



SOLDIER

D O N W U L F F S O N

Part Two

Charade

Soldier X
by Don Wulffson

On a stretcher, two Russian soldiers trundled me across the ripped-up terrain. My leg hurt terribly and the wound in my gut burned and made me sick to my stomach; still, I was alert. I was put onto a horse-drawn cart. Already seated in the thing was an oddball congregation of four look-alikes. They gave the appearance of a bunch of mummies; the heads, chests, and arms of all of them were wrapped in gauze bandaging. All had suffered burns of a similar nature, perhaps at the same time and place, and apparently they were from the same unit. They seemed to know each other well and were jabbering away in Russian. They complained of the pain from their burns; but at the same time they seemed rather pleased to be together and also somewhat amused by the similarity of their appearance.

I was vaguely curious about what had happened to them, but said nothing. I was in too much pain and too scared to really care.

"You have a water bottle," said someone behind me.

I didn't realize he was talking to me, or remember that there was a canteen attached to the belt of the uniform I was wearing.

"You going to drink that?"

I felt a tap on the shoulder. I turned, then looked up. Blue eyes were gazing down at me out of round holes in a head mask of white bandage. A white-gloved finger pointed at the canteen.

"The flash burns," said a bandage-encircled mouth. "They're making me near dying of thirst."

"Take all you'd like," I said in Russian.

"*Spasiba, syn,*" he said, thanking me.

The canteen was unhitched from my belt and passed around. Empty, it was returned to me. There were more mumbled thank-yous from the group of mummies as an unconscious man with a shrapnel wound to the chest was loaded aboard the cart.

"You from the Luga line—the Luga Operating Group?" asked a mummy across from me.

Fear welled up inside me. I didn't know how to answer; I did not even know what the question meant. *It's best not to remember anything*, I told myself. *And say as little as possible*. Desperately, I tried to think of the Russian word for amnesia, but, ironically, I could not remember it, and found myself staring blankly at the odd group. There was puzzlement in their eyes.

"What's your name?" the same man asked.

"I don't know," I said meekly, a sudden wrenching pain in my gut causing me to grimace. I put my hand to my bandage-capped head. "I'm trying, but I can't!"

"*Poteria pamiaty,*" said the mummy across from me, using the Russian term for amnesia. He nodded in understanding.

"I don't know who I am!" I told him with half-feigned terror.

He glanced around at his look-alikes. "Join the group," he said with a pained, raspy laugh. "We're not sure who we are, either!"

I lay in the cart for what seemed like an extremely long time, feeling sick, light-headed, and as though I was being cooked by a hot morning sun. I remember other wounded men being loaded on and someone telling me I was losing a lot of blood. But I have no recollection of the cart ever moving.

My next memory is of being on a bus, which surprised me greatly. The seats had been removed, and instead there were wooden bunks filled with patients. The thing was old and battered and rocked every which way. A nauseating pain clutched at my belly and I was wet with perspiration. An IV needle was in my arm, a rubber tube connecting it to a bottle of plasma overhead. My abdomen, head, and right knee had been freshly bandaged. My leg was in some kind of splint, and putting my hand to my knee I found that the spike of shrapnel had been removed.

"Why are we going to Kolesk?" a man in a bunk across the way kept muttering in Russian. "I do not live in Kolesk. I want to go home to Smolensk!"

A medic with haggard eyes and wearing a stained white apron gave the man a shot to shut him up. I am not sure, but I am fairly certain he gave me one as well. Regardless, when I next awoke, I was no longer moving, and I felt very little pain. However, only with great difficulty was I able to open my eyes. It felt like they were glued shut. Blinking, wiping bits of crust from my lashes, I was surprised to find myself in a schoolroom, the wooden walls an ugly green and many of the windows broken and boarded up. It was afternoon, and the few unbroken windows gleamed orange. I saw maps on the walls, a portable blackboard with a jagged crack down the middle, and books stacked in a corner. But there were no desks. Instead of desks, the place was filled with hospital beds and wounded men and boys. Groggily, I tried to sit up.

"Ah! Welcome back to the world!" said a pleasant voice in Russian.

I had been looking to my right. Turning to the left, my eyes met those of a middle-aged man in a bed next to a *pyech*, a coal-burning furnace. The man's head was shaved, his complexion waxy and sallow, and from the waist down his body and both legs were in a cast. Despite his appearance and condition, he had a friendly, almost happy expression on his face.

