

## Chapter Four

### Larysa

She was extremely skilled at moving forward like a cat in the night, as if her training had awakened her instincts. She was not herself in 2022, but someone from ninety years ago, almost a century, when the Russians had starved her people. She was a mother who had listened to her children wail with hunger. She was a farmer's wife who had watched young soldiers taunt her husband as a "kulak," a rich capitalist, before they marched him away from their meager farm, forever.

"Holodomor," she thought, speaking silently not from her mind, not from her heart, but from her soul.

"Gulag," she thought, raising the rifle to her shoulder, looking through the scope and putting the crosshairs on yet another Russian, almost a century later. She waited until he paused in the first faint glow of dawn—a young soldier, certainly no older than she was—to pee beside his tank, and then she pulled the trigger.

His cry was brief as he collapsed.

She withdrew deeper into the trees.

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Yes, she knew, in her camouflage and sturdy military boots, how to stalk, how to wait, how to kill. But she also knew, deep in her soul, that all of life was sacred. Her grandmother had taught her that. Every time she took the life of one of those poor boys—sent by the runt in the Kremlin to do his dirty work—she knew that what she had done was horribly wrong.

But the sin of war was so much a part of life. Especially if you lived next door to the worst neighbor in the world. They came in 2014 to take Crimea. They stayed to steal the southeast corner of her country, as if Putin had the right to piss wherever he wanted.

On patrol, her instincts directed her every step. She had taken the lives of seventeen young men. She had defended her country, as her people had done for over a thousand years.

But in bed at night—in an abandoned farm house, in the basement beneath a destroyed apartment building, in the dusty wreckage of a school, in a cave dug into the

earth—in bed at night when she could not sleep, she searched and searched for some better way than holding the crosshairs steady while she pulled the trigger.

Yes, she would study to become a doctor, so she could help the children as her mother helped the children. But that didn't stop the jets from bombing the hospitals.

Her mother loved to visit the ancient cathedral, but what had that cathedral done to stop the wars?

And if tomorrow she was killed? One less doctor, one less daughter, one less "Princess" for her grandmother to love.

But the madness would continue, unabated. Because that's the way it's always been.

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