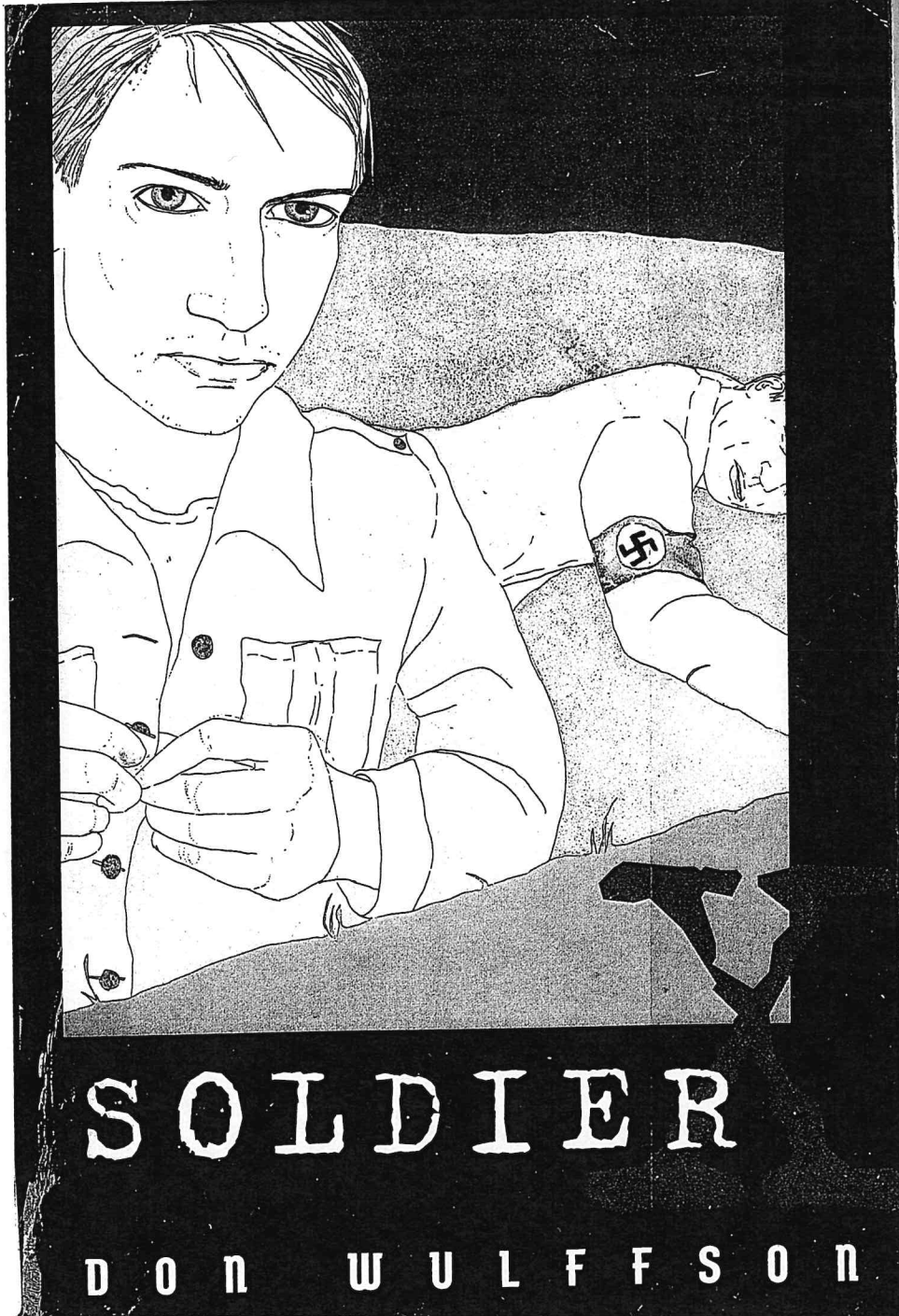


A Letter from Home

If Nikolai could be strong, I decided, then so could I. I walked and exercised, often with Mikhos and Boris, who by then were also back on their feet. We grew stronger. Soon we were doing light chores, mostly around the kitchen. The work—cooking, serving, and washing tin plates—was not hard. And it reminded me of being home, of working in our restaurant, *Küche Apfelsine*, the Orange Kitchen. (My grandfather had originally painted the kitchen orange; grandmother made him paint over the orange, which she said was hideous; then they decided it made an interesting name for a restaurant.)

