

KINGDOM OF MERIDIAN

VOLUME I

THE BEE KEEPER'S DAUGHTER

SHIÂN SEREI



A MEDIEVAL SAGA OF LOVE AND DESTINY

Shian Serei

**The Bee Keeper's Daughter.
Kingdom of Meridian. Vol 1.**

«Издательские решения»

Serei S.

The Bee Keeper's Daughter. Kingdom of Meridian. Vol 1. /
S. Serei — «Издательские решения»,

ISBN 978-5-44-831648-7

В 1290 (год н.э.) в Ростове молодой девушке Марии удаётся избежать захвата в плен. Ей предстоит захватывающее путешествие на север по реке Волге, чтобы остаться в безопасности, находясь вдалеке от своих родных. Путь Марии очень опасен. Солдаты неоднократно пытаются захватить её в плен, но ей удаётся сбежать на грузовом судне с незнакомцами. Она открывает для себя новый мир за пределами фермы её отца, познаёт романтические отношения и узнает себя как молодую женщину, сталкивается с приключениями.

ISBN 978-5-44-831648-7

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The Bee Keeper's Daughter Kingdom of Meridian. Vol 1. Shian Serei

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ISBN 978-5-4483-1648-7

Created with intellectual publishing system Ridero

Preface

The Beekeepers Daughter is the first of five books in the Kingdom of Meridian Series. The story begins with Maria, a young woman struggling to survive in medieval Russia. Through a series of tragic events, she must travel across Northwestern Russia to find safety with relatives in a distant city. Along the way, her conservative life in a village fades as she navigates a new world filled with danger. Her experience becomes a personal journey in trust, adventure, love and destiny.

You are about to be taken on an exciting journey filled with folklore, Russian history, and romantic encounters. The pace is fast as Maria travels North on the Volga River trying to evade Tatar soldiers seeking to return her to Rostov. Armed only with a handful of items and the knowledge her parents gave her; she must trust her life to complete strangers while learning to survive in a world where nothing is as it seems. Her story unfolds with chaotic twists that drive her to a destiny far greater than she ever imagined.

A word about Russian culture, you'll notice the names shifting a bit during the dialogue between characters. This shift is intentional and is a key element in how conversations take place, beginning with full formal names and then as the familiarity grows the names «soften». For example «Maria» becomes «Masha» or «Manya». Mikhail becomes Misha, Svetlana becomes Sveta and Natalya becomes Natasha or Natalie. This trend continues throughout the book and reveals when the characters are formal, friendly, serious or playful.

It was my wish to make this a historically and geographically accurate tale, but there were some points where a fact had to be sacrificed for the greater good of the story. I hope you can embrace the fictional detours as a means to further enjoy the book.

– Shiân Serei

Language Notes: The story is replete with anglicized words, meant to capture the color of Russian and other languages. These words are written in the way they are pronounced, as a benefit to the reader. You'll find an *index at the end* of the book with the complete translation of each phrase.

One Night in Rostov

It is the year 1290 in the city of Rostov. Russia has changed dramatically after being conquered by the Tatar horde. Within months of the invasion, many of the local people had been forced out of their homes or were killed for resisting the army. The autumn sun is setting on a small farm at the edge of the city, where the local beekeeper, Alex, and his family, live.

Alex loaded the last barrel of Mead onto his small cart. His back ached from loading so many barrels, but the order for all his mead and honey was too good to pass up. The Tatars had destroyed so many of his hives and fields during the invasion, leaving him with limited means to pay for safe passage out of Rostov. He walked into his small farm house to bid his wife and daughter farewell.

The room was clad in hand-cut boards, cinched with mud to fill the cracks. A large clay oven filled one corner, warming the house and providing a space for cooking. A small bed fit snugly between the ceiling and top of the oven with just enough space to slide in and survive the coldest nights. A small piece of wood pivoting a single nail held the doors to an angled closet where preserves, potatoes, and onions were kept. A rear door gave exit to the garden behind the house. Wicks dipped in beeswax were cooling by the oven, as completed candles were stacked and prepared for market.

«Lena, I'm off to deliver the mead and honey to those Tatar bastards,» he said. «This should bring us enough to get out of here, finally, and move to Neva.»

«Ladno, be careful Alex. I don't trust those monsters!» she said as she brushed her daughter Maria's long blonde hair.

Maria was reading aloud in Latin from an illuminated script her Mother insisted she memorize by practice each night. Maria hated learning Latin and paused to respond to her father.

«I will go with you Papa,» said Maria. «It will go faster with two people,» she said setting the scroll aside and standing to don her coat.

«Net Masha, the Tatar court is not a place for young girls!» Alex said in a determined voice. He turned and walked out the door without another word.

Maria's disappointment was obvious.

Her mother guided Maria to return to her seat, «Nice try, now let's start from the beginning shall we?» said Lena.

«In principio creavit Deus caelum et terram» Maria began sarcastically, without looking at the script.

Lena was the town's school teacher and the only woman who could read and write in 3 languages. Her insistence on developing Maria's mind had been a daily ritual since Maria was five years old. Now at the age of nineteen, Maria was very skilled in linguistics and sciences though her father insisted that she keep her abilities a secret.

As the sound of Alex's cart pulled away, Lena placed her hand on Maria's shoulder. «Your father just wants to keep you safe; he isn't upset with you,» Lena said calmly

Then Maria noticed that her father had left his gloves by the door.

«He forgot his gloves!» She gasped. «I'll catch up to him and give these to him!»

She quickly ran out the door before her mother could voice her objection.

Lena sighed in frustration as she picked up the scroll that had fallen to the floor. She carefully brushed the dust from it with her hands. The scroll was sacred to their family; it had been blessed by a priest who regarded it as an icon of the church. She walked to the corner of the house, rolling the scroll and setting it on a shelf Alex had built to keep it safe. Here it could radiate its power over the entire home. Lena turned and began to pack their few belongings in anticipation of their journey the next day.

Maria's freshly brushed hair streamed like ribbons of gold as she ran as fast as she could to catch up to her father's cart, shouting for him to stop. The cart came to a halt as Alex turned and understood what she was doing. «Spacibo Many» Alex said,» You may as well ride along now, it's too dark on the streets.»

The cart slowly rode through the decimated town of Rostov, a once proud city now under the Rule of the Tatars. Each day a new rule or tax was imposed by Alchiday the warlord who had declared himself their new king.

«Papa, why did they ask for so much mead tonight?» Maria asked.

«They're having a wedding for Alchiday and some unfortunate local girls,» Alex replied. «They breed with the conquered to stop the rebellions against his army. But marriage to these people is nothing more than buying cattle. They take wives and concubines whenever it suits them, but the women are just prisoners for breeding.»

«Why don't the women run away then or become nuns?» Maria asked in a naive tone.

«Because they will be executed!» Alex replied harshly.

Maria's eyes grew wide in astonishment, and she realized how dangerous and dismal such a situation would be.

«Have you not seen how they butcher anyone that defies them? Alex continued, «So many families are gone now, and for what? To rule over what remains of our little town? That's why we are finally leaving here in the morning; this is no longer our home!»

Maria rubbed her hand over her father's back consoling him, «Da Papa» she said in agreement.

They rode in silence the rest of the way. Each house and shop they passed showed damage or marking as a witness to the brutality that had come upon Rostov when the Tatars invaded months before. Alex's mind flashed through the memories of his childhood in Rostov and the now empty shell that remained under Tatar rule.

The church in the center of the city became the headquarters of the warlord, Alchiday. His soldiers killed many of the town's people while occupying the adjacent homes and shops. The local residents had been scattered to find shelter where they could, though many died defending their homes. Those, like Alex, who worked on the outer part of the city were permitted to keep their farms to serve the army's needs.

Maria was sad to see the town she had been born in become so dark and dangerous. For nineteen years she had believed she would grow up and live a simple life of farming or perhaps meet a handsome man from a big city and raise a family there. Now, every young man in the town, every classmate or friend she knew was now gone. Only her cousin Dmitri had survived the invasion of the Tatars, and his life, like her father's, was spared because he could provide a service to the army, hauling freight on a river boat.

As they drew closer to the large stone-built church, the horse's hooves were the only sound on the street as they clacked on the hard clay and rocks. Alex pulled the reins slightly, stopping the cart near the door of the church. They both began to leave the cart, but Alex stopped Maria before her feet reached the ground.

«You stay in the cart, ponimayesh?» Alex said firmly.

Maria did not reply she simply nodded and remained in her seat. Alex knocked at the large heavy door of the church and began putting his gloves on as he waited for an answer. The sound of music and shouting grew much louder as the door opened.

«Ah, Ermolenko is here.» Said the guard.

A few words were exchanged with the guard before Alex returned to the cart and began unloading it.

The horse blustered as Maria sat in the cart listening to men cheering, sounds of laughter and drunkenness and the clang of iron swords. It sounded like someone was pretending to fight in sport. Her fingers traced through her hair as she sat patiently waiting for her father to return.

Alex carried each barrel of mead inside; each trip seemed harder as he grew tired and winced at the weight of them. Finally, he finished and walked inside to collect his payment. Several minutes went by, and Maria wondered how long he would be.

Her curiosity became unbearable as she began to wonder what was happening inside the brightly lit church. The sounds and smells of food felt like an invitation to explore what a Tatar wedding looked like; she quickly stepped off the cart and walked to the door, peeking inside, hoping not to be spotted by her father.

She embraced the side of the door and carefully tilted her head just enough to see inside. There were soldiers everywhere, drinking, shouting, some pretended to fight with their swords while others ate like hungry dogs.

The middle of the room boasted a large feast of food and her father's familiar barrels of mead were neatly stacked alongside. Toward the back of the room, several women were adorned in veils. Maria struggled to recognize them but could not make out their faces. They were all undoubtedly sad. Some were crying, and others simply sat with their heads down. It became obvious that these were the future wives of Alchiday. Not just one bride but many!

The wind from the street blew unexpectedly through the passageways and lifted Maria's long blonde strands. As she stood in the door, her hair became dancing threads of light that dared to undulate into view. A soldier glanced toward the door and saw the young maiden with big grey eyes peering into the festivities. Within moments the soldier began walking towards her and took her by the arm. She feverishly looked around for her father, terrified of what would happen.

The soldier spoke to her in Turkic, a language she didn't understand as he roughly pushed her through the crowd toward the rear of the room. «What is happening?» She wondered as she felt a cold fear washing over her.

It was surreal; she was in the same church she stood and listened to her priest says prayers every week. Now her feet nervously were shuffling across the dirty floor as other soldiers looked at her as if she was the best catch of a hunt.

Suddenly she recognized her father; he was standing in front of Alchiday as the warlord's treasurer handed Alex several gold pieces for the mead and honey. Alex smiled nodded as his hand closed around the gold. He took a step back from the treasurer and turned to exit at the same moment his daughter arrived in the hands of the soldier.

Maria watched Alex's eyes grow wide as fear transformed his familiar face. The soldier held on to Maria's arm as he and Alchiday exchanged words in Turkic. The noise of the room created a backdrop to conceal the conversation of Alex as he spoke quickly to his daughter.

«I told you to stay in the cart!» He said with his voice cracking from fear.

«I'm sorry Papa, I don't know what happened, I just looked for a second!» she said as tears ran down her face.

«I'm going to get you out of here!» Alex said reassuringly.

Alchiday motioned to the soldier to place Maria with the veiled women, and instantly Alex understood what would happen.

Alex snatched Maria out of the soldier's hand and quickly slapped her face hard enough to knock her to her knees. Maria did not understand what he was doing; she only felt the burning pain of his strong hand on her cheek as she dared not to stand up. Her father had never hit her; this was beyond comprehension as she felt her body shaking in fear.

«My apologies my Lord,» Alex said quickly standing between Alchiday and Maria. «This one is a disobedient young child, not yet old enough to honor you in marriage. But I have another daughter far more beautiful and respectful. Let me punish this one at home and I'll bring my other daughter to you this very night!»

Maria was confused; she was an only child. «Who was this other daughter? What was he saying?» she thought.

As her father spoke with Alchiday, she looked at the future brides sitting a few feet away. The veiled women were watching her, she could see them more clearly now and recognized their faces.

«Lilia... Nadia... Katya?» She whispered in shock as they acknowledged her through their tears.

These were her classmates, the girls she had grown up with and here they were like prisoners, sentenced to a life of service to the man that had invaded their town and killed their families. In a single breath, everything had been revealed, and Maria understood she was about to added to their sorrow. Suddenly the reality of the situation rushed over Maria, like a burning rain of fear.

Ya Ne Boyus

Alex abruptly grabbed Maria's arm, pulling her to her feet as she continued looking at her veiled friends. He pulled her faster than she could walk as she struggled to keep up with his pace. The men in the room calmed and watched as Alex pushed and nudged Maria closer to the door while he spoke loud enough for Alchiday to hear him.

«And let me leave my payment for the mead as a token of good will to Lord Alchiday,» Alex said, as he nervously took the gold and poured it loosely over the hand of the soldier guarding the door. The coins chimed as they bounced off the paved church floor, flipping and rolling in all directions.

Alex knew the soldiers were obsessed with gold; He watched all eyes in the room train to the coin's movement giving him a moment's distraction. He reached and unlatched the large door, opening it just enough to push Maria back into the street.

Alchiday stood up in objection, shouting in Turkic as the door opened. He pointed at the door, instructing the guards to react.

«Masha, Run!» Her father yelled, as several soldiers suddenly converged toward the door.

Maria stumbled and fell back. She struggled to get back on her feet as she watched her father swing the large door closed with a thunderous bang as it latched against the frame.

Alex knew how barbaric the Tatars were. To deny them anything would mean his death, but he could not bear the thought of them touching his precious daughter. He had only hoped to buy enough time to get Maria out of the church.

Maria hesitated for a moment, then heard the shouts of them coming toward the door. Now she understood her father's intentions; she bolted down the street with life over death determination. She could hardly see, as the tears poured from her eyes. Her hands nervously wiped them as she ran harder and farther away.

Then she heard her father's voice, shouting indistinctly in the street. She ducked behind a large tree to look for him. In the distance, she could still see the dim lit street leading to the church. A wounded man was running, limping while being chased by soldiers. It was her father!

He ran directly toward her, surely he could see her hiding ahead, behind the tree, then she saw him stop and turn toward the soldiers.

He shouted and taunted them as they slowed to engage him. «Ya ne boyus!» he screamed as they pulled their swords and came closer to him.

Maria watched in horror as one of the soldiers impaled her father in the abdomen. Her father grunted then fell to the ground. He kneeled forward, holding his hands over the wound as blood ran from his body.

«Idi! Idi» he shouted as his body collapsed on the street.

Then there was silence. It was her father's last effort to help her get away.

Maria was horrified by seeing her father killed; she couldn't move, she felt terrified. It was like someone had bound every part of her body and no matter what she did, she was trapped, frozen in her place. She felt guilt, shame, and fear binding her without mercy.

She struggled to breathe as the terror took her breath. She stayed behind the tree's generous silhouette as the soldiers kept looking along the path toward her.

Then, she realized, the soldiers knew where she lived. Her father was the town beekeeper everyone knew their farm, and soon the soldiers would arrive to take their land and her mother.

The immobilizing fear left her at that moment, she burst into action, running harder than she had ever tried. She had to get to her mother before the Tatars!

She ran like a rabbit darting down the streets where moments ago she and her father has just ridden quietly on their way to the church. Finally, she reached the edge of town and saw the light in the window of their farm. The distance home never seemed so far. She consumed each step toward

the door, running harder and thinking what to say when she arrived. Finally, she felt the clasp of the door to their home in her hand.