"I think you are going to make it," he said in a joking tone. "Are you going to make it?"

I blinked. I looked at the man but said nothing. I was confused, disoriented; fear gripped me, and I wondered how I had ended up in the strange place. All around me were people—patients—speaking Russian. I closed my eyes. I drifted on the edge of sleep. I dreamed. I began to reawaken. Dreams became memories—of real things, awful things. I rolled sideways.

"He's coming around," said someone.

My eyes were still closed, but I was awake. Thinking. I needed time to think. What had happened to me? I tried to make sense of it all. And where was I now, and what should I do?

"I'll be back," said a female voice.

I was in a Russian hospital of some kind, I knew. I'd fallen into a trap, one of my own making. And I was terrified, worried. A charade; I would now have to become what I appeared to be, just another wounded Russian soldier—one who had trouble remembering much of anything.

But how long and how well could I pull it off?

I spoke Russian, of course. But how well? Would some trace of an accent, some misuse of idiomatic expression, some flaw in my pattern of speaking give me away? And then, too, there was the fact that I knew very little about Russian life and culture; I only knew what my grandparents had taught me, most of which

was about Odessa, their birthplace and where they had grown up.

I would have to be cautious, alert. I would have to listen carefully and learn quickly and well.

My life depended on it.

Across the room, something fell with a clattering bang.

I opened my eyes.

"Ah, coming back to the world again, are you?" said the man in the body cast next to me.

I took a deep breath. Nervously, I looked around the schoolroom hospital, then at the man, the huge cast on him making it appear as though he was wearing cement pants.

"I am Nikolai Mikhailovich," he told me.

Forgetting myself, I almost responded in German. But I caught myself in time.

"*Zdrastvuite.*" I said hello in Russian, my voice little more than a dry croak. I desperately wanted a drink of water and looked around hopefully for a nurse or someone who might bring me some. I saw no one in the place but patients.

"How do you feel?" Nikolai asked.

I worked up a bit of saliva and ran my tongue around inside my parched mouth. "Thirsty," I rasped. "*Mnye kho-chitsa pit!*"

"Someone will be by sooner or later," he told me.

"They are very busy. They have so many of us to take care of, and more keep arriving each day."

I closed my eyes again and felt greatly relieved. I had said very little, only a few words. Still, I had communicated without seeming to have aroused any suspicion. I took a deep breath. My head ached; I became aware of a feeling of pressure, as though someone were squeezing my skull. I put a hand to my head and found that it was tightly bandaged. I blinked, then rolled my eyes upward, trying to see the skullcap of heavy gauze I was wearing.

A doctor with wild-looking, curly white hair was hurrying past. I raised my hand, like a schoolboy trying to get attention. The doctor never noticed me. He kept right on going. A patient across the room called out to him, but even that did not slow the doctor. He rushed from the room and disappeared down a hallway.

"They are very busy, like I said," Nikolai mused.

I lay back and again tested my Russian. "I am so thirsty," I mumbled.

"I have water," said a voice behind me. "Take some."

Looking over my shoulder, I realized for the first time another bed was right behind mine, and I caught a glimpse of the back of a man's head and a tin cup extended toward me in a bandaged hand.

"*Spasiba,*" I said, thanking the man and taking the cup.

"Do not drink much," said the man. "You've been gut-shot, like me. You drink too much too fast you'll hurt so bad you'll wish you were dead."

I thanked him again, then took a sip. I wanted to drink

the whole thing, but Nikolai took the cup from me and handed it back to the other man.

"How long have I been here?" I asked Nikolai.

He made a face as he thought back. Like a caterpillar arching its back, a bushy eyebrow went up in thought. "Three days now, I think."

"Three days!"

"They operated on you—" Again the eyebrow went up. "They operated on you the first morning after you got here."

"Operated on me?" For a moment I was sure the man was lying or teasing me. How could so much time have passed and so much have been done to me without my knowing it? Feeling under the coarse sheet, then lifting it up, I had more surprises: My right leg was in a cast, my abdomen was tightly bandaged, and coming out of the bandage was a red rubber tube. Leaning over the side of the bed, I found that the tube trailed away down to a jar on the floor. It was partly filled with a pinkish liquid. "What is this thing?" I asked, sickened by the sight of the tube stuck in my belly. "And what is that stuff coming out of me?"

The man behind me answered. "I have two of them in me. The doctors put tubes in after surgery to drain out any blood or fluid that builds up in your gut. Mine come out in a few days, and then they are going to stitch up the holes in me."

