



A FATE FAR SWEETER

The Story Of Love & War

ROGER TURENKO

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Title

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By Roger Turenko

TO DIMITRI BUDANA and all the innocents who have died as a
result of the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine.

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Preface:

After 20 years of service, I retired from the US military, expecting to be happy. Instead, I found myself feeling useless and depressed. I had no wife or children. No foundation to build a civilian life. I had no direction or purpose anymore. But, everything changed in April 2022 when Ukraine's President called for experienced foreign soldiers. I became a volunteer in the Ukrainian Foreign Legion to combat Russia's full-scale invasion.

General Rutanov, Supreme Commander of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, personally assigned me a crucial mission: infiltrate Russian-occupied Crimea and destroy a massive missile storage facility. Those rockets, left undisturbed, would surely terrorize innocent people in Ukrainian-controlled territory. We had to destroy them. Despite the danger, I felt compelled by duty and moral conviction to act.

Little did I know that passion and unexpected love would find me. Nor did I anticipate how my choices, made in the name of duty, would profoundly affect both my life and the lives of others...



1

When a man is slain,
Words cannot resurrect the dead.
But, for the sake of life,
Must we bow and obey?
The dictates of a tyrant?
For death is a fate far sweeter than tyranny.
Source: *Aeschylus' Oresteia (458 BC), Agamemnon*

A thick fog enveloped the southern shore, making everything moist and slippery. A relentless rain fell from the heavens, with no sign of stopping. I learned that such weather was typical for this region of Ukraine in the spring. It was deep into the night, hours before dawn, and darkness prevailed. Even the moon was obscured by gloomy clouds. For a while, there was a spooky quietness. Then, the shrill scream of air raid sirens ripped through the atmosphere. Those were the conditions during the early morning hours when I embarked in the tiny craft that had been jerry-rigged by Ukrainian marine engineers, rebuilt from an underwater drone to a one-man mini-submarine.

My name is John Kovalenko. That's not my real name, of course, because I must conceal things for security reasons. But let me tell you something about myself. I served in the United States Army for twenty years and still consider myself an American soldier, even though I am retired. I joined the army as an officer at 22 and left at 42 after fighting in two wars: one in Iraq and the other in Afghanistan. It was a tough and exhausting career, but I earned an honorable discharge and a pension. Then, I joined the fight to defend Ukraine in April 2022, as a volunteer in the Ukrainian Foreign Legion, one month after I retired from the US military. Since then, I have fought many battles. I helped to defeat the Russian invasion in Kharkiv Oblast, and I assisted in holding the line in Bakhmut.

But as the warm winds of early May 2023 swept away the cold of the previous months, a twist of fate flung me far to the south, hundreds of kilometers away, to a mysterious port that lies somewhere between the cities of Mykolaiv and Odesa, and it was from here that I embarked on my journey to Crimea. The tiny underwater boat was designed to reach a top speed of 32 knots when submerged, which equals about 60 km/hour. That would have let me reach my destination in less than five hours. But top speed doesn't translate into actual speed.

It took slightly over 12 hours and two charging cycles, during which I had to surface for a time, to use diesel generators to recharge the sub batteries. But, finally, I reached Cape Tarkhankut and anchored the sub about 500 meters from the shore. The Cape is in the northwestern part of the Crimean Peninsula, and its coastline consists of high cliffs that rise at an almost 90-degree angle from the water. There are only a few narrow, rocky places to rest onshore, at the base of the cliffs. Mostly, the cliffs simply meet the water, without the benefit of even a pebbly beach.

The name "Tarkhankut" is Tatar. The Tatars originally inhabited Crimea before the Russian Tsars conquered it. Today, they constitute only a small minority of Crimea's population. When translated, Tarkhankut roughly means "Devil's Corner," and it is an apt description of the place. The nearby waters have always been perilous to navigation, especially in the days of wooden ships. The nearby sea has many hidden underwater boulders and rock outcrops and has been filled, over the years, by shipwrecks. Locals say that the ghosts of countless souls who died near this rugged shore haunt the surrounding seas. Tumultuous waters, towering cliffs, mysterious caves, and rugged promontories characterize the forbidding landscape. This scenery gives observers the sense of entering "hell" on earth.

But, for me, the cliffs were majestic. A thing of beauty.

The sun was still high in the sky because, to avoid Russian surveillance, I had left the Ukrainian-controlled shore long before dawn. The sub was very cramped, and I had been inside for a long time. Yet, I was hesitant to leave. To come ashore during daylight hours could be dangerous. There was the possibility of observation, and my arrangements required that I meet a representative of the local partisans in the dark, at the base of the cliffs. So, I stayed put for a while, trying to decide what to do. After about twenty minutes, however, my patience

was at an end. Freedom from the cramped sub was around me. The waters just outside the submarine would allow me to stretch my arms.

A wiser man would have stayed on board in spite of the discomfort, but I am not always wise. I simply couldn't endure it anymore. I wanted out! Furthermore, I was already dressed in a wetsuit, and all I needed to do to make my escape was to don a scuba tank and some breathing gear. In the narrow space, that was a challenge, but I managed it. In a few moments, I was ready to go.

The mini-sub, as I told you earlier, was a Jerry-rigged underwater drone. It didn't have a proper escape trunk, so there were only two ways out. One was through the top hatch. But, since I had not surfaced yet, I couldn't use that method. The incredible weight of the water above made the top hatch impossible to lift. Even if, by some miracle, I managed to open it, the result would be flooding. The only other way was through a mini-torpedo tube, at the front of the craft.

I collected several waterproof bags which I had stuffed with my things before leaving, and opened the torpedo hatch. It was a tight fit even with the bags trailing behind me. But, the plan had always been to use the tube to exit. So, that's what I did. I squeezed myself in, the hatch shut automatically behind me, and I used the interior manual release to trigger the mechanism that opened the outer hatch of the tube. Suddenly, I was propelled forward, into the frigid water outside, the waterproof bags came trailing after me, tied securely by nylon ropes.

The wetsuit shielded me from the full shock of the cold water, though I felt brief discomfort as seawater seeped through gaps in the neoprene. This initial chill quickly subsided as my body heat warmed the water trapped between my skin and the suit, with the neoprene acting as insulation. My neoprene hood offered some protection, but parts of my face remained exposed to the icy touch of the sea. Despite the discomfort, it was a welcome change from the cramped confines of the submarine. I knew I'd have to brave the cold waters eventually. It was simply a matter of now or later. There was no avoiding it. This was the job, and it had to be done.

Swimming under the water was a liberating experience. I relished the newfound freedom, for several moments, propelling myself forward and back, without purpose, just for the sheer enjoyment of it. Upward, sideways, downward. It didn't matter. I had no particular place to go. Not for several hours

at least. So, I repeated this process until, finally, my head broke through the surface. Blood raced through my veins and my heart pounded. I felt alive again!

A large, colorful fish glided past me, oblivious to my presence. It disappeared as it swam away, deep into the murkiness of the water. I turned to look back. I could barely see the small submarine, but it was hard to see anything through the murky water. I didn't know whether this was "normal" for this part of the Black Sea, but it was just as well. So long as the water remained this murky, the submarine would be well hidden. I might need it, again, as it would be just as difficult to leave by land as to enter. It would be even more difficult because after I completed my destructive mission, Russia would be trying hard to find me.

Several hours of daylight remained. I had two tanks of air. Each one represented about 45 minutes worth of underwater breathing. I needed to save one tank for the return trip. Otherwise, I would be forced, when and if the time ever came, to swim back to the sub on the surface, exposing myself to all the difficulties that would represent. So, in reality, I had only 45 minutes of underwater time. I raised my head above the surface to get my bearings. Just as I'd been briefed, a narrow, pebbly beach hugged the base of the cliffs ahead. I faced two choices: swim ashore immediately and then wait for my contact at the cliff's base, or remain in the water until nightfall. The decision was straightforward. Treading water for hours would be too draining.

I began swimming toward the sliver of beach, hoping to find a partially sheltered spot to await my local contact. This was our only possible meeting point on the shore, so I was confident he'd make his way there too. But, as I swam, my mind wandered, and memories began to surface...

I had received a summons to Kyiv from General Rutanov, who was, to say it mildly, an atypical military leader. For one thing, he was a lawyer rather than a graduate of a military academy, but he held the rank of General. His journey into the military began in 2014, fueled by patriotism following Ukraine's "Revolution of Dignity," which led to the ousting of the intensely corrupt President Yanukovich. Recently promoted by President Zelensky, Rutanov commanded respect.

Physically short, like many Ukrainian men, Rutanov bore the legacy of post-Soviet malnutrition. However, this didn't hinder him. Sequential crises, in the midst of war, showcased his unwavering competence, offering hope to a nation teetering on the edge. Unlike those who climbed the ladder through

connections, Rutanov's astute planning and decisive actions defined him. In peacetime, such men often remain unnoticed, but during wartime, they surge ahead.

Upon my arrival, I saluted him, but he remained engrossed in his work and didn't even seem to notice I was there. His green T-shirt was a departure from the formal uniform. It was a type of dress that was also preferred by his President, and it seemed to add a bit of rebellious flair to his otherwise stoic demeanor. He pored over a map of a war zone, strategically positioning troops for Ukraine's expected summer counter-offensive. Finally, he looked up from the map and saw me saluting. Instead of returning the salute, he reached over his desk to shake my hand.

