



Nexus Of Time

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Excerpt of three chapters

CHAPTER ONE

World War Two was two weeks old. On the first of September, over one and a half million German troops of the Wehrmacht invaded Poland from three fronts with Blitzkrieg tactics that bombed and terrorized defenseless civilians and the brave but outclassed Polish army. Even though Britain and France had declared war on Nazi Germany on September the third, it was a hollow gesture, as their promised help did not materialize. Polish antitank guns had surprised and slowed the arrogant enemy but it was only a matter of time before the whole country capitulated. Further to the stricken country's troubles was the rumor that Soviet forces in the east were also about to invade. Prominent citizens had been advised to leave their homeland to continue the battle in exile from France or England.

Anna Vladisciuszko tucked her fingers in the necklace as she often did when she was nervous and stared up at the circular stairwell of The Chateau as the inhabitants called the castle standing majestically above the central Polish village of Zlodek. Tears were in the twelve year old eyes for she knew this was the last time she would see her home. Almost everything had gone; even the furniture that graced the grand entrance hall had been unceremoniously loaded onto an ancient truck and taken away. Only the curtains remained, golden ones with a pattern of brick red leaves twisting and turning all the way down. When the curtains blew in the wind the leaves appeared to move.

Her father and uncle had gone and were never returning and even the servants were given a month's pay and had departed. Only old Stefan had remained and was now upstairs with her mother.

Countess Nina Vladisciuszko appeared on the balcony and called down to her child in Polish, their native tongue. "Anna, come up and finish packing your case. Stefan can't be expected to do everything."

"Yes, Mama," replied Anna. She ran up the stairs with blonde pigtailed bobbing and arrived at her bedroom just as Stefan appeared on the landing with an ornate wooden chest in his arms.

"I'm afraid this may be too heavy for us to take, Anna," he said. "Could you pack what you need in the leather suitcase I brought you yesterday?"

Anna screwed her nose up but said she would. Many of her dresses would be of no use anyway she guessed but she hated to leave them for the enemy. She opened the trunk and repacked her favorite clothes in the blue suitcase Stefan placed open beside her. Less than half fitted in. Finally she tucked a little make up kit in a gap in the corner and watched as the elderly servant shut the case and pulled the straps tight.

Down at the main entrance there was a knock, the door opened and two men entered. They approached Countess Vladisciuszko and gave a tiny head bow.

"Excuse us, Countess," the elder of the two men said, "but you must hurry. The enemy is less than fifteen kilometers away and the last train will depart from the station in fifteen minutes. We can hold it no longer."

Nina frowned, "Are they Russians or Germans?" she asked.

The men shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"No, I guess not," replied the woman in a whisper. She turned towards the stairs. "Stefan, Anna. We must go. Come now, please."

Moments later Anna found herself sitting in the back of their trustworthy but ancient Skoda and heading down to the station. Everywhere people were walking or riding on horse drawn carts. Theirs was the only motor vehicle around. Stefan, who was driving, tooted at the pedestrians who were too slow to move aside.

On several occasions he wound down the window, poked his head out and yelled, "Let the Countess, through," and grunted as the refugees moved aside. Some local villages glanced up and smiled at the car's passengers but most were too concerned with their own problems as they stumbled forward on the narrow road.

"God bless you, Countess," an elderly lady with a scarf tied on her head called out after

one stop and Nina acknowledged her with a tiny wave.

Anna jumped in fright as a massive bang filled the air behind them.

"A field gun, Anna. The enemy are close," Nina responded. "That is why we must leave. I told you, didn't I?"

"Yes Mama but if they're Germans they won't hurt us, will they?" The girl's blue eyes set over high cheekbones and pale white skin turned up to her mother as Stefan tooted the horn once again.

Nina looked down at her daughter staring at her. "I'm afraid they will, My Darling," she whispered.

"But why? I know the Russians don't like us aristocrats."

Her mother frowned. "That is true but your Grandma was a Jew and the Germans don't like Jews."

"But we aren't Mama," the girl said. "You always told me we are not Jews."

"They don't think that way, Anna. That is why we must leave."

"Where will the train take us, Mama?"

Nina smiled at her daughter. Her only child was growing up rapidly. "Questions, questions, Anna. I told you. We're heading to Warsaw then up to the coast and a boat will take us across the Baltic to Sweden or perhaps England where it will be safe."

"Is that where our navy has gone?" came the next question.

Nina tried to stop tears appearing in her eyes as she did up the button on her daughter's coat and gave her a hug. "Yes, My Darling. The English were going to come and help us but they never did. ."

Stefan turned the Skoda into the tiny Zlodek Station where an engine was hissing steam and smoke. Behind it were a dozen carriages jammed with people and several Polish soldiers manned a barricade to stop anyone else from entering the platform. The last carriage, though old, was clean and polished with curtains hanging from the windows.

Stefan drove up to a barricade that was lifted to allow the Skoda through and continued along the platform until the car reached this rearmost carriage.

Nina glanced at the desperate faces around and made a decision. "We don't need the whole carriage," she said and called to one of the soldiers. "Sergeant, allow another thirty people through."

"But where will they go, Countess? You can see the train is overflowing." the man replied.

