

Zavaliv is a magical realism story that is based on true historical events of the 1700s and is rooted in Slavic mythology and culture. Cossacks and Ottomans. Reality and Slavic Pantheon. Life in a small town on the outskirts of the Empire.

Zavaliv: In Spirit of Legends

By Roman Kurys and Mynodora Kutsa

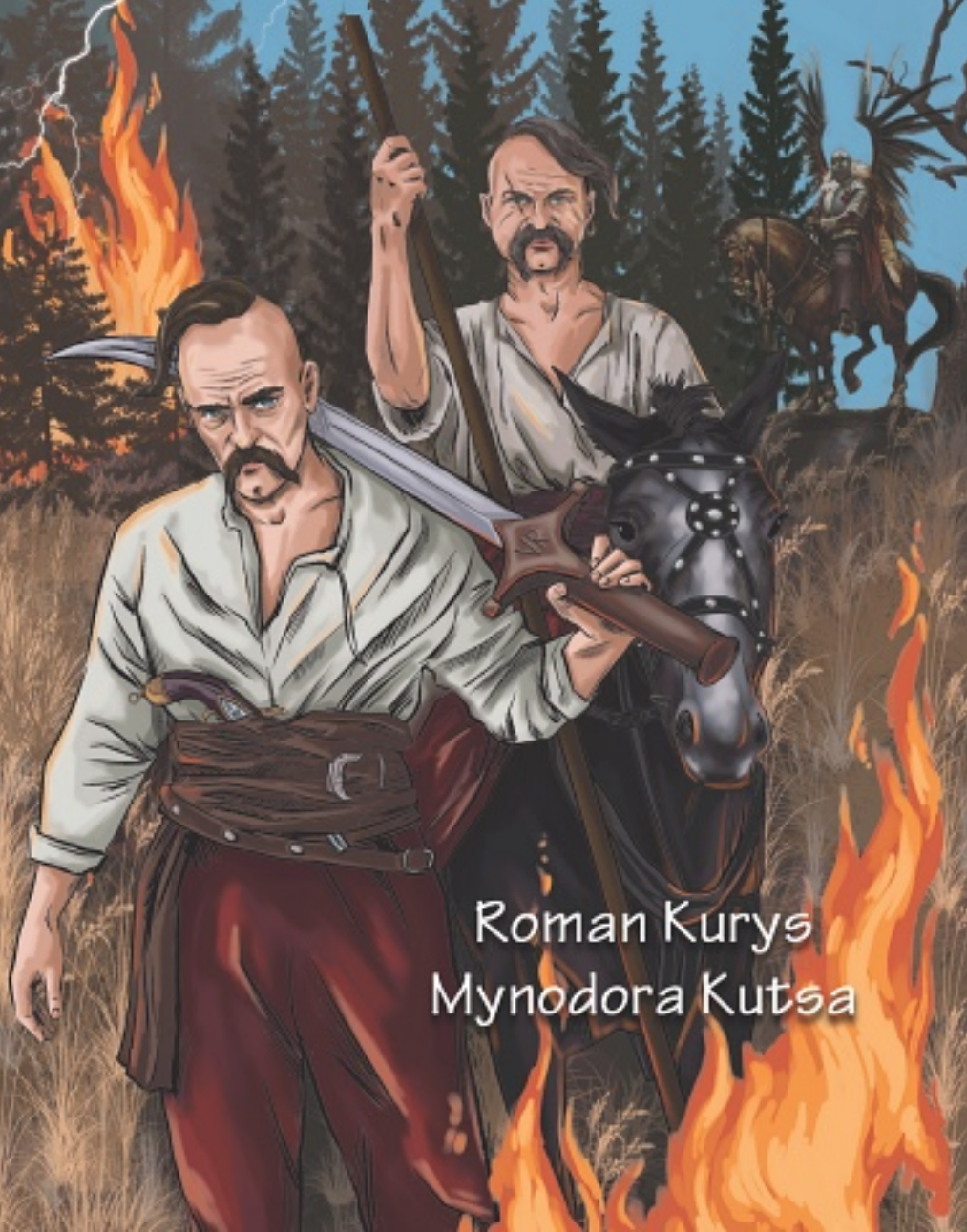
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ZAYALIV

In Spirits of Legends



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Chapter 1

A Cloud of Dust

History waits for no one. Times disappear.
We see remnants all around us,
Our ancestors met their good luck here.
Finding the Golden Oak.

We are in Nature's debt,
after the rivers of sweat.

Our Mother Nature crafted wonders:
Three mountains, a valley with a river -
a perfect place for our town.
It lived through many plunders
And experienced great thunders,
over the years, many seeds
grew in a vibrant history of deeds.

And still, we are in Nature's debt,
after the rivers of sweat.

Centuries of strife upon our grounds,
And now our town wears a crown.
On it a name of which we all are proud:
Zavaliv. And yet we're still

In Nature's debt,
after the rivers of sweat.

In a beautiful riverbed of the Golden Linden, one of the oldest locales in the Ukrainian region of Galicia - Golden Oak, settled among the three mountains. Rarely can a place hoard this much beauty; mother nature had outdone even herself here. The memory of the Golden Oak dates back to the Western Slovenian chronicles of the 8th century. It surfaces in the archives here and there, and during the 11th century, it receives a new name - Zavaliv.

Roman Petriv leaned against the rough bark of an enormous tree. This tree has been growing for centuries, as was evident by its circumference and massive crown. Its thick roots dug deep through the soil and stone of Karachyn, one of the three mountains surrounding the town. The tree's trunk was so thick that it was difficult for even a few people linked together to wrap their arms around it. From where Roman sat, it looked like its crown went up to the clouds and dug into heaven itself. Maybe it did.

He looked at the lush vegetation covering the other two mountains in sight and let out a deep sigh. It has been ten years since the battle in Zavaliv, and life has been excellent. Although their losses were massive, they had driven the Ottomans away. The people of Zavaliv came together to repair the damages and enjoyed their hard-earned peace as part of the Polish-Hungarian Commonwealth. The rest of Ukraine kept on fighting a different enemy. It was clear that the Russian empire would not grant Ukraine its promised freedom, so Hetman Ivan Mazepa raised a rebellion against the Russian Czar, Peter the Great. He allied with the Swedish army, and the never-ending tumult reverberated through the country. The echoes of this conflict carried mouth to mouth, threatening peace again, even here, in the remote town of Zavaliv.

Hetman Mazepa's alliance with the Swedish was a controversial decision. Many people felt tired of the constant struggle and yearned for the wars to end. The word was that Ivan Mazepa's army was too small to be successful, and the hope was that all the trouble wouldn't make its way to them. Ukrainian people continued to be separated, persecuted, and despite their best efforts without a country to call their own.

Jan Jablonowski, a Polish Nobleman, was a lord of Zavaliv. He had retired after a lifetime of fighting, and so did Roman. Both had fought side by side for a couple of decades and decided it was time to put all violence behind them. Jan was a good man; he loved Galicia and Zavaliv. Despite his famous nobleman-warrior past that would have allowed him to retire in the capital, he decided to settle here in the kingdom's remote corner. His castle loomed on the other side of town. The Golden Linden River cut through the land and flowed behind Jan's castle, providing it with a natural defense with farm fields that ran away from its other bank, allowing a look far into the distance.

Jan did not oppress Ukrainian peasantry, as some other Polish noblemen did. He ruled with a kind heart, allowing people their freedom, and his castle, a home suitable for a nobleman, was one of the strongest fortresses in the region. It served as a beacon of protection over the local lands and gave a sense of safety and security to the hardworking and straightforward Ukrainian people. Their area had seen many toils. Roman suspected there would be many more, with the turbulent future approaching.

Events of the past centuries sawed the ground with blood, and the sun watered those seeds with its rays. Many bright beams of gold pierced through the verdure of the oak, under which Roman sat. Each lit up the ground as if calming the

Earth's wounds, trying to make everything better, but Roman felt the land's heartbeat deep within himself. Many crippled human fates moaned underground, and many others had disappeared into the obscurity of history. Events that transpired here would stay in people's memories forever. Their heroes, born from the land of our grandfathers, remained here in spirit. The undying Cossack glory would forever be enveloped in the stories people told. Stories about the Ukrainian army made of simple Ukrainian people. They were peasants, who sowed the seeds of fear into anyone who dared to oppress their land.

Roman blinked, turned his head to the side, and squinted, looking far into the distance. He saw a cloud of dust on the horizon and stood up in a hurry. His hand went to his belt, but his spyglass wasn't there.

