

**2 May 1912**  
***Riga, Russian controlled Latvia***

Captain Voldemars Vechi sat on a cold concrete bench in his full dress uniform across from Riga University. Consumed by his thoughts, he gazed at dawn's first light as it pierced the dark blue sky. He'd been proud of his stature as a Captain at only twenty-eight years old. No other Latvian in the Czarist cavalry had moved so quickly up the ranks. He ignored the queer, curious glances of workers headed to their early drudgery behind machines in the manufacturing end of the city. Young boys leering as they scooted on their way to school did not faze him either. Even the dampness left from overnight showers seeping through the seat of his pants had gone unnoticed. His only preoccupation was what he needed to say to his fiancée.

*Oh, for the simplicity of youthful desires, he thought, perplexed at how complex his life had become. He grew increasingly anxious the more he wondered how his fiancée Otilija was going to react to his plan. Years ago, I wouldn't have even cared, much less felt so damned nervous. I would have just left a note and been off,* he thought.

He removed his cap and placed it next to him on the bench. He ran his hand across his bristly short blonde hair, then pensively stroked at the ends of his thin handlebar mustache.

*Hell, I wouldn't have even considered taking such an enormous step as marriage. Now I'm trying to move it up,* he thought.

Hoping the pleasant diversion would assuage his tension, he sucked in a deep breath and gazed into the beautiful spring Riga offered. This city had always made him feel good, especially after a cleansing spring rain, when the city sparkled with a freshly washed appearance. Teeming with moisture laden blossoms, tulip gardens rolled in response to the gentle breezes as if they were oceans. Emerald hedgerows sparkled, their dark leaves rinsed clean of the city's fine ochre dust while tiny white fragrant blossoms peeked through. Even the sullied pall of black and gray industrial dirt had been washed off the cobble-stoned streets and concrete sidewalks.

His wandering eyes finally settled on the closed, third-floor windows of the University's worn, red brick walls. He counted three square-framed glass windows back from the right and stopped. In the office where Otilija worked, the sheer, yellowed curtains remained closed.

*Still not there. Good, maybe I can catch her before she goes in,* he thought, leaning forward. He slipped his buttocks back on the bench, and then rested his chin on top of his fisted hands. Looking at the sidewalk, he mulled over how he would break his news. Before he could rehearse even one line though, through the corner of his eye, a figure approaching caught his attention. The ballerina's grace of her movement alone convinced him it was Otilija.

When he looked up, he saw Otilija's flowing, full-length sapphire blue dress elegantly brushing the sidewalk with her strides. Snow-white lace extended up from her bodice to cover her neck, and with the blue silk ribbon in her hair, framed her head like a delicate spring flower. As she drew closer, he saw her almond-shaped, brown eyes sparkle with the morning sunlight.

"Good morning, Otilija." He stood up from the bench. He politely removed his stiff brimmed cap, smartly tucked it under his arm, then strutted directly toward her.

"Voldemars. What a pleasant surprise." Her thin, peach-colored lips twitched at the corners.

"I hope you don't mind my announcing in public that the more I see you, the more I feel I'm in love with you."

"Oh, Voldemars." Otilija blushed and dipped her head. "I honestly did not expect to see you today. I thought you . . ."

"Had maneuvers?" he finished for her. An impish grin sprouted onto his face as the delicacy of her lilac scented perfume wafted into his sinuses. "Well, what would you say if I told you I had decided not to

play soldier . . . for today?” He offered a bent arm in a gentlemanly manner. She responded in kind, tipping her head and slipping her arm into the crook of his elbow.

“And that I was going to spend this wonderful spring day with the most beautiful woman I know,” he said as they started toward the University.

“I simply would not believe you, Voldemars,” she replied stiffly. As she looked up into his pale green eyes, her tone grew playful. “Tell me, how I could ever believe that? Of all the soldiers in the Czar’s army, you are the one he can always count on. Captain Voldemars Vecchi would never shirk his duties. You’re much too disciplined and conscientious —”

“I know we were supposed to get married next month,” Voldemars blurted, but when his eyes met Otilija’s, her suddenly piercing stare whisked the words from his lips.

*Was my approach careless?* he wondered. He tried to read into her deeply set, widened eyes. Hoping to recapture his broken train of thought, he glanced away, searching for words, but instead, a sense of betrayal rushed in.

“I’m sorry, let me rephrase that,” he mumbled, still cringing from the blunt crassness he sensed in his words. “I’d like to get married — I mean I think it would be better if we get married now — instead of waiting.”

