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104,025 words

The Shadow of Darkness

by

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Lumière and Oba crept soundlessly through the night hewn streets. All around them, the clatter of machinegun fire and the whistling roar of artillery shells came muffled by darkness and distance. They chose the blackest shadows and the most isolated paths. Oba guided them. His nose and eyes seemed to unerringly sense the presence of soldiers.

Oba was tall and large. He wore civilian clothing now, but in the near past, a German Gestapo uniform had covered his strong frame. He appeared much like a living man. He was well shaped and his face was starkly handsome. On closer inspection, his lips were black and somewhat torn, his skin leathery and ancient. He carried himself like a soldier, a leader of soldiers. Yet in his wake followed only one, a young woman—Lumière.

Lumière was not tall. Her appearance was almost waiflike. Her hair was black, as black as the night, and her skin the color of rich cappuccino. Her face was radiant with large deep emerald eyes that would have seemed more appropriate looking out of an Egyptian tomb

painting than on the thin face of a teenage girl. She was swallowed by a cotton shirt that was much too large, and woolen pants meant for a man. A bit of braided towel held the pants on her thin frame and kept her long shirt tightly under wraps.

Lumière let Oba lead her. She watched carefully for his signals as though a mistake might mean her life, and indeed it might.

The streets of Berlin at the beginning of May 1945 were filled with fighting and death. Hitler and Eva Braun were dead. Their bodies burned beyond recognition in a shell hole outside the Reichs Chancellery. The last remnants of the German military, old men and boys, tried to staunch the wound that was Germany with their lives and what was left of their honor. They had little of either to give. The Russians slaughtered them and raped their women, even girls, exacting a revenge for the numerous murders and atrocities the Germans had perpetrated across the Eastern front.

A few days earlier, Lumière and Oba had escaped from the German Neues Museum and were headed east. East, toward Russia. East, in search of a thread of evil. In the dark, they threaded their way between the corpses. Children and adults, military and civilians, the toils of war did not bypass any of them. Lumière wondered why these German people who were so wealthy with things and food would go to war for more. What more could they want? What more could they need?

During the day, she and Oba hunkered down in basements and cellars, hoping they would not be spotted by civilians or the military of either side. Oba carried enough food in his sack that Lumière didn't go hungry. Sometimes the food was sparse, but usually Oba was able to find something. He ate little. Lumière was not sure he ate at all.

During the day, they heard the movement and voices of many troops and people. Now, the language usually indicated Russian troops although, once or twice, German soldier's voices cut through the afternoon while they were hiding. They had made little progress east from the Museum. Each night when they attempted to move through the lines of troops, they found themselves forced back. Unwillingly they moved back closer and closer back toward the river Spree, and eventually, they were forced to parallel the river. Russian and German troops vied for both sides of the river. The night before, for the first time Lumière and Oba moved to the west of the Neues Museum. They tried to spend the day in a depression near Unter den Linden and Ebertstraße, but near noon, the sound of moving tanks forced them into the woods and gardens just south of the Reichstag building. Through their cover, Lumière could glimpse the Reichstag. It was a bombed out shell. Tanks were moving toward them from the south, and German soldiers waited inside the Reichstag. Lumière discerned the glint of the Germans' weapons as they took aim at the Russian soldiers. All at once, the crack of rifle fire and the pinging of bullets cut through the warming day.

In the early afternoon, the Russians decided to rush the German positions. Lumière noticed with dismay that she and Oba were right in the center, almost directly between the two forces. "Oba, what will we do?"

"I don't know, mistress. My skills are those of sneaking and ambush. Our travels have brought us directly into this conflict, and now I don't know what to do. We can't fight either of them, and both will kill us." He stared at her then spat at the ground, "They will both seek to defile you."

“If they can. I am not a weakling. I can defend myself.” She looked up, “Whatever we do, we must go now. The Russians are on the move, and I, like you, fear their tanks and their guns will make no exception for us. To the west Oba. Go!”