"They can share my carriage, sergeant."

"As you wish, Countess Vladisciuszko," he replied, saluted and turned to two soldiers. "Thirty more, Corporal Wijesathne, and that does not mean thirty-one. Tell them to wipe their feet before they enter the Countess's carriage."

"Yes, sergeant," replied the corporal. He walked along the barrier touching the lucky refugees on the shoulder while two other soldiers stood by him with their ancient Great War rifles held ready to use if the crowd turned ugly.

The twenty were mainly woman who smiled shyly at the soldiers and carried their bags or processions rolled up in blankets to the end carriage and clambered aboard. In the middle of the group was a man who wore an air force uniform with little pips on the shoulder. Anna was sure she'd seen him push his way through the women to get to the barrier.

"Thank you," he said and lugged his haversack onto the train.

Anna stared at him. "Why is he here?" she snorted. "Shouldn't he be fighting the enemy?"

Nina too had seen the man but she smiled. "They fought bravely, Anna. Perhaps he was shot down and is returning to his base. Once we're on the train you can ask him."

"Will we ever be able to stop the Germans?"

Nina smiled at her daughter. "One day, My Darling but it may be a long time. When you are an adult I'm sure you will be free."

"And we'll be safe in England until our land is free again?"

"Yes, Anna but no more questions. Look, Stefan has already loaded your suitcase. Quick onto the train."

Her hand brushed Anna's arm and together they climbed the two steps and stepped inside where Stefan was poking the luggage on a rack above the seats. Anna sat down and found she was across from the Polish Air Force officer. She gave him a tiny smile before turning her eyes away.

A guard's whistle blew, there was a hiss and a squeak of brakes and the carriage jerked backwards for a second before moving forward. Smoke puffed past the window momentarily hiding the platform from view and by the time it had cleared the platform and people had gone. The village houses adjacent to the railway line disappeared as the train chugged forward and increased speed out over the stony plains surrounding the town.

Anna glanced back out the window and saw the Chateau for the last time. The magnificent building that would never be their home again stood in the sunshine as it had done for hundreds of years. She felt a hand grip hers and looked up to see tears forming in her mother's eyes.

"It will be all right, Mama," she said. "We will come back one day when the world is free."

Nina said nothing but squeezed her daughter's hand as the overladen refugee train headed east towards Warsaw before, with luck, they could head north to the coast.

After the initial rush, Anna settled back and studied her surroundings. This wasn't her first ride in the carriage; in fact she had traveled through to Warsaw on the train several times but never had to share space with other people, village people she recognized and also strangers, mainly women with exhausted expressions and threadbare clothes. Sunken eyes sometimes met hers before turning away. Anna smiled at the passengers and switched her attention out the window.

"Anna," said the Countess a few moments later. "I have something very important to tell you."

"Yes Mama," Anna replied and switched her attention to the tall slim lady beside her. One day she hoped she would become as beautiful and self-confident as her mother. It was only a short time since her father's death but her mother had just continued on as ever. Anna frowned. He had been a remote man who treated her fairly but was never close. She'd heard once that he'd wanted a son but for reasons unknown, her mother had no other children. Anna's life to date had been somewhat isolated but happy, especially after she had persuaded her mother to let her attend the village school.

"Pay attention, Anna," Nina scolded.

"Sorry Mama," the girl replied and switched her attention back to the present.

"Your dress, Anna. It is very special," Nina continued. Her eyes met her daughter's and she continued talking in almost a whisper so they couldn't be overheard. "The shoulder pad on the right is like a wee pocket."

Anna grimaced. "But I've got two other pockets, Mama. My handkerchief is in one and..."

Nina smiled but her eyes remained sad. "Listen, Anna. Inside there is a tiny purse. Reach up and pull it out."

Anna used her left hand and found she could lift the material on the inside with her fingers. She felt in and touched something. With a tiny pull she extracted the object and placed it on her lap. It was indeed the smallest purse she had ever seen and looked as if it was made for a doll. The surface, though, was genuine leather with a minute brass clip on the top.

Nina reached over, took the purse from her daughter and opened it. Anna peered in the small gap but frowned in disappointment. There was only a safety pin and two small sheets of paper, inside.

"Is that all, Mama?" she asked as her mother unfolded the sheets between her long fingers. Anna loved looking at Nina's fingers with the shiny rings and red polish. One day she would have beautiful hands like her mother, she was sure.

"You must never lose these, Anna," Nina said in a serious voice. "This one," and she held out a long printed sheet, "is your birth certificate and gives the names of all our family,

even your grandparents. "

"But I know all our names, Mama."

Nina sighed and gave her daughter a wee hug. She glanced out the window and saw the train was now chugging through the flat countryside. It looked so peaceful out there as if the war was an illusion and their lives could continue as they always had.

"I know you do, Anna, but this will be needed to prove who you are. You may change your name one day. If you do, this piece of paper will show who you really are?"

"Like if I get married, Mama. I understand," Anna replied in a whisper, " but what about that piece of orange paper?"

The paper in question was more brown than orange, was only about five centimeters long by three wide, had writing on it Anna couldn't read with some numbers and letters all jumbled together.