“Now? Why — why now? I thought we had already decided that . . .”

“Uh — something has come up. There’s been a change in plans,” he babbled. “Our group has been transferred, and . . .”

He stopped abruptly as a waft of onion-tainted perspiration rose from underneath his collar. He had no idea what his orders were going to be. Assignment was two weeks away, and Command had maintained surprisingly tight control over the information. But he had to think of something.

“Well, it really doesn’t matter where we’re going.”

“You are confusing me, Voldemars. Please, tell me exactly what you’re trying to tell me.”

“What matters is that if we’re married, you can come with me. That is an officer’s privilege, you know — to take his wife. The military has housing for . . .”

“Voldemars, stop. Just stop for a moment. I still do not completely understand.” She held out one hand and pressed at her temples with the other, as if to keep her thoughts from spilling out. Her eyes grew cold and calculated. “You will be back in a month, won’t you?”

Voldemars’ eyes did not waver.

“So we can still have the wedding then, can’t we?”

“I — I honestly don’t know when I’ll be back. And I don’t know if I can even get leave then,” he admitted. His heated blush pushed the distinctly pungent rye bread odor from his open pores.

“But you will get leave sometime, though, yes?”

“I presume so . . .”

“Could we wait until then?” Her voice trembled.

Voldemars’ jaw slackened. Stumped, he combed his mind to find a more urgent yet logical reason to counter with, but failed. She was right.

*You are all I think about now, Otilija*, he thought as his eyes glassed over.

“Oh, Voldemars,” her voice gently interceded. “You know how much I want to marry you. But you know I’d like to have a traditional wedding — one with everyone there?”

*Ever since I met you last year, my life finally has meaning. A purpose*, Voldemars thought.

“If we get married now, no one will be here for the ceremony.”

*I can’t imagine a day passing without being able to talk to you or touch you*, he thought as he felt fear and loneliness at the possibility of their separation.

"Your parents said that they cannot make it here until next month. And Otomars, oh how Otomars would be devastated if he did not get to perform his traditional 'big brother' duties!" She giggled as she mimed her brother's characteristic preening, thrusting out her lower jaw as she puffed out her chest and swaggered two steps.

Voldemars remained silent and sullen, thinking, *I feel so much more alive now that we're together.*

"For heaven's sake, you know how much he likes to act like my overseer."

"But, Otilija. I want you to be my wife. Now," he pleaded. "An officer's wife. Someone to be respected and revered. As you should be ..."

"And what about what I want, Voldemars?" Her expression iced over as her voice grew louder. "Have you considered I might feel that something else may be important?"

Voldemars hung his head and absorbed her censure.

"The wedding ceremony is just as important to me — just as important as it is to any woman. A woman's wedding day belongs to her. That is when she really feels respected and revered. Not after."

"I thought you'd like to be known as Captain Vechi's wife?" he tentatively offered.

"Ha. Captain Vechi's wife? And then what? Do I just become some baggage that you carry from campaign to campaign?" She scolded, her finger pointing directly at his chest. "Or will I be just another of those damn ribbons you wear only on your dress uniform? A decoration to be taken out when there's no battle to get mixed up in?"

Otilija spun and stomped away in a huff. She stopped at the curb, and emphatically crossed her arms in front of her. She looked at the school for a moment, then turned and glared back.

"No, Voldemars. Do you hear me? No. I am not ready for that. And to be perfectly honest with you, I don't know if I will ever be." She snapped her head around. Her lips quivered as she glared at the windows on the third floor. Her face had grown flushed in rage. "And another thing you should think about, Captain Vechi. I don't know if I am ready to give up who I am. I am happy being just a bookkeeper in Riga. I am happy just being Otilija Braze for now. I am happy just being the daughter of a common factory worker. Can you understand that, Captain Vechi?"

"Otilija, please, you are important to me. Can't you see that? You are all I have now." He tried not to whine, but felt his pleading tone seep through.

"I am all you have now?" She mimed surprise, propping her hands on her hips. "Well, Captain Vechi," her sarcasm oozed. "If that is truly the case, then it is your own fault. If you weren't so damned obsessed with becoming the Czar's most important soldier, you might still be on speaking terms with your father."

He felt skewered. The possibility that he could be the cause of his father's isolation had never occurred to him. Nor could he believe that Otilija would even think it, no less say it.

"Sometimes I wonder if you even realize what you did to him, leaving the way you did." Her challenge was relentless. "Did you ever think that being a Latvian hero in a Russian army may not be what your father wanted from you? Maybe all he really wanted was for you to be his son."

