

LOVERS UNDERCOVER LÖVERS ÜNTERCÖVER



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by Chrys Romeo

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1.

Going Deep Undercover

Love can exist under any circumstances: time, place, whatever... it can happen. It can change a lifetime with its presence, with its light. Here's a story that happened in my life and convinced me of the truth that love is more powerful than anything... and it can exist anyway, anyhow.

When we got closer to the place where we had been sent someone shouted “ambush!” and we had to spread out and run. Bullets started raining above us from somewhere nobody could see. I threw myself on the ground, covering my eyes, as if that could have protected me from the bullets. After a while, the sound stopped. I looked up: the whole group had scattered on the field that was interspersed with steep trenches and valleys. I got up and walked aimlessly a few steps, when a field mine blew right next to me, throwing me over the edge of a pit and covering me with loads of dusty soil. I almost fell over in the large trench below. It was the edge of a crevasse in the ground, made by an earthquake or previous explosions. I stood up, trying to step away from the slippery ground under my feet and I scattered the dirt from my head, adjusting the metal helmet. Suddenly, I heard a voice from below:

“Hey, who's there?”

Looking down, I noticed a girl. A soldier too. It wasn't a surprise that war also recruited girls – but it was astonishing to see her there, in the ditch. Her long hair the color of sand flowed on her shoulders, from underneath the helmet. Her greenish eyes were strangely and brightly staring at me.

“You covered me in dust” she said jokingly and smiled, scattering it off her uniform.

“How did you get there?” I asked her curiously.

“Probably the same way you almost did”, she answered and kept smiling.

That seemed funny and I laughed. She laughed too, then said:

“Will you help me climb out?”

“Sure”, I said and I extended a hand.

Her long fingers, the color of pale moonlight got my attention. When she stood next to me, I realized she was probably the same height and age as I was. We were both barely eighteen, not ready for war and not ready to be exposed to imminent danger, but we were laughing at it with that unconscious defiance that young people have, with unexplained certainty that we were somehow invincible and unaffected by whatever went on around us.

“Thanks!”

She sat down and started scratching off the mud from her boots. I wanted to get out of the trench, but a bullet sizzled by my ear, so I crouched back in the ditch. I sat next to her, as she kept clearing her boots off with a stick.

“What unit are you from?” I asked her.

“Twenty. What about you?”

“Twenty one.”

She looked at me attentively. Her eyes so full of light astounded me.

The sounds of guns were still firing above.

“We might have to crawl our way out of here”, I said.

“Hmm... it doesn't matter, we're both done for”, she replied a bit displeased. “Let's go!”

We jumped from the ditch at the same time, crawling and rolling quickly under the flying bullets until we reached the forest. Then we ran to find our comrades among

the trees.

I watched her get out of sight and I was a bit sorry that I hadn't asked her name. *"Anyway, we might not see each other again, so..."* I thought to myself.

My comrades were already gathered in line. The commanding officer saw me integrate among them and questioned me severely:

"You! where have you been?"

"There was an explosion nearby and I fell in a ditch and..."

"Take your hands out of your pockets and don't wander off from the group again! Understood?"

"Yes."

Irritated that I hadn't said "Yes sir", the officer turned his back on me and ordered us to go uphill, to the top of the deep forest.

In the evening we arrived at the barracks that represented our quarters in that mountain. It had been a long tiresome way, so when we got there I was both hungry and sleepy, so I rolled in bed immediately. Early in the morning the deafening siren woke me up. I went to the bathroom, to find only ice cold water running in the taps, so I washed my face and got out in the yard. Everyone was already in line again. The commander frowned at me. The morning light was suddenly sharp and blinding.

"You're always separated from the group, soldier! Didn't you hear the siren?"

"I did."

"Then why didn't you move faster and get here in time for morning checkout?"

"I went to the bathroom."

The lines started laughing, their voices rising in the clear morning air.