"This is a bank number, Anna. You know my jewelry?"

Anna nodded.

"Well the man in the bank in Switzerland is looking after it for us. He has other things that belonged to your father and myself, too. If anything ever happens to me, you can go to the bank and get our things back. They are safe there for now."

"But the writing, Mama. It is not in Polish. Where will I know where it is?"

Nina smiled. "It is written in German and French. Somebody will be able to read it for you."

"Okay, Mama but if the whole world spoke Polish it would be so much easier."

Nina kissed her daughter and slipped the papers back in the tiny purse and placed it all into the secret pocket.

"Now remember, when you change your dress, take the wee purse out. Use the safety pin to pin it inside your clothes, inside your panties will do."

Anna giggled.

"But never lose it, Anna. Always keep it with you and never give it to anyone else to look after. You're almost an adult now so I am trusting you with it. It will be our secret. Just us."

Anna saw her mother staring straight at her with tears in her eyes.

"Don't be sad, Mama. I'll look after it. I promise."

"I know you will, My Darling. I know you will." She blew her nose and wiped her eyes. "Now relax. I know Stefan made us some sandwiches so we'll have something to eat soon and also a soda drink."

Anna glanced at the countess and felt important. Even though she wasn't yet a teenager she wanted to be treated as an adult. She squeezed her mother's hand and tucked her head back on the soft material of the carriage seat. In a few moments the youngster had drifted off asleep. The war seemed so far away.

CHAPTER TWO

The attack came without warning. Anna woke to the sound of a screaming aircraft engine in her ears and a silver and gray fighter plane flashed past the carriage window. The sleek fuselage and black and white cross became embedded in her mind in that brief second. At the same time there was a screech of wheels and a hiss of released steam as the train made an emergency stop. She was flung forward. Her head hit the cushioned seat in front and she found herself bounced down into the gap between the seats.

Outside, two Messerschmitt 109 fighters, one of the fastest aircraft in the world and pride of the Luftwaffe, peeled off after their inspection of the refugee train. Within seconds they had circled back and, at a speed of close to four hundred kilometers an hour rocketed towards the rear of the train. The lead plane strafed the carriages with wing mounted machine guns to pump lethal bullets through the roof of the carriages below.

Seconds later the second fighter continued the brutal attack before both aircraft flew off to their base. It was all over within a few moments.

In that few seconds of terror, though, bullets ricocheted through Countess Vladisciuszko's carriage destroying everything in their path. Wood, metal and flesh were pulverized in the human slaughter caused by the cowardly attack.

Nina slumped forward without even a sigh and one arm slumped over Anna lying on the floor. Blood followed. Stefan, too was dead with his head blown apart.

All along the right hand side of the carriage, human beings became bloody corpses if they were lucky. The rest remained conscious long enough to feel excruciating pain in their frail bodies before they, too died.

The screams began!

The train had stopped. Refugees jumped from the two carriages that had largely escaped the strafing. There was a frenzied panic of self-preservation.

Anna was unhurt but the sheer terror of seeing her mother her made her break out into hysterical screams. "Mama! Mama!" She pushed herself into a sitting position but Nina didn't reply. Her eyes stared straight ahead like those of a doll. Never again would she be able to protect her daughter.

But not everyone was dead or wounded. Anna felt herself being lifted. She screamed, kicked and bit in a valiant effort to return to her mother but was held in a firm grip.

"Your mother is dead, Little Countess," said a husky voice. "We can do nothing for her now but we must get off the train. Trust me! I can help."

Anna stopped kicking and looked up. The airforce officer was holding her. She could feel his rough uniform against her cheeks and smell that male stench of tobacco. But her world spun and she blacked out.

"Bloody Nazi thugs," the flight lieutenant swore. He carried the girl he knew was the countess's daughter, through the corpses to the closest door.

Smoke was pouring in the windows and the carriage stank of blood, vomit, and excrement. He kicked a corpse away from the door and staggered down the steps onto the heavy gravel beside the tracks. Still carrying the girl, he staggered toward a forest of deciduous trees that bound the railway line. Just as he entered the trees a screaming wail sounded from the sky.

"Stukas," he swore when he saw a squat Nazi dive-bomber coming in to finish off what the fighters had left. He leaped up a short bank, almost fell over a tree trunk and dived into the comparative safety of the grass beneath the trees.

The howling roar of the aircraft obliterated all other noises except one, the howl of dropping bombs. There was a direct hit as two bombs plummeted into the engine and front carriage. In seconds the locomotive blew apart and a resulting fireball shot through the wooden carriages. The front ones that had escaped most of the strafing became an inferno of flames and screaming voices. Orange and yellow flames burst through the air and clouds of black smoke and secondary explosions joined the howls of devastation.

The man flung himself horizontal into the trees with the Anna beneath him just as a massive sheet of flames sliced through the air where they had been. Dirt and debris crashed over them but a tree trunk they were behind stopped the full force of the blast. He rose to a crouch and brushed a hand over his face. It was covered in blood.

"We're safe for now Little Countess," he said when he noticed the girl's eyes open. "My name is Jozef Wishnowsky. I'm a pilot in our air force."