I often saved a bit of extra food for Nikolai. The color returned to his face, and little by little he seemed to be getting his strength back. Despite what he had been through—and what he had lost—he was still determined to get better.

One afternoon, while I was cutting up some carrots for a stew, feeling rather content, I idly commented that the kitchen reminded me of home.



Almost immediately, Mikhos was on me: "Ah! You are starting to remember!" he said excitedly. "Tell me, what else do you remember?"

I was dumbstruck and had no idea what to say. For an instant I was sure I had given myself away; then I collected my thoughts. I acted—playacted. "We owned a restaurant!" I told Mikhos exuberantly. "And I was always helping out!" I grimaced, as though deep in thought. I frowned falsely. "But that's all I remember."

Then and there I decided that it would be wise to show at least a little progress in coming out of my "amnesia." It would seem less suspicious. I told people that the name Aleksandr didn't mean anything to me, but I remembered more about the battle at Tarnapol. And I chose to remember that I was from Odessa, Russia, because I knew something of the area from stories my grandparents had told me. Perhaps more important, there was a minority of Silesians and Czechs in the region, and these people spoke with something similar to a German accent, sometimes even sprinkling their speech with German expressions. If I were to make any errors in the future, knowing these facts could save my life.

Supplies began arriving again, and so did new cases from the front. The beds began to fill up. When mine was needed, I was given a cot in a storage room with four other men. The place was hot and stuffy. After two miserable

nights in there, the group of us was granted permission to move into a vacant house not far from the school-hospital. We were told it had once belonged to an eccentric, rather wealthy woman, the daughter of some famous czarist general. I had a room to myself—a parlor. In it stood an ancient piano without strings and a large gut-sprung sofa. The place was old, musty-smelling, and quite dreary, but it was a lot better than the storage room.

At five every morning an alarm clock in a room around the corner from mine rattled us awake. There was no need to get dressed; we slept in our clothes. Before sunrise the bunch of us would make our way the short distance through the streets of Alreni to the hospital. Sergo, our brain-damaged guard, was always on "patrol," usually out front, sometimes lurking near one of the abandoned buildings. Though he knew who we were, he always demanded that we identify ourselves. After we did so, he would salute and we would head inside, where we washed up, ate breakfast, and then went to work.

Mikhos and Boris were content working in the kitchen full-time. But more and more, I started working in the wards. I mixed plaster for casts; I emptied bed pans; I cleaned up messes; I took out dirty, blood-encrusted bandages and burned them in oil drums in a field near the hospital. The work was grueling—and hard on my bad knee—but at least I was doing something worthwhile. I was helping people instead of shooting them. The work had important bonuses, too. Out in the wards, I could

check on Nikolai as often as I wanted, and I was around Tamara a lot of the time.

"X, please bring me blankets. Please heat up water to bathe the new boy. And when you're done, X, please try to get some nourishment—soup, porridge . . . anything—into the man who refuses to eat."

To this day, I can still hear Tamara's voice as she asked me—always sweetly and politely—to help out in some way or the other. I quietly did whatever she asked. Naturally, I had to help the other nurses and orderlies, too. But whenever possible, I was at Tamara's side, following her around the wards like her little puppy dog.

In late April, my identity papers, which I had to carry at all times, were amended and signed by Dr. Rostovick. Instead of a private, I was now *Aleksandr Dukhanov, medical orderly—temporary, 5th Service Regiment, Southwest Sector*.

