Love

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The day ended. Lyuba stepped out of the underground hospital into the open air. She rarely allowed herself such a luxury. But today, the desire to escape the stone prison was unbearable.

She climbed the stairs slowly. Fourth floor, fifth, sixth. She inhaled deeply. The smell of char filled her lungs. Lyuba sat by the entrance, leaning against the wall. Her muscles relaxed, and her eyes sought the height of the heavens. They found none: the smoke from the fires had swallowed the night sky, shrouding the stars.

Lyuba sighed, trying to exhale the tension of the day. She glanced at her hands. Her palms were white and parched.

"The blood of others washes off quickly!" she muttered to herself. The past days had seen the medic speaking her actions and thoughts aloud. Yesterday, 300 wounded were brought in from other areas of Mariupol. Faces, bodies, amputations, blood, pus—all of it blurred together in her consciousness. Her senses had grown accustomed to the smells of antiseptics and medications. Food: a cracker and tea—it had no scent. Yet above the hospital deep within the Illyich plant, spring was supposed to be lightly stepping.

One of the guys brought her a primrose. He extended the flower to Lyuba.

The woman held the delicate-stemmed white flower. A smile blossomed on her face. For a moment, she felt like the young ballerina she once was, poised in fifth position on pointe, then flowing with the waves of the melody. But now, there was war, and she was a medic.

Tonight, she felt the urge to be above ground. She went, but she carried the spirit of the hospital with her. Every wounded man was enveloped in little flames of prayers. Lyuba felt them during her shifts. She recognized the voices of mothers, fathers, lovers. Their pleas built stairs to the Spirit's heights, lingering for mere seconds in the celestial temple before pouring beams down upon the wounded. Lyuba heard the throbbing of maternal hearts. Spiritual doors opened for them, breaking the gates of time. Eternity flowed through with healing Love, reaching the earth, soothing, and curing.

Lyuba never spoke of it, but she simply knew. Today, she wanted solitude. To find herself. To mentally hug her son's small body, to kiss his soft cheek. To thank her mother. And amid the positions of Mariupol on the Azov, to find the heart of her beloved husband.

Lyuba hadn't cried in a long time: there were no tears.

"That's because we don't drink enough water," the medic assured herself. But here, in solitude, the tears came unexpectedly.

Lyuba did not hold back, she smiled, examining her hands. They were foreign, too white, emanating the scent of medications. Yet her great-grandmother's simple silver ring from a past life still glittered on her left hand's finger, beckoning memories from the safe times of peace.

Lyuba shuddered at the hoarse sounds rising from her chest. She was frightened, but then she understood: she was sobbing.

"I can, I have the right," she said aloud. Silence engulfed her heart. And upon the woman descended a cloud of prayer. Doors opened to former peaceful happiness.

Lyuba felt the ring on her finger brighten, turning into a glowing ember from a hearth. But it did not burn, only expanded into light. The woman exhaled the sadness that had wrapped her in iron chains. She found herself in a circle of freedom. There was no war within it, and breathing was easy.

Lyuba turned the ring. Light enveloped her. And there she was, a twenty-year-old ballerina, at home. She had a rehearsal before the performance. And there was Tomka, her younger sister, searching for something again.

"Where are my pointe shoes? I put them in the box, and now they're gone!"

"A lost and love-maddened fool, by chance, has misplaced them!" Lyuba teased with her great-grandmother's saying, continuing her exercises. A step, another. And they were together with Tomka. Before them lay a field, a river, meadows, and beyond was Lublin. The land resonated with their gazes.

"Here, great-grandma and grandpa grew wheat and potatoes," said Tomka. She tilted her head upwards, gathering rays with her eyes.

This is our Easter journey, Velkunots, to the land of our ancestors, Lyuba guessed.

"Ehey!" the girls heard, and a bucket of water splashed over them with a joyful shout.

"Don't dawdle! Happy Easter!" a familiar voice rang out, bursting forth either as droplets, or words, or melodies of a polka. Lyuba was met by sparks of boyish eyes. Her breath stumbled out of rhythm, and her heart began to pulsate with a fiery blossom, her body filling with an unusual energy urging her to move, to run, to fly.

Lyuba was already racing in dance. And with that, the light grew more intense. It spread, enveloping the Earth.

"Maybe I'm no longer here?" the woman asked herself, "Why is there so much light?"

"You are! You are eternal!" answered Someone significant and strong.

The ring on her finger warmed once more. Lyuba opened her eyes. Nearby was the dark entrance to the underground hospital. She felt the pain of humanity ascending the steps to the light.

"Light!" echoed in her consciousness. Lyuba raised her eyes to the noise: two red eyes of a plane glimmered with threat. The medic managed to fall to the ground and cover her head with her arms.

The explosion happened. The world swayed in waves. They carried away everything they could lift.

Then red lights appeared again and again, launching waves of explosions. It was necessary to hide, but Lyuba could not move. She had to understand something more.

"A circle! They have closed us in to destroy us!" her heart screamed.

