claimed that his muscles were made of steel, but they weren't. The single bullet that ripped a hole in the breast pocket of his uniform was.

Yegor propped himself up on Muscle Boy's chest and looked up at the truck. He half expected to see, looking back at him, the figure of an old hag standing over his fallen commander. Commander Boy must have knocked her over as the bullet blasted out the back of his brain. But Death was pushing his limp body off of her. No— Commander Boy's limp body was getting back up!

He stood. Steady and erect. As if he had not just been shot in the face. As if there was not a ghastly hole of bloody pulp where his right eye should be. With his remaining eye, Commander Boy surveyed the battle sprawled out before him as would a farmer assessing his yield, until it came to rest on Yegor. The judgment was still there. As was the condemnation.

Commander Boy looked Yegor straight in the eye and said matter-of-factly, "It's time."

Yegor scrambled over the mound of dead like a grain mouse scurrying from his mother's broom. Bullets whizzed past so close he could feel them raise the hairs along his skin. An arm grabbed him into a chokehold from behind but went limp a second later. An explosion ahead of him knocked him over, bashing him into a man who had been about to stab him in the back.

Yegor quickly clambered away. He put his hand in something wet and sticky but dared not look at what. He wiped whatever it was off on the uniforms he crawled over. Somewhere ahead a grown man cried for his mother. No one can prepare for the cliché of war.

He changed direction. Where he was going, he was not sure. He just knew he had to keep moving.

He looked back as he stumbled ahead. The hazy outline of his resurrected commander was not far behind.

Smoke stung his eyes so that he could barely see, carnage swimming across his vision like a fevered dream. Everything was cold gray with splashes of warm red here and there—war as impressionist art—and green. Dark, but definitely green.

He had seen it as he narrowly rolled out of the way of the butt of a gun; the German must have been out of ammo to be wielding his firearm like an ax. That, or he had forgotten himself in the heat of battle, an animal rage sending him into a hacking and slashing frenzy. He'd even roared when the butt of the gun hit the frozen earth instead of Yegor. The impact caused the gun to discharge and shoot the soldier in his own gut. Or had someone else shot the madman from behind? It was impossible to know.

How many had killed their own in this senseless smoggy slaughter?

Yegor's nails cracked as he clawed himself toward the smudge of green in the distance. It was too far, and Commander Boy too near. He could feel him just behind, reaching out, closing in.

Yegor stood up and he ran.

He ran between the blur of bodies. He ran through the puddles of muck and gore. He ran faster and faster, leaving his former commander farther and farther behind. Where there had been a straight line of snipers around the perimeter of the battle to prevent "unit denigration," there was now a crooked line of corpses, and Yegor ran past those too. He ran until he ran his hands across the first tree at the forest's edge.

Yegor grazed his palms over trunk after trunk, disappearing himself into the tree line.

Panic twisted his intestines.

Why couldn't he feel the roughness of the bark? The stickiness of the sap? Had Commander Boy caught up with him? Was he a ghost fleeing from his own body, fallen somewhere back in the battlefield of blank eyes?

Except that he could *feel* the screaming ache in his legs from sprinting across the bloodshed-soaked snow. *Feel* his lungs raw, as if a straight razor were slicing them from the inside with every icy inhale.

He spared a glance at his hands and saw that they were bright red and swollen. Perhaps Death would take his body one frostbitten finger at a time: a limb here, a limb there, a tooth, an eye, an internal organ or two, little by little until she could complete her collection.

Death was nothing if not thorough.

But he *had* escaped. He could make his own destiny! He did not have to die today.

Yegor had no time to ponder the irony of what should have been Commander Boy's last words. He had to keep running. He feared he would always have to keep running.

—

Suddenly it smelled like Christmas. Yegor was lying at the edge of a bomb crater as bits of branches burned all around him. He looked up through the falling ash-mingled snow to see fighter planes in the sky above. One side or the other had decided that their ground troops were not going to be victorious. They would kill their own to ensure victory.

As he gazed up at the grey sky, coming to terms with the ringing in his ears and the warmth seeping somewhere from the back of his skull, he noticed one of the pines swaying more than the others in the bitter wind, as if deciding which way it would like to lie down and rest its singed and weary limbs for a while. Yegor did not have to wait for it to decide. He had already spotted the one-eyed Commander Boy climbing up the branches and standing gloriously upon its pinnacle.

Yegor wrenched himself over and onto his belly, sure to have left behind fragments of his skull in the red snow. He clawed through the blackness that enveloped him, digging frozen fingers into frozen earth, pulling himself away with every last stubborn breath. The tree fell just as he heaved himself out of the way.

He tried to get up to outrun Commander Boy, once again, but was halted abruptly by a sharp pain in his ankle as muscle moved away from stationary bone. Yegor looked behind him to see, trapped beneath a large branch, his booted foot, holding him back. At least nothing was broken—unless he was too frozen and numb to tell—his military boots were truly fine boots. There was a reason that

after battle the boys that were too young to fight were sent out to retrieve them from the dead bodies. Two kopeks for every polished pair they returned to camp.

They were the best he'd ever owned. Yegor had felt so proud stomping along the cobblestone streets of his village with his troop, as neighbors, who had never thought much of him before, came out to cheer him off to war. But now that same sturdy boot trapped him like a fox, only he could not reach his foot to gnaw it off.

Yegor stretched his arm over the large branch that blocked his way until his shoulder threatened to dislodge from its socket. After dodging the bullet that had been aimed at his head, after all of the near misses in battle, after all of the men Death took instead of him, he would die because of a boot?

He watched the impossible form of the marred Commander Boy as he strolled lightly over the fallen tree trunk like a child trying to keep their balance along a railroad track on a lazy summer afternoon with nothing needing doing and nowhere needing going. But he knew what Commander Boy would be doing and where he would be going; he was the train coming to take him into the tunnel which had no exit.

No. He'd make his own destiny today.

Yegor looked down at his foot and tried to focus, to calmly evaluate the situation like he had been taught to do in training (when war was still an abstract concept and keeping calm in the face of fear seemed a rational recommendation). He could not reach his boot... his boot with the laces still sticking up out of his socks... he hadn't tied his boots this morning... he could not reach his boot... but his foot could reach him... he could wriggle his way out!

His foot was free before Commander Boy could notice, and Yegor scampered upright in order to run. But the boot—he needed the boot to run—without it he would surely lose his foot to frostbite. He turned to grab it just in time to see another pine fall toward him. He leapt out of the way, but not fast enough.

The tree came down, this time crushing every bone in his bootless foot.

Yegor woke to a man writing on the wall.

He let himself watch for what felt like a long while, assuming that he was dreaming the man scratch, scratch, scratching away. He could only see the back of his head and kept waiting for him to turn around and reveal himself to be Commander Boy writing his death sentence across the rustic wallboards. But the longer the man did not let Yegor *see* him, the more Yegor became aware of his

other senses. He could *hear* the thumping of his heart pumping blood against his eardrums, *smell* a thick scent of steam and spice in the air, *feel* a heavy warmth spread over his body and up to his neck. He tried to move the heaviness off him but found his arms and legs leaden. The unease that arose within him was too authentic to be a dream.

He must be hallucinating then. After all, were this man writing on the wall indeed Commander Boy, he would be missing a sizable chunk from the back of his head. Perhaps the man was in reality a field doctor, or his father, and he safe in bed.

Yegor tried again to move, this time focusing on just his right hand. He felt it lift to the forearm, and no further. Something was holding it back; something wound around his wrist. He was tied up like a hog hanging from a gutting rack.

So, he must be a prisoner and the man a prison guard. Or—Yegor felt his mind unfogging—or perhaps he was a mental patient. Yes, perhaps he had *imagined* Commander Boy chasing him and had in actuality lost his mind in the back of that truck.

Yes, yes, soldiers were known to go mad all of the time in battle.

Despite his predicament, Yegor felt relief.

So, if the man writing on the wall was just another patient, perhaps... yes... perhaps Yegor could convince the man to untie him.

“Hello?” Yegor croaked, discovering that his throat was dry as Volba fish jerky. The man just kept writing on the wall. Scratch, scratch, scratch...

“Hello, can you help me?” he managed, stronger this time.

“He can’t hear you.”

Yegor was startled to see a young woman with tousled straw-colored curls across the room, rosy cheeked from the steam of a bubbling pot before her. She was how he imagined a woman would look fresh from lovemaking.

“He’s too busy figuring it out.”

“Figuring what out?” Yegor asked, trying to absorb this new information of a room, and a beautiful woman, and a steaming pot of what smelled like home. It was clear that he was not in a mad house after all, unless he had completely lost his wits...

“All of it.” The woman laughed like a girl, but she wasn’t a girl. She wasn’t really a woman either. If he had to guess, he’d say that she was 17 or 18. Only a year or two older than he.

She ladled from the pot into a crude wooden bowl and stood up. The room was small, and it only took several steps for her to cross it to where he lay.

“I can’t untie you. You could be dangerous,” she said as she kneeled down beside him.

“I’m not.”

“We’ll see.” She placed a gentle hand behind his head and tilted it up while, with the other one, she offered his mouth a steaming spoonful of stew. “Careful, it’s hot.”

Yegor didn’t care—the scalding soup filled his veins with warmth.

The stew was mostly broth and root vegetables. He thought of his mother boiling pig tails to add to the rassolnik, because “*Without meat we might as well be chickens pecking at the dirt.*” They had been too poor to afford eating the good parts of the pigs they fed, raised, and sold to slaughter. Yegor thought that this woman must be really very poor to not even have pig tails.

After a while of slurping spoon after spoonful of soup, Yegor began to slow down.

“Thank you—” he began, “—your name?”

“Never you mind,” she said sternly as she got up and took the now empty bowl back over to the pot to refill.

Just then the man at the wall turned around looking rather bewildered. Behind him the wall was grey with graphite.

“He’s awake,” she laughed.

59. GIRLS WITH CURLS – 1943

He had learned not to tell her that she was cute when she was mad.

It only made her madder. Which made her cuter. Which compelled him to smile at her. Which compelled her to make him sleep on the cold hard floor on the other side of their one-room cabin.

Matysh would not tell her, but she was very cute right now. Because she was very mad.

“How could you bring him here? Have you no regard for our safety?” she was yelling at him.

“He was going to die,” Matysh responded, careful not to smile adoringly at her as he did so.

“And now we could die. Do you prefer a stranger’s life over that of your wife?”

“Of course not, but—”

“But, what? But *what?!?* I swear you’d save a wolf from drowning by offering it your bare arm to grab on to by its teeth!”

