*In the needle-like glare*

*Of tender mirrors –*

*Unearthly quest*

*And the demonic grin…[[1]](#footnote-1)*

PART ONE

1

***Moscow, Russia, Autumn of 1916***

“Count Monte Cristo relished vengeance.”

The tall, massively built man spoke in a resonating, bass voice. He wore a tight fedora with a slightly turned-down brim.

“Irina, just think – isn’t it fair to do justice to enemies? Yes, yes.”

He held his companion’s elbow lightly, helping her step over a puddle. She was a seventeen-year-old girl with black hair.

“Just listen to the sound of it: Ven-gean-ce….” The word sounded long and lush, as if the man savored it. “Although, you’re probably too young to understand this!”

He glanced at the girl, who appeared not to be listening. She raised her face towards the sun, basking in the gentle spring warmth.

“Well, what about the Christian commandments?” the girl asked.

The topic of vengeance had come up out of the blue and she wasn’t sure why Feodor Ivanovich took it so seriously. It didn’t really matter what the topic was. What difference is the topic when your company is Feodor Chaliapin[[2]](#footnote-2) – the heartthrob star, the ladies’ man. It was springtime, and she felt like life had just begun that morning, and was going to lead to everlasting happiness!

“No, I think the Count is the unhappiest person of all! To spend his life looking for revenge? How is that possible?” Her young voice exuded sincerity and innocence.

Chaliapin frowned. “My dear, you should never say these words, never,” he warned sternly. “My grandmother taught me a long time ago: as soon as you ask, ‘How is something possible?’… especially with indignation…”

“And judgment,” added Irina.

“Yes, and judgment,” Chaliapin nodded, ”Fate may hear it and put you in a situation where you’d have to answer this question.“ He shook his head again. “Better not to play around with these things.”

“Judge not, lest ye be judged? Yes, Feodor Ivanovich?”

“Exactly.”

“But the words have already been said and they’ve already been heard there!”  Irina dramatically pointed towards the sky with mocking concern.

“Iren, just be careful not to become a countess,” said Chaliapin, though it was unclear whether this was a joke or a warning.

“Well, it is a pleasure to meet you then!” With a queenly gesture Irina extended her hand for Chaliapin to kiss. “Countess Monte Cristo!” She said the last three words in French to better suit the role. “Actually, I do like the name and the title!” she laughed.

“Iren…” Chaliapin bowed, kissing her hand.

“No, no, Monsieur Chaliapin.” Irina stopped laughing and arched her eyebrow haughtily. “You kissed my hand without due respect! Please, try better!”

“Iren…” Chaliapin touched her hand with his lips again. “Honestly, sometimes you remind me of a kitten,” he smiled.

Irina frowned.

“A tiny, fluffy kitten with little sharp claws hidden deep inside the paws,” he added.

Irina put her hands behind her back and continued to walk the gravel-covered alley.  “Actually, I was born in August, so I prefer lionesses, and not cats!”

Chaliapin smiled pensively. “By the way, do you know the difference between lions and lionesses?” His eyes were laughing.

“Feodor Ivanovich, what kind of questions are you asking a young woman!” Irina was hardly able to contain her laughter.

Chaliapin continued, “Well, my dear, the thing is, lions don’t hunt. It’s the lioness who goes after the prey.”

Irina nodded with satisfaction. It could not be any other way.

 “So, Iren, this is the most important thing. When they kill the prey, hyenas begin to circle. Disgusting, evil creatures.”

He brushed a strand of blond hair from his forehead and put on his hat. “If the lioness is alone, she often leaves because she doesn’t want to fight, and the kill will go to the pack of hyenas. But if the lion is with her, he can chase the hyenas off and order is restored. Justice rules. Is he the king or not, after all!”

“Of course, he’s the king,” agreed Irina. “And the lioness is the queen!”

“Why am I saying all this?” Chaliapin continued. “The people Monte Cristo goes after are like the hyenas. They take what’s not theirs. And you, Iren, sound like a lioness who won’t lower herself to fight the hyenas. But, you should always defend what is yours,” he added. “And for sure, wickedness should be punished. Yes, my dear. Otherwise, the hyenas will be everywhere. They’re already everywhere, “he grimaced. “They’re stalking you, sniffing around, always wanting to attack and steal something from you. So, we need lions. We can’t do without them, my dear.” He looked at Irina lovingly, like a father.

Irina’s eyes sparkled with mischief again. “Feodor Ivanovich, nature preordained that I play the lioness’ role in my life and I hope I meet a real king worthy of my attention!”

 He glanced at Irina with a laugh. “Let’s go, my dear, or your father will wonder, God forbid, where his treasure has disappeared.” He took Irina’s elbow. “By the way, speaking of vengeance, do you remember Pushkin’s “There’s euphoria in battle?”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Irina nodded.

“So, there is also euphoria in vengeance, believe me. And that’s exactly why Count Monte Cristo is a happy man!”

They crossed Chistoprudny Boulevard and turned to Archangelsky Alley, next to the tall and beautiful tower of the Church of Archangel Gabriel.  Rumor had it that, in the old days, it was the secret meeting place for Moscow’s Masonic lodge. It was here that, two years ago, the abbot of Antioch Priory conducted the funeral service for Irina’s mother.  She had volunteered to work at the military hospital during the first days of the war and died of a heart attack a few months later.

Her death had a dramatic effect on the family. Irina’s mother was a wise and loyal friend to her. Her father, a well-known lawyer, never spoiled his daughter with attention, even before his wife’s death. He believed that a girl’s upbringing should be left to women.  After his wife’s death, contrary to Irina’s expectations, he was even more distant. He immersed himself in politics, like so many other people who cared about Russia’s future, as well as those who saw changes coming and wanted to get ahead in their political careers.

The world war had been raging for two years. The human toll the Germans inflicted on the Imperial army was horrifying. It was becoming more and more obvious that Russia was losing the war. The air was electrified as if right before a thunderstorm. Demonstrations erupted in the streets. The protesters demanded the immediate resignation of cabinet ministers or the entire government. The word in the streets was that the war wasn’t going well because of treason; and many even accused the Tsarina, who allegedly passed state secrets to the Kaiser himself.

Something had to be done, but what could a young *Smolny[[4]](#footnote-4)* Institute girl do? But then again, she could shoot a gun, which made her father proud, even though that was the only thing he had taught her in the previous two years, when they went to their country dacha. Well, what now? Grab a revolver and run to the frontline? A few patriots with revolvers wouldn’t stop the war. And then there was this Rasputin[[5]](#footnote-5) character…

“Feodor Ivanovich, do you know Rasputin?” Irina suddenly asked as they stood at the front door of her building. She smiled unwittingly when she saw how Chaliapin grimaced. He looked like he had just swallowed a spoonful of mustard.