"Oh," I said.

"You've got a through-and-through. Bullet went in your side and out your back."

I lifted up the sheet again and took another look at myself, then lay back, feeling weak and tired. I closed my eyes. An instant later a rush of nervous fear hit me.

"What is your name, my friend?" The voice was Nikolai's, and his head was turned toward me.

I remembered to say what I was supposed to say. "I don't know," I said, my head wrinkling with the real worry and confusion I felt.

"*Zabivchivost?*" he said with a laugh, using a Russian word meaning to forget some ordinary, everyday bit of information. He seemed to think I was joking.

I explained that my head wound had left me unable to remember anything, that I was suffering from amnesia—*poteria pamiaty*. Then I lay back, feeling suddenly very scared. "I'm crazy," I said. "I don't have any idea who I am." I hoped I sounded as convincing as I did anguished.

Nikolai apologized for laughing at me—not once, but several times, as though he had committed some great sin. "*Da*, it must be a very troubling feeling not to know who you are."

I nodded.

"Well, how are you doing?" said a nurse, a pretty blond girl, her skin so white it looked transparent. She put a hand to my head, and reaching into a pocketed apron took out a thermometer. "Open your mouth, Aleksandr."

“What?” I blurted.

“Ah, so at least we know your name!” exclaimed Nikolai.

Confused, I looked at the nurse. “Why do you call me Aleksandr?”

Flustered, she studied a clipboarded chart at the foot of my bed. “Aleksandr Dukhanov,” she said, her voice whispery soft. “Serial number K487944. Two Hundred Twentieth Armored Division. That is what your identity papers say.” She blushed bright pink. “Is there some problem?”

I just stared.

“The boy did not remember his name—until now,” said Nikolai by way of explanation.

“Amnesia,” said the man in the bed behind me.

“Ah, I see,” said the nurse. She smiled faintly at me. “We have had others with *poteria pamiaty*. Usually the memory comes back.” She slipped the thermometer under my tongue, then pressed her fingers to my wrist to take my pulse. “Let us hope that yours does, too, Aleksandr.”

Aleksandr. Aleksandr Dukhanov. That was the name of the dead boy beneath the tank, the boy whose uniform and papers I had taken. And now I was him.

“Little by little it will come back to you.”

Speechless, I stared at her, unable to tell her I already remembered everything—who I was, what had happened to me, and what I had done, both before and after the

battle. All the awful details. I wanted to scream. I wanted to yell out the truth. But I couldn't. I was afraid. It was so strange, so twisted: I was caught in the middle of a lie, pretending to be unable to remember things I wished I could forget.

“X”

The man behind me was named Mikhos. Next to him was Boris, who had been badly cut up by shrapnel. From them, and from Nikolai in the bed next to mine, I learned that I was in the village of Alreni, about forty kilometers or so from Tarnapol, in a schoolhouse that had been converted into a hospital. The place had five rooms. Three were used as wards, one as a kitchen and dispensary, and the last as an operating room.

My terror at being found out continued to gnaw at me, though no one seemed the least bit suspicious. I did make one small mistake, but even this went almost unnoticed. I told Boris that my knee was pounding; instead of the word for knee—*kalyena*—I said *bidro*, which means “hip.”

Boris asked if I had been wounded in the hip, as well.

“*Nyet*,” I told him no, struggling to keep the nerves out of my voice. “But I must have twisted it or hurt it a bit somehow.”

He nodded.

As the days passed, I settled into the hospital routine.

“X”

Breakfast was around seven. For me, because of my abdominal wound, this usually consisted of bread, tea, and *schi*, cabbage soup. For the others there was always fresh fruit from nearby orchards, *myshtsas*, a type of muffin, and sometimes *yaytsa v smyatku*, soft-boiled eggs and sausage. But even before breakfast was served, there were countless other tasks that had to be attended to by the nurses, orderlies, and other staff members. The converted classroom rang out with calls from the men.

“Nurse, please, a shot for the pain!”

“Hey you—comrade, water! Please, I am going to die of thirst!”

“Please, somebody, a bedpan!”

The last of these was the most common morning call. And orderlies would hurry to the men and bring *German helmets* for them to relieve themselves in. Probably collected after some previous battle, the helmets were what were used as bedpans. Using them for this bothered me at first, but after a while I got used to it and hardly gave it a thought.