Her words stung, but his own guilt reminded him that she was right. He was selfish, and he never took the time to listen to anyone other than himself. He was always in too much of a rush to prove his manhood.

"You know, Voldemars, if you would only step back and watch yourself sometimes, I think you would be truly amazed." Her tone softened and grew empathetic. "You are so consumed by playing soldier that I think you have lost perspective of who you really are." Her angry, flushed face glowed. She sucked in a deep breath, and then exhaled forcefully, all the while glaring at Voldemars.

"I know you could just put your time in the army and then leave, but why do I sense you will not?"

Otilija stopped, allowing Voldemars an opportunity to respond. Instead, he chewed on his lower lip and remained silent. “You are just another body to them, Voldemars. As expendable as a pair of shoes. Can’t you see that?”

Voldemars remained silent.

“I have to go now. I am expected at work. As menial as bookkeeping may seem to you, it still needs to be done,” Otilija announced as she turned. After taking only two steps, she spun and lashed out again. “Maybe a month or so apart will do us both some good. And if it is more, then that is all the better. Perhaps then you will decide what it is you really want — whether you want to be mortal and marry me, or keep on imagining you are the modern day reincarnation of Lacplesis!” Otilija stopped for a moment as if to let her words sink in. Again, Voldemars did not respond. “And maybe that will give me enough time to sort out whether or not you are the right one for me.” Otilija turned and stomped across the street, toward the tall oak doors of the University. When they closed behind her, Voldemars again stood alone on the concrete sidewalk.



Still bewildered and confused by Voldemars’ actions at the University that morning, Otilija sauntered out into her mother’s garden for a therapeutic stroll. It was a warm day even though the sun hid behind ribbons of mottled pink clouds that were fringed at both their crests and bases by pastel blue. Trying to clear her head, she released her brown hair from its restrictive bun, and then wandered through the freshly sprouting cabbage, bending over to touch some tiny purple heads as she passed.

When the gently pungent aroma of onion greens titillated her nose, she stopped and looked up. In the scallion patch ahead, her mother, Doroteja had set a three-legged stool next to the bed, and then carefully set her tools down. She pulled her fine, auburn hair under a red kerchief, and then tied the scarf’s ends behind her head before gently easing down into a comfortable sitting position on the stool. She leaned forward and started her ritual spring harvest preparations.

First, she inspected her knife, gently scraping the edge with her finger to assure it was still sharp. Satisfied, she nestled her oval reed basket in her lap, then moved the handles out of the way before bowing her head and reciting her own brief prayer for a fine harvest season. She leaned forward, bunched up a handful of the thin, emerald spikes in her curled hand, then eased her knife across their base.

Otilija craned her neck and closely watched the blade sever the spikes and free an ooze of clear fluid onto her mother’s fingers. Doroteja laid the greens into her reed basket then grabbed another bunch, and again, carefully stroked her knife through the thin tubes, but then oddly stopped and cocked her head.

“Now this is unusual. My little city girl walking in a vegetable garden,” she said with a gentle soothing voice. Without looking back, she carefully set her knife and the freshly cut greens into her basket. Pivoting on her seat, she turned and faced her. “Come sit with me, *mazulis*. Tell me what’s troubling you.”

Otilija knew her mother meant nothing other than affection with her diminutive, but it still bothered her to be referred to as little girl. “Oh, nothing. Just coming out to visit,” Otilija lied. Embarrassed, she glanced down to her feet and blushed. She scratched her toe back and forth at the ground, contemplating whether she was even ready to talk.

“Nothing?” Doroteja’s doubting expression was topped by her lifted eyebrows. “This from the girl who spends all of her time at the university with her nose in a book? This from the girl who’s already figured out what she’s going to do with her life? This from my little one who has already grown up faster than I would have liked?”

Otilija watched her mother’s face grow as consoling as she’d ever been. A warm, tiny grin blossomed on her face as she tipped her head to her shoulder.

"You will excuse me for not believing you, dear child, but the only time you ever come out here is when you need some advice."

*I should be handling my own affairs now that I am twenty-five*, Otilija thought, still hesitant to admit her problem. *But she's right, why else would I be out here?*

"I don't mean to make light of whatever's bothering you, Otilija, but I am your mother. I know you're grown up, but since I'm your mother, I can usually tell when something is wrong."

"Oh, Momma, it's Voldemars," Otilija sighed noisily as she plopped down between the rows of onions. She crossed her legs and brought them up underneath her dress, then perched her head on her hands.

