

Thunder in the West

July 1941, On A Farm West Of Pskov, USSR

It began on a day that seemed like any other day. The summer sun was warm, the heat given pause by a parade of clouds that slowly marched across the sky. The air was full of bees and butterflies, the voices of men and women, the lowing of the dairy cows in the pasture. The land was blessed with dark, rich earth, its scent giving promise that the toil of Man would be rewarded, that water and sun would bring forth food and life. It was a busy farm, as farms tended to be, but this particular one had more going on than any of its two-legged inhabitants (chickens aside) ever suspected.

For this was a place where cats lived and, in their own fashion, worked to rid their domain of rodents and other pests. The humans valued the cats for this vital task, but thought no more about their inscrutable feline ways than what the dairy cows might think of the Great Stalin. Of course, the local Party commissar would say that the cows all loved Stalin, but these cats had no time for such petty human foolishness.

Their ancestors having traveled from the Volga region many, many summers before, the cats watching over this farm were descendants of the great wild forest cats, well adapted to the rigors of life in Mother Russia and quite wise to the ways of Men. They were big, far larger than their diminutive European relatives save for their close cousins, the great forest cats of Scandanavia, who thrived in the even harsher lands farther north. They had heavy warm coats, although nature let them cast off their thick cold-weather ruffs when the warmth of spring finally broke the back of winter each year. Most of them smoke-colored with what looked like tiger stripes, they blended in well with the crops and woods covering the land upon which they lived. They were hardy, hard-working, and sensible feline folk, particularly on a farm where there was always work for any free hand or paw.

Yet not every moment was filled with labor, neither for men nor for beasts. The human children were given time to play, and even the more young-spirited adults indulged in the occasional bout of good-natured frivolity. It would not do let the farm's Party commissar see that too much time was being wasted on such pleasures, but he himself was a good-natured man, as unlikely as that was in Stalin's Soviet Union, and a father who enjoyed watching his own children at play.

The cats were far more indulgent, of course, for if one couldn't play, what sense was there in living life at all? Play was good training for life as an adult cat, of course, but it was also good for the heart and soul, and the entire clan – kittens to elders – took time out from their chores and naps to play.

And so it was, that in a decrepit old barn in the farm's southwestern fields, seldom visited by the humans except during planting season, a game of hide-and-seek was afoot. Three kittens, no more than ten weeks old and all the color of dark sinuous smoke, moved uncertainly across the closed barn's dusty floor, peering intently into the surrounding darkness. All three were determined to prove that they were not afraid, that they were not just little kittens – babies! – anymore. But they moved shoulder to shoulder, content to prove their courage as a group. They weren't babies, they had tacitly decided, but they weren't stupid, either. They faced a terrible and fearsome opponent.

"Where did he go?" murmured Misha, his gaze darting up to the rafters above. It was dark up there, very dark, even for his eyes. The only light entering the barn came from the hole through which they had entered, where one of the farmers had accidentally run into the barn with a truck after having had a bit too much vodka. Inside the barn was straw, hay, machines and other unfathomable devices the humans used to grow their crops and tend their fields. Such things were beyond the interest of the cats who guarded the farm and its unwitting two-legged inhabitants. It was enough that rats, mice, and other such creatures wanted what the humans had, and it was up to the cats to keep out the pests. There were always plenty of rats and mice: the cats never had to go far in search of a meal. And the humans need not be the wiser about their keepers.

"I don't see him," Tanya whispered, looking over her shoulder to make sure their quarry wasn't sneaking up, silent as a ghost, behind them.

Anna stifled a giggle. She was scared stiff but couldn't help laughing. It drove her littermates crazy. "He always—"

"Gotcha!" a voice cried playfully from the darkness as a white paw gently batted Tanya on the rump, eliciting a squeal of surprise and indignation.

A big cat, several times her size, streaked by out of the darkness, leaving her and the other two kittens in a cloud of dust. Black as night save for his underbelly, paws, and chin, Sasha looked for all the world like a high society gentlecat dressed in a tuxedo. He was the only cat in his clan with such a novel coat, but he was not the sort to attend a formal ball. He was a proud young hunter, strong and quick like his father. And in the dark barn, staying perfectly still or slowly stalking, belly to the ground, he was all but invisible even to keen kitten eyes. The kittens claimed they hated that he could disappear in the darkness, but they never stopped begging him to play hide and seek. He was their favorite uncle, and he loved them all dearly.