She pushed through the door still running and panting, «Mama, we have to go, ... now!» Maria said as she began to grab the packed items her mother had assembled for their trip the next day. Her mother slid down from the top of the oven, dressed in bed clothes.

«Masha, what's happened?» Lena said, «Where is your father?»

Maria couldn't bear to say the words, «They tried to take me, Mama, it's all my fault, and Papa protected me so I could get away... they're coming! ...we have to go!» Maria said as her voice cracked from the horror she was describing.

Lena, put her hands on Maria's shoulders to get her to slow down, «Masha, where is your father?» she asked, fearing the answer.

«They killed him!» Maria said as she collapsed into her mother's arms crying.

The two of them held each other sobbing, terrified, and lost. Lena now understood the look on her neighbor's faces when their husbands had been killed. How no words could ever comfort such a loss.

«Why?» Lena cried, «Why my Alex?»

Maria felt remorse overwhelm her body and soul. If she had just stayed in the cart, if she had just listened to her father, he would be alive now.

The dogs that lived on the farm began to bark as soldiers approached the farm house.

«We have to go!» Maria insisted as she carried as much as she could hold and opened the back door. Lena followed in shock, quietly behind Maria's lead as she tried to understand what had happened. They walked through the rows of the garden and bee hives to conceal their escape.

The air had grown colder outside as Maria suddenly remembered her mother's coat was still inside. She looked at her mother, following her in bare feet and only a nightgown on as they stood in the damp soil of the garden.

«Your coat, your shoes!» Maria exclaimed, as her mother looked at the ground unaware of anything but the loss of her husband.

Lena looked up at Maria, and as their eyes met, she spoke in a tone Maria had never heard. It terrified her to hear her Mother talk this way. «I won't need them,» her mother announced. «Let them come.»

Maria started back toward the house to get her mother's things, but Lena grabbed her arm and stopped her. Maria looked and saw that her mother had no intention of escaping with her.

«Maria, go and find Dima, he can get you out of town. Go to my sister in Neva, tell her what has happened.» Lena said in a disturbingly calm voice.

«What about you?!» Maria asked in shock.

«Two of us could never outrun them, but you can if you go... now!» Lena said as she reached and took a thick support stick from the nearby row of green beans.

The sound of soldiers kicking in the front door echoed in the air. Their voices shouted as they quickly shuffled into the house looking for Maria.

«Go now! I'll join you later!» Lena said as she walked back toward the house, stopping in the middle of the bee hives.

Maria, set the bag of their belongings down, preparing to fight with her mother. She reached for an equally sized stick, but her Mother turned and stopped her. «No! You run!» Lena said.

Masha was reluctant but obeyed her mother's wishes, she grabbed the bag and ran toward the nearby woods, hiding in the shadows. She watched as her mother walked into the midst of the bee hives and waited for the soldiers to emerge. Suddenly the back door flew open as the soldiers shuffled out, with swords drawn. They saw Lena standing calmly and began to charge toward her.

Maria's hands squeezed the bark of the tree she stood behind, fearing her mother would be killed just as her father. Then she heard her mother, shouting in anguish as she struck the bee hives,

breaking them open, sending thousands of angry bees into the air just as the soldiers got close to her mother. Lena lowered herself into a small ball on the ground as the soldiers stepped into the swarms. She knew very well how to remain calm in the presence of bees and had baited the soldiers toward her.

Suddenly the sound of terror filled the air as the soldiers were defenseless against the bee stings that easily penetrated their clothing and armor. Their bare hands and faces began to swell from venomous punctures until they could no longer hold a sword or see anything around them. They only knew to back away and try to escape the endless assault of the bee's wrath.

Lena was spared the wrath of the bees although she was stung a few times, she kept still and waited for the soldier's retreat. The clever farmer's wife had bought her daughter an escape, but she knew Maria would not go without her. She looked toward the woods, suspecting Maria was there watching, then ran in the opposite direction, leading the remaining soldiers away from Maria.

Maria watched until her mother disappeared with soldiers chasing behind her. She continued with their plan to meet and made her way along the edge of the nearby woods until she arrived at the river. She knew this place well as she often played here as a child. She was undetected by the soldiers as it was quite dark that night and she could make her way easily on the familiar path leading to the dock where her cousin Dmitri worked.

Hours passed as she walked in the cold night air, her mind was a blur of everything in her world changing in an instant. The sun would come up soon, and she knew she had to keep hidden for fear of being caught. Her arms soon exhausted from carrying the heavy bag. She tied a belt around her waist and put as much as would fit inside the top of her dress to keep warm and free her arms from carrying. She reluctantly left behind things that would not fit in her dress but kept the illuminated the scroll, so dear to her mother, as she knew this would have to remain in her possession. She slipped it carefully inside her dress and continued on her way along the river.

She arrived at the ship dock just before sunrise. She knew guards would be at the dock and slowly stepped along the outer wall of the dock, to remain undetected from their surveillance of the main street. Her eyes searched the piers for the ship where her cousin worked. She couldn't remember the name of it, but knew it was a cargo transport with a wide deck and yellow trim along the sides. She began to fear it may not be there and wondered what she would do if she couldn't find it.

She heard footsteps on the adjoining pier and saw soldiers making a check of the ships tied to their posts. A soldier walked to the end of his pier, looking around as he stopped and paused. Maria knelt down and moved to keep out of view, ducking between the ships that blocked the soldier's view of her. She knew if he turned down her pier, he would see her immediately. She held tightly to a post, hoping it would conceal her in the dim light.

The soldier stood still for a moment; it appeared he was trying to listen for any noise as he glanced in both directions. Maria held her breath, wishing to be invisible at that moment.

A distant trickle echoed in the water as the soldier began looking down. Within moments Maria realized, the noise was from the soldier, urinating off the pier into the river.

She nervously turned to see the familiar yellow trimmed ship at the end of her pier. She knew this would be her only chance to escape as she crawled to the end of the pier in clear view of the distracted soldier. She looked back to make she was undetected by the soldier before jumping from the dock to the deck of the ship.

Her feet thudded lightly on landing as she quickly scurried aboard the fully loaded vessel. The soldier heard the noise and finished his business before straightening his armor and walking down the pier. Maria heard his heavy footsteps and rushed toward a tarp, covering a stack of cargo.

The tarp was tucked in tightly, making it difficult to pull out and give her a place to hide. The corner of the tarp slowly unpeeled from the edge as she yanked desperately to get under it before the soldier arrived. She put her foot against the cargo and pulled harder to force it open, making it tear slightly before giving way.

Maria dashed underneath the cover, pulling its' corner back inside. She knew if the soldier saw it moving she would be revealed. She could hear his footsteps coming closer, slowing as he looked around. The tiny amount of space was barely big enough to conceal her as she took the corner and sat on it, with her back to the outside, making the cargo look as it was before.

All was quiet; she tried to keep her panting breath from giving her location away. Then the deck shook as the soldier stepped onto the ship. The boards beneath her vibrated like a hammer against a nail as the soldier stepped in her direction. She held her breath as he came near, fearing he knew exactly where she was. The sound of his sword pinged as he drew it and stepped closer. Maria tightened her back in anticipation of being stabbed by his sword.

«Got ya!» Shouted the soldier as he thrust his blade toward a raccoon, hiding on the pallet next to hers.

The raccoon shrieked and hissed at the soldier as it evaded him and ran off the ship. The soldier quickly followed in pursuit, with each step shaking the boards of the deck as he jumped to the pier and ran toward the road.

Maria's heart raced as she slowly realized she was safe and undetected. She released her grip on the net that wrapped around the cargo. She felt her way in the dark, finding enough room to slip from the deck onto the softer sacks of grain and cotton that were inside. The hidden place felt warm compared to the open air of the river bank, calming her shivering body as she fell asleep from exhaustion.

Passage to Yaroslavl

The sounds of footsteps and men's voices woke Maria; it seemed she had only slept for a minute, but the daylight peering through the edges of the cargo cover assured her it was now morning. Maria carefully looked through the stitching holes of the cover to see if her cousin was in sight.

She saw unfamiliar faces and realized how dangerous it would be if she were discovered by someone loyal to the Tatars. Then she recognized her cousin Dima's voice; he was speaking with someone else as he walked onboard the boat. As he turned in her direction, she started to move off the grain sacks, but then she saw he was walking with two of Alchiday's soldiers. They were asking him questions and looking around at the cargo holds. Maria could just overhear the conversation.

«Of course, if I see either of them I will alert you, but I doubt they would come here. They're just simple farmers, have you checked the woods?» Dima said confidently.

As he spoke, one of the soldiers stepped on board and went below to look around. The other soldier took out his sword and began lifting the covers off the cargo. Dima began to explain what was in each one, his voice was casual but annoyed at the soldier's presence.

«This is cotton, be careful with the sword, if you cut the bailing it will blow everywhere!» Dima said cautiously to the soldier.

Maria panicked, if Dima didn't know she was there, he wouldn't know to conceal her beneath the tarp.

Step by step, the soldier flipped the covers, as if he would strike the moment he saw anyone underneath.

Maria could feel her breath growing faster; the fear was like hands around her neck. She couldn't get enough air as the sound of her breathing seemed so loud that everyone on board could hear her. The edge of the soldier's sword jabbed beneath the cover, and she knew her life was about to end. Her lip quivered as her body began to shake uncontrollably. She held her breath and then heard the voice of the other soldier shouting as he appeared back on the top deck.

The guard was distracted and turned to speak with him as his sword slid away, leaving the cover in place.

The seconds that went by seemed like a lifetime as she waited for him to turn back and uncover her there. But then the other soldier, who appeared to be in charge, motioned for them to leave and continue searching elsewhere.

Maria could not believe her eyes, just as her life was surely about to end, the soldiers walked away.

Dima returned to tie down each of the cargo covers, his hands quickly lashing them with ropes. He came to the place where Maria was hiding, and as his hands reached to tie it down tighter, she whispered to him, «Dima!»

Dima's hand nervously pulled back, as if he had seen a snake. Some of the other shipmates looked for a moment then returned to their work. He kneeled down, pretending to work on the rope, and slid the cover carefully aside just enough to look inside.

«Masha? Are you and Tetya Lena in there?» he said in a relieved voice.

«Tolka ya» her young voice sighed.

«I heard what happened, sorry about Dyadya Alex, he was a good man,» Dima said as he tried to keep his voice from others ears. «They put a reward on your heads where is Tetya Lena?» Dima asked.

«I don't know where she is, but we are too meet in Neva, at your mother's house» Maria replied, wondering if she could trust anyone with these details.

«We are setting sail today for Yaroslavl, can you stay in there until nightfall? No one can know you are here, that reward is too tempting for even my friends to turn down.» Dima said as he tied the rope in place. «I'll bring you some food and water, just stay in there.

«Alright, I'll stay here, please see if you can find my mother before we leave?» Maria asked.

«I'll see what I can find out,» Dima said, in a doubtful voice.

Dima was an experienced sailor and knew how the Tatars worked. What they could not buy, they took through force. «If Lena hadn't already been captured, she would surely be dead,» He thought. He stepped off the boat and walked toward town, looking for answers about his aunt's location.

The deck of the ship was made of rough splintered boards that were filthy from endless cargo storage and dirt. Maria shifted her position often, quietly trying to relieve the growing discomfort of laying across thick, coarse ropes and sacks. There were noises and rumblings on the deck as the last of the cargo was placed on board. Maria fell asleep at times, sleeping only from exhaustion, as her mind tried to understand the events in the last few hours. From the moment she stepped off her father's cart to peer inside the church, her entire life had changed forever.

Flashes of the scene haunted her mind. The chilling fear returned as she pulled through the crowd of soldiers in the church. Her father's gentle hands turning to iron when he struck her face to create an escape; the scene of him turning to face the soldiers, unafraid and determined for her to get away; Her mother so calmly doing the same at the farm house.

She had always known her parents love, but seeing them step in the way of death to protect her, made her shake with a sense of unworthiness. She could hardly swallow from crying and running in the damp night air. She tried to silence her despair by thinking of reuniting with her mother.

The men began to come from below deck with bowls of food. They sat on the deck and talked as they ate and drank.

Dima finally appeared, carrying a bowl of borscht and a cup of water. The captain spoke to him as he walked across the deck.

«Ah Dima, missing all morning for the loading but made it in time for lunch?» he said sarcastically.

«Da Captain, I had an urgent family matter to attend to before pulling out, I apologize for my absence,» Dima said respectfully.

«I heard, Sorry to hear about your uncle. Any news on your aunt or cousin?» The captain asked.

Maria feared Dima could give information about her or her mother and listened carefully.

«Net, they vanished into the woods. That's all I know.» Dima said sadly.

«Hopefully, they will find safety.» The captain replied, patting Dima on the back, «Can you handle first watch tonight?» he asked.

Dima nodded and walked toward the place where Maria was hiding. He sat with his back to her and slid his soup under the cover for her, pretending to have the cup still in his hand to avoid suspicion.

«Masha, eat this!» he whispered.

Her delicate, shaking hands slid from beneath the cover and pulled the bowl inside. Dima could hear her gulping it and wondered if anyone else might notice. He coughed to mask the sound and alert Maria to be quieter.

Dima reached inside his coat and carefully lowered a quarter loaf of bread to the deck and tucked it behind him. «Masha,» he said in a whisper.

Maria's hand appeared again, just long enough to pull the bread out of sight. It was just bread and soup, but at the time it was a feast. She felt less tense now; her hands stopped shaking, and she focused on finding her mother.

«Dima» she whispered. «Did you find my mother?»

«No» he whispered as he reached to take the cup back into his hand, noticing it was empty.

«Do you want water?» he asked, wondering how he would give it to her without drawing attention.

«Net, spacibo» Maria whispered, «I'll need to pee if I drink anything.»

«We are leaving soon. Your mother must have found another way out of town so you should go with me!»

Dima waited for an answer but then realized Maria had fallen asleep now that she had a meal.

The ship cast off, taking the strength of the northward wind into its sail. A cool breeze slid beneath the covers as the boards of the deck creaked from the ship's movements along the river. Maria awakened as the sun was setting, and realized the ship was now well on its way to Yaroslavl.

From her limited view, she could see Dima talking to the man who was steering the ship. Dima then came and sat in front of her as before. He slipped more bread to her and told her they would arrive early in the morning.

«I'll have to get you off the ship before the crew wakes up to unload. There won't be much time, but I can make arrangements to get you to my mother's home in Neva.» He said quietly.

«I'm going back to Rostov tomorrow to see if your mother is still there,» he said confidently.

«Thank you Dima, she is a clever woman; I'm sure she is already in Yaroslavl,» Maria said hoping her wishes were true.

«Just be ready when I come for you!» Dima said as he quickly stood up.

Footsteps of the captain echoed on the deck as he walked over to Dima.

«Enjoying your rest while on watch, young Petrov?» the captain snapped.

«Just tightening my shoes, sir, all is well,» Dima said in a nervous tone.

«Indeed. Keep an eye out for stowaways. Those Tatar soldiers will be searching every ship coming in or out of port now.» said the captain as he walked below deck.

Dima hoped Maria didn't hear the captain's words. He was more like her brother than a cousin and was determined to save her.

Maria began to see her life change from dreams of the future to an unknown existence with each passing moment. The helplessness of her situation crushed her spirit, but her resolve to survive was never stronger. Her parents sacrificed everything for her, and she wanted to deserve the selfless bravery of their deeds, even though she felt responsible for setting those acts in motion.

«If only I had stayed in the cart» her thoughts tormented. «If I could just go back and change that one decision, my Father would be alive, and we would be on our way to Neva as a family.»

