

Two In the Woods

“Fall back! Fall back!”

Where to, Jim thought as he ran like hell through the woods. He remembered the day just two months before this nightmare of a fire-fight when tanks had rolled from the Russian East then the Allied West rolled theirs. And now he was right in the middle of World War Three without nukes in a cold and wet German forest.

Shots rang out through the trees and he slid down into the undergrowth. He put his back against a tree and checked his ammo clip before putting it back in his rifle. Even as the gunfire sounded like it was moving off, he decided he needed better shelter so he looked around... and found something a little more substantial.

He ran across the forest floor to a huge tree that had fallen down. The base of it looked like it would provide enough shelter to keep the rain from soaking him.

He slid back against the dirt and muck of the fallen tree-base just as a huge crack of thunder rocked the sky, and just as someone else slid into the shelter of the tree close to him.

He raised his rifle just as the other person did the same but neither fired as the

wind blew hard and the rain poured down.

“Let’s back in a little further before we shoot each other.” Jim lowered his rifle then scooted back across the mud.

As the person opposite him lowered their rifle, he saw two things that made him think this might not have been his best decision: a red hammer-and-sickle emblem on their left breast-pocket, and that his companion was a woman with a long-barreled sniper rifle.

“Shit. I’m stuck with a Russian sniper-bitch.”

She raised her rifle right at him. “Watch what you say, American pig.”

“Pig? Is that the best you can do?”

She didn’t lower her rifle and he knew that one round from it would blast his head into a lot of bloody pieces.

“Okay, how about you lower that rifle because if you blow my head off my corpse is going to stink all to hell.”

She lowered her rifle but kept a hold of it even as she sat back a little.

“Thanks.” He said. “What’s your name?”

“Tatiana.”

“That’s a mouthful.”

“Mouth... full?”

He smiled at her struggle with his language. “It’s a lot of syllables. You got a

nickname? Something shorter maybe?"

She was silent for a moment then she said, "My friends call me Tania."

"My friends call me Jim."

"Like Captain Kirk's friends do."

That made him laugh a little in appreciation. "I like that."

"I like Captain Picard much better." She said in that cute Russian accent of hers.

"Yeah, he's good." Jim set his rifle aside and shrugged off his backpack. She tensed up as he began to open his bag.

"It's alright. Just looking for a bite to eat. You got food because if not, I'll share mine with you."

"I'm not hungry."

"Yeah, well I feel like a snack." He dug into his bag to see if he still had any candy or cookies that were edible.

The rain came down hard now and he could feel cold mist from it. Tania sat with her knees up to her chest, holding herself tightly. She looked like she was in her late twenties maybe, with dark hair slipping out in tendrils from under her helmet. She had big brown eyes and a full mouth, and probably was a real beauty

underneath her baggy uniform.

“Here.” He held out a candy bar towards her.

She took it from him. “Thank you.”

“It’s good old American chocolate.”

“I like Belgian chocolate better.”

He laughed at that but not in a way that felt like he was insulting her. “You always have a good comeback for me, don’t you?”

She didn’t say anything to that because she was eating. But she decided to take the time to really look at him.

He was as dirty and muddy as she was yet his eyes were kind, a nice soft brown along with his smile that she was sure had charmed many ladies. He pulled off his helmet and his dark hair was wet and matted with sweat yet it curled gently in an unkempt way that she suddenly found very attractive.

They finished their chocolate in silence as the rain slowly let up. He took her empty wrapper from her and jammed it into his bag. Then he stood up.

“Come on.”

“Where to?” She stood up, too and slung her rifle over her shoulder.

“To find someplace with a better roof. More weather is coming and I don’t feel

like spending a night out in the cold and the wet.”

“But this is all forest?”

He stepped out from the under the fallen tree they’d taken shelter in. “This used to be prime hunting ground according to the intel I got. There’s probably a few old hunting shacks left around here somewhere. We just have to find one.”

“And if not?”

He turned back to face her. “Then the cold and wet it is.”

Tania knew she should try to get back to her unit but she didn’t want to go back to a bunch of foul, smelly men who constantly looked at her in ways that made her always be on her guard. Because even though Jim was supposed to be the enemy, he had treated her so much better than her fellow comrade-soldiers.

