

LA CANCION DEL DESHIELO

NOVELA



The Song of the Thaw

The Song of the Thaw: A Novel

Jorge A. Partidas A.

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Dedication

To all those who dare to challenge the boundaries of their own hearts,
who find strength in vulnerability and seek redemption in the face of
adversity.

May this story resonate with you, as it has with me.

And to the land, the people, and the moments that shaped us,
may we always find the courage to embrace the thaw after the long winter.

With love and gratitude,

Jorge A. Partidas A.

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Preface

La Canción del Deshielo was conceived during a time when I felt the undeniable pull of history's echoes—where the fragile boundary between personal strife and the greater tides of society seemed to dissolve. This novel is a journey through the complexities of human emotion, power, betrayal, and the ongoing struggle for survival. But it is also a story about the eternal conflict between the desires that shape us and the realities that bind us. In a world torn between the old and new, the characters within these pages must navigate through shifting loyalties and the melting ice of old structures—structures that no longer hold the power they once did.

Writing this book was not just an act of creation, but a process of self-exploration. It is a reflection on how history and identity intertwine with personal destiny. I invite you, dear reader, to enter the world of *La Canción del Deshielo* with an open heart and mind. As you journey alongside the characters, I hope you, too, will feel the deep resonance of their struggles, joys, and their search for redemption in a world that, like the ice, is constantly changing.

Acknowledgements

The writing of this novel would not have been possible without the support of many remarkable individuals. To my family, whose unwavering encouragement and belief in me have always been my guiding light, I am eternally grateful. You are the foundation on which this story was built.

I would like to thank my editor, whose keen eye and thoughtful feedback have helped shape *La Canción del Deshielo* into its final form. Your insights were invaluable in refining this manuscript, and I am forever indebted to your patience and expertise.

To the countless readers, writers, and scholars whose words inspired me whether knowingly or unknowingly your contributions have been the silent pillars on which this work stands. I cannot express enough gratitude to those who have shared their stories, their histories, and their visions, which have so profoundly impacted my own creative journey.

Finally, a heartfelt thank you to the people of the lands I've written about their cultures, struggles, and triumphs. It is to them that this story is dedicated.

Prologue

The world was cold, as if the very earth had paused, waiting. The winds howled through the valley, and the trees, stripped of their leaves, stood as silent witnesses to the seasons of history. The village of Yaroshneva, nestled in the shadows of the great mountains, had seen little change over the years. Its people, though resilient, carried the weight of unspoken stories stories of betrayal, survival, and the endless quest for a place to call home.

At the heart of this village, Iván Petronovich stood as a man torn between duty and desire. A man whose influence stretched far beyond the borders of his home, yet whose soul remained locked in a prison of his own making. His heart, burdened with a past he could neither escape nor embrace, beat with a quiet desperation a desperation shared by those around him, even if they could not express it.

The world outside, far removed from the comfort of Yaroshneva, was changing. The cities of Tiflis and Moscow pulsed with the promises of revolution, of new powers rising and old ones crumbling. But within the walls of Iván's home, time seemed to stand still. He was a man caught in the intersection of his own history and the history of his country caught between the ice of tradition and the fire of change.

As the days grew colder and the landscape around them shifted, Iván would find that the only thing more powerful than the forces threatening to tear apart his world was the truth he had buried deep within himself. And in the end, it

would be the thawing of his own heart, the melting of the ice that held him prisoner, that would ultimately decide his fate.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to Iván Petronovich's ritual and character

Iván Petronovich's Wine Tasting Ritual

"Look! Look closely!" warned Iván Petronovich solemnly as he poured the first glass of wine. As he had warned, it was a brilliant, agile, lively yellow. He delighted in showing it against the motionless flames of the stearin candles.

"Yes. Notice that it has the enviable transparency of a child's urine." He then closed his eyes and repeatedly passed the crystal glass beneath his nose, the only one he had. He appeared to be enraptured by its exquisite bouquet. "And it has the aroma of the maiden," he continued with a deep sigh. He slightly opened his eyes in the silence and shadows of the tavern, filled with villagers.

"I will find more," he whispered with his eyes half open. His muted voice could be heard equally in every corner. He raised the glass again, never taking his eyes off it, but he still did not smile. His ritual would not yet allow it. He did it only for himself because he realized the winemaking program in the Batumi valleys entrusted to him had undoubtedly been placed in good hands. He rejoiced because his predictions were being confirmed.

He had been correct when he assured the Central Committee of the Communist Party, just four years earlier, in 1945, that he would produce the best wine in Georgia and that it would be as cheerful and as desired as the break dancers, the radiant dance from Belarus, which not even the curses of

the war that was about to end could overshadow. "And now, let us savor!" he said, opening his eyes wide.

With the same seriousness and ceremony with which he had broken the barrel seal a few minutes ago, to the astonishment and general respect, Iván Petronovich brought the glass to his lips hidden behind his massive mustache. He took a small sip and then closed his already tiny eyes again.

He was pretending to be in a trance. He focused all his senses on his mouth. At that moment, time stopped for everyone except for the contortions of his lips, and for him, Iván Petronovich, the powerful General Secretary of the regional party.

He demonstrated to the village elders how to drink and savor the liquor of the gods. He taught that wine was delicate, like feelings, and should be treated with gentleness, tenderness, and innocence like the maiden that it was. It was nothing like the vulgarity of vodka he explained to the entranced and crowded listeners in the tavern when he broke the barrel seal.

The Performance and Power Play with the Peasants

One should not exhale before drinking wine as you do with vodka, nor should the contents of the glass be hastily drunk with a single elbow nudge, much less with a sharp backward lean of the back as if you had received kicks to the chest from your donkeys. Nor should any burning sensation be mitigated because there is none.

Therefore, you must not nibble on sour cucumbers or black bread after drinking. And so, the improvised arbiter of elegance, the pretended arbiter of good taste and style, swallowed slowly, with the grace he imagined was like

the flight of a swan or the leap of a gazelle. Then, finally, as was customary, he opened his eyes and returned to reality.

"Do you want to know what I discover?" he asked the confused peasants, crowding closer to hear each of his syllables. With his booming voice, he pointed his index finger at an old bearded peasant whose lips had disappeared years ago between his toothless gums, "And you too, my little Irina Georgiyevna," he said then to a chubby peasant woman with her tightly worn babushka, the frayed scarf. They feared some of it might slip away with each exhalation turned into vapor in the cold tavern.

"Well, I will tell you," and then he gazed over the two dozen faces surrounding him. "I find you, esteemed Merab!" he said to one of the peasant women whose head was fully covered, tied around her neck. "And I find you, Pyotr, who is called Befo, and you, Anastas, all my distinguished comrades. I find in our wine, produced in our motherland, with our vines, and by your work, what I find in you."

"I find!" he exclaimed theatrically as if invoking a divinity. "Wisdom, docility, and the almost mystical character that the years give you, and for which I love you so much," and he said no more. He had concluded as it should be. His last words were completed with the pose of aristocratic reminiscence of his late grandfather, Iván Mikhailovich, executed by the revolution for having made a career in the Chornaya Sotnya, the Cossack squadron led by the tsar himself.

Now, with the density and pomposity of the ceremony finished, he could return to naturalness. He could smile. "Do you know what I mean,

Merab?" he asked paternalistically to the toothless old man who looked at him perplexed and silent on the other side of the table, behind the immobile flame of the candle. "Speak! I authorize you. It does not offend me. Do you know what I mean?" he insisted gently.

At that moment, the famished peasant's face burst into an immense nervous smile, pushing the disproportionate ears and folds of his sagging cheeks toward the tight cap he wore to cover the baldness that faded into the depths of his memory.

The smile without lips made his face even thinner and his chin more pronounced, like the deep bow of a ship. But then confusion erased it, as it did for the other peasants. The smile disappeared as quickly as it came.

No, he did not know what the General Secretary was referring to. He did not even understand what he was saying with his thick voice, which he tried to disguise with a whisper. Moreover, he was frightened by the austere gaze he used to reinforce his authority. "I will make you famous, Merab! That's what I mean, you old fool!" he suddenly thundered, impatient, Iván Petronovich.

Iván's Grand Proclamation and the Peasants' Confusion

"Yes, I will make you famous, you and all of you," he said with the strength of his powerful voice, looking at the other peasants one by one. "I will also make your land famous. I will make the graceful Tiflis famous. Can you hear me? I will make you famous. Yes, that's what I will do. Georgia, I will make you famous!" he exclaimed with a triumphant gesture that finally made the flames of the candles dance. "Your name will be in the Soviet News

Agency, in TASS," he declared with a terrifying, almost tragic roar that echoed throughout the three floors of the peculiar izba, the nearly century-old log house, the oldest in the village, which served as a tavern.

But the peasants still did not understand. What did it mean to be famous? More work, more cold, more wheat, more bread? Don't you rejoice? Iván Petronovich thundered in the middle of the uncertainty. Are you so ignorant not to understand that we have triumphed? "Triumphed in what?" the confused and fearful looks of the villagers asked in unison. They had cultivated the vines and were diligent in the harvest, crushed and pressed the grapes, prepared the must, barrelled the juice, and waited.

They had done everything as instructed. Nothing was out of time or offkey, and they were never punished. Was that the reason for rejoicing? It had all been work and waiting, waiting and work, just like hay, potatoes, and beets. Why was there no celebration before, and now there was? "You disgust me!" Iván Petronovich roared. "You can take your borscht and eat your bulky and golubtsy. Eat all you want! Perhaps with your bellies full, your spirits will be lifted."

"Then drink the vodka. Drink nonstop so the devil doesn't find you idle. Who cares!" Iván Petronovich, the feared General Secretary of the party, was disgusted by the thickness of Yaroshneva's borscht, the village closest to Akhaltsikhe than to Batumi, the port on the Black Sea coast. In contrast, nowhere else did they make shchi like in Dimitry Vyacheslav's tavern, and no one like him and his wife, Natalya Ivanova, kept their secrets, their intimate

secrets, the rightful pleasures, as the innkeepers called them, without any transcendence.

Tension Between Iván Petronovich and the Tavern Keepers

"Would your lordship also like some black bread, caviar, bacon, and sour cream?" the innkeeper asked him with feigned humility amid the voices and laughter when the vodka had already freed the peasants' inhibitions and fears in the tavern.

"Why tempt me, Dimitry Vyacheslav?"

"My apologies, master, but you will punish me if I do not offer it to you."

"Nonsense!" Iván Petronovich replied grumpily.

He knew the flattery, which was already customary in dealings with him, but the innkeeper's flattery was as vulgarly fake as clay coins. Moreover, he felt stuffed and suffocated by the wine.

He had downed three mugs in search of the elusive burning sensation accompanying the vodka's pleasant warmth, the usual burn of strong Slavic spirits. "And do you also want your vodka?" Vyacheslav asked him, extending a solid bronze mug overflowing with the liquor. "Enough, you filthy old man!" Iván Petrovich roared again, snatching the mug from him. "I don't want you in my presence!"

Finally, he had in his hands the real mug, and finally, the real drink had arrived. Not that wine that choked him, the one he had been ordered to produce. And with this delivery, everything was settled for the innkeeper Dimitry Vyacheslav and his wife, Natalya Ivanova. That night would be a

happy night for the tavern and the village. More candles would be lit, vodka would be drunk until dawn, and sour cucumbers and cabbage would be eaten until exhaustion.

They would forget the cold and the mud of the road, the vast distances, and the infinite waiting. They would also forget the bland, yellowish wine, like a child's urine, that the Communist Party's Central Committee ordered them to drink in place of vodka. This damned liquor turned republics into drunken countries, as their revered dictator Stalin was.

He also had to pay a high price as a condition. He had no doubts; the needs were much more significant that year. "Why do you condemn me? What injustice have I done to you?" replied Dimitry Vyacheslav, hiding mockery in his feigned humility. "Do not deprive me of that pleasure, your lordship," interjected his wife, Natalya Ivanova, with the same affected attitude. "My husband, Dimitry Vyacheslav, deserves that and all punishments. Just give me the pleasure of being the executioner, but by some rare spell, he speaks the truth this time."

"He has obtained the unique flower for you, which ensures you, I do not know how, because he is as inept as a blind and lame ox. You old fat woman! Who are you trying to fool? You will meet the same fate!" shouted the General Secretary.

With that rude exclamation, everything was clear to the tavern keepers. Ivan Petrovich was caught in their trap, thought Dimitry Vyacheslav and his wife simultaneously. The vodka was causing what the bravado tried to conceal to grow. Curiosity emerged from every pore of his skin.

"Master! Why do you insult me?" said the woman, imprisoning and kissing his hands between hers. "Do you perhaps bear a grudge for something I did against your will?"

"Enough!" shouted Ivan Petronovich again, freeing his hands. "Give me what is mine!" The pleasure of what would be conquest and violation did not abandon him.

"But master," continued the woman in her false pose, "the uselessness of my husband tells you the truth. The flower is yours, but you must pay the price. How dare you talk to me about the price? It is not to my taste, master, but the damn peasants are not like before. They no longer appreciate the gifts of your kindness. They are miserable and ungrateful. If you disagree with the price, you will not have the flower, and I will cry bitterly for your misfortune."

"By the dogs of Jezebel, you have driven me mad! Speak to me of value, once and for all!" Natalya Ivanova shot a sly glance at her husband and then sat closer to the pederast, trying to simulate the cuddling of a Russian blue kitten. Dimitry Vyacheslav, the tavern keeper, also understood that the game with Ivan Petronovich was about to end.

"You will not regret it, I assure you," said the woman almost in a whisper. "But it is not one flower as my impotent husband told you. The surprise and your pleasure will be doubled. It is not one flower. It is two! One, two." The words crossed Ivan Petronovich's mind along with the wine and vodka, tormenting him with a sweet delight.

The curiosity for the flower they offered him was already numbing his reason, promising him the ecstasy that chained him to his disgusting passions.

And the woman recognized the enjoyment of the crime on his face. The victim was drained. He would no longer feel the impulses of reason but the impulses of base desires, and he confirmed this with his own hands that hurt.

She dug her rough woodcutter's nails into his forearm, her curved claws like those of a street cat with bad habits, full of filth, and Ivan Petrovich smiled. Masochism, as a prelude to pederasty, took control of him.

"Master, you are the tsarevitch, the heir to the throne of the tsars. You deserve the best, and we have obtained it for you. Do not deprive yourself of what is yours," continued the woman, with a malicious change in the tone of her voice.

She knew Ivan Petronovich's passion for children well, the overpowering and devilish fury reflected in his piercing eyes, and she knew how to calm him. "Think! Delight in the flower of flowers, that is why I need to ensure that my request will be granted," she finally said in the dim light of the tavern with the whisper that reaches the interior like a scream, the same murmur and peaceful noise with which the devil tempts.

Ivan Petronovich kept the defenseless silent and narrowed his eyes. Dimitry Vyacheslav, the husband, knew that the reaction was like that of a tamed animal. He also knew that the final thrust would soon begin and was prepared. He only needed his wife's approving look.

"I must see, I must see," warned Ivan Petronovich as a final defense.

"And if it is to your liking, will you pay the price?"

"I must see," was the response of the impotent one surrendered to vice.

"Master! Master!" exclaimed the woman with a gesture that surpassed the crude actress. "Why do you make me suffer? I suffer for you, and I suffer for the prize that belongs to you but awaits your decision." Ivan Petronovich recognized her fainting and wanted to react. "Filthy woman. Speak at once!"

"How hard this time has been!" thought Natalya Ivanova, but the exhausting work was yielding its longed-for fruits. The tavern keepers were fishing for the biggest prize. Their price was to enter the service of Ivan Petronovich as head of the servants of his dacha, the country house provided by the State to high-ranking officials as a symbol of hierarchy.

The salary would be good, and they would leave that tavern pigsty complete of rats, fleas, and vermin. Still, above all, they would have the most coveted thing they would have *blat*, the access, the influence that would put them on the path to pleasures, to possess what others did not have, and earn from the favors they would dispense.

Deal and the Hidden Price

"This is the deal, my master. The first flower is the older boy they call Yianni, thirteen years old, son of Gaetano, married to Mariuska Shelest," said the woman solemnly. Ivan Petronovich was surprised. He had heard those names. They were not from the area, which spoke in favor of the tavern keeper's efforts. "Continue."

"The second is the girl, Mariuska, a virgin's name, as she is. That's what she's called. How old is she?" asked Ivan Petronovich, not hiding the pleasure preceding the answer.

"Twelve years old, only twelve years. As you can see, it is not one but two tender flowers, and you will obtain endless fragrances from them. I offer you everything, to you and only to you, as the master that you are. You will have their youth at your will and what you love most. You will have the immaculate candor. You will be the key that opens that untouched treasure. I assure you it has never been touched. I have verified it myself."

"Does she? Really?" asked Ivan Petronovich with a look of delight fixed on his degenerate dreams.

"Why do you doubt if there is no end to our tribute to you? I also offer you art. You will see that they are not vulgar jesters, troubadours, puppeteers, hand players, or circus members. They are not artists. No, they are not artists. They are my master, more, much more. They are virtuosos!" exclaimed the tavern keeper again in her dramatic actress role.