The remorse and guilt swam around her like a heavy breeze until she could not bear the weight of it. A depressive mood guided her eyes to close as she slept concealed under the cargo tarp as if an invisible hand closed her eyes to sleep, avoiding the pain of her conscious reality.

Oxana's Tavern

«Masha! Wake Up! We have to go!» Dima whispered.

Maria woke and felt the cold early morning air swirling around her. The ship was tethered to the dock with a town dimly lit in the distance. Dima pulled her to her feet while the crew continued sleeping. She was weak and stiff as she tried to stand after being still for so long.

«I can't walk,» she said faintly as she fumbled to stand.

«You have to!» Dima insisted as he looked around to ensure their stealth. He pulled her by the hand and her feet began to step one by one. Her clothes still packed inside her dress, she shifted and adjusted as best she could to keep up with Dima's quick pace.

They made their way down the gangplank and quickly walked toward large stacks of freight, stored at the port.

«Where are we going?» asked Maria

«To see a friend,» Dima said mysteriously

Maria had never been outside of Rostov, and all the new surroundings were curious and strange to her. She read the signs above the shops as they walked, Tobak, Producti, Bar. Reading had never been so useful as now with so much unfamiliar space around her. The two of them wove between freight and piles of fishing nets, avoiding lighted areas. They reached the main street and then walked along an alley until they arrived at a strange looking tavern.

Dima knocked at the door, it took a while but soon a woman with short blonde hair and brown eyes appeared at the door. She clearly had been sleeping and was groggy but instantly recognized Dima and let them in.

«Dima? Shto takoe?» She asked in an unpleasant tone as she pointed at Maria.

Dima placed several coins in the woman's hand, telling her to hide Maria from everyone until someone came for her later.

The woman looked at the coins and hesitantly accepted, inviting them inside as she looked up and down the street to see if anyone was watching.

«This is Oxana, you can trust her, she runs this place and will help you. I have to return to the ship before they see I am gone!» Dima said as he hugged Maria. «My friend will come for you tomorrow and take you to Neva. Kiss my mother for me!» Dima said sweetly.

«Spacibo Oxana!» Dima said as he kissed Oxana firmly on the lips, surprising her and Maria as he made his way to the door, quickly exiting.

Oxana watched looking favorably as the sound of Dima's steps could be heard running down the alley. It was clear that she liked him or knew him well. She closed the door and looked back at Maria. She studied her for a moment, a slim girl covered in dirt, wearing a dress stuffed with clothing, summarizing her predicament and thought Maria must be family or slave on the run.

Oxana nodded, feeling sympathetic to the fear on Maria's face. «Idite za mnoy.» She said as she led Maria up the tavern stairs. The tavern had a strange smell, a mix of wine, mead and perfume seemed to permeate the air. As they walked down the hall, sounds came from some of the rooms. A man's snoring, two women talking, and distant crying.

«This is my only free room,» Oxana said shortly. «There're water and towels there, and the sheets are clean. You smell like a sailor, so... wash!» she insisted.

Maria nodded, «Mda, I've been hiding in a cargo net since yesterday! Thank you!» she said

The door closed as Oxana left, and Maria walked toward the mirror near the window. Her face and hair were filthy. Her hands looked almost black with dirt as she pulled the items from her dress and let it slip off. She reached into the large bowl of water and began to wash away the last few days of suffering and guilt.

She found a brush and began to pull the tangles from her hair. She remembered the last time she did this; her mother had insisted on helping her so they could braid it. Just moments before her father was leaving to deliver the mead.

«Why can't I go back in time?» she agonized.

She changed into a cleaner dress and slid into the bed after washing, the clean sheets and soft mattress made her gasp. It was such a comfort after so many hours of running in the woods and stowing away on the ship.

She had hardly pulled the blanket over herself before she fell asleep. For the first time since her father's death, she felt safe.

Morning came and went as Maria continued to sleep. Oxana knocked at her door with breakfast but left it by her bed when she saw how tired she was.

Maria woke up as the sun had just begun to set. She saw the breakfast and ate everything at once. Moments later Oxana returned with dinner and marveled that Maria was awake.

«Are you one of those vampires that only comes out at night?» Oxana teased. «Still hungry?»

Maria nodded in agreement as she began to chew on the first thing she touched.

«The ships are coming in from the Volga now; I expect whoever is coming for you will be here tonight,» Oxana said.

«Spacibo, Oxana,» Maria said as she swallowed and reached for water. «Spacibo bolshoe.»

«Well I've got work to do, so I'll leave you to this,» Oxana said as she left the room.

Maria finished her meal and looked out the window. The sun set over the city, and she wondered if her mother might be somewhere nearby.

A recurring sound began to resonate from the room next door. It was like the crying she had heard the night before. Maria walked closer to the wall, and could feel a vibration coming from the floor as if someone was jumping or fighting.

Her curiosity drew her closer and closer until her ear was against the wall. «Was someone in danger?» she thought. As her face pressed against the wall, she could see a small light coming through from the other room. She walked towards it and found a hole just big enough to peek through.

She leaned in and started to focus her view into the other room. It was similar to her room, but more candles were lit along with a lantern by the bed. The walls were wooden with fabric tapestry hanging across a wooden rod. The bed had a fancy lace blanket, nicer than anything she had seen in Rostov. A young woman with dark red curly hair was sitting on the bed facing a half-dressed man who moved toward her. He began to slide her dress off her shoulders and slid his hands over her bare breasts.

Maria gasped, she was shocked and intrigued at the same time. She pulled away from the wall, feeling embarrassed by what she had seen. She walked back to her bed and sat there, listening to the woman giggling as the man's voice lifted and dropped in conversation.

Maria understood perfectly what they were doing; her mother had explained everything to her when she was 13, but she had never experienced sex or even seen a naked man. Although she had seen more than expected through the clothes, her classmates wore when they went swimming, in the village. Soon she found herself back at the wall, watching again.

The woman was now on top of the man; his hands slid across her smooth skin as she rode him like a horse, gliding forward and back as he moved beneath her. Her breasts were large, and he caressed them often. She seemed to enjoy him, she smiled and moaned and placed her hands over his, encouraging him to keep his hands in place. Her hair spilled across her back as she tilted her head back and slowed her movements.

The man's body was slightly concealed by the bed linen. Maria could only see his arms and legs from her point of view. He looked rough and hairy in comparison to the woman's smooth skin. They moved together with increasing force until the man pulled at her body, thrusting himself upward and

then holding her there as he moaned. They stilled as the woman lay forward on his chest and kissed him as his hands stroked down her back.

Maria was entranced. It was the most erotic experience in her life, and she felt as if she was on fire after watching them. «Was this her husband?» she wondered. «Is this what married couples do?»

The woman then slipped away from him, standing and pulling a bed sheet to wrap around herself. She walked to the washstand and poured water from a pitcher into a bowl, then began to clean herself. It seemed odd to Maria, the woman was so passionate and then washing right away as if removing the experience entirely from her body.

She watched the man stand up and reach for his clothes. His body was muscular, and as he turned to get dressed she saw his manhood hanging between his legs. Her mouth parted in shock as she admired the fleshy shaft he covered as he pulled his pants on. A warm sensation washed over Maria, intriguing and beguiling her imagination.

She heard the woman and man talking and looked to see what else they would do. The whole in the wall painted a different scene when she peered through on the unsuspecting couple. She saw him fully clothed and smiling at the woman as he slid his boots on. He wore the clothing of a sailor and appeared to be an older man. The woman seemed uninterested in him now, a strange look was on her face as she appeared impatient and annoyed.

The man reached into his pocket and handed her some coins. The woman counted them and looked at him with a disappointed face. The man gestured with his palms up as if surprised then gave her two more coins as he walked out. The sound of his footsteps echoed down the hall while the woman went to the candles and blew them out, darkening the room.

Maria was confused and went to sit on her bed to calm herself down as she began to realize where her cousin had hidden her. She was staying in a brothel and had just watched a prostitute render her services.

«The rumors of sailors and harlots must have some basis in fact,» she thought, but then she connected the most important point: Her cousin Dima was a well-known customer and must have had some favor with Oxana to accommodate his cousin in so early in the morning. Her opinion of Dima changed instantly. She had always pictured him so proper and hardworking, this was a new side of him but after pondering the idea, she came to accept that if it were any other man she would not be as surprised by the act. He had no wife, and there was no time for love in their world destroyed by war and invasion. Perhaps this tavern offered comfort to her lonely cousin who lived a hard life on the river.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door. Maria thought it might be the woman she had been watching. She put herself under the blankets to give the appearance she had been sleeping, «Yes?» she said firmly.

A man opened the door and stepped inside.

«Sorry to disturb you so late in the evening, are you Maria?» he asked?

Maria panicked, had this man been sent to her room like the sailor she had just watched? «Why!?» she replied nervously.

The man nodded, realizing it must be Maria, «My name is Sergei, Dima paid me to take you to Neva.» He said calmly.

«Yes, I'll be ready to go as soon as my mother arrives,» Maria replied as she kept the blankets pulled up to her neck.

«Oh, I didn't know about this.» Sergei paused, «We have to leave tomorrow morning if we're to get you up the Volga before it freezes. If not, you'll have to wait until Spring.» Sergei insisted.

Maria hesitated, «The river won't freeze for at least another 2 months!» she insisted.

«Here, yes....in Neva, by the time we arrive in 3 or 4 weeks the ice will already be forming,» Sergei replied.

Maria had not considered the northern track she was on. It made sense that the weather in Neva would turn cold sooner. She had not imagined making the trip alone but understood it was her parents wish for her to get to safety.

«Horosho, I'll be ready in the morning,» she said.

Sergei nodded and left the room.

Maria hoped she was making the right decision. She laid back in her bed and looked at the ceiling. The value of the distraction in the room next door faded as the sad reality of the journey ahead consumed her thoughts into the night.

From Those with the Least to Share

Maria felt the light from the window brushing her face as she woke up. Today she would travel to Neva to find her aunt and hopefully be reunited with her mother. She got out of bed and gathered her things. She took one of the linens from the wash stand, tied it by the corners and placed her belongings inside it. It looked awkward but gave her some convenience in moving about.

Noises emerged from the room next door as she prepared to leave. She ignored them at first but rushed to the hole in the wall to take one last look to see who might be there.

A giggling young woman entered the room, she was slender with brown painted eyes that looked intense and mysterious. Her chestnut hair was in a long braid that looked like a rope twisting down her back. A man followed her inside, pulling at her clothes with an eagerness that made the woman slightly protest.

«Careful!» she said, «You will tear it for sure!»

The man was tall with sandy blonde hair and blue eyes, his clothing looked foreign with Nordic designs on the cuffs and lapels. He gestured to the woman to remove her clothing as he sat on the bed. The woman skillfully turned a button, and her entire dress slipped to the ground.

«Like what you see Captain?» She teased.

The man smiled in silence then sucked his breath in a soft whistle, «Shoo» he said in agreement.

«It was so sweet of you to offer me breakfast, but as you can see I have something else in mind.» She said playfully as she walked toward him and began to take his clothes off. Maria marveled as she could see everything from her vantage point, but only the back of the woman's bare body.

She watched intently as the woman slipped his pants off and began to caress his chest. Her hands slowly working lower until she was on her knees.

Maria could not see around the woman, and watched hoping to get a glimpse of the man's body. It was as if they knew she was watching and did everything to block what she wanted to see most, but suddenly he turned into view as the woman climbed onto the bed. The man looked bigger than the last one. His manhood curved upward with a more defined tip. It was beautiful, erotic, inspiring...and Maria's hands began to slide over her body as she felt the return of the warm sensation she had felt the night before.

The woman undid her braid, freeing her curly brown hair. Maria watched in astonishment as the woman took the man into her mouth and slid her fingers up and down his shaft. The man ran his fingers through her hair and moaned deeply as the woman took him into her mouth over and over.

Maria's hand cupped her breasts as she looked on in hunger at the couple's erotic exchange. The man seemed to be in a trance, unable to contain himself as the woman moved faster and took him deeper into her mouth. She had such power over him as if she was placing a spell on him, controlling him as he could only moan for more. The man began to whisper in a foreign language, but the woman ignored him and continued stroking him faster.

He reached and stroked her breasts, squeezing them firmly in his hands as he let out a deep moan and arched his back. The woman held his throbbing flesh in her hands and tilted her head back as his creamy juice began to pulse onto her neck. He moaned again as she squeezed him for more and praised him for giving her what she had worked for.

«That's it, let it out.» She coaxed.

The man seemed to collapse onto the bed. Breathing heavily as if knocked down from a fight.

The woman stood up from the bed and went to the washstand, cleaning herself as the other woman had done. But then she returned to the bed and laid alongside the man. Her slim curvy body was so smooth and graceful in the morning light. She was more attentive and tender than the last woman, making him completely yielding to her will.

Maria felt a hunger growing inside her body, a new and powerful mystery of pleasure and intrigue. It was as if a seed had been planted that filled her womanly curiosity to see and experience more.

She felt jealous of the woman's freedom to have a man and do such things as she had seen. She knew she needed to leave this unexpected place and continue her journey, but she felt her view on life, her body and men were awakening.

She took one last look at the couple lying in their bed, naked and draped in tossed sheets. They seemed so peaceful compared to their earlier intensity.

She gathered her things and made her way towards the door. She took one last look around the room wondering if she would ever return here again. After such an ordeal, this room had become the first comfort she had known, and the beginning of a journey not only to Neva but within herself.

Maria walked down the halls remembering her first impression of the tavern and how different everything seemed now. The smells and chemistry of the tavern lit fires of curiosity as she passed each door. She descended the staircase and was able to see the rest of the building which was dark in the early morning hours. There were several small tables and chairs in the center of the room. Large barrels of mead and ale set in the corner where dozens of tankards were cleaned and neatly stacked. She imagined how it must look in the evening full of sailors and working women. She remembered a similar place in Rostov, but she never saw the inside of it. Somehow it seemed so dark and mysterious from the outside, but now she saw it in a very different way. These were not evil beings, conspiring to corrupt anyone who dared come through the door. They were simple people, probably lonely, who were willing to exchange money for companionship, and the women working there had likewise reconciled the act of affection as a service for hire.

After seeing the last couple, she wondered, «Do they ever find love here? Is it possible?»

She walked towards the back of the Tavern, following the sounds that only a kitchen would create. As she entered the room, she saw Oxana cooking some eggs as she spoke with another woman. The relationship of the women intrigued Maria, they seemed to share a sisterhood of sorts with faceless men passing through their lives.

In the corner, there was a small table and three small children waiting for breakfast. A boy and two girls with innocent faces. As she looked around the rest of the room, she heard a voice say, «Kushet budish?»

She looked and realized Oksana had asked if she was hungry. Maria smiled and nodded in agreement, «Da! But please let me make it, I've imposed enough on you.»

Oksana was pleased with Maria's response, and said, «You are welcome to whatever we have, dear. This is Tanya by the way, she helps me run the place.»

Tanya was an older woman, she was heavier in shape than Oxana with a modest appearance and clothing. She looked like she had lived a rough life and now stared into the distance rather than at people's faces.

«Can I help you ladies finish cooking?» Maria asked.

«Da, you can make the oats for the children.» Said Tanya.

«Yes, of course, I'll get some water,» Maria said as she quickly made herself at home in the kitchen.

Maria felt an excitement and energy in the air, it was as if there was no time to think of dark events, she needed to focus on what she was doing to make her life better. All of her thoughts rushed to the positive goal of traveling to Neva and being reunited with her mother.

She set a pot of water on the stove and put the oatmeal in once it boiled. She stirred quickly to keep it smooth and noticed the children were watching her every move.

«Hungry?» She asked with a smile.

