

and took away the herds from honest reindeer farmers. How much blood was shed for the sake of that better life, how much!" She paused. "But you know, all these are the woes of the past. Life goes on. You're young and you want to live, don't you, girls? It's time to think about finding men for you."

"We'd love that, aunty," one of the girls answered. "But you know, there aren't any men for us."

Qergina sighed again. She knew the perennial problems of her people. Practically all the men from the nearby settlement had been drafted during the war years. First the older men were called up. The younger ones, the girls' contemporaries, had been drafted during the last two years. Even those who were barely of age at the end of the war were enlisted and sent to the Japanese front. Only a couple of dozen men remained, and all but maybe two of them were crippled or sick, hardly capable of giving a woman a child.

"Yes, I know," she said. "But can you not find some younger boys who didn't go to the war?"

"Don't you know, aunt Qergina?" the third girl spoke up. "The young ones have all gone too, to construction sites or factories. In the cities there are too many local women."

"Yes," Qergina shook her head, "it's the same sad story all around. And one can't go anywhere without a goddamned passport."

Suddenly the dogs began to bark.

"Someone is here. I'll see who it is." Qergina put on her overcoat and went outside. Trofimov, Bondarenko and Yatta stood under the birch tree.

"Good day, Qergina." Yatta greeted her.

"Good day, hostess." Trofimov and Bondarenko bowed towards her.

"Good day," Qergina answered in a low voice. "I'm sorry, but I have visitors, girls from the neighbourhood. It would be better for you to go now and come later, towards the evening."

"All right, Qergina, then we'll see you in the evening," said Trofimov.

Inside the tent, the girls peered from the entrance and watched.

“Look, girls, men,” exclaimed the first girl.

“How big and strong they are!” whispered the second. “One of them is a Chukchi, the others are Russians.”

“Looks like they’re geologists or something,” the third girl said.

“Hmm, but why do they carry Kalashnikovs?” the first girl said in surprise. “I never saw geologists with guns.”

“Maybe because there are lots of bandits around,” the fourth girl guessed.

“Anyway,” the first girl continued, “I don’t care who they are, I’d sure like to sleep with one of them and have a kid.”

“So would I,” said the second. “I’m twenty-three already. Am I meant to stay here like a blossom in the wilderness forever?”

“But I’m almost twenty-five,” the first girl exclaimed. “Old age isn’t far away. You know, girls, I’d give up half my life just to sleep with one of those men.”

“So would I,” the third girl added. “Just look at them. Real men, not like our feeble youngsters.”

“What’s this? Spying on me, are you, you little bitches!” Qergina appeared at the rear of the tent.

“Get out of my yaranga,” Qergina ordered. “Out! And never come back again, or I’ll set my Spirits against you.”

“Forgive us, aunt Qergina. Please, forgive us,” the first girl pleaded with tears in her eyes.

“I swear by our guardian spirits, we looked only because we heard men’s voices.” The second girl tried to explain their misbehaviour.

“How could you dare?” Qergina gradually calmed down. “How can I trust you now? How can I know you aren’t spying for the district commissioner?”

“Can’t you believe us, aunty? We’re good, decent reindeer girls. Do you know anyone among the reindeer folk who would work for the Soviet commissioners?” The first girl pleaded. “Please, forgive us, aunt Qergina. Punish us if you want to, but don’t send us away.” She fell on her knees, weeping bitterly, and the other girls followed suit, weeping and pleading. There was a minute’s pause before Qergina broke the silence.

“Well,” she said, “you really deserve to be flogged. You deserve a good thrashing.”

She took her deerskin rawhide whip from the wall. The girls

knelt down and obediently bowed their heads as a sign of submission. Qergina gave them a vigorous lashing, but the girls remained silent and patiently accepted their punishment.

"I guess that's enough." Qergina hung the whip back in its place. "But don't ever again spy on old Qergina."

"We won't, aunt Qergina. Never again."

"I hope so," Qergina's voice had now resumed its earlier calm. "Now have a seat, and I'll make you some tea."

They drank and enjoyed their tea in silence. Finally the first girl could stand it no more.

"Aunt Qergina?"

"Yes?"

"I want to ask you something."

"What is it?"

"Oh, I don't know how to start. And I'm afraid you'll get angry again. But I ..."

Qergina gave a sigh. "Come on, out with it. Tell me what's on your mind, otherwise you'll never calm down and relax."

"Well, I want to ask you about ..." the girl muttered, "about those men who came to see you, the men with the guns, probably they were prospectors or something."

Qergina adopted a stony expression. "You're to forget that you ever saw them. Otherwise you're never welcome at my yaranga again."

"Don't be so severe, aunty," the girl pleaded. "You have to try and understand us too."

"Understand what?"

"You are a real woman. You've had men, and a kid. But we ... will anybody ever want us? Is the rest of our life going to be empty and dull?"

"Yes, aunt Qergina," the third girl put in, "if we never have children, what will happen to the spirits of our kinfolk? You know, we don't want to be the last of our line. Every woman's supposed to become a mother and bear children."

"I'm sure those prospectors would be only too glad to have us. Any men would. We're young and healthy and good-looking," the second girl pleaded.

"And you know, they look like real men. Tough and strong." the fourth girl added. "I have a feeling that the Sun and Dawn

have brought us together. Don't prevent us from meeting them, aunt Qergina. For the sake of the Sun and the Dawn."

"We'll do anything for you, whatever you want," the first girl implored. "We'll come here on all the holidays to work for you. Please."

Qergina could well understand the girls. The desire for a man and for motherhood was a natural craving of their healthy young flesh. She recalled her years with Yatta, and well remembered the yearning and anguish she had felt at nights. But that was not the main thing: these girls aspired to become mothers, a sacred desire for any woman. On the other hand, it would be irresponsible. How could she put Yatta, her own man, and his comrades at such risk? But was it a risk? After all, she had lived here for twenty years, trusting her own people, and at no time had they broken that trust. They wanted her to live and help them, and they had faithfully kept her secret so that neither the Soviet authorities nor the local Party or Young Communist League had ever suspected anything. And these girls were from most reliable families, not a single Party member or Young Communist among them. Admittedly, Raulena had an older brother in the League, but he had been far away at some construction site for the last four years.

Then she thought of something else. What would Yatta's comrades themselves want? They were young men, and they had lived without women for many years. Only the Creator knew how much time they had left to them, if they were to survive at all. It was quite possible they would be upset if she prevented the girls from meeting them. Apart from which, she had to let them know that the girls had seen them.

"Well, what can I say?" she said. "You're so persistent, you little foxes. But I know your families and your kinfolk, so maybe I can trust you."

"Absolutely, aunt Qergina. Absolutely and completely. I swear it," the first girl exclaimed.

"Maybe I can ask them what they would wish."

"But you know, I can't imagine any man who would refuse," the second girl said. "And we're not at all bad looking, are we?"

"That's not the point," Qergina retorted. "And before I even talk to them, you all must swear a blood oath before me."