"Does she?" inquired the General Secretary again. The vodka was already driving him to foolish questions. "Get me the saw!" ordered Natalya Ivanova brusquely to her husband, Dimitry Vyacheslav, and it was an order that echoed through the whole tavern. At that moment, she was the first and only actress in that entire scene who quickly silenced the nearby laughter. Her violent change in attitude left no room for doubt or uncertainty in her command.

"I am so convinced of everything I offer you that if you do not like my tribute, I will not accept your rejection as an answer, and you can mutilate me for my clumsiness. Right here, on this table, you may sever my right hand,"

she said, handing Ivan Petronovich the sharp saw used in the kitchen to butcher rams and roughhewn wood.

"Does she?" exclaimed Ivan Petronovich for the fourth time, confused by the deadly tool he was forced to hold. "No, I have no fear of my commitment," continued the woman in a defiant pose before the perplexed or mocking looks of those around her. I can confirm it to you."

"Your voice, the one that roars in the region guiding us and imposing order, would at this moment be powerless to silence all the racket of the two dozen peasants who soil, offend, and crowd here with their stinking presence. You may shout all you want, and you will only get laughs and invitations to drink again."

"Look how your tablemates dare to look at you, smiling and with vulgar ease, despite your majesty and the weapon in your hand. But this is not the case with your flowers. Their art will calm the shameless, dominate the grotesque laughter, and control the veins of the passions that burst out of all these peasants, and they will do it, yes, they will do it without raising their voices, without even speaking, something that you cannot do."

"Do you realize? Not even you!" Your flowers will triumph over the irreverence these rotten children of the earth give you. Your flowers, without speaking, without threatening, without a single gesture, and without even looking, will triumph over the drunkenness and indignity that is upon you, over the vodka, and even over your power."

"Does she?" asked Ivan Petronovich for the fifth time.

Certainly! Here's the continuation of the translation:

He repeated uselessly the same thought, bewildered by the woman's challenge and the saw in his hand. His bald head was already sweating profusely and sweat-soaked his worn-out gray suit.

"Here is the price, master," said the woman then, whispering so that no one else could hear, only him. "Modest for what your flowers will give you, for the pleasure you will receive. You must consent for them to go to the city. You must consent to them being at the music conservatory with all the privileges and for me to be your head of service at your dacha. Despite the woman's whisper and the alcoholic ruckus around her, her muffled words grotesquely resonated in Ivan Petronovich's ears. They mixed with the wild frenzy of the peasants crowding the tavern, which irritated him.

He made immense efforts to reason, and in the end, he grasped the vastness of her request. He evaluated the woman's incredible proposition in its entirety. She had not obtained the flowers for his delight as she said but for her ends, and he began to see her for what she was an awful, despicable witch, fat and contemptible, who frolicked by his side with a brazen irreverence.

He stared at her silently and then squinted, as he always did when concentrating. His anger increased with every blink and with every crude laugh that came from any corner. He would not sever the tavern keeper's hand. That would be an affront to the iron. The dignity of metal was only to be used to split her head in two. Only thus would he wash away the woman's insolence.

The witch was asking for a *blat* in exchange for nothing. She was asking for privileges that only the Upravleniye Delani, the Department of

Internal Affairs of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, reserved for martyrs and those favored by the State. To make matters worse, she had dared to ask for not one but two privileges, two admissions to the conservatory. It was the unspeakable, filthy price in the mouth of a vulgar woman for a momentary, inconsequential sensuality, something that, as usual, everyone would forget with the first crow of the rooster.

But above the offense, there was the audacity. She had dared to ask. Only superiors could ask, and they were all in Moscow. That, Ivan Petronovich thought, was the greatest sin, the sin that could only be washed with blood, though putrid, that irrigated the woman's disgusting entrails.

He decided to raise the iron and split those eyes that dared challenge him, to silence Eve's mouth that tempted him to give in and mutilate that chubby woman's insolence forever. Sweat continued to pour down his forehead and temples. It fell in streams over his swollen belly, grown over more than half a century of existence based on fats and alcohol.

The more he saw the woman's black eyes hidden behind her thick and disordered eyebrows, the more Ivan Petronovich regained his composure and control. He became more convinced he had to end that devilish gaze and her magpie tongue. He was too close not to land a masterful blow, a clean, instant strike.

He would wield the tool with precise expertise, just as he had wielded the scythe and sickle in his distant youth, the instruments to reap, the ones he had been forced to replace with the violin, the true passion of his early years. His face no longer hid his intentions, and the woman sensed it. She was about

to lower her arrogance and beg for mercy when she heard what she needed to hear, the only thing that would calm the riled-up peasants, the only thing that would silence the pandemonium that had turned the tavern into a frenzy, and the only thing that would save her and justify the price she was asking.

Her husband had also read Ivan Petronovich's intentions in his face and the horror and desperation in his wife's face. Without waiting for her instructions, he gave the order. Her husband saved her life and freed him from the Siberian grave. Dimitry Vyacheslav's marvelous intuition brought them to the summit.

At that precise moment, Ivan Petronovich decided to raise his arm to split the woman's face. He clenched his teeth and prepared to strike the decisive blow, but the magical notes emanating from a violin stopped him. At first, it was a prolonged note he knew well, one that his clumsy fingers had never been able to reproduce.

As he understood it, it was the beginning of that melody, the entrance to Eden, the Eden he imagined would be his, like many Edens of the earth. Then, I followed the notes that were meant to follow. And those magical initial notes burst into the ears of the raving peasants, making them look everywhere and nowhere. What sweet angel dared tame them with its language, indulgent melody, and exquisite art?

The voices, the laughter, and the shouts ceased because the mouths closed, and the noise stopped because the bodies became still, as if a narcotic breath had fallen upon them. Only the meekness that flowed from the violin remained, and a melody that constricted and weakened the expansive effect of

the vodka. The swollen veins relaxed. The dance of the candle flames also felt the constricting effect of the music. The immobile bodies did not stir the air molecules.

Ivan Petronovich could not fathom the magic that floated in the air, and that simplicity led him to confirm Natalya Ivanova's predictions. Those notes were the only sorcerer that would have the power to calm the horde of soulless peasants in the tavern. That same balm made him lower the saw little by little, relax his mouth muscles, and extinguish the anger and fire reflected in his pupils.

It was that same comfort that closed as if by magic, the pores and the sweat despite the stifling air of the tavern, which had created a nauseating smoke. He let himself be carried away by the magical notes and felt that his solitude was suddenly populated. Music was his only sensual pleasure that was not a vice. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It was the authentic naturalness he sought when tasting the wine that looked like a child's urine. His face was serene, surrendered, grateful. Perhaps even beautiful.

Natalya Ivanova took advantage of the moment. She sensed that something worse might happen because Ivan Petronovich was reviving the secret he had tried to hide for years in his permanent internal storm: where there was music, there could be no evil, and he was evil. The woman quickly took the axe from his defenseless hand, handed it to Dimitry Vyacheslav, her husband, and then, just as before, she approached him like a cat in heat and whispered in his ear.

"Now open your eyes, my master. Open them wide. Look at the proof of my tribute. Appreciate your treasure. There is your prince, your first flower, and I assure you it is only yours. Then you will see the princess. Look. See for yourself that I have not deceived you. There are your flowers!"

In exchange, I ask for only misery and privileges not for me but for you, and they are easily within your reach. I only want the honor of serving you at your dacha."

And everything turned out finely woven together. There were no coincidences or improvisations. Yianni, the prince the tavernkeepers had designated for Ivan Petronovich, had begun performing a complete violin adaptation of the andante quasi allegretto "The Young Prince and the Young Princess" from the symphonic suite *Scheherazade* by Nikolai Andreievich Rimsky-Korsakov, who, along with Borodin, Cui, and Mussorgsky, was one of Ivan Petronovich's favorite composers. He knew all of Rimsky's works and even the dates of their compositions. He knew by heart the lyrics of *Pekovitianka*, his first opera composed in 1873, and all his other operas. In his distant youth, he prided himself on being a direct product of the great master's influence until some hollow minds from the 1917 revolution frightened him by erasing the exquisite composer from Russia's cultural heritage. They considered him the very representation of the fallen Tsarist thought.

And that accusation against Rimsky was his only and permanent incrimination against the revolution, to which he had given himself unconditionally at Lenin's side when he was just twenty years old. Only

because of his insistence had the party rectified, and justice was done to the composer, the genius Ivan Petronovich called the creator of creators.

Performance of Yianni and Mariuska

Yianni's performance was impeccable and heartfelt. For ten minutes and ten seconds, the angel conversed in crystal clear and harmonious language with the still bodies that listened, suspended in divine ecstasy. It was like the imperishable voice of Orpheus joined to the lyre, enchanting men and gods and moving all of nature with its chords.

The tavern's surrender to Yianni's celestial music seemed like the same surrender of bears and lions who came to lick Orpheus's feet, the other wild animals that gathered around him to listen, rivers that retreated to their source to hear, or rocks and trees that became animated and ran docilely to meet him.

It was that language that brought Ivan Petronovich to tears because, above the revolution, there was the music that dominated him with such a strong feeling that it could lead him even to repentance. He felt it as sublime as he imagined the expression of a religious joy he ruthlessly pursued and punished.

When Yianni finished, no one knew what to do, not even the tavern keeper or his wife. It was too beautiful to return to reality, too beautiful to think that a superhuman dream could end. Only when Ivan Petronovich opened his eyes did the tavern slowly begin to regain strength, and the candle flames started to stir again. It was only then that he reacted to the woman's words.

You will have your privilege.

It's not one, master. It's two. Natalya Ivanova quickly replied and gave the order to Dimitry Vyacheslav. Again, the violin was heard, but this time it was not Rimsky but one of Dvorak's lively Slavonic dances, and it was not only Yianni but also little Mariuska, the sister, dressed in a beautiful ballet skirt over her rough peasant trousers. She began alongside Yianni, performing the allongé and chassés applied to the Slavonic dance, dancing in slippers made of goat skin cured with birch oil, salt, and blows. The tavern reacted in a very different way. The music of Dvorak inspired an emotional force that translated into a graceful movement that the girl executed with such naturalness and mastery.

Her rhythmic cadence was almost mirrored by the flames of the candles, which moved with the same grace and stealth. That chorus of gentle and exquisite movements was hypnotic, keeping the incredulous spectators immobile. Yianni's nimble fingers controlled a universe of emotions, executing Dvorak's music with vigor, just as Mariuska's graceful restlessness and agility dominated the scene.

Dochushka! Little daughter the peasants repeated to Mariuska with every cabriole. *Blagodaryu tibiá! Blagodaryu tibiá!* Thank you! Thank you!

And that angelic dialogue between Yianni's music and Mariuska's grace also came to an end, rewarded with loud ovations followed by Young Pioneers and other heroic songs of liberty, archived for many years in the memories of the beautiful peasants, who now sang them fearlessly, their voices resonating in their throats. The emotion was uncontrollable. Tears were not hidden. They sprang forth and ran like springs in springtime. Nor were the

hidden blessings that fell upon the children, which Ivan Petronovich ignored as he dodged the challenges to freedom the peasants threw at him with their choruses and songs.

For them, it was that one moment, but for him, there would be many in which he would not only enjoy the auditory sensuality with the children. The reasons for his joy well outweighed the momentary irreverence of the peasants and the woman's requests.

You will have your two privileges. And what about the dacha? What do you say about the dacha?

It's yours, he said ecstatically, without a trace of doubt, but now give me what belongs to me. The demand left her bewildered. To give, she first had to receive.

Master, what can I give in return? Asked Natalya Ivanova with barely concealed anxiety.

I have already told you he answered, almost irritated. The privileges are yours, and the dacha too. Give me what belongs to me.

Master, I have always been loyal to you said the shameless woman with her feigned humility. You never doubted my loyalty. You have consistently recognized it. Would you think the same if you knew I was disloyal, even for your benefit? You would condemn me; yes, you would condemn me. You know well that you would condemn me.

You would condemn me if I am not loyal to the agreement with the peasant. The reward will be given to you but at your dacha.

Ivan Petronovich did not react. The angelic language still influenced him; the one Yianni had brought with his music.

But I think I can please you in one thing, Natalya Ivanova continued. If you procure the privileges, the passports, and the residence permits, I assure you that you will be able to celebrate your first night with your flowers as you always do in the safety of our tavern and the main bedroom. No one will ever know anything, just as they didn't know in the past. Then we will send them to Tiflis, and you will have them at your will, but I assure you that you will not have to wait beyond the papers and permits. I will negotiate with the detestable peasant, and he will accept.

The first night will be here. That is my commitment. That is my tribute to you she concluded quickly to prevent Ivan Petronovich from offering a considered response.

Does it? Asked the pederast, with the gleam in his eyes reflecting his vile thoughts.

It affirms Vyacheslav's wife without hesitation, but remember, I need the privileges.

It was the third Sunday of September. The rains had stopped, and the summer light was shortening rapidly. Three weeks later, the tavern keeper arrived at Gaetano's home in the Kolkhoz.

Here I bring you the good news. Here are your privileges. Now I must take the children, but hurry. I must return immediately. It will get dark, and they are waiting for me.

Vyacheslav's unexpected visit and request surprised the parents, Gaetano and Mariuska Naslishvili. Their reaction was a potent bittersweet mix that prevented them from thinking coherently or acting calmly despite the long-awaited official concessions being placed in their hands.

On the one hand, they enjoyed the coveted privilege of leading their children toward their dream goal: to go to the world of music in Tiflis, the capital. They were also happy for the income it would mean to live comfortably in the city dedicated to their children.

They received definitive passports to travel within the republics and residence permits in the city, freeing them from hated servitude and the forced connection to the land. But the price they had to pay was too high, the parents thought. The understanding was that they would take them to Tiflis. It had never been discussed that they would be taken like this and even less to be taken first to the village.

The parents asked, "Why Yaroshneva? " in unison. We agreed that we would take them to Tiflis, which is why you brought us the passports and permits. Why all these doubts?

I'm only doing what I'm told, protested Dimitry Vyacheslav, the tavern keeper. "I have no answer."

Gaetano and Mariuska sensed the grave danger. Instinctively, they recalled the warnings about Ivan Petronovich, but there was an additional threat. Outside their watch, they would have no security regarding the fate or whereabouts of their children. They would be taken from them, never seen again, and perhaps never heard of again.

There were many stories about disappearances, and many were endless, fruitless searches that always led to tears and permanent despair. Gaetano's strength faltered in the face of the risk of being, for the second time in his life, separated from his family, left defenseless and impotent. He felt that the wicked and inhuman dagger of the evil God was attacking him again.

With all his strength, he invoked the good God, the God the revolution forbade him, but whom he still, believing it a fable, placed beside Zeus in Olympus. With that invocation, he only regained his strength and longed for inspiration.

I will ease your worries. I will go with you, said Gaetano, the father. That way, you won't have to return them. Now, the tavern keeper was confused. He didn't know what to do.

Does it? He replied.

You are an idiot! Natalya Ivanova harshly scolded her husband that night when she learned the father had accompanied the children. Your mother gave birth to an idiot! she finished.

Dimitry Vyacheslav didn't understand his wife's anger, especially when she reacted to the father's reasons for accompanying them.

Is it possible that you are this much of an idiot? She angrily reprimanded him when she realized the peasant had outmaneuvered her. But there was no time to continue arguing. Ivan Petronovich was waiting impatiently.

You must stay here until I tell you! she instructed Gaetano harshly in the tavern's pantry, next to the chicken coop. The woman's gaze also didn't hide her deep anger.

I don't understand you, madam protested the father. I could stay again behind the kitchen door. I assure you I won't be a bother.

Gaetano remembered the first and only time when he and Mariuska, his wife, had waited in a secluded corner of the tavern. There, almost hidden, they had seen how their children's exquisite art managed to calm the tavern full of peasants who breathed vodka and wine through their insides.

Out of everyone's sight, they had also seen Ivan Petronovich's transformed face when he first listened, hypnotized, to Yianni's music and appreciated the daughter's dance.

Iop train match! By your mother's guts, you are driving me to impatience! The woman exploded.

If I tell you to stay here, it is for reasoned causes. Do you not agree with everything I've accomplished for you?

Those instructions were what Gaetano feared so much. His fears were confirmed, and they had little time to prepare their children.

I apologize, little mother said humbly to Gaetano. I will do as you say. My impatience to see my children's progress disturbs you. I will follow your instructions. I will prepare them for the moment you indicate.

Fifteen minutes later, Dimitry Vyacheslav returned in search of the children. Gaetano had prepared them. The main room on the top floor of the tavern was something Yianni and Mariuska were not used to. It was immense,

with one giant bed, contrasting with the two smaller beds in their own home, one for their parents and the other beside it where Yianni and Mariuska slept together.

They were also amazed by the bed's headboard. It was made of bright metal, like gold or bronze, which the children didn't recognize.

Come in, my little ones! said Ivan Petronovich, reclining in an old armchair when the siblings crossed the door's threshold. He was smiling, sitting next to a table beside the bed. Come in! Beautiful surprises await us. Look at what I have for you, just for you.

Mariuska couldn't take her eyes off the table and the huge basket of fruits from the region in its center. She had tasted apples, pears, grapes, and peaches, but never with such radiant colors and a firm texture. On the contrary, they always came to her when the fruit had lost its shine and showed signs of decay or decomposition.

Look. I also have these delicacies prepared with puff pastry, almonds, and honey from the Rion Valley. It's all yours! Yes, all yours. Come closer! said Ivan Petronovich, showing a tray full of pastries and powdery sweets and a broad smile that didn't hide his teeth, which were marked by gaps and golden ones.