"Kurwa," he cursed under his breath. He only meant to go out for a stroll, not expecting to need it. He did not want to feel too alarmed, but he also knew that this much dust visible, far into the distance, could only mean one thing. A large group was coming towards Zavaliv. Being prepared was always what kept him alive all these years, and this time would be no different. Roman whistled. His horse, the Hawk, lifted his head upon hearing his call and strutted over. Roman patted Hawk's head, and the horse dug his front hoof into the ground, as if impatient to get going. Roman nodded and jumped onto Hawk's back in a smooth, practiced motion.

"Let's go to the castle, Hawk. Something is approaching," he whispered, and Hawk took off down the hill towards the castle; the time for respite was over. He rode down the road, passing people engaged in their everyday business, and nodded back to their greetings.

"Time to get the day started, Roman?"

"Coming by later after we finish all the fieldwork?"

"Are we going to the monastery later for some penance over wine?"

He found the time to respond to everyone in good humor. There was no reason to spread the word of a possible danger yet. It could be nothing.

He hoped it was nothing.

The castle grew in size as he approached. Roman crossed the wooden bridge, stretching over a moat, and slid off Hawk's back. He walked forward with calm, measured steps. His horse knew where the stables were; what he needed to do now was find Jan.

Roman fought under the command of Jan Jablonowski, then Hetman of the Polish Empire's armies, since the fated summer of 1675. Those times were full of bloody battles with the Ottomans. Roman felt happy when they had both settled in the nobleman's castle in Zavaliv. Returning to the same town he had seen burning during the attack as a child brought him a sense of closure. Having won his last battle with Pasha Ibrahim Shishman ten years ago left him satisfied. His soul was at ease, and he looked forward to a quiet retirement. This castle and this town felt like home, and Jan had become more than Hetman to him. He was a friend.

Roman did not pay attention to the castle's grandeur anymore. He walked past the wing with eight large decorative windows without a second glance. The kitchen door that split the building into two sections was open, and he stepped across the threshold. The floor inside was a mixture of stone and wood, as if the castle was still renovating. A wooden staircase leading to the second floor curved up in front of him, and he closed his hand on the engraved railing and stepped up two steps at a time. On top of the stairs, large double doors

led into the main hall. They were wide open. Light breeze from the open windows tugged on the curtains, making them twirl. Endless shelves full of books with gilded spines glistened along the walls, and a large clock showed it was still morning. There was no one in the hall.

"Jan!" Roman exclaimed. No response came.

It was too early in the day for the servants to be inside; most had to be outdoors doing their chores. "When you need them, they disappear." he thought.

He walked past the hall and glanced into each of the large six rooms, which made up the castle's left-wing. All doors and windows were open, and the rooms were empty. A breeze carried with it the floral smell of morning dew. It was a pleasant and peaceful smell, but would it stay that way?

"Jan!" he exclaimed again. No answer.

He turned and walked past the staircase and continued in the other direction. Four guest rooms on this side were locked, and a dead silence reigned inside. Jan was not there either.

Roman stood for a minute and walked towards a smaller staircase that led into the castle's chapel. Jan had to be in there. He ascended the winding stairs, walked towards a half-open door of the chapel, and peered inside. He had to let his eyes get used to the dark interior before seeing Jan kneeling at a pew. A figure of Jesus hanging on a cross stood in the middle. It appeared to take more space than was physically possible, emanating a sense of otherworldly presence.

Roman brushed his long blonde hair away from his eyes and crossed himself. He moved forward and kneeled by Jan's side. His white scar stood out on his tan face, stretching down across his cheek and through his jawbone. In the dim light of the chapel, it appeared to be glowing.

"I would not disturb your prayers if there wasn't a need."

"You look rattled, Roman, what is the matter?" Jan said, lifting his head.

"It appears we have a large company approaching Zavaliv."

"And it is bothering you for what reason?" Jan asked, not understanding his concern.

"It is large enough to dust up the road for kilometers out. I suspect a group of people on horses."

"No. It cannot be! We haven't seen a large Ottoman force around here in a long time."

"Yet, here they are, although I can't tell for certain it's Ottomans again."

Both men stood up, crossed themselves, bowed, and stepped backward out of the chapel. Roman noticed that Jan's wound did not heal as well as his own. He saw Jan had cringed as he stood up and pressed his hand to his side. It was a puncture wound that refused to heal - a present from the Danes a few years back when Jan warred there and the main reason he had retired.

They walked toward another staircase without a word, which ascended to the top of one of the castle's towers. Jan extended the spyglass and surveyed the distance.

"What force can we gather on short notice?" he asked.

"We need to prepare to protect the villagers. Most of the soldiers are among them. I do have a small garrison stationed in the armory downstairs, but we are not in good shape to defend from an attack."

"Let's begin pulling our people in, across the moat, and prepare a letter to the magistrate of the city of Pidgaici to warn him of the possible danger. Do not send it yet, until we have some more information; I cannot see much from here. Did you send someone to investigate this matter?"

"No, I caught sight of it while relaxing by the oak on Karachyn a short while ago. There was no time to do much else, and I did not want to spread panic if there was no need to."

"We must get a better look at it ourselves then."

"I can ride. Igor Koltyk will help with the rest of the preparations. Are you in good shape to ride?" he nodded with his chin to Jan's side.

"Don't you worry about me; I have plenty of life left in me still. Velina has a new concoction brewing and is feeling hopeful this time. I'm fine." Jan said. He ran his fingers over his thick black mustache, nodding.

"You rely on that witch too much, Jan.

"I prefer the term healer, Roman."

"Hmm, she murmurs Catholic litanies when she brews those potions for you, I'm sure. What good has your "healer" done you this far?" Roman asked.

"I know you disapprove because she is not Christian, but there is something about her that draws me in. I trust her, and she means well!"

"That's what some would call enchantment. No sense wasting time talking about this now."

"I'll be coming with you," Jan said. It wasn't a question.

"I'll wait for you down in the yard then," Roman said. Jan nodded, and both men descended the stairs, immersed in their thoughts.

Roman found Igor by the smithy working the large bellows. Igor's shirt was drenched with sweat and stuck to his torso like a second skin. His chest heaved with an effort to breathe - whatever the blacksmith was making him do, was hard work.

"Bogdan is trying to work me to death in his forge, Roman," Igor said, seeing him approach.

"He's being a baby, Roman. Even my thirteen-year-old son can blow air with more force than our captain here." Bogdan laughed. The blacksmith was a tall and stout man. His big hand wrapped around a large hammer, making it look like a toy. His other hand made pincers look like a decorative tool. He never stopped hammering during the conversation; his hammer came down in methodical and measured blows.

"Enough rest, Igor, blow some more air before the fire goes out!" he said, laughing.

"Bogdan, I have an urgent need for Igor. I'm sorry if this disturbs your work." Roman apologized to the large blacksmith. Bogdan acknowledged him with a curt nod and yelled:

"Jaroslav, come out here, boy, it's time to do some work." he looked up and added: "You let me know if you need any help from me. You appear to be in a rush, and I don't like the look in your eyes, Roman.

"I will, Bogdan, rest assured that I will, but not yet.", Roman said, already walking away.

Igor walked behind him with a limp in his step. He was never quite able to get rid of it. An Ottoman had sliced his thigh open with a sword during Zavaliv's battle ten years ago and must have cut too deep. As much as Roman hated to admit it, Velina was the one to thank here.

Velina was one of Zavaliv's healers. Styha, his wife, was the other. Roman called Velina the town's witch because she did her healing with herbal concoctions and incantations to the Slavic gods. Styha distrusted her; she felt there was more to what she did than what met the eye. The woman reeked paganistic rights, there was nothing Christian about her, but she also had to admit Igor's wound had healed reasonably well. Only the scar and a limp remained. Roman usually

agreed with his wife with quiet nods but quietly hoped that Velina could help Jan, witchery, or not since Styha couldn't.

"Perceptive bastard, our Bogdan," Roman said.

"Despite all his brawn, he also has brains, that's for sure. Plus, you do have a look in your eyes that tells me something is amiss." Igor said.

By the time Jan stepped out of the castle doors, Igor was already walking away. He did not want to wait to begin preparations, given such short notice. Roman hopped on Hawk's back and rode out of the gate and across the wooden bridge. Another pair of hooves clicked a few seconds later when Jan followed him.

"The bell tower will be our best bet," he said loud enough for Jan to hear.

"Let us not waste any more time."