Anna's terrified eyes stared at him for a second while she was trying to orientate herself. "Thank you, Jozef," she said. "You saved my life. I shall never forget that." A tiny smile appeared on her face before she shuddered and burst into tears.

Jozef cuddled her in his arms while Anna let her tears of anguish flow down her cheeks and onto his jacket. For several moments the sobs continued until finally she wiped her blue eyes and sniffed back the last tears. "Mama wouldn't have been in pain, would she?"

"No," Jozef said. "It would have been so quick. In some ways she was lucky." He glanced up at

the bellowing smoke coming from the incinerated carriages. There were still high pitched screams floating through the air but they died out as their owners succumbed to machine gun wounds, asphyxiation or an even worse fate of death by burning.

Out beyond the bombed out train Jozef heard a new noise. There was a sound of engines, that deep-throated rumble of diesel motors, either large trucks or tanks. He turned to the blonde girl still recovering from her shock.

"Listen Anna," he said as he crouched down, grabbed both her shoulders and gazed into her eyes. "Will you do something for me straight away?"

Anna nodded.

"Someone's coming and I think it's the enemy. See that tree back there?" He pointed to a sycamore tree that seemed to dwarf its neighbors. "It may be a big climb but I want you to see how far up that tree you can get."

"Why?" replied Anna.

"We cannot run away, Little Countess. The enemy will be too fast and there will be too many of them. However, most troops look ahead and around. If we're lucky they will not look up. The tree has thick branches. If you can..."

"I understand," Anna interrupted, "but you must come up, too."

Jozef frowned. "I will, that's a promise but I want to see what's happening first. Okay?"

"Okay," said Anna.

The first branches were hard to reach but Jozef lifted Anna up and waited until she climbed a little way before he slipped away.

Now she was in the tree Anna could see that it was quite easy to climb. As a precaution she held onto the trunk and tucked her dress into the bottom of her large bloomers and continued upwards. This was no time for modesty.

Her head had no trouble fitting between the boughs and there was always another branch to reach for. She was tall for her age and quite wiry so found it easy to pull herself up through the branches or to grip one above her head and swing her legs up to the next notch.

In this manner she climbed higher and higher through the green leaves. When she looked down, the ground was almost hidden by the foliage and she was certain that unless anybody below looked directly up the tree they would not see her. Her only worry was that Jozef would miss her hiding place as well. Many of the trees around looked identical to the one she was hidden in.

She manipulated her slim body; found a branch she could sit on and turned around. From her position she could peep around the trunk and see the whole burning wreck.

The locomotive and at least one carriage had gone! In their place was a smoking crater. Two following carriages were pitched sideways with steel wheels exposed. Flames and smoke was still rising into the sky and burning wood crackled like in a winter fireplace at home. Every so often there would be a minor explosion and a piece of debris would shoot into the air.

Beside the tracks a few people gathered in clusters helping each other. Others were moving away along the railroad tracks in front of the wreck. Wounded refugees lay on the ground or crawled away from the flames. There appeared to be few bodies and Anna assumed those who hadn't made it were still in the burning carriages. Her own carriage was a sheet of flames and she once again felt tears return as she thought of Mama's and Stefan's bodies somewhere inside.

A different noise attracted Anna's attention and she strained her eyes through the smoke. There was something beyond the train. Jozef was right. Two squat gray vehicles like tanks but with ordinary wheels and no large gun were parked next to the track. Armed soldiers in gray uniforms and square shaped helmets jumped out.

Anna stifled a gasp. Germans!

These were the first she'd seen but the description fitted perfectly; the helmets were quite different from those worn by the Polish Army. An officer in a great coat, peaked hat and long black riding boots strolled along inspecting the bombed out train. He barked a command,

which Anna could hear but not understand and the troops rushed forward.

Every refugee that could stand was rounded up and forced to stand beside the railroad line. Then Anna saw the first atrocity in her young life. Nazi soldiers walked along the embankment and callously shot every wounded refugee in the head. Anna could see the bodies jerk as the bullets went in and hear the report of each gun echo through the forest. She stifled a silent scream but when she placed a hand over her mouth to stop herself retching horrible bile filled her throat. Her forehead was damp and clammy and, for a second she felt dizzy. It was only with sheer will power that she managed to maintain a grip to stop herself from falling. Behind the assassins, soldiers grabbed the corpses and heaved them on the burning train. It was so methodical and cruel, Anna could not even cry. But she promised herself she would somehow revenge this sheer brutality. It might take years but she would fight these brutes that invaded her country.

But more was happening. Three German Shepherd dogs were brought out from one of the tank type vehicles and set loose. They ran into the forest barking with their handlers following. Jozef was right. Anyone trying to escape would soon be caught. Anna panicked. Jozef! Where was Jozef? They would catch him!

However, almost as if he'd heard her thoughts his voice came up from below and she looked down to see a blob of dark hair coming through the boughs. He looked up and grinned at her. "Can you go a little higher," he whispered.

"Yes," she said. She reached up, climbed a couple of meters higher and watched as the airforce officer pulled himself up to the branch she had just vacated.

"You picked a good spot," he continued in a hushed tone. "Now keep perfectly still. Okay?"