But the children were terrified. They feared the humble luxury of the place, the immensity of the room, the mysterious presence of Ivan Petronovich, the *kreпки khozyain*, the undisputed master, the inaccessible, omnipotent ethereal being, just like Stalin, Malenkov, Bulganin, or Kaganovich. They also feared the absence of their parents and the wasteful

lighting of candles and oil lamps. They even feared the very treats that they had always thought were forbidden to them due to their condition as serfs, treats that would never be for them.

Why are you so fearful? Asked Ivan Petronovich without losing his smile. Everything is yours and only yours. Come, my little one he said to Mariuska, extending his arm from the armchair. Let's see. Do you fancy the peach?

But Mariuska didn't know what to answer. Her father had warned them about many things, including that they should never accept gifts or flattery from strangers.

Come on, come on, my little one! Insisted Ivan Petronovich, offering her a bright yellow and red peach, the hypnotizing mix of colors Mariuska had only seen in autumn skies at sunset. I bought it just for you.

Ivan Petronovich's immense smile beneath his thick mustache and paternal tone wanted to convey that there was nothing wrong with accepting the gift he generously offered. And Mariuska came to the same conclusion within herself, dressed in her ballerina skirt over her coarse woolen trousers. Why, then, did her father oppose it?

She imagined how wonderful it would feel to hold the softness of the fruit in her hands and sink her teeth into that world that made her mouth water and confused her mind. What could be wrong with the gift she saw in abundance on the table, generously offered?

Mariuska hesitated and found no answer in Yianni. Her brother kept his eyes on the floor and nervously played with the bow, violin, and cap he held against his chest.

And you, my little one, aren't you brave? Ivan Petronovich now addressed Yianni, his genuine interest.

But the boy didn't respond. He kept his eyes on the floor.

I asked you a question, insisted Ivan Petronovich, slightly strengthening his tone of voice. Haven't they taught you to answer when adults speak to you?

They were educated to respond when adults spoke, but Ivan Petronovich differed. He was also the symbol of power, the image and strength that the Russians had intuitively accepted for generations, with almost always irrational devotion and limitless fear.

There, suddenly, in front of them, was that image, the power of flesh and blood, offering them generously fruits and delicacies. But he was a kind master, smiling. He was not the holy master or the one from the macabre tales and the shadows they so feared, but the one who demanded an answer. But her father had told her minutes earlier that Ivan Petronovich was not good. He explained it to her briefly in the first man-to-man conversation they had urgently had in the tavern's pantry.

You must believe in me, but not as you always have. Her father warned her in the final seconds. Now it's different. Now you must consider with much more strength than ever, he repeated. The warning made Gaetano look at her without hesitation, and Yianni wanted him by his side. He wanted

him to tell him what to do, what to answer. He wanted him to explain again why they were in an unfamiliar room with the lord of lords and why everything had been done so secretly.

Why should no one in the village know they were there? They had all been their friends on the tavern night and had offered themselves as their protectors. They had shown it to them days before when Yianni played the violin for the first time. Now, they were being hidden. Why? He wondered over and over again. But in response, he only had what his father had forced him to repeat just before saying goodbye. He must not be rude, but he must not accept any gifts or kindnesses from Ivan Petronovich, either with him or his sister.

Surely, you will find yourselves in the moment when you will be overwhelmed to accept threats and familiarity, her father had warned. In that case, listen carefully, listen very carefully. Always play your music, the happiest. Mazurkas and tarantellas. Make my little one dance. Never stop acting. Then, ask Master Ivan Petronovich to show you how the men from the Caucasus drink vodka. Ask him to show you, but never, do you hear me? Never taste a single sip, not even a drop.

Just make him drink quickly and excessively. Constantly praise his manhood in the art of drinking. Ask him to drink from the large jug, not the small one. If necessary, ask for more vodka. Do not hold back. Go down to the tavern. You will be given everything you ask for, but do it joyfully; you must pretend you are happy. There will be no limits.

Just do as I say. Make Ivan Petronovich drink until his senses fade, until his pores only exude the liquor. When you feel that he has fallen unconscious, you will come to me without making any noise, just the sound of your blinking. No one must know that you left him alone. Do you understand me clearly?

And with Gaetano's words still fresh in his mind, Yianni answered Ivan Petronovich. *My father instructed me that before accepting your generosity, I must lift your spirits with a mazurka, and in the meantime, you should drink to your heart's content so you can teach me how to drink.*

Ivan Petronovich laughed maliciously. Yianni's words were unexpected, a pleasant surprise, an unforeseen sting to his senses. He interpreted that the boy was acting with the manners of one who had received rich instruction in the arts and with orders to delight him not only with his music.

Your father is wise, said Ivan Petronovich. *You should not live by music alone. The spirit must also be comforted with vodka and the pleasures of the mouth. It is time for you to be initiated into drinking and other things of men. My father says you can be my best teacher.*

Ivan Petronovich was stung by Yianni's statement, and his senses flared up. Not only was his masculinity flattered, but his faculties were awakened. He sensed this would be a special night, unlike the many others where he had enjoyed the candor of other naive children who pretended to be coy. The tavern keepers had not been wrong, he thought. He confirmed that

the price they were charging him had been very low, one more reason for satisfaction.

You must be initiated, my beloved son, said Ivan Petronovich, raising the vodka glass with the same solemnity he had when he presented the peasants with the wine from the first barrel. *With a glass, have the assurance of a sharp archer so the vodka goes straight to your heart. Only then will all inspiration awaken. Come closer, let me show you. Drink with me,* he concluded with a new smile.

Master Yianni interrupted, saying we already knew how to drink from the glass.

Does it? Ivan Petronovich asked, surprised.

Yes, my lord, replied Yianni with confidence. *Now, we want to know how to comfort the spirit with shots straight from the jug.*

The looks of Ivan Petronovich and Mariuska met on Yianni. Both were equally surprised.

From the jug? Asked Ivan Petronovich.

From the large jug, Yianni clarified. *Isn't that how hard and fierce men, real Tartars, should do?*

And with that challenge, Ivan Petronovich laughed openly. Then, he stared at Yianni for a long time, stood up, and walked to his side. The comparison of the humanities was grotesque. Yianni was as thin as the breath of wind through the eye of a needle, while Ivan Petronovich was grossly bloated and immense.

Bravo! I will teach you, said Ivan Petronovich, placing his left hand on the boy's shoulder and pressing it against his prominent belly. *Can men like you drink two or three large jugs of vodka in one go?* Yianni retook the initiative and asked.

Ivan Petronovich found the question bewildering. He didn't know anyone could drink two or three large jugs of vodka without taking a break.

Is that true? Insisted Yianni, with a feigned admiration on his face.

Yes, of course, answered Ivan Petronovich thoughtlessly. *But only the very strong. Like you?* Asked Mariuska with her sincere childhood innocence.

In addition to the other reasons that adorned the name of Ivan Petronovich as a reason for respect, Mariska now had to add his ability to drink two or three jugs of vodka in one go.

That's right, my little one, replied Ivan Petronovich as he raised the vodka jug. *I drink to your health and your father's, the wise one.* Then he took it to his mouth and began to drink, almost without breathing. The end seemed never to arrive, and he felt the burning in his throat start spreading.

Bravo! said Yianni as Ivan Petronovich set the empty jug on the table. *You are indeed a Tartar! I owe you the mazurka, master, while my sister brings you two more jugs.*

Two more? Ivan Petronovich could barely catch his breath.

Natalya Ivanova instructed Mariuska to remind her brother to play softly when she handed her the two jugs, which the girl could hardly carry in her weak hands. No one must know Ivan Petronovich's secret and understand that Gaetano and his children were visiting them that night.

Now, my lord, said Yianni when Mariuska returned with the vodka, I will play a tarantella that I hope will be to your liking. It is very short and lively, and my father says the perfect length of time is needed to finish one jug of vodka.

Your father? Ivan Petronovich asked again, surprised.

Yes, in the kolkhoz, they drink to the tarantella rhythm. Are you capable of trying it? Yianni challenged him. *You will see my sister's most beautiful steps, the likes of which you have never imagined.*

By the end of the short tarantella, Ivan Petronovich had barely finished the second jug. He immediately started to feel that the burning from the vodka was no longer in his throat but in his entire trachea, in the pit of his stomach, and around the edges of his eyes.

Now, can you teach me your style with the glass?

But Ivan Petronovich felt a sharp discomfort creeping into his mind, making him lose his balance.

He said, lying back on the bed with the brass headboard. He closed his eyes and gestured for Yianni to come closer, but they were incomprehensible gestures until, finally, his hand fell heavily over his chest. Ivan Petronovich had lost consciousness.

Stay here and make no noise. Please wait for my return. It will be brief: Gaetano told his children when they returned to inform him that Ivan Petronovich was deeply asleep. They assured him that no one had discovered or heard them. The pantry and the chicken coop were beside the kitchen, where Gaetano checked that the tavern keeper was asleep and his wife, drunk

as the Bacchante she was, snored with her head between her arms on the kitchen counter.

He searched among the utensils for the saw that Natalya Ivanova had put into Ivan Petronovich's hands days earlier, which Gaetano had confirmed in the kitchen to be as sharp as a razor. As soon as he took it, he stumbled over a pot, making it crash noisily to the floor.

Damned rats! Dimitry Vyacheslav muttered, almost without lifting his head, and fell into deep sleep. On the other side of the kitchen was the staircase leading to the second floor, where hay was stored, and finally to the third floor, where the tavern keepers' rooms were and where Ivan Petronovich lay unconscious.

The door to the room was slightly open, letting the light from the lamps and candles spill into the hallway. Gaetano checked his children's assessment. Ivan Petronovich was sprawled on the bed, emitting resounding, labored snores. His unconsciousness allowed Gaetano to proceed with comfort. Everything would be easier. He closed the door behind him, defined his plan, and decided to act immediately.

The first thing was to immobilize the defenseless drunk. He tightly tied Ivan Petronovich's right hand to the metal post of the headboard using the strap that held up the pants around his massive belly. With his belt, he proceeded to tie the feet to the foot of the bed so tightly that it seemed to cause pain, almost waking him. Then, using the tablecloth, he tied the left hand to the headboard. He double-checked that it was secure and placed a

pillow beside his face. At that moment, he felt he had tamed the beast and was serenely prepared to begin his path to freedom.

He climbed onto the bed from the left side and saw that the pederast's belly was as pronounced as a barrel of sour pickles. Next to the disgusting Ivan Petronovich, unconscious from his passions, Gaetano had no doubts. That repulsive being had to be the living image of what a demon was. It was the devil himself by his side, the one the revolution claimed didn't exist, the ultimate triumph of Satan in planting that belief in the world.

But there it was. The skin of Ivan Petronovich, so close to him, felt as filthy as the pigsty where he was, like the den where he ruminated his vices and degenerations. If the devil didn't exist, as the revolution taught, then with Ivan Petronovich, man had created him, and that confirmed his reasoning. As a member of the human race, the race that had made that monster in its image and likeness, it continued to deny the existence of the devil.

Gaetano felt called to be, at that moment, the purifier of the race, to cast the horrendous stains that men made upon themselves with beings like Ivan Petronovich into the very hells. The one who delighted in destroying the innocence of children, the creator of the scandal who deserved, as a benevolent punishment, a millstone tied to his neck to be cast into the depths of the sea.

And so, he took the pillow and gently placed it over the pederast's face. Then, with the coldbloodedness of a butcher, he uncovered the left wrist of the master of debauchery and deceit. The candles illuminated the swollen veins from the pressure of the liquor. He had no doubts that this was the

devil's skin, the one he had to destroy, just as all the wicked creations of man, or the devil, on earth had to be destroyed.

He took a deep breath. He felt confident. No doubt, unease, or fear entered his mind. He took the sharp part of the saw in his hands and proceeded with courage, without hesitation, without unease or remorse, with all the lucidity of his consciousness and senses. He reinforced his hands with the weight of his whole body and proceeded at that moment. He made a precise longitudinal cut in the forearm with one swift stroke, almost reaching the bone. It was an easy cut, without resistance, that made the blood rush out rapidly. It poured in gushes like an endless and macabre fountain, dark red, almost purple.

Ivan Petronovich immediately woke up upon feeling the wound. He barely exchanged a flash of surprise, hatred, and fire in his gaze with his aggressor, but Gaetano was quick. He didn't want that look that pierced him like the iron that penetrated the flesh and split the veins. Nor did he like the screams. Like a lightning bolt, he covered the face with the pillow and pressed it with his weight. Ivan Petronovich began to scream. His howls and desperate cries, the screams of the damned, were muffled by the pillow.

He struggled uselessly on the bed like a massive live fish thrown onto the dry ground. The strength of that beast, mortally wounded, was barely contained by Gaetano's weak humanity, but he saw that the more the beast struggled to free itself from its bonds, the more the blood flowed, creating a large pool on the sheets.

You are the devil! Gaetano gasped again and again, pressing harder on the pillow against the hidden face, suffocating the air out of him. *You are the devil! I condemn you forever to your damned realms. If you are human, may God have mercy on you.*

After the sixth jump, the last one that made the bed bounce and almost drag the bodies to the floor, the contortions and agitation stopped. Then came spasmodic and rough movements, but they began to diminish and were replaced by heavy snoring, like the death rattle of the dying.

When the snoring stopped, Ivan Petronovich barely made slight finger movements until silence and immobility filled the room. There were two inert bodies, one lifeless and the other exhausted, sweaty, and panting. *You are the devil. I condemn you forever to your hells...* Gaetano repeated almost breathlessly, nervously, without stopping, almost like an incoherent whisper, the liberating prayer of his uncontrollable anxiety. He sought justification for his actions. *You are the devil. I condemn you forever to your hells... Die... Die... You are the devil. I condemn you forever to your hells.*

Gaetano was exhausted and petrified over the corpse, just as the flames of the candles seemed to be. He waited an eternity to regain his breath until the human carcass, the one that had blindly done the work of the demon, had no more breath left in the abyss or the darkness. Only then did he begin to loosen the pressure on the pillow.

Here is the English translation of the text you provided:

But an overwhelming, immense, trembling, uncontrollable feeling invaded him. Courage was replaced by alienating fear. What would happen if

he were still alive? What could he do? What should he do? Doubt assaulted him, freezing his joints and breath. The rigidity was his, not the corpse's. Doubt and fear were now the perpetrators, the relentless sacrificers.

What if he was the devil? Lifting the pillow, the abhorrent tongue would fly out of the mouth of the demonized Ivan Petronovich like a serpent with three, five, or ten heads, each spitting pus and fire from its fangs. The tongue would be a hydra of a thousand polyps that would grab him by the neck, drag him to the mouth from which it came, chew him with indescribable suffering, and finally swallow him, alive, into its bowels, into its reigns, into the realms of darkness, the grinding of teeth, and the terrifying laughter of Satan.

He trembled uncontrollably like a tuberculosis patient in his last moments. Suddenly, the cold of those suffering from wasting diseases struck him, freezing his soul. But it was not cold he felt, but the fear of the consequences. He had had the audacity, but now he trembled uncontrollably before the results. Doubt and fear had completely taken over him. His fingers were no longer as firm as when he first gripped the iron in his hands. Now they shook like his hands, elbows, knees, and whole body.

He searched for control over himself, but it was too late. He was fainting. His vision blurred. His mouth was painfully dry, and his tongue felt overwhelmingly large. He couldn't swallow and could barely breathe. He was suffocating, and he couldn't stop it. He made one last effort to regain control, but neither his arms nor legs responded. His face fell onto Ivan Petronovich's.

They were too close, too close not to feel the bloated nose and the proximity of the mouth from where the vipers would emerge, dragging him into the kingdom of darkness. That single thought, like an act of self-defense, made him raise his trembling hand to his face and cover his eyes, nose, and mouth. But in the dimness and confusion, he touched the face of the corpse. That single contact sent waves of electric charges through him.

He felt an abhorrence so deep at touching the demonic face that it matched the fear that had previously controlled him. It was a disgust stronger than being trapped in a dark, foul-smelling sewer among disgusting vermin. Instinctively, he leaped back, standing by the bed as he frantically rubbed his hands on his suit and his body. He wiped them off the despicable sensation he had just suffered. At the same time, he felt armies of cockroaches, scorpions, and spiders invade him.

He began to act like a madman, losing control over his actions and himself. It seemed like the vermin were penetrating his eyes, ears, and mouth. He spat and slapped his face and body to kill them and scare them away. Everything became an endless confusion, making him lose his sense of reality. The violent movements prevented him from seeing the tangible truth. The pillow on Ivan Petronovich's face had fallen to the floor, and from his open mouth, no snake emerged to trap him, no crawling animals, no rodents, nor any other sign of life.

Gaetano began to regain control of his body and mind. He no longer had doubts when he finally dared to approach Ivan Petronovich. The swollen, motionless eyes stared into infinity; they had lost their aggression, surprise,

hatred, and gleam. From the open mouth, which displayed golden teeth, the asp that would trap and crush him did not emerge, and the veins no longer oozed their putrid blood.

Ivan Petronovich was dead, very dead, and the devil that had inhabited him was no longer there, returning to its realm of eternal darkness. At that moment, Gaetano also recognized that he had lost much time and had to act quickly. He untied both hands and feet. He carefully cleaned what needed to be cleaned, returned things to their place, and finally placed the handle of the saw in the right hand to make it appear like a suicide.