"I'm glad to see you, Colonel Kovalenko," he said, finally. "Foreign volunteers are important to us. Not only because of your valuable knowledge and experience but because you represent international support for Ukraine at a critical time."

"Thank you, sir." I started. "You asked to see me?"

He nodded and resumed his seat. General Rutanov exuded authority, and it wasn't just from the insignia on his uniform. It was mostly his commanding presence, and his deep, resonant voice. Once he gave an order, there was no room for doubt or hesitation. The man was confident and inspired confidence in others. Amazingly, despite being born and educated in Ukraine and never having set foot outside the country until middle age, he spoke impeccable English.

"Yes, I did." He replied.

He gestured with an open hand toward one seat in front of his desk.

"Please sit down."

I sat.

Being addressed as "Colonel" always felt a strange. In the US Army, the highest rank I had achieved while commanding soldiers was Major. It was only in the months before my retirement that I had been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, but I hadn't held that rank for very long. Technically, Ukrainian Foreign Legionnaires can hold no rank above Sergeant, as only Ukrainian citizens can serve as officers. However, the Ukrainians, including the general, always referred to me as Colonel, out of respect, even though it was not my official capacity.

I had spent over a year fighting on Ukrainian soil, and many of my Ukrainian comrades were like brothers. I periodically commanded soldiers and trained Ukrainian forces. I viewed myself as an American soldier serving on foreign

soil, even though it was without the active participation of my government. My identity, memories, and experiences were rooted in the US Army. I was pledged to defend Ukraine but I still felt like a US Army Major.

General Rutanov is known for bluntness. He gets straight to the point and is rarely afraid to say what he means. That's exactly what he did, when I met him, that day.

"I need something spectacular," he said, without elaboration.

"Spectacular?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Yes," he said. "Both a real and an informational victory. We need to show a victory, separate and apart from the counter-offensive because, frankly, we don't know how well that's going to go. You know as I do how deeply the Russians are dug in, the huge minefields they've set and the trenches. It'll be tough to get through. But, we still need to show our Western allies that we're taking the fight to the Russians, whether the counter-offensive succeeds or not. Do you remember when you proposed a plan to blow up a missile storage area in Crimea, back in April 2022?"

"Sure," I replied. "I remember."

Nothing had ever come of my plan. It was never approved. Until that very moment, I thought the top brass in the Ukrainian armed forces had just dumped it into the trash and forgotten about it. But it wasn't so.

"My predecessor didn't think much of it. And, to be honest, we were so busy pushing the Russians out of Kharkiv and Kherson, that we couldn't devote any attention to it, back then. But, now, things have settled down into something of a stalemate. The Russians keep building up the number of missiles, and we need that informational victory I talked about. Sooner or later, they're going to use those missiles to destroy Ukrainian property and to kill a lot of innocent people...unless we destroy them before they can launch. I've taken a fresh look. I like your plan, and I'm going to approve it. It's time we did something proactive, deep behind Russian lines. So, if you're still willing, go ahead and destroy that Russian missile storage depot. We'll back you 100%. Blow the damn thing to hell if you still think that you can..."

"I know I can," I insisted.

He smiled, nodded, and said,

"Good."

Many people don't understand that war is more than just two armies engaging in combat. Morale and motivation play a pivotal role. Victory is not determined only through triumph or defeat on the battlefield. Logistics and propaganda are equally important. The most effective propaganda victory occurs when the enemy discovers that they're vulnerable. And, in a war where foreign assistance plays such an important role as it does in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, it was equally important to show some impressive "wins" even if we couldn't advance very much, yet, on the actual battlefield. That's what the general was talking about when he spoke about an "informational victory."

"As you know," he continued, "our goal is to cut Russian supply lines in preparation for our counter-offensive. We want to blow up storage areas like this, harass them behind their lines, and, ideally, turn the Russian people against the war. We can save the lives of a lot of soldiers by defeating Russia with a thousand little cuts, rather than one big blow."

"Understood, sir," I said. "It's a good plan."

"We've tried to blow up this particular storage facility several times but their defenses always stopped us cold. The only way we can do it, I think, is by following a plan like yours. We need to physically infiltrate and blow it up, close in, right under their noses. Once we do that, they'll feel insecure everywhere. The goal is to make them feel very unsafe even in Russia, itself, so that they'll be motivated to withdraw and end this war against us. With respect to Crimea, and the other land they stole in 2014, we'd like to see them in total panic mode."

He was smiling now, no doubt thinking about the aftermath of a successful attack.

"I understand and agree completely, sir," I said.

"Good."

The general's gaze drifted momentarily. Yet, the intensity by which he was staring at nothing betrayed that, in reality, he was in deep contemplation. It was his way of digging into the labyrinthine recesses of his thoughts. A moment later, he turned back to me, refocusing his attention on the here and now. His voice resonated with newfound clarity.

"It's your plan, of course," he stated. "But, frankly, your American accent is obvious. You speak good Russian, but the accent could mess things up. There are a lot of Ukrainians who can speak Russian almost like the Moskali themselves. But, you have some unique skills. You know how to scuba dive, fly airplanes and

drones, pilot submarines, you're an explosives expert, and you've gone on enough covert operations that you won't panic if there is a major setback, while you're carrying it out. And, of course, you've been actively participating in training the new Ukrainian Special Forces units. But, as you know better than anyone, we don't have anyone with your particular skill set who is ready for this kind of assignment..."

"Thanks for the compliments, sir," I said, once he paused.

"I don't have the manpower or physical resources to send a whole squad." He explained. "I don't even think it would be a good idea to do that. This is a job for one very capable man, and you'll have the assistance of the local partisans. They'll be notified that you are arriving. They're all patriots, but they're not professional soldiers. So, they won't know how and where to place explosives for maximum effect, for example. You'll have to teach them, and show them how to use whatever high-tech equipment you bring along. If you want to reconsider, I'll understand. But, we don't have anybody else to take your place..."

I didn't hesitate even a second.

"No, sir, I don't need to reconsider," I replied. "I'm ready to go, and I appreciate your confidence."

"Good," he replied, stamping a printed paper sheet with the official rubber stamp that lay on his desk. It now bore the blue imprint that made it "official" and he handed it to me.

"These are your orders, Colonel Kovalenko," he said. "My aide will provide you with all the rest of the details. We've got some specialized equipment ready for you, and you should feel free to order whatever else you need and we can supply."

With that, the general seemed to retreat into his strategic domain again, fixating back on the intricate map unfurled on his desk. Without uttering a word to conclude our discussion, he shifted mental gears, digging into the depths of the imminent counteroffensive that had occupied most of his thoughts until I arrived. I couldn't help but feel a surge of exhilaration at his having considered my plan worthy, and I felt excited at the prospect of being involved in what might turn out to be a pivotal operation if all went as planned.

"Thank you!" The words slipped out of my mouth excitedly.

The general's eyes snapped up, startled by my continued presence. A mysterious glimmer danced across his calculating gaze, momentarily betraying

the shrewdness that lay within. A smile, as inscrutable as a secret code, crept upon his lips.

“Oh, by the way...do you have a wife or a steady girl?” he asked.

“No,” I admitted.

“Of course, you don't,” he concluded, with a sly smile. “Because if you did, she wouldn't have let you come here. You wouldn't be fighting in my army! So, here's my suggestion. Go pay a visit to the River Palace. That's what I would do. I mean, you never know what might happen. You might as well have a pleasant memory to take to heaven with you, just in case...”

The River Palace is a landmark of post-Soviet Ukraine. It's been around for a long time. It's a huge boat, floating at a permanent dock on the Dnieper River. A place where loud music can be found playing into the wee hours of the night. A combination of nightclub and discotheque, it hosts one of the finest selections of professional girls in Kyiv. They earn their living pleasing men. There are plenty of gray-haired grandfathers there, mostly foreigners but also a few rich Ukrainians, who go to be fawned over by nubile 18 – 25 year-old beauties. The Palace is the finest whorehouse in eastern Europe.

I returned his smile with some sly thoughts of my own. I had gone to the place, on several occasions, with friends who had gone for the girls. He probably had a point about the good memories. Everyone I knew who had taken one of the girls came out with a good memory. But, I took a pass, nonetheless. I'd never paid for sex in my life, and I wasn't about to start doing so in Ukraine. But, I didn't say that, of course, because I thought it might make me seem like a wimp. Instead, I returned his banter with my own.

“Girls are too demanding...” I said, chuckling, “I don't have time for a woman now. But, a Palace girl might work at that. They always say it's better to rent than to own...”

We both smiled at that and he nodded.

“Agreed!” He said, “Unfortunately, I already own. I have a nice fat and happy wife. She spends every cent of my salary every week, conspiring to leave me nothing for pleasures like the River Palace. But, then, what can I say...I guess I love her, so it's alright.

The light smile disappeared as he turned back to his work. His mind, I am sure, was once again far from the River Palace. He was drifting back to the

battlefield. Countless lives were dependent upon the strategy he would come up with and a profound responsibility rested on his shoulders.

Then, he rose from his seat, and extended his hand.

"God speed!" he exclaimed.

I gripped his hand, feeling the weight of our shared purpose in that brief connection.