"But Darkness will never destroy the Light!" Someone significant and strong spoke again.

"Yes!" agreed the medic, she stood up and dove into the entrance of the hospital.

Days passed, becoming identical twins, while the circle of life shrank.

April brought spring warmth and rains. And the commander assembled the personnel. He spoke briefly and honestly:

"We are running low on ammunition, there's little food, even fewer medications. We have three options: stay and die in battle, surrender to captivity—saving lives, or break through the encirclement."

"Break through!" Lyuba shouted. She didn't know where the strength came from, but she felt compelled to fill the space with her voice. Comrades gathered more closely around her:

"Break through!" struck as one upon the ceilings, echoing through the underground corridors.

The commander's eyes grew brighter, his voice ringing clear:

"Each can choose! For the breakthrough, we take the wounded, prepare the transport."

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They worked in the barn. They brought in a glass transporter, transformed it into a massive armored vehicle for the lying injured.

A week later, the breakthrough day was appointed. In Lyuba’s heart then, "Ave Maria" rang for the first time. The melody united reality into one whole, nourishing hope.

Lyuba knew her husband Andriy should soon arrive with his platoon. She waited, worried, but somehow at dawn, at the end of her shift, her ring began to warm. Warmth spread through her body, turning into light.

"He's here!" her heart jumped.

She finished her work and ran to the barn.

Andriy was standing with his back to her. His subordinates were unloading something.

Lyuba froze, leaning against a concrete pillar and smiling. Andriy commanded his men in his unique way:

"Well, what's making you shy like a bride-to-be? Push the crates aside with your foot. They won't break. And we're not here for matchmaking."

The platoon leader stretched out his words. Their vowels folded into a dear, homely song.

"Andriy!" Lyuba shouted. Her voice flew over the clanking iron, quarrels, engine noises.

...He felt it with his back but was still issuing orders. Then he turned to his beloved. She moved freely as in a grand performance in dance, when a leap—a flight. He accepted her into his arms, and she knew how to root herself into him, soul and body. Dissolve in him. ...And now she cried.

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The breakthrough began. The vehicles moved quickly. On the potholes, the hospital car bounced. Lyuba watched through the narrow window slit. The sky brightened with every minute. From there, anxiety came.

...The woman awoke with the awareness that the melody of Mary had ceased within. The column stopped, people bustled around the hospital car. Lyuba felt the column as a single organism of a giant being, now refusing to move further.

Soldiers jumped out of the vehicles, trying to repair, start, move them—it was in vain!

Lyuba saw their driver gather a team, tinkering under the hood with others. Then he straightened like a string, shrugged, and groaned,

"I don't understand what happened! Everything is fine here!" he stood guiltily in front of his comrades, tall, slender, with dirty hands. He didn't know where to put them. It seemed he wanted to hide himself somewhere.

And the wounded began to wake. One question in their eyes:

"What will become of us now?"

The medic climbed out of the hospital car, ran along the column. Every vehicle had stopped simultaneously. Something prevented them from moving forward. They remained trapped in the circle of encirclement. There was only one way out: return to the underground shelters.

The medic walked beside her beloved, surrounded by many people. Hunched figures, dark faces. Everyone thought disaster had struck: they hadn't broken free.

No one knew: beyond the forest, enemy tanks awaited the column...

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Days stretched again, but now they became pieces of broken pottery that needed to be glued together. Small shards had flown away forever. And Lyuba saw broken men.

She did not want to become a shard and worked. Her fingers remembered their task: bandaging, giving injections, yet inside was emptiness.

"Captivity!" the word became a brick each carried. This built a wall, but one impossible to lean on.

Lyuba's shift ended. She longed for freedom, to escape the walls for a moment, to breathe air. She climbed the stairs. First floor, second... At the fourth, her ring began to warm. The woman felt the former lightness, warmth spreading again through her body, and a female figure approached. Lyuba shuddered:

"Is this the past from a dream? Am I losing myself?"

"Lyubo!" A familiar Vika's voice engulfed her in joy, inducing her to smile. They embraced.

Once, Vika had been the youngest in Lyuba's unit, chief medic.

The sisters in arms went to the surface. Vika asked nothing. Her cherry-like eyes glowed.

"We will break through the encirclement. Are you and Andriy with us?"

Lyuba’s pale face began to fill with life.

"I don't want to be captive!" two tears rolled from her gray eyes, "I can't go into captivity! I want to be with my son, with my mother!" Lyuba shrugged her shoulders, as if shaking off the void of despair. A sunbeam broke through the smoke clouds and touched her hand—the ring sparkled on her finger.

"We will make it out!" Lyuba whispered.

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They tested for eight days, and the encirclement circle let them go.

In a warm frontline house, Lyuba sat on the couch beside her husband, drinking hot tea. The ring shone on her finger, and the melody of "Ave Maria" spread through her consciousness. Suddenly, Lyuba saw the rays of Light reaching from comrade to comrade, person to person. It was a unity unbreakable because eternity was its source.