As she continued to chide him, her perfect golden curls bounced furiously. It brought to mind a debate he’d had during Advanced Vector Calculus in which he had postulated that the classic equation for calculating curves was incomplete because it did not consider the density of the material that the curve consisted of. A fiddle drum fern, a swan’s neck, cook’s cinnamon buns; these would all curl differently because of their density.

In the realm of numerical uncertainties, inconclusive conjectures, and theoretical theorems, even the tiniest tweak to an existing idea can cause a ripple effect; a wave of inquiry that could potentially create a whole new field of mathematics. Even if the question leads to an answer that just doesn’t add up—a mathematical cul-de-sac, if you will—the enquirer will be celebrated for thinking about things differently enough to ask the question in the first place.

University had kept Matysh mentally occupied, and more importantly, physically from the front lines. His father had always said that they had enough bodies of young boys to throw at the enemy, what they really needed were “*minds, not mines, to defeat them.*” His father had a way with words that impressed even the most clever of academics. Tough act to follow, especially given that the eminent Professor Markov taught at the very same school where Matysh was a student.

When he’d submitted his Density Curve Conditional Proof to his professor—though yet unverified—he had been treated like a legend, because he had been bold enough to *ask!*

His father had been proud. The curls had stopped bouncing.

She stood before him, waiting. “Well? What do you have to say for yourself?”

“What was I supposed to do, leave him to die?”

She put her hands on her hips. “Yes.”

The curve of her waist made it so that it was not a perfect triangle that she made with her arm, but the area was still easily calculable. But what if the space were packed with fiddleheads? Would he be able to calculate the combined length of them all if unfurled?

He took the nub of a pencil from behind his ear where he always kept it, turned to the wooden wall, and began to calculate.

“I’m talking to you here!”

“I’m listening, I’m listening, I just have to jot this down before I—” There was the exciting possibility for a correlation between the angles of a triangle and the curls of a spiral. He’d start with a spiral of Theodorus, a polygonal spiral composed of contiguous right triangles...

The math came easily, and Matysh felt the high of figuring something out just because he had thought to ask the question. Smiling, he turned back around to finish his conversation and found the cabin was filled with the smell of food and his wife was now standing over the hearth looking at him with an exasperated smile on her face.

“He’s awake,” she laughed.

58. PLAYING HOUSE – 1943

The man turned toward Yegor and rushed over to him with a huge smile on his face.

“You are awake! Welcome, welcome to our home. I am Matysh and this is my wife, Isk—”

“Don’t tell him our names!” shouted the wife.

“He’s not going to turn us in,”—the woman cut him off by spitting over her shoulder three times. It was a superstition that Yegor knew well from his mother who ‘spit on the Devil’ to keep him from jinxing her— “we saved his life,” Matysh finished earnestly.

“Don’t tell him that we need to be turned in!”

“Oh.” Matysh’s smile was replaced with a look of horror. But he quickly recovered. “Well now we’ll just have to trust him. He has a trust-worthy face, doesn’t he, Iskra?”

“Matysh!” Iskra cried in despair.

“Oh.”

Matysh blushed profusely as Iskra flushed with anger.

Yegor looked at the two of them together. Husband and wife. It made sense; he was as handsome as she was beautiful. Tall and broad, strong jawed, portrait perfect smile, light-filled blue eyes. And a sharp dresser too in his silk-backed tweed vest, so out of place in this one-room cabin that Yegor now realized must be their home. Yegor was lying on what must be their bed, though it felt more like a cot. Across the room was a small hearth where Iskra had been cooking, a stack of logs beside it. There was barely enough space for the table that seemed to be made from a roughly cut tree trunk and two smaller trunks acting as stools. On the other side of the room, near the door, was what appeared to be some furniture in the process of being made, something with many crooked spindles, a rocking chair perhaps. The windows were all covered with bark and blankets so that the only light came from the warm glow of the fire and Yegor did not know if it was night or day.

It made him think of a clubhouse that the older children had built behind his village. The girls had thrown sticks at him whenever he tried to sneak in, but what little he’d seen of its interior—before closing his eyes and ducking—reminded him of this cabin.

“So, you *do* value the life of a stranger over that of your wife,” challenged Iskra.

“IskraKitten—” Matysh began.

“Don’t you ‘IskraKitten’ me!”

He watched Iskra as she scolded Matysh, and thought they looked very much like two village children playing house. They were clearly hiding here from something or someone, cleverly avoiding

the war in the process. Why hadn't he thought of that? Running away and playing house with a pretty girl? Probably because no girls were interested in him, pretty or otherwise.

His babushka had told him that it would be a year or two yet before his face grew into his ears. His mother had said that no one cares about ears if a man can provide for his family. Then she sent him off to war to "become a man." His father said goodbye like he knew it would be the last time. A firm handshake, a wet eye, and a hurried departure to the pig pens to get back to work.

Yegor didn't remember falling asleep, but when he woke again the fire was embers and the cabin empty.

He tested his restraints. Still bound.

Fear turned his stomach like churning butter. They must have gone to report him as a deserter!

Yet... in turning him in, they would be exposing themselves. Then they must be somewhere plotting how to kill him! Though, if they'd wanted him dead, they would have already suffocated him in his sleep...

Even *if* they weren't out collecting poisonous bark or sharpening their axe, Commander Boy might still track him to this cabin. For, what if he *hadn't* imagined it? What if he hadn't been hallucinating? What if Commander Boy really was looking to avenge his untimely death?

Then he would find him tied up like this. Unable to escape. Unable to run from him.

Yegor's stomach turned over again.

With his mouth he grabbed onto the quilt that was tucked just under his chin, and flung his head away from his right hand to yank it off.

He craned his head toward his now exposed arm and saw that it was a stocking that bound him. If he lifted his hand up as far as it would go, strained his neck down as far as he was able... he could just reach the restraint with his teeth.

Yegor started to gnaw.

Eventually, with a mouth full of fibers, he loosened the knot enough to pull free. He hurriedly untied his other limbs and leapt up, forgetting that his foot had been crushed mere hours before by a rather large pine tree.

When the throbbing of his foot provoked him back to consciousness, Yegor decided to take a more premeditated approach to this whole escaping endeavor.

What would he need to survive out there in the solitude of the snow with a shattered foot? He looked around for the familiar gleam of overly polished black leather. By the door—one lone army boot—the other evidently still entombed beneath the branches of the fallen tree.

From the floor where he lay, Yegor slithered over to the bed and untied a stocking from the frame. It was metal and reminded him of the army cot he'd first slept on when he joined, before the bunk beds began to empty, one bag of personal effects sent home at a time. He'd inherited the bunk of a boy whom everyone called Baby. The mattress smelled of piss and tears, but it was more comfortable than the cot, regardless.

Tenderly, Yegor tried to pull the large sock over his foot but found that it could barely contain his swollen toes. He, instead, used a flowery blouse and a thick wool sweater from a pile of neatly folded clothes he discovered under the bed. With a stroke of ingenuity, he ripped some bark off the window so as to craft a sort of makeshift sole for his cloth shoe. Yegor was temporarily blinded by the white winter light that glared into the cabin, scrutinizing every particle of dust that meandered through its unforgiving beam. Once his eyes readjusted, the cabin seemed less cozy, and the reality of his situation all of a sudden more urgent.

Yegor hastily fastened the bark to the bottom of his foot, put on his jacket, hobbled toward the piece of unfinished furniture he'd noticed earlier in the corner, and broke it brutally apart. He extracted a long rod-like piece of wood from the debris, and, using it as a crutch, limped his way to the door.

He hesitated.

What if Commander Boy really was out there, searching for him with his one good eye and that ghastly hole where the other should be? What if he was safer here than anywhere he could run away to?

But Yegor knew that he could not trust these two young lovers to allow him to insert himself into their dream of playing house in a cozy cabin hidden deep in the woods, needing only each other for company.

Resolute, Yegor reached for the door—when it opened.

57. THE ANGEL – 1979

Her sister was crying.

“Why are you sad, Abji?”

“These are not sad tears.”

“What kind of tears are they then?”

“They are happy tears.” Her sister was older than her and often acted in curious and confusing ways.

“Why are you crying if you are happy?”

“One day you will understand why.” Her sister was older than her and often knew things that she yet did not.

“Then, why are you happy, Abji?”

Abji used the embroidered edge of her hijab to wipe the tears from her eyes—they were green, like the trees after a rare rain. She had always wished that her own were green too, but they were dark, muddy brown like the rest of her family—like everyone else. Her sister was special. Everyone else always said it.

“I am to be married!”

“But you do not want to be married.”

Her sister had told her many shocking stories of the older girls being married to men with grey teeth who smelled like camel dung. She had *sworn* that she would stay unmarried as long as she was able. And since her father too knew that her sister was special because she was the only girl with green eyes in the whole village, he would wait for an especially rich man to marry her to. Padar would not be so selective when it was her own time...

“I am marrying for love!”

“Love?” She loved her father and her mother and her sister and her younger brothers and sisters too—though the very littles ones would sometimes flail around like a goat whose throat had just been slit—but she had never heard of a girl loving a man that she was to marry.

“An angel has come,” Abji whispered excitedly.

“You’re marrying an angel?”

“No, silly fig,” her sister laughed through her happy tears. Laughed as if such a thing was absurd, but her suddenly wanting a husband was not. “Allah has sent me an angel.”

“From heaven?”

“From far away. He gave my love much money.”

“How much money?”

“Enough to convince Padar.”

“Why did he do that?”

“Why does an angel do anything? Because he is good.”

Abji had an angel and would soon have a husband she loved. Now she'd spend her time with the other wives and wouldn't play explorer with her anymore or dig in the desert sand for treasure either. She would have children of her own to play with.

“Why do you look sad, little sister? You should be happy too! You will be the big sister now.”

She was not sad. She was mad. “I do not want to be the big sister.”

She would have to take care of all the little ones and keep them away from the fire while Madar was cooking. She had two older brothers, but they could do what they wanted to because they were boys and boys didn't take care of babies.

“But if you are the big sister, it will be your turn next. And if you are as lucky as me, one day you will also marry for love!”

“But I do not have an angel.” It was her turn to cry. But they were not happy tears.

56. UNSAID – 1943

Yegor's eyes watered, and, though he tried desperately to hold them back, the tears came—thick and plentiful—splashing down onto the pile of chopped onions before him.

Watching him weep over onions, Iskra laughed. Yegor blushed; a woman should never see a man cry, even if it was the fault of surprisingly potent putrefied onions.

“Keep it up, then I can stop worrying about running out of salt,” Iskra teased from across the room where she was sitting on her bed, mending a pair of Matysh's long underwear. Matysh was out collecting wood, and Yegor, still unable to do more than hobble over to the tree trunk table, was put to the task before him.