Many of the patients were illiterate, and one of my jobs was to write letters for them while they dictated what they wanted me to say. I can still see the large pad of cheap paper on which I wrote with a stubby, square-shaped pencil. The letters were usually very simple and about the most ordinary sorts of things. The only difficult part about writing them was the need for the soldiers to inform their loved ones that they had been wounded, and trying to be cheerful and reassuring about it. But how does a young man tell his girl he can no longer father children, an aunt and uncle that he is so crippled he can no longer help out

on the farm, or parents he is so disfigured they will probably not recognize him?

Letters—and sometimes parcels—arrived now and then for the patients and staff. Zoya and Rubin were in charge of distributing these. One afternoon in June, to my surprise, Rubin handed me a letter.

"A le-letter . . . for *me*?" I stammered. "But from whom? And how would anybody even know I am here?"

"As best we can," said Rubin, "Zoya and I locate the relatives of all the patients—especially those who have passed away or those, like you, who are unable to do so themselves."

"Thank you," I muttered as I took the letter.

"Hopefully it will help you remember more about yourself," Rubin added with a smile.

I sat down and finally mustered the courage to open the letter. It read:

My Dearest Son,

My heart is filled with joy! Your sisters and I have not heard from you in so long and we feared the worst. But today we learned that you are alive, my darling son! We were upset to learn that you have been wounded but happy to hear that the doctors say you are recovering well. They say that you have memory loss but I will cook all your favorite dishes and that will surely bring back all of your memories! Anya

and Ida and Grandpa are already planning a big party and celebration for when you come home. We cannot wait to hug you and smother you with kisses and spoil you! Write to us!

*Love,
Mama*

Reading the letter made me terribly homesick. It felt like it was a letter from my own mother. The letter also overwhelmed me with guilt. No, I hadn't killed the woman's son, but by taking his uniform and papers I had filled his family with false hope and joyful anticipation of a homecoming that would never be.

"What's wrong, X?" Tamara asked me late one evening. I had just finished my shift and was sitting alone in the kitchen, picking at my supper.

I just shrugged.

"You've always been so quiet . . . and different," she said. "But not like this. Did something happen?"

I shook my head.

"Rubin said you received a letter today. Is that what's bothering you?" She pursed her lips. "I hope I am not prying."

I showed her the letter.

"Why does it bother you, X?" she asked, after reading it.

"Because I don't know who these people are!" I blurted, in a twisted-up way telling the truth. I don't even

really know who *I* am! I'm nobody!" Leaving my supper unfinished, I stormed from the kitchen out a side door.

"X!"

I stopped in the middle of the road. I turned.

Framed in a rectangle of light coming from the open door was Tamara. She slowly walked to me, then put her hand on my arm. "You're not nobody—not to me, you aren't," she said. Her expression was solemn, caring. "Nyet. No. Not to me," she said again, then hurried back inside.

What had Tamara meant by this? That night, I kept hearing Tamara's words over and over: "You're not nobody—not to me, you aren't." Long into the night, I lay there on the lumpy divan. Was it possible, I wondered, that Tamara cared for me? It seemed she did. But what *kind* of feelings were they? Was it pity she felt? Or friendship? Or, possibly, was it something more? Of course, she had a boyfriend in the army, I knew. But was Tamara also starting to have feelings of that kind for me?

I fell asleep with this wonderful fantasy in my head.

Sounds of the Past

June arrived. The days were warmer and longer.

Sometimes, in the early evening, I would go and sit in a grassy yard behind the school-hospital. It had once been a play area. Swings hung motionless, unused. A sandbox sprouted weeds. Big, wooden barrels had long ago been joined together to make a network of tunnels for kids to crawl through. Often I found myself wondering what the yard had been like before the war, with children laughing, yelling, and running around.

It was not a great deal unlike the play area in the primary school I had attended as a little boy back in Vilsburg.