St. Nicholas' monastery stood high on top of the Stone Mountain and provided a good view from its bell tower. They would be able to observe far into the distance. He leaned in and petted Hawk's neck.

"Let's go see the monks, friend."

The horse took off without a moment's notice, understanding his rider.

They left their horses by the monastery wall, where there grew plenty of grass for them to feed on, and walked through the open gates.

"What brings you both here so early?" A monk who was tending to the grapevines on the grounds asked.

"We need to get into your bell tower, brother Anatolij," Jan said.

"Follow me." the monk lowered his head and shuffled his feet along the path. He did not ask any questions.

They entered the tower and ascended the wooden stairs in a steep spiral to the very top. In a tight space, there hung the three bells famous in Zavaliv and all the neighboring towns. They had warned villagers of many attacks and gathered everyone together for many masses. These bells have been ringing for almost four hundred years, yet somehow the quality of their sound never deteriorated. Roman didn't know how that was possible, but the acoustics were perfect - when these bells rang, it sounded like music. Roman had experienced the bell's warnings firsthand, alongside the peals of thunder ten years ago. He remembered the clouds' face and what he thought was God's voice, speaking out to him. As the bells rang, that voice told him to go forward and win.

He did.

The large bell hung in the middle, with two smaller ones on its sides. All three glistened in the sun; their surface resembled a mirror more than it did old metal. Monks kept them clean and oiled all year round, taking rotations in what they considered a holy duty. Roman hoped that bells would not need to ring their music of alarm today.

The tall, narrow windows in the tower were an excellent vantage point. A vast space rolled around them, and a dusty horizon was now visible even with a naked eye. Both men peered through their spy glasses.

"It's Cossacks," Roman breathed out in relief.

"Mazepa's banners," Jan said.

"This is going to be a toss-up, depending on their mood."

"Hold the letter to Pidgaici for now. Let's talk to them, assuming they are planning to stop and not keep moving past Zavaliv," Jan said.

"It appears they are going to cut through town, towards Karachyn," Roman said.

"Let's alert the monks to prepare to ring the bells if they stop moving and try to set up camp at any point," Jan said.

Having a large squad of Cossacks nearby was scary and exciting at the same time. These brave men stuck like a bone in Ottoman's throats. But they were also no friends to Polish or Russians, despite the treaties. Their only goal was to achieve independence of the Ukrainian land. They wanted to see a dream of a sovereign state of Ukraine come true and were willing to put down their lives for it. However, they were failing to accomplish their mission and paid a bloody price with many lives already. The good news was that they could, at least, attempt to talk with them; there would not be a conversation if Ottomans approached.

"Last I heard, Mazepa separated from the Russian Czar, Peter the Great and sided with the Swedes," Jan said.

"The Russians can never live in peace; it appears. You're still keeping up with the events, I see?"

"One of us has to; it's a turbulent world out there, Roman. We were lucky to avoid trouble this long. I knew it was too good a dream to last."

"What an illusion we have, living here, in this beautiful piece of land, far from the rest of it all." Roman nodded.

"That can change quickly," Jan said.

"Hmm." Roman glanced towards the cloud of dust that Ivan Mazepa's Cossacks were raising in the air.

"Judging by their slow speed, they are carrying wounded," Jan said after a short silence.

"Which means they might be looking for a place of respite."

"Does not appear to be a good sign for Hetman Mazepa. I must admit, he has some guts to do what he did. To side with Sweden against Peter the Great, after being his lapdog for such a long time? Must have been a difficult choice to make."

"Can't have been easy, that's for sure. Why does he think Swedes will be any different? Does he believe they will grant Ukraine its independence?" Roman asked.

"He's grasping at straws. The dream of independence has clouded his judgment. A nation of peasants, farmers, and traders can't have much hope to overcome military giants like Poland or Russia."

"Yet Cossacks exist and keep on fighting!"

"Cossacks do, yes, but independence does not. All they've done is protected the Russians and the rest of Europe from the Ottoman Empire over the last few decades. They have exhausted themselves and gave everyone else the time to rebuild. Alas, they do not see it that way." Jan said.

"It is true. If not for the Cossacks, we would all be under the Ottoman harness right now. They are fierce warriors that much we can't deny."

"They were Roman, but not anymore. I do have lots of respect for these people; somehow, I feel like one of them. Only King Sobieski's letters remind me of my Polish nobility." Jan said.

"Do you not believe there's any hope of them winning their fight?"

"There isn't unless a miracle happens, but let's go back; we know what we need to know. The good news is - it's not Ottomans."

Their ride back to the castle was a quiet one. Both men thought about the meaning of their conversation. Zavaliv's peaceful paradise can't have lasted forever. If it came to fighting, there was a Polish hussar squadron stationed seven kilometers away in Pidgaici. Close enough to make Roman comfortable, too far to allow him to relax. Zavaliv was his town, and its residents were his people. He did not think of them as

Poles or Ukrainians, and he suspected that neither did Jan. They were hardworking people who wanted peace. They also wanted a piece of land to call their own, and therein was the problem.

The Polish empire would not allow for that to happen. The Russian Empire showed the desire to swallow it into itself at the first opportunity. The Ottoman Empire desired to rule the whole world. Peace was a fickle thing.

Roman hoped for a compromise. One that would allow for their peaceful existence to continue at least here, in Galicia. The rebuilding efforts after the battle of Zavaliv had united everyone together. Poles, Ukrainians, Jews all coexisted for the last ten years in peace and harmony. They were simple people, living off their land and trading resources without any problems. The Cossacks would have to understand that here, in Zavaliv, Polish nobility was not a problem. He felt determined to keep their peace but was ready to do what he had to, no matter what the cloud of dust on the horizon brought with it.

Chapter 2

Ukrainian Flower

We love our land, the place we live,
We fight for it, as our ancestors did.
Our hearts are burning from within,
Spilled blood beats all misfortunes therein.

Orysia bent down and caressed chamomiles growing on the side of the road with her long thin fingers. She broke the stem of one and raised the flower to her nose until the yellow middle almost touched it and inhaled deeply. It would make a great addition to an already extensive collection of flowers in her apron: she loved flowers of any kind, shape, or smell.

One could almost say she, herself, was like a flower.

The beauty of nature was impossible to deny, but all that beauty also had practical applications, if you knew a few things. Each specimen had its healing properties, and Styha, her mother, knew what they were. She made all sorts of potions and ointments to remedy any illness. Shelves full of vials and jars lined every wall in their house, each waiting to help with a different ailment. Orysia was learning all she could from her mother. It fascinated her that tea from the same chamomile she was holding in her fingers now could help a person sleep better. Its calming aroma made all worries go away, at least for a little while. A periwinkle draft removed a sore throat overnight. A few drops of rare Adonis mixture helped someone with a weak heart. The list went on; these

were but a few of the benefits; there were many more if you knew how to mix the herbs right and Styha knew. Orysia felt excited to be learning all this knowledge from her mother. Lots of studying, but no one ever said she could not have a little fun with it.

She walked along a path winding uphill, and the natural beauty was everywhere. Orysia twirled around, spreading her arms - the intoxicating smell of pine, mixed with flowers and other herbal fragrances. Those smells made their way into her nostrils and tickled as she inhaled. The loud laughter of joy escaped her mouth - she felt great.

After a while, she felt dizzy and had to stop twirling. Her legs were a little shaky, and the scenery swam in front of her eyes. It amused her, and she laughed again, stumbling a little, but felt her balance returning. She glanced down, where the houses of her town laid scattered between the flora of the land. The main road rolled like a gray belt, splitting Zavaliv in two. Her ancestors have lived here since ancient times. It was her land, and she couldn't think of any other place she'd rather be.

As if feeling something was amiss, she looked ahead and stopped, bewildered: what resembled a small army was moving its way towards her. The good news was, she saw it was not Ottomans. Not knowing enough about how to read war banners, she decided to wait for them to approach.

Orysia swung her hands up to her head and adjusted her wreath. She worked hard to make it. Hours of toil went into intertwining periwinkles and red poppies together. Blue cornflowers zig-zagged its length, and white chamomiles wove in above her ears. A few strands of oats poked out here and there, adding some jaundice to the colorful palette. She slid her hands along her two-long wheat-colored braids of hair and brought them to the front, laying them over her large apron

with many pockets. Adonis poked out from one of them, while another was full of chamomiles, and a bunch of tumbleweeds stuck out from the apron's side. A warm smell of wormwood came from a small pouch at the top and a fragrant aroma of a few lilies, stuck behind her decorative sash, mixed well with the symphony of smells. Under the apron, she wore a simple linen gown, which fell to her ankles. Wide, flower embroidered sleeves covered her arms. Even though not fresh, the embroidered flowers on her sleeves matched well with the rest of Orysia and her floral harvest of the day.

