

From My Name Is Slava

Chapter Twenty-Four: Kyiv 1988

A Military Lesson

‘Rrrrrrr–aaa–unai–sssssssss... Smirrrrrrrrr–naaaaaaaaaa!’
Colonel Violin is pacing up and down in front of our line. My chin juts out, my arms stretch down my body and my feet instantly jerk together.

‘Eyes ... left!’

I turn my head left while trying to keep my body straight. I’m flattening my shoulders and drawing my belly in. How ridiculous is this school uniform? The line-up freezes, stretching the entire length of the corridor. The worn floorboards echo to the steps of the colonel judging our posture.

‘If each of you can see the chest of the fourth person to your left, you’ll ensure that your line-up is straight.’

In fact, we’ve been lining up for school ceremonies, marching songs and parades every year and each of us knows this rule by heart, but our military training teacher still thinks he needs to lecture us.

‘Karpova! Where’s your chest?’

The air sizzles, as thirty pairs of lungs exhale the tension, chuckling and giggling. I crane my neck back to see who’s snorting behind me so loudly? A boy is wiping his sleeve across his face and I hear laughter.

‘Phew, Starodub’s all snotty!’

‘Yuck!’

‘Aaaaaatstavit!!!’

The colonel wants us to get back in line, but we are just too amused

to return to position.

‘Show me your chest,’ mimics another boy.

Masha Karpova, who has the biggest breasts in the class, looks at the ground. The colonel frowns; shell-shocked during the Great Patriotic War, he can’t hear very well. He looks like a cartoon character with his bulbous nose, his silently moving lips and his shaggy eyebrows. Above his high, tired forehead a noble wave of silver hair sparkles like the three golden stars on his epaulettes. He is looking through the rank as if searching for meaning, until his faded irises fix on me.

‘*Tovarisch* Klymenko!’

What? Why me?

‘Follow the example of your sister!’

Again, my sister. My eyes drift to the line of portraits hanging on the wall. They look like they are from another era, the excellent graduates: boys with slicked long hair and girls with curls and dreamy eyes. The trophies and silver cups above the portraits are covered with dust. The scratched old wooden shelves where they stand contrast with the fresh blue plaster and shining white of the classroom doors. The glory left by the young builders of communism.

Someone is lifting a slipping strap of my school uniform pinafore and placing it back on my shoulder.

‘Come on.’ One of my best friends, Tanya, pulls me by the arm. ‘Everyone’s heading to the gym.’

‘Flash on the right!’

With giggles, we drop to the wooden floor of the school gym, facing left, and cover our heads with our hands.

‘Flash on the left!’

A few steps and we fall down again, faces turned to the other side.

‘Damn, it’s cold!’ whines Yura Minakov.

‘And hard,’ adds Dima Starodub.

‘What a bullshit exercise.’

‘Who said that?’ Colonel Violin’s eyes find a guy sticking out among the rest of us crouching on the worn floorboards. ‘*Tovarisch* Pokhilko! Don’t fuss. What if a war starts tomorrow?’

‘The war finished forty years ago.’ Seriozha Pokhilko grimaces; every-

one knows that our military teacher is short-sighted.

‘Ehhh.’ The colonel shakes a hooked finger. ‘Don’t be fooled! The enemy’s not sleeping, Pokhilko. You better be vigilant.’

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‘I hope there won’t be another war!’ says Tanya as we are walking to the shooting range. We are always together: Tanya, Olesya, Irka and me.

‘Who with?’ I snort. ‘America’s no longer our enemy.’

‘Maybe I’ll go there next summer,’ Irka says. ‘Honest—’ She responds to our incredulous looks. ‘With an exchange programme!’

‘And I’m going on an exchange programme to the Moon,’ chimes in Tanya and we giggle.

‘Remember how we were scared of an atomic bomb?’ Olesya says.

Irka nods. ‘I had nightmares about the mushroom cloud, all those horrendous photos always on display in our classroom.’

‘I didn’t lock the bathroom door taking a shower.’ I shiver as I remember living in anticipation of a nuclear attack.

‘The locks in your bathroom and toilet have always been broken,’ Irka says. ‘Every time I go pee at yours, your sister tries to break in.’

‘Go pee at home,’ Tanya teases, ‘if you’re so scared of her sister.’

‘I will only get married if my husband knows how to fix a lock,’ I say, ‘and I’m not joking.’

‘Then don’t marry “*intelligentsia*”,’ Irka smirks. ‘A rotten class, my grandpa says.’

‘Your grandpa says you can make jam from shit,’ I retort, recalling a conversation he had with my mum in the village where Irka’s grandparents lived. My parents are *intelligentsia*, all my kin live in the city. To get some village experience, I visited Irka on her annual summer trip to the countryside but I didn’t last long. Foamy milk extorted from the cow’s swollen udder made me nauseous, and a thick melancholy dawned on me in the evenings as the village – lacking a single streetlamp – sank into gloom. I missed the sounds of a noisy city street, as I tossed and turned on a bed decorated with two iron cones. There was so much mud in the yard, we were told to wear galoshes on our bare feet. My soles got itchy, stained purple

from the galoshes' baize lining. I had an urge to wash them all the time, but there was no hot water. We brushed our teeth using an aluminium jar fixed to the well with a chain.