“Thank God, no!” Chaliapin slowed down. “His secretary once came over to my apartment when I wasn’t there and left a message with my wife that the Old Man wished to meet me and wanted to know if I would see him at my place or visit him.”

“And what did you do?”

“Ignored him.”

“Really?” Irina shook her head in disbelief.

“Yes!” Chaliapin straightened his shoulders.  “I heard he could be a real boor, very disrespectful with people. God forbid, he’d say something vulgar to me and I’d punch him.” He bent his arm and clenched his huge fist.

Irina sneered, imagining the scene.

“Well,” Chaliapin nodded with a smile, “that would’ve been unreasonably silly. Also, it’s not a smart thing to punch court favorites, not good for future work. That’s how it is, Irina Sergeevna.” He walked up the stairs.

The heavy, oak door opened and out came the doorman with a thick mustache and a reserved smile. He was handsome and looked important.

“Will you come up, Feodor Ivanovich?” Irina asked. “That’d be so nice! Since we bumped into each other in the street, you were meant to visit us today! You wouldn’t want to go against fate!” She frowned jokingly. “Well, don’t hesitate so long!” she pressed him.

“I give up,” smiled Chaliapin. “My beautiful Iren, I can’t refuse you.” He followed her into the spacious foyer supported by the mighty, stone shoulders of two Atlases. When she was a child, Irina was afraid to pass between them. *‘What if one day the stone giants got tired of standing motionlessly and decided to move aside just to see what happens?’* she used to think.

The long carpeted hallway led to her apartment, which occupied half the floor. The old servant, Vasily, opened the door. He was good-natured and talkative. When she was a child, he would secretly spoil her with lollipops and tell her simple but wise folk tales that left her with the feeling that she’d witnessed a little miracle.

They walked into the large antechamber filled with many hanging coats, scarves, and hats. The apartment served as a meeting place for Irina’s father’s old and new friends as he tried to fill the emptiness left by the death of his wife.

A cheerful voice came from the open living room door.

“Gentlemen, listen to this! My colleague, Bryusov’s[[6]](#footnote-6) school friend, sent me his youthful impromptu:

*The melody has been disturbed,*

*The instrument is stolen,*

*The flame of love is not so hot,*

*My president has fallen.”[[7]](#footnote-7)*

 There was an outburst of laughter. Chaliapin smiled. Irina closed her eyes, as if separating herself from the strange world of men.

“Sergey Illich, Mister Chaliapin is here and Irina Sergeevna is with him!” announced Vasily, widely opening the door.

The laughter stopped.

“Feodor Ivanovich!” Sergey Ilich rose from his armchair, opened his arms and moved towards his guest. “What a surprise! I’m so glad, so glad! Please, come in, my friend!” He hugged Chaliapin and patted his shoulder. He was about the same height as his guest and, either because of his powerful build or his confidence, he looked like a man who had reached the pinnacle of his career.

“Thank you, Irina, for inviting Feodor Ivanovich!” he smiled at his daughter.

Irina listened to the men’s usual compliments - about how she has grown and blossomed and how she now resembles her beautiful late mother - and went deep inside the room to sit in an armchair. She was confident she was smarter and more beautiful than their wives. And of course, she also knew that they were all secretly in love with her. They just didn’t show it. Sometimes she could see it in their eyes, like today with Chaliapin.

Sergey Illich paused briefly, considering in which order to introduce his guests. He decided to start with the nearest one.

“Feodor Ivanovich, please meet Colonel Chirkov. He arrived from the front a week ago. You have already met Professor Manovsky. Not sure if you know Mr. Kerensky[[8]](#footnote-8).

“Alexander Feodorovich.” The thin man with a pale face and bags under his eyes introduced himself. He cast a careful glance at Chaliapin. “Pleased to meet you, sir. I’m a huge fan of your talent!”

Chaliapin smiled. “Please, Alexander Feodorovich! Theatrical talent is not as worthy these days as political talent.”

“Time will show what’s more worthy than what!” replied Kerensky.

The guests returned to their chairs and the divan next to the serving table, which had light snacks and a misty vodka decanter towering in the middle.

Irina felt badly that she had brought Chaliapin here at such a bad time.  It would be difficult to continue their conversation. She picked up a copy of the occult *Isis* magazine. She believed it was a must-read for spiritual and educated young women, whose ranks, she was certain, she belonged to. The magazine was different from others because it published curious, thought-provoking articles. She enjoyed reading them. That helped her explore her inner world as well as rise above and shield herself from the countless temptations surrounding her.

She never allowed herself to be infatuated with a man. Except, of course, Felix Yusupov[[9]](#footnote-9), who had stolen the hearts of many *Smolny* girls. What a satisfyingly sweet pastime it was to write unsent love letters in her diary, and to whisper with her friends about the love adventures of the famous high-society heartthrob. *But isn’t it demeaning to belong to someone? Doesn’t it make you an object of some sort?  Although, of course, it would be so interesting to find out what really happens between a man and a woman.* Shyness and curiosity struggled within her. As soon as girls quietly started talking about *that*, she would flush and walk away. She felt if she stayed and listened, something shameful and reprehensible would happen.

Also, how could you tell your friends that you don’t know anything about it? She tried to find the answer to her questions in the romantic novels she borrowed from her girlfriends, but…  “*He walked over to her, embraced her, and kissed her passionately…he felt how passionately her body shook….they woke with the first sunlight…..she touched his temple with her lips…..”* That was all. What was the secret between these lines? Her mother used to say, “Everything in due time, my child,” as she stroked Irina’s hair. But when would this time come? What if she missed it when it came? Had she missed it already? Why wasn’t she born a man? Men were the real masters of this life; they ruled the world and they ruled women. Besides, could women really do anything meaningful for the good of Russia?

Irina sighed and turned pages in the magazine. Her reading was interrupted by Professor Manovsky’s loud, orator’s voice. He was clearly used to talking to large audiences: “The beauty of writing is in simplicity, gentlemen, and the perfection of harmony is not easily obtained.  Here I quote Archbishop Whately.”

Kerensky joined the discussion. “Well, our prosecutors speak like this…” He stroked his short hair with his hand. “I can entertain you with some examples, gentlemen.” He looked around at the guests. “When they want to express indignity at loose, modern morals, they say, ‘The fist has the right to break faces’.”

Chaliapin burst into loud laughter, louder than the rest of the guests.

“How do you like that?”  asked Kerensky, pleased with the effect. “Or, how about this...” He paused for a moment. “When they want to point out that the deceased was a drunk, they say: She spent time with the horrible beverage that is the scourge of humanity.”

Chaliapin had been reclining in his armchair with his legs crossed. He put down his empty glass, picked up a marinated mushroom and joined the conversation, filling the living room with his resounding voice: “Simple talk is the best! Simplicity doesn’t mean it’s lacking anything. I agree with Professor Manovsky.”

The professor smiled with gratitude.

