

Battle

“Yuri, can you get me and Sasha some more greens? Please?”

“Yes, Yaroslav, and make it snappy. I’d go myself, and beat you by a mile, but I can’t run on my arms, can I?” With hearty laughter, Eduard tumbled over, wiggling his leg stumps in the air. 13-month-old Sasha, the fingers of his left hand jammed into his mouth, laughed through his drool, producing bubbly mirth which would have been easier if he had removed his hand, but he kept it firmly in place, almost choking with glee at Eduard’s silly antics. Sasha’s young mother, Yvette, held him comfortably on her lap, grinning at Eduard in spite of herself. You crazy fool, she thought, you’ve lost both your legs in the war, and all you do is crack jokes and spin funny yarns. You have nothing to live for in the world’s eyes, yet you act as if the entire world would knock on your door at any moment. Thank you for bringing a little humor into our struggle to live. Thank you for making Sasha laugh. And you are completely crazy, do you know that?

“Okay, okay, okay. I was just out while all of you were napping, and I checked the traps.”

“Anything, my dear Yaroslavsky?” Eduard was upside down while posing his question.

“No. At first, I had trouble finding them. Too much snow.”

“It’s done some more weather, then?”

“About a foot last night. Then the winds kicked up, and the drifts at the trees and fences are piled up head high.”

“As in this high?” Eduard righted himself and stretched erect to his maximum height, balancing precariously on his stumps. He wobbled and teetered, fighting for balance, but abruptly toppled over, rolling and rolling along the hay-strewn dirt floor, exaggerating his mock agony at failing to maintain his stance. Sasha squealed and chortled, blowing tiny bubbles out between his lips and fingers. Yvette couldn’t repress a chuckle.

“Oh, *much* higher, Eddie Peanut. Why don’t you stand up and show me properly?”

“I *did* stand, Yaroslavsky. I stood so high, you were staring at my belly button. Whoosh! Do I have to do it all over to demonstrate? It takes a truckload of energy to do it, and I already used up my quota. My morning bean soup only lasts so long. Besides, I need food more to feed my intellect.” Eduard tapped his temple with his index finger. “How can I read all the books here on one lousy cup of navy bean soup?”

“Ha ha, Mr. Peanut. Mr. Filbert, half the books are in French. You can’t read French. You only know English and German.”

“Ach, Wie hab had der conversation before! Ja, Sie ist absolutely correct. Ich bin Deutsch. But! I hab been vurking on die French. Is it not so, Yvette?” Turning to her, Eduard made elaborate gestures, and in an affected voice, beseeched her: “Ah, mon Yvette! Yvette Yvonne Jeanne-Marie Claudette! Yvette, je t’aime! Je t’aime, Yvette! Do you love your Eduard? Ma Cherie, ma pamplemousse! You’ll marry me, n’est-ce pas? I will be your slave, and I will carry you over the threshold!”

Yvette rolled her eyes at Eduard’s playful, insincere entreaties. “Did you just call me your ‘grapefruit’? ‘Pamplemousse’ means ‘grapefruit,’ does it not? I am *not* fat and round like a grapefruit. Look at me: a skeleton from a starvation diet. You need your eyes checked.”

“Non, non, non! Not my eyes! I need my *legs* checked. Hold it, *I* will check them.” Eduard proceeded to ponder his lower extremities in a learned fashion, with an assortment of professorial facial expressions. “Ah! I have checked my legs! Sacre bleu, they have checked *out*!” He shuffled over closer to Yvette and continued in a snobbish vein: “Excuse me, miss, I left my legs here for safekeeping while enjoying the opera, and I have come now to reclaim them. Here is my *claim* check, proving beyond all doubt that I put them in your care.” Eduard pretended to riffle through numerous imaginary pockets in his long, tattered winter coat. He bent his head down at various angles to aid his search, but Yvette gave him a gentle push and he tumbled back to his original spot.

“You silly Eduard. I don’t have your legs. General Schnitzer has them.”

“Ah, the general.” Within a second Eduard became thoughtful and serious. “I forgot: he collects them. He has a fine collection of limbs, a few heads, some digits and toes for decoration, but his great vice is legs. He can’t get enough! Ah!”

Yuri interrupted. “Now, you two, you must promise to behave, if I must brave the cold to collect some winter collards. But I may have to dig through a ton of snow and ice to find more. We finished row five, but I believe there are another dozen rows hidden in the same field.”

Eduard became almost drearily somber. “Yes, we will behave. Have we ever not behaved? I’ll tend our petite fire, which is a sheer pleasure, seeing as how the little chimney is now completely unplugged. Heat! Cooking! To work!” With a grand flourish he hoisted himself up the two steps to the upper level and over towards the grate, first gathering a few stray bits of kindling and tossing them over to the firewood pile. Then he inspected the spring, a small, hollowed-out area in the concrete inset, sticking his finger into the clear water. “Ooh! Still cold! Thank God for spring water!”