The motors of the tanks not a hundred meters away, revved and machinegun fire and high explosive shells flew over their heads.

“Keep your head down, Oba.”

“Yes mistress.”

The huge Russian tank guns blasted yellow red spurts of deadly fire at the building. Stone dust burst into the air at each shot. Lumière heard the screams of dying men. German machinegun fire blazed everywhere, and she was astounded neither of them had been hit. Then Oba went down. He didn't make a sound, just jerked backwards and fell to his knees.

“Oba!”

“It is nothing, mistress.”

“There is nowhere for us to go. Can you run?”

He stood up, “They will shoot you down, mistress. You run, I will draw their attention.”

“Oba, there are too many of them. We have nowhere to run. Nowhere to go.”

Oba didn't say another word. He stood up and began running toward the line of Russians, then he yelled, “Mistress, run the other way, through the line of tanks.” At each word, Lumière saw a blast of blood and muscle burst from Oba's body. He would move until his body was cut to pieces—they could not kill him.

“No! Oba!” she screamed. Lumière removed a small tablet from her pocket. It was pure gold striped oddly with black lines. The tablet was about fifteen by ten centimeters and one centimeter thick. One side was marked with ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics and the portrait of a

seated woman. Across the lips of the woman's picture once was a frown, now it was neither a frown nor a smile. Her mouth was straight as though at any moment her lips might turn either way.

Lumière jumped up. She held the tablet in her hand and said a word. The word itself was encased in power. It rose up from her lips and seemed to swirl with sunshine. It was like a dust devil but formed of light and darkness instead of earth. The golden swirl rose up and expanded. It encased Oba and swept him along. It caught up the tanks and buffeted them mercilessly. Their guns stopped firing. The Russians who walked behind the tanks were bowled over. Their bodies buffeted and their weapons lost, but they were unharmed. When the golden light hit the Reichstag building, it washed over the stone and rushed through the windows. Each man it touched fell to the ground blinded and unmoving. The world became nearly silent in the wake of the thing the girl had created.

A German soldier took careful aim with an antitank weapon at the slim girl who stood between the Russian tanks and the Reichstag. He had many antitank Panzerfausts to fire at the Russian vehicles, and he expected to die today. What would the death of one girl mean to anyone? He knew he made the right choice of target when the swirling light exploded from her toward him. He aimed at her. The moment the light hit him, his finger squeezed the trigger. He was unable to hear the heavy thump as the round cleared the tube. His eyes were unseeing as the projectile rushed toward the now running teen. He could not know it struck a tree not ten feet away from her.

Lumière was not far from Oba. The way for their escape was now clear. They could make their way through the line of stunned men and tanks and head east—their original destination. But then a roaring filled her ears. Lumière felt herself lifted into the air. She felt the touch of

super heated air on her back and the penetration of burning of metal into her legs and arm. Her last thought was excruciating pain. The tablet was pushed from her fingers, and she could not know where it went.

Vasily Grossman stood next to Efim Gekhman. They were sheltered in the rear of the Russian troops at a place where they could observe everything that went on between them and the Reichstag building. The fall of the Reichstag might be the last shots fired in Berlin. They both had out their paper tablets, pencils, and the poorly constructed binoculars they were issued. When they could, they borrowed one of the Russian field commanders commandeered German binoculars. So far neither of them had been able to collect, beg, borrow, or steal a pair. The war might be over before they could get some—they still had hope.

Vasily and Efim both wore Russian officer's uniforms with green tabs that marked them quartermasters of the second rank. They were, in fact special correspondents with the Russian army reporting for the Russian newspapers. Vasily's uniform was wrinkled and worn. He had a large nose, weak eyes aided with round spectacles, sensuous lips, and a strong chin. Efim was thin and wiry with a mischievous look and outlook. They both were laughing at the futility of the German's defense, and their writing was taking a sarcastic turn—even though they were just taking notes.

The Russian tanks were moving forward. Vasily had just written: huge guns were blasting yellow, dagger-like fire at the building, and everything was swamped in stone dust and black smoke. He immediately stopped writing and pointed with his pencil, "Look Efim, do you see that?"