Laughing good-naturedly and glancing back to make sure he hadn't really frightened the little ones, Sasha dashed back out the hole into the sunlight, his jade green eyes glittering, the kittens howling in hot pursuit. He slowed down so they could catch him, trying not to laugh at their terribly serious faces as they pounced on him. Pouncing was such serious business for a dedicated kitten, much less three. He desperately restrained himself from howling with laughter. It simply wouldn't

do to hurt their feelings. Instead, he let himself be wrestled to the ground, his large and powerful adolescent body rolling carefully so as not to hurt the tiny marauders.

“You got me! You got me!” Sasha yelped as Tanya bit his ear, growling like a tiny tigress. Misha had his mouth clamped as far as he could manage around one of Sasha’s rear legs, his jaws spread so wide he could only manage a muffled “Ummph!” And Anna had simply buried her smiling kitty face in the fur of his belly, laughing, her whiskers tickling him mercilessly. “I surrender!” Sasha cried out, laughing as he gently detached Tanya from his ear with a gentle swipe of his forepaw, then shaking Misha loose with a quick shake of his hind leg. Anna, still laughing, simply rolled to the ground as he stood up and shook the dirt from his ebony coat.

“Sasha, you always cheat!” scolded Tanya, her little gray face all business, eyes narrowed in fierce accusation.

“Yeah!” Misha agreed, rubbing his face against the deep fur of Sasha’s flank. “You always cheat! With your black coat we can never see you!”

“Just so!” Anna chided. Then quickly added, “Can we do it again?” The other two kittens seconded her motion with cries and howls of their own.

“Okay, okay,” Sasha agreed readily, pausing a moment to lick their tiny ears and nuzzle them with his broad nose. It would only be the fifth game that morning, but the day was yet young. “But this time-“

He was interrupted by the faint sound of thunder, far away. But there was no trace of storm in the sky, the clouds passing by clearly not laden with rain or threatening bolts of lightning. Straining his acute hearing, he could tell that it was coming from the west. But it didn’t boom and fade like thunder in a normal storm. It faded, then grew, faded again, as if dozens - hundreds - of thunderclaps were shattering the sky somewhere far away. He had seen storms in his young life, but none such as this. This was a storm to be feared. He would need to tell his father.

He noticed some of the humans in a nearby field pause in their work, looking to the west, as well. Even they could hear the louder booms of the thunder beyond their sight. They listened for a moment, then after some animated discussion they began to run back toward the farm’s central living area. They were obviously frightened.

“Come on, children,” he told them, “we need to get back home.” He ignored their pleas and protests as he herded them with his nose. “Quickly now, quickly!”

“Sasha!” A melodious voice suddenly called out to him from the tall grass near the ramshackle wooden fence surrounding the barn. A feline face appeared, that of a young female his own age. Unlike all others of the clan, she was unique in her way, just as he was in his. Her eyes were a piercing blue, beautiful eyes that always captivated him. Her fur held a gentle blend of white and cream, darkening to a light tan on her head, with the tips of her ears and all of her shapely tail a mocha brown. Her white feet padded lightly over the ground between them. His sister.

“Nina Nikolaevna!” all three kittens cried at once, charging off to greet her. Sasha was their favorite uncle, but Nina was also their favorite aunt.

Nina quickly nuzzled them in greeting, but her attention was riveted on Sasha. “Father has summoned the clan hunters,” she said quietly, her blue eyes narrowed with worry. She, too, looked toward the west, her ears pricking up to the sound of the thunder.

“What’s wrong?” Sasha asked, his eyes reflexively darting around them, searching for any threat beyond the faraway thunder. It was not like Nina to be worried. He had physical courage, he knew, much more than her. But she had an inner strength, a quiet wisdom that demanded respect even at her young age. She did not frighten or worry easily. Fear grew in him.