Mum had come to my rescue. She brought jam for Irka's grandparents and the resilient air of confidence swirled around her dynamic figure. Next morning Irka's grandfather took us to the station on his old wooden cart. He asked how Mum made the jam.

'Take a kilogram of sugar per kilo of apples,' Mum started reciting.

Irka's grandfather's wordless roar shook the air.

'With a kilo of sugar you can make jam from shit!'

I was impressed. No one in our family ever used the 'S' word. When we got on the train, Mum said sugar was not as easily available in a village as in the city. A kilo of sugar for Irka's grandpa was a real treat.

'You can get real denim in America,' Olesya says dreamily to Irka. 'I'd sew a denim skirt.'

'My sister took away a *real* American denim skirt she had given me,' I say.

'She said I grew too big but in reality she got pissed at me because I went out with Sasha instead of taking Simon for a walk.'

'You take your nephew for a walk almost daily,' Tanya comments. 'A girl with a pram.'

'You should lose weight,' Irka gives me a look.

'No, she shouldn't,' Tanya objects. 'All the boys fancy her.'

I feel awkward about my bulging breasts. I've never been skinny but since last year I refuse to wear turtlenecks because they make this part of me too obvious.

'Listen,' I shout to make them shut up. 'When I went to Vilnius last summer, Thomas said – Thomas, the boy who kissed me, remember?' I stress when the name doesn't spark much recognition. 'So, Thomas said Lithuania would be an independent state in five years!'

The girls still look impassive.

'I didn't believe him,' I say. 'He was a nice guy, not any kind of a nationalist.' Another attempt to impress them. 'Remember, I had that book about Ukraine I wasn't allowed to mention or my folks would be jailed?'

'Slava, look, there's Oleg over there,' Olesya murmurs.

My heart pounding, I look at a group of the uppers crowding around a volleyball court. I crave a glimpse of my crush but he must not notice that I'm looking.

'Oleg ... Oh, my Oleg ...' Irka's humming. I hit her under the ribs and feel the blood rush to my face. She's unbearable.

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'Girls, lie down. Boys, get ready!'

Girls blush, boys giggle. Four girls are stretching on mats thrown on the concrete floor in front of the underground tunnel openings, gaping holes that breathe an earthy cold.

Irka is fidgeting on the mat trying to get into a comfortable position; the hemline of her dress rolls up revealing the blue veins on her pale skinny thighs.

'Skopko, Skopko, move left!' Dima Starodub urges.

Irka shifts her body, pulling her rifle along and lifting herself on her elbows. Her dress rolls further up. Boys are bursting with laughter.

'She's brave!' says Yura Minakov.

'I still can't see enough!' chimes in another boy.

'Piss off!' Irka snaps and angrily fires her charge. Bullets squeal through the air. Too fast.

'Next quad!' the colonel orders.

My turn. I feel the might of the rifle pressed into my shoulder; the rifle's cool, sleek surface caresses my hot cheek. I aim at the black dot inside the circles running out toward the edges of the target. Shutting my left eye, I peer with my right one through the hole of the sight. My legs press against the floor as I aim at the bullseye at the other end of the dark tunnel.

'Zaryazhaaaaay ...'

I check the charge of my rifle. A draft of air from the twenty-five-metre tunnel passes under my tummy, giving me goose bumps. The rest of the class is breathless behind me.

'Agoooooon!'

Feeling at one with my rifle, I fire. I forget about the boys staring at my arse. At school, we are genderless. In our society, we are 'the class', 'the

people', we are unisex.

Bah!

Bah!

Bah!

Bah!

Bah!

Colonel Violin is back with a stack of pierced pieces of paper, slightly limping. His lips move silently as he shuffles through the targets, consumed by the results. His solemn look prompts my imagination to see him in a war trench, reading a yellow triangle letter informing him of the death of his comrades. Finally, he stumbles: 'Valkovich, forty. Good! Sinko, thirty-three. K-karpova!' He looks up in disbelief. 'Karpova, missed the target altogether! *Ne gadizza!*'

The colonel shakes his head, while Masha Karpova flicks a speck off her dress with her manicured fingers. She's regularly told to wipe off her nail polish and her eyeliner but she never does. I wish I had her attitude. If my results are lower than the very top, Mama becomes all tense and cringes as if from a blow. This keeps me anxious about my marks. I have no right to fail.

'Klymenko ... ! Forty-seven!'

Three points short of a hundred per cent. Colonel Violin looks at me with delight.

'Maladets!' He is beaming.

I've got this reputation: a nice girl and the best student. Teachers are pleased with me, but if I don't know something it's terribly embarrassing. I'm trapped in a cage of their expectations. I must excel in every subject, although I don't get maths. Last year with the start of trigonometry and functions I fell behind. I don't waste my time on homework in maths any longer – I copy both algebra and geometry from Olesya. The teacher helps me out in class. He still believes I know the stuff and gives me top marks. I'm afraid to fail, I feel like I'm a string strained to the limit. If I get one

hundred per cent in all subjects, I'll be given a golden medal and can enter the University with only one exam. I know I should get the medal because Mama wants it. My sister got hers ten years ago. All of this makes me too stressed. The teachers never say a good word and always raise the bar, they are never satisfied with our performance.

I cannot wait to graduate and never go near maths again.