"Where?"

“There. Look there. Do you see that boy?”

“It looks like a boy?” Efim put his binoculars back to his eyes, “It’s a beautiful boy. Maybe a girl. What’s she doing?”

Vasily put his binoculars to his eyes, “He...she has something in her hand. She’s yelling something. “Adoni, dear Father Abraham, do you see what is happening?”

“I can see it, but I don’t believe it.”

“Its looks like the sunlight and shadows are swirling around her,” Vasily strained his eyes through the binoculars.

“Do you think she made it happen?”

“It’s centered right where she is. What do you think?”

“I’ve seem a lot during this war, Vasily, but I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“Look! Our troops are dropping. Do you think she is German?”

“The Germans are dropping too. They haven’t fired a single round. Vasily, the tanks are being moved around—pushed backwards.”

“You’re joking.”

“Just take a look.”

“No. I’ve got my eyes on her. How can she do this?”

“She’s definitely not German.” Efim leaned forward, “They fired on her.”

“Fired on her?”

“Panzerfaust by the looks of it.”

“Why would they waste a weapon like that on a girl?”

“A girl who makes miracles.”

“Dear Adoni! Efim, I see her thrown into the air like a rag doll. She’s got to be dead.”

“Dead or dying like millions in this horrible war.”

“Look. The instant she was hit, the moving light stopped.”

“It was her, Vasily,” Efim spat between his fingers. “The end of her and good riddance, my grandmother would say. What a dangerous thing—if you believe it.”

“I don’t believe it, but I want to see this person.”

“You’ll see nothing but a broken, dead body, just like all the others you’ve already seen.”

“Come on Efim—let’s go. Quickly now”

Efim walked slowly, unwillingly to the jeep, but they both stepped in. Vasily pressed the starter and put the jeep in gear. They flew past their own troops still stunned on the ground and past the tanks unmoving and jumbled as though they were toys. Efim half stood up in his seat, “Have you seen anything move a T-34 tank like that? Watch out, Vasily. You’ll run her over. She was just here.”

“I didn’t think you were interested.”

“Professional interest only. There she is. Blown half apart by the looks of her.”

Vasily stopped the jeep and leapt out. He ran over beside the girl. She lay on her face. The back of her shirt and pants legs had been nearly blown off. They were still smoldering. The thick clothing had somewhat protected her slight body. Her body, small and thin, showed through the large holes in her clothing. Blood covered her white shirt and dripped onto her pants. Vasily put his hands around her shoulders and turned her over. She was beautiful. The most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Behind him, he heard Efim gasp, an entirely involuntary intake of breath. Efim came up beside him, “How could you ever think she was a boy? She is so beautiful.”

“She is also dying.”

While they watched, the girl choked on a mouthful of blood. Her eyes fluttered and flew open.

Efim covered his face, "She is dead."

"She is not dead. Here, you dress the wound on her arm. I'll get her legs."

"She is bleeding from her lungs. How long do you think she will last?"

"I hope, long enough for an interview."

"Vasily, Vasily, Vasily," Efim pulled out the first aid kit and began tying her bleeding arm.

The girl gave a pathetic gasp. Vasily tilted back her head and turned it to the side to clear her airway.

Efim shook his head.

"Take her arms Efim. I'll get her legs."

Efim grabbed the girl's arms. He shook his head, "You think the field hospital will help her? Are you a fool?"

Vasily lifted her by her feet, "She weighs almost nothing." He rasped under his breath at Efim, "Efim. Did not you see? A girl who can do this. She stopped the tanks. She stopped the guns and the troops. All the troops. What kind of girl is this?"

"You are living in a world of fantasy, Vasily. Whatever girl she was, she will soon be dead."

"You drive, Efim. I'll hold her."

Efim shook his head again. While he drove, Vasily held the gasping girl in his arms, "Dear God she is trying so hard to live. Efim are those tears on your cheeks?"