Then he checked the pockets. In the wallet, he found a little over two thousand two hundred rubles, a fortune he had never thought he would touch, something he could never achieve with his work over all his years of life, earning only eleven rubles a month. He quickly put it into his own pockets and continued his search. He also found the gold watch, which he placed under the tavern keeper's straw mattress. The hidden watch would have some meaning for someone with investigative tendencies.

He was about to leave, but he wanted the last image of triumph over evil. Ivan Petronovich's swollen eyes and face, the color of eternal fire ashes, told him that his work was complete. He felt a rare sense of relief. He had brought justice for the human race, but at that moment, the absurd reasons for why he was there inevitably came back to his memory.

Fourteen years earlier, on the night following May 28, 1933, after completing twelve years of demanding studies at the music conservatory run by the distinguished Professor Giovanni Smilo in Florence, and when his face

still bore the serene smiles of celebrations and congratulations, Gaetano was ambushed in the presence of his infant children and his wife Carla, still barely a teenager, just outside Siena, while driving the family's old Peugeot, a second-generation gift from his parents.

He was happily on his way south to his village, Montalcino, where more celebrations awaited him, along with his new home on Via Salustio, a family gift passed down through generations. Except for Carla's futile screams and the powerless cries of his twin sons, Gaetano and Giovanni, the one named after his grandfather, the famous woodworker from his town, it was an action with no commotion or noise. Modern slave traders were much more refined, efficient, and professional than the African slave traders of centuries past.

This time, they were hunting for European labor for the fields in Ukraine and Georgia, driven by the desperate Russian need for skilled agricultural workers.

Gaetano's Desperate Struggle and Tragic Realization

Gaetano, like so many others, was mercilessly snatched and kidnapped with the complicity of mercenaries and Russian and Italian extremists, condemned to a communist country at a time when Pope Pius XI's encyclical *Divinis Redemptoris*, opposing atheistic communism, had just been published.

It was a master operation that, with one swift stroke, separated Gaetano from his wife, his children, and his Buonforte, the violin with which he had masterfully performed the *Violin Concerto in D Major* by Johannes Brahms the previous day, followed by sonatas by Tomaso Albinoni, the

brilliant Venetian composer of the 17th century, at the conservatory. After three days and nights of confinement, cold, hunger, and thirst, like hundreds of Italian peasants, Gaetano was finished off in a freight car at the Moscow rail terminals, where he was told the harsh reality and awoken to a cruel nightmare.

From then on, they were no longer Italians and were assigned to fieldwork. They were warned that Italy was not even a past worth remembering or a tolerable memory. Russia urgently needed to rebuild its agriculture, which had been decimated by the clumsy leadership that caused the bloody rebellion of the kulaks and the peasants. Stalin's forced collectivization policies in the first five-year plan of 1929 and the Bolshevik purge of 1936/37 left the fields without plows, livestock, or people.

Peasants and kulaks were dying like flies, by the hundreds of thousands, in prisons and forced labor camps in Siberia. *Do not attempt to escape*, Mariuska Shelest, the assistant to the peasant settlement program in the western and southern foothills of the Caucasus Mountains in Georgia, where Gaetano was finally sent, warned him.

On the night of his capture, he was mistaken for a peasant, never as a musician, but to his captors, that distinction did not matter. The night and the region made peasants out of everyone. Anyone found on the remote roads of Tuscany was a peasant who knew how to cultivate vines and make wine. The scheme planners thought no better workers could be found elsewhere, not even in France.

Wait, wait, or you'll end up hopeless in Siberia. Cooperate for your good. There's still a long way to go, Mariuska kept repeating in broken French that Gaetano barely understood. He pitied her because, even though she was Russian, she had been forced to go south when she had so much to offer to ballet in Leningrad, her only passion.

The woman insisted that everything comes in time to those who know how to wait.

But to Gaetano, those consolations were mere words. He cried for the loss of Carla, his children, his homeland, his freedom, and his music. He hated Russia, Georgia, and everything that smelled of Russia and Georgia. He hated the endless muddy roads, the endless distances, the endless loneliness, the endless waits, the endless pacifications of Mariuska. It was hard for more bile to fit in his devoted soul.

It is better to die. Chi di libertà è privo, ha in odio d'esser vivo, chi non ha libertà aborre l'essere vivo, he repeated in his melancholy and resentment, the artist turned into an improvised vineyard laborer. *Shut up; they might hear you. Accept that some things are beyond remedy. It will be easier to bear what can't be fixed if you accept.*

Never! Protested Gaetano. *My bones will not be buried in this miserable land.*

Shut up, the woman warned again. *You're asking for the worst. I'm investigating whether you stay in Georgia and are assigned to cultivate grapes or flowers in a kolkhoz on a collective farm. Think about it. You would never bear the wheat harvest in Transcaucasia or the harvesting of beets or*

cotton in Azerbaijan or Armenia. If you do not yield, it's one step from there to Siberia.

But not even the scorching sun of Georgia, nor its beautiful fruits or flowers, nor the communism of Stalin's era, characterized by the rule of terror, would break his spirit. His delicate fingers had been dedicated to the violin, not to field labor.

You must be realistic, the woman insisted, instinctively recognizing the danger of giving in to excessive grief.

Your hands will be mistreated in the south, but the cold will take them from you in the north. Besides, here you have the gypsies captured in Miskolo, and you earn favors because you perform exquisite Russian music. Be thankful because at least you have access to your art, and you've been given a violin, but you exceed your rebellions.

They were words Gaetano despised until one night when he was roughly taken from his hut to a freight train that would, in two days, be crossing the Siberian steppe with uncovered wagons filled with condemned souls, like so many of the Stalinist purges. The patience of the commissars had run out.

They no longer wanted conflicts in a region that had become a hotbed of tensions and suspicions between the Georgians, the predominantly Muslim Adzharians, and the Ossetians, who were demanding their independence. It was a region where the Georgians also aspired to impose their language over Russian.

Revolutionary law protects you. He is my husband, Mariuska argued vehemently as a last defense to the police chief just before the convoy left.

Do you have proof? Many, but only the medical recognition of pregnancy, will you accept. *Impossible. There is no time,* the officer replied. *Are you placing yourself above the law?*

That single threat was enough to free Gaetano, but only on the condition that he would not recidivate. Not even Beria would save him the second time. Still, the birth would be monitored, the definitive proof of the marriage. From that moment on, Gaetano's *speech* (permit) was revoked, and he was only authorized to travel between the Kolkhoz and his residence, nothing more.

He searched for the reason behind the changes in his life forged with such inhumanity. His only answer seemed to be what he believed was the path laid out by an evil god, the God of a collective society in which individuals were ordered and subjected as part of the whole. The hated social collective determined all manifestations of human life, leading to the final phase of a classless society, where the individual man would be fully absorbed into the collective.

He tormented himself because he couldn't find a way to fight this God of darkness. Everything resulted in confusing, incoherent messages. How could he understand the constant whirlwind in which he lived and the mental confusion created by the system he was forced to accept and understand? It was the purest pantomime of a government that claimed to be exercised by the multitude.

Reflections on Power, Freedom, and the Future of the Family

To Gaetano, communism was the opposite of the spirit of freedom of modern times, which had been born in his own Tuscany. It was the denial of the meaning of the wonderful Renaissance. For hours, he tried, as a confused pantheist, to find in any place, even in the innocent gaze of Yianni, his third child but the first Soviet child, the stillness, the resignation, the answer, and the refutation to the cruelty and barbarity in the twists of his life.

Communism, he would say quietly to his son, *wants to create a new order, but it's a lie, my dear. There are no changes without faith, hope, love, or freedom.* In response to his musings, he only found innocent laughter, like his authentic and unforgettable firstborns who grew up in Tuscany. But then it seemed he saw the longed-for answer in the events that led to Yianni's birth, not in his tender gaze.

If he gave life to the Russian son, the son also gave life to him in the same act by making him a Soviet citizen with rights. By giving him life, he gave him hope, and with hope came freedom. More than a union with his son, his birth meant a union that carried the inescapable singularity of two beings forever tied together by life itself. Wasn't that the meaning of his birth? Yianni, a Russian son, was not an invisible stake holding him to an unknown land but, on the contrary, the key to the answer to freedom that would become clearer with each new Russian child.

Mariuska watched contentedly. With her husband's quiet surrender to Yianni, she believed she saw signs of significant progress. She understood that the love for his new land was finally arriving, and Yianni, born of her womb,

was its bearer. The reward for her patience was paying off. Gaetano's invitation, four months after Yianni's birth, confirmed it.

Gaetano said, "Let's have a companion for him one night in the dim light." That night, by the light of a small candle, Mariuska surrendered with as much love as when she invited him. She felt fertilized in both body and spirit, overflowing with happiness.

A daughter who was nothing like Yianni was born. She had light hair and green eyes like her mother's but the Mediterranean skin color of her father. Yianni had been born robust, weighing a little over four kilos, with vibrant pink skin. Mariuska, on the other hand, barely exceeded three kilos; her pallor never left her cheeks. Instead of being calm and drowsy like her brother, she was dynamic and rarely slept. *She will carry your exact name*, Gaetano lovingly told Mariuska.

No. Let's innovate. Let's give the girl a name from your village. Gaetano took her by the hand. Once again, he ceded the privilege. He had created Yianni, the Russian version of Giovanni, as he understood it. *Your name is beautiful; it's Maria from my village.*

It was not the name that concerned the mother. She hid another anguish.

What will become of them? she asked.

They will be distinguished.

Mariuska wanted to place those words and promises in the care of a Higher Being whom the revolution had warned her did not exist because the God of the Christians, the God of Gaetano, was no more than a fable, a

mythological god, a narcotic for the people because it prevented man from understanding his actual earthly situation, consoling him with the apparent hope of an afterlife.

How will we manage? The anxious mother asked again.

We will educate them. It's the only guarantee, no other.

We will educate them in what you and I know well: music and dance.

They will be virtuosos and recognized. They will be respected and admired.

And the promise and the effort were fulfilled. At the age of four, Yianni spoke an advanced language of music that his father taught him during long hours of hard labor in the fields.

At six, he received his first distinction when assigned to the school's superior musical group. Two years later, he performed in public for the first time as a member of the regional orchestra at the Kolkhoz Amphitheater. In that first public performance, he was accompanied, while performing the cheerful compositions of Tchaikovsky's repertoire, by the dance of a precocious girl who amazed with the grace of a promising apprentice despite her young age. Mariuska, the daughter, also paid tribute to the teachings and efforts of her mother.

But soon, limitations arose. By age ten, Yianni had absorbed everything music could offer from the region. Mariuska needed space, choreography, a stage, and a world for her ballet to develop all the exquisite art that was only beginning to emerge.

You will have to go to Tiflis, the capital, the parents were urged. *How?* they asked themselves. *Our requests are unanswered.* They didn't know

anyone, didn't know the *nachalnik*, the chiefs. Also, they didn't have passports to leave their land and beg for their case in the capital, nor did they have residence permits elsewhere, nor the means to cover the expenses.

Then someone spoke to them about a patron, Ivan Petronovich, the party secretary for the entire region. They were told he was a protector of the arts, that he was the only way, the sure way to their children's future. They spoke of everything good, but they also warned them. They didn't hide the rumors, the open secret, or the price to be paid. They also told them how to get to him through Dimitry Vyascheslav, the tavern keeper from Yaroshneva.

Have you decided? Mariuska's last question, as a flash of maternal weakness, came when Gaetano agreed to contact Vyascheslav. It had been a determination fought against that had stolen his life during sleepless nights for almost two years since he learned about the possibility through Dimitry Vyascheslav and the General Secretary.

It had been nights spent alongside Mariuska, who also sought to avoid the danger that the road to Tiflis represented. But Yianni was growing, and he was approaching fourteen years old. Without special privileges, he would be snatched for military or rural services just as Gaetano had been taken from Tuscany, and Yianni's virtuosity would be lost forever.

Gaetano did not answer. He had no response but to embark on the long and bitter pilgrimage to Yaroshneva, where he would meet the tavern keeper. Dimitry Vyascheslav laughed crudely at Gaetano's proposal. Only when he controlled his laughter could he speak.

You want me to help you with Ivan Petronovich. You ask for not one but two privileges for a family immediately. Did you know families wait years without asking for a privilege, let alone something substantial? But you want two privileges, and you want them now.

By my grandfather's shadow, you do not settle for less! And again, he laughed heartily.

Gaetano waited patiently until Dimitry Vyascheslav's offensive laughter subsided.

Your recognition won't be far, he said, his head bowed. This time, the tavern keeper no longer laughed nor hid his displeasure at the audacity.

No villager in his right mind would have your boldness. You don't know what you're exposing yourself to. Besides, what do I get in exchange for the favor you're asking for? Can honors feed you or keep the fire going? And how will you compensate me if I fall from grace by helping you?

I have nothing to offer you, Gaetano replied. *But if I were in your place, I would accept the request made of me. Our children, mine and yours, are the future and glory of the homeland. The anthem of our youth says it, and you must honor it daily.*

Dimitry Vyascheslav fell into new laughter. *You're either stupid or naïve. I'm neither of those,* Gaetano said. *I claim what the motherland offers, and as you know, neither you nor I can refuse it. I assure you that I know the severity of the penalties.*

Bragging! Nothing but bragging! If you know your rights, then why not handle the request directly? Dimitry Vyascheslav's response was a challenge, facing Gaetano closely.

I will follow your advice, Gaetano said, not lifting his gaze. *I've come to you only because they say that it's within your power to untangle the paths and because one day, you will find benefit as a patron of the arts.*

Dimitry Vyascheslav burst into laughter again, mocking the art Gaetano represented. But then, surprisingly, he stopped laughing suddenly. In the serene masculinity of Gaetano, the tavern keeper realized he wasn't facing just any peasant. The revolution had surprises. Those at the highest positions fell with the force of a hurricane in the blink of an eye. Then, they were replaced by unknowns who rose with meteoric speed.

Could this be the case with the learned peasant who barely dared to lift his gaze? Then he reflected. Why fear him? Reality told him otherwise. He spoke to a simple peasant, perhaps learned but not born in Russia. No *nachalnik*, no chief, had been born outside the republics. Why would it be different now?

The doubt made him ponder. He was in an uncomfortable position that was unfamiliar to him. He wasn't used to intermediate positions. He knew how to defend himself in extreme positions. He knew what to do and what to say when he had to be very humble or very arrogant, depending on the role he had to play, but ambiguous positions confused him. He needed to think.

Wait, he said.

How long? Gaetano asked naively.

Dimitry Vyascheslav still didn't know how to respond.

I don't know. Why are you pressuring me? Gaetano warned that I must return as soon as possible.

I have no answer for you and won't have one soon, the tavern keeper responded grumpily.

Gaetano warned him that I had managed to get the nachalnik of our kolkhoz to allow me to come for the day. I can't return to your answer. I'll have to give explanations.

Dimitry Vyascheslav fell silent. The fear returned, and the crossroads were beyond his strength. *I'll call my wife.*

Gaetano thought that the presence of Natalya Ivanova, the wife of the tavern keeper from Yaroshneva, would be a longed-for help to ease the mission that led him on his pilgrimage. Still, he soon found no docility or maternal feeling in that disheveled, coarse person.

Chapter 2: Kiev

Gaetano had remained silent throughout the meeting. At that moment, words were no better than his silence, but the virtue of silence was not really in not speaking but in knowing when to remain silent. However, the fear gradually overtook him, telling him that the time to talk was approaching.

The party leadership had officially informed him that a decision had been made to send his two children, Yianni and Mariuska, to Moscow to compete for the prestigious cultural representation of the Soviet Union abroad according to the new political agendas. It was about competing with many other applicants from the other Soviet republics to select a small but highly selective cultural representation. If they succeeded, not only would they be the genuine representatives of the new communist society before the world, but it would ensure their entry into a unique class within the Soviet social hierarchy, with all its unlimited privileges.

Party's Decision and Gaetano's Silence

"Do you wish to make any comments, Comrade Naslishvili?" asked the Sectional Secretary of Culture.

"It is a wise decision. My son is capable of excelling in all the tests. He will awaken admiration for our motherland in the most demanding circles," Gaetano replied without hesitation, aware that the party's decision was not asking for permission or an opinion as a father but as a member of Yianni's teaching team.

"But you do not think the same about your daughter?" "No, comrade."

Gaetano's reasons, which he expressed decisively, were well known. Mariska had made significant progress but would compete in a world of exceptionally high standards where she would face older competitors from a school she was not familiar with.

But the party members didn't see it that way.

"She is very well trained. That very training and her young age are seen as a strong reason that advises her participation, rather than being a cause for objection," said the same Secretary of Culture.

"Undoubtedly," Gaetano interrupted, "but I cannot forget that she is responsible for performing to the best of her ability in representing our beloved republic. I have no hesitation in stating that her talent will exceed expectations and earn the greatest praise, but those virtues alone are insufficient. We seek the best. There will be other representatives with many more years of life and experience in a style that is not hers. She will not be competing on equal terms."

These were very valid reasons. It could not be forgotten that the search was for the optimal, the best of the best. Still, the party members were confident she embodied all the attributes needed to succeed. "Do you not agree, Comrade Chitzieska Khortakov?"