“For example, the Bible simply says that Cain killed Abel, correct? But how would it sound in today’s court?  I’m afraid to even think about it.” He looked around with a smile.

Kerensky chimed in: “Cain, while acting with premeditated criminal intent, deprived his brother Abel of his life!”

“Bravo!” Chaliapin laughed again and clapped his hands.

“Exactly!” Professor Manovsky rose from his seat. “Exactly, gentlemen. Deprived someone of his life while acting with premeditated criminal intent. Why not simply say, ‘killed’? Because the simple word ‘killed’ is disturbing, you see. Some orator may say: ‘He killed out of revenge,’ but then, immediately, the simplicity of this phrase frightens him and he adds: ‘and he wrongfully exercised the function which he had no authority to exercise.’ However, when you talk about murder, what does that have to do with any functions? Don’t laugh, gentlemen, I use this example with my students and each time I marvel at how many fools there are!”

 *’I’m so tired of this endless political talk,’* thought Irina. *’People talk themselves into a frenzy. Love of Russia has become a Sisyphean task for them! Every day they push that huge rock of patriotism up the hill. Then they go to sleep and the rock rolls down, and the next day they begin this sweet and endless work anew.  Sometimes it feels like you’re in a huge auditorium where anyone can climb the stage and perform their own play called ‘Russia and I.’ Mother used to say that although there are many decent people in Russia, as soon as they start chest thumping and using the word ‘I’, it becomes obvious to any intelligent person that they are not at peace with themselves.’*

Irina reclined in her armchair and half-closed her eyes.  *’Russia…. My country has such a beautiful name! For sure, people marked by God are born here because only God-chosen people are able to suffer like this. Christ died suffering and was resurrected for all the people of the world, and now the Russian Orthodox are dying in the war for all the people of the world. And those who gave Russia all their talent, all of their strength, all their love, and felt all the despair of that love, will surely be resurrected. For sure they will be!’*

“…..She always dresses like a nurse in the field hospital…”

“*Who are they talking about*?” Irina wondered, tuning in. “*Sounds like the Tsar’s sister, Olga Alexandrovna*.”

“She begins her day, you won’t believe this, gentlemen, at seven o’clock in the morning, and she doesn’t sleep all night if there is work at the hospital to assist the newly arriving wounded. And the soldiers refuse to believe that the nurse who’s dressing their wounds is the Tsar’s sister and the daughter of Emperor Alexander III.” The colonel downed his vodka and unbuttoned the collar of his uniform. It was getting hot in the room.

“It’s amazing, gentlemen! Russian women are a phenomenon.” Professor Manovsky clasped his hands.  He saw, from the corner of his eye, that Irina was looking at him and became even more excited. “Even if they’re born in foreign lands, when they get here and begin to serve Russia, sometimes they turn into saints. Women in Russian history are something lofty and tragic, inexpressible with words.” He glanced towards Irina, who looked away and went back to her magazine.

 “The more I listen to you, soldiers, the more I think that maybe I should just drop everything and join the army. At least it’s simple there: here is the friend, there is the enemy. And here…” Irina’s father’s face was flushed after the vodka, as he talked to the Colonel.

Irina pushed back into the armchair. *’No, I wouldn’t want to be a man. It’s so boring, very boring. All day, from morning till night – there’s business, worries, talking politics, arguing with others that Russia is heading in the wrong direction. And they have to drink this disgusting vodka while doing all* *this.’*  *No, I definitely don’t want to be a man!’*

She opened the magazine to a random page and saw a small ad that read: ‘Attention, kind reader! Revealing the concealed. Assisting with opening psychic abilities. Big Afanasievsky Alley, Building 36, Apartment 4. Every day from six in the evening.  Porphyries De Twait.’ *‘That’s a funny name, Porphyries De Twait.’*

The towering grandfather clock struck six times. *’Big Afanasievsky 36 is not far,’* she thought.

“My apologies, gentlemen, I must leave you,” she said. “I’ve been engrossed in my reading and have forgotten that I have a class at six.”

Giving Chaliapin a smile, Irina left the living room, put on her coat and hurried to the door. Chistoprudny Boulevard embraced Irina with motley crowds. She didn’t take the cab and slowly walked towards the Arbat, delightfully breathing in the fresh spring air. The city was awaking from the winter slumber. Street sweepers in long aprons were diligently sweeping the courtyards and walkways. They were busily quarreling with the cabbies for always blocking the streets. Loud boys with large trays noisily offered freshly baked buns and *kalachi*,*[[10]](#footnote-10)* matches, and cigarettes.

A loud group of university students passed Irina, gesturing excitedly. She heard broken phrases about revolutionary terror and the salvation of Russia. Two men appeared at the gateway next to a pharmacy. Their faces were red from alcohol. They hugged each other and sang in unison, “I kissed passionately, yeeeees, ah, with the other guy’s wife...”

Irina prudently walked around the merry couple, turned to the Arbat, then into an alley, and finally into the foyer of a building with the number 36. From an open window on the third floor, someone was diligently playing scales on a piano.

“Maybe I shouldn’t go,” she thought, as she walked up the carpeted, white marble stairway and was about to ring the bell.

The door opened almost immediately and she saw a short, skinny man with a thin face. He wore a red silk robe decorated with embroidered dragons, and a small, round hat that made him look Chinese. His eyes pierced hers, and she felt as if he had momentarily put his tentacles around her and withdrew them at once. Without a word, he showed her in.

“Actually, I’m looking for Mr. Porphyries... De Twait,” she said.

“Come in,” said the man.

They walked down a long, dark hallway and entered a small room with draped windows. Flickering candlelight illuminated the room.

“Make yourself comfortable.” The host pointed to the only chair in the room.

Irina sat down, carefully straightening out her dress.

The man quietly walked around and stopped in front of her. Looking at him, Irina noticed that he didn’t look Chinese. His eyes were wide and green. A Frenchman? He didn’t look French either. She suddenly realized that she hadn’t told anyone where she was going. She became anxious and wriggled uncomfortably in the chair.

“I saw an ad… in the magazine,” she did not recognize the sound of her own voice. Perhaps, I’m in the wrong place?” She attempted to rise.

“You’re in the right place.” The host gestured for her to stay seated. “And, just in the right time,” he added sharply. “A little later would have been too late.” He slowly walked around Irina again. She didn’t move.

When he stopped in front of her again, he folded his arms across his chest. Irina was attracted to a massive ring on his finger that looked like a book decorated with multicolored stones.

”Porphyries De Twait.” The man smiled enigmatically and bowed ceremoniously. The edges of his robe opened slightly, revealing lean, muscular calves. Irina bit her lip so as not to laugh. The host, on the contrary, looked very serious and focused.

“Irina, you will have to wait a little.”

*’Did I tell him my name?’* she wondered.

“I must get permission to work with you,” he said.

Irina looked at him quizzically.

“You see, I don’t usually work with regular people,” he explained with an important air.  “Only with the chosen ones.”

