

Classification: Deserter

By Francesca Milani

He watched his wife waving her hand goodbye as the train pulled away from the station. He watched as his Mikhaila's figure diminished in size, stilling waving slowly, but constantly. *He would miss her . . .*

Looking out the foggy window at his side, Dmitri watched as fields raced by in a continuous, whizzing blur; then the forests came and more fields and some waters and more and more fields . . . it seemed endless. But that was what it was like to everyone else on the train: for he just thought of his Mikhaila and, for him, those thoughts whisked the time away faster than a speeding bullet. He remained pensive in his window-seat, thinking of Mikhaila, when the train stopped with a jolt arriving at the Red Army camp nine hours later. With a firm step and his small duffle bag clutched in hand, he got off of the train. Before he was steadily situated on the ground, two iron hands wrenched him from where he stood and dragged him for a few yards until he was able to find his feet again.

"Come on, Slacker," said the man with the iron hands, "I dunno and I dacare if you're here for soldiering or not, but you gonna end up as that either way."

Dmitri was wrested over to a ragged tent where he was thrust inside. Crowded inside, four men covered in grime squatted on their blankets. Expecting them to discover his presence with a word or a look, he was disappointed as they showed him no hoped-for acknowledgment. A small vacant area was left to the right of the tent flap as if they had been expecting a new-comer; he spread his blanket down on the wet ground and sat upon it. First thing on his mind was to write a letter to Mikhaila to inform her of his arrival at the camp, which was a short but passionate note; he creased it in the triangular fold and put it in his bag. He sighed heavily.

Coughing lightly, he said rather quietly, "*Здравствуйте*. Hello, the name is Dmitri . . . what's yours?"

"*Привет*. Hi, I'm Vadim. These are Alexsei, Anton, and Ivan," answered the scowling man on the opposite side of the tent, gesturing to each in turn.

"Nice to meet you," Dmitri said.

They grunted; Vadim raised his eyebrows, but quickly lowered them into a scowl. "*Хорошо*. Eh, one could say that."

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Крпukkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkh! Hours of exploding bombs and machine guns followed that first explosion of noise; it went on and on and on . . . They were victorious. The Red Army was victorious, and they advanced on deeper into the Nazi Germany Reich. But Dmitri was down and they passed over him, unnoticed.

No one came and brought him to the camp . . . they only collected the others; it was as if he was invisible. Then they left. They left. Dmitri had tried to call out, but he could not speak, and even if he could, what sound could a small, weak voice like his make over such raucous noise? The left him and he was alone. Alone. He lay there for hours.

Mikhaila, he thought of his wife. *Mikhaila*. He would go to her. But how? He was wounded and the camp lay too far away, and the Red Army was too far ahead by the time he had collected wits enough to think of his situation. Or he could lie there, lie there with the dead and the rest of the groaning and dying, wounded. *But Mikhaila . . .*

He must live. He must live for *Mikhaila*. He must rise. He must. He *must*. *He must*. Then he blacked out and lay unconscious.

Dmitri opened his eyes, blinking at the bright blue sky above him. He was rested, but his body ached and he felt disgusting; the dew left him wet and uncomfortable. He turned his head on one side. In front of his eyes grew a flower of various shades of violet with a squirt of yellow and orange shooting from its middle, exquisite, delicate, and yet evidently unyielding as the strong wind barely hindered its movement; but more amazingly, it had not been trampled underfoot. It reminded him of *Mikhaila*—well, *everything* beautiful reminded him of her, of *Mikhaila*.

He painfully turned himself onto his side, resting on an aching elbow. Gazing all around, there was—there was nothing . . . *nothing*—there was nothing. No sign of life—or what once was life—stood anywhere . . . except the one flower, and the brown, trampled grass and faraway trees. He was *alone* and no one had seen him, no one had found him, no one had rescued him . . .

Mikhaila! He must see her. He must rise and go! To the camp!

He attempted to pull himself into a crawling position, but failed as his legs gave way under him. So he dragged his miserable, twisted body forward, towards the direction of the camp. Hours of crawling and resting, slithering and inaction, and the constant heaving breaths; but Dmitri struggled onward, onward, onward, en route to the camp.

He finally climbed to his feet and stood, wavering in the wind, tasting the air, the fresh air above the musty ground. Then the sun fell, painting and sprinkling orange, yellow and red, pink and purple on the horizon; and the moon leaped up in the sky.

Dmitri looked around. He was much closer to the camp, though still very far. He ran forward, refreshed and eager to get back to camp. Then he saw it: a Soviet truck came puffing towards him; he ran out of the way of the truck, to avoid being

hit. A light shone down on him and he was told by the passenger not to move. Why hadn't it come before?

"Huh, you thought you could get away, huh? *Hem*, no . . . we got you now," said the man who got out of the truck.

He carried a gun under his arm, pointing downwards. Dmitri let himself be pulled along towards the truck; he was being taken to the camp; he was safe.

He got inside his tent directly, and sat down to write a letter to Mikhaila. It said something of his coming home in at least a week and at the most two weeks, and that she shouldn't expect him before the first. He had been fighting for three weeks now, but each day had seemed like a month. One or two weeks left to go

A head popped into the tent. "You coming with me, *товарищ*, fellow," said the arrival, motioning towards Dmitri, "General Chuikov wanna talk with you."

Dmitri stepped out of the tent and was dragged to his unknown destination. A man with big eyebrows was sitting in a chair.

"*Сэр*, sir," said Dmitri's companion and left them.

"Do you know the penalty of one who deserts his fellow soldiers? Do you?" asked the General. "Uh, *да*, yes, sir," Dmitri said slowly, hesitantly.

"*Хорошо*, well, what have you to say for yourself?" he asked.

"About what, *сэр*, sir?"

"You were charged of being guilty of desertion. You were found running from one of our truck's *long* after every man in the ranks alive came back here. Well?"

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Mikhaila received her husband's letter from the station with quivering hands. She tore it open and laughed in delight at the news. Her Dmitri was coming back to her! *Ура!*

A week went by, and because her house was more than a desirable length away from the train station, Mikhaila rented a small room in the Station Inn to meet Dmitri when he came off the train. She would have everything beautiful and a luncheon would be spread on the little table. To pass the time on her little vacation, she was hired as waitress at the Inn, so that she could watch the incoming trains and still be using her time well. The first week went by . . . no Dmitri; the next week started . . . no Dmitri; half of that week went by . . . no Dmitri? Where was he?! That week dwindled away into the next week . . . where was Dmitri? Then the next week and the next week . . . no Dmitri. She quit her job and stood at the station, waiting for her Dmitri to come.—But he did not. And she stood there, waiting, waiting, ever so patiently, but ever so painfully for her Dmitri to come home . . . but he never did.