The madam was to be the final arbiter, but she found it challenging to decide. Mariuska's tender age was a severe limitation because it still did not allow her the necessary expression for such a demanding competition. She would have to rival renowned talent in an environment like the Bolshoi

Theatre, which, by tradition, gathered the most select, modern choreography with technical demands that defined an extremely high standard.

In contrast, she thought, they would likely not find young girls as talented as little Mariuska. Her astonishing achievements would compensate for any lack of experience due to her age, which was neither that much nor so obvious. She was sure Mariuska would captivate with her grace, technique, and vocation, which heightened her few years, but she had a grave doubt.

The very limitation of age is an extraordinary advantage. Still, only if the technical and artistic rigor was softened in favor of the international political image they sought, but she did not believe this would be the criterion of the judges. "We must decide," urged the Secretary of Culture.

Debate Over Mariuska's Participation

"How can you reason and feel simultaneously?" asked the madam, thinking of her innate affection for Mariuska. In this case, sentiment and thought conflicted, as a blind man was trying to guide a blind person who was seeing one.

"My father is not being fair to me!" Mariuska protested. "I'm so glad you will decide in my favor in the end! I will triumph in Moscow," she assured Chitzieska Khortakov, her eyes full of a very different shine, given by dreams of grand stages in the major European capitals.

It was not a dream. It was a real possibility, and yet the madam had doubts. Her fear of the lack of experience and needing a few more years of study weighed heavily. That deeply affectionate feeling inclined her to accept, but her reasoning made her hesitate. She was forced to think with reason, not

with her heart. It would be a very grave disservice to Mariuska if others ended up being the winners.

"Comrade, we must decide," the Secretary of Culture urged her again, sensing her prolonged silence. She was at a crossroads. The decision was clear.

"I lean toward Comrade Naslishvili's position," she said resignedly, her gaze on the floor.

The madam's decision had somewhat relieved Gaetano. Still, the teenager's rebellion as a reaction to this refusal only passed through Gaetano's mind at that moment, just as the real problem that Yianni's favorable vote would entail also only passed through his mind. In Yianni, there was undoubtedly more poise, and he would feel less affected by triumphs and the limelight. Still, paradoxically, that same sobriety of judgment would make him reason in tune with the system that oppressed them despite Gaetano's subtle efforts to neutralize the communist indoctrination that was taking root in his son.

Yianni meekly responded to the daily teachings from Vasily, and Gaetano could do very little to stop it. He insisted on references to Florence, Siena, Pisa, Viareggio, Livorno, Leonardo da Vinci, Galileo, Giotto, Dante, Petrarch, and Michelangelo because there, veiled, were the ideas of freedom that, as a father, he felt obligated to pass on, but he had to be very careful. Open opposition to Vasily would mean tearing Yianni away from his home, denying him the refuge it provided, the thin and fragile thread on which his contact with his son and his dream of a world of freedom hung. It would also

mean removing the protection from an environment where many seemed to be in an eternal search for masters, as dogs were.

Yianni could not have a master. He belonged to himself, to sublime music, and to the world that would welcome him as a unique star, the star already beginning to shine with its powerful light. That was why Gaetano had guided all his actions to become a permanent companion until Yianni could recognize his reality in an entirely free environment.

Father and son carried out the exercises and studies together, and in doing so, Gaetano succeeded in isolating him from Vasily's influence. The more time they spent together, the less time Yianni spent by Vasily's side. Moreover, musically, they had structured a team already recognized for its ability to adapt many solo violin and viola works. Yianni's spectacular achievements instinctively garnered silent but heartfelt approval for Gaetano's work and the team he formed with his son.

"He will find professors in Moscow who will replace me. No difference will be noticeable," Gaetano warned in light of the praises and the impending separation.

"Undoubtedly," Chitzieska Khortakov added, "but if your work is to be part of the trial in Moscow, then a good amount of preparation with other professors will be necessary. Therefore, the child must travel as soon as possible."

That comment outlined a better idea, the one Gaetano left hanging in the air. He knew it was a remote, almost unthinkable opportunity, but life had taught him to dare to undertake any endeavor and finish it. All it took was to

put all his enthusiasm into it because he was backed by himself, a strong and determined man living as if he would never die.

"Why risk dealing with substitute professors?" the party leaders at the meeting asked. "Can't Comrade Naslishvili himself be the support agent in Moscow? Who better than him, who has achieved the harmonious complement that works like a delicate, tiny clock mechanism with his son?"

It was a conclusion that solved a serious problem. The contest opportunity was approaching rapidly, and in no more than four weeks, they would need to adjust their activities, travel, and acclimate to the new environment. The best and most convenient solution was undoubtedly for the duo not to disband and for the team to remain firm. It would be absurd to lose the experience achieved between father and son, a benefit that would immensely strengthen the chances of success.

Furthermore, there was a beautiful paradox that the party leaders quickly pointed out. Comrade Naslishvili had not been born in Russia, but the revolution had made him Russian, in body and heart. This achievement should also be highlighted as a product of the new Soviet society. He was a man who had come from far-off lands and had integrated without condition, leaving as his legacy two citizens who would be examples to the world. It was an additional reason to boast before the nations about what the system was capable of and its good results.

The party was pleased with these remarks, and Gaetano was too, but for different reasons. Gaetano rejoiced in the triumph of his strategy. He would travel to Moscow with his son, help him, support him, make him

succeed, and in the meantime, Tuscany and freedom would always be quietly present.

Mariuska's reaction, the daughter's, to the decision not to compete in Moscow was as Gaetano had expected, though not as vehement. Tears appeared for the first time, but they were not of sweet feelings but anger. Chitzieska Khortakov, like Nina or Vasily, was powerless to control the outbursts, as unexpected as they were violent.

On the other hand, Gaetano made no more significant efforts to calm her. She accused him of being the primary decision driver, but it comforted him that she also blamed the party members. Despite the sharp reproach the father had to endure, the path to independence he had laid out for her was reinforced.

Mariuska's Rebellion and Gaetano's Guidance

"I won't dance anymore, never again," the daughter said at the end of her accusations, and she ran out into the street and the park where she could be alone, away from her hated home.

Here's the English translation of the content:

"Let her vent," Gaetano advised his wife.

But the mother was uneasy. She knew that anger, especially in women and even more so in adolescents, never promised a good end to its outbursts.

"We just need to stay very alert. Never forget what an angry person says," the husband retorted. "Anger is a short-lived madness, and its remedy is delay. Let her vent. This way, there won't be any repressed anger that leads to hatred," the father insisted.

But the mother persisted in her disagreement.

"It is not right for someone with little strength to show anger. Anger clouds the mind."

Dimitry, the herbalist's grandson, understood the mother's disturbance clearly but differently. His worldly experiences in the kennels told him that in Mariuska, there was not anger but weakness, one that could easily be broken or bent. The mother was about to break that weakness to take it back, but he would use it to bend it.

"It's not right for you to let yourself be deprived of what is yours," he said to her in the park. He almost quoted verbatim the exact words she had said to him when she let the puppy be taken away.

These darts were Mariuska's worst stings; her almost childlike expression did not hide it. The decision forced her to remain in a world that now suffocated her. At her young age, she felt like nothing had a way out, no meaning or purpose. The world suddenly turned into a pittance and a fog that pointed to no path and raised heavy doubts she couldn't answer. What had all the effort and endless hours spent on exercises and dancing been for?

But even in the suffocating darkness where she thought she was, she saw some answer and clarity in Dimitry. What made the face of a friend shine so brightly?

"You wouldn't understand," Dimitry answered, tempting her vanity.

"Yes, of course, I would understand," she assured him with the same vehemence as the anger she had shown days before.

Dimitry explained, but he reserved the ending to create unease.

"They are two different worlds. You should not insist. You told me yourself, and you were right. I couldn't understand the classics or their teachings, nor the pursuit of perfection in human movement. Where I go, those things have no value."

"I was wrong," Mariuska answered, looking down, holding onto the hope that Dimitry might have the solution.

"You're rushing," Dimitry said. "Can you accept a world built on rats?" he asked bluntly, with sarcasm.

Men or rats. In Dimitry's world, what was the difference? At that moment, Mariuska didn't care.

"Yes, I accept it, and I will accept it," she said with a conviction that no longer reflected the traces of anger but the change promised to her.

"You must abandon what you do," Dimitry told her, emphasizing his voice. He spoke as someone who despised integrity, like a worldly person who saw trickery in superior qualities.

"Yes, I will do it, I will do it. I am determined," Mariuska reaffirmed, with the force of someone who feels desperate. Her candor no longer feared any action, any looks, or gossip.

Dimitry smiled. He remembered his vow the night he received Mariuska's letter. The path cleared quickly where he would be the prince and she the princess, the path where he would defeat the conservatory.

"I need proof of your decision," warned the teenager, now a trader in feelings and opportunities.

The demand surprised Mariuska. What kind of demonstration was being asked of her? Didn't her voice reflect the crystal-clear afflictions she carried inside?

"It's not enough," Dimitry declared.

For the young man, the purpose had to be sealed in another way because if it wasn't tightly bound in those moments of weakness, there was a risk it would break.

"Buba, why are you examining me? What kind of confirmation can I offer you?" Mariuska asked desperately, in her innocence and uncertainty. Her word had always been the seal of her actions. Why didn't it have value for him?

"Because I made a vow," Dimitry confessed, reflecting feelings tied to the gold he was accumulating.

"Tell me about the vow," Mariuska asked. "Am I part of it?"

It was the moment of revelation.

"I've sworn to give my life to you."

"Forever?" Mariuska asked, with a renewed childlike gleam in her eyes.

"Yes, forever," Dimitry confirmed.

The anger and confusion that had overtaken Mariuska's face had disappeared entirely. In their place was the glow with which Dimitry had illuminated her darkness.

"You ask for proof. Then, it is only fair that I do the same. How do I know you will give yourself to me forever?"

Dimitry was surprised. Moments earlier, he had been in control; now, he was being cornered, but he accepted the challenge.

"I will give it to you, but it must be at night, with no witnesses but the stars."

Mariuska felt the same tingling sensation on her skin when Aleksandr urged her to choose the ride.

"Why at night?"

"Are you afraid?" Dimitry took the initiative.

"A vigilant and foresighted fear is the mother of safety," her father had told her many times, but he had also taught her that fear must always be preserved, but never shown.

"I'm not held back by fear," Mariuska answered.

"Then why do you hesitate?" Dimitry demanded. He instinctively knew that from doubt to denial was but a small step.

Dimitry's Influence and Mariuska's Struggle

Mariuska felt the tingling sensation on her skin again. The idea of the night meeting alone attracted her and urged her on. What proof would she receive in the light of the stars? What would she have to give in return? The temptation of the unknown, which also served as a balm for her anxieties, enticed her. The meeting was set for eleven at night at the foot of the stairs that rested in the garden next to the herbarium.

At the appointed hour, Dimitry descended the stairs, and beneath them, in the dim light, was already Mariuska. She wore loose pants, a long coat that shielded her from the penetrating chill of the night, and a woolen hat that

covered much of her yellow hair. A timid light from a small bulb in the herbarium barely illuminated her face, stiff from the cold, and nearly darkened the vibrant green of her eyes.

The little light also hid her expression, which wavered between reason and impulse, between her thoughts and the suspicion of the unknown, between rebellion and her earlier conversation with her parents. Despite the indocility that urged her, she openly communicated to her parents her conversation with Dimitry that afternoon and the appointment for the night. It was a natural, clear communication, as spontaneous as she had always maintained.

She had been raised not to keep secrets or act covertly, and experience had shown her that this and no other was the best path. "My dear bambola," her father had said after listening carefully to his daughter's account. "I know the disappointment caused by my refusal to support your participation in the Moscow competition, but I ask for your trust again. I ask that you believe me. Opportunities do not close. Had that been the case, I would have defended your participation with all the strength of my heart. But though it seems folly, with my refusal, you now have so many alternatives that you won't even know how to navigate them. However, these goals will only be achieved if we remain united."

"After this opportunity, there's no other," the daughter retorted.

"I must claim your trust," the father replied patiently. "These goals exist. For now, do not dare to dream of them, and do not ask me what they are. You must have faith, and we must defend and support each other. If you and Yianni had gone to Moscow, you can be sure that the end of our union would

have come. Not now. Now I will be with Yianni, and your mother will be by your side. Yianni will succeed, but he will return because I will make him return. That return, my dear, will not be to live a life that I already know bores you. It will be a unique reinforcement to achieve the goals I do not allow to wake in your imagination in much less time. Strive a little more while we await our return. From there to the world, I aspire for you will be a very short distance. I put all my effort into making my words a reality, but you must believe in your mother and me."

"I've brought you the proof," Dimitry said when he reached the landing of the stairs. Dimitry was carrying a leather suitcase covered in dirt. He kept it hidden underground in some secluded spot.

When he reached Mariuska's side, he opened the box. The little light barely revealed its contents. It contained paper money, many loose jewels, gold teeth and eyeglass frames, and two medium-sized, solid gold figurines, one serving as a salt shaker and the other as a pepper shaker.

"All of this and more is for you. This is my proof. Take it."

"And what do you ask in return?" Mariuska asked.

Dimitry did not answer immediately. His heart was pounding in his throat.

"I want you," he confessed.

"Forever?" asked the girl, not looking him in the eye and almost whispering.

"Yes, forever," Dimitry confirmed.

Mariuska remained silent. Her mind was a whirlwind of confusion.

Dimitry also doubted but did not dare ask: Was this how a woman reacted on her first love date?

He decided to take the initiative. He approached her, sought her hand, and then tried to kiss her on the lips with the fervor of the senses but with the gentle awkwardness of the inexperienced. He brought his lips close to Mariuska's cold cheek, but there was still no response. She kept her gaze on the ground.

Mariuska did not feel the presence of a teenager becoming a man, nor did she feel the tingling on her skin that the challenge to the unknown produced. Instead, she felt the presence of her father's words, which he had repeated almost at the door when she was preparing to attend the meeting. She remained still. There was something glacial in the air.

"Before taking any step, the one you want to take tonight or any other in life, always remember that the size of his chains measures the slave's freedom."

The meeting and Dimitry's approach made her understand the meaning of her father's words. What was offered to her was nothing more than links in the chain of an enslaved person, and the promises of devotion were nothing but a swarm of bindings. Her true freedom lay in what she did well: dancing, studying, improving, union with her family, and trusting in herself.

"Buba," Mariuska said, her face very close to Dimitry's but still looking down. "Can you understand that I love you very much? But you must also understand that with vows, there is always the risk of losing what is certain and not knowing if the uncertainty will ever be achieved. I want to be

part of your world, but we must promise nothing and give nothing. I free you from the promise, and I free you from the proof you asked for. You must also free me. Perhaps one day we will be for each other, but it won't be because of promises made untimely."

Returning, Mariuska found her father waiting for her almost at the threshold of the door. No more than ten endless minutes had passed, each seeming like an eternity since she had met Dimitry. Her face was neither stiff nor sad. It had the radiance of someone who felt liberated, who was reclaiming her path. No words were necessary between father and daughter. Everything was clear, and everything was understood. The spontaneous hug confirmed it. The faith in the future had been renewed with a regained intensity.

The news of the Naslishvili family's imminent departure to Moscow came unexpectedly, undermining the preparations for the train journey. Instead, by instructions from the Kremlin and because Georgia was Stalin's birthplace, an exception was made. The only participant who would travel by plane was Yianni Natslishvili. A military aircraft, a Kolinsky bomber adapted for civil service, was offered. The Troika would lead to the Tupolev Trimotor and the Antonov.

"A very generous and splendid concession," they warned Gaetano.

But while the comforts of air travel were offered, these conveniences were more theoretical than real. The Kolinsky cabin was uncomfortable, without air conditioning, and the rear seats, where they would have to travel, were not armchairs but wooden benches attached to the long and narrow

fuselage. The backrest contributed to the discomfort because it was the curved wall of the cabin. It wasn't a journey that would take less time than the train route. On the return trip, the plane was scheduled to stop in Kiev.

They could only carry musical instruments, essential personal accessories, and limited food rations for the journey. A thermos with a hot drink and a thick blanket were mandatory. At the heights they would travel, the cold would freeze even though.

But while Mariuska, the mother, was busy with the trip's preparations, Gaetano's concern differed. The time was approaching when he would have to tell her about the existence of Iván Petronovich's roubles and the truth about everything that had happened in the tavern of Yaroshneva.

Time had indeed healed the wounds, but Gaetano found no justification for keeping the mystery from his wife for so long. Life had made them one, and except for the constant presence of the memory of Iván Petrovich, there was no mystery between them nor any joy or sorrow that had not been shared.

For this very reason, Mariuska would not accept the long silence that had been to her benefit. It was a protection to keep her isolated because, upon discovering the secret, she would become an accomplice unless she denounced it, and in her, the secret would die. Gaetano also worried about the reasons that drove him to reveal it. The plane trip carried its risks, and in the event of an air accident, Mariuska would need access to the capital hidden at the Yaroshneva station. It was the life insurance that fate had prepared for them.

Again, in the middle of the night, Gaetano approached his wife to open the only hiding place in his heart that she did not know about.

"I want to ask you the questions you don't want to answer," the woman said in the darkness when everything that needed to be said had already been said. "Why now? Wouldn't it have been better to remain silent forever?"