The children didn't respond, they were quiet and looked at each other for assurances on not speaking.

Maria felt drawn to them, their innocence and bright eyes full of curiosity. She took the pot to their table and began filling their bowls with oatmeal. «Kak tebya zovut? She asked the little girl.

The children remained shy and did not respond to her. They began eating and kept their eyes on their food. Each of them started to blow on their spoonful's waiting for it to cool.

«Oh!» Maria said realizing it was too hot. «Do you have milk or butter?» she said, walking to the stove to look for it.

Oxana pointed her in the direction of the milk and eggs. Maria brought both back to the table and added them to the bowls. «Does anyone here like cinnamon?» She asked in a voice that reminded her of her mother's.

Maria looked toward Oksana curiously as if she may have done something wrong. «They are shy with strangers and so many coming and going around here,» Oksana said with a glance of understanding as she handed Maria a small roll of cinnamon bark.

One of the boys pushed his bowl toward her and waited as he watched her. Maria felt excited, it was the first sign of communicating with them. She reached for a knife and scraped the cinnamon flakes into the bowl.

«Spacibo,» he said softly as he began to eat again.

«Pozhalysta,» Maria giggled as she brushed her hand over his head.

Maria stood and remembered she had not put any honey in the oatmeal. She looked around the kitchen and spotted a small ceramic pot sitting by the stove. She returned to the children's table and taunted them playfully, «I don't suppose anyone here likes honey?» she said.

All three children stopped eating and pushed their bowls forward immediately.

Maria giggled as she removed the top of the jar and lifted the wooden comb spoon inside as the honey dripped slowly from the combs. «Oh look how dark it is, this is the best honey!» She said as she drizzled some on each child's oatmeal.

The children smiled and happily began mixing the honey into their oatmeal, continuing to devour it.

Maria reached for a bowl and set with the children while she ate her breakfast. She began to realize these children were probably born in this Tavern, not knowing who their father might be. It was such a different existence than what she had known growing up on a farm. She could not imagine what her life would have been like without her father. And at that moment she felt the cold reality sweeping over, that now she would be as these children were now, facing a life without the protection and care she had lost in Rostov. She looked at their innocent faces and quickly wiped her tears away, repeating to herself to focus on moving forward.

There was a knock at the front door as Tanya went to see who it was. She returned with Sergei, who looked like he was in a hurry to leave. His eyes were wide, and he stood as near the door as possible.

The ladies offered him breakfast, but he refused quickly.

«Are we going to miss the boat?» asked Maria as she stood, preparing to leave.

«Net, we have enough time, but if any of my wife's friends see me here, I will be a dead man in the morning,» Sergei said in a nervous tone.

Oksana and Tanya burst into laughter as Maria smiled and turned to say goodbye.

«Thank you for your hospitality and kindness, I appreciate everything you have done for me,» Maria said as she picked up her things.

Oxana noticed her linen wrapped around Maria's things. «Wait, I have a sack here...» she said sifting through her potato bin, «It's not fancy, but it's clean.»

Maria smiled, delighted to have the white linen sack to carry her belongings in. Everything fit perfectly, and the cinch cord made it easier to carry.

«Poka detii,» she said sweetly to the children as they looked up at her, not understanding why she was leaving so soon.

Maria and Sergei walked towards the door as Oxana followed them.

«Oksana will you please tell my cousin Dima that I have left for Neva and will wait for my mother there?» Maria asked.

«Of course, he should be here at the same time next week,» Oksana replied.

«Meanwhile, he handed me this before he left. I believe it's for... the unexpected» Oksana whispered without Sergei hearing as she placed a bag of coins in Maria's hand. «No reason for anyone to know you have that, dear.»

Maria smiled and nodded, understanding Oksana's advice as she carefully hid the bag of coins in the potato sack.

Dima opened the door and walked outside onto the porch as Maria followed. Suddenly the little boy she had given the cinnamon to ran onto the porch and wrapped his arms around Maria's waist. He did not say a word, he only held her tightly for a moment then ran back inside. Maria only had a moment to pat his head before he was gone. She looked toward Oksana in astonishment.

«They don't get treated very kindly in this town, thank you for making them feel special,» Oksana said with a quivering voice.

Maria hugged Oxana and felt the warmth of her heart.

«You know, there is a place like this in my town, and I thought the people there were so...» Maria began.

Oxana stopped her and smiled, «Nothing in life is as it seems dear. God speed you on your way.»

Oksana turned and quickly walked inside, clearly feeling the emotions of the moment.

Maria watched as the door closed, and she realized how much she had learned about life, people and even herself in this unassuming little tavern. She wished she could have stayed longer but accepted that her journey must continue.

Maria continued with Sergei down the street where a carriage was waiting.

«We have to board a ship on the other side of the harbor where the Tatars control the ships. It's likely they are looking for you from what I was told, so... put this on, you're my wife if anyone asks.» Sergei said as he handed Maria a kerchief while they climbed aboard the carriage.

The streets of Yaroslavl were quite different from Rostov. Maria admired the larger buildings and smooth streets. The energy was different in the city, there seems to be more possibility for a future life. She began to imagine how Neva must be even more impressive and have even more to offer.

Sergei handed Maria a small bag of coins, «Dima said these are for expenses.»

Maria nodded in confusion. Why would he give money to Sergei and Oxana for the same reason? Then she remembered when her cousin had paid Oxana for her stay in the Tavern. She realized Oksana had chosen to give the money to her instead. She remembered back in the tavern, and how Oxana had taken risks to help her. In a world where the rich exploited the innocent, she had experienced generosity and kindness from those with the least to share and most to lose.

Kupala

The carriage slowed to a stop as it pulled alongside a large single sail ship, tied to the dock in Yaroslavl. There were pockets in the sides where boat oars could be extended, and each board of the vessel was glued together with an acrid black tar. The ship was taking on cargo, as barrel after barrel was rolled up a plank on the side. The name Kupala was carved into the forward side and across the back in large letters. Maria recognized the name from mythical stories she had heard as a child. Each summer there were festivals where maidens engaged in rituals with flowers and water celebrating traditions in the name of Kupala, but Maria's parents were Christian and forbid her from taking part in such things.

Maria exited the carriage and looked up to admire the overwhelming size of the Volga River. It seemed more like a sea compared to the river she knew in her small town. With each day since her escape from Rostov, the world had become a much larger place, and she was both terrified and intrigued to discover more.

Sergei boarded the ship and spoke with the quartermaster about their travel arrangements. From the dock, Maria could hear some shouting and arguments, but this was typical negotiation tactics in Russia. As she looked around taking in all of the sites, a large group of men walked by her to board the ship. They were poorly dressed and smelled of alcohol but walked like kings of their own world inside an entourage of sweat and muscle.

Sergei returned with a discouraged face that he tried to hide as he explained the situation to Maria. «There is not enough for both of us to take this trip, so you will have to go without me.» He said in a slight whisper, keeping his back to the ship. «I told this man that you knew your way around the ship and would be okay without an escort. Can you go alone?»

Maria's hand slid towards her pocket, thinking to offer the money Oksana had given her earlier. But something in the back of her mind told her to go on without Sergei.

«As long as this ship will take me to Neva, I will be fine,» Maria said as she reached for her sack of belongings.

Sergei seemed very relieved, «The quartermaster is a good man, he will keep an eye on you. Meanwhile, I'll explain everything to your brother when he returns next week.» He said with a smile.

As they walked towards the gangplank, Sergei's voice lowered once again as he whispered, «There are all sorts of people on these ships, criminals, slaves even spies. Do not trust anyone, and sleep with this in your hand.» He said cautiously as he placed a palm-sized knife between her fingers.

Maria quickly hid the knife in her pocket and thanked Sergei for his help. «I appreciate everything you've done for me, now go and be with your dear wife, she is lucky to have such a devoted man,» Maria said as she began to board the ship.

Sergei watched as Maria found her place on the deck. He marveled at her maturity and character as he was accustomed to the cavalier and insatiable personalities of city women, but this young farm girl seemed wise beyond her years. With intense regret he turned back to the carriage, watching this charming lady fend for herself on an unknown journey.

Maria looked around, taking a long silent view of the Volga River; the view was breathtaking in the morning air. She felt the boards beneath her feet creaking and bumping as men below worked and prepared the ship to get underway. She recognized the boisterous language and tone of the workers who had passed her earlier on the dock. These were the oarsmen who would row the ship to its destination. She found it hard to imagine such an existence and wondered how anyone could live such a life.

A few more passengers boarded the ship as the ropes were being untied. The ship gently floated away from the dock as the creak and splash of the oars began their rhythm to and fro taking the vessel

northward. Soon the dock was a small detail on the rear horizon as scenes along the river rolled by. A cold breeze blew from the South filling the large square sail entirely until it whistled at the edges.

The cold air quickly chilled Maria's body as it blew through the open weave of her dress. She saw a portal inside and decided to seek warmth inside of the ship. Her curiosity was peaked, she wanted to explore rest of the ship and find where she would be spending her nights. She had never slept in a cabin on a ship, and her mind began to imagine a spacious room with a window and comfortable bed. She saw the quartermaster directing everyone in different directions; each person seemed to be going the wrong way or had a complaint about their assigned place.

«Excuse me, sir, can you tell me where I will be sleeping tonight,» Maria said gently.

The quartermaster turned to answer her as if he were annoyed by yet another question, but he saw the innocence of her big grey eyes and hesitated to answer. His demeanor changed as he smiled, «Young miss, you'll be sharing the forward cabin with our cook. We've no steerage for young ladies, and I can't put you on the deck with the crew. Just walk straight down this way to the door at the end». He said.

«And may I also have a room, kind sir?» Teased an oarsman, faking a woman's voice

The quartermaster quickly returned to his coarse nature and barked at the man, «Get your gear stowed below and get to your post! He said as he pushed the man to the stairwell.

Maria giggled quietly, enjoying the kind attention she had not expected. She walked toward the cabin, keeping her hands along the walls to balance as the ship rocked from left to right. It was an unpleasant almost sickening sensation to have such sway in each step. The massive Volga was clearly not as gentle as the river she had just traveled the day before.

As she reached for the door she feared for the worst of characters, she imagined a fat old man keeping her awake all night with snoring. «Why would they put me in a room with a man?» She wondered in protest.

She took her hand away from the doorknob and decided to knock softly before opening the door. Hearing no response, she felt relieved and opened the door, trying to keep from stumbling in as she made an effort to walk and enter as the ship swayed sharply to one side. At the corner of the room, a naked petite woman stood bent over a wash pan with her hair dipped in the water. She was wrapping her hair in a towel and quickly looked up, sensing the open door and shouted at Maria,

«Close the door!» the woman snapped.

Maria stepped inside and immediately closed the door. «Sorry! I'm looking for the cook's cabin.» Maria said awkwardly. «He said it was this way, and I must've opened the wrong door.»

The woman fixed the towel over her head and comfortably walked about the cabin as the light from the forward window cast a shadow on her nude figure. She had a slim hourglass figure with full breasts, warm brown eyes, and long chestnut hair. She moved in a hurried pace as if she had to be somewhere else at any moment.

«Relax, you're in the right place, I'm the cook, Svetlana Nikolayevna.» She said, extending her hand generously.

Maria hesitated to extend her hand and tried to avert her eyes feeling embarrassed by Svetlana's nude body.

Svetlana's brown eyes looked down and realized her appearance, «Oh, sorry, not used to having guests on voyages. Most of the crew prefer me this way.» She said with a loud laugh. Sveta's bright smile was contagious, her teeth looked almost childlike, white and perfectly straight.

Maria smiled and continued to look down at the floor, «It's pleasant to meet you Sveta, I am Maria Alexandrova.»

The two made brief eye contact and stood in the middle of the room with awkward silence around them.

«Right,» said Sveta, as she reached for her dress. She turned her back to Maria as she pulled it over her head.

Maria's eyes quickly looked noticing how different Sveta's body looked compared to her own. As the dress cascaded down Sveta's back, the curves of her body intrigued Maria. The graceful way her body curved sinuously inward to her waist, then extend outward to her hips. Her skin was smooth and toned with tan and white where her clothing had been. She had bruises and scratches that seemed to tell a story of her hard life as a cook on a ship. Maria felt an awkward interest to see the rest of Sveta's body in more detail but looked away before Sveta turned around.

«I thought the cooks were men on these ships?» Maria asked politely.

«They usually are, but my father died with debts to the ship's captain so it was either take his place or watch them put my mother and me on the street,» Sveta replied in a neutral tone. «Besides a kholops life isn't so terrible compared to the nunnery!»

Maria quickly understood the situation and stopped asking questions. She pointed to an empty bunk and waited for Sveta to nod in agreement that she could sleep there. Sveta nodded and continued preparing herself.

Maria moved to sit on the bunk and fell onto it as the ship rocked more intensely with the wind and waves.

«That wind is a blessing and a curse on the river; it speeds up the ship then shakes you all about,» Sveta said as she finished dressing and walked toward the door. «I've got to go get started on lunch. Welcome aboard Maria!» Sveta said while closing the door behind her.

Maria looked around the cabin as she sat on the bed. It was very different than she imagined but it was warm, safe and moving toward Neva. She noticed Sveta did not have many dresses or personal things, some of the clothing scattered around the room looked like it belonged to a man rather than a woman.

«Perhaps she is the only woman on the ship, and with so many men, I can't imagine how much attention she gets!» Maria thought as her mind blended the scenes she had seen in the tavern and the site of seeing Sveta naked just moments before.

As the ship continued to lift and drop into the water, Maria felt an overwhelming sickness come over her. It was as if she had consumed a dozen green apples and now they took their toll. She laid down and hoped the feeling would go away. She soon fell asleep in a state of bilious confusion.

Hours later the waters calmed, and she awoke in a disoriented haze, forgetting momentarily that she was no longer in her familiar bed at home, but on a ship cutting its way North on the Volga River. Maria retraced her steps back to the top deck, where the quartermaster and crew were organizing barrels along the walkway.

«These get taken off at the next port» shouted the quartermaster. «Make sure they are secured. Then let's get the other one's below to make more room for the crew to sleep.»

Maria saw the men were carrying the barrels toward her as she stood at the top of the stairs leading below. She quickly went back down the staircase and went in search of the kitchen. She made her way below another deck and followed the smell of food and sounds of cooking.

Sveta noticed her and immediately offered her a bowl of soup, «There's my cabin mate!» She said in a joyous tone. «Gospodi, you're green! Is this your first time on the river?» Sveta teased as others laughed.

«First time on the Volga,» Maria murmured as she looked at the soup rocking back and forth in her bowl.

«Take some bread, it will help until you get your sea legs,» Sveta said as she handed Maria a small loaf.

Maria sat at a table, dipping the bread in her soup. She slowly felt better with a full stomach. She noticed the other passengers, some were eating, others were merchants accompanying their cargo to various ports on the River. For them, this was just another day of work, but for Maria every detail of the ship and people were new.

She took her bowl back to Sveta and tried to wash it, but Sveta brushed her aside.

«Will you replace me?» Sveta teased. «They have cleared the main deck. You can go up and see some of the villages along the river if you like.» Sveta said as she began to clean a pile of bowls and pans.

Maria smiled and nodded in agreement. She headed to the top deck and found a comfortable space near the front to look out, watching one group of homes after another roll by on the banks of the river. Each village was unique, some larger and some quite small.

«How many lives, and how many stories each place must have.» Maria thought.

The afternoon sun painted the landscape as each new village came into view. A dock with many ships, a quiet inlet leading to a distant village, the trail of chimney smoke tracing a path to a port side tavern. Maria imagined her life if she were to step off the boat and begin a life at this place or the next. With each new scene, she realized her life had become a random direction on an unknown path, but it also felt free with unlimited possibilities. She braided her hair to keep it out of the wind and dreamed of her future life in Neva.