“Yes, thank God,” said Yvette. “He was kind to lead us here and give us a life-saving supply. How long ago we would have perished without it.” She crossed herself reverently.

“You know, Yvette, if you were Lutheran like me, you wouldn’t have to make the sign of the cross,” Eduard remonstrated.

“What, you object to the cross?”

“No, no, my pet. I love the cross. I cling to it.”

“Well then. Display your love, and be like me: show your affection for God and His suffering.”

“Believe you me, Yvette, no one knows affection for God and His suffering on our behalf more than me.” Eduard thumped his chest for emphasis, and a lone tear slid down his cheek.

Yuri had already left through the corridor, down the steps, and carefully removing their special barricade to keep out weather and wild critters, ventured out to the field, after replacing the barricade.

The abandoned field lay close by, presently covered with snow, fortunately, since it kept the remaining crops at freezing temperature, protecting them from exposure to the much colder wind. Yuri was puzzled by the reticence of the local wildlife to the abundance of morsels growing within easy reach of the spacious woods, but wondered also if most of the animals had been driven off by the recent fighting.

Yuri was not his real name; only one he had invented for convenience. Yaroslav also wasn't accurate, but an endearment fabricated by Eduard's fecund brain. His identity could no longer be a matter of public record, both for his own safety and that of any surviving relatives. He couldn't be sure that Eduard and Yvette were real identities either; he suspected that they too had pasts that needed protection. So far as he knew, they might even be enemies, using criteria of an earlier time and place, but fate had contrived to bring them together for mutual survival. In the beginning he used to stare furtively at Eduard, certain that he recognized subtle features of the other side; listening to Eduard's unusual accent and choice of words partly confirmed his theory. Yvette also bore faint resemblances to a type of woman he had been cautioned against from boyhood on up. As time passed, and both Eduard and Yvette repeatedly proved their loyalty and usefulness to him, his biases weakened until, like a soggy, flimsy tissue, they sundered into nothing. Obstacles fell from his eyes and automatic connections in his thinking dissolved. He began to see through his prejudices and view his companions as real people with real feelings and real value. He began to care what happened to them. He realized one day that their worth transcended what they could do for him; he was startled at a reversal of his logic: he now wished to fathom what he could do for them. Their needs became equal to, or even greater than, his own. What was this new turmoil in his mind? Why had he never experienced this kind of transformation before?

He loved them. Not selfishly, but selflessly. Not for his own pleasures or purposes, but for what would edify them. How could he help them realize their dreams? How could he lay before them even a few, insignificant shards of joy? He felt that he would be willing to do anything for them. Let the foe

threaten; he would advance to meet it, shielding them with his own body. What do you want? (I have come to claim my victims, the foe shouts. Stand aside.) I will not stand aside. I will strike you, and I will defend my friends. (Then you will die with them, the foe screams.) I would rather die than betray those I love.

Not so fast, his anti-conscience cooed. Self-survival above all; is this not so? Your background and military training demand it.

He thought hard. But his decision was steadfast; it could not be changed. Yes, I would die for them. Anti-conscience be damned.

Thus deep in meditation he dug with his stick to uncover the precious collards. Here they were, wonderfully sheathed in their natural deep freeze. He plucked several leaves, then scooped the snow back over the remaining portions. The leaves were partially damaged by the frigid conditions, but they were always cooked and consumed quickly, to everyone's relish. How God had mercifully led them to the most desolate spot imaginable, then helped them discover a veritable garden of Eden in disguise, he couldn't begin to figure out. Thank you, God, he breathed. Even if it was a garden encased in ice. Which was good: food items lasted much longer, rather than going bad in mere days, had they been in a warmer climate.

Dismantle the barricade, put it back in place. The trouble was worth it. Nothing small could get in; nothing big could enter without ample warning.

"Ah, Slavsky! You bring dark green tasties, nourishment for flesh and mind. I thank you with my heart." Bowing before Yuri with magnified obeisance, Eduard procured the greens and whisked them off to the pot.

"Yes, Yuri. You are a man of gold," said Yvette.

Yuri protested. "No man is gold. At best we are alloys, iron mixed with dirt. Gold spoiled by tin. Steel weakened by shifting mud. You don't really know me."

Eduard busily stirred the greens and sprinkled in some bits of dried meat from the storeroom. “No, no, Slavsky. We know you well enough. Did you not personally intervene and save all of our lives? Have you not watched out for us day by day, and attended to our constant whinings and whims? Truly, my Yaroslavsky, Yvette is the accurate prophetess, telling out what is sure: you have a heart of gold, and it beats with utmost sincerity.”

“Stop, both of you. As you well know, we have all benefitted each other, and I need you as much as you need me. Are you not the head chef, Eduard? I couldn’t boil water if my soul depended on it. As you bow to me in gratitude, so I also bow to you, thanking our good God that He sent someone who actually knows how to make nature edible. And you, Yvette. How much you have comforted me in my despairs, advised me like a great sage, and encouraged me to form a stronger bond with my Lord. You have wisdom and discernment beyond your years. How on earth did you receive this great gift?”