“Father has called a council,” she told him as she herded the kittens back toward the ancient pile of wood that had once been a human house, but that now served as the great hall of the farm’s feline defenders. “And Outsiders have come,” she whispered in his ear as she veered off with the kittens toward their home under the stairs of a nearby hovel where Vera Nikolaevna, Sasha and Nina’s older sister, stood waiting tensely for the kittens to return.

Sasha stared after her. *Outsiders*. Cats from beyond the clan’s territory. There had been no cries of alarm or sounds of combat, so he knew they had not come with claws outstretched. But why would they come at all? Sometimes an Outsider drifted into the clan’s territory and were peacefully added to the clan family: any clan needed new blood to survive. But Nina had said Outsiders, plural, more than one. That had never happened in his young lifetime, although he had heard his father and grandfather tell of such things, and more.

Ears flat against his head with worry, he hurried into the clan’s central den, effortlessly worming his way through the dark tunnels.

As he entered the great hall, he saw that the clan’s hunters, the adult males, had all gathered in a great semicircle, while the womenfolk guarded the precious children in their dens. Some two dozen pairs of slitted eyes met Sasha’s gaze. He recognized all of their faces, all the males from the farthest reaches of the farm their clan protected. He had met them all individually at work and play since he was a kitten, but never had there been a gathering such as this in his lifetime. The clan’s families had gathered often enough, the kittens rolling and playing as the adults conducted the more serious business of grooming or courting. But this was not a family gathering. This was a council of war.

Sasha was the last to enter, and quietly sat down in the outer ring of the semicircle, among the younger clan hunters.

His father and leader of his clan, Nikolai Mikhailovich, sat at the focus, facing the hunters. At his side were two Outsiders. They were uncomfortable being surrounded by others not of their own clan, in a place not their own. Their tails twitched, the fur on their necks stood on end. They knew their lives were forfeit if they offended the clan father, yet still they had come.

His father commanded silence with a mere twitch of his tail. While his graying muzzle betrayed his advanced age, Nikolai Mikhailovich was a large and powerful cat. Easily weighing twelve kilograms, he was a match for any two of his most powerful hunters, even now. But he had never abused his power, had never raised a claw without just reason. He had been a good and shrewd leader, a gentle and loving father. But his face now betrayed none of the kindness that lay beneath his thick silver coat.

“This is a council of war,” he announced, his deep voice thrumming through the hall. He flicked an ear toward the two Outsiders who sat beside him. “Nikita Grigorevich has come to us from the Western Road Clan.” Several of the assembled hunters nodded in recognition and respectful greeting. Nikita’s clan was well known and honored from the periodic ritual battles both clans had fought over the years. But they were not fought for territory, only to hone the skills of their hunters and to ensure mutual respect. “You will listen carefully to what he has come here to say.”

The clan father of the Western Road Clan chirruped a respectful but brief greeting. He, too, was a strong cat, but not nearly so large or old as Nikolai. His golden eyes darted among the hunters, his ears fully erect. “Invaders have come to our lands,” he began, “human invaders from the west.” A murmur of disbelief rose among the hunters, quickly stilled by Nikolai’s steel-hard stare. “It is difficult to believe, I know,” Nikita went on, “but it is true. They have come before, these ones, not so many generations ago. In the time before the Revolution. In the time of the Tsars.”

The hall was absolutely silent. All the hunters had heard the tales the elder cats had told of those olden times. The majesty, the madness of the Great War that had consumed all before it. Could it be that it had come yet again upon them? Tails twitched nervously, but they said nothing.

“But this is worse than all the old tales you have been told!” Nikita boomed. “The humans fight not only with their rifles and great guns - have you not heard the strange thunder from the west? - but now with enormous armored war machines that churn buildings into dust, and winged craft that take weapons into the sky. These invaders spread death everywhere before them. And all of us - not just my clan, but yours and others, as well - are directly in the path of their destruction. And our own humans, those we are sworn to guide and protect, burn their own villages and crops before retreating, leaving nothing but ash for the enemy to choke on.”

The hunters grew restless now, both from fear and denial, yet none openly challenged Nikita’s story. Nikolai, their clan father had not yet given them permission to speak.