Hours passed, and the smell of the evening's meal began to drift from below the deck. Several passengers and crew went below, but Maria felt content to remain and think about her father. She hoped to light a candle for him as soon and also imagined her mother making her way toward Neva at the same time.

«Perhaps she is one ship ahead of me or took a different route by land through Moscow.» She thought.

The wind grew cold as the sun began to set on the Volga. The river was endless, each turn revealed another long stretch of waves and life along the bank. Maria cradled her arms around herself, wishing she had a coat. She looked back across the empty deck as she headed toward the stairs leading below deck.

A man stood at the bottom of the stairs and waited for her to complete her steps before walking upward. He had dark hair and green eyes with a serious face. She stepped off the staircase and looked at him with a nod of appreciation for waiting.

He smiled in return, and his face seemed to completely change. It was as if he was a different person when he smiled. Maria's eyes followed him as he walked past and climbed to the top deck. He had masculine features, his hands were thick from hard work, and his shoulders pushed against his clothing as he moved.

She found herself taking in each detail of his body, as he walked out of sight. Her sudden fascination puzzled her.

«Why am I looking so much at women and men?» she wondered.

She did not feel she needed more to eat, so she returned to her cabin. The few clothes she had were all dirty, so she decided to clean everything while she had the room to herself. She found a wash basin and made use of the water and soap left in view by Sveta.

The cold water made her hands ache as she twisted and squeezed the cloth. She took off her dress, and undergarments one by one until everything was washed and hanging on any available surface in the cabin.

She set the washtub aside, knowing she could not empty it without something to wear. Then she slipped into the bed to keep warm. The feeling of her naked skin sliding between the cold sheets gave her a boost of energy that faded as she grew warmer. She was soon asleep, as the remaining sunlight faded orange to black through the window.

Are you sleeping?

Maria awoke in her bed, still naked beneath the sheets as she heard the sound of people talking outside her room. Their voices were growing closer, and the clump of their footsteps announced them before the door swung open.

«Maria?!» whispered Sveta into the dark room as she giggled.

«Maria are you in here?» Sveta persisted as she led a man inside and closed the door.

«I think she's asleep, so let's not wake her» Sveta giggled in a voice that clearly had the influence of wine.

Maria was astonished; she was too embarrassed to say she was awake. It seemed better to pretend she was asleep and perhaps they would go somewhere else.

Sveta came over to Maria's bed and nudged her gently, «Ti spiish»? She whispered in a careless giggle.

The man's deep voice filled the cabin, as he pulled Sveta to the other side of the room, «Ladno, she is asleep, idi suda!» he said playfully.

Maria kept perfectly still; it was impossible escaping now without a tremendous embarrassment. She understood what might happen, and in the dim grey light of the moon that cast the window, she could see them embracing near Sveta's bed.

He was taller than her and had his hands around her waist, pulling her against him. Sveta seemed to resist him a bit, but as they kissed, her arms began to encircle him. Then her hands glided up his arms and shoulders until her fingers were running through his hair pulling him deeper into the kiss.

Maria felt the sensation of arousal building inside her as it had in the tavern when she watched through the wall as the girls satisfied their men. Only this time she didn't have to peak from a distance, it was just a few feet away, making it almost repulsive without wanting to stop watching.

«Davai,» the man said hungrily as he pulled Sveta harder against his body.

Sveta stepped back from him and pulled her dress over her head, letting it drop to the floor.

The dim light seemed to caress her body at every curve. Her breasts disappeared into his hands as he touched her, kneeling down to taste her nipples in his mouth. Sveta caressed the back of his neck, holding him to her as he sucked her nipples. She tilted her head back as he held her in his arms, sliding his hand down her back, caressing every inch of her.

Maria strained to see his hand as he stroked his fingers up Sveta's thighs and then slid them between her legs. Sveta moaned as he touched her there, Maria felt her body throbbing as she witnessed the intimacy of the two lovers, camouflaged in the darkness.

She watched him kiss lower and lower down Sveta's body, leaving a trail of kisses that made Sveta's body quiver as he moved. The anticipation built with each kiss, making her wonder if he would continue further, then his eagerness was expressed as he suddenly shifted and buried his face between her legs. His strong hands cupped her round bottom, squeezing her flesh as his tongue slipped inside her wetness. Maria could hear him kissing her there, and the sound of his sucking was rewarded when Sveta gasped.

Sveta dug her fingers into his shoulders, it was too much for her to take and continue standing. She pulled him toward her bed and lay back waiting for him to satisfy her. Maria could see Sveta's body easily as the window was closer to her bed. The light made her skin look ghost like, and the view of her large nipples made an erotic contrast to the shape of her full round breasts.

The man untied his belt and let his clothes fall to the floor as he eagerly pulled his shirt off. Maria admired his masculine shape; he looked powerful compared to Sveta's nubile body. He had broad shoulders and a defined back that tapered slowly toward his waist. She felt on fire as she looked at his masculine buttocks, it looked as if it were chiseled from solid marble and she wanted to reach over and feel it but knew she could not.

He knelt on the bed, ready to take Sveta. Maria quietly turned her face, hoping to see the rest of his body.

«Why doesn't he turn this way?» she thought frustrated from the view. She wanted to see everything, all of him. Then she saw Sveta's hand sliding down his back, coaxing him on top of her. He slowly lowered over her and reached down to guide his throbbing flesh inside her.

Maria felt her breath failing her, as she watched him feeding his manhood to Sveta's hungry cave. Sveta gasped and whispered, «Slowww, you're so big!», As he moved deeper inside her. His body moved closer and closer until he covered her beneath him, Sveta's hands traced down his back and clawed at his ass in ecstasy.

From Maria's view, they were an entanglement of legs and arms, joined in the center. They moved together, like a language without words, only gestures, touches, and gasps between movements. It was beautiful and erotic to watch, and seeing them secretly gave an intensity that excited Maria even more.

The man lifted himself by his arms, hovering over Sveta as she wrapped her legs around his waist. He began to thrust his shaft into her. His back and ass became a rhythm of flexing muscle accelerating in each repetition. He rocked Sveta firmly against her bed and headboard with growing strength.

«Surely they know the noise they are making would wake me up!» Maria thought as her hands began sliding quietly under the blanket, finding her erect nipples with her fingers. She pinched at them, wanting to imagine the pleasures taking place just out of reach. She was so aroused, so eager to feel the pleasure of sex and attention but kept absolutely quiet to maintain her secret view.

Then her eyes caught the gaze of Sveta, who was now watching her as the man continued pumping his body into her. She could see Maria, and kept her eyes directed at Maria knowing she was watching. A slight smile crept over Sveta's face as if she had gotten what she wanted, enjoying the twist of being seen.

The man began to groan more intensely, with each thrust his voice grew louder, building to a final conclusion. Suddenly Sveta pushed the man off of her bed and onto the floor.

«Wait! You have to finish another way!» She whispered as she got on her knees and turned him toward her mouth. Sveta seemed to position her body like an actor on a stage, she had situated herself and the man to be turned just enough for Maria to see their crescendo of pleasure.

Sveta eagerly took his hard shaft to her lips and slid it deep into her mouth.

«Finally!» Maria thought excitedly, as she could see the rest of his body.

His penis was firm and looked massive compared to Sveta's hands and mouth as she pleased him. His strong legs were like iron that rose up from the ground to present his impressive shaft. She wondered if all men kept such wonders in their pants, and marveled at how big they could grow from a woman's touch.

The man placed his hand on Sveta's head, guiding her to take all of him, it looked impossible to fit so much in her mouth, but Sveta slid him deep inside until her lips were at the end of his shaft. The man moaned in appreciation and stroked his fingers through her hair. He slid his hand to the back of her head and pulled at her hair, it looked almost brutal to Maria, but Sveta seemed to like it, gasping as she slid off of it and quickly returning.

Maria noticed Sveta's hand was between her legs, stroking herself as she took the man in her mouth.

«Finish me, I am burning!» the man said.

Sveta smiled as she squeezed his cock firmly in her grip and stroked him twisting her hand around his shaft. «Shhhh» Sveta moaned softly... reminding him, they were not alone. «I want it in your mouth» he sighed, as she responded eagerly.

Her hands moved quicker as she took the tip of his penis, and sucked it while she stroked him. Her other hand cupped her breasts and pinched her nipple. She was trying to bring him to the point

of no return....and then he suddenly grabbed her head, pulling her hair and thrusting his cock deep into her mouth.

He gasped as she tried not to choke from his strength, then she placed her hands on each side of his hips and pulling herself off his shaft with a mouthful of his juice. She let it drip from her mouth back onto his penis and onto her breasts, as he caught his breath. She slowly stroked him as he placed his hand on the wall to keep from falling over.

Maria's hand had found its way down her body, reaching the place that begged for attention after watching the interlude unfold in front of her. As her fingers began to slide between her legs, she felt intense wetness, waiting to greet her welcome fingers. Her pulse seemed to push through her skin, where she began to stroke her fingers, curious and eager to see where this burning pleasure would take her, but it would have to wait until she was alone.

Sveta looked like an enchantress; she had taken him on a journey and made him give her everything she wanted. Maria watched her as she stroked her hands through the juices that covered her breasts; it was like a trophy to Sveta. She seemed content to control him from her knees as she stopped stroking him, and reached for her dress to wipe herself off.

Maria watched in a state of amazement; an entire world seemed to exist in the bedroom that escaped all boundaries of life, time and space. Her interest and curiosity to learn more grew by the minute.

The man dressed quickly and prepared to leave as Sveta retreated to her bed. He sat beside her and quietly placed something in her hand.

«No, it's not right.» Sveta said, «You make me feel like...»

The man interrupted as it clenched his hand around hers, to keep her from returning it. «I know the captain doesn't pay you much, take it for your mother if not for yourself.» He said, as he kissed her hand and quickly exited the cabin.

Sveta held her hand open revealing a few coins that reflected in the light. She sighed deeply and set them beside her bed. She looked over at Maria, seeing her eyes closed and assumed she had fallen asleep.

Sveta looked at the ceiling of her cabin, it was dark and unremarkable in the night light. She seemed very far away from the place and time she was currently in. She wiped her body once more with her dress and set it on the floor as she pulled a blanket over her bare breasts. She rolled towards the cabin wall and sighed as she drifted into sleep.

Maria quietly turned in her bed, her body still alive with hunger she could hardly contain, but she knew she had to remain silent. She ached to stroke herself but there was no way she could attempt it undetected.

She slid one of her hands to her breast and imagined a man lying beside her, holding her like that. The warmth of his body against hers and the freedom to make him hard whenever she wanted. How amazing the intimacy seemed between a man and a woman, such an escape from ordinary life to something exquisite and sensual.

Her mind raced through the images of men and women she had seen in the last few days. So much to learn and explore and yet, she couldn't imagine herself with anyone unless she loved him. The mix of life as she had seen at home and the world she was now in made all her expectations swim in her thoughts until she too fell asleep.

Port Mologo

Maria woke up and looked over toward Sveta's empty bed. She had already left to work in the kitchen, leaving everything sorted and cleaned as if nothing had happened. Maria felt a strange awkwardness about facing Sveta after watching her with her lover the night before. But as long as Sveta did not know that Maria was awake, it seemed harmless to have secretly watched their encounter.

Maria's clothes had dried overnight, she folded them for storage and went below to the kitchen to get something to eat. She was starving after skipping the previous evening's meal while doing her laundry. She heard Sveta's voice talking with people as they were given their ration of food. The room was filled with merchants and crew members, all struggling to find a space to sit or stand while eating their oatmeal.

«And here's my sleepy cabin mate!» Sveta said with a cheerful voice, «Slept like the dead last night I think?»

«Da...» sighed Maria as she held her bowl up for a helping of oatmeal.

Sveta filled her bowl until it was almost overflowing, then handed Maria some raisins.

«Shh,» Sveta whispered as she motioned with a finger over lips not to tell anyone.

Maria understood that this was an extra kindness that others did not receive, «Spacibo Sveta,» She replied.

«Na zdorovie, hope we didn't wake you last night.» She giggled as she winked at Maria.

Maria's face ran flush with embarrassment as she tried to pretend ignorance of Sveta's comment and rushed toward the stairs to eat her meal on the top deck.

As she emerged from below, the fresh air blew across her face and through her hair. It was crisp and refreshing with a slight scent of spice in the breeze. She found her comfortable space at the front of the ship and looked at the towns and ships that passed by. The ship was much closer to the shore than before, and more details could be seen.

«We'll be in port for a few hours today if you want to stretch your legs?» came the voice of the quartermaster. He pointed forward to a large pier and harbor where the ship was headed.

«What's the name of the town? Maria asked.

«Mologo» he replied.

Maria thanked him and finished her oatmeal. She wondered if perhaps her mother had made it this far already. Perhaps her mother was also in Mologo, and they could continue their journey together. Her heart filled with hope as she went to prepare for going ashore.

Sveta was in the cabin when she walked in. Maria smiled but had difficult looking Sveta in the eyes. She felt ashamed for watching her and pretending to be asleep. At the moment it had been exciting, but now it made her feel wrong and awkward.

Sveta noticed and asked «Something wrong?»

«Net» Maria quickly responded, «I was just thinking about looking for my mother when we pull into port. It's possible she made it here already.»

«Oh, I didn't realize you were traveling to meet your Mother. I can help you look if you like? I know Mologo very well.» Sveta said kindly.

Maria started to decline her invitation but realized she didn't know this city at all. «That would be very kind of you, thank you,» Maria responded as she turned to look Sveta in the eyes.

Maria felt overwhelmed with a need to confess what she had seen the previous night. «Sveta, last night I...» she began.

«Masha, I know... we were impossible to ignore and I'm sorry about that. I had too much to drink, and he hasn't seen me for several months, we just got carried away» Sveta said, «Besides it made me feel excited that someone might see us, it's more umm... intense?» she giggled as she embraced Maria.

«You forgive me?» Sveta asked cheerfully.

«Konechno,» Maria sighed in relief.

They both paused in silence, then Sveta smiled and asked, «So... you *did* you watch us!?»

Maria felt her face turn red again as they both burst into laughter, «mDa!», she giggled as she playfully made a guilty face.

The two began to laugh like sisters, immersed in the excitement at the reception of each confession.

Maria looked curiously at Sveta as the ship listed to one side for a moment, then a loud thud was heard along its side.

«We're in port!» Sveta said, «Let's go look for your Mother!»

The two began chatting as they walked off the ship and headed toward the shops and town square. They felt themselves in that rare moment when new friends are made, and everything feels alive and free. The complimentary mix of blonde and brunette, smiling as they walked in port caught many men's eyes, but they ignored them all and kept a fast pace toward the line of shops along the river bank.

«If your mother is traveling north she would definitely come through Mologo. All the ships stop here because this is where the rivers intersect on the way to Neva.» Sveta said confidently, guiding Maria through the busy port.

Barrels and boxes were stacked in all directions as ships loaded their freight. The port appeared like a giant dance of cargo and people, each moving in a different direction at a hurried pace. The smells and sounds were all so foreign to Maria, as she often stopped to see something new or read the markings on the crates.

«You can read?» marveled Sveta.

«Da, my mother is a school teacher.» She replied confidently.

«You're so lucky! I only know the ship symbols, never learned text, but I'm good with numbers.» Sveta said.

«What about your father, what does he do?» Sveta asked.

Maria paused; it was the first time she had spoken about her father's death since the night he was killed. «He is a... was a beekeeper and farmer until he was murdered by the Tatars.» She said softly.