"Silence!" roared the officer. "You go to your place now and don't make this happen again, you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

“Yes, sir!”

“When a superior officer is speaking to you, you must stand up straight. Didn't you know that?”

“Yes sir, I knew that.”

“Then why didn't you?”

“I couldn't remember.”

“What do you mean, you couldn't remember?”

“If you're yelling at me I can't remember everything I must, sir.”

The commander stared at me, trying to see if I was making fun of the situation or really meant what I said. He couldn't decide, so he shouted at us to go have breakfast:

“To the dining hall, soldiers! Move!”

The canteen was suddenly filled with noise, chatter and clinking dishes. I ate in silence, alone at my table. I didn't know anyone well enough: there hadn't been time for it. We had been gathered and rushed up the mountain to strengthen the defensive posts, before we could even glance at each other.

Then I heard more noise flooding from the doors of the canteen: a new group was coming in for breakfast.

“Unit twenty”, someone said next to me and I looked up curiously.

They were mostly girls. The guys in the canteen whistled cheerfully, welcoming the pretty soldiers who seemed to expect that and not pay much attention to the atmosphere. They were hungry and only cared about the food at that moment, which they quickly placed on their trays. The commander announced that the new unit would be mixed up with ours, so we had to make room for them in the barracks.

I had just finished breakfast and I stood watching the girls unpacking in the yard. Suddenly, I saw the one I had met a day before, in the ditch. She was struggling with a backpack. I approached her.

“Hi. How are you? Can I help you?”

She looked at me and didn't seem surprised. She allowed me to help, agreeing to it somewhat tired:

“If you want to, you can take this backpack; it's a bit heavy.”

I picked it up.

“Which are the barracks we're staying?” she asked, looking around mostly bored and detached, as if she had seen enough and had had enough of it already.

“Over here. Those are the officers quarters. We're staying on this other side. Why did you get here so late? We arrived yesterday. Weren't you supposed to be here at the same time?”

My questions made her answer simply:

“I don't know. Our guide probably took a detour. It was a long way up the forest. Actually, it was quite a miserable track”, she said with disgust.

I opened the door to the barrack.

“You can choose your place, there are enough available. We've got bunker beds.”

“Where are you staying?” she asked me somehow disoriented and undecided.

“I'm over here, the top. The one below is free.”

“Perfect. I prefer the one below. I'll stay here, if you don't mind.”

She seemed to feel safe next to me, so she placed her backpack on the bed and sat on the edge, looking around in desolation. Then she suddenly remembered something and glanced up cheerfully:

“Let's introduce each other. We've met, but I don't know your name.”

“It's Ky.”

She looked at me attentively and her eyes glistened with a deep light.

“Ky”, she smiled as she said my name. “It suits you. My name is Seloren.”

I shook her hand again – the same pale moonlight hand with slim fingers.

“Nice to meet you, Seloren.”

Her name was just as delicate and refined as her hands. I was amazed by the

unusual girl that somehow had landed in the same forest, on the same mountain, in the same barrack with me.

She seemed tired and she took off her boots, stretching on the rough blanket.

The wooden barrack was empty. Everyone was still at the canteen.

“You didn't eat much” I noticed. “Don't you want breakfast? I could bring it for you.”

“That's nice, but I don't like the food they give us. I must be careful what I eat. I have some sandwiches in this backpack.”

“I'll let you rest now”.

I got out, as the soldiers were gathering for the instructions in the yard. We had to make a schedule for patrolling the forest and I didn't want to end up in the night shift, though it kind of happened anyway. As I was crossing the yard, the commander saw me.

“You! Are you wasting time wandering around? Don't you have anything better to do, soldier?”

“I was going to check the schedule.”

“I'll simplify the schedule for you: go to the canteen and help wash the dishes! Are you there yet? Move!”

I had to go to the kitchen, so the schedule was decided in my absence... and I got the night shift, of course.