The staff worked endless hours trying to take care of the hundred or so patients in the place. They usually looked haggard and totally exhausted from the never-ending chores that had to be done—changing our dressings, and feeding, bathing, and cleaning up after us. They also had to get recovering patients up out of bed and back on their feet. As far as the military was concerned, the idea was to send these men back to the front; but being short-

handed at the hospital, the doctors kept many on as long as possible to help out.

The hospital had only two doctors—Dr. Swaroff, the man with the bushy white hair I had seen on my first day, and Dr. Rostovick, a nervous little man whose eyes always looked frozen wide with anxiety. We saw very little of our doctors—or of the skilled nurses. From dawn to dusk—and sometimes far into the night—they were in the operating room doing surgery. Taking care of the patients in the ward was left mostly to male orderlies and volunteer nurses from the village of Alreni, few of whom had any real medical training.

In charge of the ward staff was Zoya, a stocky woman with a booming growl of a voice. Katerina, the blond nurse with the alabaster skin, was Zoya's niece. She wasn't at all like her aunt; slender and delicate, she spoke so softly it was often hard to make out what she was saying. Lina, also blond, was a tireless worker and very efficient, despite the fact that she was so short she had to drag around a box to stand on when working at the bedside of a patient. Marusia was a somewhat dull-witted and clumsy girl who always seemed to be making a mess of things; but because she had a beautiful face and figure, almost all the men seemed to be in love with her. Tamara, the youngest of the unskilled nurses, had long, brown hair that reached almost to her waist, dark, mysterious eyes, and a gentle smile. She lived with Zoya and Katerina.

Rubin was the head orderly. He was easygoing and

well liked by the patients and the rest of the staff—except Zoya, who always seemed to be finding fault with him. Vlad and Oleg, half brothers, and both as big and strong as bears, were the only male orderlies who worked at the hospital on a permanent basis. The rest were recovering patients. We also had a single guard for the hospital—Sergo. With a dented, surgically scarred forehead, Sergo was a former patient—and so badly brain-damaged he had been declared unfit for military service, but had taken it upon himself to play soldier guarding the hospital.

During a German offensive, Alreni had been attacked and briefly occupied. Most of the inhabitants had fled eastward, abandoning the town. A deathlike stillness seemed to hang over the place. The window near my bed framed a stretch of dreary-looking wood houses and buildings, and beyond that a pine-forested mountainside. Directly across the way were a stable, an abandoned dry-goods shop, and an extremely small house with a green door that forever hung cockeyed on its hinges. Often, in the roadway between the schoolhouse-hospital and these buildings, I would see our guard, Sergo. By himself, rifle on his shoulder, he either stood at attention or marched back and forth.

Other than to groan, feel miserable, and sleep, there was little for us to do to pass the time except talk. Mostly, the patients talked about their homes and families, about the work they had done before the war, and about things that had happened to them on the battlefield—especially

about how they had been wounded. Nikolai, in his plaster pants, had been wounded in both legs when his battalion had accidentally been bombarded by their own troops using “Stalin organs,” multiple rocket-launchers. Mikhos had been shot twice in the stomach trying to get to a wounded comrade. Boris had been a few meters from a soldier who had stepped on a mine. The other soldier had been killed; Boris, though badly injured by the blast, had somehow managed to make his way on his own to an aid station several kilometers to the rear.

My story was probably the strangest of all—but, of course, I could not tell it. I could only lie and say I had trouble remembering anything. The others started guessing where I was from, which made me nervous. In Russia there are dozens of ethnic groups, and countless languages and dialects are spoken. Because of my blond hair, blue eyes, and manner of speaking, it was the consensus that I was either from Silesia or Odessa. I did nothing to dispel this conclusion and thanked them for trying to help.

With everything locked up inside me, I thought constantly of home—of my mother and grandparents—and of Hals and Oskar, and of Jakob, Willi, Fassnacht, and Do-belmann. And then there was the soldier—Aleksandr—whose uniform I had taken. I said as little as possible and mostly just lay looking up at a ceiling of white, peeling paint. It looked like dead, flaking skin.

Every part of me hurt, and I was so scared and lonely and lost that I often felt like crying.

If it hadn't been for Nikolai, I don't think I would have made it. Nikolai, who had a wife and two young sons back home, was to me like the father I had never known. He talked to me a lot and always had a smile and an encouraging word for me. Another thing I received from him was a new name. I hated being called Aleksandr or Alex, and told him so. He began calling me X.

“It suits you,” he said.

I agreed.