

PARABELLUM
When you live in Peace prepare for War

BY: Jack Nanuq

CHAPTER 1
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Albany, NY

Carson Nowak navigated the minefield that was his great-grandmother's attic; careful to step where the random boards were nailed to the joists. The dry-rotted flooring had the structural integrity of toilet paper. No need to crash through the ceiling; that would really set her off. Moldy boxes, piles of clothes and garish Christmas decorations, all covered in layers of dust and pigeon shit, further complicated the task.

He glanced at the map, drawn on the back of a piece of junk mail. The queen of recycling, Nana never threw anything away without finding at least a second use for it. He spotted the old tarp. The steamer trunk should be under that mess. Carson sighed, "Any farther away and it would have been in the neighbor's house."

What the hell am I doing? he thought. Carson had tried to talk her out of this fool's errand, but she insisted it be brought downstairs. When he showed reluctance, she screamed at him in the four languages she knew best. Then in the one she knew the least; English.

"You lazy sunz-a-bitch!"

It stung, even though he knew Nana didn't mean it. Since her last stroke she was quick to anger. "You know better," he responded.

"Go," she pointed a gnarled finger upward.

I guess if I live to be 100, I'll be crotchety too. Probably pissed off because God doesn't want her, he thought.

From the attic he could hear her yelling at the day nurse. Not so much yelling at the girl, as at the television. Curses poured forth. Most in Czech, some in Manx. When she stopped to take a breath Carson could hear CNN commentators discussing the recent election. The US Supreme Court was looking into the count but it appeared the younger Bush would be the next president.

Nana ranted and raved. She thought him unfit for the job and kept saying "You know what a Bush iz? Iz lady part. Should call him President Puzzy."

The nurse, Haitian by birth, was trying desperately to calm the old woman. Carson knew this because she was speaking French. A language both women shared. He didn't understand the words, but they were melodic. That might just calm the older one.

What has got into her? he thought. "Iris change the channel to QVC! That might help!" he shouted.

When I'm done here, I'm taking Nana for a hot fudge sundae. Her doctor would suggest an anti-anxiety pill but he knew ice cream worked better than drugs.

He pulled the tarp aside and grabbed the handles of the trunk. *Jesus, what's in here... gold?* He hadn't expected it to be heavy. He summoned his strength and grunted. *Newton's First Law of Motion; a body at rest will remain at rest until acted upon... or something like that.*

The old woman was yelling again, the nurse now crying. Different languages ricocheting around the house like a car crash in front of the UN.

He thought about leaving the trunk there and rescuing the nurse. She didn't deserve this but he suspected he'd have to come back later. *Get it together Carson, man up and soldier on.*

Ten minutes later he lumbered into the kitchen. The trunk banging against his shins. A sweat soaked shirt plastered to his chest. The room smelled of chicory and chicken soup. The old woman shut up immediately and beamed. Her doughy features brightened. The skin usually the color and texture of a white coral beach was now rose-tinted.

The younger woman smiled, "I get you a beer." Her skin was cinnamon and satin.

"Thank you," he said and smiled back.

"Nana, you have to be nicer to Iris. She doesn't need this grief and doesn't know your ways."

"You good boy, tank you," she said staring at the trunk.

"Now apologize to Iris."

"Vaat?"

"Apologize right now or I'll take this back upstairs."

Iris brought him a Genesee Cream Ale. "It okay," she whispered.

"No, it's not," and he sat on the trunk.

"You move." Nana tried to push him away.

"No, apologize!"

"Ok...I sorry." It was half-hearted. He knew that was the best they could hope for.

He cupped the woman's face in his hands, "You know I love you, and am only stern with you because it is for your own good." Parroting the words she had used on him for four decades.

The old woman patted his cheeks and moved to a kitchen drawer. She came away with a ring of keys and a twenty-dollar bill.

She handed the money to Iris and again said "I sorry." This time the apology was genuine. The old woman fumbled with a brass skeleton key and handed it too Carson.

"You open."

The trunk was packed full of ledgers and notebooks. On top was a lumpy leather bundle.

Nana pointed to the oddity and said "Table." She then took a seat in an old wooden chair.

He picked up the package. It was heavy and metallic. *A wrench maybe*, he thought as he set the bundle down on the kitchen table.

She unwrapped the mystery package. It contained a C-96 Mauser broom-handle pistol and a silver cigarette case. She slid the gun toward Carson. "Careful, iz loaded." She said it with the nonchalance of a counter guy at McDonalds.