At night the forest was full of lurking shadows, cracking branches, screeching owls, unexpected shuffling of leaves and we being startled at the slightest sound. We put our night vision goggles, so we at least thought we were safer somehow even though it was still unnerving, to stare into the darkness and walk on our toes.

Close to dawn I came back and climbed in bed. Everyone was asleep. Seloren was asleep too.

However, in the morning when the alarm went off, just a couple of hours after I had thrown myself in bed, I looked around and I didn't see anyone: they had already

exited to the yard. I was still so sleepy that I put the blanket back on my head.

Then I heard a voice next to me:

“Ky, wake up. The alarm already went off.”

”I know, I heard it”, I said from under the blanket.

“So come on, get up!” she insisted. “It's been five minutes since the alarm.”

I took off the blanket and looked around.

“Get up Ky”, Seloren spoke again.

She was closing her backpack, putting a towel in.

I mumbled from my bed:

“I don't feel like going to the morning checkup. I've been on patrol last night and I'm sleepy. You go and tell them I'm asleep.”

“You'll be in trouble. The commander will be furious.” she warned me.

I yawned. She came next to my head.

“You really aren't coming out?”

“Nope. I want to sleep.”

“And I'm telling you the commander will be furious.”

“So what. Let him.”

“ As you wish,” she said and went out.

She returned in less than ten seconds.

“The commander said you should come outside right now.”

I realized I had to get out of bed and face the situation again.

I went outside. The commander was waiting in the yard, with everyone in line, staring at me. The yard was too silent, with too many eyes.

“Why didn't you come out when you heard the alarm, soldier?”

“I was sleepy.”

“Is that how you talk to an officer?”

“No, sir.”

“I didn't hear you!”

“No sir!” I shouted.

“No sir what?”

“No sir that's not how I talk to an officer, sir!”

The commander scrutinized me again, squinting his eyes to see if I was doing it on purpose.

I expected the worst to happen: thunder or lightning to strike me down. In the silence of the yard, the commander spoke word by word:

“I'll give you a chance: we're about to have shooting exercises this morning. You'll shoot first. If you don't hit the target in the middle – if you don't shoot a perfect shot, you'll serve in the canteen, wash the dishes then stay on patrol the whole night! Let's go.”

I went to the shooting field at the back of the quarters. They had lined up cardboard targets, white shapes with black circles and the middle point that I had to hit by all means.

I was given the rifle and I stretched down in the grass, aiming attentively. I could feel the eyes of my comrades and also Seloren watching me curiously. My hands were not steady. I was tired after the night shift. My eyes saw the target through a veil of fog. I pulled the trigger and I heard the roar of the bullet. It hit the cardboard, but not exactly in the middle.

The commander ordered immediately:

“There you go: to the canteen! And tonight I'll check how well you guard the gate and the premises!”

I stood up. I didn't know how I got the courage to speak. Maybe Seloren watching me gave me the audacity to surpass the borders of what I would usually do.

“That's not fair, sir.” I spoke firmly. “I was up last night too. I won't be much use if I don't get a few hours of sleep.”

That tipped the odds against me: having the nerve to contradict the orders.

The commander became furious, just as Seloren had warned me.

“One day of underground lockup for you! Take him away!”

Two soldiers grabbed me by the arms and dragged me to the cellar that was meant for prisoners. First they hit me a few times, because I didn't want to get inside, then threw a bucket of cold water on my head. And then I was left in the dark, to tremble the entire evening and the whole night. I was sitting down, crouched with my head on my knees, feeling the water still dripping on my back, the shirt sticking to the cold skin. I thought the hours were endless.

However, not after long, something unexpected happened: when the barracks were silent and I could only hear the owls screeching far away in the forest, everyone sound asleep, the door cracked open and someone slipped in.

“Are you here?” I heard an anxious voice.

It was her.

I looked up in the dark.

“I'm here”, I said.

“Then why didn't you say anything?”

“I just did.”