But could she trust him? As she followed him into the woods, she felt like she could. She just hoped she wasn’t wrong.

She almost stumbled as Jim dropped to his knees before she saw why. Up ahead about twenty meters away was a little wooden cabin. It looked old but sturdy. Thunder rumbled overhead, and it was getting dark quickly. “Can you look through your scope and see if anyone’s in there? I don’t want to surprise anyone.”

She used the tree stump in front of her to rest her rifle on while she peered

through the scope.

“Can that thing pick up heat signatures?”

“Heat signatures?” She asked.

Damn language barrier- “Body heat from people.”

“No.” She peered through her scope through the two windows that faced where they were. “I don’t see anyone inside.”

“Okay. Follow me and watch my back.”

She kept herself a few paces behind him as he slowly went up to the little cabin. He crouched down and touched the door knob, then slowly turned it. He eased slowly forward as he pushed open the door. Then he stood up and went inside. After about a minute, he called out to her, “Clear.”

She followed him inside and was surprised to find a single open room with a old bed against one wall, a stone fireplace on the other wall, a small kitchen, and a sofa in front of the fireplace with a small table in front of it.

She set her rifle against the side of the sofa along with her pack then she sat down on the sofa. She watched as Jim set his rifle beside the opposite end of the

sofa and his pack down, too.

“You got any food in your pack?”

“Just rations.”

“And by the look on your face you don’t really want them, do you?”

Tania laughed a little at that. “I don’t ask what it’s in them anymore.”

“Well then, how about an American MRE?” And at her puzzled look, “Meals Ready to Eat. I’ve got two packets of spaghetti here that aren’t half-bad.”

She watched as he slid pouches into an envelope-like thing. “What are you doing?”

“Heating them up. It’ll take a few minutes.” He got up from the sofa and started a fire in the fireplace.

The cabin quickly warmed up as rain began to fall outside. She took off her boots as Jim came back and sat down on the other end of the sofa.

“So, what part of Russia are you from?”

“I grew up in Odessa, on the Black Sea. My parents died when I was two and my grandparents raised me. My grandfather was a sniper in the Russian Army but I wanted to be a champion target shooter.”

She looked at the flames softly dancing in the fireplace as she thought back to her first visit to an Army barracks, all the lewd calls and terrible things that were said to her. She brought her knees up to her chest as she suddenly felt cold despite

the warmth in the room now.

“Here.” Jim said as he handed her one of the meal packets. She took it and sampled a bite, then she began to eat like she hadn’t eaten in a week. “I guess you like that.”

She just nodded then they ate their meals in silence. He set their empty packets down on the coffee-table in front of them.

“How long have you been a soldier?”

Jim felt the weight of her question hit him hard as he sat back and put his feet up on the coffee-table. “Too damn long. I joined the Army when I was eighteen and was just about to put in my retirement at twenty years in when this damn war broke out.”

“What would you do if you weren’t a soldier?”

He closed his eyes and rested his head against the back of the sofa. “I’d be sailing somewhere it’s always warm.” He opened his eyes and looked over at her. “I bought a little sailboat a few years ago and it’s docked in Key West. If I could get there from here I’d never come back to fight in this damn war. Do you think I’m a coward for doing that?”

She was silent for a moment and he started to get scared as to what her answer would be. He didn’t know exactly what he wanted from her, but with her he felt a

tiny bit of hope, kindness, and attraction.

“No.” She said softly. “I didn’t hear your men searching for you today.”

“What about you? What would you do if you didn’t have to fight?”

She smiled softly. “I like to sail, too. My grandfather had a boat we used to take out almost every day in the summer.”

“You sound like you’d make a good first mate.”

She laughed a little at that, then her expression changed quickly from soft humor to fear as she looked away from him. “If I go back, they might think I deserted. They would rape me first then shoot me.”

“Then come with me.”

“What?” She asked as she looked back at him with wide eyes.

“I’ve seen and done a lot of shit, a lifetime’s worth of nightmares. But I’ve never harmed a woman or a child. And I would never hurt you. And at any time you decide it’s not working for you, you can leave.”