“You know as well as I, Yuri. Just as Sasha is a priceless gift from my husband, so any feeble help I can offer you is a gift from our Lord. It is all due to Him; I am only an imperfect vessel.”

Eduard came over, balancing the steaming pot. Distributing the bowls and spoons, he announced, “Take as much as you want; only be sure to eat all you take. We must keep costs down to continue serving the public and still make a profit.” He winked at Yvette and filled her bowl to overflowing.

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Late that night, Yuri studied the contours of their home, the charcoal gray shapes almost hidden by day’s absence. He had long ago memorized every detail; each lump of clothing, each outline of their bedding, the blankets and quilts piled high, the small troves of personal belongings, the rise and fall of the concrete barrier spanning the inner perimeter of the walls, the angular rows of books. He listened to the soft sounds of bodies deep in sleep, to the almost inaudible gurgle of the spring, to the small crackle of embers, now confined to an ever shrinking ellipse of orange where the cooking fire had been.

He had long since committed to memory all of these things in the range of his vision, yet continued to review them, because they brought comfort to his uprooted soul. Reared in a spacious house with rich furnishings, he had felt like a foreigner. Living now practically in squalor, he treasured this space as the sweetest home he could imagine. Growing up in a large family, attended by servants, doted on by parents and siblings, he had felt ostracized and isolated. Living now with outcasts, misfits and sworn enemies, he treasured the bonds among them as the most precious relationships he could ever conceive.

He heard rustling and shuffling on his left. It was Eduard.

“Yaroslav, I can’t sleep.”

“You too? Too much greens and fat?”

“Ah, Slavsky. Yes, too much fat. I eat as much as you, what our rations allow, but I have less body area in which to spread it out. It goes down here---“ he tapped his stumps--- “makes a u-turn, and collects in my head, causing me to think too much.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“Everything. Anything. Life. Love. War. My family. My sister and my brother-in-law and their two daughters. My boss at work in the old factory. My school friends. Did they survive? Are any of them still alive?” He fell silent. Yuri said nothing. “I think about Yvette. Her husband perishing in this senseless war. She needs a man for her son, and for herself.”

“She has us.”

“No, I mean she needs what only a husband can give her. She needs to be complete, and she will need help to raise Sasha in the right ways.” Eduard shifted his weight, trying to ease the strain of sitting. “I am inadequate for the task. But you, Slavsky; you---“ He left his thought unsaid.

“Eduard, you are more adequate than you think. In any case, I respectfully decline. For two reasons: one, I do not desire Yvette. She is pretty, certainly, and her spirit is truly golden. Even as skin and bones

she is a picture of beauty. But I can't wish for her, because it would upset our balance. What would happen to you, Mr. Peanut, if Yvette and I spent our time doling out attentions only to each other? You would be left out, and our relationship to you would wither. She and I could craft a strong cord, only to sever our cords with you. Then we would perish. We need to remain equidistant, equal, like three sides of a triangle. We need all of our wits, all of our strength, and all of our gifts in union to survive what faces us. Oh, you would make a fine show, laughing on the outside to convince us it's no big deal, but on the inside you would cry yourself to sleep every night. Surely you can see this, Eddie Peanut?"

Eduard sighed. "Yes. I can see it. I have turned these little thoughts over and over in my mind, and I know that you are right. You are always right about people, Yaroslavsky."

"Not always right. I used to be sadly, incredibly wrong. Someday I will tell you."

They were silent again. Eduard coughed. "And reason number two?"

"Reason number two: I have someone else."

"A girl at home? You sly Yaro, you never told us! How many secrets do I have to pry out of you?"

Eduard gave Yuri a jab in the ribs.

"Some secrets you don't want to pry out. A girl at home, if indeed a home is left. If a girl is left. I have a cottage in my heart just for her. We made promises. I will make no overture to another woman unless I discover a fate I pray has never occurred. Until that time, my heart belongs to her."

Eduard had no further comment. Yvette's soft, regular breathing filled one side of the room. Sasha made no sounds; his sleep was the perfect, soundless rest of the innocent, unaware of the cataclysm always looming. The last cinders of the fire winked out.

"There's something else, Slavsky."

"What is it?"

"An uncomfortable feeling. A premonition of disaster."

“Mr. Filbert, every day for us is a small disaster, spread out and diluted just enough so that we can strangle its scrawny little throat.”

“No, no, this is different. When I was saying my prayers earlier, something stopped me. A malevolent force, a heavy curtain snuffing out my soul. It was a presence that made me clammy and set my limbs to quivering, like the prelude to a terrible snowstorm.”