One could indeed say she, herself, was a flower.

Orysia looked back towards Zavaliv and then glanced the other way to the approaching group advancing closer towards her. She wondered if anyone in town had noticed their approach, and if, maybe, she should run back with a warning. Common sense told her, yes! Everything in her being screamed: "Run! It can't be safe! Run, and tell everyone." Orysia thought about listening to her common sense, but what did it know of adventures? What did it know of excitement? Nothing. Common sense did not like adventures nor excitement. It liked boring, mundane life where nothing changed, and everything remained the same. Orysia decided common sense would not get its way today. She continued to walk along her path, murmuring a song.

When she got closer, she saw that this was quite a large group, stretching far into the distance. Much bigger than she thought when she first saw it. There was order to their movement, an absolute precision. Everything and everyone moved in unison with one another, but she sensed tiredness. It loomed over them, like a giant cloud. It had to be a part of a defeated army, either looking for a place to rest or making its way to join other groups like them. Orysia decided there would

be no harm in asking. She did not care much about banners or allegiances; her passion was to prolong life, not take it. While she felt some fear, her sense of curiosity was much higher.

In front of the procession, large stallions carried men in bright clothing. They wore wide comfortable-looking pants with wide sashes on their waists — sharovary, a style of pants popular with the Ukrainian Cossacks. Their pistol's butts poked from under the belts, and their unbuttoned jackets fluttered in the wind, showing simple white linen shirts underneath. Long, slightly curved swords hung from their waists, running down to their ankles. Behind the equestrians, she saw wooden, open-top carriages pulled by horses. It looked like supply wagons, but she also saw they carried wounded warriors.

"Could this be a real Cossack army?" she thought.

Orysia couldn't help herself but smile. She was about to meet the warriors about whom she had heard so much. These warriors fought for her land; they campaigned to put an end to all the fighting. She knew they saw her now, and the man in the front raised his hand in the air. The procession stopped. It was an odd sight: a column of Cossacks stopped in front of a young woman's lithe figure on a dusty dirt road. The sun was at her back, and she shone in the areola of sun rays, shimmering almost like a mirage. Three men in front of the procession dismounted.

"Hello there. Do not feel alarmed; we don't mean you or anyone else any harm!" one of the Cossacks said.

She didn't respond, looking down on her bare feet instead. Her toes poked through the dry grass and green burdock. The morning dew droplets sparkled and rolled down her foot,

absorbing moats of road dust. Orysia enjoyed her morning walks barefoot.

"My name is Denys Vedmid'. I go by just Denys, and my friends and I are looking for a place to rest. That forest on the mountain, on the other side of this town, is where we are going."

Orysia reached into one of her apron pockets and took out a small bushel of coltsfoot. She smelled the yellow flowers and threw it on the road in front of the Cossacks, making a slight bow. She glanced up with a sly look in her eyes, her mouth bloomed in a smile, and she laughed. The sound carried in the air like the tinkling of small bells.

"Good day to you, Denys. My name is Orysia Petriv. I go by just Orysia." She said, and Denys smiled.

"Thank you for the welcome and coltsfoot good luck. What town did we stumble upon?"

"This is Zavaliv, Denys."

"I have heard of this place." said a man to Denys's right side. "This is where Jablonowski castle stands."

"Is that right?" Denys asked her.

"Yes, it sure is. The castle is right down there, over by the river."

"Still occupied by the Polish?" asked another man on Denys's left.

"I would not say occupied. We're all living here together," Orysia said.

"I see a Catholic Church with its sharp roof in the distance, Denys! It is Polish; they are still blemishing our land all over Galicia."

"Well, yes, we also have a Synagogue and an Orthodox Church. Everyone has their tastes, you know," Orysia said, feeling a bit of anger in Cossack's voice.

Three men looked at one another in silence, frowning, as if unsure how to proceed.

"Orysia, we are Cossacks of Orthodox faith who are at war with the Russian czar. As you see, we carry with us the banners of Ivan Mazepa. We are no friends to the Russians, the Polish, or the Ottomans. We are friends to people such as yourself, people of Ukrainian blood. We fight for the freedom and independence of our land."

"Oh. Father's not going to like this, Denys. He's not going to like this at all." Orysia said, clasping her hands together. She was now beginning to regret not running down the road to warn people of the strangers' arrival.

"Well, Orysia, at the moment, we are not very concerned with what your father might like or dislike. We need to find a place to set up camp and give our wounded some time to heal."

"You should care about what the father thinks. Really, you should, but what is this you say about the wounded?" She felt an instinct to help take over. They had wounded, who were in pain, and she could help.

Three men glanced at one another again and began laughing out loud.

"A daddy's girl, I see!" Denys said. "You ask about our wounded for what reason?"

"I can help. Well, not only me but my mother and I can," she said.

"So that is what all those flowers and grass all over her are! A healer witch?" exclaimed the man on Denys's left.

"It is not polite to address a woman as a witch and not even offer her your name. I am standing right here." Orysia pressed her lips in a pout.

"Oh, she is beautiful, knows the art of healing, and is feisty!" roared the same man. More people now joined them, coming from the back to see why they had stopped.

Denys shook his head. Without warning, he swung his hand and slapped the laughing man near him upside the head. The laughter stopped, and silence felt awkward.

"Vasyl', you're not among the Russians anymore. Show at least some manners; it is our blood we are speaking to!" Denys said without raising his voice.

Awkward silence continued for a few long seconds. Vasyl' was scratching the back of his head while everyone else dropped their eyes to the ground. Some people coughed; some shuffled their feet. Orysia just then noticed how large of a man Denys was. He towered at least a head over Vasyl' and was so large that she wondered if that was how he got his last name: Vedmid'. He was indeed as big as a bear.

"I'm sorry, young lady. My name is Vasyl' Rosomaha. I have been warring for so long I forgot my manners." he said, raising his eyes to her.

"And I am Orest Vovk!" Offered another with enthusiasm, without waiting for Denys to ask him.

"Nice to meet you, Vasyl' and Orest, although I'm no lady. Orysia would do fine. My mother and I are healers, however, so you are right there. We are no witches, although we do know herbal remedies to help those in need." She bent her neck, looking behind them to the carriages and added: "and the wounded too."

Murmurs began spreading behind them, as people passed on the news. Stumbling upon a healer was a good sign, and the cloud of tiredness she sensed earlier began to dissipate. She saw more people coming to the front to look and listen. They were warriors with hard faces and sharp eyes, used to

seeing death and laying down their lives for the cause without hesitation.

"Will you help us, Orysia?" Denys asked.

"As I said, you must get my father's approval first. You must!" She wrung her hands together. Everything in her wanted to help.

"We will do what we must then. We are not here to fight and hoping to rest and get help in our land," Denys said.

"Denys, are we really not going to talk about a Polish nobleman's castle not one kilometer down the road, though? I would imagine soldiers are gathering right now to meet us," Orest said.

"You are right, Orest. Sad times, these are, when a Ukrainian cannot get some rest on Ukrainian soil. Sad times indeed."

"We will lose more people if we keep on moving. Why don't we at least attempt to speak to Jablonowski? Is he even here, or traveling somewhere?" Vasyl' asked.

"He is here. Jan hasn't been doing much traveling these last few years. You should speak with him too. Jan is a good man; my father never speaks badly about him. People like him as well; when he's around, we all feel safer." Orysia said.

"It is settled then. Someone, give me a white cloth to carry with me. Let's try to talk but be prepared to act if "the talk" does not go well." Denys said.

His words were passed on, and the procession began to adjust. Horses pushed carriages towards the back, and able warriors moved to the front. Some of them sat on the ground and began to fill their wooden pipes with tobacco. Others took out their swords and ran whetstones along the edge of already sharp blades. Someone struck a chord on bandura. Denys

stuck a large piece of white linen to his hat, and Vasyl' and Orest dismounted.

At this moment, the sound of church bells carried through the air. It wasn't the calm, slow, methodical sound calling people to service. It was a sharp, chaotic melody that warned of danger. It continued without stopping, booming, growing in its power. The warning alerted everyone around that something was amiss.

"We're expected," Denys said.

"We have some distance to cross. We should do it soon before too many people gather," Orysia said.