"Why are you asking me to declare prudence? You know you're forcing me to strip away my doubts," Gaetano rebuked, thinking about the risks of the plane. "You've always mixed prudence with a grain of madness," Mariuska replied. "It's the profile of your whole life. I'm not criticizing you; I want to know the risks and dangers of flying."

What for? Gaetano asked himself. Those concerns no longer made sense. It was necessary to do what had to be done, and part of that was traveling in a plane that had survived the war and whose maintenance was said to be better than that of civilian planes.

"It's useless to be cautious in the face of adversity," was Gaetano's simple response.

It was not Mariuska's expected guidance, but she knew her husband was speaking the truth. There were no alternatives. She would have to remain silent, but in her silent submission, she silently begged him to cancel the plane trip and stay on the ground. She knew that from that moment on until she saw them return, her nights would be filled with torment amid feigned peace and hidden, endless insomnia.

The plane was worse than they had imagined. The fuselage was longer and narrower, painted in a dull olive green, making the interior even darker.

Behind the pilot seats were two simple, colorless, and uncomfortable armchairs. Then came the wooden benches attached to the fuselage, barely enough for three passengers per side. These benches were where the Naslishvili family would travel. The armchairs were reserved for passengers who would board in Kiev.

Furthermore, the plane was ugly. The three enormous engines at the front were disproportionate compared to the size of the aircraft, and the three tail wings were also disproportionate. The entire apparatus looked like the whim of an aircraft designer who had made engines attached to wings to make them fly. Its only saving grace was the two young pilots who infused the heap of iron and aluminum with their good humor.

Vladimir, the older one, was the captain but was called "major," while the slightly younger copilot was referred to in the slang as the "cadet." The cadet mocked those who expressed fear of flying.

"You're like philosophers giving us unintelligible answers to unsolvable problems," he would say. "You torment yourselves without sense." But that disdainful attitude toward the fear of flying only increased Mariuska's anxiety. The machine seemed even more grotesque than she had imagined and incredibly heavy. How could such a contraption fly?

"And very high and fast, madam," the smiling cadet responded. "Speed and height keep the teeth intact!" he assured her, wanting to say that the height kept the high mountains in check, protecting the passengers, and the speed kept the plane in the air, avoiding impacts that might dislocate the teeth and, in the process, the brain.

Mariuska, the daughter, also felt the mother's apprehension. The frustrated illusion of the trip to Moscow had grown when she learned they would be flying, something no one in her family or circle of friends had ever done. But then, when she saw the plane up close, the yearning and ambition turned into distrust, anxiety, and relief. She didn't even know how that machine could fly or how it could carry passengers, among them her father and brother. Her only irrepressible comfort was that she would stay on the ground. She was also comforted by Aleksandr's illuminated face, which was filled with admiration for the aircraft.

Aleksandr was also struck by the plane but in a completely different way. He found it beautiful from every angle. He felt awestruck, however, because he had never been so close to a flying machine and because it represented humanity's brilliant mastery over gravity and brute force, which attracted him so much. He imagined himself controlling the beast in the skies, as falcons controlled the air with arrow-like flights.

"I want to fly," he told the cadet.

"Welcome aboard!" was the mocking response. It was the aspiration of many young men his age, reflected in their eyes with the same excitement.

"What do I need to do?" Aleksandr insisted.

"Join the Air Force."

"What do I need?" he pressed.

"Much," the cadet replied. "And in the end, after passing many tests, only one thing is important, and sometimes it's better to start there. You need *blat*, influences, huge *blat*. The rest comes naturally."

"I don't have it," Aleksandr confirmed.

"Then don't bother."

And with that, the reality that led to resignation was confirmed. Nothing was possible in the high Soviet spheres without the most basic thing: influence, something Dimitry Vyacheslav and Natalya Ivanova, the tavern keepers of Yaroshneva, had relentlessly sought.

But Dimitry, the pragmatist who had discovered that morning Mariuska's quiet charm for her brother, an unexpected obstacle to making her his own, was very close.

"We can buy her," he assured the pilot. At his age, he was already well-versed in life's twists and solutions.

"How much money do you have?" the cadet asked, astonished.

"No, but we have savings."

The pilot's smiling gestures disappeared. They were entering serious matters, and he could make a good profit.

"The entry to the academy will cost you fifteen hundred rubles. Staying will cost you six thousand. You'll also need to cover the cost of uniforms and maintenance. In total, ten thousand rubles."

It was an unprecedented amount capital for an entire generation. Furthermore, it was a payment to a state academy of the Armed Forces, which was supposed to be free.

"We can pay six thousand in total. Not a kopec more," Dimitry confirmed.

"If you provide the fifteen hundred for entry, we can close the deal right now," the cadet responded with a stern face.

"What guarantees will we have?"

"Upon my return, your brother will travel with us, and I'll get him to Leningrad. That's the only guarantee. It's not enough. I propose five hundred for entry and the remaining thousand when he enters the academy. I'll consult," the cadet said and headed to speak with the major.

Aleksandr had heard the whole negotiation in astonishment. His brother was making deals for him without consulting him, and he was talking about figures that defied all logical reasoning. Six thousand rubles was a fortune, the same amount he could pay on the black market for the rights to a farm with a house, livestock, and a guaranteed, peaceful life for the rest of his days.

"Do you want this or not?" Dimitry asked privately while the pilots were talking.

"Yes, but..."

Dimitry didn't let him continue with his objections. "Are you willing to leave with them when they return? Today, if necessary, but I want to think it over," Aleksandr defended himself.

"There's no time to think. The answer is one, no alternatives: yes or no," Dimitry insisted. "You know I don't have the money."

"That's my problem."

"It's also mine. How will I repay you?"

"With money when you earn it, or with services. I choose. That's the condition. We can clarify the details later. I want to know if you accept going to Leningrad." The picture became clearer for Aleksandr.

"Maybe we can buy *blat*, but there are other conditions to fulfill. I don't see you sick, and you have the minimum grades." Aleksandr glanced sideways at the aircraft, the pilots who seemed to be finishing their consultations, and then at Mariuska, the daughter. Going to the Leningrad Academy meant a separation of three, perhaps four years. What would happen in that time?

The thought of being away from Mariuska made him hesitate, but then he understood that she would, sooner or later, also go to Moscow and would be closer to him than if he decided to stay in Tbilisi. The decision had to be a single one.

"I accept!" his brother confirmed with a smile.

The cadet quickly agreed to the conditions. An advance of one hundred rubles would be given that day, four hundred upon his return, and one thousand when Aleksandr arrived in Leningrad and entered the Air Force Academy. The remaining four thousand five hundred rubles would cover his stay and other necessities.

When they arrived at the airport, Chitzieska Khortakov, Vasily, Nina, an official car with government representatives, and two buses with what appeared to be a commission of reporters and onlookers; the cadet and the significant exchanged glances; this promised to be a long farewell filled with speeches and tears.

"Impossible!" they said in unison.

They headed to the base tower, submitted their flight plan, and asked for immediate clearance to take off.

"Impossible!" they were told at the tower. Civil acts had to be completed in full. "Here's your permission, but you must wait for the ceremonies."

"Don't worry," said the cadet, heading to the plane. An improvised stage had formed next to the aircraft, and farewell speeches had already begun.

From that moment on, the pilots began their checks professionally, reviewing controls, valves, pumps, hydraulic and electrical systems, and fuel and oil levels.

By the time they finished, another official had taken the stage and spoke passionately, smiling at every flash from the huge cameras.

"With apologies, we must inform you that we need to clear the area in five minutes," the cadet said, approaching the podium.

"Five minutes?" the officials wondered. There were still many speeches and photographs. Couldn't they wait at least an hour?

"Impossible. Five minutes. It's a military order," the major said, and with that, he boarded the aircraft.

But the officials persisted until the pilot, having reached the end of the allotted time, started the engine on the right side, opposite the door to the cockpit and the makeshift stage. The engine's roar was deafening, followed by a large cloud of acrid, whitish gas that enveloped everyone.

The cadet hurried to board and clear the crowd from the aircraft before starting the central engine. The Naslishvili family looked at each other, confused. The long-awaited moment of separation had suddenly arrived. Neither the noise nor the gas allowed for farewells.

Mariuska, the mother, who thought she would weep on her son's neck as if they were taking him to be beheaded, nervously urged him to board, as she did with Gaetano. The confusion made her react thoughtlessly according to her sense of duty and the habit of following orders rather than her maternal instinct. The food provisions, two thermoses one with coffee and the other with soup and the heavy blankets were already on board.

Her final words were, "Go with God. " Gaetano stared at her. For the first time in his life, she invoked divine protection.

Others were also filled with confusion. The draft created by the propeller accompanied the smoke and noise. Amid the chaos, the farewell formalities were replaced by the concern of not letting the speeches, hats, and scarves fly away. Hurried and simple handshakes replaced the official embraces and kisses. The pompous recommendations meant to be expressed were forgotten or blown away by the winds.

Mariuska, the daughter, was the only one who seemed to maintain composure. She ran and hugged Yianni for a long time, followed by her father. She said the same thing to both of them.

"When you succeed, think of us; we love you so much."

Then she went to find refuge, her eyes filled with tears, in her mother's arms.

When the central engine started, there was no doubt. It was impossible to remain near the aircraft any longer.

Gaetano stumbled aboard, followed by Yianni. He turned his gaze for a final farewell, but the cadet had already boarded and closed the door, which also served as an improvised ladder. Through the window, he could see how everyone on the ground was quickly distancing themselves from the noise and air currents generated by the plane's engines. When the third engine, on the left, started, there were no visitors left nearby, and the aircraft was free to move safely.

A handkerchief waving from behind one of the windows signaled a farewell. At that moment, the mother and wife understood the whole reality. It was her husband and son who were leaving. She hadn't kissed or hugged them or given them last instructions. She was left alone, guilty of her clumsiness. Tears began to well up; then she started to make faces, followed by gestures resembling pouts and, finally, an open, inconsolable cry.

"Son! Son!" she began to shout.

The plane slowly moved through the auxiliary corridors to take the main runway. The handkerchief behind the window could no longer be seen, and those on the aircraft could no longer hear the mother's contagious sobs.

The plane reached the beginning of the runway. It remained there while the pilots conducted acceleration and deceleration tests for each engine. When they were satisfied, the aircraft was ready for takeoff. The engines roared. The intense vibration throughout the fuselage left no doubt: the machine roared for freedom to take flight. The foot brake was released, and

the plane lurched forward suddenly. The unexpected movement unbalanced the passengers sitting on the benches. The run down the runway grew faster until it felt like the plane was about to take off. Everything was moving quicker now. The trees and buildings were left behind at the speed of a strong gust of wind. The plane was in the air and on its way to Kiev.

Neither Gaetano nor Yianni could get over their astonishment. It was the first time they had flown. They pressed their faces against the windows to see the city, the river, and the fields and called to each other to point out what they saw. The town was visible from Yianni's side, while Gaetano could see the river and the dacha along the river's big bend. Both were smiling like children with a new toy, pointing outside with their index fingers.

The plane quickly gained altitude. Soon, they began flying through thick clouds, and the city and river were far behind. The view was filled with intense cloud cover in their place, making it hard to see the dense forest they were flying over. The noise inside the plane decreased as it leveled off at cruising altitude, and their ears adjusted.

"Welcome to the air!" the cadet shouted with his usual smile so that they could hear. "You can travel in the seats if you want," but he didn't say to whom they would be given after. The Divine Catherine would be a surprise among many they would experience on board the plane.

It was an invitation the passengers quickly took up. Despite the short time, they were already feeling the discomfort of the benches, but what attracted them more was the proximity to the pilots. They could talk without having to raise their voices. They also had a better view of the vast landscape

ahead. During their conversations, they could inquire about the meaning of the cockpit console's numerous controls, spheres, and clocks that intrigued them.

The flight plan, in a straight line of 1,350 kilometers to the northwest, would take them across the entire republic of Georgia from Tbilisi, then over the Black Sea, the Pontus Euxinus during the time of Alexander the Great and the Romans, then the Sea of Azov, an internal sea within the Black Sea, and finally, into Ukraine to reach its capital, Kiev.

Gaetano likened the adventure of the trip to Moscow and the difficulties he knew they would face in winning the coveted grand prize to the adventures of the Argonauts, the Greek mythological heroes who conquered another grand prize the Golden Fleece and had to defeat the impossible. First, it was the horrible dragon with triple rows of teeth and a body covered in greasy, yellowish scales, and then the two monstrous bulls that vomited flames from their noses, their bodies impenetrable to iron.

He felt at ease again with the history and legends of Georgia. He was passionate about the coastal region of the Black Sea, Colchis, and was famous for that distant mythological expedition. He imagined the plane's flight plan drawn by Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, just as she had mapped the route for the legendary ship Argo and the cadet with Tbilisi, the expert pilot of the legendary ship. It seemed that in the cramped space inside the noisy aircraft, the combative spirit of Hercules, Castor, and Pollux, especially Jason, who died wandering, was traveling. Gaetano felt like Jason walking in a land that was neither his nor would ever be.

Soon, their hands and feet began to numb, and the Naslishvili family quickly understood what the cold of the heights felt like. They also began to appreciate Mariuska's foresight her maternal instinct had predicted everything. Besides forcing them to wear thick socks, she slipped an additional pair into each of their pockets, along with winter suede and fur gloves, but she had no luck with the woolen hats.

Both opposed it, but they regretted it at their flying altitude. They kept their feet protected with the two pairs of socks and the blanket, just like their hands, but their ears remained exposed. The battle against the cold, the rarefied air from the reduced oxygen, the noise of the engines, and the monotony of the landscape dominated by an endless carpet of clouds made Yianni nearly faint. He was on the verge of losing consciousness, succumbing to a heavy stupor.

Gaetano, on the other hand, resisted and delved deep into himself. He analyzed, with tedious repetition, the reasons for being there, but in that confinement, he soon realized that those answers no longer made sense. What value did those thoughts have when he was at the mercy of the air, the engines, gravity, politics, and forces entirely foreign to him?

He checked the time. An hour and a half had passed in the flight, and there were still four hours to go. He was bored. The fascination with flying had already passed, as had the interest in deciphering the landscape. The plane's controls were nothing that warranted a conversation, and the cadet, the only one of the pilots inclined to talk, had also fallen into indifference. The major smoked and drank coffee with his eyes fixed on the horizon. Gaetano

realized he could not compete with the major's interest in the infinite and did not attempt to distract him.

In the end, weariness overtook him, just as it had overtaken Yianni and made him sleep. Unknowingly, he closed his eyes until he collapsed onto his son. He tried to settle so as not to disturb him or remove the blanket's protection. The contact reminded him of the early days of Yianni's birth when he believed he found the future of his life in his son's eyes.

No answers came to him, but there was refuge in the warmth of his son's little body, just as he had found refuge in that warmth now. In those days of uncertainty, even with shocks, he found unexpected peace in that warmth, and Yianni's body still held the secret to that peace. He felt once again the sweet sensation of his son's company. It was that warm contact and that protection that finally made him sleep as profoundly as his son.

The dream suddenly turned into a nightmare. He dreamed that he was traveling in the same train from Yaroshneva to Tbilisi, but instead of tracks, he felt the car swaying madly over the unstable ice of a frozen lake. He could feel the ice in his feet and the blows to his ribs every time the vehicle lost stability and then regained it like those toys that, despite all the bumps, always regained their balance. One of those jolts felt very strong, and he entered a semi-conscious state.

The pain wasn't fictitious or imaginary; it was genuine. He opened his eyes slightly and immediately noticed the strong movements in the plane. He sat up, surprised in his seat. The usually cheerful cadet kept his eagle-eyed

gaze fixed ahead, but his hands were tense on the controls, like the claws of a bird of prey that had caught its victim.

He looked at his watch. He had slept for about an hour and a half. Then he looked outside. He could only see the wings and engines of the plane and then an impenetrable fog. The tips of the wings jolted with the same instability as if the aircraft were racing across rough, stony ground. Then, he could only see the white of the unknown and the storm surrounding them. They were flying inside a cloud filled with water, and every turn of the propeller brought the cloud closer, but they couldn't leave it behind. The turbulence was the reaction of the infinite, stormy cloud, vomiting its invader with continuous spasms.

Flight to Kyiv and Gaetano's Reflections

Gaetano was confused. He had never flown before and didn't know if the experience he was going through was a regular part of the journey. Even so, a natural fear, confirmed by the serious expressions of the pilots, began to invade him. Could they be close to a tragedy? He wanted to ask, but that would show suspicion, violating one of the elementary lessons he had taught his children. He had repeatedly said one must preserve fear, but it must never be revealed.

He chose to do what he had to do. His composure should be an example for his son, the pilots, and himself. With every invisible bump the plane seemed to hit and overcome, his stoic resolve was reaffirmed with every burst of engine power. His concern shifted to taking care of Yianni's sleep. He wanted to prevent the sense of panic that was beginning to twist his stomach.

The major, too, maintained the same stillness that Gaetano displayed but with a gaze forward, like Lynceus, the Argonaut who could see through walls, discover hidden obstacles, and distinguish objects three leagues away. When the major looked back to check if the passengers were still asleep, he noticed the calm on Gaetano's face and was pleased by this repose.