Tamara joined me there one afternoon. At first our conversation was about the patients and ordinary matters we dealt with everyday. But then she asked me about myself—and if I remembered anything more. I told her as much as I could—about my family and other things I could safely share with her without giving myself away. Then I asked her about herself.

“I went to this school,” she said.

Sounds of the Past

“You did?” I said, surprised.

“Yes, when it *was* a school and not the place the war turned it into.”

I followed her as she made her way across the yard. “My father built this,” she said, putting a hand on one of the interconnecting barrels of the labyrinth. “He made it for the school. Dungeon World—that’s what we called it. It was just about everybody’s favorite thing. Lina, Marusia, Vlad, Katerina—all of us—we’d crawl around in there for hours!” She smiled at the memory. The smile sagged as she ran slender fingers over the warped wood of one of the barrels.

“Have you lived in Alreni all of your life?” I asked.

“Most of it. My parents moved here from Moscow when I was a baby.” She grimaced. “Papa was in prison when I was born.”

“In prison? For what?”

“For being an anti-Communist—an ‘enemy of the state.’” A hard smile turned into a sneer. “He thought the Communists were idiots, and told them so. He had the guts to stand up to them.”

“Like you did during the inspection—when you helped the paralyzed man?”

Tamara shrugged delicate shoulders.

“That was very brave,” I said.

“Thank you.” She sat down on a school bench, suddenly looking very young and vulnerable.

“How old are you?” I asked.

"Fifteen." She looked around the schoolyard. "Do you ever wish you were just a little kid again?"

"Yes, or at least have things back the way they were."

"Until I was twelve years old, or so, everything was so great."

"What happened when you were twelve?"

"That's how old I was when the lousy Germans invaded us. And right before that, Papa got in trouble with the Communists again. He wrote a pamphlet about Stalin betraying any of the good in communism. He wrote under a false name, but they caught him anyway. He was imprisoned again, this time for life—at the Peter and Paul Fortress in Leningrad."

I waited for her to go on.

"And while he was in prison, mother started seeing another man. We fought. More and more, I stayed with Kate-rina, at Zoya's house. One day, when I went home, mother wasn't there. She'd run off with the other man." Tamara scowled. "I don't know where she is—or really care."

"And you've been staying with Zoya ever since?"

She nodded.

I sat down on the bench, feeling too big and awkward for the thing. "Your father's still in prison?"

Anger flaring in her eyes, Tamara put a hand to her long hair and flipped it to one side. "No, he's dead."

I hung my head and then looked up frowning, waiting for her to continue.

"He was killed at Leningrad in 1941."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. You didn't do anything."

I averted my gaze from hers.

"He was taken straight from prison and put in a death squad."

"What's that?" I asked, with genuine ignorance.

"The worst kept secret in Russia," replied Tamara. "Death squads were sent in ahead of the regular troops—armed with only grenades. They ran straight at the stinking, bloody Germans. They stepped on mines. They made the Germans use up ammunition. Those who get close enough threw their grenades. If they turned and ran, they were shot by their own troops." Her eyes hardened with rage. "And that's what they did to my father!"

"I'm so sorry, Tamara." I put a hand on her shoulder.

"I hate the Communists—just as much as I hate the Nazis," she said, her voice a lingering whisper.

"I do, too," I said.

In the old house where I lived there was an antique radio and record player. The thing, which ran on a gasoline-powered generator, was huge—about the size of a refrigerator, and about as heavy. None of us at the house could get it to work, but Rubin, after tinkering with it for a few hours one day, had both the radio and record player going. That afternoon, we hauled the contraption and a box of records to the hospital in an ambulance.

Not long after we had it set up in one of the wards, and Vlad and Oleg had mounted speakers in all the wards. Nothing was coming through on the radio. But then we tried out a record. It was incredible! No one had heard music in so long. And all of a sudden the whole hospital was filled with it.

It was classical music, Tchaikovsky.