“That’s peculiar for you to say, Eduard, because when I came back in from the garden earlier, and I was wrestling with the barricade, something went click in my head, as if warning of something to come. For a split second my vision went gray, and I had a fleeting impression of someone wanting to enter from the outside, but being prevented from doing it. He was waiting for an opportunity, perhaps while I had the corridor open, so that he could slip in with no one noticing. That’s crazy, surely, since we would have fair warning of anyone trying to get in.”

“That’s two of us, then. I wonder if Yvette has sensed anything similar. Her spiritual antenna is so sharp, she has insights I never would dream about. Maybe tomorrow we should ask her.”

“Maybe. I would not want to upset her for nothing. But if you and I both possess this unease, we should share it. We must stay united in our sharing and in our perceptions.”

A small crack gave evidence that a live ember still lurked somewhere under the cooking pot. Eduard and Yuri continued to converse in low tones, drifting from topic to topic. Eventually sleepiness arrived and the two men bedded down for the remainder of the night.

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Everyone overslept the next morning. Not that it made a whit of difference. They had nowhere to go; they were compelled by circumstances to seek shelter in this abandoned farmhouse, subsisting day to day on what provender had been left by the previous occupants who had been driven away to who knew where. It wouldn’t matter a speck if they stayed up all night and slept all day, except that they had

agreed to keep a regular schedule of sleep and wakefulness, of activities and leisure, for their sanity if for no other reason.

They knew immediately it was late from the position of the shadows admitted by the skylight. That skylight, even more so than the grimy windows, was a godsend, permitting daylight but keeping out cold and wet since it was undamaged. With no electricity and no abundance of candles or other means of illumination, they depended on the skylight for gauging the passing of time, the boundaries of day and night.

After a late breakfast, each adult spent some time alone with selected hobbies as part of their daily routine. Yvette had found cloth remnants, thread and needles, so she practiced sewing skills. Yuri kept a daily journal, but was running out of pencils. Eduard rummaged in the books and picked one on French history. Today no one seemed to be able to concentrate for very long, and soon everyone was distracted or bored. Only Sasha, insatiably curious and never tiring of exploring the same territory over and over, remained absorbed. He crawled to Eduard and attempted to play with the pages in his book. In a few short days he would begin tentative steps as he mastered walking. Already he pulled himself up by using the seat of a wooden chair.

“No, no, little Sasha. These pages are for big people only. Look, you sit on my lap and I’ll read to you.” He plopped Sasha on his leg stumps and commenced reading aloud in fractured French. Sasha was content, cramming his fingers into his mouth. Mangled French phrases danced in the cold morning air.

“Oh! Oh! Your French is so bad, Eduard!”

“Sasha thinks it is divine, Yvette. Don’t you, little Sasha? Nom de plume, et car Dieu adore tout le monde.” He continued reading. Yuri smiled and closed his journal. On one of his forays outside he had wandered to the far end of the field, through a small portion of forest, and thought he had glimpsed

another farm cottage, approximately half a mile distant. How fortunate if he somehow managed to go there and find some writing instruments. His supply here was almost completely nubs.

“Bring me the book, Eduard, and I’ll teach you correct French. If you are determined to read French literature, then you should know how to do it well.”

Eduard shooed Sasha toward Yvette and followed close behind, with the book in tow. “I would love to learn French from you. I already know a good deal, but I have encountered a dead end. I have reached the limit of the lessons I remember from school. So now you can teach me new material. I will be your best pupil, much better than this Slavsky fellow, for instance. I will be stellar, complete the course, and then you will confer a diploma on me, yes? I will have it framed and hung prominently on my wall.” Yvette and Yuri snickered with delight.

Yuri stood up. “Yvette.” Yvette and Eduard turned to face him. “Eduard and I were talking late last night. We compared notes, and both of us have received an impression---a visitation of sorts.” He stopped, considering how best to frame his thoughts. His friends waited patiently, as Sasha went to grapple with a supply of blankets. “We have felt an evil presence, a palpable spirit, a specific force different from the general air of desolation and depression that surrounds us. Always we have, I think, successfully beaten back this overall negative feeling in our surroundings, encouraging each other and devoting our efforts even more in our prayers and in our studies of the scripture.” He slapped his coat lapel, indicating the location of the lone copy in their possession, a well-worn New Testament minus its covers. They took turns caring for it and meditating on its unique revelations. “I’m not certain of the meaning or purpose of this new threat, this more direct attack that Eduard and I have experienced. Have you sensed anything new or anything stronger in this vein?”

Yvette pondered the question, studying Yuri’s features for several moments, and then looking at Eduard. With some hesitation she finally replied, “No. No, I don’t believe that I have. You know that I have been much more comfortable in this place for the last week or so, much more than when we first

arrived. I have both of you to thank for that.” She turned back to Yuri. “But this is significant. It means--it means that our spiritual enemy is focusing his energy, desiring to frighten and demoralize us by escalating his belligerence; he wishes to divide us and cut us off, if possible, from the love and protection of our Lord.” She reflected for a minute. “Can I see the testament?”