It was the tranquility of a mature man in the face of adversity and the trust in the driver. He felt flattered and rewarded Gaetano's composure with a slight smile, the first one Gaetano had noticed since meeting him at the airport. With that friendly gesture, the major communicated everything. Gaetano could be calm and continue sleeping, and his stomach discomfort was meaningless. They would reach Kiev as promised, with a slight delay.

Once again, he thought Gaetano's commitment to his beliefs had yielded results.

As they approached Kiev, the sky became slightly clearer and calmer. That calmness paradoxically woke Yianni. His beautiful face was filled with tranquility and rest, and Gaetano and the pilots smiled at him.

"Have I left you alone for too long?" he asked his father as he stretched.

"Almost three hours!" the cadet answered with the good humor that had overtaken him again.

"I'm sorry," the son said regretfully. "The smoothness of the flight invites sleep. Don't you think so, Father?"

Yianni didn't understand the laughter that followed his question. He didn't understand that with those laughs, the knots that had tightened the hearts of the other passengers were being released.

Kiev appeared much larger than Tbilisi, and perhaps because of its size, the ravages of the not-too-distant Nazi occupation and the subsequent reconstruction efforts were hidden from the air travelers. From the height, the beautiful profile of the city stood out, with the stunning Sofia Cathedral, the Assumption Church, and St. Cyril's Church, all magnificent with their multitudes of domes, either outlined or gilded. But the wonders of the flight did not end there. Gaetano was still surprised that the plane, in the middle of the rain, flew as smoothly as it had in the full sun, just as it had when they took off from Tbilisi. He had the childish belief that rain put out the engines.

"I have a lot to learn," he told himself. His world of music had distracted him from knowing more earthly matters, such as the effect of rain on airplane flight.

The landing produced the same sensations in Gaetano as the takeoff, but this time, there was the added sense of the city's grandeur. However, he was confused upon arriving at a military airport, where there were different types of planes, especially many of the so-called jet planes, which he had heard flew without propellers and were four times faster than the old Kolinsky.

The fast planes were stationed in large quantities in various places. They seemed ready to take off and attack or defend the city. It was said that the invasion that would come was not from the descendants of Andrei

Bogolyubsky, who had destroyed the town in 1169, nor from the Poles, the Lithuanians, or the Tatars. The invasion would now come from another continent, from America, assisted by England, France, Greece, and Turkey, their European and Meso-Asian satellites.

Later, Gaetano found a logic in the landing that confirmed a fundamental law of nature: the rest and balance of forces. If one moves from stillness to motion in takeoff, it is precisely the opposite in landing. The trees, buildings, and planes he saw rushing by as they approached the runway slowly stopped their race when they made contact with the ground.

He also noticed that, unlike takeoff, the radio conversation intensified during landing. The pilots were speaking, but Gaetano couldn't hear them because of the noise from the engines. That conversation remained active until, once on the ground, they approached immense metal buildings without doors, inside which more planes could easily be identified as jet planes. However, they were much longer than those for runways. However, they were covered with gray tarps. It seemed they were being hidden from prying eyes, perhaps even from the military.

At the end of the long row of hangars was an old building, and beside it was a small hangar from which a small plane had been removed to make room for the Kolinsky arriving from Tbilisi. After a brief wait in front of the hangar, the major turned off the central and left engines, made a 90-degree turn, and slowly entered. When they reached the parking point, following the directions of a guard, the plane lurched forward sharply when the pilot slammed the brakes and turned off the third and final engine. If they had taken

off with a sudden movement backward, now the rough movement was in the opposite direction, forward. Again, Gaetano thought, it was the law of nature, compensation, and rest.

"Welcome to Kiev!" the major said from his seat when everything was calm and the noise of the engines no longer deafened them. With these words, he told them they were on the ground in Kiev. "But I must inform you that you'll have to wait inside the plane while we get out and take care of some formalities."

Waiting in 1950s Russia was natural, even if it required remaining uncomfortable.

"I want to go to the bathroom," Yianni told his father as the delay stretched and the pilots didn't return.

When he asked them to wait, the major did not consider using bathrooms or the possibility of stretching their legs.

"Let's go down. I'll accompany you," Gaetano said.

As soon as they set foot on the ground, the guard who had directed the plane to its parking spot arrived and urged them to get back on.

"We need a bathroom," said the father.

"There is none," the soldier replied.

"We need one," Gaetano insisted.

"THERE IS NONE!" the guard repeated harshly.

"Please understand. We've been traveling for more than five hours. The child and I need the bathroom."

"Get back on the plane!" the soldier ordered loudly.

The sharp tone immediately irritated Gaetano.

"Only when you let us use the bathroom."

"Get on if you don't want me to have you and the child arrested!"

"Your threats will change whims but not needs."

The guard felt Gaetano's challenge as a mockery. Without a word, he pushed him against the plane's fuselage and nearly made him fall. He grabbed his rifle, unsure of what to do.

"Stop! Stop!"

It was a penetrating and powerful female voice that surprised everyone. It was the voice of the Divine Catherine.

"You are very bold," the woman scolded Gaetano after an officer accompanying her ordered the guard to step away. "Soldiers are only following the orders they receive."

Gaetano was still in shock. Everything had happened so quickly. First, there was the incident with the guard; then, a woman had appeared from nowhere to protect him from a blow that surely would have broken his jaw or some other bone. She was a woman just beginning to mature, with a warm voice, thick blonde hair gathered in delicate braids, a sweetly severe gaze, and a fine white fur coat that highlighted the beautiful features of her face.

What grave thing have you said to the poor soul that has riled up his spirits? You have ventured unnecessarily the woman insisted.

I ask that you accept my gratitude for your timely presence Gaetano excused himself. We have done nothing grave. I requested the use of the bathroom for my son and myself.

The woman laughed.

I presume you are not from our country she said in a low voice.

I am Russian Gaetano replied.

The lady's gaze indicated that she doubted his statement.

Let's do something to ease your troubles she said and turned to the officer accompanying her.

Do you think it's possible? he concluded.

Naturally, madam the officer answered.

Upon returning from the bathroom, Gaetano found the woman in the same place. He could now view her differently. Her smile and gaze were enveloping, just as he remembered the women's gazes silently applauding him when he won first prize at the Florence Conservatory. It was the captivating feminine look that he thought was long gone from his life after he arrived in Russia.

Well, the woman spoke up, and I am pleased to see that justice has been done. Let's forget the incident. Perhaps I could enjoy your hospitality and the good fortune of your invitation to board the plane.

If it had been uncomfortable for the Naslishvili family to reconcile their humanity inside the plane, it was even more so for the lady with her heavy coat. Ultimately, arrangements were made for her to occupy the seat where Gaetano had been.

I think we can now speak calmly said the beautiful woman once she had finally seated herself.

Did you know you'd be stopping in Kiev to pick up other passengers?

Yes, madam Gaetano replied, sitting next to Yianni on the wooden benches.

That other passenger is me. However, I have an advantage over you. I was informed of who my fellow travelers were. I was told that you and your son are prodigies, violin virtuosos. Still, you are removed from this world, mere participants in the contemplative and beautiful life that music and poetry provide. However, you surprised me. With your firm protest, you, sir, also tread on our soil.

Gaetano recalled the insolence of his act from moments earlier.

I have no words to express my shame.

Nothing could be further from the truth! the lady interrupted him with a gesture that briefly brushed Gaetano's hand.

That brief contact sent a strange sensation through him. He gazed at her. It was hard to pinpoint her age because she physically looked no older than thirty, but her composure and confidence suggested a person twice that age.

Are you curious to know who I am? the enigmatic woman finally asked him.

I don't feel free to ask Gaetano excused himself.

Come now, maestro! she said. Your rights, and your son's, go far beyond what you think. I am Catalina Kuriltaya.

Gaetano was stunned. It was the Divine Catalina, the one who was so often spoken of, the one he had heard about at the Tbilisi Conservatory. It was she, in person, the one said to be a descendant of the founders of Kiev, of

Vladimir, or his son Yaroslav, or any of his other eleven brothers. She was also said to be descended from the Rurikids and anyone else who had stepped on the sacred land at the beginning of the millennium. With her grace, she seemed to represent, as a whole, the figure of Rurik the Viking, the legendary Scandinavian leader, his son Igor, and his brother Oleg, who extended their conquests south and made Kiev the center of the kingdom.

But it wasn't her noble lineage, so far removed from the Russian mentality and the communist system, that gave her the radiant presence and recognition she enjoyed. Her beauty and charm enveloped her with a mysterious and captivating aura, highlighting her as the most recognized soprano in the Soviet Union and much of Europe.

It was, indeed, the Divine Catalina, the incredible one, the one from the fairy tales of tough Bulganin's Russia, the angel whose voice could make even the elderly Stalin dream like a child, the one who had added color to the impersonal, gray exterior talks of Molotov and Andrei Vischinski, and the one who made both men and women, inside and outside Russia, sigh with her grace and presence as they crowded into theaters and box offices to either hear her sing or at least catch a glimpse of her.

Once he recovered from his surprise, Madam Gaetano said, "You honor us with your presence. I assure you that traveling with you will be one of the highlights of our lives."

I appreciate your gallantry, maestro the woman replied without losing her smile but I repeat, your rights and those of your son go far beyond what you think. You will receive a unique recognition, which will bring me great

joy. Now, since we know each other, I can tell you that I am traveling for the same reason as you. Still, while you will compete to fulfill a formality for a prize already said to be yours, I, on the other hand, will be a judge in the opera theater competitions. I trust I can count on your help, as I understand I am not blessed with the luck of being near the judges who will have the privilege of being, as some have called them, your judges.

Catalina's compliment made Gaetano and his son uneasy. They already felt rewarded for their efforts to go to Moscow because those warm words were an invaluable prize in themselves. Gaetano was about to respond, but the major arrived at the plane's cabin just then and stopped at the door without boarding.

I kiss your hands, madam said the pilot to the beautiful woman with a discreet bow. I apologize for the interruption. I have news. The announcement of bad weather will force us to remain on the ground until we receive permission to depart.

What a relief! exclaimed the lady, her blue eyes wide open. I am not fond of these machines, and I confess my deep dislike for the jolts caused by atmospheric phenomena. Don't you think the same, maestro?

The title of "maestro" coming from Catalina surprised and pleased Gaetano.

My only experience with planes has been this one, madam. We've felt some turbulence, but we are in the capable hands of the major, a helmsman who brings any vessel safely to port.

Bravo! the woman exclaimed again. From now on, I sense my journey will be unforgettable. Excellent pilots and excellent company! What more can one ask for?

But she said, turning to the pilot what should we expect?

The flight plan indicates the departure time tomorrow at nine, weather permitting.

That means we must return home. Isn't that right? Catalina asked again.

That's correct, madam confirmed the pilot.

Well, very well. You and your young son will have the chance for a magnificent rest she said to Gaetano. Where will you stay?

I don't know, madam. This stop wasn't planned Gaetano replied.

Then the major will have the answer.

I have it, but I regret to inform you that it won't be your liking, as it wasn't mine. We are at a military base and landed as a concession. The passengers will have to remain here.

What do you mean? Catalina interrupted. Are you saying the maestro and his son are confined to the base?

More than that, madam the major said in a tone that carried some embarrassment.

So, to this old building, without heat or comforts? the woman asked incredulously.

The pilot hesitated to respond.

Is this something I shouldn't know? Catalina pressed.

I regret to inform you that the passengers will be confined to the plane.

What madness am I hearing? What madness are you telling me? Are you saying the maestro and his son must stay this night in this plane, trapped in the discomfort of this machine?

The pilot didn't answer immediately.

I opposed the commander's decision, but he didn't relent. I even suggested changing positions so the passengers could use our bunks, but the commander obeyed his orders. My proposal was not accepted.

The lady laughed.

Here's the translation of the content you provided:

And you, maestro, dared to oppose a soldier! What can one expect from him if he has such an intransigent superior? Let's find a solution because you cannot stay in this captivity.

Madam, your kind wishes are enough.

I don't share your opinion said the woman with the composure that made her the one in charge of the situation. Moreover, I won't be at peace thinking you will spend a night of terror. Please leave it in my hands. I only ask you one favor.

Anything you wish, madam Gaetano said immediately.

Help me get out, help me get down.

Fifteen minutes after Catalina Kuriltaya's departure, the soldier whose stubbornness had angered Gaetano appeared at the aircraft.

You may use the bathroom facilities at your discretion but must return to the aircraft afterward.

Forty-five minutes later, the same soldier appeared.

You must collect your belongings. You are expected to transport out of the base.

With the suitcase and instrument cases in hand, the Naslishvili family walked behind the soldier, who led them through hallways and doors until they finally reached a courtyard where a large black vehicle awaited them under the incessant rain. As they stepped out, the driver got out, protected by an umbrella, took the suitcase and instruments, and placed them in the vehicle's rear compartment. He then opened the front right door and invited Yianni in. Afterward, he opened the back door. It was Gaetano's turn. As he barely stuck his head out, he saw Catalina sitting there, smiling, protected from the cold by the fur coat that covered her up to her neck and part of her face.

How does it feel to be free? was the almost mischievous greeting from the beautiful woman.

Like all her attentions and concerns, the question disarmed him again.

I would spend hours explaining it to you Gaetano said. The answer would contain much more than she could ever expect in her wildest fantasies. You would be bored instantly.

Soon, you will know that I am a woman of premonitions she said to Gaetano, sitting right next to him as the vehicle began to move. Almost like

an oracle. My hunches have rarely let me down. I have a feeling, maestro, that we will have a good time. Do you know why?

Before trying, I would like to express our gratitude.

The woman gave a slight smile.

There's no need. I will be content if you answer my question. Can you tell me the reason for my premonition?

I'm afraid not, madam.

It's straightforward. You are not a man who bores.

Gaetano was overwhelmed and couldn't respond. Moreover, Catalina's gaze left no room for reply, and the events of the day and the unexpected occurrences had dazzled him. It wasn't easy to reason in this whirlwind, much less decipher why he was not a boring man. What interest could he offer a woman who grew more beautiful and charming with every glance, a woman from a world so distant from his own?

With little traffic, the vehicle passed the base's entrance controls and joined the main roads. Yianni was enraptured by the realities of the great city on the banks of the Dnieper, the source of Orthodox Christianity in Russia and the head of Byzantine traditions and heritage.

Catalina continued to explain the mischief I've been causing since I left the plane. First, I had to arrange suitable accommodations.

Catalina spoke with the assurance of an old acquaintance, but this news didn't bring the peace that the woman wanted to offer the travelers. They didn't have funds to pay for lodging or meals.

Despite your undeserved attention, I regret to confess that we cannot accept this.

I don't want to seem imprudent by asking the woman said, not hiding her confusion but what powerful reason do you have to reject what is rightfully yours?

It's not imprudence, madam Gaetano clarified, avoiding her gaze and speaking softly. But we won't be able to afford the lodging.

Catalina fell silent for a moment.

I ask for your forgiveness. Perhaps I should have started there Catalina excused herself. You won't have to pay anything. You are guests of the State. Your expenses, from the moment the trip started until your return, are covered by your host. The base commander thought that keeping you in the aircraft was fulfilling his part of the State's commitment and not violating any security regulations. Only a narrow mind could harbor such clumsy thoughts.

The helplessness of solving his problems and leaving the solution to a woman frustrated Gaetano.

Madam, he protested that these are too many inconveniences on your part.

Nothing, nothing! Catalina interrupted. With two or three phone calls, everything was arranged. There was no difficulty or effort to secure your entry to the October Hotel.

The October Hotel?

Gaetano couldn't hide his astonishment.

The October Hotels, honored by the revolution, were the most exclusive, distinguished, and expensive in the central Soviet cities. Only high-ranking foreign guests, top public officials, or highly renowned figures could access them.

The consensus was immediate. Nothing less would do for you.

But Catalina refrained from saying that in the 1950s Ukraine, she could ask for favors.

Moreover, when she requested benefits in Kiev, she paradoxically did favors. The honor of pleasing the unique diva of singing was a privilege that bestowed an enviable aura on many. For others, especially public administration officials, it was a pinnacle of their careers or, at the very least, something they could brag about and take pride in.

I am overwhelmed, madam. How will I ever repay you for this attention?

You don't need to pay anything. I don't want to repeat what you deserve.

Even so, I find this favor immense.

When the hotel manager answered my call and confirmed your rooms Catalina continued he asked to greet delegates from Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia, as well as very high, high-ranking officials from the party in Ukraine and Moscow. This invitation is a polite way of requesting my performance. It's something I accept, something I do frequently. However, it occurred to me that perhaps you would be kind enough to make a presentation alongside me.

Family's Farewell and the Departure

We would be very honored, madam! Gaetano interjected.

Again, Catalina smiled as she looked at him sideways, her attraction containing all the feminine grace of a beautiful and composed woman.

You can see for yourself that I'm not wrong. I warned you that I am a woman of premonitions, and you've just confirmed it. My premonition told me you would accept, and my premonition tells me that you will be very successful. My premonition allowed me to accept you. Have I done wrong? she asked with a hint of mischief.

Catalina's arrival at the hotel was, as always, an event. At the entrance steps from the street stood the manager, accompanied by waiters ready to serve the diva and her guests. Each held massive black umbrellas to ensure not a single raindrop touched them. They entered a cozy, artistic marquee at the end of the steps and then passed heavy bronze doors with beveled glass.