Time had stopped. For a moment there was peace. For a moment there was beauty. Everyone was mesmerized. There were smiles on the faces of most of the patients and staff; and there were tears, too. Sergo came in from outside. With his scarred, dented-in head, he stood in place, swaying from side to side, holding his rifle as though it was his dancing partner.

It was the happiest I had ever seen the people in the hospital.

From then on, everyday from one-thirty to three-fifty P.M. there was a "symphony." At four o'clock there was usually a broadcast from Radio Moscow. The broadcasts, though biased and filled with propaganda, gave me some idea as to how the war was going. On June 6 the Allies had landed in France, at the beaches of Normandy. And while the British, Canadians, and Americans were coming from the west, the Russians were attacking from the east. Towns and cities all over Germany were being bombed to pieces, and I was sick with worry about my family.

When I try, I can still hear the broadcaster's voice—an irritating growl of bombast and political garbage. "Yesterday the glorious forces of the Soviet Union struck yet another mighty blow into the heart of the Fascist murderers, driving relentlessly westward as our fearless soldiers . . ."

One afternoon during one of those broadcasts the mail arrived. I was giving a sponge bath to a man whose arms looked as though only stitches were holding them together. I continued to work as many of the staff hurried over to see what had come, for themselves and the patients. As I was finishing up with the sponge bath, I saw Tamara emerge from the group around the mail bag with a letter in hand. Reading it, she made her way across the ward, the place filled with the sound of the broadcaster's voice. She suddenly stopped. A look of horror on her face, she hurried out a door.

I made my way outside. I found her across the roadway, sitting on the porch of the abandoned house with the cockeyed green door. Her head was back and her cheeks were wet with tears.

"Tamara?" I approached her tentatively.

She looked at me, then slowly removed the scarf from around her neck and wiped her eyes with it.

"Tamara?"

The letter fluttered to the ground. She spread the blue scarf wide in her hands and seemed to be studying it. "This is all I have left of him," she said. "Only five weeks ago—"

in this very street—Isaak gave it to me before he left for the front.”

I looked out at the empty street, in my mind seeing her sweetheart, the tall, handsome young man—then seeing them embrace. I'd been so jealous then. But now I found myself wishing him back, if only to take away Tamara's pain.

“Five short weeks, and now he's gone—dead.” A sharp cry suddenly escaped her. She turned away, sobbing.

I just stood there, not knowing what to say or do. I waited until her crying finally stopped. She looked up; she reached out to me, and I helped her to her feet.

“I'm so sorry about your friend,” I managed to say.

She cocked her head to one side. “‘Friend’?”

“Boyfriend,” I corrected myself.

“No, Isaak wasn't my boyfriend,” she said.

“Oh,” I muttered, far more surprised and confused than I think I sounded. “Then who was he?”

Her arms went around me. Weeping, she pressed her head against my chest. “He was my brother!”

“I'm so sorry,” I said over and over, feeling a thousand different things at the same time, holding her and gently stroking her hair. “I'm so sorry, Tamara.”

From the hospital came the broadcaster's voice: “And today, from the front, yet another victory for Mother Russia!”

Exclamation

For a long time after the day she received news of her brother's death, Tamara became very quiet. And different in other ways, as well. She went about her routine uncaringly, almost lazily, a blank expression on her face. At the same time, she did something that made me feel very good: She always seemed to want my company—so much so that I had the feeling she was following me everywhere I went, instead of me following her, as before. In the ward, the dining hall, the kitchen—she always seemed to be at my side. Still, she rarely spoke; and I did not know what this bond between us really meant. Did Tamara love me? I didn't know. I hoped so, but I was afraid that it wasn't really the kind of love that I wanted from her. A brother. I felt I had somehow become a substitute for her brother Isaak.

After learning about Tamara's loss, everyone else on the staff tried to help and comfort her. Her closest girlfriends were Katerina and Lina. Especially during the first days after Tamara got the letter, either Katerina or Lina would hug

Tamara as she cried. And every now and then they would go out of their way to say something comforting.