She came closer and her bright eyes glistened in the night towards me. She kneeled next to me, touching my cold hands.

“What did they do to you?”

I shrugged carelessly.

“They threw water on my head.”

“What's up with your hands?”

“What's up with them?”

“They're freezing”, she said, bewildered that I couldn't figure it out.

“So what?” I said in a matter of fact tone.

She looked at me curiously and then started smiling amused.

I asked her a more serious question:

“Have you come to set me free?”

“No”, she answered.

“Then why did you come? And how did you get the door open?”

“Actually, I brought you a blanket”, she remembered and unfolded it over my shoulders. “Here, to keep you warm. I had to bribe the guy at the door with a pack of cigarettes”, she smiled.

“You're slick”, I smiled too.

“Yeah,” she admitted and her eyes glimmered in front of me.

“Thank you for the blanket.”

“Don't thank me. It's the blanket from your bed. You'd better not lose it, or we'll both be in trouble. I couldn't let you freeze in here the whole night”, she added. “It's cold in here, isn't it?”

“Isn't it obvious?”

“Yes, it is.”

Then she suddenly laughed:

“You were great! I can't believe you confronted the commander that way. But why didn't you shoot right? I kept my fingers crossed for you!”

“You did?”

She stared at me sideways, her features more serious in the dark.

“Yes, I did.”

“Well, it seems it didn't work”, I grinned. “I'm in here now.”

She smiled again. Then she said:

“Tell me something.”

“What?”

“Did you do that on purpose? Get yourself in trouble, I mean.”

“Do you think I like being in here?”

“I've been watching you yesterday and I think you have a talent for setting people off.”

We both laughed.

Outside the guard moved and banged on the door.

She stood up.

“I must go. Good night.”

“Good night. And thanks”, I added as I watched her disappear.

The blanket made the night warmer. In the morning, when the door cracked open, I stepped outside to find the commander enraged again. He grabbed the blanket, taking it off my shoulders.

“What's this ? Where did you get it? Who brought this to you?”

I was blinded by the morning sun and the mountain fresh air, so I didn't feel like speaking right away. And I wasn't going to tell him. The commander turned to the guard who confessed, so Seloren was called to stand by my side.

“You're going to be on guard by the gate, both of you, for twenty four hours straight! Let that be a lesson for others who don't take orders as they are instructed!”

So it was decided: we had to stand and guard the gate together, Seloren and I.

I couldn't help but see it as a fortunate opportunity to spend more time with her. I enjoyed her company in a way I couldn't explain.

She wasn't very happy about it though: the idea of standing there until the next day didn't enchant her.

At first we remained by the gate, listening to the shouts in the distance, where the soldiers were exercising. We just stood there in silence, watching the mountain tops high above the forest: the steep rocks and the snowy ridges.

The sky was getting cloudy and soon it started to rain. Seloren retreated under the small roof of the gate booth, leaning the gun against the wall and holding the uniform

around her, to keep warm. I remained there in the rain, water dripping down my steel helmet. I liked the sound of the raindrops against the metal: the clinking sound was cozy and soothing.

“Ky, do you want to get a cold?”, I heard her ask me a bit upset from the booth.

“Yes”, I replied and I smiled, closing my eyes and letting the rain fall on my face.

“Get some shelter over here. I feel a chill only by seeing you standing in the rain like that.”

“Don't you like the rain?”

“No.”

She looked around to the silent forest with the pines fluttering their needles and the fir trees whispering mysteriously. The rain made the forest seem more peaceful. Mist was floating above the trees, coming down from the mountain tops. It also brought a humid chilling air.

“I think you haven't had enough freezing last night”, she said a bit ironically.

I smiled at her.

“No, I hadn't.”

“That means I struggled in vain to bring you the blanket, right?”

Her smile intensified.

“Well, it wasn't entirely in vain.”

“Can you explain to me the use of it?”