He didn't mind. He liked helping and told Iskra this often. To which she always replied that he'd better like it, considering the mess he had made during his attempted escape the month before.

When the door had opened, there on the other side had stood Matysh with his arms full of wood, and Iskra holding a bunch of dirty, frozen, onions.

They'd stood and stared at one another across the threshold for a long, drawn-out moment. Then Iskra pushed lightly past him, walked across the room, plopped the onions down on the table and said, “Good, you're up. Now you can help me cut these.”

And he had. And he did. And he hoped to continue to do so for however long she would let him.

The onions were shriveled and yellow, riddled with soft brown spots prone to melting at the merest touch into a foul liquid that would seep into the still good bits. And yet, while Yegor was careful to cut around all of these, he was also sure to remove no more than was necessary. Every morsel mattered, especially with three mouths to feed instead of two. He realized now how generous Iskra had been when she'd made him that stew his first day here; must have used up half of their supply of potatoes.

Now that Yegor was no longer really a guest, their meals were more meager than his army rations had been. Hunger was an unshakable escort.

He was reminded of his younger self—lurking behind trees, peeking around corners—refusing to leave his older sister alone. Not even when she offered him a whole bag of cinnamon rolls to get lost so that she could twist tongues with Baker Boy behind the tool shed. Yegor had wanted to inconvenience her more than he'd wanted that dense, sickly-sweet treat that the boy's sticky fingers had pilfered from his parents' shop to trade for popularity with senseless girls like his sister.

What Yegor wouldn't give for a single cinnamon roll now.

Hunger slept with him at night from his bed of bark and odd clothes by the hearth, woke with him in the morning to Iskra bustling around the cabin, tidying up what was already scrubbed spotless, and sat with him at supper, never shy to take a second helping of what little broth there already was.

Matysh, though the largest among them, feigned fullness at every meal so that he could give his last few bites to Iskra. She'd scold him for not eating enough, but, congenial as ever, he'd wave her words away with, "The thoughts in my head fill me so full of knowledge that I barely have room to squeeze in a cracker." Yet Yegor knew that this was not true, as he frequently caught Matysh's stomach growling loud enough to be heard over the scratching of pencil on wall.

Matysh was probably the kindest man Yegor had ever known, kinder even than his father had been when he'd woken before the sun rose for a fortnight to nurse Czarina's wounds. Yet the reality was that when the sow's piglets—who she had been so stubborn about not leaving behind—grew nice and fat, Yegor's father had sent them to slaughter just like the rest. Yegor suspected that Matysh would not have had the heart to.

Iskra teased Matysh lovingly about his soft and "mushy as a bowl of overcooked Kasha" heart, which included amusing Yegor with stories of him trapping mosquitoes in cups and releasing them outside instead of just squashing them unceremoniously, like she, and every other sensible person did. "Of course, when he'd open the door to let the one out, another five would fly in!"

Yegor began carefully carving up another onion. This one he would likely have to forfeit a quarter of.

At first Yegor felt guilty that his foot prevented him from helping Matysh with outdoor chores and perimeter checks, but now he looked forward to these times that he was able to spend alone with Iskra. When Matysh was around they either talked philosophy, which made Yegor feel stupid, or sat in silence while he worked out some new math theorem, which made Yegor feel stupider.

They had tried to play cards with a pack that Yegor had taken from Baby, whose bunk he had inherited when he didn't return from patrol one morning. He'd heard him sobbing into his mattress nightly, so assumed that he had run away. Better than assuming the alternative; that he was crying because Death had been forcing herself into his bed.

All personal effects had to be turned in to the commanding officer, which was not yet Commander Boy; two more men would have to die before then. So, as Yegor packed Baby's belongings into the military issued olive drab sack, he hastily stuck the cards into his own pant pocket.

There they had remained as he was unable to use them lest it reveal his misconduct. Yegor kept them regardless; the weight against his leg made him feel rebellious.

They had become so familiar to him that he'd forgotten that they were even there. And so, Yegor was delighted to rediscover them the day he lowered himself cumbersomely onto a seat to rest his foot, and the point of the familiar pack dug into his thigh. That is until he found out that Matysh had an uncanny ability to remember what cards had already been played and predict which would be dealt next.

Iskra played with him some when Matysh was out, dressed in his three-piece suit as if he were off to the University instead of collecting kindling or scouting for non-animal tracks in the snow. Yegor lost most of the time but, even when he got lucky, he'd often let Iskra win anyway because he liked seeing her gloat. It was adorably obnoxious, and sometimes she'd even hit him playfully in the arm saying, "I *told* you I wasn't bluffing!"

Fortunately for him, Matysh was out often, collecting wood for his mysterious furniture project that he had needed to restart nearly from scratch after Yegor demolished it during his ill-conceived escape. Apologize as Yegor might, Matysh would not accept it, saying, "You did me a favor, this one will be even better!"

"One what?" Yegor would ask.

But, with a twinkle in his eye, all Matysh ever replied was, "You will see..."

Whenever Yegor asked Iskra what Matysh was working on, she'd get flustered and start fidgeting. "He wants to surprise you," was all she'd say. It was the only time that Iskra seemed to lose that brazen unabashedness that Yegor was both intimidated and roused by.

Yegor realized that he was on the last of the onions and slowed down.

There wasn't much to do in a cabin in the woods in the winter, day after day after dark, dark day. So, as a general rule, they would try and take as long as possible to complete any task. Iskra worked on a quilt made from bits of fabric cut from clothes she had mended or had been beyond mending, Matysh carved geometric shapes into pieces of wood, leaving behind splotches of red and little slices all over his soft hands, and Yegor, Yegor waited for Matysh to leave.

When they played, or cooked, or cleaned, Yegor and Iskra talked. He had told her almost everything about himself, more than he'd ever told anyone, which didn't mean much as up until this point no one seemed terribly interested in knowing about the thoughts ricocheting around in his head. But Iskra kept asking, and so he kept answering until she probably knew more about him than even

his own mother had. She was easy to talk to with her disarming laugh, straightforward retorts, and easily blushing cheeks (especially when she heard the bold words that came out of her own mouth).

Yegor had only left out two things: that he'd never kissed a girl, and that he had seen his former commander stand up from being shot in the face to chase him down, presumably into a hole in the ground. The part about the girl he didn't tell because it made him seem young, like a little brother. The part about Commander Boy he didn't tell, partly because he was feeling more certain by the day that he had imagined the whole thing in the strain of battle and didn't want to sound foolish for ever believing such a thing were possible, and partly because he knew that Iskra very much believed that such things were possible and he didn't want to find himself thrust out into the cold where he would no longer be a danger to them, but where there was the possibility, however remote, that his revenant commander might still be searching for him.

Yegor had learned a lot about Iskra's life in return. She'd run away with Matysh when they had been forbidden to marry. Iskra was the daughter of the family's cook and had been considered too low class for Matysh. In love, he had married her anyway. Matysh's mother (well-known in the best social circles) was mortified by the scandal and had disowned him. His father had tried to convince her to find forgiveness in her heart, but, cold and unfeeling as it was, she had refused. Cast out without a kopek, they took what they could and came here to his family's old, abandoned, hunting cabin. Apparently, his family had summered in the nearby village, but something terrible had happened there to make them leave, though Matysh would not say what. The runaways dared not tell Iskra's mother where they were going for fear that she would try and visit them and unwittingly reveal their whereabouts to Matysh's family who most certainly had every man in their employ on the hunt for him like a pack of borzoi hounds in pursuit of a hare.

Iskra missed her mother, and sometimes would begin to tear up when speaking of her. But when Yegor would try to change the subject, she would sit straighter, dredging up a strength from deep within—a bucket of cool water being drawn from a well on a warm day—and would continue her story as if nothing had happened.

Once, when Iskra had the hiccups and she and Yegor were naming people who might be thinking of her (the hiccups would stop when they got the right name), Yegor had foolishly named her mother. Iskra had been so startled by the sudden reminder of her heartache, that the hiccups had stopped. She'd seemed sad but, when Yegor tried to apologize, had said that she was actually happy because that meant that her mother still thought of her.

Yegor finished chopping the onions and wiped his eyes on the back of his sleeve.

“Three onions,” he said comparing the pile of edible against the foul.

“Out of five? Not bad.”

“Do I get a reward?”

“Depends. What do you have in mind?” Iskra laughed.

Yegor wanted to ask for what he knew he could not, so instead he put forth the question, “What is it that Matysh is making?”

Iskra placed down her sewing and sighed, “I’d hoped you would have figured it out for yourself by now, but like my mamushka used to say to Papa, ‘Men have nothing between their ears but wind whistling through a valley.’”

And then Iskra told him.

And then Yegor wished he had never asked.

55. UNIQUENESS THEOREM – 1943

Matysh swung the axe and... missed, barely restraining the downward momentum from driving it into his shin. If only calculating angle of blade and velocity of swing translated into axe chopping wood. Somewhere along the way his muscles missed the memorandum of neurons that his brain was sending, or simply refused to read it.

Matysh had often suspected that his body was revolting against his brain. For instance, his brain knew that even though *most* of the time he missed the log, or got his blade stuck partway in, or struck at an odd angle causing it to hurl toward his unguarded face, according to Probability Theory, *eventually* he would have to hit perfectly and chop this problematic piece of wood exactly in two. Yet his shoulders did not seem to concern themselves with probability distributions, and his arms certainly did not give a second thought to the law of large numbers, and his hands definitely did not care that each time he swung he should have no greater or worse chance of humiliating himself in the presence of the judgmental trees, and his fingers—his fingers were too numb to care about anything.

He was sure that Yegor would have practical knowledge to chop this wood in a fraction of the time—he had grown up on a sort of farm. Iskra had told him this during one of their early morning whisperings as they lay pressed against each other in their small bed while Yegor still snored softly from across the room. Yegor himself didn't divulge much. He was likely less shy with Iskra because they were from a similar class. Matysh had always felt a little self-conscious of his pedigree around his wife, and privately did so still. She said exactly what she was thinking, and then acted without thinking it through. If it had not been for Iskra, he would never have had the courage (nor rashness) to stand up to his mother and leave his assured future for an uncertain one with her.

It had been a season and some since they had hauled what essentials they could pack onto themselves to this little forgotten cabin. It belonged to his family but had long been abandoned for a fancier hunting lodge following the untimely and unnatural death of Oksana, their maid and Matysh's only caregiver. After so many years of abandonment, it showed: the forest had grown onto the lawn, the bathroom was a patch of bushes out back, their tub was the rain (or melted snow), and icy air whistled through every joint and gap, filling the long dark nights with mournful howls akin to a pack of starving wolves.