The two young women helped Tamara greatly. But I think it was Zoya, the grouchy, ugly head nurse, who helped her the most.

It happened in an odd way.

One afternoon Tamara accidentally dropped a liter of blood while taking it out of an ice chest in the operating room. I was on my hands and knees on the floor cleaning up blood and broken glass when Zoya charged over angrily and took Tamara aside.

At first Zoya lambasted Tamara for her clumsiness. We were in short supply of blood. Losing a whole liter of it was not an insignificant matter.

"You could cost someone their life!" Zoya exclaimed.

Tamara apologized, then started crying.

"There is no excuse for this kind of behavior!"

Tamara hung her head abjectly.

I expected Zoya to keep on with the tirade and show no pity. That was usually her way. Instead, to my surprise, she suddenly took a new tack, turning things around so that the incident could be used to help Tamara.

"We have all suffered great losses in this war," Zoya said, her tone suddenly softer and kinder.

"I know," Tamara replied. "But now my whole family is gone!"

"You have suffered a great deal—as we all have. We all have reasons to go around feeling sorry for ourselves.

But we can't," said Zoya. "We have to keep going. We have patients, and they need our help."

"Yes, I understand, but—"

"No! You don't understand!" Zoya exclaimed. "You've lost your father and now your brother. The two of you were very close, and his death has hit you hard. But it is time to get over it. And the only way to get over it is to stop thinking about yourself, Tamara. Start thinking about the patients."

Tamara, head hanging, nodded.

Zoya lifted her chin. Smiling, she continued. "I am telling you this not just for the sake of the patients, Tamara dear. I am telling it for your sake. Not until you get back to caring for patients with all your heart and soul will your own pain begin to go away." Zoya let go of her chin, but continued smiling. "Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"Yes," Tamara replied softly.

Zoya patted Tamara's arm. "Good, then you will be okay."

Little by little, Tamara emerged from her despair. She threw herself into her work with more energy and compassion than ever. She was not exactly the same person as before. She was something better.

In the mornings, I began getting up extra early. And instead of walking to the hospital with my friends, I would

make my way through town to the house where Tamara lived with Zoya and Katerina, and walk to the hospital with her.

One morning we arrived earlier than usual. We stoked and refilled the ancient wood-burning stove, and after tea and a little fruit, we went to work—Tamara in the wards, me in the operating room. The hideous stainless-steel surgical table—I had begun scrubbing it down when Zoya and Katerina arrived. Yawning, I called out a sleepy hello.

“Get everything in top shape.” Zoya had come into the operating room. “There is going to be an inspection today.”

Fear swept over me. “Oh,” I said, the word a hard knot in my throat. “At what time?”

“They are supposed to come around noon. But who knows when the idiots will show up.” Zoya gave me a pat on the back. “I hope they don’t take you.”

Then she was gone, leaving me frozen, a horrifying panoply of thoughts going around in my head. I wanted to scream. I wanted to run. I didn’t know what to do. I continued scrubbing—in my mind seeing myself standing for inspection, then being led off. *I won’t go—not this time!* I decided. *I’m not fighting in their stinking army, or ours.*

I lugged a bucket of filthy, red-tinged water outside and poured it onto the ground. I rinsed it and refilled it from the iron spigot, working the pump handle angrily, then made my way into the kitchen. I set the pail on the

wood-burning stove, waiting for the water to heat. Tamara came in. She put a hand on my shoulder, then, surprising me, she reached up and kissed my cheek. For a moment, our mouths lingered close.

“Try not to worry, X,” she said. “You’ve been here less than three months. You’re not fully healed.”

I tried to force a smile.

“Try not to worry,” she said again, then began mixing porridge in a bowl.

