



SOLDIER

D O N W U L F F S O N

The Visit

Now and then there would be a death in the ward. The body would be tagged then trundled away on a wheeled cart—which, with gallows humor, was referred to as the happy wagon. One of those taken away in the thing was a soldier whose bed was across the aisle from mine. He had suffered severe head and leg wounds, and had never regained consciousness after being brought to the hospital.

One afternoon he began making an odd rowing motion with his arms. For hours, he kept it up. It was very strange, almost as though, unconscious, he was rowing away, off into another world—the next world. He rowed far into the night.

The next morning he was gone.

And another man—very strong and muscular looking—was in the bed. At first I did not know what to make of the new man. He looked so healthy and fit, and I was at a complete loss as to what might be wrong with him; then gradually I began to realize that he was not moving—at all. He was paralyzed from the neck down. Lying flat on

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his back, he stared at the ceiling. Only once did he turn his head in my direction. I said hello to him. He didn't answer, and his gaze went back to the ceiling. He blinked, and a tear—one he could not wipe away—slowly trailed down the side of his face.

Nurses, orderlies, and other patients sometimes tried to talk to him. Only rarely would he respond, and then only with one- or two-word answers. He was all alone with his misery, and wanted to keep it that way.

I felt a strange bond with this man. He was keeping everything locked up inside. Like me, for his own reasons, he did not want to—or could not—talk about what he was dealing with inside. Explaining what he was thinking and feeling was impossible. And there was no one to whom he could turn for help.

One morning there was a sudden flurry of activity, and through word of mouth I learned that the little school-house hospital was going to be inspected that afternoon.

"They look for malingerers, soldiers shirking duty by pretending not to be well enough yet to fight," Nikolai told me. "They also look for impostors, anyone not qualified to be in one of their wonderful military hospitals. And they check the staff, to rate their performance, and so forth." Nikolai lowered his voice to nearly a whisper. "They are a bunch of pompous asses. Communist bigwigs—stupid, self-important bureaucrats."

Fear swept through me; Nikolai's words went around and around in my head: "*They also look for impostors.*"

Certainly, I fit the description!

So far, no one seemed to have noticed that I was different, that I was German. I had spoken little, and very carefully; even my mannerisms were very Russian—the way I shrugged, for example. So far, none of the staff or patients seemed to have detected anything unusual about me. But would I withstand the scrutiny of the inspectors—government "bigwigs," as Nikolai had put it, people actively seeking someone such as me?

A horrid fantasy played in my head. In it, Communists were pointing at me as I lay in bed, yelling at me, exposing me as a German. "But I am half Russian!" I would cry. "I am as much Russian as I am German!" Laughing, they would beat me to death with their fists.

"Is something wrong?" Nikolai's head was turned in my direction.

I realized I was gripping my bedding with both hands, and sweat had broken out on my brow.

"Are you all right?"

"*Da,*" I said. "Just a cramp in the belly."

He nodded.

I wiped my brow, tried to relax. I looked out at the ward.

In preparation for the visit, the staff was scurrying around, working even harder than usual to get everything in top shape. Even our doctors, Swaroff and Rostovick,

made a relatively rare appearance. Rostovick was even more nervous than usual, and buzzed around like a windup toy, his words coming out mechanically fast as he ordered people around. Swaroff, too, seemed a bit edgy. But it was the orderlies who seemed the most worried of all. One of them, a man named Yuri, even asked Rostovick if he could get into an unoccupied bed and pretend he was a patient.

"*Nyet!*" screeched Rostovick. "Definitely not!"

Yuri disappeared briefly. When he returned he had a bloody bandage—that he had probably taken from the trash—wrapped around his head.

Swaroff told him to take it off. Yuri did as he was told.

"Why are the doctors and orderlies so scared?" I asked Nikolai, trying to hide my own terror.

"If the doctors are found wanting, they may be sent to the front—to triage stations, which are far bloodier and more dangerous than here." His brow furrowed. "I know, I was in such a place for two days. As for the orderlies, if the inspectors decide that any of them are well enough, they will be sent back to fight—and probably die."

As it turned out, the officials did not make their visit until two days later. Lina, standing on her box, had just finished changing the dressings on my wounds and was emptying the jar of pink liquid into another, larger jar. Outside, I saw a dust-covered car pull to a stop and a number of solemn-looking men get out. They went to the operating room first but did not stay there long. Soon they entered our ward.