Nana then picked up the other item. With trembling hands she popped it open. Inside was a black and white photo of a German soldier, in front of a sidecar motorcycle. She handed the photo to Carson. Except for the eye patch, the man in uniform could have been Carson's twin.

CHAPTER 2
Isle of Man
April 1, 1915

The 15-year old newcomer struggled out of her bed and stepped onto the stone floor. The surface was cold but not unbearable. She would leave in a few minutes and there was no reason to light the coal stove; no need to waste a precious resource for a few minutes of comfort. She crouched next to the bed and retrieved her diary and pencil.

1st April, 1915

Today is my birthday and I have been a widow for seven days now. I have yet to tell his parents. What should I say? I know what I want to say, but what words should I use. Should I tell them he was a weakling? A sniveling whiner unfit for adulthood or responsibility. He got a blister his first day of real work and it got infected. Who dies from a blister? Should I say I hate him, even in death I hate him. I hate the entire family! If it hadn't been for him and his father I'd be home right now! I'd be safe and warm, not in this foreign land.

This is what I want to say, but how can I? The censors would never let it get to the Motherland. They would think me deranged and evil. How could she talk ill of the dead, they would ask? Would they think I'm mad? They might lock me up and life will be even harder. No, I must hide my true feelings. I will not lie to them but I will not be entirely honest either. Tonight, I will write the in-laws and tell them of his departure. Let them grieve for him for I will not.

A kangaroo kicked inside her abdomen and reminded her of the upcoming arrival; one more month. She prayed for a girl. Maybe after the War her daughter could be a dancer? *Will this war ever end? Will we ever see Peace?*

She looked outside; the sky over the Irish Sea was multi-shades of blue and charcoal. Fluffy clouds with pastel tinges enhanced the image. Gulls and songbirds celebrated the approaching day. A

distant bugle from Camp Knockaloe signaled reveille. The Camp was home to over twenty thousand POWs.

She patted the bump of her midsection and returned to the journal.

My dearest little one;

One day I will tell you all. I will tell you how you came to be born in captivity. I will tell you of your grandfather the cobbler, your grandmother the gymnast. You will know of my family, the good ones.

The widow examined the book. Written in her own version of shorthand, confident only she could decipher the code. Strange cursive tracks that more closely resembled those made by worms in fresh dirt, than any known language. She closed the book, slid it under her nightstand and moved to the wash basin.

She slipped out of her nightgown and cleaned the areas that needed to be refreshed. Then she dressed in her work clothes. Before leaving the room, she threw a black shawl over shoulders.

She walked the lane to the Church of St. Maughold. Sunrise service would start in a few minutes. She made it a point to attend Mass on a daily basis. Cows were drifting across green pastures, changing grass into milk; their pungent aroma reminiscent of her original home. A light spring rain, more fog than precipitation, put dampness in the and enhanced the aroma. She pulled the shawl over her head as a black clad figure entered her peripheral vision.

Fr. Fagan, announced his arrival with *"Moghrey mie."*

She recognized the Manx greeting but hadn't yet mastered the dialect, so she responded in broken English. *"Guden morning to you too Father."*

He switched to English.

"It won't be long, will it, Maria?" glancing briefly at her swollen middle.

"About four weeks, the mid-wife says."

"We are all praying for you, especially since it is so soon after your loss."

"My people have saying... 'The dead stay with the dead and those alive stay with those alive.' I am much sorry. It not well translate."

"I think I understand. You are doing well then?"

"Dah, yes, tank you."

They reached the Church and he held the door for her. She shook the water from her shawl and stepped inside. Three nuns and three parishioners were kneeling in the front pew. Sister Veronique's rosary beads were tapping ever so slightly against the woodwork. They echoed inside the almost empty building.

You do that to draw attention to your devotion. Good for you and might you never learn that everyone knows that's what you're, the young widow thought.

After their morning Service, Maria and the three nuns walked to the rectory. The air was bright and full of life. The rain gone; the dampness chased way by warm spring breezes.

The group moved at Sister Veronique's pace. She shuffled in her sandals, a blackthorn cane steadying her crooked frame. She scanned the hills. A petrified mole, with two wild hairs set squarely on her chin.

"If only Palestine had been this green I'd have stayed. It might be the land of our Lord's birth but it was as brown as a sunbaked turd." Her English had a Normand accent.

Maria thought about her brief visit to the Levant. She would always remember it as the place she was taken into custody and where she got pregnant, but not in that order. Her father-in-law had insisted they visit the Holy Land, and other places, before Gregor start his studies.

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At noon the women of the rectory heard a pony cart on the cobblestone lane. Maria peaked out a window. Three men stood in front of the small animal. The cart was approximately 4 feet wide and 6 feet long. A large bundle took up half the cargo space.