Denys nodded, and three Cossacks started to walk downhill, following her. They kept a good pace, but by the time they approached the castle, many people stood on both sides of the road, looking at them. Orysia waved and smiled, trying to put people at ease, but the armed Cossacks behind her made everyone cautious.

Cossacks had a good reputation among Ukrainians. After all, they were the freedom fighters, who stood up for the ordinary people when no one else would. They continued to fight even though everyone else had counted them out. But people also felt uneasy. Hetman Ivan Mazepa's alliance with the Swedish was not a very popular decision. Everyone wondered if this would bring more war to the already war-torn land. The fact was that the Polish Empire was not very friendly with either Russians or Swedish. Many people in Zavaliv did not want to choose between their long-term Polish benefactor, Jan, and an army of Ukrainian Cossacks who defended their land and fought for the right to proclaim independence.

The Golden Linden River swam its course near the castle, and water lapped softly at its banks. The river twisted and turned, flowing into the distance as far as the eye could see. It

was a good morning. Summer was here, and the sun already shone brightly in the sky, working its way to its zenith. A very light breeze swung the emerald branches of linden trees, which grew on both banks of the river. A large, open pasture looked like a comfortable home for the town's cattle. Cows were grazing in the distance, and kids who were supposed to be watching them ran around in circles - no doubt, some silly game was in progress. Nothing about today said: trouble.

Orysia led the three Cossack leaders down the road, towards the castle. In front of the castle's moat, waiting to meet them stood two rows of Galician warriors. The backline leaned on their long muskets. Those in the front stood with hands resting on their sword's pommels. Their allegiance was with Jan, and so it made for an awkward standoff. People of the same land and heritage but sworn to different alliances stood ready to square off in a fight: no one smiled. A light breeze tugged on a piece of white cloth poking out of Denys's hat. Someone spat on the ground. Someone coughed.

After a few seconds, people stood apart, making room for a large man who stepped forward with a confident gait. His long blond hair trailed behind him in the breeze, and cold blue eyes darted over to Denys, recognizing him as a leader, and he rubbed a long scar on the side of his face. Two men stood, unmoving, staring at one another without saying anything. The look of pure ferocity in the man's eyes showed he was not afraid of his adversary's size.

"Orysia, why don't you come here and join us? There is no need for you to stand on that side unless you're being forced to?" He asked.

"Oh no, father! These are good people. They don't mean any harm. They have wounded and came to ask for our help!" Orysia said and walked toward him. "Please, hear them out."

"My name is Denys Vedmid'," the Cossack spoke. "This is Vasy! Rosomaha, and this is Orest Vovk. We come in peace and need help. We hope our countrymen will find it in them to help those who fight on their behalf."

"I am Roman Petriv, captain of Hetman Jan Jablonowski detachment, albeit, retired. Although I am a Ukrainian by birth, I want to make sure you understand that officially, this land is under the control of the Polish Empire," he said.

"Yes! We know where the official matters stand, although we may disagree on how things should be. I believe you'll find many of your people who agree with us. Maybe even, you?"

"What is it you need?" Roman asked.

"We need some respite. The forest over there on that mountain looks right for the force our size. We have wounded, and your daughter, whom we met gathering herbs, mentioned you could help. Although she also mentioned, we would have to get permission from her father, whom I see we have just met." Denys said.

"What is the size of your unit?" Roman asked, and a hint of a smile fluttered across his lips.

"We are sotnia. Although, at this point, we are short of a full hundred."

"Is it true you are in alliance with the Swedes now?"

"It is true. As you see, it is not going much better for us now than when we were in alliance with the Russians. Anything is better than the lying Russians, though." Denys said and sighed.

"That is something we can agree on."

"Like you and all the good people of our land, all we want is peace and independence for Ukrainians. Nothing more, nothing less," Denys said.

"Interesting times, these are," Roman said. "I cannot turn you away in good faith. Too much Cossack blood has been spilled already, and your cause is noble. If you mean no harm, we will welcome you and your men, Denys."

"Thank you!"

"The decision to help you with food and provisions will be up to our town's residents. If there are any signs of trouble, however..." Roman paused.

"There will not be any trouble. My officers and I are grateful for all and any help you are willing to provide. We will treat everyone as neighbors and countrymen because that is who we are." Denys said.

"There will be no trouble. We appreciate your welcome, Roman", Vasy!' agreed.

"My guys will behave!" Orest added.

Roman stepped forward and extended his hand. Three men shook it in agreement, and the tension dropped considerably. The Cossacks and townspeople relaxed, and smiles began to flutter on their faces. Gossip about the newcomers started to spread. So many tales they could tell, so much news. Where have they been? What have they seen?

"Orysia, take them to Styha; let's get her to help with some healing. I will be behind you shortly; I need to leave a note for Jan," Roman said.

"Oh, I know she'll help, father, I know it!" Orysia said and motioned for the Cossacks to follow. "Come, come, let us not stand around much longer. My house is just over there, across the river. Let's go and see mother."

Denys turned to Vasy!' and whispered something in his ear, then turned to Roman.

"Vasy!' will head back to let everyone know we reached an agreement to start setting up camp. As you can imagine, we

were a little tense upon learning of a Polish nobleman estate being so close-by. Wouldn't want to leave my people hanging."

"That is the case everywhere in Galicia. Some Polish noblemen are good for our people, and some...not so much. Jan is a decent man." Roman said and turned to the side. "Someone, please tell the monks to stop ringing those bells before they break! There are festivities to be had here, not warnings!"

Orysia turned around and began to walk down the road. "Come, come, now that father approves, let us tend to your wounded as quick as we can. Follow me! We need to speak to my mother."

Denys and Orest nodded to Roman and followed Orysia. Vasyl' was already walking back towards the rest of the Cossacks. People's friendly smiles, words of encouragement, and pats on the back followed him. Zavaliv welcomed the Cossacks, and people were glad to help.

A deep booming base of the large bell complemented with the two small ones' lighter tremble slowed down and stopped. Only an echo of their melody weaved through the air in a perfect symphony, carrying the fading sounds of good news. It felt as if the echo refused to fade away entirely and reverberated its message in the air. Except now, that message was not of a warning, but of hope. An exciting time was ahead of Zavaliv.

Chapter 3

Orysia's Test of Skill

The mountains shook, and the ground trembled,
When Cossacks fought for our freedom.
Deep rage grew in their minds,
and cursed enemies dismembered
laid on the battleground. They remembered
that they had family and friends in our land
Cossacks protect us with their lives, and so they stand!

Orysia Petriv walked over the bridge under which swam the Golden Linden. She felt happy. Not listening to her common sense turned out to be the right decision. As she walked to her house, she thought of Cossacks setting up their camp on top of Karachyn. Zavaliv buzzed with the news of Cossack's arrival, and by the evening, she knew, everyone would come up there to see them. The fact that there would be no conflict between Jan and the Cossacks made this news that much sweeter. First, she reminded herself that her mother and she would need to do their best to take care of the wounded. A few she saw lying on carriages, and she guessed there were many she had not seen. She felt confident in what Styha and herself could do to help.

Approaching her home with two Cossacks behind her, she saw Styha standing in the yard. Her mom was throwing corn on the ground, and chicken ran around her in a feathery clump. They were pecking at the corn in a hurry, trying to catch every

golden kernel. The approach of strangers startled the birds. They fluttered to Styha's side, making loud cooing noises. One of the roosters flapped his wings, and the red comb on top of his head stood at attention.

"Orysia, who is it you've brought with you," Styha asked.

"Mom, these are Cossacks!" Orysia said with a wide smile.

"Oh, are they?"

"This is Denys, and this here is Orest. They are...umm, well, who are you?" Orysia asked, realizing she did not remember how to address them other than their names.

"I am Denys Vedmid', otaman of our sotnia."

"I am Orest Vovk, starshyna of our Baturyn Kurin!"

"They're Cossacks, mom! Like, real Cossacks!" Orysia said.

Denys and Orest tried to hide their smiles by bringing their hands up to fluff their mustaches.

"And also, they have some wounded from an important battle. They're here to ask for our help in healing."

"Why don't they tell me themselves what they came here for, child," Styha said.

She still stood in the middle of the yard with chickens surrounding her like an army. Apparently, the news of Cossack's arrival did not excite her as much. Her face might as well have been chiseled from stone for all the emotion it showed. Sorrow burrowed deep in every wrinkle and, in her eyes, swam hopelessness and calamity. She had seen too much pain in her life, and the news of warriors' arrival reminded her of the times she did not want to remember. Styha brought up her rough hands and adjusted the black shawl covering her forehead but remained silent.

"But mom! Father already spoke with them!" Orysia said.