A surge of deep respect compelled me to also offer him a salute. It was an act that had both ceremonial and actual meaning. There were no spectators of course. Our encounter had been an intimate one, and the general, himself, had made a deliberate effort to discard the significance of rank. There was no one to impress. Beyond that, it was already clear that he didn't expect, want or need me to salute him. But my admiration for him was immeasurable, and saluting was my way to express it.



2

As an Army Special Forces soldier, I never served in the Navy SEALs, although I've heard that it is an outstanding institution. Had I been in the Navy or with the SEALs, arriving by water might have felt more natural. Truth is, I'm not the greatest swimmer in the world. Yet, this aquatic approach was my only option. I had to make do.

When I finally resurfaced, I was gasping for air, my heart racing. After removing my scuba gear, I took in my surroundings. The narrow, pebbly beach stretched before me, barely a few feet wide at its broadest point. Rocky outcroppings from the towering cliffs above interrupted the shoreline, creating a rugged, isolated landscape.

The massive cliffs fronted the beach directly and soared upward, defying gravity. The top of the cliffs, I knew, from reviewing a topographical map several days before, opened up into a mostly flat plateau. My breathing was finally slowing down, but I remained very tired from the effort.

I sat down, periodically laying down, on the small beach. For what seemed almost like an eternity, I mostly just sat there, staring outward, toward the sea. I fell asleep for a few moments, every so often, despite the daylight. But, then I would wake up again. Finally, darkness fell and the night began.

I had chosen the safest spot on the peninsula for a clandestine landing. Everywhere else, where the land met the sea more gently, via sandy beaches or sheltered coves, massive defensive fortifications now stood. Anti-tank ditches and concrete "dragon's teeth" lined the shore. Mostly, they were designed to impede mass landings and wouldn't have significantly hindered a lone scuba diver like myself. However, along with the obstacles, such areas are heavily manned and watched, making them poor choices for coming ashore. This location, with its rugged terrain, remained unguarded—perhaps because of its inhospitality.

Suddenly, a clattering of falling rocks caused me to glance up toward the cliff top. In the distance above, I could just make out a silhouette: a figure

equipped with a headlamp, skillfully rappelling down the sheer face using ropes and anchors. Having just arrived in Russian-occupied Crimea, I admit to feeling paranoid. Yet, no Russian soldier would descend so openly and steadily towards me. If it were the enemy, I reasoned, they'd have likely opened fire by now. If he was not the enemy, he had to be the partisan contact I was expecting.

As the man's feet touched the pebbly beach, he paused at the cliff's base, his headlamp's glare momentarily blinding me. Sensing my discomfort, he switched it off, plunging us into darkness. Moments later, he activated a lantern at his waist, providing a soft glow that allowed us to see each other clearly. He was an older man dressed in rugged attire, still tethered to his climbing ropes. A satchel filled with supplies hung over his shoulder. After a brief moment of observation, he spoke.

"You are John Kovalenko?" he asked, his accent initially striking me as Russian. I later learned it was the distinctive cadence of Crimean Tatars speaking Russian.

"I am," I confirmed with a nod.

He smiled and, without untethering himself, extended his hand.

"Welcome to Qirim!" he said warmly. "I am Mustafa Azmetov."

Mustafa, I realized, was a Crimean Tatar partisan, and "Qirim" was the Tatar name for Crimea. According to my mission brief, he would be my guide to the other resistance members. He had an olive complexion and was considerably darker than the average Ukrainian, but no darker than the average Sicilian from Italy. His hair was short and gray and his face was marked by deep wrinkles and scars, but even at 68 years old, he seemed agile. He had climbed down the cliff with ease. Underneath a slight paunch, he was still very muscular, a strength carved out of a lifetime of working hard with his hands. While slightly chubby, he was not significantly overweight, especially for a man of his age. Neither his age nor weight seemed to hold him back. As I later learned, he had been scaling these cliffs since boyhood.

"Zdravstvujte," I said in Russian as I shook his hand firmly, which is the formal way of saying, "Hello."

He smiled.

"Hello," he replied in Russian.

"You know my name, I see..." I mused.

"It's in my mission brief," the man explained. "It's an honor to have you fighting alongside us. We'll have much to discuss."

A sense of deep relief washed over me. Everything seemed to be going according to plan.

"Thank you, Mustafa," I said. "I've heard a lot about your successes down here and I'm honored to meet you as well."

That was a white lie. I had no information about the partisans, other than the fact that one of their representatives would meet me at the bottom of the cliffs. But, I was mindful of the need for solid diplomacy and good rapport. He reacted as I expected, with a smile. His eyes sparkled with pride at the idea that an American military man had not only heard of his team and their exploits, but was impressed by his operations.

"It is night, John Kovalenko," he said, gesturing at the cliffs towering above us, "and the path up is difficult. You are, no doubt, tired and there will be no one watching us here, now, or in the morning. No one ever comes here. Halfway up, there is a cave, carved into the sandstone in ancient times. Some say it was the Amazons, a race of women warriors, who carved the caves. I don't know. But, I do know the way to one of them. I doubt anyone else knows it even exists. We can eat and rest there. And, in the morning, we can continue our journey..."

It seemed like a sensible idea. I gazed up at the cliff, assessing the climb. Unlike Mustafa, my cliff-climbing skills were poor. Getting even halfway up would be difficult, but getting some sleep, after the long journey that started in the middle of the night, the night before, seemed like an attractive idea.

"Just lead the way, Mustafa." I replied eagerly.

The man had brought extra climbing equipment for my use. He unwrapped it now and handed it to me. There was a large amount of extra rope that could be physically attached to the pulleys and ropes he was already using, a supplemental harness, a hammer, extra stakes for hammering to the rock face, and more.

"Here," he said, "you probably won't need most of it. Follow close behind me, on the same path. But, you have the stakes, if you need them."

Mustafa gathered my scuba gear and other belongings, the sack containing my high-tech drones and so-called "invisibility cloaks" (which I'll tell you more about later on), and put them all into a much larger fabric bag. He closed the big bag, hooked a rope to it, connected the opposite end to a hook on his belt, and began to ascend, as I just watched from below. His movements were graceful and

self-assured. I followed behind as best I could, muscles straining as I climbed. It was not something I enjoyed doing.

Inch by inch, we made our way up, gripping rugged rocks and crevices as we climbed. About halfway up, we reached a ledge and a few feet off that, toward the left, there was a cave opening. Moving toward the left, swinging slightly off the path he had taken on the downward trek, we turned and arrived, one after the other, at the entrance to the ancient cave. A moment later, we were both inside. He unslung the winch and pulley system from his satchel, expertly anchored it to the cave floor, and connected that to the rope he had attached, earlier on. Then, he pulled all my belongings up to the cave with ease.

Soon, when my stuff was safely inside the cave, he took some wood from a corner, where he'd probably piled it up long ago, and filled a stone-edged fireplace near the entrance. With some help from starter fluid and a simple lighter, the cave became illuminated by a flickering flame. The sound of the crackling wood filled the air. Whoever built this cave, so many eons ago, had built well. There was an outgoing draft coming from somewhere in the back of the cave and it pushed the smoke outward, bringing in fresh air.

Mustafa took a metal grill that had been sitting in the corner of the cave and set it over the fire. And, then, plastic pouches of seasoned meat came from his backpack. He set it on the grill and soon it was being barbecued over an open flame.

He gestured toward a large rock big enough for me to sit on.

"Please, sit, relax..." he said.

I took my seat and stared at the dancing flames as he tended the meat. After a few minutes of silence, I leaned toward him.

"Mustafa, tell me about your people," I said. "I'd like to understand their history, their struggles."

He didn't answer immediately. But, then, after a minute or so, he turned toward me and spoke.

"There is so much to tell that there is nothing to tell..." he answered.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

He took two skewers worth of the smaller pieces of meat, put them onto a wooden platter and came closer, sitting cross-legged on the rock floor, eating one with the help of a rag that prevented his hands from being burnt. He offered me the other, with the metal on that one also covered with a rag.

"Eat." He urged.

So, I ate, and it was delicious. It wasn't my first experience with so-called "Shashlik," a dish made from barbecued meat that was a favorite throughout Ukraine, but the Tatar version had some spices that were different from the shashlik made in mainland Ukraine.

"Our history is long," he said. "For centuries, we faced oppression, forced deportations, and the threat of losing our culture. But, now we are fighting back."

He laughed.

"Don't you see it?" He asked.

"What?" I replied.

"It is a fire in our eyes that demands justice." He said. "And, I see that fire in your eyes, too, even though you are not one of my people..."

I smiled back and said, "I've read that Tatars were exiled by Stalin, after WWII."

"That is true," Mustafa agreed. "My family spent decades in Kazakhstan. My father, Allah rest his soul, decided that we would return, in 1975. He bought a small house far from the city, where I've lived most of my life. But so many Russians were brought into Crimea to replace us that we are now strangers in our own homeland."

"What about the Russian takeover in 2014?" I asked.

"Many were unhappy about it, including me," he replied. "Some protested and were arrested, never to be heard from again. About 15,000 to 30,000 people fled. Tatar TV channels were taken off the air, our cultural and religious buildings were vandalized, our mosques raided, our homes painted with crosses. Anyone attending seemingly pro-Ukrainian gatherings was arrested. Beyond that, not much changed."