Nikita nodded. “I did not believe it either,” he said softly. “That is why I brought Andrei Borisovich with me, as proof.” He turned to his companion. “Andrei came to me from the Forest Lake clan, three days travel to the west. He is

now a son of my clan, for he has lost his own. My own scouts confirmed his story, and I brought him here right away to warn you.” He gently nuzzled his companion. “Tell your tale, Andrei,” he said softly.

Sasha took a closer look at Andrei Borisovich. At first glance he was like any of the other hunters gathered in the great hall: a stout animal with a tiger-stripe pattern on his smoke-colored fur. But on closer inspection it was clear that Andrei had been through a terrible ordeal. His fur was dirty and matted, and Sasha saw that there was more than one blood stain on his coat. And there were patches that looked black, as if the hair and perhaps the very skin had been charred, burned. He was thin, as if he had been running for days without food, and Sasha realized with a shock that he probably had. But the worst were his paws: he could see traces of blood around all four feet. Andrei had run so far and so long that the pads on his feet had worn down to bare flesh. Here was a cat in terrible pain, but who was too shocked by some larger horror to show it. Sasha involuntarily looked to the west, his mind’s eye trying to picture the catastrophe that was rolling toward them.

“It began with thunder,” he said quietly, his voice cracking with emotion. “Just as you hear outside now. That’s when the humans began to leave our forest village. They took what they could with them, but some simply walked away with nothing but their ragged clothes. In a half-day the village was empty of all but us and the rats.

“Then came the Red Army soldiers, hundreds of them. They came by train and truck, walking on foot. They dug holes in which to hide themselves, and hid in the houses and the forest.” He looked up helplessly. “We had no idea what was to happen,” he whispered.

He was silent for a moment, his eyes amber eyes wide, staring at the past. “Then the fire from the sky came,” he went on softly, lost in that other world, “what the soldiers called ‘artillery.’ There was thunder far away, then a terrible shrieking sound. The earth gushed forth in fiery blasts, destroying anything nearby. Buildings. Humans. Cats.” He shuddered violently. “Then the armored beasts came. Great gray slab-sided things. Ugly. Hideous. Making a horrible roar as they churned the ground in their advance, enemy soldiers swarming behind them. The armored beasts carried great guns that bellowed fire and thunder, like the artillery. Many of the Red Army soldiers were killed. Too many to count. Few managed to escape. Fire took everything else. The entire village burned to the ground. Homes. Crops. My clan’s den.” He looked at them with haunted eyes. “We tried to save them,” he rasped. “They were trapped by the flames. My scouts and I – the few of us who were left – we tried to reach them, to save even a single kitten. But we failed,” he whispered in anguish. “We failed!”

A spontaneous wail arose from the gathered hunters, a sound of snarling fury and deepest despair. None of them could imagine a more wretched, horrible calamity. Hunters and huntresses were called upon to face great perils when the clan was endangered, and some inevitably lost their lives. Sometimes a kitten was

lost to an accident or a larger predator such as the wolves that sometimes traveled through the nearby forest. It was rare and ever a tragedy, but it happened: life was not always kind to those of the feline clans, any more than it was to the humans they watched over.

But to lose an entire clan, the young and the mothers, all in one terrible stroke was simply unthinkable. Andrei Borisovich's clan had been much smaller than their own, and so had only one community den. It was the only practical way for them to live. And it had guaranteed their destruction. Such a vile way to die, and at the hands of faceless human invaders. It was simply too much.

Nikolai sat silently for a moment, letting his hunters give voice to their emotions. Then he spoke in an iron voice that instantly silenced them. "We cannot bring them back," he growled. "But we will do what we can to prevent such a tragedy from befalling other clans...and our own."

He looked over the hunters, their fur standing on end, their tails twitching, lips bared in a snarl at the unseen enemy. "Nikita Grigorevich has asked our help in moving his clan to safety," he went on. "This was a bountiful year for our Western Road brethren, and they were blessed with many new kits. More than they can move to safety by themselves." He stood, rising to his full height, his tail high in the air. "And we will help them! Let none say that Great Fields Clan did not meet this challenge with honor!"