“Of course.” Yuri came across and sat with the other two, slipping the frail book into Yvette’s hands. She delicately leafed through the gossamer pages until she came to the passage she wanted. She read from Romans 8: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.” Yvette kept the slim volume open and a calm hush enveloped them. Even Sasha, busied by tussling with blankets, had paused and sat regarding the group with quiet curiosity. Mulling over the powerful words, each one received additional strength and nourishment to sustain them for the remainder of the day. Their corporate prayer time that evening was unusually lengthy and rich, and everyone retired with an extra measure of peace and assurance.

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Sometime in the middle of the night, Yuri awoke to an insistent commotion, not particularly noisy but continuous in its agitation. The outside was totally dark because the moon was setting during late afternoon. Yuri couldn’t see a thing, but determined that the disturbance was coming from Yvette’s sleeping area. She was fidgety, then made several thrashing movements. She began to groan, and called out some words Yuri didn’t understand. Her native language? Or the inscrutable workings of dreams? He became a little alarmed; he had never noticed Yvette disturbed in her sleep, and he often

awakened in the middle of the night, enjoying the velvet calm of a dormant darkness. Yvette continued to make random motions, but then became still. Yuri waited attentively, and then relaxed. Good, he thought, she has settled down. Suddenly her groaning recommenced, reaching an unexpected crescendo, and she cried out, sitting bolt upright. Startled to consciousness, she glanced about, momentarily confused. Quickly her wits returned and she whispered vehemently: "Yuri! Are you awake?"

"Yes! What is it?" He kept his voice undertoned, so as not to disturb Eduard and Sasha.

Yvette didn't answer. Yuri felt his way over and sat down beside her. He couldn't see her face, even mere inches in front of him, but she was staring vacantly into the dark. Abruptly she flung her arms around him and buried her head in his shoulder, sobbing quietly but with great intensity. She dug her fingers into his coat, but he had so many layers on due to the cold, that he could barely feel anything. He held her firmly. After a lengthy interval her crying abated and she released her hold.

"Must have been a monster of a nightmare," Yuri offered.

Yvette continued to collect herself, stilling her rapid breathing. "Is Eduard awake?"

Yuri cocked his ear in Eduard's direction. He detected Eduard's unique snoring. "No."

"Don't disturb him. I'll tell him tomorrow."

"Tell him what?"

Yvette breathed deeply several times. She was on the verge of weeping again, but stifled it. "You are right. It was a nightmare. A monstrous one, surely."

"Can you describe it?"

"I---I---yes, I can. I dreamed I was out in the field at night. The moon was full, and I could see the snow and vegetable rows and nearby trees almost as clearly as if it was daytime. As I watched the snow, it turned crimson. I looked up at the moon, and it had turned reddish, then changed to black, and disappeared. My perception of snow and trees vanished. I panicked and began to run, looking for light.

I fumbled for light switches on an imaginary wall, even though I knew I was outside. I fell to my knees and ran my fingers along the surface of the snow, searching for switch plates. Then a dull glow appeared behind me, and I wheeled around to see: a charcoal-orange ball sat on the horizon, growing brighter and bigger. In a blaze of light it assumed a face---the most horrible face I could imagine. It was a face on fire, with dark patches for the eyes and mouth. It continued to enlarge, and it bent down toward me. I couldn't move or do anything. It opened its mouth and appeared it would swallow me; I felt its heat and the snow beneath me turned to water, then to steam. I tried to call out but my voice wouldn't obey. As the mouth opened wider, it reminded me of a blast furnace I saw once, in a steel mill. I tried to find a weapon, swinging my arms in every direction, and I grasped a large wooden stick. I held it up toward the mouth and the stick burst into flames---the flames spread to my sleeve and I was sure I'd be burned alive. Then---then I woke up."

"That was quite intense."

"The most vivid, frightening dream I've had in a long time. I think now that I have been visited by the same presence you and Eduard told me about. You are right: instead of a diluted, weak atmosphere of vague evil, I experienced a concentration, a personified spirit of evil power. A frontal assault. An individual struggle." Yvette became quiet and meditated for several minutes. A subsequent fit of shuddering and fright convulsed her, and again she fought them, reclaiming a measure of tranquility. "For we aren't wrestling against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, powers, and the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places."

Yuri continued: "Therefore put on all of God's armor, so you can withstand in the evil day. After you have done everything you can, stand firm."

"One of Paul's letters."

"Ephesians. Chapter 6, I think."

They talked and then prayed. Eventually Yvette was fortified sufficiently to resume her rest. Satisfied that she was alright, Yuri returned to his spot. Eduard snored with abandon, undisturbed by anything. Sasha slept the sleep of childlike bliss.