She nodded, pretending to understand.

Porphyries left the room. Irina looked around. The room was filled with bookshelves. She rose from her chair, walked over to one of them and read the titles on the book spines, with curiosity: Papus*, les Disciples de la Science Occulte*; Leadbeater, *Law of Cause and Effect*; Plutarch, *Osiris and Isis.* She hadn’t read any of these books and she respected the owner of such a rare collection.

She took one of the books from the shelf: Comte de St. Germain, *Practical Astrology*.” It looked familiar. She remembered reading in the *Isis* that the book contained illustrations of seventy-eight ancient Egyptian Arcana - important occult mysteries depicted as symbols. Mastering them is the *Taro* initiation.  She randomly opened the book to the middle, as she usually did with her Byron tome when she wanted a quick answer to some question.

“Arcanum I. Magus,” she read the title next to the dimensional picture of a man wearing white clothes and standing by a pedestal. A snake belted the man’s cloak; a band was on his forehead; he held a scepter in his right hand.

*’Oh well, Magus... let it be Magus,’* Irina thought. She returned the book to the shelf and smiled, wondering how long it would take the Magus (she decided that she would now call Porphyries ‘the Magus’) to get permission to work with her.

Irina returned to her chair. She remembered that her Smolny girlfriend, Lena Troyanovsky, often joked about her ability to get into unpredictable situations that did not offer easy solutions.

*’And even now – why am I here?’* she thought. *’How does he know my name? Maybe I should leave before it’s too late? Well, before you can find a solution, you need to have a problem,’* she realized with relief.

Porphyries entered the room. His face looked serious. He took a deck of cards from his robe pocket, shuffled it, and extended it to Irina. “Pick one.”

*’Ah, he’s decided to do some fortunetelling; he must have his doubts, too,’* Irina thought, carelessly touching a card with her finger. Porphyries turned the card over, glanced at it, and appeared to cheer up.

“I’ll work with you,” he pronounced, as if he’d just given her an expensive gift. “You’re a rare ….” He didn’t finish the phrase and started again: “You’re a rare individual, very rare.”

*’It’s a good thing I didn’t leave,’* Irina thought, as she began to like how things were turning out.

“What card was that?” She couldn’t resist asking.

“Eleventh Arcanum, tamed lion.” He sounded like he did her a favor by answering and he did not explain what the card meant. “I assessed you,” he suddenly said solemnly.  “I can tell you there is a lot of work ahead. Your channels are all blocked, seriously blocked. We’ll clean them!”

In a quick movement, Irina smoothed the long, grey skirt and was about to inquire whether her own consent was necessary for cleaning her channels, but Porphyries preempted her.

“I know that this work will require significant effort, not just on my part, but also on yours. But,” he raised his index finger, “considering you always strive for self-improvement, you should do fine. For brevity’s sake, you can call me Magus.” His eyes were laughing.

Irina instinctively raised her brows, surprised, and nodded.

“And now – listen.” He sat in front of her, in the lotus position.  “We begin with subjugating the body to the control of the Will. This is accomplished through strict diet… ”

Irina sighed, remembering the aroma of the freshly baked *kalachi* on the street vendor’s trays outside.

“…and physical exercises designed to develop concentration, strength and flexibility,” he continued.

She liked the idea, imagining herself as a circus gymnast, soaring under the domed tent, watched by hundreds of eyes, with heart-stopping admiration. It was a childhood dream.

“Then,” Porphyries slowly and carefully pronounced each word, “We’ll work on creating and accumulating the dynamic nerve fluid, using a series of breathing exercises.”

He rose, folded his hands behind his back, and paced around the room.

“Then, having perfected the body and disciplined your psyche, we can train the will power, the look, the voice and the gestures. Personality plays an important role. What’s your personality, by the way?” Porphyries stood up and looked into her eyes.

Irina looked aside and shrugged shyly.

“I will explain.” Porphyries started to pace again. “An active temperament produces magnetizers, while a passive temperament helps develop psychometrics and mediumship.  Women, unlike men, are generally more passive, although…” He looked at her carefully. “There are exceptions, as always.”

The idea of being an exception seemed promising to her. It would be better to control men than to belong to them.

Irina listened to Porphyries’ quiet, even, almost indifferent voice, as her eyes followed his movements, measured like the swing of the pendulum. She tried to apply what she was hearing to herself.

“And, one more thing…”

She winced as if awakening from a dream. Porphyries stood directly in front of her, with a piercing gaze. She felt an unusual sensation, as if a myriad of tiny needles were stuck into the back of her head.

“Remember what I’m about to tell you. It is important. Dark times are coming.”

Irina raised her eyes and froze, expecting more.

“I hope you like Russian fairy tales?” asked Porphyries suddenly.

*’That’s a weird question!’* Irina thought, and shrugged uncertainly. *’Of course I like them, but should I admit it? What if I say yes and he smiles at me like I’m a child?’*

“Well, like it, don’t like it, it doesn’t matter. I’m sure you’ve heard about the Invisible Hat?”

Irina smiled, remembering that, as a child, she had often dreamed of such a hat, so that she could secretly watch the life of grown-ups, which was concealed from her and, therefore, even more interesting.

“Really, who didn’t want to have the Invisible Hat as a child?” Porphyries smiled dreamily. “But,” he said more seriously, “in reality, the Invisible Hat is simply the region of the energy field that is free of the vibration of human thought. There are situations where a person must become invisible in order to save his life. To do that, it’s necessary to transfer the center of your consciousness to another place, usually memories, without reacting to your surroundings in any way. Then you become invisible; you don’t radiate anything into your surrounding environment. This practice came to us from the East. The Ninjas, for example, were very good at lowering their brain activity emission in the frequency range felt by people.”

Irina was not familiar with the word “ninja” but was too shy to ask.

“We’ll work on that, too. Dark times are coming,” he repeated again.

“Yes, the times are uneasy.” Irina nodded in agreement. “Mister De Twait.” She finally gathered courage to ask.

“Magus,” he corrected her with a smile.

“Magus,” she exhaled the word. “Tell me, do you know…”

“Yes, I do,” smiled Porphyries, warm light emanating from his eyes.

“Then tell me what will happen to…” She stopped, embarrassed to continue, because her question seemed frivolous. She wanted to ask what would happen to her. “I wanted to ask what would happen to my world…to Russia?”

“To Russia?” Porphyries studied her eyes with sadness. “Russia will be torn to pieces…” he said quietly, “but *you* will find love.”

“Will it be happy?” she whispered.

“Love in itself is happiness, yes,” answered Porphyries and looked away.

                                                            \*\*\*

On the way home, Irina took a cab. The cold, angry wind came out of nowhere, forced itself under the raised cab roof, making her hide her face in her coat collar. Fluffy, hazy clouds embraced the frozen moon. The wind angrily chased them away; it did not tolerate challengers. The moon, like a yellow eye, peeked from behind the clouds, watching the night city from its height, hiding the eternal mysteries on the other side of the soul….