“You only had the illusion of doing a good deed for a helpless soldier. As for me, I benefited in a different way: look how you're keeping me company as a result. I would have been bored otherwise, guarding the gate by myself. Instead, now we can talk.”

And I grinned. She stared at me for a while, then she looked away. I didn't know whether she was glad or not to have me there. I waited to see if she chose silence or conversation with me.

In the yard, the commander was shouting again, his voice getting distant behind

the barracks.

Then Seloren looked in my direction, asking casually:

“So, what would you like to talk about?”

I was thrilled she decided in favor of conversation. I thought about it for a second.

“Tell me about yourself.”

“What would you like to know?”

“What's a girl like you doing in the army?”

“What do you mean, a girl like me? Like how?”

“You seem fragile.”

“I'm not that fragile.”

“You seem scared.”

“I'm not that scared. However, coming here wasn't my choice. I was recruited for my medical training. I was in med school when the war started.”

She stared at me through the rain drops, her eyes a bit shady.

“What about you? What are you doing in the army?”

“My specialty is gun powder, bombs, mines, artillery... stuff like that. I'm usually the one who cuts the wire before everything blows up.”

She smiled amused.

“Did you ever cut the wrong wire?”

“Would I be here if I did?”

She laughed.

“It wouldn't surprise me, the way you're going about things. So what else do you want to discuss?” she inquired.

I glanced at her slim figure trembling in the humid chilling air.

“Have you ever been in love?”

She shrugged. The question didn't startle or upset her.

“Yes, for a day. I danced with him at a party, but I didn't see him the same way

after that. It didn't last.”

I wondered why she had liked that boy - and if it could have been me instead, would it have lasted longer?

I didn't say anything though.

“What about you?” she asked me directly.

“What?”

“Have you ever been in love?”

“No”, I said but it wasn't true.

However, I didn't want to tell her about the girls that I had taken an interest in before her. It didn't matter anyway. The war had robbed us of the perspective of dating or having fun. It was a luxury we no longer afforded. We had to stay alive: that was the main priority.

“What do you think about this war?” I asked her after a while.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, do you think it has a purpose?”

And I stared into the distance, at the mountain tops, as if to get a better perspective from the view. The mountains made me philosophical, as if something metaphysical was in the distance. She seemed to think about it, pondering on the answer.

“It might not have a precise purpose, but it's probably necessary to get over it.”

“How is it necessary if it doesn't have a purpose?”

She smiled.

“Like all things without a purpose, it's necessary to end. Maybe the fight in itself is necessary. We must defend something.”

“What would you have done if we had met as enemies in the battle?” I suddenly asked her.

She replied calmly, with the same undisturbed smile:

“I would have shot you.”

I didn't know if she meant it as a joke or as the truth. But I didn't care. I put the gun down and I started jumping around in the rain, throwing my hands up in the air:

“Come on! Shoot me now!”

She shook her head amused, staring at me with her intense eyes shining brighter.

“You're totally nuts! “

It started to get cold, but I felt like playing. The moment had heated my mood. I stepped up to her with my fists closed.

“Guess which one has a hidden treasure.”

She played along. I knew she didn't have anything better to do anyway, but there was an attitude of complicity that I could already see about her. She was actually captured by my game.

“This one.”

“Here, you won!”

And I opened the fist, showing her a piece of grass.

She just smiled, not getting the point of it, but it didn't matter very much.

“And do you know what I've got in the other fist?” I continued.

“No.What?”

“It's the purpose of war. The meaning of it. Look!”

And I opened the fist willingly. The palm of my hand was empty. She looked at me as if to say again “*you're nuts*”, but she just laughed.

And then she said:

“I've got a riddle for you too. If you guess right, I'll tell you where you can find a book of poems. Now it's your turn.”

She extended her fists. I chose one of them. When she opened it, I found a small pebble.

I was thrilled.

“Yay, I win! Ok, so tell me. Where is the book?”

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