A British soldier wearing a starched khaki uniform with chevrons, and a large holster knocked on the door. Two men with him wore threadbare uniforms of the Kaiser. These men, not much older than Maria, had the look of heeled dogs. Not beaten but respectful and wary. Neither carried any extra weight and their clothes hung loosely like ill-fitted sacks.

The Brit was about a head taller and two stone heavier than his charges. The shorter men were heavy boned but only shells of their former selves. Given the desire they might have been able to overpower the guard, but it was doubtful such desire existed.

But where was there to run to, this is an island? Maria thought. I think about running also.

These men with their high cheekbones, flat noses and round blue eyes beamed when they saw her.

"Good afternoon, how may I help you?" the nun asked.

"Would yee be Sister Clarice?" the Brit asked.

"I would."

"Corporal Miles Davis, at your service. We are from the Camp. These two gentlemen are guests of King George. We've just come from the docks and brought you a gift."

He pulled aside a tarp that covered a large Grey Seal. Water dripped from the animal. "Mr. Cavendish, of the trawler *Newcastle* caught this by mistake. He told me to bring it to you. Says you're from Norway and would know how to prepare the beast. Folks here on the Island don't eat seal and he didn't want to see it go to the dogs."

"That be true, have the boys take it over to that tree and I'll show them how to butcher it."

"I'm afraid they can take it over there, but we cannot stay and help."

"What do you mean you can't help. That animal must weigh 200 kilos."

"I'm sorry. Sister the lads are expected back at the Camp this afternoon. If we don't get back soon the Commander will think they've escaped. We wouldn't want to cause an incident now, would we?"

The Camp had an agreement with the Islanders. Scores of prisoners would go out on work details, with an escort.

"If I could get word to the Camp, that your services are required, would that suffice?"

"I don't know about that."

"Let me put it too you this way. We are Sisters of Mercy and Charity. If you agree to stay and help, my second act of charity would be to ensure you and the boys have a good meal."

"You say that would be your second act of charity and what might be your first act of charity be?"

"My first act of charity would be to share a glass of Jameson, with you."

"Aye, that'd be good, who am I to stand in the way of charity. The lads could use a good meal, all they get is fish and boiled spuds. I'm just lookin out for their best interests, understood?"

"Understood," the well-traveled nun said. She turned toward the rectory.

"Maria."

"Yes sister," she said as she walked out the backdoor.

"Would you please take a note to the Camp Commandant?"

"Yes, madam"

"And take a basket. Pick some wild greens on your way back; we'll have them with supper."

"Yes, madam."

Two hours later an exhausted Maria returned to the rectory, her basket full of fresh shoots and leaves. The walk had not been bad but the constant bending to pick the bounty had put a strain on her middle and back. The hoped for dancer was now bouncing around like a rugby player.

When she returned to the rectory it had a festive mood. An outdoor table had been set for a party. The air ripe with the scent of frying meats and boiling vegetables. A light breeze kept bugs at bay, and songbirds were extra vocal. Chickens clucked happily as they scratched and pecked at tidbits under the butchering tree.

The two prisoners hummed and moved about lively. Happy to have performed honest work and anticipating a well-earned meal. Both had shed their tunics and were down to their shirt sleeves. Their gaunt frames clearly visible. Ribs and arm bones wrapped in sinew. Suspenders held their trousers in place; almost five inches of unused waist showed clearly. Neither had the distended stomach of malnourishment but also absent was any hint of extra substance. The sun had started to ripen their pasty complexions. Both men smiled at her but neither spoke. Maria nodded and walked into the kitchen.

"Maria, you are just in time," said Sister Clarice. "As soon as the greens are cooked, we'll be ready to eat. Here, let me take that, you sit down."

"No, I'm fine."

“Now don’t be silly, and if you keep that up you will need to go to confession for lying to a nun,” Sister Clarice grinned.

“Take a break, while I clean these. What have we got here? Dandelions, chickweed, lambsquarter; wonderful mix; I’ll sauté them with bacon.”

“Sister, can I ask you a question?”

“Certainly, what is it child?”

“Why don’t the prisoners talk?”

“They’re not allowed to; neither speaks English. They are under orders not to speak German; for fear they might be planning an escape or something of that nature. I’m sure they’re not the evil devils everyone portrays them to be, but who am I to go against the Crown?”

“But they’re not German.”

“What do you mean they’re not German?”

“I’m pretty sure they’re Slavs. I’m from Prague and I’m certain they are Slovak.”