                                                            \*\*\*\*\*\*

Irina entered her apartment. She gave her coat to the servant and went to her father’s study where he liked to work late, at times falling asleep on the huge leather sofa. The door was slightly opened. She approached it and listened to the muffled voices inside.

“So, Sergey Illich, you’ll have to move to St. Petersburg by autumn.” It was Kerensky’s voice. “George hopes you accept that decision with understanding.  He’s a kind man, but when it comes to the Brotherhood business, he’s very firm in his decisions. And he could be tough.”

“Hmm. Well, this is somewhat unexpected.” Sergey Illich’s voice was hesitant. “But do tell Prince Lvov[[11]](#footnote-11) that of course, of course…”

Irina moved away from the door, but stopped short at the next phrase. “Are you sure that there is no other way?” Her father’s voice sounded gloomy. “I’m not talking about myself, Alexander Feodorovich. You do understand. I mean the Emperor.”

“Another way? My friend, don’t you see what’s happening? The Emperor is weak. He lacks resolve. Shall we wait until Russia is torn to pieces?”

Irina remembered Porphyries’ words and moved closer to the door.

“Do you remember Alexander III? Remember what he told his Prime Minister in Gatchina when he insisted the Emperor should meet with some European ambassador? Do you?”  Kerensky‘s voice was full of pride.  ”He said ’When the Russian Tsar is fishing, Europe can wait!’ That’s an answer worthy of a Russian ruler! This is how the Emperor of a great country should act! And look at Nikolai Alexandrovich![[12]](#footnote-12) The Tsar is suffering from a weak soul, which may be completely normal for a private citizen but is absolutely unacceptable, and even fateful, for a monarch!”

Irina frowned. One should not speak ill of the Emperor.

“Fate turns the beautiful qualities of his soul into a murderous weapon!” exclaimed Kerensky passionately.

Vasily peeked out into the hallway from his small room. Irina placed her finger to her lips and walked to her bedroom.

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Irina dreamt of Kerensky. Alexander Feoderovich was wearing a military uniform. He had barged into Porphyries’ apartment and demanded that Porphyries immediately hand over to him the dynamic nerve fluids necessary to save Russia. Porphyries was smiling and saying that he didn’t have any fluid left because just yesterday he had given all his supplies to a young woman with blocked channels.

*’I won’t give it up,’* she thought. *‘I won’t give anything to anybody. What’s mine is mine. I’ll never regret anything.’*

2

By autumn of 1916, the general mood was quite different from the previous few years. The war with Germany was in its third year and the end was nowhere near. Whatever patriotic fervor so many felt when the fighting began in 1914 was now gone. The Imperial Army bled at the fields and the soul of the Russian people bled with it. After the disastrous Great Retreat of 1915 the Tsar dismissed his cousin, the Grand Duke Nicholas as the commander–in-chief and assumed that position himself. That did not solve any problems. It only made things worse. Now, in the eyes of the people, the Tsar was solely responsible for all the troubles at the frontlines and in Russia. 1916 brought more misery. In the attempt to help France, the Imperial Army launched the Lake Naroch offensive. In two weeks, the Germans pulverized the numerically superior Russian Second Army. The notorious human wave attacks by the desperate Russian soldiers only added to the horrendous death toll. The population’s moral was at its lowest. The French were about to crumble. Trying to salvage the catastrophic situation, General Brusilov launched his offensive in June of 1916. After three months, the Germans finally moved their forces from France to the Eastern front and were fought to a standstill at the cost of a million Russian lives.

By September the air was soaked with anxiety and anticipation of impending doom, making it difficult to breathe deeply. Peoples’ faces were gloomy and worried. The streets were filled with war amputees and men wearing military coats. Many of them were quiet, as if they lost their ability to talk. They just looked in front of themselves with expressionless eyes.

   3

After moving to St. Petersburg, where she and her father settled in their old apartment on the Moika embankment, Irina and her *Smolny* friend, Lenochka[[13]](#footnote-13) Troyanovsky, volunteered at the hospital. She completely forgot about her Moscow loneliness.  She was grateful to Moscow for the opportunity to have met and talked with Porphyries. She had learned a lot from him. She had discovered her inner strength and, with it, the belief that the circumstances, no matter how difficult, would not break her.

Pain was everywhere in the hospital. It pulsated, filling the air. Irina felt it physically. Pain lurked in every corner, waiting for its time, then crawling out and gripping each patient’s throat, making the already miserable, tormented people cry and scream. The wounded lived and died with the pain, but the pain did not leave. It paused, awaiting new human bodies.

Today, it was unusually quiet on the hospital floor. The old clock tick-tocked rhythmically on the wall.  Irina was sleepy. Supporting her head with her hands, she tried to read, forcing herself concentrate on the book she had borrowed from Porphyries, in Moscow.

“Nurse…” The voice came from the post-operative room.

Irina quickly put the book into the desk drawer and rushed over to the patient. He was an exhausted grey-eyed young man with a bad gut wound. She bent over him.

“I’m here.”

“Water, water…” He forced out the words, unsealing his dry lips painfully.

“I can’t. The doctor said no.” She soaked cotton gauze in water and wetted his lips.

“Irochka[[14]](#footnote-14), my dear,” an older man on the adjacent bed tried to raise himself.

She turned around and fixed his sheet. It was covered with yellowish stains – blood leftovers from the previous patients.

“*Dochka*![[15]](#footnote-15) My leg hurts so much, I can’t take it anymore. For Christ’s sake, give me one more shot!” The soldier was suffering from phantom pain in his leg, which had been amputated three days prior.

At night, Irina walked around the rooms and looked into the faces of the wounded soldiers lying in their beds. She realized that they needed her not only as a nurse, a sister of mercy easing their suffering; they saw hope in her; a hope radiating to them from another world, a normal world where ordinary human life went on as usual, where there was no blood and suffering.  After a month at the hospital, she learned to unmistakably determine which wounded soldier would survive and which one would not. Often, that did not depend on the grimness of their wounds.

Those who wanted to live tried to talk, to joke; they asked her to listen to them. She would sit next to them and listen. With each word, they clung to the rough bark of the tree of life.

Her shift was coming to an end when Lenochka appeared in the doorway. She looked well-rested, wearing a white starched apron with a red cross sewn on the chest.

“Did I wake you up?” she chirped, kissing Irina. “Your eyes are swollen as if you just awakened.”

Irina glanced in the mirror, smiled and wagged her finger at Lenochka. Although they were the same age, Irina always felt much older than this thin, blond-haired, blue-eyed girl who resembled Snow White and seemed as if she’d melt if you didn’t protect her.

“How was your shift? How’s Nikolayev? Still in pain?” Lenochka sat down on a small couch covered with white upholstery.