Anna nodded, squeezed between two branches and stared down. Immediately below she heard yelping. A dog must have traced their scent to the tree.

She froze!

A dog barked directly below them. The animal knew they were in the tree. She clung to the branch and was almost too afraid to breathe.

There was a harsh command in a foreign language, probably German as if the dog was being called.

The dog gave a whine and barked again.

There was another command, this time in a more angry tone and the dog retreated. All became silent and Anna let out a breath. It seemed the dog was smarter than its owner was. Thank God for that!

They could hear footsteps below and the dog had started to yelp again. Perhaps it had picked up a new scent.

For half an hour Anna clung to the tree and watched as another large group of refugees were brought out of the forest and made to stand with the others by the line. Finally the soldiers returned, the dogs jumped back into the rear of the tank type vehicles and all the soldiers except four climbed aboard. Engines were started and the ugly trucks reversed away.

"Sit and place your hands on your heads!" Anna heard the Polish words as she watched the refugees do as they were ordered.

For an eternity that was actually only a few minutes the refugees sat on the embankment while the Nazi soldiers covered them with rifles and one particularly nasty looking machine gun. Anna heard the sound of an engine again and two gray trucks with white crosses painted on their doors ground to a halt by the smoldering train.

"Climb aboard!"

The order was once again in Polish. The refugees were herded under the covered trays of the vehicles. The soldiers had one quick look along the tracks in case and climbed in the back with the prisoners. An order was given, there was a clunk of gears and the enemy drove away.

CHAPTER THREE

When they were sure it was safe, Jozef and Anna climbed down from the tree. She studied her rescuer really for the first time. Jozef was tall; over a meter eighty had short dark hair, a thin face and was clean-shaven. He noticed her inspection and smiled.

"What happens now, Jozef?" she asked

He rubbed his jaw. "I was due to get off at the next station. As far as I know my base is still in our hands so we'll make for it. It's near Kutno. Have you heard of that town?"

Anna frowned. In geography at school they had drawn maps of Poland and she had vaguely remembered the name.

"We would have gone through it in the train on the way to Warsaw. Is that right?"

"Yes. If we can get to my base we should be safe. I think it's only about twenty kilometers away. If we're careful we should be able to get there."

"Unless the German's are in the way."

"Yes, unless the Germans are in the way."

Anna glared out through the trees. "We'll get past them, I just know," she said in a determined voice.

"Right," replied her companion. "Come on."

For hours, it seemed, the pair followed the railway line. Beyond the forest were small farms and a few tiny villages that Jozef said they should walk around rather than through. Finally they moved away from the track along a narrow road that was entirely deserted. Jozef suspected they were in a no-man's land between the two opposing armies. Any moment though, they expected to hear the rumble of tanks or howl of aircraft but all was silent. Smoke rose into the sky from several spots in the distance but there was nothing close. After an hour the sound of horses' hooves were heard in front.

"Quick, into the field," said Jozef. "Hide in the crop."

Anna needed no urging. She scrambled into the tall corn plants growing adjacent to the road and crawled forward several meters before stopping when she realized that her companion hadn't followed.

She peered out and saw an old four-wheeled horse drawn wagon stopped at the roadside. Jozef was casually chatting to a farmer sitting on it as if it was a Sunday afternoon.

"Come out, Anna. It is safe," he called.

Anna stood and walked warily forward. The man looked a just like the typical farmers in her village but he was a stranger. Could he be trusted?

"Hurry, young lady if you want a ride," the man grumbled. "I'm heading your way."

Anna smiled shyly and let Jozef help her up on the wagon. She landed in a pile of hay and moved forward as Jozef followed.

"Fifty groszy if you take us to the airfield," he said to the farmer.

The grizzled old fellow rubbed his beard. "Well it's five kilometers out of my way," he muttered as his two draught horses started a slow plod forward.

"Two Zloty," offered Jozef. He took two bills out of his pocket and dangled them under the farmer's nose. "Not one groszy more."

The farmer's eyes lit up. "Okay," he muttered and grabbed the bills.

Jozef winked at Anna and they both leaned against the wooden sides of the wagon. The horses moved along not a great deal faster than a walking pace but at least Anna could now rest her weary limbs.

Anna awoke and wept.

Her sleep had been punctuated with vivid dreams of the atrocities of the previous few hours. The vision of the burning train and the Nazi officer killing the wounded with no more compassion than if he was dealing with sheep was cemented in her mind.

She opened her eyes and moved her stiff body. An arm was around her and the tall air force officer looked down.

"Don't despair, little countess," he said quietly and kissed her forehead. "We will be safe soon."

Anna realized it was dark and cold. The back of the old farmer was at the front of the wagon and Jozef was beside her. As she turned her face their eyes met and he smiled. Then she remembered. They were heading for his air base. This gave her something to clutch at, something tangible to aim for.

"How much further do we have to go?" she asked.

"We're almost there, Anna. You have been asleep over an hour but that was good."

Anna moved a little to further relieve her stiff legs and body. As well as the queasy feeling of anticipation in her stomach she was hungry, cold, and felt filthy.

As if he sensed her discomfort, Jozef gave her a little hug. "Twenty minutes," he said.