He stopped for a moment, but then continued,

"There was no point in fighting them, back then. So, I kept my head down, said nothing, and continued working. Resistance got you nowhere other than jail, and there was no organized opposition. But in 2022, when the Ukrainian army actively went to war with Russia and with Western support, the time to evict the Moskali finally arrived. That's when I joined the resistance..."

I nodded. "I think you played your cards right," I commented. "And, by the way, I'm impressed with your rock climbing."

He smiled at that, as he turned the remaining shashlik on the fire.

"I have been coming to Tarkhankut for many years," He said, "I've been climbing these cliffs since boyhood. My father taught me. Now, it is second nature to me. I know every nook and cranny, like this cave, for example."

"You live close?" I asked.

"Not really," he replied. "An hour and half drive, partly because of the bad roads."

"So, you drive here from your house?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "Many people don't have cars, but I have one. A piece of crap, I have to admit. An old Jigoli. The smallest car ever made. You will see. It was my father's car before it became mine. One of the last products of the Soviet Union. Shitty car, made in a shit hole. But, it gets me from place to place. It uses very little fuel and, when it breaks down, which is often, it is cheap to fix."

"How did you find this place?" I asked.

"The cave?" he clarified.

I nodded. "Yes."

"By accident," he replied. "I discovered it as a child. It became my secret hideout." He paused, his eyes distant with memory. "No one has come here for a thousand years. Only me, I think. There are many other caves and few are known. This one is the best. I used to come here when I was upset. It is a peaceful place where I could gather my thoughts."

Then, focusing on our current situation, he added,

"You can safely leave your gear here until you return to Ukrainian-controlled territory. No one will find it."

"Sounds good to me," I replied.

"Tomorrow, we will climb the rest of the way to the plateau," he explained. "After that, we drive south."

My belly was full from the meat and the fresh bread and the cave, warmed by our fire, provided cozy shelter. Perhaps, it was once equally welcoming to ancient people. We had the modern luxury of foam mattresses to soften the hard rock of the floor, but I mused that even with simpler bedding like straw, it would have made a decent resting place.

Exhaustion began to overtake me as the warmth and fullness lulled me to sleep. Despite the unfamiliar surroundings and lack of a pillow, my eyes grew heavy. Within moments, I drifted off, the day's fatigue finally claiming me.



3

I awoke the next morning, my body aching all over. The discomfort wasn't from sleeping on the foam pad atop the stone floor, but rather from the lingering effects of spending 12 hours in the cramped submarine. Thankfully, I'd managed a solid eight hours of sleep. I felt relatively refreshed and alert despite the muscle pain. A couple of ibuprofen would do the trick. I fished the pills from my med pack and washed them down with a long drink of water from my canteen.

We rekindled the fire and prepared a pot of "ovsyanka," the Russian term for oatmeal. After breakfast, we tackled the remaining climb up the cliff. A short walk brought us to Mustafa's "Jigoli" car, which was waiting for us. He hadn't exaggerated—it was possibly the smallest vehicle I'd ever seen. The Jigoli earned the nickname "people's car" in the Soviet Union due to its fuel efficiency and affordability. Its tiny engine produces 30 horsepower. Some, like Mustafa, continue to drive these vehicles to this day.

Unfortunately, I am over 6 feet tall, and it took some work to squeeze myself in. But, soon, we were both inside the little car, driving south toward the partisan's camp. About halfway to our destination, we came across expansive open fields of sunflowers, and I immediately realized that it was the perfect place to test my drones. It would be easy to go deep into the fields, far from the main roads, where there was no chance of observation. This opportunity might not have presented itself again, any time soon.

"This place looks fairly deserted," I commented.

"It is," Mustafa confirmed.

"I wouldn't mind stopping here for a short time, if you don't mind," I said, "I'd like to test my drones where no one is likely to see."

He nodded his understanding.

Of all the things I had brought with me, the micro-drones were the most critical. They had to be working properly, or there was no point in even trying to go forward with the operation. It was much safer to test them now, rather than

wait until we were near a city or any area with a substantial population. There was no sign of other cars, pedestrians, or any other humans. The expansive sunflower fields were ideal.

We turned off the pavement and began driving down a gravel side road. The "road", if you can call it that, ended after a short time, turning from gravel into dirt. Eventually, we were simply surrounded by an endless sea of sunflowers. That's where we stopped and got out, making our way a little further into the heart of the field on foot, gingerly stepping over irrigation channels filled with running water. After walking together in silence for a bit, Mustafa spoke.

"No one will disturb you here," he announced.

We stopped walking and squatted down as I opened and emptied the drone parts. I tried to continue making conversation as best I could.

"Most of the grassy areas in Crimea seem brownish," I commented. "But, here, all the leaves are brilliantly green. And, the sunflowers are intensely yellow..."

"The grass is brown because we get little rain," Mustafa said. "Not enough to grow such crops."

"There seems to be no lack of water," I pointed to one of the nearby irrigation canals, as I began to assemble the first drone.

"Da," he replied, "...but none of it comes from Qirim."

"Where does it come from?" I asked.

"From the Dnieper," he replied.

"Mainland Ukraine?"

"Da."

"Hmm..." I mused.

"There is a reservoir called "Kakhovka", north of us," he explained.

"I've heard of it," I commented. "The Russians control it."

"They do now," He agreed. "But, only since 2022. It is the largest dam in the world...well, maybe, the second largest. In Soviet times, these fields were part of a collective farm. Very big. The dam was built to bring water here and to other dry areas in southern Ukraine. When the Soviet Union collapsed, all farms, like this one, were divided among the workers. Each worker received a small plot. That was in 1991."

"Interesting," I said. "It doesn't look like anyone ever built any fences or divisions of any kind."

"You're right," He continued. "Because it's all still one big farm. Most workers have moved to Simferopol, Yevpatoriya, Yalta, and other cities. They wanted to sell their plots of land, but it was not possible because Ukraine had no land transfer laws. Much of it just fell out of use. Other plots were rented out to big farming companies. In 2014, when the Russians invaded, Ukrainian farm operators who did not swear loyalty to the new regime were expelled."

"The Russian government took the land?" I asked.

"Some of it, yes," he replied. "Most of it was just abandoned. Kakhovka reservoir was north of the new border. Ukraine cut off the water flow and the fields became worthless. Under Russian law, land could be sold, but there were no buyers."

"You say Ukraine shut down the water supply?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes," he replied. "But, in 2021, in spite of that, a group of wealthy Moskali oligarchs began buying land. They bought everything. And, people were happy to sell even for almost nothing because, without water, the land had become almost worthless. The Moskali paid very little and they bought it all, plot by plot, piece by piece. By September 2021, they owned everything. But, the land was still dry and worthless. They looked stupid. But, now, there is more water than anyone needs. This year, Crimea will have the biggest harvest since Soviet times. More money will be earned from this year's crops, alone, than all the money they paid for the land. That is because, when the Russian army took over Kakhovka dam, in February 2022, the water began to flow again."

"You think the oligarchs knew?" I asked.

"Of course, they knew," the man replied. "That's how people become oligarchs. By knowing. In advance of everyone else. Connections. Cheating. They always cheat. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 didn't suddenly happen. It was planned for years. For Putin, it was about restoring the Russian Empire, but for the rest of them, it was only about money. About agricultural land like this, oil, minerals, and a whole host of other things that Ukraine has and the rest of the world wants. The Moskali seize and exploit every resource, and line their own pockets."

"Why did Ukraine shut down the water?" I asked.

"Poroshenko said the Russian Navy was using the water." He replied. "But, we also drank it, and grew food with it. When Zelensky replaced Poroshenko, he promised to reopen it. But, Ukrainian nationalists objected. It stayed closed."

I had almost finished snapping the pieces of one drone together, so I looked warily around, once again, confirming there were no other people who might witness what I was about to do.

"You're certain no one is going to notice what I do here?" I asked.

"As certain as I know the sun will set this evening." He replied.

"How can you be so sure?" I asked.

"Because I know the manager," He replied. "His father, actually. A pro-Russian asshole. Outside of that, he wasn't so bad. In Soviet times, he was one of the collective's managers. In 2014, he supported the Russian takeover. When the Oligarchs started buying land, he helped find and convince the owners. The Moskali eventually hired him to run the place again. But, he spent his entire life drinking, so he died of liver failure a few months ago. His son runs things now."

Then, man's expression conveyed a sense of disgust, and he continued;

"The son is a bigger alcoholic and a bigger asshole than his father. He even hires his drinking buddies to help run the place. Right now, they'll all still be sleeping. When they wake up, it'll be hard for them to even stand up. They won't bother investigating a few sounds in the fields, even if they hear them."

"I hope you're right," I commented.

"Do people drink alcohol in America?" he asked.

"They do." I answered. "We've got our share of alcoholics. Less than here though."

"I don't drink." Mustafa insisted.

"Why not?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"The Prophet warned us against this poison."

"Not drinking is a good thing..." I commented.

"Yes, alcohol is of the devil," He agreed, "But, the Russians are allies with the devil, and they put down their bottles twice a year, once for sowing and the other for harvesting."

"Are Tatars opposed to alcohol?" I asked.

He paused for a moment.

"In theory, yes." He replied. "But most drink anyway. Alcoholism is a problem. Many Tatars watch the Moskali. Then, they ignore the Prophet's warnings. Even my own nephew, Muhammad...he thinks of himself as an Islamist, but he is an alcoholic."