"Ah, your soldier. He's got you thinking, has he? And by the look on your face, my dear, I'd guess that one of you is getting cold feet?"

Otilija sighed heavily, and then absently weaved her hands through the foot tall scallions. She snapped one off and slipped it into her mouth before any of the extract could ooze out. Doroteja reached into the patch and mimicked her daughter.

"Mmm, still needs another week or so," she said as she slipped it into her mouth.

"I don't know if I'll ever understand him, Momma."

"Is he putting you off again?"

"Actually, no. He wants to get married now instead of waiting until after Jani."

"You know I wouldn't be too worried about that," Doroteja rambled without listening to her daughter. "Sometimes men just need —" She gasped, and appeared suddenly horrified. She coughed, almost choking on the onion. "Good Lord, child. You don't have to, do you?"

"Oh, no, Momma. I've been good," Otilija defended.

"My goodness, child. You do know how to make a mother gray," Doroteja released a relieved sigh. She reached over to Otilija and stroked her wavy brown hair.

"Then, he does have some reason for getting married now, doesn't he?"

"Yes. I mean, he says he does. Oh, honestly, Momma, I'm not really sure at all. He said it was because he is being shipped out on assignment —" Otilija stumbled through her words.

"That can't be everything that's bothering you," Doroteja prodded.

"I think what bothered me the most was that he couldn't look me in the eyes when he said that. He wouldn't say where he was going, or for how long, but he still wants me to go with him!"

"Oh?" Doroteja frowned, apparently trying to hide a snicker. "If I were you, I'd be quite relieved that he wants you to go with him, and not leave you behind."

"But, Momma," Otilija slapped her hands onto the ground in protest. "If we get married now, there'll be no ceremony — and there's just no time to get anything ready by Saturday — and Otomars can't make it — he's still stationed in Petersburg at least until Jani — and Voldemars' parents can't make it here on such short notice — and there's just not enough time for me to get ready." Otilija gasped a deep breath before continuing. "I haven't even talked to the dress-maker about a dress." Otilija stopped and simmered as she collected her thoughts for a moment. "And I just can't convince him of that. He's so ... he's so damned bull-headed."

Doroteja giggled, then tried to hide her smirk behind her hands. Baffled by her mother's response, Otilija stopped munching the onion stalk. "I guess you are starting to realize what I've been going through for years," Doroteja placed her open hand on her daughter's shoulder, then peered into her eyes. "Men are an enigma, my child. They seem to always have complete control of every last detail, and pride themselves at that."

"But Momma, it's not just that —"

“Patience, my child, let me finish. But when emotions are involved, especially heart-felt ones, they’ve absolutely no control. I don’t think there’s a woman alive who could say that she understands why they do what they do.”

“But, Momma, it’s just not like him. Not Voldemars. He has always understood. He has been so considerate with my feelings. He’s always been a patient gentleman.”

Doroteja gazed into Otilija’s brown, almond-shaped eyes while she gently stroked her daughter’s hair.

“I simply can’t understand why he’s acting this way now. Especially since he knows how much I want my ceremony?”

“From what you’ve told me about Voldemars, he’s a man of great feeling. In that way, he’s quite unlike other men,” Doroteja said in a subdued tone.

“So, then why is he being so stubborn?”

“Dear child, all men are stubborn. Look at Poppa. Stone faced and serious about everything. And your brothers, well, they are just like him. But your Voldemars, though, has a bit of a different character to him. Very different.”

“But — ”

“Think about what he’s saying, Otilija. Look hard into what he’s really saying. It doesn’t sound like he’s doing anything out of selfishness or stubbornness. I think he’s doing this just because he loves you very much and doesn’t want to leave you here, alone.”

Otilija’s eyes widened like saucers. She gazed deeply into her mother’s eyes and read her sincerity. “Do you really think so, Momma?”

Doroteja nodded with a slight smile. “And I’d say that you’re very fortunate to have a man like Voldemars interested in you,” she added.

Otilija gazed at her mother, squirming as she thought. “So, then you think we should get married now?”

“Dear child, you’re a grown woman now. You can think for yourself. What I think isn’t important.” Doroteja stood up, bent over, and picked up her reed basket and stool. She offered her hand to Otilija, then helped her up to her feet.

“Take your time and think it over,” Doroteja offered as they headed toward the house. “But do remember, Otilija. This isn’t the first time a man has disappointed you, and speaking from experience, believe me, it will not be the last. But when it all comes down to the end, I really don’t think that Voldemars will disappoint you very much.”