He hadn't wanted Iskra to have to carry anything, but she had insisted, and he was secretly glad that she had. They still brought too little and had forgotten some embarrassingly obvious

essentials such as a sharpening stone for his dulling axe, rope to bundle and drag branches for the fire, and a bucket—for so many things. He did not realize how useful a bucket could be until now.

And now they had to share it all—with Yegor.

But it was a small price to pay for Iskra no longer coming in from outside with her grey eyes bloodshot and her delicate nose red and runny. Yegor's company made for a happy Iskra, and he liked seeing Iskra happy. A happy Iskra was a distracted Iskra. Distracted from being lonely or distressed while he was out. And more to the point, distracted from joining him on said outings (from experience, she found his woodchopping endeavors *highly* amusing, mercilessly laughing as he again and again proved statistical probability principles fallible).

Matysh reached down to pull the axe from the frozen earth, particularly thankful that his wife had not been there to witness his last pitiable attempt.

As he heaved upward, Matysh was overwhelmed by a rush of lightheadedness. Sparkling shapes crept from his ears towards his pupils. 'Seeing stars' was the vernacular term. They were constantly moving so that he was unable to estimate even a rough number... yet he could just make out... there, through the shimmering veil... the shadow of a silhouette peeking out from behind the white trees.

Enemy? Fugitive? Servant sent to retrieve him?

Matysh gripped the axe handle. Depending on how long he had been watched, his watcher might not know how poor his aim was. Matysh did have an old hunting rifle—found under the bed with a wolf spider at home in each barrel—but he had left it with Iskra. He liked the idea of her having the protection. Besides, she was a much better shot.

The twinkling shapes receded into the peripheral nearly as quickly as they had overtaken him, restoring his view of the forest, dormant under a heavy blanket of snow.

He looked toward where he had seen the figure. There was nobody there. Just him and his own icy breath as he swayed slightly in place.

Perhaps it had been a vulture. Matysh had noticed an increasing number of the avian scavengers. This somewhat unnerved him; their superb sense of smell drew them to the stench of battle.

Or perhaps there *had* been someone. If so, they had already continued on their way to wherever it was they were trying to find their way to (for some it was toward the South, for some it was toward the North, for all it was as far away from the Front as their blistered feet could run them).

Matysh had become somewhat accustomed to spotting strangers amongst the trees on his regular reconnaissance to scout the proximity of the battlefield—for months the fighting had been too close for comfort.

He would begin these ‘missions’ by working his way outward in a steady spiral, always keeping the cabin at the center, as if a string were tied to its smokestack—tethering him to Iskra’s warming stew that would be waiting for him upon his safe return.

Often, he would see nothing but pines, deer hoofprints, and fighters speeding overhead in formation towards the sound of snow-muffled battle in the distance. But occasionally there would be a fleeting sighting—a man slipping between trees, a small group disappearing into the underbrush, once a figure so bundled that it was impossible to discern gender, age, or nationality, scuttling past in a distinctly animal-like manner.

There seemed to be an unspoken agreement in the forest that if you didn’t acknowledge someone, then they wouldn’t acknowledge you. Don’t ask them questions, they won’t ask you questions. You don’t shoot, they won’t shoot.

As of late, it appeared that the front was pushing further away toward the East. The sightings had, consequentially, been decreasing in frequency. Indeed, there had not been many since finding Yegor lying, as if dead, in the snow beneath a downed tree that Matysh had come to investigate for firewood. Yegor had then been surrounded by a wake of vultures, squabbling over who would be bold enough to tear the first nibble. The vultures had learned that in the harsh of middle-winter, the best way to get a meal was to simply wait around for bodies to fall and not get up (though there wasn’t much meat to be found on many of these walking skeletons).

A feeling of being watched woke Matysh from his daydreaming. He looked toward the same patch of trees yet again. And again, there was no one there.

Hunger could make you see things. It could also cause you to consume your own muscle, including the heart.

He brought his attention back toward the unhalved log and readjusted it on the tree-stump, though he knew it was not its positioning that was the problem.

He touched the frozen blade to the center of the wood, lifted it overhead—once, twice, and—let it fall with spectacular inaccuracy. The log stood in the same exact spot and smugly mocked him.

Matysh found himself wishing that the shattered bones of Yegor’s foot were miraculously mended so that he could come help him be the man that he needed to be for Iskra.

But it was too cold for wishing beyond the bounds of possibility.

Matysh dropped the heavy axe beside the stubborn log. It sank into a pile of snow.

All around him the snow sparkled underneath the struggling winter sun. Billions of snowflakes, all unique, as incalculable as the stars behind his eyes.

No two snowflakes were alike; the complex structure emerging whilst the frozen water droplet fell from cloud, through differing temperatures and humidity regions, to ground. Wilson Bentley had attempted to find two that matched by photographing thousands of flakes with a microscope. The images were beautiful, but he was ultimately disappointed.

Matysh wondered what unique, snowflakesque, combination of his and Iskra's traits their child—now growing inside her—would express?

He hoped that it would not get his dominant gene for large noses, which both his father and mother prominently bore. Nor his aptitude for chopping wood, or building cribs.

54. BEHOLDING A WOMAN – 1979

Her mother and aunts buzzed around her sister like bees, but with needles instead of stingers.

The dress was the color of horse blood. It was embroidered with thread from the city: blue like the midday sky, the yellow of turmeric and her mother's hands after cooking, green like roasted pistachios, orange like the candied rinds they ate only on special occasions (such as this), and gold—gold like the ring that her mother wore, and her sister soon would. It was still three days before she would be made a wife, but the cousins were already arriving, the cooking already started, and the finishing stitches on her dress being stitched.

Her sister would be allowed to wear makeup for the wedding and the mothers were trying it on her now, arguing over which color of red her lips should be: saffron red— no ruby red— no blood red to match.

It took more than one set of hands to place the bride crown on.

“How do I appear?” Abji asked, turning around to reveal the finished look. Her face was framed in a curtain of beads that hung like strung pomegranate seeds. Her lips were like two tart cherries, plump and shiny. She was surprised how much her sister looked like a woman.

But her sister already knew that; that she was beautiful. That she was the *most* beautiful because she was the only one with green eyes. She just wanted to hear the bees buzzing their praises.

Her heart hardened in her chest. Like the pit of an apricot after all the fruit had been eaten off, by someone else, someone who hadn't bothered to ask if she wanted any.

She imagined Abji tripping over her gold-threaded hem and falling flat on her pretty, painted face in front of the whole village. In front of her new husband. Then he wouldn't want her, green eyes or not, and she would have to come back home.

This make-believe made her feel better, for a moment. Then she felt bad because she loved her sister, and her sister could not help that Allah had blessed her with green eyes.

“You look like... like a beautiful woman,” she heard herself say.

Her sister was the honey, and she was just another bee trying to get a taste.

She would not have been so envious had she known that she too would become a woman, sooner than she could ever have expected.

53. SOUNDS IN THE NIGHT – 1943

It was if they had agreed not to talk about her swelling belly or what would happen when the baby came.

Yegor did casually mention a couple of times that his mother trusted him to care for his younger sister when she was little. He had no younger sister.

It seemed as though now that he knew her stomach was growing, it became rounder and rounder by the day. And with it she grew more and more vibrant. The quilt (that he now knew she was making for the baby), and the mysterious piece of furniture (that he now knew was a crib), were almost done. And the belly (that he now knew carried a child), kept growing, and growing, and growing...

His foot healed more by the day too. He could walk now, stiffly, though there was barely any room to move around in the already tiny cabin with Matysh's "masterpiece" nearly finished. If there was barely any room for him now, how much less would there be when a baby rested in that lovingly crafted crib?

At night he lay awake near the fire, thinking these sorts of questions and fighting sleep. The reoccurring dreams were relentless. It would be coming towards him. The bullet. There was no way he could avoid it. It would be so close that he could see his distorted reflection in it... then Commander Boy would push him, and he would be falling, falling into a bottomless pile of bodies as the bullet stayed its course and blew his commander's brains all over the inside of the truck. And then he would run, tripping over the bodies. So many bodies. Blank eyes staring up at him. Bloodstained hands trying to pull him down. Commander Boy would follow, always right behind no matter how fast he ran, his one good eye seeking him out no matter how well he hid, twirling that bullet that had been meant for him through his fingers until it became a blur...

He knew that they were just dreams, and that the stress of war had likely caused him to hallucinate the horrifying and entirely inexplicable incident, but there was a part of him that on a visceral level feared that he hadn't imagined a thing. That that bullet really *had* been meant for him. That Commander Boy was still out there. Searching. So that he might deliver Yegor to Death in his place.

Yegor relived that moment often. Less so when he was awake and distracted by Matysh's jovial ramblings and Iskra's lively chatter. But it was nearly all he could think about when the fire went out.

Yet sometimes it was all he *tried* to think about. Sometimes he *welcomed* the wailing of wounded men. *Willed* the cacophony of gun cracks to surround him. *Urged* on the high-pitched whine of bombs whizzing by and the splatter of raining mud that followed. Though it was often not enough to drown out the gentle, rhythmic, creaking of the cot across the room.

In those moments, he would close his eyes tightly and try to count down from a great number, concentrating on the next number with all of his attention so that he had none to spare for Iskra's soft short inhales. As seconds stretched to minutes, Yegor was ashamed to admit, he sometimes let himself fantasize that it was he who was making the cot groan and Iskra moan.

As her belly rounded to the size of a pumpkin (a favorite of Czarina's), Yegor started to wonder whether he'd be able to hold back his raging feelings for Iskra much longer.

He knew he should be grateful. How lucky he was that the bullet missed him! He should feel fortunate to even be alive! But Yegor could not help but think that being in love with a taken woman was a fate worse than death.

He had started to formulate a sort of story in his mind, like one his babushka used to tell to him so that he would know how to be a hero to a maiden of his own someday. He would confess to Iskra how he felt, and she would confess that she felt the same way. And they would run away together. And they would raise the child as their own. And be a family. But whenever he tried to let himself play out this fantasy scenario to "and they lived happily ever after" a voice inside would interrupt, *How can you compete with Matysh?* and then, *How can you betray his trust?*

—

It was some time mid-day, though it was impossible to tell with the windows covered, when Matysh stepped away from his scribbling and said he was going out to grab some wood from the pile.

"I'll get it," Iskra offered. "The baby could use some exercise."

Yegor, who was practicing shuffling tricks with his pack of cards, felt slightly hurt by this. A sign that she didn't enjoy their time alone as much as he did.

"Join me, Yegor?"

Yegor looked up at Iskra who was by the door. She was holding out his army jacket.