“He was bad last night,” said Irina from behind the partition where she was changing. “I even had to give him an injection out of turn. I wrote it down in the log.” She came out, having changed into her regular dress.

“Listen, Iren, why don’t you sit with me, we’ll chat a bit.” Lenochka patted her hand on the couch next to her. Her voice and eyes were saying that there was a reason she had come to her shift a little earlier.  “I’m going to tell you something!”

“Well, what happened?” Irina sat down on the chair across from her.

Lenochka excitedly filled her lungs with air.

“Irenochka, you won’t believe what I dreamt last night!”  Her eyes were shining with thrilled amazement. “Imagine this: a huge room. No furniture. Everything is covered with white and black silk; the fabric lies in large, soft folds, like waves; and there are mirrors, many mirrors!” She suddenly interrupted the story. “By the way, did you order that dress for New Year’s? I tried one on today! I want to make it tighter here…” she placed her palm on her hip, “and…”

“Lena, don’t change topics, I want to go home, I’m tired.”  Irina leaned on the back of the chair.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Lenochka gave her a guilty smile. “I’ll be brief. So, I suddenly see, right in the middle of the room, there is a big chess board and all the pieces there…” she paused, “are alive!”

Irina sat on the couch next to her friend.

Lenochka leaned towards her and whispered in her ear, “And there are two…I don’t know who they are… sitting by this board. One has white wings, the other – black. Like an angel and a demon.” She hastily crossed herself. “And the demon says, *‘Look at these fools! The people…They invent things, create things, but they still don’t understand the secret of the mirrors! They still don’t know that we placed the mirrors all over the world, that we use the mirrors to watch them. Day and night! Their thoughts and their actions! And I see that their souls become blacker with each generation.’* And the white angel...” Lenochka took Irina’s hand, “shakes his head… He says*, ‘No, you’re wrong. I’m always here with you watching them.  This is our game: you’re black and you play white. I’m white and I play black. And I see that you’re wrong. Their souls become whiter with time.’* And the black angel smirked, so horrifyingly, and didn’t say anything. That was the dream. What do you think?”

Without waiting for a reply, Lenochka rose from the couch and fixed her headscarf. “Just think about it! It’s some kind of mystery with these mirrors. I’m beginning to think maybe they really are some kind of windows from another world.”

“Or to another world,” said Irina quietly, also getting up from the couch.  “Only they see us, but we can’t see them.” She was envious that she didn’t have such a curious dream.

“Will you visit us Friday?” Lenochka studied herself in the mirror.

“Yes, and Papa promised to join me. He likes calling on your home! I even think he likes Sophie,” Irina added in a matter-of-fact tone.

Lenochka stopped fixing her headscarf.

Sophie, Lenochka’s older sister, was a beautiful and unusual woman. She was an experienced woman, because she was once married. No one knew why, but all of a sudden, she left her husband a year after the wedding, and returned to her father’s mansion on Nevsky Prospect. A true socialite, she began inviting a diverse crowd to the mansion: promising politicians, young and flamboyant army officers, mostly from the General Staff headquarters, successful businessmen who made fortunes on military contracts, poets, artists and musicians, unacknowledged but talented, in her opinion. All of them were drawn to this bright and magnetic woman. Her main talent was creating celebrations, no matter the circumstances. Her father, the famous banker Piotr Petrovich Troyanovsky, did not object to his daughter’s lifestyle. On the contrary, he made sure to carefully examine her guest list and participate in her parties. At times, he would invite some of the guests to his study for a private talk.

“By the way, is Alexander Feodorovich coming?” asked Irina.

“Why do you care about Kerensky?” Lenochka walked over to the medications table and picked up the tray with the thermometers.

A little old woman peeked through the open door. She was carrying a water basket and a mop. “Ladies, should I wash the floor here?”

“Polina Polikarpovna, first mop the patients’ rooms!” Lenochka told her.

“I already did! Didn’t you hear? I make a lot of noise when I mop,” the old janitor said, pursing her lips.

She really did make a lot of noise. The entire floor could hear her muttering loudly, talking to the wounded, sometimes even singing and dancing in order to entertain some sad soldier. The patients liked Polikarpovna and waited for her to come. She considered herself indispensable, one the most important persons in the hospital.

“What about the hallway?” Irina smiled.

“Not yet,” the old woman looked at the young women with a sly smile. “I get it, I get it, I’m not stupid. I’ll clean the hallway, then I come back here. You can share your secrets for now. Ha ha, I get it, I used to be youuung…” she sang, pranced around, spilling some water from her bucket, and went out the door.

“So, why do you care about Kerensky, I was asking?”  Lenochka looked at her friend.

“I don’t know. He’s a little weird, and I like weird people. Somebody can be quiet, shy, introverted, and then, suddenly he’s Napoleon.”

“God forbid Russia should have a Napoleon like that,” Lenochka noted.

“I don’t think he’ll come, though,” Irina said. “He’s not well. He had tuberculosis and lost a kidney. He still hasn’t recovered from the surgery.”

“I know about the surgery,” Lenochka said. “That’s why I’m asking. I don’t think he’ll come. Sorry. But I’ll be there for sure!”

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Irina left the hospital. The morning was damp and cold. The sky was heavy, grey, as if it had drunk all the Neva River and was about to pour the water down on the earth. The street was empty, which was unusual even at this early hour. A loud, metallic, grinding sound and a bell ringing made her stop and yield the way to a streetcar. It emerged from a corner and rumbled by with a groan, swaying from side to side, as if trying to shake off the passengers. It was so packed that people were clinging to it as they stood on small steps outside.

*’Everyone is clinging to one another, but not because they want to help each other. They’re just afraid to fall under the wheels and become a piece of mangled meat,’* Irina thought. She looked after the streetcar and imagined how that could be, shivering with dread.

“Scary, eh?” Someone behind her echoed her thoughts.

She turned around quickly and saw a pair of glaring, strangely split eyes that belonged to a tall, unshaven man with a disproportionately small head, and a hat pulled down over his eyes. The man suddenly appeared half a step from her.

“What? What do you mean?” Irina asked, confused.

“The same thing you do,” said the stranger in a husky voice.

Not wishing to continue the conversation, Irina quickly crossed the street.

“Hey, where are you going, lady?” The man smirked and followed her.

Irina walked faster.

“Hey, lady, you don’t want to talk to me?” He was breathing down her back. “I’m not good enough for you?”

Irina slowed down, and looked around. As ill luck would have it, there was not a policeman, not a cabby, in the street.

“You know, I’ve been taught not to speak with strangers in the street,” said Irina sternly, grasping her umbrella.

“Oh, yeah?” The man probably also noticed that the street was empty and insolently stretched out his hand. We don’t have to be strangers. My name is Stepan.”

Irina demonstratively hid her hands behind her back.

“What, you’re afraid to get dirty?” He was annoyed and moved closer to her.