"You are torturing me, Vasily. I can't stand to hear her dying there in your arms. She reminds me of my own child. You're getting blood on your uniform."

They listened the whole way to the horrid gurgling breath of the girl, while Efim drove them to the field hospital a couple of miles away. At the hospital, Vasily picked the girl up in his arms and carried her inside. He stopped the first orderly he met, “Here is a wounded girl. She needs your help.”

The orderly halted, and his lip curled, “Sir, we don’t have any time or space for civilians even if she is your love interest.” He looked at the girl then lifted her eyelids, “She doesn’t have much longer anyway. She will be dead in just a little while.”

“Can’t you give her a cot, something? Can’t a doctor just look at her?”

The orderly’s strained face became a little gentler, “We don’t have any room here for the dying. You can leave her outside with the rest of the expiring soldiers—no one will molest her there. Here we only have the time and resources to treat our own soldiers who might have some hope of living. You can tell she is bleeding on the inside. Not even a surgeon could fix that.”

Vasily stammered, “You can’t do anything?”

The orderly pointed, “I told you. Put her with the soldiers outside who are dying like her. No one will molest her—at least while she is alive.”

Vasily stepped to the opening in the tent where the orderly pointed. He carried the girl out into a fly infested area where lay the dead and dying. They were all Russian soldiers, aligned in twin rows. He saw a soldier who was gasping much like the girl. A piece of shrapnel obviously skewered his lungs. Another soldier lay begging for water. The top of his skull was gone and exposed his brains to the world, yet he cried out for water. All down the row, they were all quietly waiting for death. Many made noises, the noises of those who did not know they were left to die, yet for whom death was certain.

Vasily glanced at the girl. Her lips were slack. In and out of them wheezed her labored breath. She grappled the air in gasps that now and then that sent a trickle of blood down the side of her face. She was pale. Her hair, partially unbound by the blast was thick and long. It cascaded from her head like a shining black fall. He pulled her closer and put his face in her hair and smelled blood and the scent of his mother and his wife, his daughter.

Angrily, Vasily whirled on his heel and exited the hospital.

Efim looked up at him, tears still made tracks down the sides of his face, “They... they wouldn’t take her?”

“They told me to put her with the men who where dying.”

“Vasily, look at her. She is dying.”

“Efim, look at her. She is Jewish.”

Efim turned his face away as though he didn’t want to know the truth.

“Look at her hair. Look at her complexion. Look at her features. She is like our mothers and wives and children. Whoever she is, we can’t just leave her out here to die. Remember the thousands of dead Jews we saw at Treblinka.”

“I remember, Vasily. How can I forget? I can never forget, but...,” he swallowed and shook his head.

“Come on. Let’s take her back to headquarters. She can die quietly there.” Vasily held the slight girl lightly in his arms and stepped back in the jeep. “Go on.”

Efim put the jeep in gear, “What will Colonel-General Berzarin say?”

“He doesn’t need to know.”

“With the racket she is making, she will be hard to hide. What if the commissar finds out?”

“What is one dying girl to the Fifth Shock Army? Efim, you worry about too much. She will die soon, and that will be that.”

Efim drove up to the Fifth Shock Army headquarters. When the jeep halted, Vasily grabbed the girl in his arms and started toward the house where the correspondents stayed. He stopped and turned part way around, “Get the clerk Klava Kopylova.”

“Why her, Vasily? She’s practically the General’s PPZh, his campaign wife.”

Vasily started off again, “Just get her, Efim. She will be able to help.” Vasily took the gasping girl to the open room and laid her on his cot. She was still bleeding. For the first time since he had taken her off the battlefield, she opened her eyes with some intelligence in them and stared up at him. Pain filled her gaze. Her lips trembled and blood leaked down the side of her face.

Vasily mopped it up with his handkerchief. He tied her bandages a little tighter. The girl began gasping harder and panting. Vasily touched her cheek, “Death won’t be much longer now, child.”