Sveta realized she had made a mistake in asking such a question, «I'm so sorry, I didn't realize he was...» She said trying to find the right words.

«Thank you» Maria interrupted, «I still can't believe it.» She sighed.

The two continued walking at a slower pace as Maria shared the story of Alex's death, how he was a hero for saving her and now she was desperate to find her mother as she fled from the Tatar controlled region of Russia.

«This port is too busy for the soldiers to keep watch, so you're safe here,» Sveta assured Maria.

Maria wished to change the subject, «So you seem to be free to go into port, doesn't the captain fear you will run away?» she asked.

«Well, he has the contract on my father's debt and knows where my mother is, which keeps me from running away, but he gives me special privileges because I take care of him when he asks for it.» replied Sveta.

«Take care of him, how?» Maria said in a teasing voice.

Sveta blushed as she raised an eyebrow and spoke in a sarcastic voice. «Oh, yesss... you're So big... give it to me! You mad beast!»

«Big?» Maria mused.

Sveta held up her smallest finger, bending it limply, «Enormous» she replied in a high pitched tone.

The two of them burst into laughter as passing citizens walked around them on the crowded streets. They visited several shops, makers of dresses, coats, shoes, confections and pastries. In each place, they received no news of Maria's mother. Maria described her mother and left the store owners with the message that she would continue to Neva, should her mother appear in the following days.

As they walked back to the ship, Maria was sad that she hadn't found her mother or had any news of her whereabouts. Sveta could see her sad face and wanted to cheer her up. She pulled Maria into a nearby store and purchased some honey for her, «To remind you of home» Sveta said.

Maria's eyes filled with tears as she held the clay jar of honey close to her heart. She truly missed both her parents and felt so alone without them. But her new found friend gave her inspiration

to keep going and make the most of her days. Maria knew her father and mother had done all they could to get her to freedom, and she didn't want to disappoint them by giving up. She had to continue on the journey to Neva.

As she and Sveta walked toward the ship, she asked Sveta about her life and how she felt about life onboard the ship.

«I'll lose my best years to this crazy life, I know it. By the time I'm done paying my father's debt, I'll be too old for most men to want me as a wife. Although some have said, they would take me as soon as I'm done. I won't believe in that until the time comes.» Sveta said sadly.

«But if that's the way of it, why should I suffer and go without a man's attention? Most of them are very generous and bring me nice things. Of course, they have wives back home, I'm just someone to fill in that need for variety while they're away.» She continued.

Maria interrupted, «What about love? Don't you want love?» She said kindly as she placed her hand on Sveta's back.

Sveta paused, «Of course I want to be loved and to love. But that time is not now, it's somewhere in the future when I can have a say over where I go and who I'll be with.»

Maria could hear the sorrow in Sveta's voice, she knew she ached for love just like anyone would. Perhaps that's why she allowed men to have her in bed so she could feel something other than despair.

«It's a hard life,» Maria said calmly

«Indeed it is.» Sveta replied, «And that's why I drink!»

They laughed and continued back onboard the ship just as it was making ready to set sail. The new cargo was on the deck, and other items had been offloaded. The captain stood at the mast and shouted at Sveta as she walked toward the downward staircase, «Don't wait till the last line is cast off to come back aboard!»

«Sorry captain – won't happen again!» She replied sarcastically.

«Da, you say that every time!» he blasted as he reviewed the papers for the cargo.

Maria returned to the cabin and placed the jar of honey by her bed as Sveta changed her clothes before going to the galley.

Sveta's naked body didn't embarrass Maria as it had before; she was becoming used to seeing her cabin mate this way. It seemed almost natural to look at her now.

Sveta pulled her clothes off and quickly washed with a wet towel. She stood with a small pan of water on the floor, dipping the cloth in the water then making long strokes along her body. Maria laid face down on her bed, propping herself up on her elbows as her ankles crossed and lifted up and down as she talked.

Sveta told her more about the ship, the crew and the ports that they would see on the way. A trail of water trickled from Sveta's shoulder, down across her breast, following a path unique to her body, slowing as it ran past her hips and down her leg. The cold water made her nipples harden as she finished washing her front.

Sveta noticed Maria was watching her closely as they talked, she turned her back to Maria and playfully asked, «Wash my back?»

Maria felt nervous but stood and walked toward Sveta, «Hold your hair.» Maria said as she reached for the wet towel.

Sveta turned and lifted her hands to pull her hair out of the way. Maria began to slowly wipe from her neck, across her shoulders and down her back. Sveta sighed from the cold cloth against her skin. Maria's hand continued down Sveta's back until she reached the curves of her bottom. She paused there for a moment, wondering if she should stop.

She held her breath and continued down Sveta's body, gliding the towel over every inch of her backside. She couldn't help but to look at every detail of Sveta's body. She had never closely seen

how a grown woman looked unclothed, her mother had always kept covered, and her friends at home had moved on or died before reaching that age.

Her eyes took in the softness of Sveta's skin, how her legs flowed upward to the soft hair that delicately covered her most intimate flesh. Maria wondered if her body looked the same, so impressive and wondrous.

«I think my legs are clean dear,» Sveta said as Maria realized she had remained too long in one place.

Maria quickly stood up to return the towel. Sveta smiled and thanked her, turning toward her to take the towel from her hand. Maria's eyes glanced down and saw that Sveta's nipples were absolutely firm with arousal. She quickly looked back into Sveta's eyes.

Neither lady said a word, they simply realized they had shared an intimate moment that was unexpected and pleasant. Sveta reached for her working dress and Maria returned to her bed.

«See you at dinner!» Sveta said as she put on her shoes and headed for the door.

«See you then!» Maria responded.

The new found friendship between the two was filled with energy to explore and share. It was a comfort that made them feel closer and more confident about their lives. Someone they could say anything to and understand each other as they were, not as they should be.

Maria opened her travel sack and found the small script she had carried since leaving her farm. She whispered the words in Latin thinking about their meaning for the first time, «In principio creavit Deus caelum et terram, In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.» She reached for a brush and pulled it through her hair as she continued reading in fascination at the creation of woman.

«In the beginning, the last thing God made was a woman, the final crown of all creation, no wonder our bodies are so inspired to look at and touch.» She thought.

The light in the room faded as the sun set on the Volga with the Kupala catching the last breeze northward, carrying it toward the next stop along the river.

Fireflies on the Volga

The smell from the kitchen began to permeate the entire ship like a silent announcement that it would soon be time to eat. Maria decided to get some fresh air before making her way below. She walked up the stairs expecting an icy blast of air but to her surprise, a warm breeze lifted her senses as she took the final steps up onto the deck. She smiled as it still felt like daytime under a canopy of stars.

The cloudless sky revealed the majestic constellations as a full moon sat just above the horizon. She could still see the lights from Port Mologo in the distance, but her eyes were drawn to the river banks where fireflies danced along the water's edge, pulsing their locations to each other in a celebration of the last warm days of autumn.

It reminded her of the stories her mother had told her when she was a little girl; fairies and magic creatures granting wishes to lost children in the woods. She imagined herself encountering such a creature, and what she would wish for. Immediately she realized she would want to go back in time and change one decision, to remain on her father's cart and reverse all the events that followed. She could still see him on the street trying to stop all the guards as they chased her. An unarmed man standing valiantly against an army to save his daughter.

She felt unworthy of such devotion and sacrifice by both her father and mother who had done everything possible to get her to safety.

«If nothing else I have to honor their wishes.» She thought. «I have to live a life worthy of their love and sacrifice.»

For the first time, it occurred to her that her mother may not be on her way to Neva. «Surely she must have been stung dozens of times while my escape.» Maria thought. «Anyone with that kind of injury would not be able to run or hide for very long.»

Maria began to recall childhood incidents where children had gotten into the beehives and were stung as a result. Her father had always warned her that her friends should not play near the hives but of course, they didn't listen, hoping to steal some honey and get away unstung. Most of the children recovered from their injuries in a few days, but she remembered one of her friends that almost died from a single sting, like a devil was choking him from the inside.

She tried to remember a time when her mother had been stung, and could not recall it. In fact, she remembered that her mother had always avoided going near the hives. «What if mama had such a reaction or knew how dangerous it would be for her to be stung at all?» She wondered.

She felt the back of her neck tingle with the realization that she may be searching for her mother in vain. «Maybe she never left!» Maria thought as her mind raced through all possible scenarios. «What would they do to her, if they caught her?»

At that moment, a warm breeze with the scent of wildflowers and honey blew through her hair. It smelled exactly like the breezes that came across the fields in Rostov. She felt her fears soothe for a moment, but it left her with such a yearning to be reunited with her family. The once simple life in a small farmhouse had become a faraway heaven, fading quickly in the passing wind.

«She has to be alive, I just know she is» Maria asserted as she turned her attention back to the fireflies. As far as she could see along the river ahead, fireflies lit the way as an invitation to continue on the journey. She closed her eyes for a moment and wished to find her mother, just in case the fireflies were listening.

The quartermaster and a few deckhands were moving barrels below. The new cargo was transitioned on various decks unless it would be offloaded soon. It made sense to her as it gave more room on the deck for the men to sleep.

The quartermaster noticed Maria sitting by herself and the sad look on her face. «Is everything alright, Miss?» He said calmly.

«Yes, thank you I am fine.» She said realizing her sadness was no secret.

She stood to go below and get something to eat but had to wait until the men finished with the barrels.

«Why is it necessary that everything goes below?» She asked the quartermaster «Is it to give more room for the men? Maria asked.

«That and to protect it from damage during storms» the quartermaster answered. «If cargo is damaged the captain has to pay for it, so you can understand why we are so careful.» The quartermaster explained as he watched the men working.

«Ah, makes sense,» Maria added.

«That won't fit that way! I told you to turn it around before you go down the stairs!» The quartermaster shouted at the men. «I better get back to work, have a good evening, Miss.»

Maria nodded and returned to her seat, waiting for them to finish. It seemed a very hard life aboard the ship; everyone was on a tight schedule with very little room for rest. She wondered how people could spend years or a lifetime in such a trade.

The men finally finished, and the quartermaster returned. «You can go down now, Miss,» he said kindly.

«Thank you, I was wondering about this trade you have. It seems so difficult, how is it that men can do this for so many years?» She said curiously.

«Ah, well...» the quartermaster replied as he paused, «It's certainly not a job for everyone I'll give you that. But we only work when the river flows. This will be our last run of the year, once the Volga freezes we'll be waiting for the spring thaw.»

«The whole river freezes?» Maria said in surprise.

«Da! Ice as deep as a man is tall and jagged on top like frozen rocks! All ships stay in port until spring, then it's a new river, it changes and flows differently each year.» He said in a kind voice that reminded her of her father.

«It sounds a lot like farming,» Maria said, «Everything is seasonal... So what do you do when the river is frozen?» She asked curiously.

«I spend time with my wife and children in Neva» he replied. «I hardly see them from spring through fall.»

«That's important,» Maria said in a supportive tone.

«Da, we used to live in Yaroslavl but after the Tatars had come it was no longer safe. Neva is outside of their control, but they allow us on the river to keep supply lines moving.»

Maria nodded, understanding all too well the situation he was describing.

«Best you get below Miss, the food will be gone if you wait too long.» He said cheerfully.

Maria smiled and walked toward the stairs turning to wave to the quartermaster, «It was nice talking to you, and have a good night... Oh, and my name is Maria!» She said extending her hand.

«The pleasure was mine, Miss, enjoy your dinner.» He replied.

Maria continued making her way down the stairs, thinking it odd the man had not given her his name, she walked towards the smell and sounds of the kitchen. She could hear the chatter of the ship's crew and merchants all talking on top of each other in the noisy room. There was no place to sit, and everyone pushed and shoved to get closer to the food.

Maria felt intimidated to be surrounded by so many men; it reminded her of the Tatar court in Rostov. The men had the same kinds of looks on their faces as she pushed by them, some annoyed, some curious and many looking at her with hungry eyes. She felt her appetite fade and turned to leave the room.

«Skatina takoe! Let the young lady through, ya bunch of cows!» Barked the captain.

It was the first time she had seen him face to face. He was shorter than she imagined, with wide shoulders and a stocky build. His face was rough and tan from a life on the river, he had deep wrinkles around his eyes and a white beard that needed trimming.

«Forgive us, lass were not accustomed to delicate young ladies on the ship.» Said the captain in a boisterous voice.

«Shto?!» Came a woman's voice from the kitchen. It was clearly Sveta listening in and protesting in her playful manner.

The men burst into laughter and moved aside to let Maria through. She smiled, appreciating the accommodation and moved toward the large bowl of soup Sveta had prepared. She leaned over the bowl, admiring the dark red color of the soup, it was borsch, and it smelled delicious.

Sveta appeared from the kitchen and quickly prepared a small bowl for Maria. «We took on fresh beets in Mologo!» Sveta said excitedly. «This is my mother's recipe, but we've already run out of cream, thanks to all these hungry bastards.» She stated in a voice loud enough for them to hear. The men cheered, and it became evident that everyone got along like one big family with playful insults.

Maria felt more comfortable in the room when Sveta was nearby. She smiled and turned, looking for a place to sit.

The captain turned and swatted a man on the back of his head, «Gennady, make room!» He charred.

A young man stood and made eye contact with Maria. He was clearly the youngest of the entire crew and immediately offered his seat without objection. Maria smiled as she walked towards the seat, noticing the young man continued his gaze on her.

«Thank you,» Maria said sweetly.

Gennady paused for a moment, appearing nervous, «Preyatnoga apetita». He said quickly.

«Gena, where are my cargo records?» The captain said as he cleared his throat.

«Da Captain, right away,» Gennady said as he quickly exited the room.

The captain came and sat next to Maria. «Welcome aboard, Miss. I saw you come on in Yaroslavl, but I had my hands full with these greedy merchants.» He said.

«Thank you, your ship is... very nice!» Maria said nervously, unsure what else to say to him. He appeared as if he wanted something from her but she could not imagine what it would be.

«Ah, she was a fine ship in her day, but each year she's more rotten and gone through with worms than the year before. Held together with pitch and patch.» He said in a regretful voice. «Are you staying with us all the way to Neva?» The captain asked.

«Yes sir, that is my intention.» She replied

«Very good, we'll get you there safe and sound.» He added as he stood to leave the room. «Oh, and be mindful of Svetlana, she's a great cook but full of mischief!» He said jokingly.

«Ya slishu!» Sveta's voice boomed from the kitchen.

The captain chuckled, knowing she could hear him.

Maria suddenly remembered how Sveta described the captain's small penis. Her face turned red as she couldn't help but stare at him, this strong man with such a humbling secret.

«I'll be mindful sir, thank you for your advice,» Maria said charmingly as she held her giggle.

The captain turned without another word and began pushing his way through the crowd. «Make a hole!» He bellowed as he exited the room.

Maria finished her soup and returned the bowl to Sveta.

«Spacibo, it was delicious, reminds me of home,» Maria said.

Sveta smiled in appreciation, «Na zdorovie!» She said.

Maria made her way out of the room, this time, the men instinctively knew to clear the way. She felt recognized and respected by their gesture but kept her eyes down as she felt uncomfortable when she saw how they looked at her.

She returned to her cabin and felt the weight of the day overtake her. She laid on her bed and felt warm and relaxed as the ship rocked its way northward on the Volga. The sound of the oars creaked their familiar rhythm beneath the decks as she began to fall asleep.

The Power of Words

Maria awoke as she heard Sveta entering the cabin. Sveta appeared exhausted, and her clothes were dirty from cooking and cleaning in the kitchen. She seemed to be in a hurry and frustrated by her tasks.

«You've got the right idea,» Sveta said as she noticed Maria waking up. «I wish I could get some sleep.»