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About a week passed. Winter was at its zenith. A blizzard dumped two more feet of snow, rendering Yuri's foraging more difficult. Temperatures hovered around zero during the day, but much lower at night. Eduard tended larger and longer-lasting fires to help warm their living space. The integrity of the skylight and windows continued to aid in shutting out some of the cold. Only the corridor, where the front door used to be, admitted fresh, icy blasts each time Yuri had to traverse the barricade. They had fashioned makeshift drapes from some of the extra blankets and hung them at the corridor's entrance and over the two windows in the large room they occupied. Eduard's sizeable pile of firewood dwindled, but it was resupplied by a huge store of cut logs in a shed on one side of the garden. Their basic needs of food, fuel and shelter had been miraculously provided. They were the chance beneficiaries of a meticulously planned, well-stocked residence; the previous owners had done the work, and now the present wanderers, driven to this place by violent events, enjoyed the fruit of other, unknown hands, able to hunker down and survive at least through the winter without having to find another location. They managed their food supply with discipline and careful rationing. They ate enough to stay alive and function, but kept their meals on the skimpy side. The garden was huge but probably wouldn't last beyond spring. The cache of dried beans and meat in the inner storeroom likewise was diminishing, but could satisfy for at least two more months. They had discovered a root cellar and decided to reserve the contents until the garden gave out.

Eduard had received the news of Yvette's nightmare with due seriousness. Providentially, it seemed, he located a small booklet on spiritual warfare in the diminutive library, but it was written in French. Off he trundled to Yvette, and they enjoyed translating and discussing the text for many hours.

Yuri accidentally found a row of carrots hidden among the collards, and for several evenings they feasted on the orange roots, often mixed in with their ubiquitous bean soup. Eduard joked that the abundant consumption of carrots would give them all increased powers of vision, and they would be able to see anything in the dark, even sneaky, camouflaged spirits.

Early one evening Eduard was watching over the fire and, satisfied that he could leave it unattended for a minute, scooted over to one of the windows. The day had been excessively blustery and dark; another winter storm was approaching. Eduard touched the blanket shrouding the window. He sensed the colder air gaining entrance through invisible cracks around the window, momentarily trapped by the blanket before seeping leisurely down to the floor and into the spacious inner room. Eduard lifted a lower corner of the fabric to peer outside and was startled by a tiny glowing light, a pinpoint of red. As he cried out in surprise, the point of light shifted rapidly sideways and moved beyond the window, out of sight.

Yuri yelled out, "What's wrong? Have you fallen?" He hurried over to see Eduard with his nose mashed against the window pane, looking in every direction. Yvette came partway but stopped near the fire.

"Yuri." Eduard used Yuri's preferred name only when he was distraught or fearful. "Yuri! You won't believe what I saw!"

"What, then?"

"I saw---I saw a red---what in the world did I see? I lifted the blanket to inspect the outside, and at the exact moment I looked, a red dot was staring back at me! Then it disappeared, moving off to the right, like someone running away."

"Too many carrots, Eduard?"

"No, no, Yuri, I'm serious! It was a red dot, like a red eye. What animal has a single red eye?"

"It looked like an eye?"

“Not at first. But in the instant I saw it glaring through the window, it took on the form of an eye.”

“Did you see any shape of a head or body? Any fur?”

“No fur, no body. But there was a head---of sorts. An ill-defined, fuzzy outline---what animal it could have been, no one could say, certainly.”

“The red possibly was a reflection from the fire?”

“No. This window doesn’t give a view of the fire; it’s around a corner.”

“So the red color emanated from outside. From the eye itself, perhaps.”

Eduard shivered uncontrollably, as much from fright as from the cold, and shuffled back towards the fire. He stopped in front of Yvette, who stared at both men intently. Each regarded the other for awhile, but no one gave further voice to his thoughts. An animal with one red eye? What kind of animal? What eye possessed its own source of light, instead of reflecting it? Why had they seen not one solitary trace of an animal during their entire stay?

Later, just after dusk had fallen, Yuri went outside to fetch more wood from the shed. He preferred to go out only in the daytime, when it was slightly warmer and he could see where he was going, but there had been too many distractions and odd jobs needing immediate attention earlier that day. Setting the barricade back in place, he picked his way carefully between the outer wall and the garden. He slipped on a frozen patch and bent down to inspect it: there was a shallow depression, glazed over with a thin, icy crust, as if an area of snow had melted and then refrozen. Beyond the depression’s circumference the snow was fluffy and undisturbed. As he resumed his path, he found several more flattened places, exactly the same as the first. Really strange. The sun hadn’t been out all day; even if it had, it couldn’t selectively thaw one spot and not another, when that entire side was uniformly exposed to sunlight. He quickly gathered an immense armload of wood and brought it inside, replacing the barricade with extra care. He pondered the dilemma of the glazed depressions, but made no progress in understanding it. He decided not to share it with the others; maybe he had imagined some of it. After

all, it was very dark and extremely cold. The next day he would go out and perform a more thorough examination.

