

The Lamb

by Keppiehed

Can Pyotr find his courage when faced with his greatest fear?

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: This was written for Brigit's Flame, week #4. The prompt was "renegade," and I chose to use the first definition: 1. One who deserts his faith, cause, party, etc.; a turncoat; a traitor. Also, I would like to thank my crack team of betas and their eagle eyes: Azuire, Fawatson, and Mister Troper. Wow, guys. You are truly amazing at what you do. Thank you much.

The swelter of summer had passed, and with it the rank torture of heat-soaked bodies marinating in the confines of the cattle car. This was hardly better, though...it was an unexpectedly bitter winter, and one extreme temperature just replaced another. The crush of bodies didn't provide any warmth; they were merely packed in and shivering in the train car, unable even to sit. They had to stand or lean and hope that the man next to them leaned back and didn't buckle under the weight.

Pyotr counted himself lucky to have been one of the last loaded into the train. He hadn't thought so at the time; the wait had been interminable, and he was desperate for his assignment. He hadn't wanted to miss the action, and he was frantic to board this last car to the battle. With all the soldiers streaming in, he had been afraid he wouldn't get a chance to embark, but his long delay then proved fortuitous now, as he had a wall to lean against and a crack of fresh air to breathe. When had his enthusiasm turned into trepidation? When had excitement for glory soured to fear? He didn't know, but the heaviness in his gut like undigested food seemed to be there to stay.

Kirill jostled against him. "Sorry, mate," he murmured. "I'm getting a little groggy, I think," he admitted.

Pyotr squeezed himself against the slats to make room. "Here. Lean against the wall and try to get a nap."

Kirill smiled gratefully. They tried to move without causing a stir to the rest of the crowd, but that was a nearly impossible feat. The groans were audible as Kirill shifted a few inches to rest his weight against the slats of the car. He sighed in relief. "I think I've got some blisters already, and we haven't even started. It was from that last march. I had to use boots from that guy we found by the side of the road, and they are about a half size too small. Ah, well. And to think I had visions of the glories of army life!" Kirill laughed ruefully.

Pyotr grimaced. "At least we have boots. I heard they ran out of provisions in Stalingrad." A few heads turned their way. He lowered his voice. "They didn't plan well at all. It was a massacre, they say."

Kirill frowned. "This is dangerous talk, my friend. It wasn't a massacre. It's a war, and that's why we are coming to help. Reinforcements. Our brothers need us."

Pyotr could feel the itchy wool tightening around his neck. He stuck a finger in the high collar of his uniform and ran it around the inside rim, but the irritation stayed. There was nothing soft on his body these days, not his clothes, nor boots, nor even the breeze in the air anymore. All he could perceive was darkness and the cold stench of the other men's fear around him. Men he would likely die with. That thought made the blood pound in his veins and froze his heart to a stop. He gulped down the taste of bile, forcing the air to circulate in his system. The panic threatened to rise up and overwhelm him as it always did when he thought such things. He could just make out the dim faces of his comrades around him. How many would be bloodied and maimed, their skulls blown open and crows picking at their eyes when they got to their destination?

What was waiting for them except rot upon a battlefield? Pyotr started panting as he saw the skulls leering at him. His friends' faces became death masks before his eyes.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. "Pyotr? You okay?"

Pyotr forced a smile through the black dots that were swimming in his vision and nodded. "Of course, friend. But you are wrong about it not being a bloodbath. I heard that the *Studka* dive-bombers utterly destroyed our *zagradostrayads*. That the German artillery is unstoppable. When we get off this train, we are going to our death. Do you really want to be a part of that? What if there was a different fate in store for us?"

Kirill held his breath. "I think you are not well, comrade. You are not yourself. You are speaking in such a way that is not becoming of a soldier in the Russian Army. If you could hear yourself..."

"Oh, but I can!" Pyotr interrupted. "I know what you are thinking, that I am talking about deserting, like a coward. No, imagine it. What if we left the group and attacked in a smarter way, a way that was going to help the Red Army and not just end in our death? Would you come with me then?"

Kirill only stared a moment. "Keep your voice down. You are speaking of madness. It is this car, this journey. When you get an NKVD in your hand..."

"But that's just it!" Pyotr laughed a little wildly. He knew his voice was too loud, but he couldn't stop the rising hysteria. "They aren't giving foot soldiers like us machine guns, Kirill! Those are only for the officers. We are getting Moisin-Nagants!"

"So? That's still a good rifle. You can kill yourself plenty of Germans with that!"

"Don't you see? They only give one soldier the weapon, and the next man a five round clip of ammunition. When one of you falls, the next man follows behind and takes either the clip or the gun. They are sending us like lambs to the slaughter! And we are walking blindly to the butcher!"

Pyotr's words caused a sensation in the car amongst the men who had overheard. There was a rumbling as news of it spread throughout the train. The gentle buzz of talking became a louder hum and then a thunderous roar as every man found his voice.

Kirill only leaned away, his eyes hard. "You have started something bigger than yourself. You don't even know what you say!" he accused, his hiss cutting through the crowd.