«You're not done?» Maria asked.

«No, the captain wants to see me, and I don't think it's about my cooking,» Sveta replied.

Sveta sorted through her few dresses, in an attempt to find something appropriate to wear. She kicked off her shoes and sat on her bed taking a deep breath. She paused, staring at the floor as if her mind was overwhelmed with thoughts.

«Can I help?» said Maria

«What, you want to go visit the captain instead? Be my guest!» Sveta said sarcastically.

Maria laughed slightly and said, «I meant to help you get ready» as she reached for her hairbrush and walked towards Sveta.

«Oh, that's nice,» Sveta said in a relieved voice.

Maria began to comb Sveta's long brown hair, she had to make tiny strokes as the steam in the kitchen had made it brittle and tangled. Sveta turned her back to Maria to make the brushing easier, she was delighted to have such attention.

«You don't have to do this you know?» Sveta said calmly as she reclined and closed her eyes, taking a rest when she could get it.

«I don't mind, besides your hair is very pretty when it's brushed,» Maria replied

«And when it's not...?» Sveta jabbed sarcastically.

«C'mon don't be like that,» Maria said, knowing how women always destroy their compliments.

«Sveta, I'm curious how it works with him.» Maria asked, «Do you just show up and do it, or does he talk to you?»

Sveta felt embarrassed by the honesty of the question but realized there was no intended harm in her words. «Sometimes we talk a lot, others I'm just a servant doing his bidding,» She said regretfully.

«There are times I feel more like a wife, or how I think a wife would feel, taking care of her husband. I listen to his problems, rub his shoulders and say it will be fine, that he is clever, and he calms down.» Sveta continued.

«He seems kind of rough, does he hurt you?» Maria asked.

«I suppose to some he would be rough, but I am used to such men. His hands are hard, but usually, he is kind.» Sveta said as she decided to share more than she intended, «It's not just the sex he wants. Actually, a man with power is very different. He wants your words as much as your body. You can't just lay there and wait for him to finish, that will only make him angry. He needs you to say something to make him feel you... even after you're gone.»

Maria was surprised at what she was learning; she had never heard such an idea. The curiosity in her awoke as a thousand questions filled her mind.

«What do you say!?» She asked in an impatient voice.

Sveta giggled as she knew this question was coming, «I try to think of new things to keep myself from growing bored but in general, they are all the same idea. You see, when a man looks at a woman he feels hunger inside him, a craving that he cannot contain. It's like a fire that grows out of control until he has her... or thinks of her until he finishes with his hand.» She said as she burst out laughing.

The two of them giggled like school girls as Maria finished her hair and reached for a dress Sveta could wear. Sveta pulled her dirty dress over her head and reached for a damp cloth to wipe the sweat and dirt from her body. As she wiped, she continued her explanation.

«So... I have to think like a man and say the words that are like... perfect breasts for his mind. Words he will want to touch and feel, days or months later. In fact, sometimes, I think it makes them finish so much faster when I talk to them like that!» Sveta said as she dried off and pulled the clean dress over her head.

«Like what?!» Maria shouted, feeling frustrated by the delay in the answer.

Sveta laughed, «Oh you mean exact words? Well let's see...» she paused.

Maria's anticipation was overwhelming; she felt she was learning a great secret that would give her a magic power to use on an unknown future love. Her mind became open to learning as if she was being entrusted with a great mysterious secret full of power.

«I'll tell him I want him or need him, that his body is strong, or he is so big or hard, like I've never seen or touched a man before, and if he is close to finishing I'll beg him to come, but only if he is out of me, because I don't want to get pregnant!» Sveta said, as the two of them sat together on the bed.

«I know it seems strange, but I feel proud when they finish, because I know I did that, I took control of them and made their body produce that magic juice!» Sveta said as her eyes sparkled.

Maria's face twinged, «Eww, that's disgusting!» She said in horror.

Sveta laughed, «Oh believe me I used to think the same way, especially at first, but now I crave it! And if I were married I would want it inside me every day, there is just something about it that makes a woman feel better...more... regular, you know?»

«Really?» Maria said in amazement.

Sveta's eyes lit up with excitement, «Really!»

They both stood up smiling and laughing at their conversation. Maria primped and groomed Sveta's hair and adjusted her dress. The look of a servant had faded away, Sveta's hair had a slight curl as it draped down her shoulders. Her dress revealed the fullness of her body, feminine, elegant and beautiful.

«Irresistible,» Maria said with a smile as Sveta changed her shoes.

«Thanks, I don't know what time I'll be back, depends on if he's in a talking mood,» Sveta said as she walked towards the door.

Maria smiled and straightened up the room. «I understand; I hope he is nice tonight.» She said unsure if it was appropriate or not.

Sveta smiled and exited the cabin. There was such energy when the two of them opened up and shared parts of their life. Maria had never experienced such a relationship except with her mother. But this was different, she didn't feel inhibited to ask such questions and since her time in the tavern, her curiosity about sex had preoccupied her mind.

As she heard Sveta's footsteps walking away from the cabin, she imagined what her new friend's evening would be like. A knock on the door, the captain bidding her come in, and then how he would touch her or what she would say to him. She remembered how Sveta looked on the night she brought the man into their cabin. The way she touched him so confidently and took his hardness into her hand, and his juice in her mouth. It was hard to think of this as erotic or desirable, but she valued Sveta's insight.

«Maybe this was something a woman grows to wish for or demand?» She thought.

Maria felt the eagerness to explore her body, she had the cabin to herself and pulled her dress off. Her hands slid across her body, she felt every inch of herself and wondered how she compared to Sveta. She knew her breasts were smaller than Sveta's, but Maria was slimmer with longer hair. She took the hand mirror by Sveta's bed and looked at it, as she held it out and slowly lowered it down

her body. She could see her familiar curves, just as she had admired in Sveta. Her hand lowered and she watched the reflection of her womanhood in the glass.

She felt aroused in her exploration, her hands sliding over her skin as she looked into the mirror as if it were her lover's eyes. She slid her fingers between her legs and felt herself wet with desire. She wanted to visit the pleasure she had discovered while watching the lovers in the dark, the couples in the Tavern and even the hungry looks from the crew.

She eagerly climbed into her bed, blowing out the single candle lighting the room, greeting the cover of darkness like an invitation to go on an erotic journey in her mind. She felt her nipples harden and pinched them noticing how it made her body tingle all the way down to her wetness. She pinched harder and harder to see what would happen until she found the limit where the pain was greater than pleasure.

Her fingers eagerly rushed between her legs. The slippery juices of her body made them glide quickly over her flesh. She spread and pulled her lips wide to expose the firm spot that cried out for attention. Each time she pressed it, she felt shivers of pleasure echoing through her lower body. She stroked it and teased it as it became firmer and aroused. Her other hand slid down and found the opening where she felt such a desire to be taken. Her finger slid inside her warm body, dripping wet and eager to be filled.

She carefully slid her finger inside her inner walls, it was exquisite and filled her with desire. Both her hands worked feverishly, circling and pressing as she ventured deeper inside her wetness. A warm glow began to spread across her body as she felt her breath escaping. It was as if she was flying, higher and higher, faster, stronger with each stroke and everything in her being urged her to keep going and find how this journey ended.

Images of the man she had watched with Sveta raced through her mind, his powerful body, his muscles and large member penetrating her over and over, and then she imagined what it would feel like inside her own body... that throbbing flesh, filling her as her hands squeezed his arms and held on to him until he came inside her.

Suddenly her face felt hot, she was shaking with excitement and hunger for more as she curled her fingers deep inside her wetness, feeling a pleasure so intense she couldn't contain it. Her fingers were soaked in her juice as she made her body into a playground for pleasure. The thought of a man, coming inside her suddenly felt amazing, to have that pleasure of his hard shaft thrusting and bursting like an explosion of power made her quiver and moan.

Then she felt something new, terrifying and wonderful at once, taking over her body as she moaned out loud in ecstasy. There was no turning back, no escape, only complete surrender to the demand she felt as her body tightened around her fingers and squeezed in wave after wave of incredible pleasure. She held her breath and suddenly the world stopped as she felt her soul escape for a moment then slowly transcend back into her body, carefully, lowering her back to the bed in ecstasy.

She raced to catch her breath as if no air was left in the room. She gasped and slowly rested her hands, ceasing all movements as her hips arched and twisted from the echoes of her orgasm. This was heaven, paradise, and she wanted to remain in such a trance of pleasure. She closed her eyes and imagined a man, softly kissing her body now, touching her and whispering things in her ear. How his body would feel next to her and the warmth of his touch. This was more than sexual exploration now, it was a secret way to visit her future lover. And she couldn't image denying him anything he wanted.

Maria's thoughts faded into dreams as she laid in her bed. The ship gently rocked and cradled her into a deep sleep where she drifted in images of a man's bare body and his hands on her. It was the first time she had dreamt of such erotic and powerful sensations. As if a fire had been lit inside her soul that would not easily be controlled or extinguished.

A Storm at Midnight

A rushing sound crashed and knocked at the sides of the ship as Maria awoke in her bed. She felt the room spinning and dropping as she realized something was very wrong. A few seconds later another crash from the opposite side followed by creaking boards and shouting from the deck above.

She quickly got dressed, stumbling about the cabin as she tried to keep her balance. She looked out the small window, but there was no light only the loud crash of waves knocking the ship in all directions. She could hear the oarsman moving things about on the deck below, everyone clamoring and shouting.

The door burst open as Sveta returned. «Good you're up!» She said quickly.

«What has happened, did we crash into something?» Maria asked.

«It's a storm; it came in fast before we could get to the port so we will have to ride it out,» Sveta said as she put on her coat.

«I have to get to the kitchen and secure everything, or it will be a mess in the morning! You can stay here or come with me, but it's dreadful at the front of the ship.» Sveta added as the floor seemed to drop from under them and suddenly boom as it caught the next wave.

«I'll go with you!» Maria replied as she grabbed her shoes.

The two made their way down to the kitchen where pots and pans were rolling in all directions. It was dark and confusing as people shouted at each other to act quickly.

«Can we light a candle?» Maria asked in frustration as she stumbled over the cookware.

«No it's too dangerous, no fires are allowed when there is a storm, it turns the ship into a burning prison if it gets out of control!» Sveta replied as she reached and felt around in the kitchen blindly searching for the nearest object. «I know it seems impossible but grab everything that moves!»

Maria felt a large pan rolling towards her and put her hand out to catch it. Her fingers were greeted by a tumbling iron pot that rolled into her grasp. Piece by piece they held on to the walls for balance grabbing the tumbling cookery until the sea of clanging metal was silenced. They sat on the floor of the galley, listening to the ship creaking against the thud of the river's waves.

Sveta sighed, «I knew I should have locked everything down before I left the kitchen.» She said with a sarcastic laugh. «Thanks for your help, though!»

«You're welcome.» Maria said, «I think the storm is calming!»

«We're lower on the ship, it's not as noticeable down here,» replied Sveta.

The captain shouted orders from above the decks that were repeated by the quartermaster through the hallways down to the oarsman, «Hard port, only port!»

The shuffle of extending and retracting oars drummed through the ships timbers in response to the orders. The crew was in complete unison with every word that came from the captain's lips.

«What are they doing?» asked Maria.

«The storm is pushing us toward shore, so they drop the sail and steer us into the current to keep us straight.» Said Sveta as she motioned for them to sit against the wall.

Their eyes adjusted to the limited visibility in the dark galley. The clouds moved quickly, letting occasional moonlight work its way through the windows and stairwells.

«Are we safe?» Maria asked nervously.

«Sure, it's a lot of spinning about but the captain's good at keeping us away from danger. You realize why he is the captain at times like this.» Sveta said admirably.

Maria listened to her words and began to realize Sveta had feelings for the captain, regardless of her objections to being his servant. She thought to ask about the evening's meeting but decided this was a question that should wait.

Flashes of lightning silently lit the hallways followed moments later by explosive thunder that shook every part of the ship. Maria had seen many thunderstorms during summers on her farm, but she had never heard one so fierce and close. She moved closer to Sveta feeling safer near her friend.

Sveta put her arm around Maria, «Ladno, just another day on the river» She said as she patted her back.

Maria's arms wrapped around Sveta, she couldn't help the fear of such an unknown experience as it shook and terrified her. Sveta realized Maria was still a young girl, tender and easily frightened. Her womanly instincts to nurture took over as she held Maria in the dark.

Lightning flashed again in an almost blinding brightness then absolute silence. Finally, a dark distant roll of thunder echoed across the sky booming and shaking with less intensity. Sveta kissed Maria's head and patted her back, «It's moving away from us, we can go back to the cabin soon,» Sveta said reassuringly.

Maria looked up feeling encouraged and felt calmed by Sveta's words.

«Thanks.» She replied, «I've never experienced such a storm in my life.»

The ship began to slow its hard shifting and soon the sounds of the oarsman returned to their normal pace.

«Those poor men, we probably lost half a day's progress up the river. They will be rowing extra tonight.» Sveta explained.

The ladies soon returned to their cabin, the waves had calmed slightly but continued to batter the ship. Sveta was extremely tired, but Maria wanted to know how it went with the captain.

As Sveta took off her dress, Maria asked, «So, how was it... with him?»

Sveta paused, «I'll tell you in the morning, I'm exhausted.» She replied.

As Sveta's clothes dropped to the floor, she fell to her bed, exhausted. Maria looked at her in the dark, she looked cold and didn't have the strength to pull the blankets beneath her over herself.

Maria went and took the blanket from her own bed and returned to Sveta's bedside. Without a word, she draped the blanket over Sveta's body and lay alongside her.

«Such a paradise,» Sveta whispered as she fell asleep instantly.

Maria felt such an appreciation for all Sveta did for her, and wanted to return her kindness in some way. She curled up behind Sveta and let her arm drape over her. Sveta shifted slightly then took Maria's hand, holding it to her breast.

It was shocking at first, Maria wanted to pull her hand away thinking it was an unconscious mistake. But the sensation of Sveta's breast, so warm and soft in her hand, felt very different from her own. She dared not to move a single finger, feeling the tender impression of Sveta's nipple against her palm.

Maria felt awkward, speechless, uncomfortable but also aroused as she had admired Sveta's breasts since the moment they met.

«Was it wrong?» Maria wondered. «Surely Sveta knew this was not a man beside her.»

Maria searched her mind, trying to find an answer but realized her objection was to the idea of touching a woman, not how it actually felt. In fact, it only felt feminine and natural to touch someone so familiar and kind. Maria let out a deep breath and laid her head on the soft curtain of Sveta's hair as it spilled across the pillow as they both drifted into sleep.

Weft Threads

Things moved slowly the next morning; Maria awoke in Sveta's bed to see she was already up and getting dressed. Sveta seemed late for getting to the galley and said very little before quickly slipping her shoes on and heading for the door.

Maria felt guilty for not having a task to perform, she could hear people all over the ship working, moving things about and shouting for help with this or that. She got dressed and headed for the top deck to see what the ship looked like after the storm.

At first glance, everything seemed normal until she noticed a few barrels were missing from where they had been lashed the day before. Then she turned and saw several members of the crew looking at the sail, it had a large tear at the base where it had been pulled hard against the grommets and was split completely open from the breeze running through it. Her eyes grew big at the idea the wind could be so violent.

«We didn't get it down in time.» The quartermaster said as he saw her looking at the damage. «That storm caught everyone by surprise.» He added as he rubbed his hand over the back of his neck in frustration.

«Can you fix it?» Maria asked.

«In the next port we can, but that's bad news for the oarsmen, they have to push upstream against this current.» He said gritting his teeth in anger.