Styha motioned for Orysia to come to her, and Orysia swung the fence gate open. Cossacks followed in her footsteps. The gate's hinges protested in a series of loud squeaks as if not wanting to let anyone in. The chickens clucked, and a rooster paced in front of Styha, dragging one of his wings stretched down through the dust on the ground. He was ready to jump on the intruders if they made a single wrong move.

"So, you already saw Roman, as my excitable child here tells me? You will find I have seen enough trouble to be a bit more skeptical than most." She said, addressing Denys.

"Yes, we have spoken with Roman! All we need is a place to rest, not cause any more sorrow. We also have some wounded, and Orysia shared that you might be able to provide us with healing."

"What is this important battle my daughter spoke about?" Styha asked.

"Every battle is important if it helps us get closer to our independence!" Orest said.

"And at what cost? How many more lives must we sacrifice?"

"We are willing to sacrifice every last one of us so that our people can live free," Orest said.

"I was afraid you would say that. Why should I spend energy and herbs healing you, if you're going to rush back into slaughter again?"

Denys and Orest looked at one another in confusion. That was not the response they expected.

"So, I see not every Ukrainian is behind Ivan Mazepa's cause?" Denys asked.

"Don't give them any more grief, woman; they've had enough. It does not matter what cause we are behind. If you

seek help, then help you will receive. We owe you that much for your service to our land. All Zavaliv is buzzing with excitement; let's do our part and be good hosts to our blood." Roman said, coming up to stand on the other side of the fence.

"Or half-blood," Styha said, pursing her lips together.

"You're in Galicia now, gentlemen," Roman said, addressing the Cossacks. "Polish blood mixes deep in our ancestry."

"As I said, we don't mean to intrude or cause trouble," Orest said after an awkward silence. "We're thankful for a place you have provided for our respite and will not press our luck further. If you will excuse us..."

"Oh, don't be a fool, child," Styha waved her hand. "Of course, I will help you. What kind of a healer would I be otherwise? It sounds like many warriors require help, so why don't you help me carry my bags?" She turned around and walked inside her house without waiting for an answer.

"And Roman, don't just stand there, offer them some water. They've come a long way!" She yelled over her shoulder.

"Oh, but of course!" Roman exclaimed. He pointed towards the well with a wooden bucket rocking in the light breeze. "Help yourself to some fresh, cold water!"

Cossacks did not need to be asked twice. They proceeded to lower the bucket into the well.

"You have to excuse us; we did not expect company. The last time strangers came to our town, they were Ottomans, and it was not a friendly visit. We are cautious of strangers here." Roman said.

"But you're here, sticking together and standing tall. I respect that. That's the Ukrainian spirit we're fighting for!" Orest brought the bucket back up, full to the brim with cold

water from the earth's depths. Denys grabbed the cup, hanging on the side and dipped it into the bucket. He sipped on the water as if it was aged wine and smiled. "Sweet and cold." Orest, who grabbed the cup after him, nodded in agreement as he swallowed the whole cupful in a few gulps.

"Are you going to chat by the water, or is someone coming to help me?" They heard Styha yell from inside the house.

Styha grumpiness seemed to serve as the last straw. Three men laughed, and any remnants of tension disappeared.

"Is she always like this?"

"The more excited or nervous, she gets the worst it gets," Roman said.

They shared a laugh and headed in the house. After they packed a couple of baskets full of medicines and a few small but bulging sacks of an assortment of supplies, they were ready to go.

"Come and make yourself useful, otaman and starshyna! You're on my battlefield now." Styha said

On the edge of the forest, the Cossack camp was sprouting up fast. Where there was nothing an hour ago, stood rows of tents and campfires. A large mass of trees swung their branches in the wind, and people moved to and from. A hawk's cry, looking for dinner, carried from above them as the bird circled the camp. People moved bundles of branches to prepare the evening's campfires. Cossacks sat together in small groups, here and there, sharpening their weapons and enjoying a moment of rest. Under the oldest, towering oak, a large, square tent loomed, with a flag planted next to it. A symbol of a cross on top of a flat pedestal shone white upon the red background. On one side of the cross were a moon and a star, both white like the cross. It was Ivan Mazepa's

heraldry, which Cossacks were flying with pride near their otaman's tent.

The otaman himself was walking alongside Styha. Denys carried a basket and, from under his armpit, stuck out a large roll of linen.

"Where are the wounded?" Styha asked.

"They're by the forest, in the shade," Orest said.

"Good to see your men have at least some sense. Let's get to it."

"What is brother Anatoliy doing here?" Orysia asked, pointing to a small gathering of Cossacks with a monk in the middle. Anatoliy was waving his hands, looking very excited.

"It seems the monk cannot resist such a good preaching opportunity. It's too bad; he's wasting his time." Denys said and smiled.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that. Anatoliy can be very persuasive." Styha said.

The monk spoke with excitement in his voice. He spread his arms and paced a few steps back and forth while speaking. A cask stood on top of a small carriage behind him; it appears he had brought Cossacks a gift. The wine was a reasonable price of entry, and the crowd around him grew by the minute.

"By the end of the night, he will be the main attraction!" Styha said. "I never understood how he does it. All that man talks about is how ancient his monastery is and how magical its bells are."

"I bet he's delighted to get a new audience," Orysia said.

Walking closer, they saw Levko Chobotar standing there as part of the crowd. He was listening with a smile on his face. Styha noticed that Velina, Levko's wife, was not with him, but Luna Chobotar, his daughter, and Orysia's best friend stood next to him.

"Luna," Orysia exclaimed! "How did you and your father make it here so fast?"

"He was excited to see the Cossacks and started up as soon as Roman and that other big Cossack shook hands by the castle. It's Anatoliy you should be asking about. How did he carry this cask of wine up here so fast?" Luna asked, without noticing that Orysia was not alone.

"Ahem. That big Cossack's name is Denys," said the big Cossack, addressing Luna.

Luna dropped her eyes, and her cheeks colored a bit.

"Hi Denys." she giggled, and grabbing Orysia by a forearm, pulled her to the side. Styha, Denys, and Orest continued to walk towards the forest. Wounded and weak didn't have the pleasure of having the time for gossip.

Orysia followed Luna, curious about what her friend had to say. The two women had grown up together, and despite their families always quarreling, they somehow managed to remain friends. It wasn't as much about their families as it was about their mothers. Styha and Velina did not see eye to eye - religion was at the heart of that hostility. Orysia's mom, Styha Petriv, was a healer, a znakhar, as people called her. She claimed to have a cure for any sickness. Luna's mom, Velina Chobotar, had a more sinister reputation but was as good at healing illnesses as Styha was. Velina was one of the few remaining pagans who did not pray to the one Christian God. Instead, she worshipped Slavic gods of old. When people prayed in a church for a good harvest, Velina would light a candle to Morana, an ancient goddess of seasonal re-births. When people prayed for more rain, she chose to ask Veles, a God of forests, water, and Earth, for his help. When people celebrated Jesus's birthday, she put flower wreaths at Perun's feet to keep the god of thunder and lightning appeased.

No matter the conflict, no one denied Velina's abilities in healing and fortune-telling, and since everyone was curious about what their future would bring, Velina always had a job. Slavic forests gods satisfied the needs which Christian one could not. When the future looked uncertain, she would pray to one of her gods and make a charm containing a protection spell. While people swore, they were Christian by faith, they could not resist a bit of extra reassurance from somewhere else. After all, Slavic paganism ran in their blood for an innumerable number of years.

Styha, being a devout Catholic, could not accept that Velina refused Christianity and chose to worship the ancient Ukrainian gods instead. Levko Chobotar, Velina's husband, and Roman Petriv, Styha's husband, tried their best to make the two women eye-to-eye, but enmity remained. Some townspeople went to Styha for remedies, some to Velina, and some to both. It was just how things were.

Orysia and Luna, however, never bothered to be a part of their mother's squabbles. They grew up to be good friends, albeit their completely different natures. While Orysia was trying to follow her mother into the forest to look at the wounded, her friend's mind was elsewhere.

Luna stopped after she dragged Orysia a few steps away and exclaimed:

"Oh my god! I am beyond excited!"

"Luna, I am on the way to help the wounded. Can we talk later?"

"Wounded. Help. Heal. Duty. That's all you ever talk about. Look around you!!! I've never seen so many good-looking strangers! Aren't you tempted in the slightest to flirt a bit?"

"Well, I have noticed, but no! These strangers make me more cautious if anything, but yes, duty is important, you, airhead."