The horses ambled forward while the wagon creaked on its primitive springs and the large thin wheels turned through the slush. They went around a bend and the sky became red. Anna stared ahead as the smell of smoke filled the air.

Jozef sat up in alarm. Beyond the dark silhouette of the trees orange and yellow flames crackled into the air. "The base has been attacked," he said and turned to Anna. "Can you run," he asked.

Anna nodded and jumped off the rear of the wagon as soon as the driver halted at Jozef's request.

"Go home and thank you," the officer called to the driver. He grabbed her hand and, they ran forward. By now the scene in front showed burning buildings and aircraft. Shouts filled the air.

Anna ran until her heart pounded so hard in she thought her chest would burst. Her legs ached and cold air streamed through her thin dress but still she ran. Finally they turned off their narrow road onto a larger one. The airfield was only a hundred meters away. She stumbled and almost fell but Jozef grabbed her arm.

"I'm okay," she panted and continued onwards towards the burning buildings.

Finally they were at a tiny guardhouse building not much larger than a telephone booth with a lowered wooden arm painted red and white blocking their way.

"Halt!" cried a voice and Anna relaxed a tiny bit. The command was spoken in Polish.

"Flight Lieutenant Wishnowsky," Jozef replied. "Returning from leave."

A corporal dressed in Polish uniform stepped out, recognized Jozef's uniform and lowered his old rifle. He looked nervous.

"Thank God, you've arrived," he said. "All of the pilots have gone. You are to report to the major in front of the control tower," he grimaced, "What's left of it. There's an important package to deliver."

Jozef frowned. "Major?" he queried. "Where is the squadron leader?"

"Dead!" replied the corporal. "His plane took a direct hit as he tried to take off."

"And the others?"

"Three were destroyed on the ground but the rest were already in the air when the first attack came. We assume they are safe somewhere." The guard shrugged. "All communications are out."

"Thank you, Corporal," replied Jozef and turned to Anna. "Come on," he said and glared at the soldier as if he almost dared him to try to stop the girl from being taken onto the base.

The corporal's eyes met Anna's for a second; he nodded and raised the wooden arm.

"Stay with me," Jozef said.

They walked up the lane towards the ruined forecourt but stopped when an officer marched towards them out of the darkness. Jozef saluted and waited for the other man to speak. Anna couldn't hear all the conversation but it was obvious the army major was anxious about something. He asked Jozef if he was a pilot and nodded curtly when told that was correct. .

"It's up to you, then flight lieutenant," he said. "All the pilots who haven't left are either dead or too wounded to fly. The Germans have us surrounded and we expect a final thrust at dawn." He nodded grimly. "We fought bravely but our antitank guns were largely destroyed

this evening. Our patrol has reported upwards of thirty Wehrmacht tanks only three kilometers to the north. General Wladyslaw Roworowski needs to be evacuated now. He'll be here shortly."

"What about our plane, Sir?"

The major gave Jozef a brief smile. "It is safe. Before the first attack we cut a hole in the fence, taxied six hundred meters down the road and covered it in camouflage netting. Luckily the Stukas missed it. It's at the end of the field now. Everything is set. Follow me."

He strutted off down the side of the bombed out airfield with Jozef and Anna following. She peered around as she walked. Everywhere were soldiers and civilians, mainly farmers by their clothes, working. Horse and carts were in several spots and loads of stones, rocks and soil were being shoveled around.

She gasped when she realized what was happening. The field had been bombed and the huge craters were being filled. Other debris was also being removed in an effort to make the grass runway serviceable again. Already, over half was relatively level and was being smoothed by a massive steel roller pulled by two horses. Further up the field two carts filled with rocks were parked beside a massive hole that half a dozen men were filling. Further across still, several airforce ground crew were placing a line of drums along the edge of the runway.

"Keep with me, Anna." She heard Jozef's voice above the other sounds. A large hand gripped hers as they rushed forward.

Suddenly, out of the flickering gloom Anna saw their destination. A high winged trimotor airplane stood on the grass. It was huge with a black painted front fuselage and six square windows under a massive wing that couldn't be reached when she walked under it. A rear door was open. What made her worried though was the huge ugly swastika painted on the tail.

Anna's thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of a large khaki automobile that braked to a stop beside them. The driver jumped out and rushed around to the inside back door, which he held open and saluted.

A tall man dressed in a crisp military uniform covered in decorations and wearing a cape stepped out. Both Jozef and the mayor snapped at attention and saluted. It must be the general. He had darting little eyes and a large white moustache that stuck out almost as if it had been waxed. In spite of herself, Anna gave a tiny giggle and the man stared at her.

"So you have the child?" he remarked coldly. "Where is Countess Nina?"

"General Roworowski, the Countess Nina Vladisciuszko was killed in when the Nazis attacked her train," he said. "I managed to rescue Anna."

The general frowned and Anna's heart raced. She glanced away, ashamed that a tear appeared in her eye as she thought of Mama and the last time she'd been with her. She lifted her eyes to find the powerful man looking into her eyes.