I murmured acknowledgment, but I was more focused on setting up the drones than on his critique of alcohol consumption. Mustafa sighed and continued,

"Many have caught this Slavic disease... It is contagious." He said.

I smiled reflexively, but quickly stopped when I glanced at him. His expression conveyed deep sadness; the topic clearly depressed him. But, it only took a short time before his demeanor changed. He turned, surveyed the surroundings, smiled, and took a deep breath, exhaling with audible pleasure.

"The air is good, yes?" he asked.

The air did seem exceptionally clean and fresh. I snapped together the last piece of the first drone and turned to him.

"Yes," I replied.

"It is the sunflowers."

"You think so?" I asked.

"Absolutely," he insisted, "they clean the air."

I smiled.

"They breathe in carbon dioxide and breathe out oxygen," he continued. "That's what gives this air its freshness."

I wasn't inclined to argue.

"I see," I said.

"That is why we must have water," he said. "Without water, Qirim is a desert."

"With water, Qirim is a paradise." He continued without prompting. "The one good thing that the Russians ever did was to bring the water back."

This positive comment about Russia surprised me. Was it a hint of support for Russia? He was, after all, supposed to be a partisan. For an instant, I wondered whether to question his reliability. But, there was no choice anymore. He was privy to the most intricate details of my mission plan."

"The water also makes Russians richer, doesn't it?" I pointed out, eager to see his reaction.

"That is true." He agreed.

"So, maybe, Russia had cause to invade Ukraine? After all, didn't the Ukrainians shut off the water supply?"

But, he shook his head violently.

"It was never Russia's water!" he exclaimed.

"Then, Ukraine did the right thing to block the canal..." I stated.

"No," he replied.

"But, how else could they put pressure on Russia?" I asked.

"Water is life," he insisted, again. "It should never be cut off."

Mustafa and his group were approved by the top brass of the Ukrainian armed forces and he had gone to great lengths to meet me at Cape Tarkhankut. If I couldn't trust him, my plan was already doomed. The fact that Russian troops hadn't arrested me was really proof enough. Hearing complaints about Ukraine's alleged misdeeds was unsettling, but it seemed to me that he simply exemplified the nature of Ukraine, a vibrant democracy, where people had a wide range of opinions and felt free to express them. Furthermore, technically, he was right. Ukraine should not have cut off the water, since most of it supplied the civilian population of Crimea.

The partisan movement had started out consisting of Crimean Tatars. Now it included Ukrainians, ethnic Russians and many others. Its members shared a common hatred of the Putin regime, each for their own reasons. As a Tatar, Mustafa had obvious reasons. So, I decided to stop asking questions to test his loyalties. But, he wasn't particularly concerned about my asking or not asking. He was going to tell me anyway. He wasn't done making his point or with explaining his position.

"Water is the blood of Qırım," he continued without prompting, "Without it, the land and the people wither. But, freedom is the heart. Without a heart, blood cannot be pumped. When we were united with Ukraine, we had blood and a heart to pump it. United with Russia, we have blood and no heart. The one, without the other, is of no value. Do you agree?"

"Absolutely," I said. "That's why I'm here...to help you free yourselves."

He nodded and spoke again.

"I believe you," He said.

In response, I smiled again and finished setting up the first quadcopter, which was now ready for its maiden test flight. Mustafa stared at the drone skeptically.

"It is very small..." he said, seemingly disappointed.

I nodded.

"Small, but effective," I confirmed. "We call them dragonflies."

"America makes such drones?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Yes."

"You have used them before?" he asked.

"Sure," I replied. "I've been using them for reconnaissance for several months."

"But, we need drones to blow up Russian missiles." He pointed out.

"Yes. And, that's exactly what they'll do. I'll use them as kamikazes..."

He continued to look skeptically at the tiny aircraft.

"I don't understand," he said, simply. "The walls of the bunkers where the missiles are stored are made of solid concrete. How will such a tiny drone even make a hole in the wall?"

"It won't," I explained.

"But, don't you want to blow up the missile storage area?" He said. "It is a large facility."

"These carry more than enough explosives to do the job." I replied.

"How can that be?" he asked.

"The key is precision, not weight," I replied, "They can be placed just right."

There was a pause for a few seconds.

"I don't understand," he said, finally.

"Each one of these drones carries one of these," I said, taking a round metallic ball, about the size of a ping pong ball, from my utility belt.

He shook his head skeptically.

"Also, made in America?"

"Of course," I said.

"But, it's not much bigger than a large bullet," he complained.

"It's a lot bigger than a bullet..." I pointed out, "More like ten bullets. About the size of a standard grenade. In Iraq, we used them all the time."

"Against missile bunkers?" He asked.

"Mostly to kill individual terrorists," I replied.

"But, a warehouse..."

"It will work fine." I insisted.

Mustafa looked very worried.

"Are they miniaturized atomic bombs?" he wondered.

I laughed and shook my head.

"No," I said, "They're just very high-precision explosives filled with IMX-101. One drone, acting alone, can't blow its way into a hardened bunker. But, if we get one or two of them inside the bunker...the Russian army's obsolete methods

will do the rest. The Russians habitually pile up warheads, artillery shells, plastic explosives, and so on. Lots of them, all in one place, and all filled with TnT and similar outdated technologies."

"Outdated?" he wondered.

"Yes," I confirmed. "It was invented in the 1860s and it's highly unstable. Newer explosives, like IMX-101, explode when exposed to an electrical charge. TnT explodes the moment anything nearby explodes. Since the Russians still use TnT, I can destroy an entire Russian missile bunker with just one or two of these dragonflies, so long as I land them in the right place. When it blows, the warhead blows along with it. Then, nearby warheads also explode. And, they cause other nearby warheads to explode, and so on. It's a chain reaction. Within a few seconds, the entire facility will go up in smoke. Poof!"

Mustafa stared at me for a moment, shocked and expressionless, needing a moment to wrap his mind around what I'd explained. But, a few seconds was all it took. Suddenly, his craggy old face lit up with a broad grin.

"Velikolepno! This is why I love America!" he said, enthusiastically. "A brilliant plan!"

"Thank you," I replied.

"Tell your government we also need this IMX-101..."

"I'll do that," I promised him.

In truth, however, I was on my own. The US government did not support my presence on the ground, and it wouldn't offer any support. Whatever I managed to get, from contacts in the military, was sent unofficially, and had to be delivered in such small quantities that the auditors would never notice it was missing.

"How far can these little drones fly?" he asked.

"They're powered by silver batteries," I replied. "They fly longer than those that use cheaper lithium technology. But, probably, no more than about 4 kilometers."

"Hmm..."

"In good weather..." I added.

"And, in bad?"

"Depends on wind speed, direction, and so on..."

"We should have good weather for many days..."

"I'm counting on it," I said.

"But, the air base is more than 30 km from our camp..."

I nodded.

"I know," I said, "We'll just need to travel a bit."

"It won't be easy," Mustafa cautioned. "Thirty kilometers is almost an hour's drive given the bad roads. Police and military patrols are on high alert now, because of our success. You know about the success of our operations?"

"I've heard," I said, although, in truth, I had heard nothing.

I had been instructed to meet a partisan contact person and to rely on his help. That was it. All I really knew about them was that they were mostly native Crimean Tatars, some other minorities and a few Russians. My knowledge base was about to expand. Mustafa was determined to tell me more.

"In November, 30 Russians in an Ak Mecit hospital never returned to the battlefield. We killed them with a bomb." He informed me.

Ak Mecit is the Tatari name for Simferopol.

"A month later, we set fire to a barracks, filled with Russian soldiers," He continued, "They all died in their sleep. Burned to death. In January, we killed two Russian National Guardsmen in an open gun battle. In February, we traveled to occupied mainland Ukraine, and killed 4 Russian soldiers in Nova Kakhovka, with a car bomb, not far from the reservoir we talked about. In March, we killed the deputy head of Nova Khakovka's occupation administration. In April, we blew up a National Guard checkpoint near Oleshky, killing 5 Russians. A few days later, we killed two occupiers in Velyki Kopanii. And just a few days ago, we reached into the heart of Russia. Our group in Nizhny Novgorod, deep inside western Russia, almost managed to kill the filthy Moskali imperialist Zakhar Prilepin. He escaped. But, we got his driver."

"That's an impressive record," I said, although frankly the idea of killing injured soldiers in hospital beds didn't seem honorable. It felt like something the Russians might do. But, suddenly, I realized that this was exactly why they did it. It was biblical-style justice. Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, and so on. At least, they targeted only the occupation administration and soldiers. They didn't go after ordinary Russians. Meanwhile, the Russian armed forces deliberately attacked and terrorized Ukrainian houses, shopping centers, hospitals, museums, and churches virtually every day.

I reminded myself that it was unfair to judge these partisans by American military standards. They were fighting for survival against an incredibly brutal regime, forced to match fire with fire. However, my mission in Crimea wasn't to

attack injured soldiers in hospital beds. My objective was to destroy the weapons they were relying on and deal a blow to Russia's military efforts. I resolved to keep my new companions focused on the plan, steering clear of any diversion into personal vendettas or revenge.

I was finally ready to test the drones. The controller app was loaded and one of my phones was up and running, with the drone controls displayed on the screen. I leaned the phone against one of the largest sunflower stalks and picked up the drone.