I was lost in thought when I realized the water had begun to boil. I hefted the heavy pail off the burner. It caught on something and tipped. Scalding water hit my arm. “*Ach sheisse!*” I screamed in pain—in German. “*Mein Gott!*”

Tamara’s head jerked up, her eyes suddenly wide. “Oh, my God!” She came toward me—then backed away. “My God, who are you? What are you?”

Later, Katerina smeared salve on my scalded left arm, and wrapped it in heavy bandaging. Tamara watched, her expression dark, unreadable, her eyes fixed on mine. Feeling transparent, all my secrets revealed, I stared back.

“Is something wrong?” said Katerina, looking from Tamara to me. “What’s wrong?”

The inspection took place late that afternoon. I stood rigid with nerves, my burned arm throbbing, as the team of in-

spectors examined the orderlies—Boris and Mikhos, and I, and seven others.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Tamara whisper something to Zoya, who shook her head and opened her hands in a gesture of futility. I turned my head. I looked out at the ward, and at my friend Nikolai, sitting legless in a wheelchair. He crossed himself.

“What are his wounds?” a green-uniformed officer demanded as he stood before me.

Rostovick explained.

An unsmiling woman—perhaps a doctor from headquarters—examined me, and then Boris, the last in line. The inspectors conferred. The woman returned. Her gaze traveled down the line of us, and for a moment came to rest on my bandages. “All except these two,” she said tonelessly. She pointed at Mikhos and me.

I hung my head, sick with shame, as Boris, Konstantine, and the others were herded away.

Flight

A white-painted bus.

On it, severely crippled—but “recovered”—men were taken away late one afternoon. Home—that was their destination. Nikolai and I smiled through our tears as we said good-bye.

The bus groaned away, pitching from side to side.

The other orderlies and nurses who had helped them board the thing watched as it turned a corner, and then was gone. The others went inside; Tamara lingered for a moment, then followed them. I sat down on one of several wooden crates the bus had brought. It was a warm afternoon, but my heart felt frozen. I looked out at Alreni, at a desolate sprawl of wooden buildings extending several kilometers over thinly forested flatland. Beyond lay dark, brooding mountains, their peaks lit lavender by a failing sun.

In mid-August, a broadcast from Radio Moscow informed us that the Germans had launched a new offensive. We hardly needed to be told. In the distance we had already begun hearing the rumble of artillery fire.

We knew what to expect next.

Before the week was out, ambulances, carts, and military vehicles of every sort began arriving with wounded men. More than half of the new arrivals were from southern, Asiatic regions of the Soviet Union, making it extremely difficult to communicate with them. There were so many of them, and we were so desperate for transportation, that even old cars were pressed into service; and these would come pattering to us directly from the front with their bloodied passengers.

The hospital quickly filled to overflowing. Men with gaping lacerations, blasted limbs, and horrid burns—the wounded were everywhere. Dr. Swaroff and Dr. Rostovick, the nurses, and the rest of us were overwhelmed trying to care for all of these men. And still more kept coming.

For the first time, I began pulling a double shift. Instead of working just a nine-hour day, we all worked twelve hours—six on the day shift and six at night.

Between Tamara and me there was a wall of silence; we hardly spoke. I didn't know what she was thinking—or what she would do. At any time, she could turn me in. I wasn't sure if I cared.

The fighting came closer. As we worked, artillery rounds sometimes shook the building. We could even hear the snip and snap of rifle fire coming from the forested hills beyond Alreni.

Orders came down. The hospital, as well as the town, was to be evacuated, starting immediately. All our wounded were to be transported to Tredsk, a town some thirty kilometers to the east.

Fighting was already breaking out in Alreni as trucks, ambulances, cars, and old, battered buses arrived to take us away early one afternoon. Working at a frenzied pace, we loaded all of our most seriously injured patients on board. We had started loading the walking wounded and medical supplies and equipment, when the wooden buildings across the way erupted, showering us with flaming splinters. Somewhere nearby a machine gun hammered; grenades banged in quick succession.

“Go!” I screamed, slapping the side of a bus.