"The idiots have finally arrived," Nikolai whispered jeeringly.

I watched the entry of the bunch—a general, a sergeant, a doctor carrying a medical bag, and a man in a black suit, whom Boris identified as a *politico*, a Soviet commissar. I was scared, but not as much as before; the reality was not as frightening as the fantasy. Finally, it was going to be over with—one way or another.

First, the orderlies—eleven of them—were made to line up for inspection. The doctor declared eight of them fit to rejoin their units. One of these was Yuri. Looking like prisoners being marched off to the gallows, the sergeant led them away.

"Now comes the little show," Mikhos whispered over his shoulder.

Severe and self-important looking, the group made its way up and down the aisles between the beds, with Swaroff, Rostovick, and the nurses on their heels. I could hear them firing off questions about one thing after another. Dr. Swaroff and the nurses seemed rather composed, but Dr. Rostovick was so nervous it was ridiculous. His movements were jerky and unnatural, and his high-pitched, annoying voice could be heard all over the room as he stammered out answers to questions.

The *politico* carried a briefcase and had a list of some kind. Now and then he would whisper something in the general's ear; the contingent would stop, the dark-suited man would open his case, and the general would pin a

medal on the gown of a patient. Many of those receiving a medal seemed very pleased, but not a few appeared quite indifferent, almost scornful.

My hands started to sweat. The group wound its way down our aisle. In one of the first beds was a recent arrival, a boy who had suffered a head wound. On the top of his shaved head there was a circle of stitches, which for some reason had been left unbandaged, and he just lay there, totally limp and completely unaware of anything. Regardless, the general pinned a medal on this brain-dead boy—as though he still had a brain after all.

Nikolai and I exchanged glances but said nothing.

When I looked up again, the general was criticizing Dr. Swaroff about something. A heated discussion ensued, and the two walked away, out of earshot. My attention shifted to the dark-suited man, a stoop-shouldered, eerie-looking character. Taking advantage of the moment, he was flirting with Tamara, the pretty young girl with long, dark hair. She looked annoyed and was backing away, moving in my direction.

"How would you like to work *for me* at the commissariat?" he was asking her.

"Thank you, but I am needed here," Tamara replied.

"You would be doing very important work." He flashed a gold-toothed grin.

"I am *already* doing very important work, comrade. Don't you agree?" she said evenly, her dark, fathomless eyes fixed on him.

The man persisted. His intentions toward the girl were obvious; and he continued to pursue her openly despite the fact that he wore a wedding band, was old enough to be her father, and was making no progress at all with her.

His flirting was finally brought to an end by the return of Dr. Swaroff and the general. The two seemed to have patched up their differences and were now chatting amiably. After a handshake, the general again commenced decorating the wounded soldiers. A boy with a great mop of shaggy, blond hair was extremely excited to receive a medal. Startling me, the green-uniformed officer turned my way, but the *politico* tapped him on the shoulder and indicated the paralyzed man in the bed across the aisle.

"You have served the people of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics well, comrade," said the general as he pinned on the medal. "Your nation is proud of you." He saluted.

The paralyzed man stared at the ceiling. "Take it off me, please," he said.

For a moment the general paused; then, as though he had not heard, he continued on.

"Take it off!" yelled the paralyzed man.

The general glanced sourly back at him. Then, after repeating his little speech, he decorated another soldier, conferred briefly with the *politico*, and then headed toward the exit.

"I don't want it, you stupid fool!" cried the man, his voice filling the ward. "Get it off me!"

The entourage stopped at the door. The general turned, showing a face red with anger and embarrassment, and looked back at the man. Time seemed to have stopped. The ward was silent. All eyes were on the general.

"Please," muttered the man.

The sound of footsteps broke the silence. Quietly, Tamara made her way to the paralyzed man and removed the medal. For an instant, the general looked as though he was going to charge at the girl and throttle her; but instead he suddenly turned and stormed from the room, the other men on his heels.

"Thank you," said the paralyzed man.

Tamara wiped his tears. She bent over, kissed him on the cheek, then made her way down the hall that led to the operating room, the medal in hand. For a long while after she had left, the ward remained silent.

Loss

Tamara Imanov. That was her full name. Everyone was sure there would be repercussions, that the girl would be punished in some way for standing up to the general. But the days passed and nothing happened.