He hadn't been outside since he had arrived. Granted, his foot was largely healed, but he'd been nervous about leaving the safety of the cabin. Besides, usually it was Matysh who went out, so why would he leave and miss his opportunity to be alone with Iskra? Iskra who was now asking to be alone with him.

"I suppose—"

“*Ypa!* It will be good to get some movement back into your foot.”

Why? Because she was planning on sending him away on foot? But before he could dwell on that terrible thought, he had been bundled up, Red Army boots back on (the stranded one had been retrieved by Matysh some time ago) and was walking lamely along next to Iskra.

The air was fresher than Yegor remembered air could be. Though it chilled his lungs, he breathed it in deeply, leaving him lightheaded and giddy.

Everything was bright and radiant with sunlight. Including Iskra’s golden curls which bounced softly with every step she took away from the cabin, from Matysh, and deeper into the seclusion of the forest, with him.

Yegor admired her cheeks, flush with cold and excitement as she found the first snowdrops of the season. Their little bell-shaped flowers pointed down at the snow that they had only just burst forth from. She squatted, with some difficulty, and ran the tip of her finger across the tiny white bells. Yegor half expected to hear them tinkle.

“No fairies in this one.”

“Fairies?”

“Oh yes, they hide up in the bells. Didn’t you know?”

Yegor didn’t know how to respond to that, so he didn’t. “Uh…”

Iskra giggled.

“Help me up, will you?” Yegor took Iskra’s outstretched hand in his and helped heave her back up.

She didn’t let go right away. But then her hand slid from his, leaving his skin feeling tingly and exposed.

They stood in silence—the kind of silence that only a winter forest can whisper—Iskra looking down at the snowdrops and Yegor looking at Iskra looking down at the snowdrops.

“Spring is coming soon,” she said, and she looked at *him* now. Her grey eyes were so bright they were almost silver.

Iskra and he stood so close that the warm breath from her mouth, unfurling like smoke, mingled with his own. Smoke from his internal fire for her.

Yegor opened his mouth, not sure what words would leave it, but knowing that this was the time to say what needed to be said, when he saw it—a dark figure hiding between the barren trees.

“Oh!” Iskra exclaimed. Yegor looked back to her. “The baby just kicked so hard!”

Could the baby sense Commander Boy nearby too?

“She is doing acrobatics in there, I think. Want to feel?” Iskra took his hand and placed it on her belly. It was moving around, as if possessed.

Yegor felt a wave of unease pass through him.

“Are you alright?” Iskra was wearing an expression of mild concern.

“I’m not sure...” He was craning and whipping his neck around, searching frantically amongst the trees, but the figure was not there.

“I think we should get you home.” Iskra took his arm to gently lead him back toward the cabin, but he stayed rooted to the spot. If Commander Boy had seen him, then he was here somewhere, nearby. Hiding from view. Watching. If Yegor went back, he would surely lure him there. He had to keep Iskra safe. He had to run.

“Come on,” she said in her very Iskra way, half serious, half mocking.

He looked around once more. All around.

“What is it? What do you see?”

Nothing. He saw nothing.

Perhaps it was just his paranoia that caused him to see the figure. Paranoia brought on by nerves. Nerves from being outside for the first time in months. Nerves from being about to confess his undying love to Iskra. It was probably an animal, or a figment of his imagination...

“Yegor, talk to me!” Iskra’s hand was now in his. Her skin warming his skin.

“Sorry, I thought I saw...”

“What? What did you see?” It was Iskra who now looked worried. She began search the shadows of the trees surrounding them. Yegor suddenly remembered that she was still afraid of being found by Matysh’s family. He didn’t want to make her worry over some phantom of a shadow. Not in her condition.

“Just an animal.”

—

That night Yegor lay awake trying not to dream. Instead, he occupied himself with worrying about the baby, about there being no room for him, about being sent out into the cold woods where Commander Boy lurked in wait, twirling that bullet between his fingers... then he heard the gasp.

At first, he thought of a large number. Would 700 be high enough?

Then a sharper gasp.

A gasp not of pleasure, but of pain.

52. BLOOD AND GUTS – 1943

He must have wet the bed.

Matysh had been drinking so much hot water to stave off the hunger pangs that he was constantly having to bolt out into the cold to relieve himself. Perhaps he hadn't emptied his bladder enough before he'd fallen asleep, pressed between the rough cold logs of the cabin wall at his back and the warmth of Iskra's back against his front; she could now only sleep facing away from him, her full belly taking up nearly all of the cot.

Then he heard the gasp.

"Iskra?" Yegor's voice from near the dark hearth where Matysh was secretly envious that he slept—all of the room to stretch out that he wanted and none of the shoulder pain and back spasms suffered from being wedged up against the wall.

Another pained intake of air.

"Iskra?" Matysh reached out to gently shake her awake in the event she was only having a bad dream—hunger can do that to you—and his hand met soaked fabric.

"What's the matter?" Yegor was beside them now. He crouched down. "Is she in labor?"

Naturally—the wetness—her water must have broken!

"Is it the baby, IskraKitten?"

Her only response was an unnatural, guttural groan.

"Iskra, how can we help you?" Yegor pleaded.

"Light. We need—" but Yegor was at the hearth before Matysh could finish his command. He heard the familiar scrape and sizzle of the fire being stoked, the crackle of the reigniting embers, the soft roar of a new flame bursting forth.

The little room was suddenly ablaze with a bright warm glow, illuminating Yegor adding twigs to the greedy flame, flickering light through the uneven spindles of the crib, casting bars of shadow across the cot, and sending shimmering orange reflections dancing over the surface of a puddle of red.

Blood.

It filled the cot—fresh, not yet sticky—and Matysh swam in it. He felt a shudder pass through him and gagged, though there was nothing to come up.

His first instinct was to calculate how much blood loss there had been, but it was impossible to measure without being collected in a solid container, and they had no such container—that damn

bucket they hadn't thought to bring! Besides, the blankets had already absorbed too much for an accurate calculation. Normally, he'd feel better knowing exactly how much had been lost (he was comforted by precise measurements), but he had a feeling that would not be the case in this particular situation.

Matysh began to peel himself up from his tiny sliver of resting space so that he could come around to the front of Iskra and see her face—see if he could reach her. But as he rose, he noticed the large pool of shining blood growing outward across the floor like an exploding star.

Matysh caught sight of his reflection in its glassy surface and was shocked to see that it was not his face as he remembered it from the grand mirrors of his manor home, but gaunt and sickly. The image elicited the memory of another time his reflection had not seemed his own, in the school bathroom mirror, having just fled from his biology lesson.

Biology had always been his worst subject. He could memorize the structure of a cell and map the classifications of animal species with ease, but when it came to the blood and guts—dissection time—he simply couldn't stomach it.

He had always had an aversion to bodily fluids; a squeamish child, never playing in the dirt with the other boys who slingshotted worms at each other at garden parties when their mothers weren't watching and smashed them open on rocks to investigate the mass of guts, organs, and digested dirt encased inside. He remembered when, in secondary school, he had been asked to perform his first dissection on that same smooth segmented body. He had felt so badly for it. It looked so exposed, ripped from the soil, naked in the bright open air, only to be plunged into a sterile vial of isopropyl alcohol. It seemed so... unfair. So, while his fellow classmates were gleefully pinning their worms to the dissection table, Matysh had quietly set his scalpel aside, excused himself by feigning some illness or other, walked to the nearest bathroom, locked himself in with the row of child-sized squat toilets, and wept. When he came out and looked at himself in the mirror, he observed his humanness in a way he had never noticed before. For the first time was ashamed to belong to his species.

After school, he returned to the science room—all evidence of worm dismemberment wiped clean—to apologize for missing that day's lesson. The teacher proposed he make up the class by writing a paper outlining worm anatomy to which Matysh had heartily agreed. He received top marks. From that day on, Matysh opted to write the paper rather than dissect every time: the frog with the delicate webbed toes, the cow eyeball that stared back at you, the red gleaming pig's heart still fresh from the butcher's knife. He had thought he was being so clever with his excuses—headaches,

stomach flu, mysterious blurry vision—but he now realized that his teachers must have known, considering that they started discussing his next paper with him before he'd even made up the newest excuse.

That all changed in University. He had been fairly certain that his future lay in the realm of maths, but his father insisted that “a well-rounded student makes for a well-versed scholar” and enrolled him in an anatomy course. This was well past the point of pig hearts and the professor did not care for excuses. On dissection days, Matysh would be sure not to eat anything beforehand and wear a kerchief over his face to steady his stomach against the formaldehyde fumes. He would take an observer's role as his lab partner readily released the taut muscle from beneath the dehydrated skin of a street dog with one long delicate slice, or—with that same blade—remove the tubercular lung from an equally malnourished man.

It was the last unit of the semester, Matysh already resolved to leave his practical studies of biology behind, when the cadaver was rolled out. Apparently, this was a big treat as it was a “fresh death.” No one asked where it came from. It had not been frozen or in any other way preserved, so when Matysh tentatively made the first incision—as ordered by his professor who had not failed to notice his lack of active participation—it leaked. He had thrown up right then and there. On the cadaver.

He was given passing marks, perhaps because the professor did not want to have to deal with him again the next semester, but more likely because of the importance of his father. He kept waiting for his father to ask to speak to him about the incident, but he never did, which could only mean that he hadn't been told. How that was possible in an environment where information seemed to move faster than sound waves along a 22-gauge copper wire, Matysh did not know. Likely, it was because no one wanted to speak ill of the esteemed Professor Markov's son for fear that they might fall out of his favor. Little did they know that had they spoken up, it probably would have earned them a position of rare respect. It was not that his father rewarded people who spoke ill of his son—he had always been a supportive and fair father—but he valued TRUTH above all else. A person who would choose honesty over academic politics would have chosen integrity over fear, and *that* was to be admired, no matter the circumstance. But none of the desperate-to-impress students understood that, and so no one spoke a word about the incident.

The professor had on the spot excused Matysh from the rest of the unit. Henceforth, Matysh dedicated himself to a vocation rooted in the theoretical, where the worst threat of injury was a paper

cut while working out an equation (and even then, he would feel slightly nauseated at the sight of a red splotch amidst the numbers).

Blood.

He retched again. This time a searing pain traveled up his throat as bitter, acidic, bile met the roof of his mouth.

Matysh tried again to extract himself from the cot, this time sliding successfully off. He hurried around to the front where Yegor was returned, crouched down next to Iskra, begging her to look at him. To open her eyes.

Matysh lowered himself down beside Yegor, “Let me.”

Yegor wavered for a moment but then moved aside.

The blood loss was indeed extreme. Quite likely more than the 1/5th loss of the body’s blood supply that marked hemorrhagic shock, making it difficult for the heart to pump a sufficient amount of oxygen-rich hemoglobin through its veins, often leading to organ failure.