Pyotr could feel the excitement and panic building up. It was like fizz in a pop bottle; once it was shaken, it had to be released. "Our barrier troops were decimated by the Germans! You can't refute that! They have better artillery; we don't even get guns to each man! I don't want to die, I just want to..."

"To what? Run away like a coward? Better to be shot than be a coward. Stand up and be a man, Pyotr! The rest of us are!" spat Kirill contemptuously.

"I just know my chances." Pyotr defended. "There isn't a possibility of us winning this fight. Why should so many good men die?"

"Do you think Vasily Zaytsev thought that, then?" Kirill asked.

Pyotr stilled. A hush descended over the men who heard that name.

"Yes, that's right; we are going to the very city where Vasily Zaytsev first held his own standard issue. If he had turned tail like the traitor you are trying to become, do you think Mother Russia would ever have such glory to call her own? You disgust me. Go run to the dogs, but I will stand and fight." Kirill's words were laced with venom and pride.

Pyotr felt a chill. Kirill had chosen his barbs well. They had long told stories to each other of their hero, Vasily Zaytsev. The man had committed so many fantastical feats that his deeds needed little embroidering. Still, as boys will, the stories had grown until it was impossible to tell what was legend and what had actually transpired. Now he had reached nearly mythical proportions and was revered by both as a savior. Pyotr felt a stab of shame pierce his heart, that he might be held up to the ideal of Vasily Zaytsev and found lacking.

"I'm not going to desert," he whispered. "I'm just going to flank and get a better position. I just don't want to run blindly out and die in a heap, that's all. Come with me. Be my wingman."

Kirill stepped away from the wall and put his face right next to Pyotr's. "You do what you must, brother. You tell yourself what you have to. But if you turn from us, I will take it for what it is, and I will react accordingly. I won't let you be less of a man than I know you to be. I won't let you disgrace the name of Russia. Know this."

Pyotr looked in Kirill's eyes, gray ones that were just like his own. They had grown up together. They weren't just friends and comrades; they really were brothers in the ways that it counted as such. Pyotr saw the steel there and nodded.

There wasn't time for more words. The train shuddered to a stop for the first time in days. The sounds of doors being unlocked on preceding cars met their ears. Pyotr could hear the instructions as he waited. The bullhorn carried through the slats. The repetition drilled into his head.

"You will be given a rifle. The man next to you will be given a clip. Stay together. When the man with the rifle is shot, pick it up, load, and shoot. You will be given a rifle. The man next to you..."

Pyotr chanced a glance at Kirill. There was grim determination on his face. Pyotr swallowed. "For a cause worth dying for," Kirill said, and held out his fist.

Pyotr stared at it and trembled. *Was any cause worth dying for?* He couldn't remember now, as his guts turned to jelly and his heart struggled to keep beating. He just wanted to live; was that so much to ask? He didn't want these war games from other men who had grown old behind their desks, in other lands, who had tasted the summers and the breezes into their old age. Pyotr just wanted to keep breathing in and out, not smell the smoke and taste the carnage on his tongue. He merely nodded and hit the fist that was proffered; he couldn't look Kirill in the eye.

The door slammed open abruptly with a metallic shriek that startled Pyotr. The winter air shocked him, and the sound of the bullhorn in his ear was too loud. He was deafened and blinded, and it was only a moment before he felt the push behind him and he was off the train. He stared dumbly at the weapon in his hand. *He had got a gun.*

It was a scene of horror and chaos around him. It was nothing like his worst nightmare...it could never be. This was so many times more terrible that he never thought he'd take that next breath in. The sounds and sights that met his eyes were nothing Pyotr could have dreamed up in the darkness of a boyhood vision. Twisting, screaming, bones and blood...Pyotr stared, shocked, and then he knew with utter certainty what he had to do.

He turned, found Kirill on the field. His friend also had a rifle and was firing away without impunity right at the enemy's territory. Pyotr tracked the man he had grown up with in his sights and fired a bullet directly into his brainpan. He was spared the sight of his best friend's face exploding, because he had aimed at the back of his head. It was almost poetic, like something from a book. The other man never saw it coming, didn't know what had hit him. Pyotr didn't stay to watch him fall, just turned and ran.

He didn't have to fire another shot. The woods were his cover, and he made it. It wasn't until nightfall that he noticed the fine spray of blood that coated the front of his jacket. The drops had fanned out like a mist and must have carried on the wind to mark him. The red blood of the Red Army. Kirill's blood. Pyotr regretted it, but in the end he had his life, and that was what really mattered. A cause worth dying for.

A/N: There was, indeed, a Vasily Zaytsev who served in the 1047th Rifle Regiment of the 284th Rifle Division of the 62nd Army. He was a legendary sniper, and in his

lifetime the snipers he trained killed over 3,000 enemy soldiers. He was awarded the country's highest honor, the "Hero of the Soviet Union." He is buried under a monument to the defenders of Stalingrad, and to this day people revere him as a great hero.