

Sapphires in the Snow

By Nicholas R Solari

“Anton,” Ruslan croaked. “Come here.” Anton Listratov stepped out of the pillar of light that poured through the cell window and approached Ruslan Belevich, who sat hunched on the edge of his bedframe. “Anton,” he repeated. “Let me see her.” Anton shifted back under the light and turned his back to Ruslan. His beaten muscles rippled as he peeled off his shirt, revealing a host of scars around a tattoo of a young girl. Ruslan looked into the girl’s face, the face he once knew as flushed with color, the face he now knew as dark green lines under beaten skin. He looked into her eyes, ones he once knew as glimmering sapphires, ones he now knew as empty green ovals.

The Moment clung to Ruslan as best it could. It wrestled with him. It tried to pin him down, to strangle him, but Ruslan couldn’t hold on. Instead, he let go.

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Her eyes were sapphires again, and her cheeks were flushed with life. Small white snowflakes kissed Alisa’s face as she skipped down Moscow’s cobbled streets and wandered into a toy shop. Ruslan, hands clasped behind his overcoat, followed close behind.

“Papa?”

“Yes, kitten?”

“Look. It’s beautiful.”

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Alisa pressed her hands to the square glass case which housed an intricately carved wooden pony. The toy's mane and tail were authentically crafted with horse hairs. A small tag hung around the horse's neck: *65 rubles*. Alisa's father approached the counter where the shopkeeper perched on his stool, book in hand.

"Excuse me, I would like to purchase the wooden pony." He gestured toward the display case.

"Of course. Seventy roubles."

Ruslan hesitated, confused. "The tag says 65."

"We have to get by. All of our prices are raised."

"Fine," said Ruslan, reluctantly fishing out seventy roubles and pushing it into the shopkeeper's outstretched hands. It was the principle of it. The man produced a key from behind the counter and unlocked the case, handing the toy to the overjoyed Alisa. Ruslan wrapped his arm around her, and they walked in step out of the store.

As Alisa's small hands clutched the wooden pony, its tail came loose, and a gust of wind scattered the tiny fibers into oblivion. The girl held her toy out before her, her expression both confused and surprised. Ruslan snatched it from her hands and marched angrily back into the store. He lowered the pony gently onto the shopkeeper's counter before slamming down his fist. The owner dropped his book and straightened to face Ruslan's glare.

"Look," he demanded, pointing his thick finger toward the pony's rear, "the tail fell out. Is this what I paid extra for? Give us a replacement."

The wide-eyed owner sat back on his stool. "That's the only one," he said. "There aren't any others."

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Ruslan hesitated. “Then fix it.”

The man furrowed his brow. “The horse hairs are expensive. It would cost another twenty roubles at least.”

“Twenty!?” Ruslan was shouting. “I paid you seventy for this damn trinket! Now you expect —” Ruslan was returned from his rage by a small tugging on his overcoat. He looked down to see his familiar sapphires peering up at him.

“Papa, it’s ok. I still like it.” Ruslan was motionless. Then, he handed the pony back to his daughter, and he let it go.

* * *

He found himself once again staring at the empty light of the cell. Anton had put his shirt on and was shivering in the cold, but he looked worriedly at Ruslan, concerned only for his former colleague.

“Thank you, Anton.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“No, not for showing me.”

“For what?” Anton looked puzzled.

“For carrying her.”

Anton hung his head. “Ruslan,” Anton began, “even still I am in your debt.”

“You’ve repaid me in every way.”

“I never could. If that man was anything but dead, I wouldn’t have lived past thirteen. You’re the only reason I made it to university.”

Dead. That was the word - the word that greased the Moment with an oil thick and black enough to send it slipping between Ruslan’s fingers. Then he closed his eyes.

* * *

Anton’s thirteen year old face stared back at him. He sat in his friend’s kitchen with two bowls of cold stew between them. Rather than scarf down their meal to return and play in the fields, they barely ate. That day was different.

In small farming towns, everyone knew everything about everyone, and in this town, everyone knew Anton’s father was a drunk.

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