What were the symptoms again? Pale skin. It was too dimly lit to tell. Cold skin. He put the back of his hand to Iskra’s cheek. It was cold and clammy. Her breathing was rapid and shallow, also a bad sign. He knew as he put his finger to her pulse that he would find it as weak as he feared.

“Iskra, make any noise at all if you can hear me.”

A groan.

Matysh looked to Yegor who had started pacing back and forth through the puddle of spilt blood cells, plasma, and platelets. He was looking from Iskra to the door and back again.

“We need to fetch the village doctor,” Matysh heard himself say.

“The doctor? But aren’t you hiding—”

“That doesn’t matter anymore.” Matysh looked back to Iskra. There was only one thing that mattered now. That had ever mattered. “Turn left out the door and run until you intersect with a river. Follow it upstream. Once you find the bridge—”

“You want *me* to—” Yegor interrupted, “I— I can’t go out there.” He was staring nervously around at the windows and door, looking back and forth as if preparing for someone to burst forth from one of them at any moment and attack.

“You must!” Matysh heard a desperation in his own voice.

“I’ll stay with Iskra,” Yegor offered, then added, “You know the way better.”

“She is my wife. I am not leaving her.” How could Yegor even ask? “Now, cross the bridge and follow the road into town. The doctor is three houses to the right of the old church—”

“But I can’t go out there,” Yegor repeated, shaking his head as he backed away from the door.

Matysh couldn’t believe that Yegor would not want to help when he had always been so willing and seemed so fond of Iskra, like she was his older sister even. “Your foot is healed well enough to carry you on this life-or-death errand!”

“It’s not my foot, it’s just that... *he’s* out there.”

“He?”

“He— He’s looking for me. I didn’t tell you before, because I didn’t want to frighten Iskra, but— she felt him earlier today, the baby felt him. He was nearby. He might still be. If we don’t let him in, she might still have a chance...”

Was he lying? Making an excuse? Or was there more to Yegor’s story than Matysh knew? He wished now he had not been too polite to ask.

“There is no one out there, Yegor. If someone were out there, they would have broken in already. Or they’d be frozen to death!”

“He can’t— I— just can’t.”

Matysh felt his shock turn to anger. All those times he’d purposefully left them alone together because he knew that they could talk more openly when he wasn’t around. All that time he could have spent with Iskra! And here he was starving, yet still sharing his food with Yegor as if he were a member of their family. And yet, at the first real request for help, he doesn’t want to go?!

“I do not know who you are running from, and I do not care to. We’ve never asked—for *anything*. You *owe* us. Please, for the love of God, go!”

“It’s not God that I’m worried about,” Yegor mumbled. But then a decision set his face firm and he suddenly seized his long-unused army coat, shoved his feet into his boots, and wrapped one of Iskra’s shawls around his head.

He gave her one last, grim look then opened the door, inviting in a gust of snow that stirred the flames and caused the bars of shadow to dance furiously around the cabin.

The flames calmed back down. Yegor was gone.

His bloody footprints marking his passage out into the night.

51. EXPLORER – 1979

Her *sister* had not been kicked out of the house.

She was being told secrets that only women—or girls about to become women—could know. Secrets she would pester her sister to tell later.

Her younger brothers and sisters, also sent away, tagged along behind her as she set out towards her closest auntie’s house. This auntie had many children of her own, maybe she wouldn’t notice a few more.

—

“What are you all doing here?” asked her auntie, who seemed to be having company—some visiting relative for the wedding. They were cooking together on an outdoor skillet from which large amounts of good smelling steam was rising.

“Madar is talking to Abji.”

“Ah... well go out back with the others.” She waved her and her brothers and sisters away.

Behind the house there were children everywhere—playfighting with sticks, singing to horse-hair dolls, chasing each other in circles and giggling wildly (a few were crying, but someone always was). Some were her cousins, but many she had never seen before—more relatives.

Several young mothers with nursing babies attached, and some older girls who had not yet been found husbands, seemed to be keeping a casual eye on the children from where they squatted in the shade of a cloth canopy.

Her brothers and sisters were soon playing and singing and giggling and crying along with the rest. Not her. She only wanted to play with Abji.

She was not supposed to wander off on her own, but no one seemed to notice or care. So, she headed away from her auntie’s house, towards the lumpy brown tents that were spread across the sand like really big dung patties. They were the tents of visiting relatives—her sister’s, and her sister’s soon to be husband’s. Between the two of them they had enough relatives to double the size of the village.

Women swept sand out of entranceways, men talked amongst each other with lower lips bulging full of naswar, boys hung around the horses and sucked on the green powder snuck from the men, girls watched her walk past with arms crossed. They were probably wondering what kind of girl would be wandering around on her own.

The kind that wanted to visit the other villages that the relatives had come from, maybe even the big city where only the boys would go because it was too dangerous for girls—unless they were the wrong kind of girl, or wanted to become the wrong kind.

Abji told her that there had been girls from their village who had gone there. If they ever tried to return home, their parents would pretend that they did not know who they were anymore. She did not want to be the wrong kind of girl. She did not want her parents to pretend not to know her anymore. But she also wanted to see the city. To see the world.

She'd dress like one of her brothers; slip on a pair of tonbaan, tuck her hair under a hat. She did it all the time with Abji when they were thieves or treasure hunters or—her favorite—explorers from a distant land. Though her sister was too pretty to be a believable boy. Soon she'd be too pregnant too.

She reached the edge of the dung patty village where a couple of recently arrived families were still unpacking their camels. She turned away from them and set out boldly (Abji told her that if you don't want to be bothered you should walk like you're on an important errand for your padar) towards the sand dunes that looked like the humps of giant camels.

One of the sandy humps had a twisted old tree at the top of it. The branches grew sideways instead of up because of the wind. She climbed the sand and then the smooth bark. From here she could see the whole village. It looked like a village for dolls.

“I declare this land discovered, by me, the greatest explorer of all time!”

The tree was a mountain. Her mother's old hijab that she used to protect against dust storms, a flag.

She tied it to the highest branch. It just hung there like a dead snake. There was no wind today.

She dug for treasure for a bit, but it wasn't the same without her sister.

Had it been long enough?

She untied her scarf and shrugged it back around her shoulders.

Was it time yet for Abji to whisper to her the secrets that only women—or girls about to become women—could know?

50. UNDER COVER – 1943

He tore through the trees, snapping twigs from splintering branches, ripping past brambles, leaving a tracker's wildest dream in his wake—Yegor; a wild boar in the brush, and Commander Boy; the hunter. Yet he felt he had no choice but to barrel on. Slowing down to slide stealthily from shadow to shadow like he (and his swelling foot) wanted to do, might mean the difference between life and—

Yegor was overcome with shame at the thought of how he had hesitated to help. Of how he had been a coward once again when confronted with the choice between valor and self-preservation.

Matysh, of course, was right. They *had* done so much for him. *Iskra* had done so much for him. If she died before the doctor made it to her, because he had delayed... Yegor pushed the thought from his mind as he plowed through the thick underbrush. She had brought him back to life. Now she deserved the same.

Let Commander Boy try and stop him!

Yegor ran harder and faster through the forest, crushing frosted leaves underfoot. He was forcibly reminded of the last time he sprinted through these woods. He could only hope he would fare better this time.

How far had Matysh said the river would be? Did he say? Had he somehow run past it? Veered in the wrong direction?

There was but the tiniest sliver of moon to see by. It kept peeking out from behind the icy clouds to wink at him before concealing itself again. Each time it did this, he would have to stop and wait for his eyes to readjust to the lack of light until the dark dissolved into shades of shadow. This made for maddeningly halted progress.

It was as if Death herself were playing a duplicitous game of Hide and Seek with him from the starless sky.

Perhaps she was watching him from the heavens. Was she not part of nature? Was it not natural for all things to die?

Yet Yegor had not. So why should *Iskra*?

Perhaps Yegor could make a deal with Death. What would she want in exchange for sparing *Iskra's* life? What would he be willing to give to save her? *Anything*, Yegor thought.

He landed on his back with a sickening crack. Felt his breath forcefully leave his lungs.

He gasped.

Chill air swelled his deflated chest and sent him into a fit of coughing.

Yegor put his hand down and felt a chill, sleek surface beneath him.

He had slipped. The cracking sound had been ice. Fortunately, it appeared not to have broken through completely, yet.

Now that the racket of ripping roots and snapping branches had ceased, he could clearly hear the soft glubbing of the river below where he lay sprawled on his back across its frozen surface.

He knew a boy who had drowned like this. The kids in his village had been taking turns taunting each other to walk out onto the river where they were forbidden to venture in winter. The boy was showing off and had gone out too far where the ice was thinnest and had fallen through. He had flailed around for a few moments while Yegor and the other children watched, both stunned and captivated, and then he was gone. The wind rustled the dead leaves still clinging to the frosty branches. The birds called to each other across the white winter sky. It was like he had never been there. Yegor remembered thinking how that could have been *him*. That *he* would have walked out on the ice if he'd been dared. But no one had thought him brave enough to bother.

Yegor dredged up the memory of supper that night, his father teaching him the trick to getting off of ice if you fall, "Stay still. Keep your body as flat and wide as you can to spread out your weight. And slowly slither yourself off the ice like a water snake." He then added something about how idiotic the boy had been for flailing around like a *durak*. This had pleased Yegor.

He followed his father's long-ago given advice and very, very, carefully rolled over onto his stomach. From there, he gingerly spread his arms and legs out wide. His heartbeat, still quickened from the shock of falling, pounded against the cold, hard surface. His breath, still heavy from running, billowed off the tip of his nose, melting the frost just beneath it.

The urgency of his mission wanted him to stand back up and run. But he dared not.

Painfully slowly, Yegor wormed his way over the sheet of ice between him and the wintery water beneath.

At last, Yegor felt the rugged frozen mud of the riverbank and clambered onto solid ground. Once he had safely seated himself on the shore, he looked back at the place where he had fallen. The moon, who had unabashedly come out of hiding to watch Yegor humiliate himself, looked as well.

Only from the trail that his stomach had made from slithering through the dusting of snow that covered the ice, could Yegor make out where he had slipped and landed. He could just perceive the softest, superficial cracks there, though he could have been imagining them. This ice was thick, so thick that he could have stood up and walked off it.

He hadn't been in any real danger of falling through.

Yegor felt foolish having slid on his belly like a little boy frightened of drowning, more so for not having noticed the river in the first place. At least no one was around to witness his folly—except maybe Death. No, Death would have sunk him to the bottom of the cold black waters had she the chance. She must be elsewhere occupied. Yegor didn't want to think where.

He got up and began to run once again upstream.