A roar of agreement went up from the hunters, and Nikolai nodded solemnly. "Yes, we shall help our brothers and sisters of the Western Road, but we have much more to do, mighty hunters. We must spread the word to other clans that war has come to our lands. They must be warned, and quickly. And we must also make our own escape from the path of the fury that comes toward us."

He paused, again taking his seat. "There is also one more thing we must do," he began in a low voice, glancing at Nikita Grigorevich. "We must help the humans."

He was met by stone cold silence.

"But, Father," Sasha said quietly, "how can we? To do so is against the Covenant." The other hunters flicked their ears in silent assent, content to let the clan father's blood son carry the argument.

"I know, Alexandr Nikolaevich," his father told him gently, using Sasha's proper name as protocol demanded. "All of you know that we are bound by the Covenant to keep our intelligence secret from the humans. We all know what would happen were they to discover we were intelligent beings: there would be war between us, and the cost would be terrible to all." He paused, drawing a deep breath. "But there are times when we must. Even the Covenant tells us this, if not in so many words."

"We did not do so well the last time, Nikolai," Nikita Grigorevich said softly.

Nikolai frowned mightily, but he did not disagree. "Too true, Nikita," he said, his voice heavy with memory, not his own, but of tales told to him when he was just a young hunter. Looking up at the gathered warrior cats of the clan, he

explained, “Few of you know this, but our great grandfathers – Nikita Grigorevich’s and my own – were of the same clan, some twenty-four summers past. They were the last days of the Tsar.”

The Tsar was like a mythical being to the cats of the forest and the fields, a mighty and tragic creature. Though they realized intellectually that more than one human had borne the title, in cat lore the Tsar was a superhuman being, beyond nature’s touch. But not beyond that of other men.

“I will not relate the tale here and now,” Nikolai went on, “but you must know that folk of our kind discovered that the Tsar and his family – his entire clan – were to be murdered.” There was a shocked gasp from the assembled hunters. Yet another event that had been unthinkable before this day! “Two of our great-grandfathers tried to warn them,” Nikolai said heavily, his eyes meeting those of the former clan father of the now extinct Forest Lake clan. “They failed, and both died in the attempt.”

“And now we are to help those who murdered the Tsar?” one of the hunters asked. It was not a challenge, but a point that had to be made.

Nikolai flicked his tail just so, indicating ironic agreement. “Yes, much as it grieves me,” he said heavily. “Because our lands are being invaded, our mothers and cubs being killed. As goes the old saying, ‘The enemy of my enemy is my friend.’”

“Father!” Nina called from one of the tunnels leading to the great hall. She strode before the hunters not as a female, but as the princess that she was. Sasha was so proud of her, but now afraid of what news she brought.

“Yes, daughter?” Nikolai replied, the fur on his neck standing on end. Nina would never interrupt such a gathering without good reason. This would not be good news.

“The humans, Father,” she told him. “They’re leaving. All of them. They’re taking whatever they can carry and fleeing to the east.”

“The Red Army soldiers will be here soon,” Andrei Borisovich muttered. In the west, the thunder grew louder.

“It is time, then, my brothers!” Nikolai growled. “First, we must send a rescue party to assist the Western Road Clan to safety.” He nodded toward Roman Konstantinovich, Nikolai’s son-in-law, a burly hunter who was missing a chunk of his left ear. “Roman,” he said, “you will lead. Pick ten hunters to take with you. The Western Road Clan is two days travel at a walking pace. But you will have little time: you must go, complete your task, and return by sunset tomorrow.” He paused, looking the veteran in the eye. “If you have not returned by then, the clan must depart without you.”

Roman flicked his tail, displaying rational fear tempered with confidence. He was a veteran. “You need not worry, Nikolai Mikhailovich,” he replied. “We shall not fail you or those of the Western Road.”

“I would go with you, Roman Konstantinovich,” a female voice called out. Nina. Feminine, yes. Weak, no. The great hall again fell silent. Roman was about to

say something, then snapped his jaws shut. This was most unusual. He knew his sister-in-law, blood sister to his mate Vera, to be precocious, but this was unprecedented. “Clan Father?” he asked uncertainly.