It was already moving.

“X!”

I saw Tamara in the back of a flatbed truck filled with patients, and then I was running after the thing. Sergo pulled me aboard. A blind man kept yelling: “What’s happening?” Other patients cried in pain as the heavy truck bucked and jolted along the rutted road.

For a moment our convoy seemed to be leaving the fighting behind—as well as Alreni, much of which was now in flames. We were passing through a wooded area when we heard intermittent gunfire coming from off to our left. The back window of a car in front of us shattered and black smoke began pouring from beneath the vehicle. In a great eruption of flame and flying debris, it exploded. I saw several Russian soldiers running through gales of smoke and dust, gunshots chasing them. Some of the shots punched holes in the cab of the truck as it swerved around the burning debris of the car. More shots rang out; Katerina seemed to swoon, to collapse almost gently, ladylike onto her arm. Her eyes closed; blood pooled out from beneath her.

“Oh God, no!” shrieked Zoya.

I looked at Zoya kissing the translucent face of Katerina, crying, almost howling; then Tamara was holding both of them, the dead, beautiful girl and her aunt, Zoya, soaked with blood from her niece.

I think it was a mortar round that hit the bus behind us. The front two thirds simply disintegrated. The rear of it spun around, spilling several of its occupants—Dr. Rostovick and three or four patients.

Spewing gravel, our truck skidded to a stop.

I scrambled into the back of the bus. An orderly walked past me, his face freckled with tiny cuts from broken glass. No one else in the bus was alive.

For a moment, there was relative quiet.

What was left of the convoy was headed away without us.

Those who had been in the rear of the bus, and had survived, were sitting on the ground in a daze. Zoya, Tamara, Mikhos, and I helped them aboard our truck. A group of terrified townspeople, mostly women and children, emerged, and we helped them on as well. The truck was now packed with dazed and wounded people; there was no room for the rest of us. I slammed my palm against the door of the truck, surprised by my new role as leader. “Go!” I ordered.

Bullets kicked up powder puffs of dust in the road; one bullet hit a rear tire of the truck. Tilted to one side, the vehicle lumbered away.

“We have to get out of here!” Mikhos yelled.

Zoya, Mikhos, Tamara, and I scrambled into the woods. Two Germans ran past; they saw us but kept going. Sergo loomed into view. I grabbed Tamara’s hand. All of us ran. Somewhere behind us, a machine gun was chattering. Mortar shells exploded in the woods, off to our left.

“Down!” I screamed.

We hugged whatever protection the land provided. The thunderclaps of mortar rounds pounded the woods, spraying us with dirt, rock, and chunks of wood. A tree snapped at the base; in flames, it fell. I heard Mikhos scream.

“Mikhos!” I cried, and for a moment saw him, trapped beneath the blazing, fallen pine, now a part of the flames. Zoya dragged me away, and then Tamara was beside me,

too. We were running, Sergo ahead of us. Off to our left, spears of flame were shooting upward and outward from the forest. Instantly, it became a swirling wall of flame. We ran, waves of superheated air chasing us. There was a sudden crackling roar directly above us as towering firs burst into flames.

"There!" Sergo was pointing, screaming.

Off to our right, and down a steep, pine-needle-covered incline, was a broad ravine. We ran, fell, then skied down the slope, tumbling together into the ravine—a dry streambed.

The world lit with intense light, intense heat. I saw the red of the fire through closed lids. Flames roared overhead.

Then they were gone.

I opened my eyes to blackness, to smoke. And through tearing eyes I saw thousands of red-hot little curls of burnt pine needles drifting downward.

The fire continued burning, but it was far beyond us now—great tendrils of flame leapfrogging, looping away through the forest.

The three of us picked ourselves up. Our clothes were pocked with burn holes; our hair and brows were singed. We were coughing; the cut in my hand was bleeding; our eyes were red and burning.

But still we could see that something was wrong.

There were only three of us. Zoya was gone.

Part Three