He moved faster now, despite the intensifying pain in his foot; a path had been cleared for him by the bank of the river. There, around the bend, a stone bridge and a country road.

The first gentle light was beginning to creep its way up behind the mountains that framed the village tucked safely into the valley below. Yegor took the road toward the friendly little lights in the distance. His foot throbbed with every impact, but still he ran.

As he reached the outskirts of town, the road became wildly uneven, lined with crisscrossing carriage ruts and deep hoofprints where horses must have struggled through the mud of autumn before winter froze the marks of their toil solid.

Endeavoring not to turn the ankle of his injured foot, Yegor carefully circumnavigated the many pits and divots while trying to keep pace. All of a sudden, and perhaps too late, it dawned on him that anyone who happened to look out their window and see him trudging down the middle of their street in his army jacket would take him for a deserter, which he supposed he was. He would have to make up a story that included the coat (it was much too cold to take it off). He would tell the doctor that there were wounded men in the woods, that they'd somehow got separated from their troop and gotten lost. He couldn't tell the doctor the real reason he needed him, or he might bring the authorities to retrieve the runaways. Besides, the story didn't matter if he couldn't find the doctor to tell it to.

Yegor soon located the church, its welcoming spire calling him toward it.

The enemy had left their mark here—most of the stained-glass windows were boarded up, and there was a chunk missing out of the house next door, as if a bomb had been aiming for the church but had missed.

Now, how many houses from the left of the church was the doctor? Or was it to the right?

Desperately, Yegor looked up and down the unpaved street. A handsome sign with gold lettering, just visible in the brightening blue light, quickly caught his eye. Swinging from brass chains in the chilled breeze, it read: *Mister S. Baranov, Physician.*

There was no point hesitating. Yegor trudged right up to the front door, lifted the metal knocker, and let it fall with a loud clunk against its brass plate once, twice, three times, four—the door

swung open and a bleary-eyed woman in a robe and frilly nightcap confronted him, “This had better be an emergency.”

“It is—” Yegor spoke swiftly, spinning his tale of savage war and unlikely survival and need for a doctor immediately!

“Doctor Baranov is away.”

“Away? I— I need him *now*.”

The woman in the nightcap, blocking his way into the doctor’s residence, did not seem moved.

“Comrade,” he added for politeness. “Do you know how long the doctor will be?”

“I can’t say, no. He has been called to serve the Motherland as a combat medic. He will return when we have won her Great Patriotic War,” she said as if she knew it to be wishful thinking.

“Is there anyone else, an assistant perhaps?”

“Doctor Baranov’s assistant is currently *assisting* him.”

“Right... Is there anyone else? A midwife?”

“Why would you need a midwife for an injured soldier?”

“I don’t— I only thought— someone with a medical background— is there no one else?”

“There *is* the old doctor, Dr. Volkov, but—”

“Where can I find him?”

“His is the last house out of town, just before the bridge.” She pointed back toward the direction from which he had come. He must have passed it and not even noticed. “But you should know—”

Yegor didn’t wait for her to give him a reason why he should not go. It didn’t matter how old the doctor was as long as he could still walk and had his wits about him.

—

A twittering of overwintering birds was singing the sun awake as he reached the house. It was tiny and the lawn so unkempt that it was no wonder he had overlooked it before. Yegor knocked.

The man who answered was much younger than he expected, no older than forty, but Yegor had no time to wonder why the villager had called him the “old” doctor. He also had no time to ask about the elegant patch that covered one of his eyes. This side trip had already added more time than he cared to know onto this life-or-death errand. So now, not only would he have to convince this half-blind doctor to come with him, but he’d have to convince him to run.

“There are. Wounded. Men!” Yegor panted through the gap between the frame and the door. “We were forced into the woods. By the Germans. Separated from our troop. Been lost for days in the snow. We need a doctor. Desperately.” Yegor clutched the stitch at his side.

The doctor squinted in the morning light with his one good eye, looking rather stupefied by the sudden interruption of his breakfast which Yegor could see laid out on the table in the room behind him, beside a teetering stack of reading material.

“Please, can you help?” Yegor urged.

“Why do you assume that I am a doctor?”

At first Yegor was taken aback. He even looked to either side of the small cottage to see if he had missed any other houses along the lane. But there was something about the way that this man dressed and held himself that reminded him of Matysh. A certain refinement. Schooling. This had to be the doctor.

“A woman in the village sent me here.”

“Did she?” The doctor looked bemused for a moment, then, “These men, why did they not accompany you?”

“As I explained to you, Mister, they are wounded.”

“Severely?”

“Yes!”

“Yes. Yes. I think I can help. Indeed. Let me retrieve my case.” The doctor stepped back inside and closed his door.

Yegor wondered if that had been an excuse to retreat inside, but a moment later the doctor reemerged in a handsome traveling cloak that matched his eye-patch and a smart, gleaming leather bag in slender, gloved hand.

As they set out, the thought occurred to Yegor that he might warn the doctor to keep a watch out for Commander Boy. *But how would he explain even if he had time to explain?* So, Yegor said nothing and hoped only that they could outrun him, should he follow.

Luckily, the doctor was light-footed. Legs long and graceful where Yegor’s were short and clumsy. Footsteps buoyant while Yegor’s were plodding. There was now a sharp pain every time Yegor landed on his injured foot, and he feared he had rebroken the not quite yet healed bones. But still he lumbered and limped along behind the spry doctor who had taken the lead along the riverbank back upstream.

By time they reached the cabin, it was basking in the morning sun that filtered through the trees. They had returned at a much swifter pace than Yegor had taken to find the doctor. He blamed the malevolent moon.

Yegor hadn't wanted to tell the doctor that his story was fabricated until they arrived, lest he have a change of heart. Only now as they neared the door was it that Yegor said, "There is something I ought to inform you—" but Iskra's scream from inside spared him the effort of explaining any further.

The doctor glanced sideways at Yegor with his good eye. A look of puzzlement turned—eager? But the moment passed, and he was already taking several long strides to the door. He pushed it open.

Through the doorway, like a framed still-life lit by a ray of morning sun, Yegor viewed the scene before him: Matysh sat on the floor with Iskra, who had been moved to his own bed near the hearth. Her head was cradled in his lap. She had been changed into a clean nightgown and was wrapped in the quilt she had so painstakingly crafted. Between her legs, a circular stain of blood ruined the carefully cross-stitched pattern of horses and horseshoes meant to bring good fortune to the baby. Her lips were purple, but her chest still moved gently with quick, shallow breaths. Then, as if possessed, the whites of her eyes rolled, and she screamed again.

Matysh looked up at the opened door. Then he was standing before Yegor saw his legs straighten.

"What is *he* doing here?"

"The doctor was away— this is the old doctor," Yegor began, but as he said it, the meaning of the word 'old' clicked into place in his brain. Old, not as in age, but as in *used* to be the doctor. So why wasn't he the doctor anymore? Yegor had a sinking feeling that he didn't want to know the answer to that.

Alas, Matysh offered it anyway, "He's no doctor. *Murderer.*"

"That's quite the accu—" began the old doctor.

"I am Adrik Markov's son," Matysh proclaimed, as if that were explanation enough.

This seemed to mean something to the doctor though Yegor could not see how Matysh's father had any bearing on this situation.

"As I explained to your father, the maid was very ill. I did everything I could to ease her pain."

"By prescribing poison for a cold?" Matysh spat back.

Yegor was profoundly confused by the odd turn of events unfolding before him. Somehow Matysh knew this doctor, and the doctor seemed to know him, or at least Matysh's father. It would

seem from when his family summered in the nearby village. And he had treated their maid for a cold. But given her poison instead of medicine. *But why would any doctor do that?*

“I saved her the suffering of a long, drawn-out death from Influenza. I can ease her suffering, too,” the old doctor said gently, taking a step toward Iskra. “She is clearly in hemorrhagic shock.”

“Don’t take one further step! You are *not* welcome here. Your services are *not* needed.” Matysh moved himself between the doctor and Iskra.

It was as if the icy air filling the cabin froze time itself: The doctor face-t-face with Matysh who was looking at him with mingled horror and defiance. The doctor, though older and not as broad as Matysh, appeared in perfect health (aside from the eyepatch) and full of vitality, whereas Matysh, in contrast, looked starving and sunken. Yegor was shocked to realize how much weight he had lost.

As if the doctor had the power to manipulate time, he started it again with his voice, “I have come to help.” With those words, he lunged abruptly toward Iskra.

The two men were suddenly one. One man with many limbs trying to tear itself apart. Matysh managed to wrestle the doctor out of the cabin, nearly knocking Yegor over as they tumbled into the wet snow.

Yegor stood there, as if carved from ice, until a scream unthawed him.

Iskra was gasping like a fish out of water, eyes rolling, moaning. He ran over to her, but before he could help, before he could even reach out and brush a blonde curl from her clammy brow, he was shoved aside.

“Let me see. I can help.” The doctor was beside him.

Yegor knew he should stop him, but while he was deliberating his best recourse—the flash of a scalpel swept across Iskra’s perfect throat.

There was a moment in which it appeared that the doctor had merely sliced through the air just above her skin, as Yegor could see no visible incision. Then a single long slit spread open like a strand of rubies stringing themselves around her neck. Whatever blood was left in her trickled out as she took one, final, wet gasp.

Iskra was dead.

Matysh flung himself from the door and knocked the doctor aside—too late.

Iskra was dead.

Yegor stood up as the two men struggled for the scalpel, crashing into the crib, and sending spindles rolling across the floor like stray grenades.

Iskra was dead.

Yegor took a step back, unable to wrench his gaze away from her once rosy cheeks, now pale as snowdrops.

He heard the sound of a man wailing on the battlefield, crying out for the embrace of a woman he would never be touched by again. Or was that him crying out for—

Iskra was dead.

He was suddenly knocked to the floor by the struggle, tangled up in muscle and madness. As the men rolled away, Yegor was able to dislodge himself. He scrambled up, tripping over a stray spindle and smacking into the doorframe—hard—with a crack like gunfire.

Yegor gripped the frame to keep from falling right out the door. As he turned to look back at the scene, he noticed that his hand left behind a red print on the wood.

Iskra was dead.

Matysh and the doctor were locked in an embattled embrace. The doctor was trying to claw at Matysh's face with his slender surgeon's fingers, but Matysh managed to catch his head in an arm hold and flip him onto his back. The doctor used the momentum to roll Matysh right over him and pin him down in turn. As he did, the doctor's eye-patch started to slip...

Puckered skin encased an eyeball, shriveled, and scarred.

Bombs hurtled through Yegor's brain, reverberating off the inner walls of his skull; he had brought the old doctor here.