«Well get it down before it rips sideways as well!» he shouted at the crew.

Maria stood in a trance, as she watched the breeze flickering through the loose threads of the torn sail. She instantly remembered her mother teaching her how to make blankets on a loom. Each winter the snow would cover the doors and windows, burying the family inside for days at a time. They always had a fire, food, and tasks to keep their mind off the harsh cold that imprisoned them.

Maria's mind immersed her in the scene of her mother guiding Maria's hands across the loom, teaching her how to stretch the main threads in the loom before completing the piece with a shuttle and fill thread. The process took days to complete as they wove blankets and sewed quilts from scraps of cloth.

Maria slowly blinked, staring determined at the sail as she walked toward it. «I can fix this!» Maria said excitedly.

The quartermaster looked up from his tools, feeling annoyed by Maria's interjection. He searched for a reason to excuse her from the task. «Oh, I couldn't impose on you miss, you're our passenger, and mending a sail is a very dangerous job, the weight of it alone is...» he continued in a patronizing voice.

Maria could sense she had to prove her abilities and felt the school teacher voice of her mother emerge in complete authority, interrupting the quartermaster before he could finish speaking.

«Look right there! See how the tear is perfectly straight?» She asked insistently.

The quartermaster sighed and nodded, hoping she would stop talking.

«Those are weft threads, they just fill the sail, the stronger ones... the warp threads that go up and down are fine! I can patch on both sides through the warp threads, all I need is a needle, thread and a piece of canvas....do you have that on board?» Maria said looking up from the sail at the stunned quartermaster.

The quartermaster stood speechless as the young lady spoke in a language he had only heard among shipwrights and riggers.

«You have the tools, yes?» Maria said confidently.

The quartermaster turned and shouted at one of the crew, «Fetch me the sail gear in the tackle box and the old sail from down below!»

A member of the crew rushed down the stairs, returning moments later with the items.

The quartermaster placed his hand on Maria's back gently and spoke quietly in her ear, «If it's not done right, the sail will be ruined. You're sure about this?» The quartermaster said as he handed the tackle box to Maria.

Maria nodded confidently and walked toward the sail rigging. She felt she was being taken seriously for the first time, rather than a helpless kitten with no value to those around her. The crew unleashed the base of the sail and lowered it for her. They laid the old sail out on the deck and stood like an audience, watching a performance. Maria immediately went to work measuring the tear and size of the patch she would need to cut from the old sail.

The quartermaster watched from his post with a smile as she had all the deck hands helping her. Each man seemed eager to be her hands and teased each other in the process.

«Those are weft threads there.» said one crewmember to another, as if he knew it already.

Maria giggled and corrected him, «Actually weft threads go up and down, those are the fill threads that go across, they are the weaker of the two.» Maria said as the man nodded in embarrassment.

She walked out the length of patches to be cut and looked around for a knife. The quartermaster stepped down from his post and pulled a blade from his belt, working it along the sail where Maria pointed.

He cut a large set of patches and placed them over and under the main sail to be sewn together. The men held the weight of the sail as Maria set out to stitch the patches in place, ignoring the attention she drew from each man watching her. Her long blonde hair dancing in the breeze as she knelt and turned over and under the sail.

She looked up and saw their blank faces, all looking at her. «Sorry gentleman, I know it's heavy, I'll go as quickly as I can.» She said keeping her eyes on the sail.

«It's not heavy to me!» One man said, «Nor I!» said another, as each of them wanted to boast of their strength in hopes of impressing her.

After two hours, the stitching was complete, and the quartermaster returned. «Well I'll be!» he said as he inspected the work, pulling at the edges to test the strength. «That's excellent work!»

«Thanks, we still need a grommet.» She said still focused on the task.

«Now that I can do!» said the quartermaster as he motioned to one of the men to cut a whole and clamp a ring around it for reinforcement.

Moments later, the sail was lashed to the cross arm and hoisted up as it caught the wind, and the ship made a familiar pull forward. The patch held and took the weight of the breeze as before.

Suddenly the oarsmen, covered in sweat, began to appear on deck, one after another in a long line. It was evident they had been told the news and were all looking at the sail with an inspired smile. Then the quartermaster began to clap as he walked toward Maria acknowledging her with a big smile, the entire deck began to cheer with applause as the men felt relieved to have their sail back.

Maria didn't understand how important her contribution was to the ship, the southern currents of the Volga routinely made hard work for the oarsmen, but without a sail to help propel the ship it would have been almost impossible to travel North. She was their hero.

The captain also joined in and patted Maria on the back,

«U Nas Kupala!» he shouted, «U-ra!»

«U-ra» the crew responded in unison.

Each member of the crew looked Maria in the eye, thanking her and nodding their head in appreciation before returning below.

The captain remained to speak with Maria. «You've done us a great service young lady, and saved me a substantial amount of money in repairs.» He said in a grateful tone.

«Normally we give some money to each of the merchants if we are late getting in but we'll back on schedule now.» Added the quartermaster who listened in as he packed up the repair gear and old sail.

«Ay, and that as well.» The captain continued, «I'm returning your fare for the trip and hope you'll continue with us to Neva, but of course you are free to pick another ship at the next port if you wish.» He said as he handed Maria a small bag with gold coins.

Maria's eyes grew wide with astonishment as she held the coin purse in her hand. «Thank you! I just wanted to help, I didn't expect all this!» She chirped.

The captain nodded and continued on his way, returning to his duties and shouting at the crew, «Back to work! We're underway and making time to Cheropovets!» he said in a boastful voice.

The men scattered like ants devouring a piece of bread, all with a destination of haste and purpose.

«That was really sweet of you,» Maria said to the quartermaster, knowing he had spoken to the captain and brought the men on deck.

«Miss, you never asked what the benefit was to you, and on the river, everyone looks for their reward before the work. The captain and I both appreciate that.» He said as he rolled the remains of the old sail. «Thanks again.» He said as he turned to complete his tasks.

Maria stood on the main deck in astonishment. She felt truly valued and respected from people who had every reason to ignore or dismiss her. There was a lesson in the experience she wanted to hold on to, she had asserted and proven herself when she would have normally backed down. At that moment a small part of the shy farm girl faded away, and the woman inside her began to emerge.

She headed below eager to share the news of her adventure and reward with Sveta. It was as if the entire experience had not happened until she told it in full detail to her new dear friend. She stopped in her room to store her gold, packing it in her sack and storing it under her bed before making her way toward the kitchen.

She could already smell the scent of something sweet in the air, there was no mistaking it, Sveta was making blini, her favorite! She rushed down the stairs and raced into the kitchen before the crowd had formed.

Sveta saw her and immediately waved for her to come inside the cooking area. Maria smiled and came around the other side of the wall separating the crew mess and cook space.

«Blinchiki!» Maria shouted excitedly.

Sveta laughed, «Da, my favorite.» She said as Maria agreed on the same.

The two ladies nibbled at their Russian-style pancakes covered with berries and honey as Maria shared the story of mending the sail and the captain's generosity. Maria detected a hint of jealousy in Sveta's eyes but quickly dismissed it. She knew Sveta had been the only woman on board, and this meant Maria presented a competition even if it was not intentional.

Sveta sounded genuinely happy for Maria, even though her eyes were a bit far away.

Then Sveta surprised Maria in response, «Well that's good news, now you can pick a better ship with your own cabin!» She said half laughing.

Maria's eyes filled with tears, «You want me to go?», She said in horror. «I thought you liked having me there, but yes, of course, I should respect that it's your home, and I'm imposing...» Maria said trying not to be offended even though she was clearly hurt.

Sveta quickly put her plate down and moved next to Maria, wrapping her arms around her. «Ignore me!» She said apologetically, «I'm a stupid jealous woman.» She said as her voice softened, «I don't want you to go!» Sveta said as she squeezed Maria tightly.

It was the first time Maria saw Sveta's softer side, she was not as tough as life on the ship had forced her to be. «I want to stay on board until we reach Neva,» Maria said assuredly.

They wiped each other's tears and quickly finished their meal as the sounds of the men came into the crew mess looking for their meal. Stools slid across the floor as utensils, bowls and plates began their routine distribution among the hungry shipmates. «Davai Blini!» the men shouted in a playful manner. It was wonderful to feel the positive mood of all after a hard night and exhausting recovery from the storm.

The Unexpected Barber

Sveta and Maria were sitting in their cabin, sharing stories from their childhood after the evening meal. Each of them took turns revealing intimate details about their experiences and adventures while growing up.

Sveta talked about the son of the town blacksmith, his strong hands, smile and piercing blue eyes, and how one night while her father was away at sea and her mother fell asleep, she snuck out of the house to see him.

«Of course, I was only 15 at the time, my mom would have killed me... and my father would've killed the boy for sure!» Sveta giggled as she continued the story. «I remember it had rained that day, but it was summer time so there was this misty, light fog in the air. We agreed ahead of time to meet behind the stable where he worked.

So there I go, taking all the back ways so no one can see me because everyone in Neva knew my mother. Finally, I make it to the stable and head to the back where he is supposed to be waiting for me. But it is so foggy I can't tell if he is there or not, so I start walking through the straw, getting closer to the door that leads inside the stable. And he isn't there! Of course, I'm frantic, I've come all this way and nothing!»

«Why didn't he show up?» Maria asked hanging on every word Sveta spoke.

«He did! Just as I was about to go home and never speak to him again, I see a shadow moving in the stable, they always keep a fire going to heat the iron, so it's lit up with this orange glow. But what if it's not him, right? I leaned back against the wall, hiding in the shadows, just in case it's his father or someone else.

«Was it him?» Maria asked as she leaned forward in anticipation.

«Yes! He steps out and whispers my name, and I decide to wait to see what he does because he can't see me yet! Then his head drops and he says, „Bleen!“ Because he thinks, I didn't come!» Sveta expressed in an excited whisper.

«So of course at this point I can't stand it any longer, and I say, «What kind of language is that in front of a lady?» Sveta says as they both burst out laughing.

«So what happened, did you kiss him?» Maria said anticipating more of the story.

«Oh yes, we kissed! I wasn't sure what to do, but I didn't want him to know it was my first time. He walked over to me, looked in my eyes, and without another word he kissed me, just like that.» Sveta said as her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm.

«And you know, I liked it! He wasn't shy or afraid to offend me like most young guys are. He just did what he wanted! I can still remember how his tongue felt in my mouth, it was so erotic!» Sveta said.

«So he kissed you, and that was it?» Maria asked as she imagined every detail.

Sveta paused, «Well...no, there was more» she laughed, embarrassed and covering her face with her hands.

«We must've kissed for an hour or more, and we kept getting closer to one another, I could feel his hands were eager to touch me more but he kept them right at my hips, or he would run them up my back kind of playfully. Then during the kisses, I noticed his fingers would just move a little closer to my breasts or lower down my back right above my bottom. So, of course, I'm pretending not to notice but how can you not, right?» Sveta teased.

Maria's mouth fell open as she knew this story was going to get more interesting by the second.

«I decided to see what he would do if he thought I was in agreement for more, so I hold my breath and just... pushed my tongue deep into his mouth, daring him to be bolder. He starts to moan a little bit, so I know he likes it. And I don't know where the idea came from, but as I pulled away from the kiss I sucked his bottom lip real slow... pulling it between my lips as I slowly let it go.

And that must have done it because he pressed me against the wall and his hands went right over my breasts squeezing me like there is no tomorrow. I could feel his hardness right through my clothes, like a rock down there pushing against me!»

Maria smiled imagining every detail, «Then what?!» she snapped wanting Sveta to continue.

«Then I pushed him away and told him I needed to go. I mean... as much as I liked it, I was young, and it felt a little wrong if you know what I'm saying? It was wonderful and terrifying for a first-time.» Sveta said looking for Maria's agreement.

Maria nodded, disappointed that the story had to end, but she completely understood. She could not bring herself to confess she had hardly experienced such things with a man yet.

«I remember my first kiss.» Maria began, then a knock suddenly came at the door.

They both looked at each other curiously, not expecting anyone.

Sveta went and opened the door, and two of the oarsmen entered the cabin.

«Well... back for more, both of you?» Sveta teased.

«Da.» they both nodded

«And you already washed?» Sveta commanded.

«Da.» They quickly agreed like children agreeing with their mother.

«Alright, which one goes first while the other one watches?» she replied seductively as she walked toward her bed.

Maria was shocked, it seemed so businesslike and crude.

«Two men at the same time!?» she thought as she quickly put her shoes on and said, «I'll go get some fresh air!»

«Don't be silly you can stay and help!» Sveta replied calmly.

Maria looked horrified as she turned to Sveta in shock. Suddenly, Sveta understood what Maria must be thinking.

«Ah! Net dorogaya, it's not that.» Sveta gasped and laughed as the full weight of the scene began to unfold in her mind. «They are here for haircuts.» She added with a riotous laugh as she reached behind her bed and pulled out a small sharp knife.

Maria's sighed in deep relief, «Konechno, haircuts» She said as her face turned red in embarrassment.

«Have you ever cut hair before?» Sveta asked.

«I watched my mom cut my dad's hair a few times,» Maria replied

«Well come on I'll show you,» Sveta said as she placed a small stool in the middle of the room and looked at the men waiting for one of them to sit.

The larger of the two men stepped forward and sat on the stool like an obedient child.

«They like their hair really short because it gets sweltering hot when rowing and with everyone so close together down there, head lice can spread like wildfire,» Sveta said as she ran her fingers through the man's hair pulling it out word for examination. «I leave just a little bit to keep them from getting a sunburn and cut the rest.» She said as she began pulling the knife through the man's hair.

Maria watched as the man offered no objection as Sveta cut his hair vigorously with a knife. She pulled hard, yanking and hacking away at his locks, causing his head to bob from one side or the other while the man looked completely calm.

«Now you try!» Sveta remarked while handing the knife to Maria.

«Oh I'm not sure am ready, I think maybe I will just watch this time.» Maria contested.

«Nonsense, you patched the mainsail today, we learn by doing not by watching, just like sex!» Sveta said as the men laughed.

Maria jabbed her elbow at Sveta for embarrassing her as she stepped behind the man and began to cut his hair.

She ran her fingers through the long last part of his hair and carefully began to cut. Her touch was so gentle the man's eyes lit up, and he smiled. His friend noticed and decided to tease him.

«Vse normalno Victor?» the other man asked.

«Da, ochen horosho» Victor replied.

Sveta could see what was happening, and nagged Maria to work faster and be firmer.

«Right, we're cutting hair tonight, not seducing the crew, get on with it!» Sveta said as she placed her hand over Maria's to guide her to pull harder and finish.

Maria had no idea her touch was so gentle in comparison, but she enjoyed the reaction that she saw.

Victor stood and turned to face both ladies. «Spacibo!» He said as he rubbed his freshly shorn head.

His friend laughed as if he looked ridiculous. «Davai, ti tozhe» Victor snapped as he pushed his friend into the seat.

Sveta looked at Maria and shrugged her shoulders, «Go ahead.» She encouraged.

Maria was determined to cut in the same way Sveta did, this time, she ran her fingers through the man's hair and quickly pulled the knife through making stronger strokes than before. She was so intent on doing it the way she had been shown that she did not see the young man's face wincing in pain by her firmer technique. She was done in seconds and tapped him on the back to stand.

He turned and faced both ladies to thank them, and at that moment Maria could see the tears in his eyes that he tried to conceal by quickly blinking. «Spacibo,» the man said weakly. As he and his friend turned to leave the cabin.

The moment the door closed the two of them burst into laughter, «Did you see his face?!» Sveta said as she covered her mouth in surprise.

«So awful, he must think I'm a butcher!» Maria said regretfully.

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