She took a step back and looked at the man again, but to her surprise, she could not see his eyes, and realized that he was cross-eyed.

“I’m not afraid to get dirty.” She tried to appear calm. “So that you know, it’s a woman’s privilege to extend her hand.” She looked at him conceitedly and attempted to walk around the cross-eyed man, but he spread out his arms and blocked her way.

“What do you want from me?” she raised her voice angrily.

“Like you don’t know.”  The man grimaced and tried to hug her, but hearing the sound of an approaching car, he quickly turned around and lowered his arms.

The savior car drove out into the intersection and…turned in the other direction. Seeing that the cross-eyed man was hesitant, Irina attempted to walk around him, but he blocked her way again.

“We’re both thinking the same thing,“ he grinned, showing small, tobacco-stained teeth. “You said you were scared. I also think so.” His grimace froze on his face.

“You?” She looked up to him. “Why are you scared? You’re a man,” she asked.

“No, *you* should be scared,” the man drooled as he smirked. “I though that street car, when it was passing by, and you were looking at it… it’s overloaded, like Russia.”

“So?” asked Irina. She kept walking closer to home while the man talked to her.

“So?” He pondered, scratching the back of his head.  “You know what needs to be done? How to fix this street car?”

‘*How can I get rid of him?”* Irina thought frantically, “*There is no one around…what if I run? I won’t outrun him if he chases me. Should I scream loudly? That would be silly. I should keep on walking home, maybe there will be someone along the way, or at least the doorman in my building.’*

“What?” she asked the man?

“I said, do you know how to fix this car?” he repeated.

“Maybe it should be repainted?” Irina said, hoping to keep him busy talking as she was getting closer to her building. “What color do you like?” She looked around, but the street was still empty and she walked faster. However, the stranger kept up his pace and continued walking next to her.

“It’s not what I mean.” The cross-eyed man looked irritated.  “How do we make it lighter? Get it?”

“How?”

The man’s eyes darkened and narrowed with hate. “I think we should kill half the people. Damn, maybe even more… those bloodsucking bitches. They keep on sucking on the people’s blood!” He hissed, “They think Russia won’t survive without them…” He was getting more excited. “Kill them, kill them all, then the ride will be easier.” He grinned again.

‘*He is insane,’* her thoughts were racing through her mind, ‘*Why is the street so empty? What happened to everyone? What should I do if he tries to do something to me?’* Her heart was beating fast and she felt a tight knot in her stomach.

“You’re talking about the rich, yes? Will you kill women and children, too?” she inquired.

“Oh, no!” he said intending to appease her. “Broads are made to please men. Take you, for example.” He gave her a lusty look. “You’re pretty attractive; that’s why I followed you.”

*’Almost home. There is still nobody around. What do I do?’* she thought, walking even faster. The man kept up next to her.

“Now I understand,” she continued the conversation. “However, I must disappoint you. When I looked at the streetcar, I was thinking about something else.”

Irina stopped at her building’s front door. The street was still empty but she knew that the doorman was inside the foyer. She felt better and more secure now.

“Thank you for the company,” she said. *‘What did he say his name was?’* she thought. ”Stepan.“ She was relaxed now, feeling she had finally reached home. “Good-bye, Stepan.”

The cross-eyed man looked at her sullenly and quietly. His breathing was fast. He reminded her of a vicious dog on the verge of biting someone.

Irina resolutely opened the front door and entered the foyer. The cross-eyed stranger followed her.

*‘Oh my God, where is the doorman?’* she thought and was immediately pinned against the wall under the staircase.

Irina smelled his sweat and his lust; his salivating mouth and heavy breathing were in her face….She thought that screaming and calling for help would be so undignified….

“You don’t like me? Don’t like *me*? Who do you think you are, eh?” He ripped open her coat, her dress collar. The buttons poured down and bounced on the marble floor…The first, the second, the third….”You think you people are special? You have different blood? Let’s see.” His rough hand scratched her skin. “The tits are here, and here…all the same, the noble girl or the kitchen wench…”

With incredible effort she finally freed her right arm and forcefully struck the pain center on his neck with her finger, like Porphyries had taught her.

The cross-eyed man wheezed, released his grasp and slowly lowered to the floor gasping for air.

Irina kicked him in the groin so hard that he curled up and groaned.  “Do your kitchen wenches have bodies like this?” she yelled with hatred, and kicked him again.

She stepped back, watching the scum writhing in pain, and crouched down to collect the buttons. She thought that it was absolutely necessary and reasonable. She could not leave the pearl drops that her mother had sewn on to her dress. Irina ran up the stairs. Only now she realized that the torn dress was hanging, baring a part of her breast, and that the light blue material was stained with dirty handprints. She closed her coat, ran up another flight and looked down. The cross-eyed man stopped gasping and moaning. He rose from the floor and looked up with hazy eyes.

“You…listen to me…. You know, I feel sorry for you. I will get to your body…I promise. Just wait.” He hunched and hobbled towards the exit.

Irina banged on her front door with her fist. Again and again. It opened. She saw her father’s baffled face. Vasily stood behind him, startled. The crystal pendants chimed on the bronze chandelier as it trembled when the front door slammed behind her. She saw a strange, embittered face in the oval mirror.

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 “I won’t let you! I won’t let you out!” repeated Sergey Illich, pacing around his daughter’s bedroom. Irina was half-lying on her bed, bundled in a blanket.

“Papa, I beg you, calm down,” repeated Irina, touched by his concern and long-awaited care. “It was all my fault. I wasn’t careful with that man.”

“You’re not going anywhere, you hear me? Not anymore! No more hospital work!” He was becoming more and more agitated. “I’m going to call them, I’ll tell them you’re leaving the country, you’re going to Africa, hell knows where!” He stopped and looked at his daughter, alarmed. She had changed a lot over the previous twenty-four hours: her face was sunken and there were dark bags under her eyes.

*‘Maybe I should call the doctor,’* he thought. *‘Maybe she’s not telling me the whole truth.’* His heart jumped.

“Papa, my dear, you know…” Irina took a candy from the small bedside table and removed the crispy wrapper. Lenochka had brought her the candies, warning that Irina should eat them while she’s still young. Otherwise, with age, eating sweets would make her fat and men wouldn’t pay attention to her.

Irina savored the bittersweet chocolate.

“You know, Papa, I’m grateful this happened!” She looked at her father tenderly.  “Maybe, if it were not for this incident, I wouldn’t have understood that you…” she stopped, choosing the right words, “that you still need me, Papa, and that you love me!”

“Good God, Irinochka! What are you talking about?” Sergey Illich’s eyes became wet and he sat down on the edge of the bed. She took his hand and placed his palm on her cheek.

“Your hand is so cold… It’s a sign of energy deficiency, actually,“ she said with expertise, remembering Porphyries’ lessons.

“Oh no, Irinochka, the apartment is cold, so my hands are cold.”