"And how rough looking! They've seen real battles, Orysia! Not stories of old or legends, but battles happening right now! Doesn't that excite you?" Luna ignored Orysia's response and spoke so fast she barely had the time to catch her breath. Her chest heaved, and, to contain her excitement, she wrapped Orysia's hands in hers and shook them.

"Oh, Luna," Orysia said, shaking her head.

"I know, I know! I can't help myself." Luna giggled.

"How about I catch up to you once I have had the chance to help mom tend to the wounded?"

"Your loss! Catch you later." Luna said and pranced away towards the tents.

Orysia looked around and saw that Styha and Denys were already by the forest's edge, entering in a shade. She sped up, but Levko saw her passing by and called out.

"Orysia, hey! There you are. Have you seen where Luna went? She was just here."

"Yes! She was just here and went to look around the place; she is very excited."

"That's what I'm worried about," Levko said, scratching his head. "That girl can never stay out of trouble."

"She'll be ok, just high spirited, is all. Where's Velina? She didn't come with you?"

"Oh, Velina is a bit occupied at the moment," Levko said.

"Jan is not feeling well again?"

"She's trying her hardest to heal him, Orysia. I know your mom disapproves of her methods, but she means well. Hors is a good god, with potent magic powers, he will help heal Jan's wound this time."

"Hmm, you sure she's not asking Chornobog for favor instead? I mean, she's somewhere in the woods, and who knows, maybe Iisovyk will not let either her or Jan come back home one day."

"Don't be silly; Iisovyk is a wood creature. He won't harm those who appreciate forests and the animals living in it."

"Well, what about Chornobog?"

"Don't let your mother poison your mind. Think for yourself; your one god is no less violent than our many. Also, neither one of us has ever seen them, have we?" Levko asked.

"No, you're right," Orysia admitted.

"So, let us not argue over which gods we chose to worship when there's a much better story going on right over there," Levko said, pointing to the Cossack gathering.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Levko. You are right, but I need to get going. Mom is waiting for me by the wounded already." Orysia nodded and hurried towards the forest. Anatoliy's voice trailed behind her.

"This is but to quench your thirst from all that marching. Tonight, I will share our monastery's history with you over another cask! By the time I am finished, you will know our bells are nothing short of magical."

"Magical? Well, how can we miss such a story, boys?" She heard a response, but the words became muffled as gentle rustlings of the tree's leaves took over when she entered the forest. That rustling carried with it groans of the wounded. Plain white sheets with wounded Cossacks on them stretched under the trees, too many for her liking.

"About time you showed up," Styha said without raising her head.

"Behind me, there's a hopeless case. Take a look; maybe you'll see something I didn't. Otaman Denys has asked to show him special care."

Orysia looked around and saw the Cossack about whom her mother spoke. Large dark blotches covered the sheet under him, and he laid there without any movement or sound. Denys was leaning against a tree nearby, looking lost in an unspoken sorrow. Next to the Cossack laid his horse, who was also wounded. The animal's side was heaving with heavy breaths. Haler's instinct took over while her mind was still absorbing the situation. She grabbed one of the baskets near Styha and knelt by the wounded man.

"Your mother already looked at him, and there does not seem to be much hope for Andriy," Denys said. "He was like a son to me, a brave Cossack, so full of life he was. But berserkers are like that; in their battle rage, sometimes they bite off more than they can chew."

"He still is like a son to you! You will not say he *was* as long as he *is* still breathing. And as far as I can see, he is. So, shush, and come help me." Orysia said. Denys raised his eyebrows, but his hesitation did not last long; he nodded and knelt near Orysia. It was her battlefield now, and this time the otaman would follow.

"Andriy, you said?" Orysia said while looking over the wounds.

"Yes."

"Listen to me, Andriy; I know you can hear me. You will not be losing hope or think about leaving this world yet. I will be fighting for your life, but so must you! Denys tells me you are a berserker in the battle, so this is a battle. The most important battle of your life. Fight it alongside me!" Orysia spoke while running her fingers gently over the cuts and dry blood. Most of

the wounds were not deep, and she could tend those with ease. The problem was one deep cut, running across his side down to his thigh, and she saw the whites of his ribs poking through. The edges of the wound were black, and a myriad of small red veins ran from it. Yellow puss foamed along the sides of his injury, trickling down in slow, thick streams. Things were indeed looking bad; the infection was in his blood. Orysia got up and handed Denys a stack of clean cloth.

"I will begin preparing the herbs. Please soak these in water; we will need to clean these wounds. Mother should have had your people bring a few buckets already."

She heard Denys walk away and took another look at Andriy. His face was ashen, devoid of any blood. His cheeks looked collapsed, making his cheekbones and nose stand out abnormally sharp against his pallid visage. She felt panic rise in her chest and fought to suppress the feeling.

"A living dead," she thought. "How am I supposed to help here?" There would be time to panic later; right now, she needed to focus.

She rummaged through her basket contents until she found what she was looking for: a small bottle with a liquid made from cherries and walnuts. This mixture would help with inflammation. She poured it on a clean piece of cloth and proceeded to dab the sides of the wound.

Denys brought back a bucket of water, and she dipped her towel in it. Gently dabbing at Andrii's injury, she dried it and applied the mixture of cherries and walnuts again.

When that was done, she reached for a glass jar with thick yellow balsam. It was a unique remedy for infected wounds. This mix of honey, dry chamomiles, and butter was what Styha had used on Igor's thigh, which was cut during the battle of Zavaliv, a decade ago. Orysia prayed that it would have the

same healing effect on the wound that was twice as bad. She dipped her finger in the jar and spread balsam in a thick layer. Andriy moaned, one of his eyelids fluttered open, another eye stayed shut. It was swollen and black. His fingers twitched.

"Shh, stay calm, you are going to be ok!" Orysia said. She laid her free hand on his, but Andriy passed into oblivion again. Denys laid a large bundle of clean white cloth near her and stepped away without saying anything. Orysia glanced up at him and saw nothing but worry in his eyes. She clenched her teeth, forcing herself to remain calm. It was taking a lot of effort to do so, but she had to finish. Afterward, she could run around screaming, waving her arms, and doing anything else that people in panic did - but not now.

She reached into the sack and took out clumps of dry forest moss. Gently she pressed it over the balsam until it covered the wound. When she felt satisfied, she sat up and motioned to Denys.

"Denys, help me wrap this canvas around his wound. If you could lift his body a bit, I will do the rest. Denys complied, and, in a few minutes, she was done. Orysia wiped her arms with a fresh cloth and, with a heavy sigh, sat up with her back against the nearby tree. She was almost ready to let go of control, let her emotions take over, and slip into a panic when she heard a whinny. Orysia looked up and shook her head.

"That's Eagle, his horse," Denys said.

"Is it normal to name your horses after birds?" She asked.

"Only the fastest ones, when you see them fly around during the battle."

"Father named his Hawk."

"That's a good name for a good horse," Denys nodded. "Eagle is Andriy's best friend. It will break his heart when he dies."

"If he dies! Common, let's try and help this noble animal. No sense in trying to save a man and abandon his best friend." Orysia knew how much his horse meant to a warrior. She saw the care and attention Roman gave Hawk, and she understood what Denys was saying. They walked up to the horse together. He laid on the ground, shuddering with pain — a flock of flies plastered around a short, but deep sword slash across its stomach, feeding.

"Denys, bring me three or four large empty sacks, please, the cloth we have is too small for such a large animal. And if possible, some oats. Let the nearest house know Orysia needs it for healing, and they will provide."

"You think there's hope for Eagle?"

"There's always hope," she said, dropping down near the horse with her remedies. Denys ran off to his horse and galloped down the mountain towards the closest home he saw. Orysia finished dressing the wound with moss and stood up to clean her hands. At least ten Cossacks stood a few feet away, observing her. She was so absorbed in her task that she did not hear them approach.

"Don't just stand there, staring! It's rude. Make yourselves useful and boil some water in this bucket for me, please?" She asked, referring to no specific man.

"How bad is it, healer?" one of them asked. Another grabbed the bucket she pointed to and carried it over to the campfire nearby.

"It is bad." She sighed. "The cut is swollen and infected. I did all that I could. For him and his horse. I did all that I could." Orysia said and felt tears welling up in her eyes. She bit her lip to stop it from trembling. Panic was threatening to take over.

"You, your mother, and the other woman, Velina, performed miracles today. We cannot express in words how

much we appreciate your help. We are blessed to have made a camp in this town."

"So Velina did come," Orysia murmured to herself.