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Everyone retired earlier than normal; the day had begun with a bit of excitement when Yvette was roused before her usual wake-up time by Sasha, standing up on two legs, unaided. As he had walked tentatively toward Yvette, she clapped her hands with joy, and soon everyone was awake, reveling in Sasha's new mobility. His walking brought with it greater responsibility; now, he had to be watched with increased alertness, for his own protection. That had been a significant part of the distraction keeping Yuri from replenishing the wood before dark. More exhausted than usual, each one settled down and drifted quickly off to sleep. Except Yuri: he was as tired as any of them, but something was bothering him. A nagging voice pushed at the back of his conscience, but he couldn't put his finger on what it was. He detected a nervousness, similar to what he had before his exams in school. A wash of nausea and dread welled up inside. This was the same experience he had had prior to his first military action, lying awake in fear, counting the minutes until the pre-dawn attack was launched. The fear was of the unknown, of pain and death, of deprivation and torture. Sure enough, the actual engagement fully justified his fears, but after that first day of battle, he ruminated over what had happened and realized that, if anything, his fearful expectations had affected him more perversely than the actual chain of events had done.

Breathing a prayer of succor, he recalled several scriptures which calmed him down somewhat, including a verse from Matthew: "Listen to me: I, Jesus Christ, am with you always, to the end of all time." Feeling more settled, he adjusted his position and joined his comrades in repose.

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In the deep recess of night, Yuri's eyes opened. His body was perfectly still; only his eyelids had moved. There was a scraping sound; inside or out? The wind had ceased during the day; twilight had

descended in silence. There were no trees close enough to the house for limbs to brush the walls. Scrape, scrape. It was irregular in its rhythm. Yuri sat up and listened. The sounds probably came from outside; they seemed muffled and distant, a scouring on the outside wall. A wild animal? Presently there came a subdued impact accented by dozens of faint snapping sounds, as if something had fallen headlong into a bush. A few seconds of silence followed. Then the scraping resumed: scrape. Scrape, scrape. It sounded exactly as if someone was dragging a rod along the wall. Without warning, an explosive report came from beyond the barricade, like a battering ram thrown against a door. In an instant Eduard and Yvette were awake; Yuri flung off his blankets and stood, alert with terror and foreboding. All of them focused on the corridor, now faintly alit with a dull, yellowish hue. A horrendous crash ensued, as if the contents of the barricade had been splintered to bits. A familiar roar, accompanied by sparks and smoke, gave them all simultaneously the realization that the corridor had been breached; the barricade was destroyed, engulfed in flames, even though it was hidden from their view. What was it? Who? Who had found them? Would the attacker burst in and murder them all, no questions asked?

Yvette gathered up Sasha, also awake, and went quickly to Eduard; they clung to each other in abject terror. Yuri grabbed his heavy staff---the only physical weapon of any substance that any of them possessed---and headed resolutely to the corridor. If the intruder was armed, then they were all doomed. Yuri's staff couldn't stop bullets, although perhaps he could gain an element of surprise. But they were the surprised party, weren't they? Yet, he couldn't stand and do nothing; his soldierly training propelled him forward impulsively. He had no plan of action, other than facing the enemy. With a defiant yell he stormed into the corridor, which curved out of Eduard's and Yvette's line of vision.

A prominent halo of fire lit up the entire corridor and partly illuminated the inside of the house. The growl of fire increased in intensity, and Eduard and Yvette could visualize the whole structure being reduced to ashes. With terrific clarity and force, Yuri's voice boomed out from the corridor, carrying

over the tremendous din of incineration and burrowing to the center of consciousness. In a stentorian command, shot through with righteous fury and celestial anger, Yuri shouted, "In the name of Jesus Christ, creator of the universe, savior of all mankind, and utter destroyer of all evil, I rebuke you!" The noise of conflagration dimmed momentarily, followed by a sharp blow, grunting, and a brief scream of agony. Yuri's scream. In that instant, Eduard and Yvette knew that they had lost their protector. Immobile, they held each other tightly, faces fixed wide-eyed toward the corridor, strengthening themselves to meet their end.

The flaming din reached a new height of ferocity, and the corridor became as bright as day. Suddenly a fiery shape entered the room: towering to the ceiling, it vaguely resembled human form, but Yvette instantly recognized the face: the same demonic eyes and cavernous mouth from her nightmare. Eduard, too, saw the tiny point of red in the center of each eye, the very same vermilion orb he had caught staring through the window earlier the previous day. In both fascination and fear they watched this orange devil, crackling and popping like an enormous bonfire, smoke billowing out to choke them, its amorphous outline shimmering and flickering with a thousand tongues of fire. Tiny promontories of fire licked out and began consuming the room's contents; they dripped to the floor, igniting particles of straw, ends of blankets, cuffs and sleeves of garments, the cover of a book. The hellish spectacle appeared to increase in size, its limbs sweeping through the air, the head swelling to monstrous proportions, its heat singeing their faces, lighting up every corner, every square inch of the chamber, its mouth opening wider and wider, to swallow up the entire house in its orange-red maw.