Tamara was quite pretty. But her attractiveness was not entirely a consequence of her features; after what had happened at the inspection, I saw a very loving, strong, and good human being. Nothing is more alluring than a girl like that.

I had a crush on her—as did many others in the ward.

One day she came and took my temperature and pulse.

“Your temperature is fine,” she said, “but your pulse is racing.”

“I know,” I said. I looked at where her hand was touching my wrist.

She blushed with understanding. “And why is your pulse racing?”

“Because of you,” I said, afraid that I had been too bold. I smiled nervously.

Loss

Our eyes met. She gently patted my hand, then she was gone.

Early one morning I noticed Tamara peeking out the window not far from where my bed was situated. She did this over and over. It was nearing our lunchtime when suddenly her eyes lit up. Across the way were the stable and the abandoned dry-goods shop; and coming down the alley between the buildings was a young soldier—handsome, dark-haired, and unusually tall. He stood waiting in the alley when, from a side door of the hospital, Tamara suddenly emerged. She hurried across the road to the alley, where she and the soldier embraced. He gave her a blue scarf. They kissed, then, holding hands, walked down the street and disappeared from sight.

“Her boyfriend,” said a boy across the way.

“Marusia’s prettier,” said another patient. He made a face. “But she’s got a boyfriend, too—probably a dozen of them!”

I looked to where Tamara and her boyfriend had kissed. A sinking feeling inside, I frowned and looked away.

At this point, I had been in the hospital more than two weeks. Except for my abdominal wound, I felt pretty well. Though the tube was still in my side, very little of the pink

gunk was coming out of me. I could sit up and even eat some solid food. My knee and head hardly bothered me at all.

Since coming to Alreni, supply trucks and other vehicles brought more wounded to the schoolhouse hospital on a fairly regular basis. They suddenly stopped coming. The reason, we learned, was that the Germans had retaken a large area of western Russia, and this had cut off all transport into Alreni. Now the hospital was running out of almost everything, and the patients began to suffer. At the same time, because there were fewer cases, we began to see more of our doctors and skilled nurses. Freed from doing almost nonstop surgery, they finally had more time to visit the wards.

I was awakened one afternoon to find Dr. Swaroff and a pudgy, moon-faced surgical nurse hovering near me.

"How are you feeling, boy?" asked Swaroff.

Due to the shortages, the dressing around my belly hadn't been changed in some time. The thing was sticky and crusty, and I'd been feeling nauseous off and on all day. I was about to tell him how miserable I felt, but then Tamara came over, and to Swaroff's question, I simply answered that I was fine. I wasn't about to whine like a little boy in front of her.

On Swaroff's instructions, she removed the bandage from my head. Then the chubby surgical nurse plucked the stitches from my scalp. Swaroff apologized. He and Rostovick had been so busy in the operating room that the

sutures had been left in too long, he explained, and the wound had healed over to an extent that they were difficult to remove. It took quite a tug to get some of them out, and it felt like my scalp was being pulled apart. I clenched my jaw and tried not to let myself so much as flinch.

"I hope I'm not hurting you," said the stout nurse.

"*Nyet*," I said. My eyes were on Tamara—and the blue scarf around her neck, the one from her boyfriend.

Swaroff threw back the thin sheet, cut away the crusty bandaging around my abdomen, and began examining me. "The wound is healing nicely," he declared. "But this," he told the nurse, as he held up the red rubber tube, "should have been removed days ago!" Two strong, practiced fingers passed down on either side of the tube. "We're out of local anesthetics," he told me, "and I'm afraid this will hurt." He began to pull.

I closed my eyes against the pain. It felt as though a snake was wiggling around inside my gut. Suddenly it slithered wetly from the hole. I opened my eyes, and panting, lay back as Swaroff stitched the opening closed—without anesthetic. Sweat broke out on my forehead. Tamara patted it away with a cool cloth. "You are very brave," she said in her soothing voice.

I pursed my lips into something near a smile.

An orderly cut off the cast on my leg.

"It looks good," he said as he examined my knee. After touching it all over and asking where it was tender, he

slowly bent the knee, testing the flexibility. At first, it felt as though my knee was going snap in half, but as Swaroff continued, the pain ebbed.

"Bed rest today," he told Tamara. "Then I want him walking with support."

"Yes, doctor."

Tamara and the other nurse rolled me onto my stomach so that Swaroff could work on the bullet's exit wound in my back. I let out a cry—not of pain, but of indignation. My rear end was exposed. Tamara must have seen hundreds of soldiers' backsides before. But it didn't matter—not to me. Furious and embarrassed, I quickly covered myself.