She felt deep inside that he could be trusted to keep his word. He’d had so much opportunity to hurt her, yet he hadn’t touched her at all, nor spoken harshly or in an ugly way.

“How would we get out of here?” She asked with a faint bit of hope.

“We head south till we’re out of Germany. Then I can make contact with a guy I know who can get us papers then on a freighter across the Atlantic. Once we

reach Key West and get on the boat, we'll be in the wind."

She thought about how good it would feel to be truly free, to feel the sun on her face and the wind in her hair. Most of all, how much she would see Jim smile.

"Alright. I'll go with you."

He got up from the sofa and went over to the sink. "I'll heat up some water so you can clean up. Then you can take the bed."

She got up from the sofa. "I can sleep on the floor."

"No." He used the handpump at the sink to fill a kettle full of water. He took it over to the fireplace and set it in front of the fire. "I'll sleep on the sofa."

After a couple of minutes, he handed her the kettle and she took it into the little lavatory. She stripped off her clothes and washed quickly and put on her spare shirt and pants from her bag. When she came out, she saw him sitting on the sofa.

She wanted to go over to him but-

"Tania, go to bed."

"Jim..."

He stood up and turned to face her. "We don't know each other all that well and we don't need to rush things. Because after we're out of here, you might not want to be with me."

She felt her heart fall hard and painfully. "Or maybe you won't want to be with

me.”

He smiled but it didn't reach his eyes. “And yet you might be the best thing that ever happened to me. But I'm not going to fuck it up by fucking you before we're ready. Or in a place where it's safe.”

His words, though a bit harsh and soft at the same time, touched her deeply because they were the words of a man who didn't believe in himself, but believed in her.

“Alright. We'll see what happens once we're safe.”

Jim sat back down on the sofa as he heard Tania climb into bed. It was going to be a long night but as he closed his eyes, he fell asleep. And dreamed of blue water and Tania by his side.

They woke before the dawn and ate and dressed, not saying much to each other. Then as the sun peeked through the clouds, they left the cabin.

She followed close behind him through the forest with only the sounds of birds in the trees. Yet she had a feeling there had to be soldiers around them. Jim said if they met American soldiers he would have to claim her as his prisoner but that she would be under his protection. She told him they had to avoid Russian soldiers no

matter what.

Then he stopped suddenly and she almost stumbled into his back. He dragged her down behind a fallen tree. She peered over the moss-covered wood and saw them, five Russian soldiers calling out her name. Then as their voices lowered she heard their terrible threats to her if they found her.

“I gather they’re not saying good things in Russian.”

Tania nodded as she checked her rifle to make sure it was ready to use. She used the fallen tree to rest it on as she looked through her scope to the first soldier she could see.

“Tania,”

She looked over at Jim as he moved close to her side and whispered, “You’ll get maybe a couple of shots before we’ll have to run and set up again. Can you move and shoot that fast?”

She slid the bolt of her rifle to put the first bullet in the chamber. “Yes.”

Jim watched as she went completely still, her breathing slowing like he’d seen snipers do before they let off their deadly shots. Her first round cracked out through the woods and the first Russian soldier fell in a bloody heap with half his head blown off. Then she got off a second round and killed another Russian soldier before he grabbed her and found a new position for her to take up.

This time she held her rifle steady and let off two more rounds, each hitting

their targets. She was cold now, and deadly. And he knew this wasn't about being a soldier following orders, but a woman out for revenge. She said they hadn't hurt her but she wasn't going to let them hurt anyone else.

He grabbed her again as the last soldier yelled out her name over and over. She took up a position behind a tree then dropped to her knees. She said something in Russian before she let off her last deadly round.

As the forest grew quiet, she felt heart begin to beat again. She'd felt the sniper's calm as her grandfather had called it like she'd never had before.

She stood up and put another round in her rifle in case other soldiers from her unit came for them.

"Remind me never to piss you off." Jim said as he stood up beside her.

"Piss... off?"

Jim smiled at Tania's puzzled look and word-stumble. "Make you angry."

"Oh. I would never..."

"I know. But you're more than capable of taking care of yourself."

"I couldn't have done it without you beside me."

They looked at each other for a moment, then he held out his hand to her,

“Come on. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

She took his hand, and let him lead her to freedom.