"Will Andriy and Eagle live?" A blunt question came.

"He will live, yes! They will both live. We must believe that." she said and could not hold her tears anymore. They rolled down her cheeks, and she slammed her fists into the ground. "They will live! They must live!" Panic buzzed inside her, like lightning.

Strong arms grabbed and pulled her tight against a hard chest, which sucked away her panic. She put her head on his shoulder and sobbed.

"I am not prepared to deal with this. I heal people's illnesses, not mortal wounds!"

"If not for you, Andriy would have had no chance at all! If not for you and the other two healers, many of our friends would not have had their chance! You are a real blessing to us; don't you question that!" someone said.

Orysia did not say anything back. She allowed herself to feel comforted by the Cossack's moral and physical support. Strangely, it made her feel better. She felt safe, as if nothing could go wrong. She wondered if this feeling was what Luna was chasing? After a few minutes, panic retreated; she pulled away and wiped her face with her sleeves.

"Thank you." She said.

Behind her, Denys and a few other men were wrapping Eagle's moss-covered wound in large sacks. Once bound, the material would apply pressure for balsam and moss to do their job. Someone was already throwing oats in the boiling water. Next to them, Bogdan, Zavaliv's blacksmith, was wringing his large hands together. His face looked white as snow.

"So that is what the sacks and oats were for." He mumbled.

"Yes," Orysia said. She felt awkward after her outburst, but no one was laughing. Cossacks took her place, finishing up what she had started under Denys's guidance.

"Thank you for helping, Bogdan." She said, walking towards the large man.

"Oh, I did not know I was going to see all of this. I love the tales of battles, but the sight of blood. It makes me dizzy."

"Why don't we walk away, Bogdan. Not much else we can do here right now. Anatoliy is probably still telling his stories; he's very excited about the new audience. I'm sure Cossacks will have some to share as well."

Bogdan nodded, and they walked out of the forest into the open clearing. It was strange seeing a big man pale at the sight of blood, which made her feel better about her panic attack. Everyone had a purpose. No one could rival Bogdan with a hammer, and if today was any indication, remedies and healing was her calling.

The sun was dipping towards the horizon, and Orysia realized that more time had passed than she thought. Dusk would be upon them soon, bringing Zavaliv's townspeople here. No one was going to miss a chance of sharing an evening meal with the legendary freedom fighters. She saw that many people were already bringing over food, expecting a long and grand evening. More monks joined Anatoliy, bringing more brown casks of wine with them to the camp. Bogdan's steps became surer, the blood returned to his face, and he smiled.

"Anatoliy will be talking forever! That man cannot be allowed any wine; he's going to talk their ears off!" He said scornfully, but a broad smile spread across his face. Orysia settled near the group of people listening to Anatoliy. Her mind was still processing what happened earlier. She knew she did

the best she could, and now only time would tell if her best was good enough. Styha had passed on Andriy, so she could help many in the time it would have taken to help him. Orysia felt responsible for Andriy now; Denys's pleading eyes stuck in her memory. Andriy had to live; he just had to.

Levko's deep voice freed her from her thoughts as she heard him argue with Anatoliy over faith, as per the usual.

"Catholic, Orthodox, or Jewish, a place of worship is a place of worship!" Levko said.

"And next, of course, you will say that pagan gods are fine to worship as well?" Anatoliy responded, looking upset.

"As a matter of fact, yes! People have been worshipping Perun for centuries before we were forced to convert to your religion. Everyone should be allowed to worship whom they want."

"What blasphemy!!!" Anatoliy exclaimed, crossing his arms across his chest.

"Blasphemy? Says a Pope's bootlicking Catholic!" One of the Cossacks yelled from the back. "I'd rather side with a pagan then with a Catholic."

"Orthodoxy is in our hearts; it is in our blood!" another Cossack said.

"Didn't the Russian Orthodox Church excommunicate Ivan Mazepa?" someone asked from the back.

"We are no friends to the Russians of any faith. We are talking about the Ukrainian Orthodoxy here, though!"

A tall man stepped through the crowd towards the center, and his dark eyes burrowed deep as he looked around him. No one said anything for a moment,

"Oh, I see. Tell me then, how is Ukrainian Orthodoxy getting along with the Swedish Catholicism? Since the

Swedes are now your allies, right?" the man asked, running a hand through his thick, curly black hair.

"It gets along with whom it must! Treacherous Russians will not be getting our loyalty again."

"One might say, Mazepa was treacherous himself. Did he not betray Peter the Great, his long-time ally?" the man inquired.

"Not before Peter made it clear we would not get our independence that he promised us!" a few more Cossacks stood up, looking at one another, their fists balled up.

"So, your independence is all that matters to you, then?" the man asked, unphased.

"Yes! All Ukrainian blood will be free from the chains of bondage! We have been a nation without a country for far too long!"

"Huh! Talking about a nation without a country My people have been..." someone began.

"Be quiet, Moshel!" Levko shushed the town's tailor. "There will be a time and place to talk about your Jewish heritage. Now isn't it."

"You are right. I am afraid you are going against forces more powerful and cunning than you know, however!" the newcomer said.

"What do you know of powerful and cunning forces? Who are you?" one of the Cossacks asked.

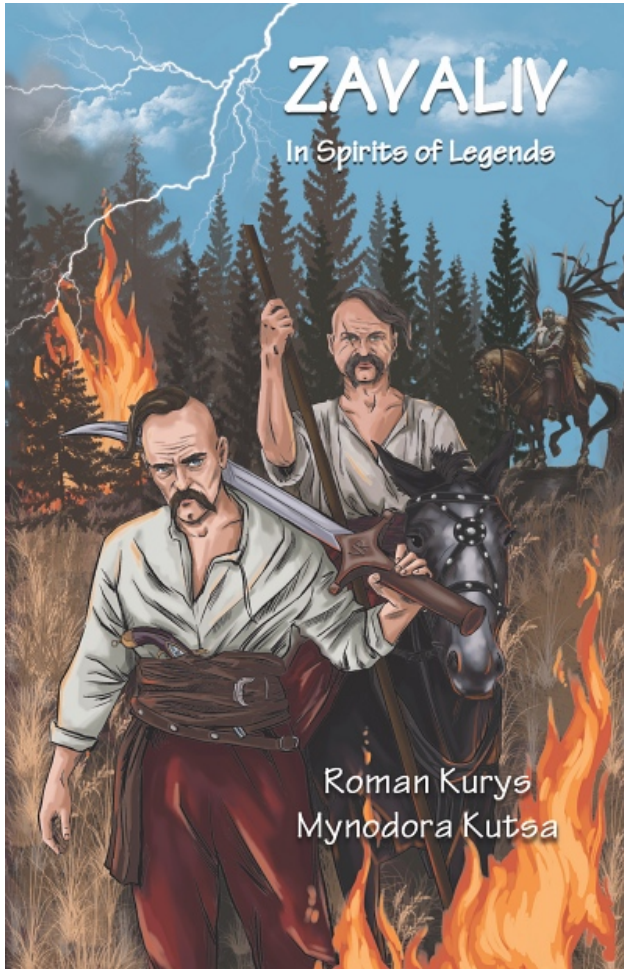
"I fought by King Sobieski's side at the Battle of Lviv, that Black Summer of 1675. I have protected this land from Ottomans all my life, much the same as you. I know something about courage. I often paid my soldiers from my treasury to make sure they could support their families. I know something about honor. I have known a few political intrigues involving the Polish royal court, so I also know something about

cunning. My name is Hetman Stanisław Jan Jabłonowski, and you are camping on my land."

He paused for a moment, and then his lips opened in a smile. "And you are welcome on my land, as Roman already told you. I respect brave warriors, and even though our causes are not aligned, we are all patriots of this land. You'll come to find I love Galicia and its people as much as you, despite the differences in our allegiance. We happen to be loyal to different leaders, but here and today, it will not matter! Orthodox, Catholic, Jewish, or Pagan, everyone will have a voice here, as long as no one harms one another!"

At that time, Roman Petriv and Igor Koltyk walked up from behind Jan's right side. Vasyl Rosomaha and Orest Vovk stepped up from his left, and someone began to clap. It proved contagious and spread like wildfire.

Orysia sighed with relief - her dad was here. Everything was going to be just fine.



Zavaliv is a magical realism story that is based on true historical events of the 1700s and is rooted in Slavic mythology and culture. Cossacks and Ottomans. Reality and Slavic Pantheon. Life in a small town on the outskirts of the Empire.

Zavaliv: In Spirit of Legends

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