The pudgy nurse laughed. Tamara apologized. Me, I lay there on my stomach, mortified, as Swaroff removed the stitches from my back.

"You'll be up and about in no time," he told me, then left Tamara and the moon-faced nurse to rebandage me.

Lying facedown, I couldn't see the two as they worked, but I could tell the difference very clearly between Tamara's gentle touch and that of the other woman, whose fingers were like fat, stumpy sausages. Finally, I was rolled onto my back again, and the two left. I hurt, but I was glad to finally have the cast and tube gone. My mind was drifting when a drone of voices caught my attention. I turned to find Dr. Rostovick, a thermometer in hand and Katerina at his side, talking to my friend Nikolai.

"You have a fever," said Rostovick in his nervous, annoying voice.

Nikolai shrugged.

"Do you suffer from headaches?"

"Sometimes."

"And night sweats," continued Rostovick. "Do you sweat a lot, particularly at night?"

Nikolai nodded yes, at the same time shrugging it off again as being of no importance.

Rostovick, a worried expression on his twitchy face, looked at Nikolai's chart. "Four days without antibiotics," he muttered to Katerina. He gave her a knowing look, then pulled back Nikolai's sheets. Peering closely at the pants-like cast, he began pressing down on the plaster, which had a spongy, sort of soggy look about it.

"Does it hurt there?" Rostovick asked as he pushed down fairly hard on one spot.

"Yes, a little bit, Doctor," replied Nikolai.

"And there?" Rostovick's hands had moved to another area.

"No, Doctor."

"And how about there?"

"No, not at all."

Rostovick turned to Katerina, said something to her, and she hurried off, returning a few minutes later with two orderlies. On the doctor's instructions, they began cutting away at the huge cast. Almost immediately a putrid stench

arose, and I didn't need to be a doctor to see that both of Nikolai's legs were badly infected. From midhigh down, they were swollen and streaked with black.

"Gaseous gangrene," said the doctor.

Nikolai pushed himself to a sitting position and stared down at his legs in horror and disbelief. "But they hardly hurt at all!"

"That's sometimes the case." Rostovick took a safety pin from his lapel then jabbed Nikolai's legs—gently at first, then harder.

Nikolai just watched. "I don't feel it!"

"The nerves, undoubtedly, are all but dead," Rostovick said, as he continued jabbing Nikolai's legs and feet with the pin. He looked at Katerina. "This is what happens as a result of not having a full regimen of antibiotics."

"What is wrong with my legs?" demanded Nikolai.

"They are badly infected, comrade."

All the color drained from Nikolai's face. "But I was sure they were getting better!" He lay back heavily.

Mikhos looked around from his bed at Nikolai, his forehead wrinkled up into a tight frown.

"We'll have to take them off," said Rostovick. "In order to save your life. And even then we may not be able to stop the—"

"Both my legs?" Nikolai stared wide-eyed at the ceiling.

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"No, Doctor!" cried Nikolai. "What will I do without

my legs? I have a wife and children. I must take care of my family! I must work!"

"I'm sorry, comrade," said the doctor.

The operation was done that night. When Nikolai was returned to his bed, there were only stumps beneath the blanket.

In the morning I awoke to hear him crying softly to himself. He would not speak to me, Mikhos, or Boris—not to anyone.

That afternoon, Tamara and an orderly helped me from my bed. Between the two, with my arms around their shoulders, I walked almost the entire length of the ward. I was light-headed. My belly cramped up on me a bit. My knee felt weak but really hurt very little. All in all, I felt quite good; and walking with one arm around Tamara provided the pleasant illusion that she was my girl. But in another way, I felt horrid. As I walked, Nikolai's eyes were on me. I knew what he must be thinking, and I felt sick with guilt.

When I returned to bed, I averted my gaze from my legless friend. I just lay there, staring up at the ceiling—an ugly parade of thoughts going around in my head. The sun went down; the room began to darken. Around the ward, kerosene lamps were lit, turning the place to a soft mix of

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yellows, grays, and blacks. Surprising me, I felt a hand—Nikolai's—touch mine.

“It's all right, son,” he said in a faint voice. “I'll make it.”

I blinked at tears in my eyes. We did not look at each other. We simply lay there in the dark. He clasped my hand tightly and said good night.