Iskra was dead, because of him.

Yegor turned. Away from Matysh and the doctor writhing together across the cabin floor. Away from Iskra's body bled out on the hearth. Away from his broken heart, he ran.

49. THE SECRET – 1979

Her sister's back was against hers.

It was the last time that she would feel it. Where it pressed into her and where it curved away. Where it gave warmth and where it left her cold.

"I am so excited I cannot sleep!" her sister whispered so as not to wake the little ones.

I am so sad I cannot sleep, she thought. But she didn't say it out loud.

"Are you still angry at me for not telling you?"

She *was* still angry. But she did not say that out loud either. She would wake the little ones for sure if she did.

"I told you; Madar made me promise. And you really *are* too young to know such things."

Her sister had never told her that she was too young before now. Her sister had always told her everything before now.

"I can tell you're awake."

They had slept side-by-side for almost their whole lives. Her sister knew her sleeping breathing. And she knew her pretending to be sleeping breathing too. But even though she knew that her sister knew, she still pretended anyway.

"I can't tell you the secrets Madar told me, but I *can* tell you a different secret. Not even Madar knows yet."

She pretended still, until—"What secret?"—she could no more.

"Oh good, you're awake," Abji teased softly.

Her sister turned over so that they were face to face. She could not see her sister's eyes in the dark, but she could sense that they were open.

Abji pulled the blankets over them so that they were in their own little private world. She smelled like cardamom and rose water.

"What secret, Abji?"

"The angel. He is coming. To the wedding!"

"He is?"

She had never heard of an angel coming to a wedding before. What would he look like?

"As the guest of honor," her sister confided. "I asked my love to invite him, and he said 'yes!'"

What color skin would he have? What color eyes? Would he shine like the moon or twinkle like sunlight on sand? What would he wear? Would he have to cut holes in his shirt for his wings?

The wondering kept her awake long after her sister's breathing became sleeping breathing.

48. NO LOOK DOWN – 2011

Jac looked down even though she knew she wasn't supposed to. Then again, she also wasn't supposed to leave base without permission or escort in an active war zone, hitch a helicopter ride from Kabul to Kandahar, slip on a burqa, bribe some pre-teen to be her "male guardian," hop a bus to a speck of a village at the edge of the Registan Desert, climb a thousand-foot cliff without UAI certified climbing gear, all for a self-serving interview based on hearsay.

Yet here she was.

Looking down.

Her guide, a local named Berikbol, had strictly forbidden it. He'd wanted to blindfold her at first so that she would not fall prey to temptation. Claimed that one could just as easily climb by feel as by sight, that in fact many found it easier, and his young children training to be guides often practiced this way.

Might as well ask a photographer to shoot with his eyes closed.

Jac could just make out the settlement in the distance: a haphazard clump of squat, flat-topped, mud dwellings. Beyond, dunes undulated like colossal snake tracks rippling across the desert. They stretched unbroken to the horizon and beyond.

It hadn't looked so far up from down there.

The muscles in her hands started to spasm and Jac gripped tighter. No way to stop the muscles around her eye from twitching, though. Knuckles whitened around the weather-worn metal of the climbing rungs as she watched wisps of clouds flit over the sea of sand a thousand feet below.

Vertigo vomited from gut to skull.

She knew the feeling well, even though she'd never scaled the sheer side of a desert cliff before with nothing between her and the earth but air and iron handholds hammered into stone by some unknown and incomprehensible person from the past to whom she was trusting her life: *another fucking panic attack.*

Her editor had suggested she see a therapist—"there were resources in place for this sort of thing... happened to the best... normal even" (his tone had suggested otherwise)—who'd lent her this inspirational CD on dealing with panic attacks that she never had returned but carried around over the past year with the intention of dropping it in the mail somewhere foreign and letting the

stamps be her excuse. There were two things she remembered from it whenever she felt an attack coming on:

1. Panicking about having a panic attack could only make it worse
2. No one ever died from a panic attack

Of course, the inspirational speaker lady was likely not taking into consideration panic attacks while mountain climbing.

3. She really needed to return that CD

Jac had hated therapy almost as much as she had hated gratitude journaling, long walks with no destination, self-help podcasts, the happy haze of medication, and meditation. But she had still tried it all. Desperation can make people act, well...

Berikbol carried on climbing hand-over-hand up ahead of her. The only sound the rhythmic clipping of his carabiners in and out of a thick, black chain which ran alongside the handholds. There were two carabiners, each attached to the end of a ragged rope tied around his torso and thighs, so that one remained clipped into the chain at all times as he moved his way steadily up the cliff face. *Clip, clip. Clip, clip. Clip, clip...*

Jac was also clipped to the same chain by the same sort of homemade harness, though she had no idea what it was anchored to on the perpetually out of reach peak, or if it would hold if she slipped and fell. She allowed herself to fantasize about testing it—just letting go and plummeting alongside broken bits of corroded metal towards the unforgiving ground below.

Acclaimed Journalist Dies in Tragic Climbing Accident

No.

No plummeting to her death until the obit read:

Pulitzer Prize Winning Journalist Dies

Jac was attached to Berikbol too, which oddly made her feel safer than being clipped to the chain. The sturdy man looked as if he were made of some metal stronger than iron as he effortlessly scaled the rungs as though merely climbing one of the ~~spindly~~ stunted desert trees, now only specks breaking up the monotony of the ~~desert~~ sandy wasteland far below. *Wordy, but could be tightened later.*

Writing was like breathing, Jac did it involuntarily. It also happened to be one of the few things that could bring her back from the edge of an attack.

“Why are you look down?!” shouted Berikbol from somewhere above. “Look to me, Ms. Jac. Look to me!”

She wrenched her gaze away from the sobering vastness of the landscape, and looked up at the short, muscular man. She would describe him in this piece as compact... like a can of spam. Though she doubted pureed, mystery pig parts passed Islamic purity laws. Compact like a can of... chickpeas?

FACT CHECK: Mountaineers in Kandabar Province eat chickpeas.

Though technically, he was a ‘guide’ not a mountaineer. Since technically, this was not a mountain but a ‘butte’, with its steep sides and flat table-like top. But mountain seemed more impressive (and impressing her readers was, after all, the whole point). Yes, Berikbol would be a mountaineer and this seemingly ceaseless cliff-face rising strangely out of the sand like some alien spire, a mountain.

It served the story better.

~~PTSD Crippled War Correspondent Seeks Mountaintop Wise Man in
Last-Ditch Attempt to Save Career~~

Finding Inner Peace Surrounded by Decade of Conflict

At best this would be a personal interest story. A counterbalance to the mistargeted drone strikes and bombed weddings. At worst it would be a self-help fluff piece—a shut in sitting around and praying all day away from any acid burn victims or beheaded Imams, wasn’t exactly Pulitzer material. Still, she needed *some* semblance of a story in the event her editor found out she was not, in fact, bedridden from bad street shawarma, but had left base without authorization or an escort in an active war zone. (Her editor would have known better than to fall for the Western trope that foreign food makes you well acquainted with foreign toilets had he ever traveled beyond the split-level, cubicled city of the New York Times office. But he hadn’t. And that is *exactly* why she used that excuse.)

“No more you look down,” Berikbol instructed.

“Okay,” Jac said.

“You promise to me.”

“Okay,” Jac lied.

Jac brushed bangs from brow with the back of a sweaty hand as she reached for the next rung—and wavered. Her hand was trembling, like a cinder block shack in a Port-au-Prince earthquake.

There was this part of her that had always thought herself special. Different. Better. The badass black sheep. But in this moment, she was reminded that she was just a normal woman who shits herself when she looks down from the side of a cliff, like any other normal woman would. Only another white sheep who was just really bad at keeping clean.

She needed to *get a fucking grip*. Jac closed her hand around the rung—

JAC GRIPPED THE SMOOTH METAL LIP OF THE HUMVEE SEAT. THE CABIN REEKED OF WHATEVER INDUSTRIAL CHEMICAL MOUNTAIN BREEZE DETERGENT THEY USED TO COVER UP THE STENCH OF SWEAT, TESTOSTERONE, AND ‘OH SHIT’ PISSING.

—The industrial Mountain Breeze smell lingered in her nostrils as Jac took a sharp intake of desert air, acutely aware that she was suspended a skyscraper above ground by only the grip of her sweaty hand around a metal rod and a single piece of frayed rope tied to a stranger who seemed to think rock-climbing with your eyes closed was a smart idea.

Her whole face tingled. She must be hyperventilating—lightheaded from the rush of oxygen. Falling was suddenly less of an abstract concern.

Fucking PTSD.

Fucking Pvt. Parsons.

Jac breathed slowly in through her nose and shakily out through her mouth until the Mountain Breeze faded to sun and sand.

Determined not to let the unwelcomed memory overwhelm her, Jac hoisted herself up and took hold of the next handhold.

Clip, clip—and the next—*Clip, clip*—and the next—*Clip*—

—CLICK.

CLICK, CLICK. CLICK, CLICK. CLICK, CLICK.

THE SOUND OF THE CAMERA SHUTTER FLUTTERED AROUND HER AS SHE HELD THE DYING SOLDIER IN HER LAP.

CLICK, CLICK. CLICK—

—*clip*.

A blow like a hammer hitting the inside of her temple jerked Jac's head to the side.

Fuuuck!

She'd never make it to the wise man at this rate. No wise man, no interview. No interview, no answer. No answer, no fix for her broken brain. No fix for her broken brain, no career.

There were only two directions to go: up or down. And I was damned if I was going to go back down when the answer I was seeking might be just up above.

Jac's arms shook visibly with exertion as she resolutely continued to climb the side of the cliff, one rung at a time. She fixated all of her attention on the rugged texture of the iron against the skin of her sweaty palm— On the sound of the carabiners clipping in and out of the chain— Made a steady rhythm out of it: *Reach. Grasp. Unclip. Clip. Step. Reach. Grasp. Unclip. Clip. Step...*

She was starting to regret the extra weight from cramming her travel backpack with so many electronics: laptop that overheated in the sun in a matter of minutes in one of the sunniest parts of the country, work iPad which she only really used for skyping her editor with no internet access, and her recorder (the one thing she might actually use—fingers crossed) with a baggie of backup batteries that she hadn't had an interview long enough to need in over a year. But what was the alternative? Leaving them with the locals to get stolen? Better that than her arms just giving out—

Jac's head bumped into the sole of Berikbol's shoe. He yelped something in his own language which she was pretty sure translated to "Fucking white lady is going to get me killed!"

Fucking writing stories in her head was going to get her killed.

"Sorry," Jac called up. "Are we there?"

"Yes. Best you sit and no to stand."

"Okay."

"And no look down."