The general smiled. "Your mother was killed only this morning, Anna?" he said in a softened voice. "Do not try to hide the tears, my child. Let them flow. Your grief is understandable. I knew your mother; Nina was a beautiful lady. "He turned to Jozef. "Are you ready Flight Lieutenant Wishnowsky?"

"Yes Sir."

"Good," replied the general and his eyes switched back Anna. "I expected your mother to accompany us too, Anna," he said with a touch of sadness in his voice, "but I am glad you made it. Lord knows! Our country may need you in the dark years ahead. Climb aboard and find a seat while I talk to the officers here". He turned to the driver of his car. "Lieutenant, could you please escort Countess Vladisciuszko onto the aircraft."

"Certainly, Sir!" came the reply. "If you will follow me, Countess."

Anna stared at the man. Why were they talking about her Mama? Then the grim truth hit her. With her mother dead she was now the countess so they were talking about her. She glanced uncertainly at Jozef but he gave her a smile of encouragement.

"Go," he said quietly. "I'll be there soon."

Anna followed the lieutenant up the steps into in aircraft. She had never flown before but the sight of the narrow interior sloping up towards the cockpit seemed reassuring.

"Take a front seat," said the soldier. "The general usually likes the back." He glanced at

Anna's unkempt clothes and muddy appearance and smiled. "Have you had a hard day, Countess?" he asked.

"Our train was bombed and my mother, the real countess was killed this morning," Anna replied.

"I see," replied the man. "I am sorry. I don't suppose you have any luggage."

"It was destroyed in the bombing. I have nothing."

The man smiled briefly and left Anna by herself in the plane. She sat back in the comfortable seat and gazed around the interior. It was a little like a railroad carriage with five wicket basket type seats on each side of a narrow passageway. Each seat had a square window beside it with creamy colored curtains tied back with a ribbon. A luggage tray made of rope netting fitted between brass tubing dangled above her.

Her wait wasn't long. Almost immediately, the general came aboard and took a seat directly opposite her. He smiled but said nothing. Three other officers came aboard and finally Jozef walked in and up the passageway. He stopped by Anna smiled and briefly touched her shoulder before going through a skinny door in front. Anna saw the front windscreen and rows of instruments and levers before the door shut.

"We're ready, General," said a voice from the rear and the back door banged shut.

Seconds later the engines started. The whole craft vibrated, the engines screamed with power before the throttle was cut back and the noise lessened.

Anna stared outside into darkness and she had no idea what so ever where the runway was.

Everyone waited. The engines increased power and the airplane began to move forward. The view now changed outside Anna's window and she could see dark tree outlines and a red sky. She saw a green flare shoot into the sky and suddenly straight ahead, two lines of red and orange fires started. Of course, those buckets she'd seen earlier were fire buckets. They were filled with oil and, when lit, marked the edge of the runway.

The engine noise changed into a massive roar and the whole plane started to shake. They were moving. The oil fires shot past in a blur, the floor became level as the little back wheel lifted and the lights dipped away. They were airborne.

Even as Anna gazed back the fire pots were going out so all that could be seen was the burning embers of the buildings and bombed out planes. Anna leaned back and relaxed.

"Hungry?"

Anna looked across the darkened plane to see the general's face.

"Pardon?"

"I just asked if you were hungry," repeated the general. "Would you like a sandwich, Anna?"

Anna smiled. "Yes please," she said and found a slab of bread in her hand. She bit into to a delicious ham sandwich and realized she was ravenous.

"Thank you," she said.

General Wladyslaw Roworowski nodded and switched his attention away out the far window.

Anna munched her sandwich, accepted a second one and also a small tin cup of hot sweet coffee and stared out at the darkened landscape below. Everywhere in the blackness were circles of flickering flames. It was as if the world was afire.

"It will stop in a few minutes," said the general. "We'll be flying over Germany soon."

Anna shuddered at the word.

"Don't worry," said Roworowski. "Our Fokker is painted in Deutsche Lufthansa colors. I doubt if the enemy will shoot down one of their own."

"But the Royal Air Force might," replied Anna.

"You're a very knowledgeable young lady," the general said. "Do you know your geography?"

Anna smiled in the darkness. "Some."

"We'll be over north eastern Germany soon for about an hour before we arrive over the Baltic. We are due to land in Denmark in a few hours. We'll paint out the swastikas there. Afterwards, the Fokker will fly us down to The Netherlands for a refueling stop before we cross the North Sea to England," General Roworowski explained.

"I see and how far is that, Sir?"

The general smiled. "About one and a half thousand kilometers. It will be a long journey so relax. The worst part will be over soon."

Anna was getting used to the drone of the engines and the vibrating cabin and once again looked out the window. It was now different below. Everything was black with no sign of lights anywhere. Nothing!

"Are we over Germany now?" she asked.

"Yes," replied the general. "Why don't you go up and sit with Flight Lieutenant Wishnowsky. We normally have two pilots so there's a spare seat."

"Can I?" replied Anna with a touch of excitement in her voice.

"Yes, but don't bump any controls."

"I won't," she said and stepped forward.

She saw Jozef's back on the left and squeezed into the other seat. "The general said I could come," she said.

"Did he now?" t Anna saw his teeth flash in a smile. "I suppose you learnt flying at school, too."