"Where is the controller box?" Mustafa asked.

"It doesn't exist," I said. "They're designed to work from a smartphone. The camera sends the video back in real-time. I only need this joystick to guide the drone. The drone also has an autopilot based on artificial intelligence. It can make its own independent decisions, including recognizing and landing on a target."

Four sets of tiny helicopter blades began to whirl as I pressed the "start" button displayed on the phone's screen. The buzzing little quadcopter sounded like a very large bee. It rose vertically until it was above the level of the sunflower stalks. I moved the joystick and slid my finger across the controller screen to change the angle of its ascent. Now, it flew upward at a lesser angle, but climbed ever higher until it was so far away that it disappeared from sight. But, the fact that I couldn't see it, didn't mean it couldn't see me.

I set the drone to hover overhead. I could still hear the continuous buzz but the sound was so low that it now sounded more like a big fly. I adjusted the camera, pointed it down, focusing directly at us. The picture was clear as a bell, but we weren't in it. Instead, we were hidden under the flower tops. Increasing the magnification didn't help.

But, I clicked on a red button on the phone's display, and the camera switched to infrared mode. That changed everything. Now, I could now see both of us, squatting in the field. We were emitting heat, just as every human body does, against the backdrop of relatively cool flowers. The guidance systems were working perfectly.

I brought the drone back down and snapped together parts to build a second one, testing it the same way. Then, the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth. All proved to be in perfect working order. The testing boosted my confidence and I turned to Mustafa.

"I'm finished," I said, disassembling the drones and returning them to their carry bag. "It's just a matter of giving the batteries a full charge, and getting them to the right place."

"Good," he commented, rubbing his belly and grimacing. "Because I am hungry, and it is time we visit my good friend. Svetlana. She is excited to meet you."

"My arrival is supposed to be on a need-to-know basis..." I pointed out.

"Don't worry," he assured me, "she needs to know."

For a moment, I was at a loss. He read my expression and understood my concern.

"She is our leader," He informed me.

I had wrongly assumed that their leader was a man. That's because Crimean Tatars are Muslims. During my service in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other parts of the Middle East, I had never found a woman in a leadership position. But, Crimean Tatars don't put such stringent limits on their women. They are extremely liberal compared to other Islamic cultures. While women still fulfill traditional roles, they also take on broader responsibilities and leadership positions.

"Sorry..." I said, feeling somewhat foolish. "I look forward to meeting her."

He smiled.

"As you should," He replied, "because she is an excellent cook..."



4

The resistance base camp was in a rural area and occupied a vast expanse of grassland and a small area of thin forest next to a small stream that ran along the edges of the property. Several basic cabins were constructed in a central layout resembling a town center and other cabins fanned out on every side, out from there. Each cabin was tiny, with space only for two bunk beds. None had private amenities like toilets, running water, or cooking facilities. They all relied on a shared facility at the center of the compound.

The site resembled a substandard US Army barracks in some respects. But, unlike the immaculate facilities on American bases, most of the structures were in significant disrepair. To put it frankly, the so-called “rest complex” which the rebels used as their makeshift headquarters hadn’t been properly maintained for years. It was falling apart.

Surrounding the living area were mostly withered fruit trees, and there were a few neglected vegetable plots now overrun with weeds. The former inhabitants had once lovingly cared for those vegetable plots, growing potatoes and other essential crops that provided sustenance in a communist society where Soviet collective farms seldom yielded enough food to meet basic human needs.

Food rations had once been rigidly enforced in the former Soviet Union. Citizens could spend an entire day waiting in line to receive a basic weekly allotment of potatoes. Dachas and rest complexes, like this one, were once owned by state organizations and intended for the leisure and recuperation of workers and their families. Most of them were located in rural areas, and included plots of land that could be planted. In a time when there was little food, they were a lifeline. Soviet citizens augmented meager rations with self-grown produce.

Fortunately, circumstances changed. In modern Russia and Ukraine, capitalism has brought many benefits in terms of lifestyle, leisure, and economics. Rest complexes, once important to survive in the midst of widespread food

shortages, are no longer important. The market economy provides access to many other food sources.

The idea of "rest" also underwent a huge transformation. Previously, taking a "vacation" meant exchanging a cramped city apartment for a dilapidated rural bungalow. Now, both Ukrainian and Russian citizens take trips to resorts and coastal destinations just like Western Europeans. Vacations to Turkey, Montenegro, the Black Sea coast of Bulgaria, and Romania are the norm. Dacha communities and "rest complexes" have lost their appeal.

This rest complex was a remnant of the bygone era. Only elderly former employees of defunct Soviet enterprises still come to such places. And, even they seldom bother. The specific rest complex that served as the headquarters of the local partisans had once been the prized property of the now bankrupt "Weights & Measures Institute" in Yevpatoriya. The complex was overgrown with weeds and underbrush. Nobody cared. It was better to keep the place in its ramshackle condition because, then, it would attract less attention.

We completed the final stretch on foot. As in the sunflower fields, Mustafa's little Jigoli was ill-equipped to handle the rugged dirt road. After a 15-minute walk beyond where he parked, we caught the scent of a delightful aroma wafting through the air. The enticing smell of barbecued shashlik caressed our noses. Seasoned barbecued meat is a signature specialty with Tatar roots, adored throughout the nations that were once a part of the former Soviet Union. Despite the dreary surroundings, the mouthwatering scent left me feeling hungry.

We walked by a row of cabins, and I noticed a slender man with a shaved head and a thick red beard streaked with gray. He was sporting a pair of wire-rimmed glasses and they gave him a distinctly nerdy appearance. That general impression was complemented by a Star Wars T-shirt and a pair of cargo pants adorned with multiple pockets. He was seated on a stool, surrounded by an assortment of electronic scrap. As we approached, he seemed to be paying meticulous attention to a particular project, carefully soldering and running silver lines across various circuit boards.

Beside him sat an open laptop, its screen displaying a series of complex codes and diagrams. He seemed totally immersed in his work, even though, at the same time, he was listening to and humming along with some sort of music through a

pair of headphones. He finally looked up as we passed, paused what he was doing, smiled, and took off the headphones. Then, he laughed.

"Mustafa!" he exclaimed, laughing louder, "I knew it would be you! You can smell food from 20 kilometers away!"

"True enough, my friend..." Mustafa replied, smiling, "Unfortunately, I can't eat like a pig and never gain weight, like you..."

"Ah," the man said, dismissively, waving his open palm, "it isn't true. If I ate like you, I would also be fat!"

The space around the man was cluttered with an array of electronic gadgets, most of which I couldn't even identify. Amid the sea of technology, he had wires, cables, batteries, and tools scattered all over the wooden table and floor. He didn't seem to notice the dust, the flies, or the mess. The man's eyes lit up with curiosity as he studied me. He adjusted his glasses and stroked his beard. A smile was on his lips, and I sensed he was brimming with questions, but he didn't ask any of them.

Mustafa smiled as he sparred verbally with his friend.

"John, this is Sasha Melnyk," Mustafa said, enthusiastically. "One of our most valuable assets. He is half-Russian, but we forgive him for that, because he is one of our most dedicated freedom fighters and, definitely, our biggest eater!"

"On this, we disagree," Sasha said, "I'm looking at our biggest eater!"

Mustafa leaned in close and whispered in my ear, acting as if he were sharing a profound secret. He spoke loud enough so the other man would hear every word.

"If you didn't know better, you would assume him to be a full-blooded Tatar, wouldn't you?" Mustafa said.

"I heard that!" Sasha quipped.

"Did you know," Mustafa continued, no longer pretending to whisper, "that my friend, Sasha here, was once the best smuggler on both sides of the Azov Sea?"

Sasha shook his head.

"That was long ago." He insisted, setting the record straight. "Now, I am an IT specialist."

Mustafa waved his palm, dismissively.

"Once a criminal, always a criminal," he said. "Thankfully, he now dedicates his basic criminality to helping us free the peninsula from the Moskali. He is our resident hacker. All these things you see around him are parts of something new he is creating for us. What is it, Sasha?"

"An early warning system." The man replied. "It will detect the unauthorized approach of unknown people."

"How, will it know friend from foe?" I asked.

"Artificial intelligence." He replied quickly.

"Ah, yes," Mustafa said, motioning to the man, first and then to me, "Did I tell you that this inquisitive person is John Kovalenko, the American we talked about?"

He gestured toward me.

"Svetlana Yurievna told me," Sasha commented.

He turned toward me, and added,

"I hope you help us kill more of Putin's men!"

"I'm here to destroy one of Putin's biggest missile bunkers," I replied, wanting to make it crystal clear, "If that means killing some of Putin's men, then so be it. But, disrupting Russian logistics is the goal, not killing Russians."

"I see," Sasha said, turning back to his electronics, "My goal is just to kill them. The more dead Putin lovers, the better..."

Mustafa turned to me and spoke.

"You wouldn't believe it, but as I said before, he is half-Russian," he said.

"I am not half-Russian." Sasha snapped.

"Your father was Russian, was he not?" Mustafa pointed out.

"Being Russian is not about genetics," Sasha insisted, "There's not a scientist on Earth who can tell Russians and Ukrainians apart from one another, based on genetic testing. The difference is not in the biology, but in the heart..."