The headquarters clerk Klava ran into the room. She was a tall busty woman with an angular face and blond hair. She put her hand over her mouth, “What did you do, Vasily?”

“I could not let her die out in the dirt.”

“Is she dying?”

Vasily swallowed past a lump, “I think she is.”

“You can’t leave her here. Bring her into my room. There is an extra cot.”

Vasily picked up the girl and followed Klava.

They didn’t have to pass through the headquarters to get to Klava’s room. Klava pointed to the extra cot, “Why didn’t you take her to the field hospital?”

“I did.”

Klava stared expectantly at him.

“They wanted me to leave her with the dying soldiers.”

“Couldn’t do it? Is she a friend of yours?” Klava pulled off the girl’s shirt and began pulling off her pants. Vasily backed to the front of the room and turned away toward them.

“I...we saw her take a hit on the battlefield in front of the Reichstag. When I saw her, I couldn’t leave her to die there.”

“She is beautiful. No underthings. She’s likely a German orphan. That or a whore. If she isn’t, she’ll be soon enough—with the Fifth Shock Army around.”

“Klava after Treblinka, I couldn’t stand to see another of my people...”

“If you thought she was a Jew...she’s wearing a rosary.”

Vasily turned part way around. He turned back again, “Could she be a gypsy?”

“Her hair is too clean, and gypsy women don’t wear men’s clothing.”

“People will do anything to hide from the Nazi’s.”

“...and the Russian Army.”

“How do her wounds look?”

“Come help me turn her over. Come on Vasily. She’s like your daughter. Give me a hand.”

Vasily came over reluctantly. The girl was beautiful. At least what you could see under the blood and the bruising. She was not obviously wounded on the front of her body. He helped Klava turn the girl over. A chunk was carved out of her bloody right leg and shrapnel wounds peppered the back of the other leg and her buttocks. Her right arm had shrapnel cuts all over it. Klava and he began washing and bandaging her wounds. Klava looked up from her work, “You know, this won’t do her any good.”

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“Why not?”

“If by the grace of God she survives, the shrapnel will kill her from the inside out. I’ve seen it lots of times.”

“Efim thinks she won’t survive anyway.”

“Her breathing isn’t as labored as it was. She doesn’t seem to have any punctures through her chest or lungs. I washed her entire back, and I can’t see any wound there.”

“Is it possible to bleed from your lungs and survive?”

“She isn’t bleeding much now. What she needs is a doctor.”

Vasily ran his hand through his hair, “Do you have any idea where I can find one, Klava?”

“A German doctor, maybe. You might trade him bread or meat.”

“Do you mind if I leave her here with you.”

“Yes, I do, but you may leave her here anyway. When she dies, you must remove her body right away.”

“Can you stay with her until I get back?”

“No. I’m on shift now. I need to get back to work.”

“Can Efim stay with her?”

“If he will.”

“Just give me a moment. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Klava looked disdainfully at her bloody hands, “Very well, Vasily. Hurry.”

Vasily found Efim. He was waiting impatiently outside the headquarters, “Vasily, is she dead yet?”

“No, not yet. I need to go find a German doctor to treat her. You must stay with her while I go.”

Efim raised his hands, “I can’t stay with her. Her gasping was driving me crazy. I’m a father, I can’t stand to hear that.”

“You must, while I find the doctor.”

“I’ll find the doctor. I promise. You stay with the girl.” Efim ran off in the direction of their jeep, “I’ll look.”

“Don’t disappoint me, Efim.”

Vasily returned to Klava’s room where the girl now lay partially on her left side with a sheet and a woolen blanket covering her. Klava gave Vasily a single pained look, and the girl a longer one filled with compassion. She left the room.

Vasily sat down beside the cot. He touched the girl’s cheek, “Little one, I could not leave you to die—not after what I saw. Did you really make the world do your will for one moment? Can I believe what I saw with my own eyes—what Efim saw.” He smoothed her hair. Her breathing was only slightly labored, “What are you really? Are you a person or are you a demon? Could you possibly... could you be an angel?”

