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For the next couple of weeks Trofimov could not help recalling his conversation with Yatta. As it emerged, Yatta knew practically the whole route to the Bering Strait: across the Strait lay America, a land beyond Stalin's rule. All of which meant that if they escaped from the camp together, they might have a chance to flee from this terror and misery and reach a safe haven. Therefore ... therefore ... but how to persuade Yatta to flee with him?

With Yatta's hunting skills they would not starve. This was a unique opportunity, there would never be another. It would be crazy not to take it. But how would they get out of the camp compound? Both the inner and outer zones were surrounded by three rows of barbed wire several metres high. There were four watchtowers, and a screw with a machine gun on each of them, watching round the clock. If they managed to get out of the compound and camp enclosure, they would have to go deep into the forest, beyond the reach of pursuers. To live by hunting, they would need weapons, at least one rifle. But they could think of something, maybe, when the time came. After all, they were experienced war dogs.

With whom should he escape? Just himself and Yatta? A larger company would be much better, stronger. They could fight off pursuers and wild beasts. So who should they choose? Certainly Bondarenko. He was tough and an excellent fighter, he had lived in the woods and Trofimov trusted him. The same with Timoshkin, and Yakov too. He could discuss the idea with them without fear of betrayal. The question was whether all of them would agree. Mikhail would: he was capable of taking risks. The other two less so. They might have reservations. Leaving a familiar form of misery for a new one was scary. Yakov was getting sicker, although Ganin had some influence with the present doctor. In any case, it was only fair to suggest it to them. If they refused, he and Yatta could escape on their own.

Trofimov thought about this day after day, and for the first time since his arrest a year and a half ago, life acquired new meaning. Before, he realized he was doomed, and his only concern was to steal one more day before the inevitable end. Now it looked as if he might be granted a new lease on life.

A few weeks later Trofimov was walking.

“Well,” Vaskov told him one morning, “it looks like in a week or so you’ll be sent back to work. But before that happens, d’you feel like spending a bit of time here as my official aide?”

“Sure, no question.”

“Fine,” Vaskov smiled. “It’s almost an official position. It’s an accepted custom that the barracks orderly can have a goner who’s still on his feet as assistant. So, after the roll call each day I’ll send you to chop firewood and bring water. Try to avoid meeting the bosses. If you do meet someone, just say you’re the assistant to Vaskov, the fourth barracks orderly.”

“Thank you, Yefimych,” replied Trofimov. “I’m truly grateful.”

“You’re Mikhail’s buddy, and he’s been my pal for two years. To be frank, though,” he added, “I never thought Yatta would manage to get you on your feet. You were in a real bad way.”

“I know,” Trofimov said. “I was ready to die. Yatta gave me back the will to live.”

“Good,” said Vaskov. “Course, you realize you won’t survive all twenty-five years of your sentence, but you can live for quite a while with your advantageous position.”

“Advantageous? Are you joking, Yefimych.”

“Not at all. You’re Mikhail’s pal, and he’s my crony. I’m a trusty and I have connections with other influential trusties. Although Mikhail is just a labourer, he’s no ordinary convict. He’s a tough guy, the petty bosses are afraid of him. You’re also old Ganin’s favourite, and he’s quite influential too. Yatta treats you as a friend, and he’s an important man. So there you are.”

“But I can’t keep bugging you and them all the time,” Trofimov argued. “And I’m on the black list: I’m to be used only for hard labour, nothing else.”

“On the black list?” Vaskov looked sympathetic. “That’s no good. But often the bosses ignore the black list. They know that