He tapped the left side of his upper chest and then pointed to his head.

"And, also, of course, in here..." he continued.

"In your head or your heart?" I asked, confused.

"Both," He replied immediately. "Because even though the Soviet Union is long gone, Russians, inside their heads, won't admit it. They look to the past. Ukrainians look to the future. I was born speaking Russian. But, I speak Ukrainian now, and English too, and I hate Vladimir Putin and all the backward-looking things he represents. I renounce any part of me that was ever Russian, if there ever was any..."

"Well said," Mustafa turned to me and praised his friend, "He has a beautiful way with words, doesn't he?"

Then, he turned back to his friend to say,

"I was only teasing you, Sasha. We are all Ukrainian and Tatar. You, especially. Despite you being a Christian, you are more of a Tatar than I am."

"Da," Sasha replied, nodding.

"But, of course, unlike me, Sasha is not just a simple man who knows how to work with his hands. He is a genius!" Mustafa added.

"That's not true," Sasha insisted modestly, "I know electronics and can program things. It's not a special talent."

"Don't let him fool you!" Mustafa insisted.

"You work as a programmer?" I asked.

"Yes," He replied.

"For a local company?"

He shook his head and said,

"I work for myself."

"Freelancing?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Lots of work for foreign companies. Some big names. Mostly for little companies that need small jobs done."

"And, his brilliant criminal mind also comes into play!" Mustafa proudly pointed out, "He also works as a troll for an infamous Russian IT company."

Sasha shrugged his shoulders.

"It's my cover," he admitted. "The pay is good and they hired me because I know English."

Mustafa was busy nodding his head and laughing under his breath.

"They hired him, yes." He said. "He works for the Internet Research Company,"

I recognized the name immediately.

"Isn't that..." I began to ask, but Mustafa cut me off.

"Exactly," He said, "A partisan warrior working part-time for Prigozhin! A Wagner Group troll who gets paid to write stupid comments, in English, in Western news media."

"I hate some of the crap I write." Sasha insisted.

Mustafa nodded, and said,

"But, it saved our asses more than once. The FSB would have arrested us long ago if he were not on Prigozhin's payroll. They were hot on our trail after we blew up a military recruiting station. But, then, they found out who he works for, and

assumed no Wagner Group guy would do that. So, they moved on to investigate other people.”

“Da...” Sasha agreed. “That is why I do it. Aside from the pay, of course.”

“You’re fluent in English?” I asked.

“Of course,” he replied, in nearly perfect English.

I continued to speak in Russian out of courtesy to Mustafa, who didn’t speak English.

“But, you also do software outsourcing work?”

He nodded, and said,

“Maybe I will go to Silicon Valley someday...”

“What about the sanctions?” I asked.

“What about them?” he asked in reply.

“Well, you are based in Crimea. And, Russian-held territories are cut off from the international banking system. How do you get paid?”

“Easy,” he claimed, “nobody really knows where I am. I use VPNs. I pretend to live in Turkey. My PayPal is linked to a Turkish bank account in Istanbul. It’s not easy to withdraw the money and I haven’t withdrawn anything for over a year, but it’s there. Like a forced savings account. When I need to, I’ll take a trip to Turkey. Right now, I don’t need the money. That asshole, Prigozhin, pays me enough to live on. I’m single and I don’t need much.”

“As I told you,” Mustafa interjected, “a brilliant criminal mind at work!”

“Ah,” Sasha dismissed him with a wave of his hand, “Shut up, already, Mustafa.”

“He’s just smart,” I commented.

Sasha nodded, smiled, and pointed with his silver circuit drawing pen.

“There, you see?” he said, “did you hear that, Mustafa? Pay attention and learn from the Americans!”

Mustafa, smiling, but shaking his head, turned to me and said,

“I say criminal...” Then he feigned whispering something, making sure it was loud enough for the other man to hear. “Don’t feed his ego. It’s too big already!”

I turned back to Sasha.

“What caused you to join the partisans?” I asked.

“I brought him in.” Mustafa blurted out before Sasha could reply.

“Yes, he did, because I hate Putin...” Sasha added.

“Come,” Mustafa said, “You need to meet more people.”

Giving Sasha a final look, he added,

"We'll see you at dinner."

Sasha, occupied with his electronic machinations, nodded, but said nothing more, as he looked down at his work.

We walked deeper into the dacha complex and came upon another man. This one was young and scrawny, sitting on one side of a long, weather-worn, wood table. He looked to be in his early 20s and sported an untended black beard, greased by pieces of rendered fat, along with bread crumbs. There was also a measure of vodka that wet part of the beard, and the man continued drinking vodka from an open bottle.

We were a short distance away from the outdoor fire pit, where the shashlik was roasting and it continued to smell delicious. Mustafa pointed to the young man.

"This is Muhammad, my nephew..." he said, shaking his head with dismay. "Who, unfortunately, drinks like a fucking Russian..."

The young man glanced up with a resentful look on his face.

"Why don't you say something good for a change?" The drunken young man asked.

"I hope that is not the fat of a pig," Mustafa commented, obviously irritated.

"Of course not!" the young man insisted. "It is halal fat of the cow. What do you take me for?"

"I take you for a drunkard, who might now know one from the other," Mustafa replied and then added, "My nephew says he is an Islamist, but he drinks against all the teachings of the Quran."

"You never have anything good to say..." the young man complained, dismissively waving an open palm. "Am I an old man like you? I need to live. And, by the way, I face Mecca every day and pray, three times a day. Do you? Of course, not. You don't even know where Mecca is! When was the last time you prayed? You cannot even remember, can you? And, yet, you lecture me about alcohol!"

"I don't need to constantly pray to prove my devotion to God," Mustafa replied. "Almighty Allah knows me and I worship him in my own way..."

"Formal prayer is required by the Quran, as you know." Muhammad pointed out. "Maybe, you are a Christian now? Have you converted?"

"What kind of stupid question is that?" Mustafa demanded.

"I can criticize you, also?" Muhammad replied. "Do you see?"

Mustafa said nothing but shook his head, frustrated, mumbling something under his breath that only he could hear. But, then, he spoke openly again.

"As you can see, my nephew is a disappointment," Mustafa said, "Thank Allah that his mother, rest her soul, is not alive to see this drunkenness. But, he has good qualities too. When he isn't drunk, he is a very good shot, for example. An excellent sniper. And, he has courage beyond that of most men. Believe it or not, he single-handedly attacked an entire group of Russian soldiers with nothing more than a Kalashnikov, killing all five. He was wounded himself, with injuries that would cripple most men. Yet, he returned to assist on another operation only a few weeks later."

Listening to his uncle praise his virtues as a soldier, the young Tatar man beamed with pride.

"That is why I drink." He claimed. "Because of the wounds. And, the pain..."

"You were an alcoholic long before that incident..." Mustafa pointed out.

"I would stop drinking now, if not for the pain..." Muhammad insisted. "So, this is the American?"

"Yes," Mustafa answered, "This is John Kovalenko."

"He doesn't look so impressive." Muhammad mused, saying it slowly, in case my Russian skills weren't good enough to understand him at full speed. He wanted me to hear his low opinion of me. "Why are you all making such a big deal out of him?"

"He will help us destroy the missile storehouse," Mustafa advised.

"We don't need him." the young man insisted, shaking his head. "We could easily do it ourselves."

"No, Muhammad," Mustafa corrected him. "You are wrong. The base is heavily defended. Surrounded by many kilometers of electronic sensors. We would be captured or killed if we tried. John spent years in the American Special Forces. He is an expert at high technology warfare..."

"You think this American is more blessed by Allah than we are?" Muhammad asked. "That he can do things that we cannot?"

"He has electronic countermeasures that can defeat the Russian detectors," Mustafa explained, "He has micro-drones that can clandestinely penetrate their bases from several kilometers away."

"Very impressive," Muhammad said, snidely. "But, I don't see the difference between Americans and Russians. If this American is so powerful, let him do whatever it is that he needs to do, himself..."

The comment merited a response, and I was on the verge of saying something, but my attention was momentarily diverted. A striking young woman – tall, slender, and dark-haired, appeared, emerging from the communal kitchen, which was nestled near the crackling fire pit. She approached us carrying a tray laden with glasses. Despite her delicate frame, her poise and adept handling of what had to be a heavy tray were remarkable.

She was a true Tatar beauty with subtly almond-shaped blue eyes that stood out in contrast to long, black silky hair that flowed over her shoulders. Her olive-toned skin was unblemished. The high cheekbones, ruby-red lips, and aquiline nose made her the portrait of perfection. Every feature harmonized with the next and she captivated me immediately. My heart might have been hardened by war, but her soft gaze melted it.

It didn't take her long to notice I was staring at her. Women have a way with such things. She averted her eyes, only to swiftly return them with a playful smile, meeting my gaze directly. This fleeting interaction lasted not more than a few seconds. The smile was gone almost as soon as it came. But, she continued to approach our table, her demeanor shifting to stoicism. Her expression was now a poker face concealing inner thoughts.

"Kompot?" she asked, putting down the tray. "Help yourselves."

"Thank you," I said, with an idiot's smile on my face, transfixed by her beauty.