“Nina Nikolaevna,” he rumbled in answer to her, yet looking at Roman, “your wish is granted.” He shifted his gaze to his daughter’s surprised face. “In fact, I command it. You and Sasha will both go on the rescue.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but could find no words. She had expected him to deny her. “Yes, Father,” she replied, lowering her eyes.

“Roman,” Nikolai called the hunter leader. “Assemble the rest of your hunters and await Nina and Sasha outside. They will join you shortly. Then you must make all haste to the Western Road.”

“Yes, Clan Father!” And without another word, Roman Konstantinovich quickly began to pick the hunters to accompany him.

“The rest of you,” Nikolai boomed, “return to your families and make preparations to leave.” In a bustle of twitching tails and whiskers, the great hall quickly emptied.

“Nina, Sasha,” Nikolai beckoned his children, with Nikita and Andrei still by his side. “I did not want to tell the others this, but I must tell you,” he said quietly. “This is the last day of the Great Fields Clan.” Before they could protest, he growled, demanding their attention. “The only way we can warn as many other clans as possible is if we disperse,” he explained. “We will use the human trains to make our escape. No more than two families will go on each train – and only one family per train if we have enough time.” He glanced at Andrei Borisovich. “This will also guarantee that at least some of our clan will survive the coming storm.” Nikolai fell silent, nodding at his old friend Nikita from the Western Road.

“Nina, Sasha,” Nikita began, “to my suggestion your father has agreed: once you rescue the Western Road Clan, you must make your way to the great northern city of Leningrad. In the last Great War our folk made contact there with forest cats from the far north. They may have information on the invaders, and it may be critical if we are to help the humans. You must make contact with them, warn the city clans, and do what you can to help the humans.” He glanced at Nikolai, then continued, “There is a station near the Western Road Clan, where their kits are to be taken. There, too, you will board the train for Leningrad. Special arrangements have already been made for you. Someone will be waiting.”

“But how are we to return here for Father?” Nina asked heatedly, the hair on her back suddenly rising in anger and fear as she turned her gaze to Nikolai. “I’m not leaving him here!” Sasha tensed in sympathy with her reaction, but his brain had not yet accepted the fact that he was seeing the last hours of his clan before it passed into shadow.

“Children...” Nikolai began, then paused.

To Nina and Sasha their father suddenly seemed to age right before their eyes, crushed under a burden of responsibility they could only hope to never have to endure.

“My children,” he began again, “this will be a most perilous journey. I am sending the two of you together because you each have strengths to balance the weaknesses of the other, and because neither of you are yet mated. I wish...I wish I could be there to see that. I have many grandchildren, yes, but I would have liked to see the beautiful kittens you will both have someday.”

Nina and Sasha glanced worriedly at one another. Then Nina’s eyes widened with understanding. “You’re not leaving here, are you Father?” she asked in a choked whisper.

Nikolai slowly shook his great head. “No, daughter,” he said heavily. “My time on this earth has almost run its course. I have lived a long and full life, blessed with many children. But it is time. The hunters still respect me, but I am old and tired. And ever since your mother died...” He turned away from them, toward the woods to the north where their mother had gone on from this world. “I have missed her so,” he whispered, remembering his beautiful mate of so many years, her dark blue fur, lush and thick, the yellow eyes that always captivated him. His heart ached for her. “Were it not for the two of you, I would have passed on some time ago. Now, once you and the clan are as safe as I can make you, I will take my leave.” He bared his teeth in a fierce grin. “Perhaps I shall take a piece of one of these invaders with me!”

“Father,” Sasha pleaded, nuzzling his father’s side, “please...”

“No,” Nikolai told him gently but firmly with nuzzling of his own, and a tender lick of Nina’s ear. Then he stepped back from them and held their gaze with his own. “I love you, and am so proud of both of you,” he whispered. “But there is no more time. You have a very hard road ahead, and you must hurry!”

“Come, children,” Nikita told them softly as he and Andrei Borisovich turned to leave the great hall.

With heavy hearts Nina and Sasha followed, leaving their father alone in the silent great hall.