With stunning abruptness, the satanic maelstrom lurched and fell backward slightly. Its dizzying symmetry began to disintegrate: the limbs retracted and the bodily dimensions shrank in chunks, like a bright poster being folded in at the corners. The head diminished in size and appeared to collapse down toward the midsection, as a roof caves into a building consumed by flame. Great clouds of dense smoke obscured the reddish outlines and snuffed out the ghoulish apparition; it separated into a thousand

embers, as in a fireworks display, and as Eduard and Yvette gaped in disbelief, the glowing flames slowly vanished. An unseen force blew the smoke out into the corridor and beyond; the tiny flares on the straw floor and clothing were extinguished, leaving charred, ashen edges behind.

For a very long time Eduard, Yvette and Sasha remained in their protective embrace, gawking at the empty space where the conflagration had been. Finally Eduard called out in a heart-rending plea: “Slavsky! Slavsky!” Overcome with loss, Eduard yielded to his grief and tears, weeping in loud laments against Yvette’s neck. She held him close, venting her own silent tears, but she felt very much the role of comforter. She was not stronger than Eduard, was she? She was not repressing her emotions, was she? No. Her own weeping was proof of that. And she was not stronger than Eduard. Each of them had their individual strengths; where one was weak, the other was strong, bolstering and edifying and encouraging. At this particular moment, she was the comforter, and Eduard needed to be comforted. She gladly held him, letting his lamentations run their course.

Why had Yuri died? They both wondered. He wasn’t supposed to die; they were all supposed to survive together. They had found each other completely by accident, but had forged an unbreakable bond. Each one needed the other. Who would go out now, to gather wood and food? Who would construct a new barricade?

God, why did you allow Yuri to die? I don’t understand. I can’t understand very much, but I’d really like to know. Is it part of a grander plan? Will it improve our situation? I don’t see how. I don’t see any good in this at all. I’m actually mad about it. Can I be mad, God? Can I be mad at you? But you will love me, even if I’m angry. How can you love us, no matter what? Can you teach us to love you, no matter what? Please teach us to love, to believe, to never give up. Because you are our only hope.

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Following the shock of that night, Eduard and Yvette meditated at length on what had transpired. Again and again, Yuri’s last words echoed in their minds: “In the name of Jesus Christ---” Brave Yuri.

How could anyone be so brave? He had faced certain death, unflinchingly and courageously. Even though he had been killed, his rebuke, uttered in the name of the most potent force of the universe, had worked: God Himself had slain the beast. He had doused the demon and taken it apart, reducing it to harmless particles and inconsequential vapors. Yuri had had the uncommon valor of facing the most fearsome of foes and invoking the infinite power of God against it. Yuri, the brave. Yuri, you were our immediate protector in life, and you went to your death, still protecting us. Even though you were initially suspicious of us, you became our friend, and then you fell in love with us. Your love for us sent you to your own demise. How your love and courage burn in our hearts, dear Yuri. You were, in a sense, Jesus Christ for us. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

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Dear Slavsky,

Please forgive that I scribble in your journal. Yvette wrote in it also, but I gave her permission. It's my fault. Please forgive me. I have not read any part that you have written; I would not violate the trust you have in me. Even now, weeks and months after our fiery visitation, Yvette and I marvel at your bravery. You are a true soldier. You served in the military, fighting in senseless human engagements, but I think it prepared you for your greatest fight, saving us three from certain death. You won, Yuri. You defeated the foe---by calling upon our great God, who continues to deliver and protect, even today.

Did you know, Slavsky, I found the testament on your body? It was completely unharmed. It was my turn to care for it, but you forgot to give it to me that day. Yaroslavsky! Why must I constantly remind you of your appointments and tasks?

Ah! Forgive me, my dearest friend. For what you did for us, sacrificing yourself on our behalf, I will allow you a thousand forgotten obligations---no, a million. A million times a million! (What number is that? I'm no good at math. You were always a genius with numbers.)

Slavsky, Yvette and I have realized something. We always knew it, of course. We knew it in our heads, but not in our hearts, where it really matters. In my heart, Slavsky; see, I am thumping my chest to show you how much I mean this. So, Yvette and I, we know, according to the scriptures, that you are not really dead. Your body died, yes, but your spirit is alive. And some day, Slavsky, Yvette and I, and all the rest of God's kingdom, will see you in a new, fabulous body. Did not our Lord gain a new body to replace the one riven by nails and a spear? An eternal body, frail no more, but able to leap over buildings!

Someday, I too will have a new body. With legs! Real legs! Who wants stumps in heaven? So, then, when I meet you again, with my resurrected legs, we will run a race, you and I. And I will beat you! Yes, by many body lengths. I will run faster than you!

Goodbye, my brave friend. I love you with the love of Christ, from the depths of my heart. I will see you soon.

Your most loyal friend,

Eduard (Mr. Peanut)