All opened to a circular lobby surrounded by paintings of revolutionary allegories, the classic Popular Brotherhood, where workers waved red flags, many with fists raised, supporting the dominant image of Lenin or Stalin, always looking ahead, optimistic, defiant, guiding armies of workers and peasants to the triumph of the proletariat class.

Inside, an impeccably dressed, slender young man with prematurely graying hair slicked back with pomade took the contrasting old leather suitcases carrying their meager belongings and the worn instrument cases. He invited them to board a small elevator with sliding bronze metal rods, where the three barely fit, located at the side of the lobby. From inside, Gaetano

exchanged glances with Catalina, who seemed to say a brief but warm goodbye with her enigmatic smile.

On the third and final floor, the same hotel employee opened the elevator door, stepped out, and led the Naslishvili family to their room. It was spacious, with two enormous beds covered with soft, white duvets and elegant bronze bed frames at the head of each, very different from the crude and worn frames Yianni had first seen in the room of the innkeepers in Yaroshneva.

It is our greatest desire that you find your stay pleasant the employee said as he bid them farewell.

For the first time since leaving Tbilisi, Gaetano was alone with his son, sharing the same emotions simultaneously. It was 5:45 PM on this rainy day, April 23, 1950.

Fifteen minutes later, a discreet knock announced someone at the door.

A short, bald man in the lobby moments earlier was waiting for Catalina and her guests. He was holding two sets of formal wear for men. He was the costume director from the Kiev theater, bringing the costumes for that night's performance. Again, Gaetano felt an overwhelming sense of helplessness, making him falter. For the first time since finishing at the Florence Conservatory seventeen years ago, he was putting on a tuxedo with a starched shirt and high, shiny collar.

He understood that this surprise was a unique announcement. It was the return, the return to the life that had been abruptly taken from him but with infinitely greater meaning. Then, when Gaetano saw the radiant image of Yianni in the suit that the costume director's expert eye had chosen, he

realized that the long-awaited change in his life had arrived and would be triumphant because it would be with his son.

All the hardships and sufferings of so many years melted away in that instant with that glorious image. It seemed that the metamorphosis of his past life, forged with so much inhumanity, had been led not for evil but to give him that sublime joy, and for this, he went to his son and embraced him in a warm hug that he didn't want to let go. The world was rewarding him in a way that he clung to, unwilling to let go.

Then, it was Gaetano's turn. Again, the costume director's expert eye had been correct. Except for small details that would be tackled immediately, the suit highlighted the figure that exuded his Latin blood's emotional strength.

Thus, the symbolism of that suit was a way to highlight the figure of one who couldn't hide the expression of his soul, and Yianni was moved. He saw his father in a different light. The suit highlighted the beauty of his almost forty-two years, his hair still black and abundant, his slenderness, and his height near six feet. To the son, he was the figure of a demigod, the type of hero Mariuska, his sister, often spoke of. The costume director confirmed with his smile the reciprocal appreciation of father and son. The beauty of the scene overflowed, and Yianni could not contain himself.

His embrace of his father contained the same admiration and love with the added fervor of his youth.

A soft knock sounded at the door. This time, two middle-aged women dressed entirely in white and carrying black leather briefcases entered.

We can begin whenever you wish one of them said.

Gaetano and Yianni exchanged glances.

We don't know what you mean Gaetano replied.

The comment caused the women to exchange glances. They didn't understand the musician. Did he not know that it was their job to take care of personal hygiene, shave, calm muscles and nerves with relaxing massages before the performance, and finally apply the necessary makeup?

Yianni's opposition was categorical. No woman would see him naked, and certainly no woman would bathe him.

The woman understood the young man's modesty but tried to make him reason.

We do this every day. You shouldn't have reservations.

But deep down, the message was different. She indicated that it was their duty, that they had to fulfill it, and that their job included, besides massage and makeup, personal grooming of the artist. There was no alternative. It had to be done.

You understand they appealed to the father.

Gaetano discerned clearly. It wasn't about a man or a woman or a child. The women were facing a responsibility and a job, nothing more. And so Gaetano relented. Being naked in front of a woman who was washing his back in the perfumed bathwater and making him close his eyes as she gently rubbed his temples was as embarrassing as it was for Yianni, but there was no escape nor time to waste.

You must get used to it. It will be part of your life Gaetano advises his son.

Soon, they discovered that the initial embarrassment gave way to very different and delightful sensations. Under those women's guidance, the bath cleaned their bodies of dirt, but its significance was greater. There, submerged in that soapy water, smelling of lilies and the tamarisk flowers, a kind of pagan sacrament was taking place, a baptism to allow them entry into the new religion and the new life of the great stages. It was the cleansing, the ritual initiation into a new world that they gladly accepted at the expert hands of the priestesses with the black leather briefcases.

Once finished, with their bodies clean, relaxed, and filled with aromatic oils and smooth powders, they found no anxiety about the first performance. On the contrary, they were ready to show what was expected of them. The ritual had been a blessing.

While the final touches were made to the Naslishvili family's personal arrangements, the artistic director entered the room with an assistant carrying the gala suits already prepared and ironed for the Georgian musicians. He wore a gray tailcoat, a perfect cut matching what Gaetano and Yianni would wear.

The program was agreed upon with the director. The first to perform would be Yianni, who would play, just as in Yaroshneva, the violin arrangement of the andantino quasi allegretto "The Young Prince and the Young Princess" from the symphonic suite *Scheherazade* by Rimsky-Korsakov. Afterward, Gaetano would perform, hoping to play a

composition by his contemporaries, Dmitry Shostakovich, Sergei Prokofiev, Alan Katchaturian, or Nikolai Miaskovsky. Still, the Soviet Musicians' Conference had condemned them as formalists the previous year, and he didn't want to mention this suggestion, at least not in public.

It was decided to start with the classics. Beethoven, the first movement of Sonatas Nos. 1 in D Major and No. 1 in G Major, followed by the devilish *Tzigane, the Gypsy* by Maurice Ravel, a politically neutral novel work from a few years earlier. Then Catalina would finish the act with the repertoire she had already rehearsed with the director. Finally, some joint performances could be improvised.

The director suggested that we start at seven if that time doesn't pose any inconvenience.

The act would take place in the hotel dining room, which had a small stage that made it a theater.

If you are in the lobby at 6:30, I will personally take you to the rehearsals and prior arrangements with the orchestra musicians.

A little after 6:30, Gaetano and Yianni arrived dressed formally, with their old and battered cases protecting the immaculate instruments. It was an appearance that achieved the impossible. They silenced the agitated and noisy environment, and for brief moments, they even overshadowed Catalina, dressed in an exquisite white outfit with discreet fantasy beadwork, golden sequins, and a semi-low neckline. With her radiant blonde hair artistically styled, the diva, the Divine Catalina, ruled the room like the queen she was

over the middle-aged men, whose irrelevant bureaucratic demeanor futilely tried to capture and hold her attention.

Is this the prelude to what we can expect? Catalina asked Gaetano when he approached to greet her. He was a man radically different from the one she had seen hours earlier, reflecting a unique charm that also highlighted his son's tall and serene image.

We are merely the undeserved prelude to you, the true art Gaetano replied with the composure given by the circumstances.

Catalina smiled and approached him to speak closely.

Your gallantry hides the missing complement.

The comment confused Gaetano. What complement was she referring to?

I regret to acknowledge that I can't define what you're asking Gaetano said amidst the envious, jealous looks of the men, eager to correct what seemed to be a blunder of the maestro.

The woman lowered her gaze slightly. She smiled again and didn't say anything more. She had discovered in Gaetano's confusion the answer she had been searching for. She had no doubts. The momentary discomfort hadn't been because he didn't know the compliment but because he had faltered under her gaze like a weak strand of cotton. The impulse reignited the extinguished fire in the man who perhaps had never loved passionately. The same sweet bewilderment made her vibrate when she first saw him from afar, challenging the armed guard and then on the plane, in the humility of his worn suit, as battered as the instrument cases.

There was no need to say it, to declare the missing complement, to invite her to the celebration of triumph after the performance. It was noted in the maestro's eyes, the message invisible to the coarse eyes of the others. It was shouted by Gaetano's confusion in front of the woman, the poet's bewilderment, the sweet wound that had always made humanity dream of a renewed spirit, alive, ardent, brave, and whose mark was impossible to hide.

Yianni achieved the *vacation* in his performance, the most coveted thing any artist could attain after completing their presentation. It was the collective hypnosis, the sepulchral silence, the sublime submission to the artist of an audience submerged in a deep trance due to the effect of his art and still unaware that the outstanding artistic execution had ended. Only Catalina, on stage, was the one who brought the audience back to their senses, pulling them from their muteness and surprise, responding with impassioned and prolonged applause.

Then Gaetano performed.

The impact on the audience was similar, but this time they were prepared. They wouldn't be caught by surprise. They reacted vividly when he entered because he was the maestro and the father of maestros, and then they rewarded him at the end, standing to applaud. He was applauded not only for his art but also because he demonstrated that music was the language of angels that fills solitude and repairs broken spirits. Gaetano proved to that effusive audience that music was the greatest good that mortals know.

The culmination of the night of miracles was believed to have been Catalina. Still, when the three of them went on stage to perform selected

music and arias, with the backing of professional musicians from the theater, the outburst was total. The gray men became multicolored with their lively and fiery impromptu dithyrambs. For his part, the theater director, accustomed to the most prominent artistic manifestations and fanatic audiences, could not believe his eyes and ears. He had never seen anything like it, despite the audience that leaned more toward politics than culture.

At the end of the concert, toasts and more elaborate recognitions followed. The heads of delegations competed for the privilege of remaining in the memories of those artists who had dazzled them with pure and moving art. Then, the spontaneous clamor arose for a performance the following day in the main theater of Kiev to elevate Naslishvili's success to the organizers of the Moscow competition, ensuring the confirmation of their triumph.

At the main table, the protocol director had reserved, as required, seats for the artists. There, at the round table in the center of the dining room, beneath the massive chandelier that hung from the ceiling, also painted with revolutionary allegorical frescoes, sat the Secretary-General of the Ukrainian party, the three heads of the foreign political delegations, the mayor of the city, and General Rudonov, the military chief of the area, whose operations center was the base where the Kolinsky and the reaction planes were stationed. It was a brilliant table, adorned with beautiful floral arrangements in the center, lace tablecloths, and pure silver candelabras with fine candles lit with long and lazy flames, surrounded by shiny silverware, artistic crystal glasses, and the neat porcelain dinnerware with thick blue and gold borders.

It was a unique sight that, due to its splendor, made those like the Georgian musicians, who were only used to humble tables, uneasy. They also didn't understand the language that demanded to be the center. They didn't understand the language of the government hierarchies or the high-ranking military officials with their chests adorned with the most colorful medals. Still, it was inevitable, and they had to learn. It was part of the baptism from just hours ago and one of the consequences of the ritual. The promises and secrets of success were accompanied by discomforts, one of which was luxury, the superfluous for human happiness, which was evident right there.

Gaetano was invited to sit to Catalina's left and the military man's right, and Yianni sat to the diva's right. Gaetano's unease grew when he noticed that Yianni's neighbor, to his right, was a stocky man, very similar to Iván Petronovich. He had several platinum teeth and three medals on his jacket lapel, indicating he was a hero of the revolution or of the war.

Moreover, Gaetano's anxiety increased with the military man's insistence, General Rudonov, who monopolized him, praising him with a vodka glass in hand and constantly inviting him to drink and converse. What could the military man know about music as a sublime art, orchestration, or the meaning for the soul of the endless search for perfection through the instrument? But if the general knew nothing, then, by contrast, what could Gaetano know or ask about the mysterious planes covered in tarps and hidden in the hangars? Besides, he wasn't a drinker.

Catalina observed and became uneasy. She answered many of the questions the stocky neighbor was asking Yianni, relieved Gaetano from the

military man's drinking invitations, and tried to maintain a common topic for the whole table with her spontaneous laughter, spark in her eyes, and wit.

The arrival of food was the artists' best ally. Interest quickly faded with that unexpected feast full of exquisite delicacies. The abundance and the speed with which they were devoured led to a collective joy in which revolutionary popular songs were sung aloud, the expected prelude to exhaustion, which slowly started taking its toll on the guests. In less than sixty minutes after the concert had finished, many tables had been relieved, and thirty minutes later, at 10:20, only General Rudonov, Yianni, Gaetano, and Catalina remained.

Who was Amarilis in your life? Catalina wondered as she quietly watched how Gaetano exhausted his patience trying to establish the impossible bridge of conversation with the general. She saw how her neighbor slowly and almost poetically let words flow, searching for special euphony in a desperate attempt to communicate with the military man, who was drunk on vodka and sleep.

I suggest an idea if you allow me Catalina said softly, very close to Gaetano's face. Perhaps the general would appreciate a soft melody more than your elaborate words.

It was again the relief that had been present all night, the one that had made Yianni loquacious in front of so many adults, a distant reminiscence of the young maestro in the temple. Still, this time, it was Catalina who, in her way, asked that he play just for her and never for the overweight general. She longed to hear, almost desperately, in the violin notes and the genius of

Tchaikovsky, Boccherini, or Mozart, the answer to the tormenting question that the man arrived from the sky in an old warplane placed before her.

Was she, perhaps, in love? she asked herself repeatedly.

But she distrusted the man from the sky and his sweet gaze. Perhaps her heart remained with a peasant woman she left behind in her homeland, Yianni's mother, the woman she called Amarilis to liken her to Virgil's shepherdess. She distrusted herself because perhaps it was all a premonition of impossible and unfortunate love, like Pyramus and Thisbe or Romeo and Juliet, the love that was worth more to unite in death than to separate in life.

She didn't know and was filled with doubts. She thought she had known love, but now, suddenly, without any argument as a reason, she doubted with a strength that tormented her. Why did she feel troubled like a fragile flower in front of that man she barely knew? But what was troubling her? Did anyone have answers? Did anyone know what love was? she repeated to herself as she watched him with a gaze that didn't lie or hide her inner thoughts while she admired his confident bearing, and then, with sublime boldness, he cast aside the general and decisively turned his body toward her.

It was for Catalina and only for Catalina. With her, he wanted to communicate with the language of beauty and the ever-flowering path, the one of music, the language distilled by art and genius. It was the sweet liquor she had been waiting for, the one that, second by second, overcame hesitation, short-circuited her breath, and made her heart burn with the call of love.

Gaetano looked magnificent again with the instrument on his left shoulder, his black suit next to his white tie, and his straight hair slightly falling over his forehead. There, in his seat, with his back to the general, who was unconscious from vodka and sleep, with one calf almost beneath Catalina's chair and the other under his own, sitting upright on its edge, he began the beautiful melody of *Orfeo ed Euridice* by Gluck, followed by the violin arrangement of the touching aria in the fourth string of *Suite No. 3* by Johann Sebastian Bach. here

Each movement of Gaetano, almost brushing against her, invited her onto the celestial path of eternity. There, with the few candlelights, the dimness framed the unique language of lovers perfectly, the same dimness that also served the heavy sleep of the general, his chin resting on his chest, and of Yianni, whose head rested in his arms on the table. In those magical notes, all notions of time became one. At that moment, there was no beginning or end, no distances or cardinal points, no stormy glances.

And suddenly, for the second time that night, the *vacatio* occurred. With the last note, Catalina was suspended, defenseless, helpless, just like Yianni and the general were in their dreams. But she didn't want to react. How, she thought, could she have lived any moment of her life without the adorable levitation that music and that man gave her? The man who didn't hide the sweet bitterness and the delightful pain in his eyes that also dominated her.

She couldn't control the desire to express through song the feeling that consumed her from within. Then, softly, like the caress of a morning breeze, she sang:

Alfredo, Alfredo, di questo cuore

Non puoi comprendere tutto l'amore;

Tu non conosci che fino a prezzo

Del tuo disprezzo-provato io l'ho!

It was not Catalina who overshadowed the muses of the times and the waters in the room's dimness with her soft and soothing song. She revived with her muted voice the character of Violetta, whom she knew so well and had often portrayed on the stages of Russia and Europe. She sang the aria from the end of the second act of *La Traviata* but didn't sing it as she had in the grand stages she knew so well. It was not like the country house outside Paris as the opera setting called for. It was Kiev, right here, genuine, close, felt, and loved.

Catalina, the Divine Catalina, the Sweet Catalina, the Magnificent Catalina, abandoned Russian and sang in Italian, the incomparable language of poets that Gaetano had never forgotten.

Alfredo, Alfredo, non puoi capire

Tutto l'amore che porto nel cuore

Non sai che anche a rischio del tuo disprezzo

Lo metto alla prova!

Gaetano wanted to answer in the same language as Ariosto, Petrarca, and Dante, from the *dolce stil novo*, the poetic movement that arose in his

very Tuscany at the end of the 13th century. This movement displaced the old conventions of love. Still, the words did not come to him. He tried to escape by resorting to waltzes, but neither his arms, hands, or fingers responded. The exquisite music would no longer be heard in the hotel environment, filled with the pure romanticism of the Parisian *Belle époque* that had tried to disguise itself with a fictitious proletarian frame. Only the souls of Catalina and Gaetano could be heard as they drew closer until their breath, broken and passionate, became one.

At that moment, Amarilis, the one from Virgil and Tiflis, slept as profoundly as the general, Yianni, political delegates, and sleep itself. A hypnotic cloud, a peaceful cloud of dreams, had fallen upon everyone but Catalina and Gaetano.