"Kompot" is a homemade fruit beverage prepared by simmering fruit in water until the essence is extracted. The process reduces the fruit to a bland pulp. Its essence is transferred to the water. The drink is reminiscent of juice, particularly when sweetened with sugar. But, as tasty as it was, the kompot was obviously not what caught my attention or that of others. Because I was not the only one who saw her smile, which was fatefully unfortunate.

"She is very beautiful, yes?" Mustafa commented.

"Kok eye zavut?" I asked a Russian language question, which translates to "What is her name?"

"It's none of your business!" Muhammad snapped angrily.

But, Mustafa ignored him.

"She is called Yasmina," Mustafa answered, "Granddaughter of our deceased leader, Igor Fedorov and our current leader, his wife, Svetlana Fedorova."

"And, she is a devout Muslim!" Muhammad interjected loudly, speaking directly at me. "Which means she is not interested in you!"

With a look of burning rage, he fixed his eyes on me as if I had committed a grave sin. My mere inquiry as to the girl's name had provoked him. That slight trace of a smile, which had briefly graced her lips, had infuriated him. There was nothing I could do to change the fleeting moment of connection, nor did I have any desire to do so. Looking back, I doubt there was anything I could have done to appease his jealousy, short of immediately leaving Crimea.

In some bizarre way, however, I empathized. The girl obviously captivated him as she did me. We were both trapped by her beauty. I wasn't drunk or irrational, as he was, but I was smitten nonetheless. That said, I was not yet willing to admit it even to myself. I didn't yet understand the depth of my attraction to the girl. However, I readily understood his infatuation. That small gift of a smile had transformed Muhammad from a skeptic, unenthusiastic about both western culture and me, in particular, into a bitter adversary.

"What kind of talk is that, Muhammad?" Mustafa chided him.

"Yasmina is required to marry a Muslim man." Muhammad insisted. "That is Sharia law!"

I recognized, right away, that this resentment might jeopardize my mission and that it would be best to nip it in the bud. It seemed prudent to downplay the incident.

"I asked her name, nothing more," I said.

"Anyone can see what you want," he insisted. "It is in your eyes. Your intentions go beyond getting a name."

"John Kovalenko is our guest, Muhammad!" Mustafa reproached him. "You must treat him with respect."

"Why should I?" Muhammad blasted back. "He is a smug American, who travels the world, like other decadent westerners, seeking to play games with the women of poorer nations!"

"First of all, let us get one thing clear," I retorted, "My purpose here is to blow up a Russian missile warehouse. That's my only purpose. I am not here looking for a woman. I'm sworn to fight for the Ukrainian Foreign Legion and that's what

I'm going to do. Accomplishing my mission is what you see in my eyes. The only thing. I assure you. There is nothing more. The rest is your imagination."

"You are a very bad liar!" he exclaimed. "It is obvious that you want her."

"Stop this nonsense, Muhammad," Mustafa interjected. "Yasmina is a grown woman. If she chooses to befriend this man, the choice is up to her, not you."

"No, it is not up to her!" Muhammad insisted, "And, it is not up to me, you, or this decadent American. It is up to the Almighty Allah. He forbids it!"

"So, in addition to being a drunkard, you are also a Prophet now? Who speaks for Allah?" Mustafa asked, dismissively.

"I speak for Sharia law, which is clear," Muhammad answered immediately.

"Does Allah forbid people from smiling or asking a name?" I asked.

"He forbids marriage between non-Muslim men and Muslim women!" Muhammad exclaimed. "So, keep your eyes off of her!"

"We are not living in Arabia," Mustafa replied. "We are a secular people. This man is our guest and he is not a polytheist, an idolater, or an atheist. He is a Christian, one of the people of the Book..."

Mustafa was making an assumption that, to be honest, was not entirely true. For most of my life, I have not considered myself a Christian. I am more of an agnostic. I believe, sometimes, that there is a God, but I've seen too much injustice to think that, even if He does exist, that He particularly cares what happens to us, individually. I've seen my best friends die in front of my eyes. Why would God allow that to happen? And, why would He let the Russians kill so many innocent people? Still, I appreciated Mustafa's attempt to defend me.

"There is no explicit prohibition in the Quran that says a Muslim woman cannot marry a man of the Book." Mustafa contended.

"The Sunnah and Hadith forbid it!" Muhammad argued.

"Interpretations by men who came after the Prophet." Mustafa stated, dismissively, "Some hadith imply that the Holy Prophet, himself, lusted after the wife of his son! Do you also believe that? We each must read the Quran, and reach our understanding of it, knowing the people involved. We Tatari are a modern people. And, soon, Ukraine will be inside the European Union. Will we join Europe by returning to the dark ages?"

"Why should we join with infidels in Europe?" Muhammad asked. "Idolaters, no better than Moskali, allies of the Great Satan. Supporters of homosexuality and sin. Insulting Almighty Allah with their twisted laws and

culture. No, we don't need Europe. We need only ourselves. Our task is to bring about a worldwide Caliphate!"

To be perfectly honest, I've never read the Quran, the Sunnah, or the Hadith. I probably never will. Nor do I really care what they say. I did not understand anything they were discussing. I knew only that Mustafa's arguments and explanations were getting him exactly nowhere. That was probably because no logical argument would ever soothe his troubled nephew's injured pride.

His anger didn't arise out of true religious offense, but from unrequited affection for Yasmina. She had no interest in him. In fact, as I would later learn, she despised him. My presence reminded him of that. It didn't mean that Yasmina wanted to be with me. But, it did tell him, in no uncertain terms, that she didn't want to be with him. For that reason, Mustafa's attempt at giving a civics lesson fell flat. It only served to increase Muhammad's envy, anger, and frustration. It made him think more about his inadequacy.

"You are keeping company with the wrong people!" Mustafa exclaimed in frustration. "That Imam is one of them. Stop parroting his words. You are making me embarrassed that you are my sister's son. If she were still here, she would set you straight!"

"If she were here, she would agree with me!" the young man countered. "It should embarrass YOU to keep company with infidels!"

Mustafa was quickly losing his patience.

"Such loyalty to the Faith by a p'yanitsa!" he replied sarcastically.

The word "p'yanitsa" has no direct English equivalent. Such a person is not only addicted to alcohol, like an alcoholic, but is always drunk and out of control of himself at all times. The remark simply slid off his nephew's alcohol-fueled Teflon coating, as the young man paid no attention.

"Let there be no doubt that the Caliphate will be restored!" his nephew proclaimed, repeating the words his local preacher had been saying daily. "Sharia will return to the land. And, in Almighty Allah's holy name, all will be bound to the Quran, the Hadith, and the Sura. Infidels and evildoers, alike, will be punished. It is only a matter of time!"

Mustafa responded to his nephew's proclamations with a derisive snort.

"You and your so-called 'Islamist' friends speak a lot about this supposed Caliphate," he replied, his tone laced with skepticism, "But, where is your 'Caliph'? When he arrives, let me know. But, until then, we fight for Ukraine's

right to exist. Our ultimate goal is and always will be to join the free nations of the world. That means joining the EU."

The conversation had reached a stalemate, with neither of them willing to concede. Muhammad, his anger and intoxication clear, abruptly stood up and grasped his bottle of vodka. He took another swig and stormed away. The tension was palpable as he exited, leaving an uncomfortable silence in his wake.

Mustafa's voice became low and apologetic.

"I apologize for my nephew's terrible behavior," he said, his eyes conveying a mix of embarrassment and concern. "He is drunk."

I tried to reassure him with a calm and understanding response.

"Don't worry," I replied, "I don't take it personally."

But, Mustafa felt he needed to say more.

"He was not always like this," Mustafa explained. "He drinks more and more these days. And, he is also under the influence of an Islamist Imam."

"Mostly, I think, he is simply fixated on that girl..." I said, smiling.

"You may be correct." Mustafa agreed. "He has admired Yasmina from afar for many years. But, she has never had any interest, and I doubt that she ever will. Not, at least, until he reforms himself. You can see how beautiful she has become, can you not?"

"I'm not blind," I admitted. There was no use in lying about it.

"She is a practical girl," Mustafa added, "and has no use for men addicted to the bottle. And, of course, no time for fools who dream about Caliphates. She is only 21 but possesses the mind of a much older woman. She does not smile often or easily."

So, there it was. Mustafa had also noticed the smile. Was it that obvious? It lasted no more than a second, yet it seemed that everyone had seen it.

"How did she come to be a partisan?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Her grandmother didn't want her to be," He said, "She tried everything she could to stop it from happening."

"Her grandmother is Svetlana, the same woman you said is the leader of this partisan cell?"

"Yes," he replied.

"She doesn't want her involved?" I asked.

He shook his head.

“No,” he explained. “Too dangerous.”

“But, not for her?” I asked.

“Of course,” he replied, “Svetlana doesn’t care whether she lives or dies anymore, but she cares about Yasmina.”

“How is it, then, that Yasmina became a partisan?” I asked.

“It is a long story,” he said, shaking his head in dismay.

“The girl has suffered much...” Mustafa continued. “She was born in Russia, where her father and mother lived for several years. But, her father was drafted into the Russian army and sent to Chechnya. He died, and her mother died of grief shortly afterward. She was brought to Crimea by her grandmother when she was still a baby. And, now, Yasmina is very much like her grandmother was as a young woman. Very stubborn, for example...”

“But, my question was how did she become a partisan if her grandmother didn’t want her to?” I asked.

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