"No," answered Anna. "Only geography and arithmetic. Polish of course and a few other languages."

"Do you speak English?"

Anna screwed up her nose and thought before speaking. "A lee-tle bit," she stumbled in English. "I'm not very good," she quickly added in Polish.

"That's great," answered Jozef as he eased back the throttle. "You'll get better. Put on the headphones and you'll be able to hear any radio messages coming in."

Anna did and frowned when a burst of German rattled her ears.

"They want our identification," replied Jozef. "We'll just ignore them."

"But they'll send a fighter up to us."

"They might but I think they're too busy to worry about one little Fokker. Tell you what; you can be my observer. Keep an eye out. If they come they won't have lights ...Damn," he said as if he'd forgotten something. He pointed to two switches. "Click them up, Anna."

She reached over and did. Straight away the panel lights shot on and red and green navigation lights shone from the outer wing tips. The girl jumped in fright.

"My God!" she stammered but grinned when she saw Jozef's smile and heard the German in her ears stop.

"I thought that might do the trick," he said. "They think we're a German airliner. Still keep an eye out, though."

"I will," replied Anna.

They flew on over the black landscape while Anna continued to search around with her eyes. Every so often a light flickered from the land far below but blackness prevailed. Then the scene changed. It became inky dark without any lights what-so-ever."

"We're over the Baltic," said Jozef. "Turn the lights off now,"

Anna reached for the switches again and glanced at the pilot. He nodded and she plunged them into eerie darkness.

"Denmark in about an hour," Jozef said.

The trimotor Fokker droned on through the empty night, Anna nodded off periodically only to awaken with arms or legs stiff from lack of movement. After the second time, she took Jozef's advice and went back into the cabin and sat opposite the general who glanced up and smiled.

"Were you sleeping?" he asked.

Anna smiled. "Well, sort of. It's hard to sleep, though."

The general nodded. "If you don't want to sleep, would you like to talk?" he said.

"What about?"

"Yourself, your mother and what happened."

Anna tried to work out whether he was interested or just being polite. Why would this powerful man with a war to worry about be interested in her?

"Do you really want to know?" she asked frankly and smiled when her companion gave a grave nod. He did seem genuine so she talked about her terrible day. In some ways it was

difficult but it was also therapeutic. All the time Roworowski looked intensely at her without interrupting.

"Jozef saved me," Anna concluded. "I would never have thought of climbing a tree and would have been found by the dogs." She shuddered. "They just shot the wounded. They're worse than animals. Why are human beings like that?"

"I don't know," replied General Roworowski. "Our civilization has stepped back into the dark ages." He stopped. "Will you take some advice from an old man, though?"

"Of course, General. What is it?"

"You are the remaining member of one of the great families in our country and in being so are in great danger. The fascists regard you as a Jew, which they are trying to eliminate while the Russians think the whole aristocracy should be disposed of. They wiped out everyone even remotely associated with the Tsars in their own country. Even your young age would not protect you if you are caught."

Anna turned pale. "Go on, General," she said.

"I think you should change your name when we get to England."

"I see," Anna replied. "I think Mama hinted at that." She felt she could trust the general so told him about her purse and secret documents.

"Can I see them?" the general asked when she had finished. She nodded, took them from her secret pocket and handed them to the man. He read the documents thoroughly before handing them back. "Your mother showed sound judgement, Anna. Don't ever lose these."

"..and my name?"

"Pick any but a common name would be preferable or even a foreign name."

"An English name?"

"Why not. That may be even better. I'm sure I could get you identity papers for any name you wish."

"But I can hardly speak English. It's such a funny language. Nothing makes sense."

Roworowski smiled. "You will learn it, Anna," he said. "Once we are there, try to start thinking in English. It will be hard but you are young and bright. It's only hard on us old men."

"I'll try," Anna felt pleased with the compliment. "A New World with a new name."

"But never forget who you really are, Anna Vladisciuszko. Never," the general commanded.

"I won't," replied Anna solemnly.

The Fokker's three engines never missed a beat as the sun began to rise in the east. Ahead were islands belonging to Denmark?

Eight hours later after quick paint job and two refueling stops, the Fokker trimotor headed across The North Sea. Anna, who was sitting, once again in the co-pilot's seat grabbed Jozef's arm and shouted out.

"I can see land, Jozef! It's England, isn't it?"

"Yes, Anna. We've made it!"

But Anna wasn't listening. "Fighters!" she screamed and pointed above them.

Two black dots grew larger until their shapes became distinguishable. One peeled off so Anna could see the underside of its wings and the huge blue and red circle painted on them.

"It's the Royal Air Force," she sobbed unable to stop tears of relief.

The second Hurricane fighter, for that was what it was, slowed down to match their speed and flew along side. Anna could see the pilot signaling.

"He wants us to follow him done," said Jozef. "I have a feeling they know we have the general on board but they won't expect the bonus."

"What bonus?" asked Anna.

"A real live, full blooded Polish countess." Jozef grinned and pretended to duck out of the way when Anna reached across and slapped his arm. He waved to the Hurricane pilot and turned to follow it in towards Coltishall Air Base, England and a new life for everyone aboard.

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