“Before, it was always warm, even hot, in any weather,” she sighed. “Papa, do you love our Emperor?” she looked at him.

“How fast you’re switching topics, Irina Sergeevna!” he exclaimed.

“Why?” she asked innocently. “I’m just like any other woman.”

Hearing the word *woman*, Sergey Illich became tense again and looked closely at his daughter, wondering whether she just said it or…

“Why are you looking at me like this, Papa? I’m just curious. Also…,” she sat up, reclining on her pillows, “we don’t talk very often.” She moved aside, and her father sat next to her on the bed. “Tell me, are we Russians all crazy? Is it only the Russians who talk politics day and night? We talk about politics, government failures, intrigues, conspiracies, treason and reforms. Is it just a Russian thing or do the Germans, the French and the others also do that?”

Sergey Illich coughed.

“My dear, this has nothing to do with the country. It has to do with the historical period. When you live during a time of change, what else is there to talk about but the change? In Russia, everybody wants the change. Once it happens, everyone will calm down. Until the next change,” he smiled. “And this Russian fervor… it’s because of vodka.” He laughed. “Russians can’t live without drinking. Like in the Tale of Bygone Years.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Irina shook her head.

"’Drinking," he chanted the quote, "is the joy of the *Russes*. We cannot exist without that pleasure. “By the way, do you know that according to last year’s statistics, a year after the Prohibition[[17]](#footnote-17) announcement, alcohol consumption in Moscow increased twenty times? This is a good example of fighting Russian alcoholism with government bureaucracy.”

“But do the people really want changes?” She returned to the topic.

“The people?” Sergey Illich shrugged his shoulders. “The people want a quiet life, plenty of food, vodka. They want an earnest heart-to-heart and the indispensable scuffle that follows, but just for fun. But the most important thing, the people want justice.”

“What is justice?” Irina took another candy. “When everybody gets an equal share, as the socialists say?”

“What is justice, you ask?” Sergey Illich paused to think. “Justice is the truth. There is a saying, *‘God is not in strength but in truth.’* By the way, this is the reason people are not happy with our court system. They want courts to be just, not crooked. Although, if you think about it, everybody has his own truth. It doesn’t matter how you share things, equally or not, someone will always be dissatisfied. And also, such equality can’t last long. Everyone has different ideas.” He paused. “Why don’t you get some sleep, my dear.” He lovingly stroked his daughter’s hair. ‘The morning is wiser than the evening,’[[18]](#footnote-18) as you know.”

Irina turned on her side, pulled up the blanket and put her father’s hand under her cheek.

“Life is so good,” she thought smiling. “It’s so good to be young…and not because of these candies.”

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 “Unbelievable – a cabinet minister in the future government!” Sergey Illich came out of the stuffy room where the Honorable Master of the Brotherhood, Prince Lvov, had just ended the secret meeting. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his forehead. The Brotherhood had confirmed the secret list of future cabinet members. The new government was to be formed immediately after removing the Tsar, physically, if necessary.

“Physically, Lvov said.” Sergey Illich shivered at the thought, although he agreed that drastic changes were needed. The heavy losses and the overall failures at the German front, the Emperor’s behavior, unbefitting of a Russian ruler, and of course, Rasputin’s influence on the royal family, all suggested the need for a palace coup. Sergey Illich remembered his recent conversation with the Navy Minister, Admiral Grigorovich. The Admiral’s intelligence service was investigating the rumors that German spies had penetrated the Tsarina’s inner circle. Responding to persistent requests from the palace regarding the exact date of the beginning of a naval operation, the Admiral purposely gave a false departure date and destination of several Russian cruisers. Unsurprisingly, a German flotilla appeared at the time and place he provided. In the beginning, Lvov had begged the Tsar to send the Tsarina to Crimea, even by force, if she refused. Later, the Brotherhood came up with the idea of regency with the Tsar’s brother, Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich, after crowning Prince Alexei, a minor. At this meeting they adopted the final plan: remove or kill Rasputin, imprison the Tsarina in some God-forsaken place, force the Tsar to abdicate, crown his brother, and, of course, change the government.

Sergey Illich put on his hat and broadened his shoulders, as he stepped outside. The thought that he, together with the other freemasons, had been included in the future government, not only gave him a sense of belonging to a great task that would change Russia’s destiny, but also filled him with a sense of significance and self-importance.

“Prince Lvov is right. It’s obvious we must act, and act quickly!” Sergey Illich waved his hand, hailing the cab that appeared from behind the corner. Sitting inside the cab, he worried about his daughter. What should he do? If he was so busy now, what would happen when the time came for great accomplishments? Send her out of the country? For that he would need a trusted companion, someone Irina liked. But there was no such person around. Also, this street hoodlum…. Who’s to say he wouldn’t ambush Irina again?  It’s a good thing, at least, that she befriended the Troyanovskys. The city was becoming more and more restless with each day… The people were angry. There were food shortages. Prices had jumped threefold compared to the prior year. The war should be stopped, but you couldn’t say this out loud – you would immediately be branded as a defeatist and traitor. Turbulent times…

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The brightly lit and columned grand hall in Troyanovsky’s mansion on Nevsky Prospect teemed with a motley crowd invited by the hostess, Sophie Troyanovsky. She invited her guests, using criteria known only to her. The music played, the waiters waltzed around with champagne and light refreshments on their silver trays. The guests mingled and laughed as if there were no war, no dreary, slushy weather outside the walls of the mansion, and no anxious expectation of the change that permeated the air of the northern capital.

Irina entered the hall and looked around. Lenochka was nowhere to be seen. Irina’s father hadn’t arrived yet. She saw Kerensky’s lonely figure. He was standing by a column, away from the men who were talking politics in the billiards room. The smell of cigar smoke and snippets of the latest news were coming out of there.

“Alexander Feodorovich! I’m so glad to see you! I didn’t expect to see you here.” She walked over to Kerensky.

“I didn’t expect to be here, too, honestly,” he said, kissing her hand. “You look better and better, Irina Sergeevna.” He admired her unimposing, dark navy dress with white lace collar.

“I’m only looking better because I want to hear a compliment from you, Alexander Feodorovich!” Irina said, smiling back at him.

“Iren, don’t kid me! Show me a man who won’t take it as an honor to make you a compliment. You know, it’s easy to say this kind of truth!” He called over a waiter and picked up two champagne glasses. “To your beauty!” he raised his glass and sipped from it. “Every man, wise from experience, knows…” he bent over to her ear, “that true beauty is hidden beneath the cover of modest clothing.”

“You don’t like my dress?” she looked at him innocently, hiding her smile.

“You want to know the truth?” Kerensky’s face expressed doubt.

“Of course, Alexander Feodorovich!” Irina cried. “You just said that truth is easy to tell.”

“Oh, well…” He again showed doubt and embarrassment. “I have to lie.” He paused. “I didn’t like it at all!”

They both laughed.

“You know, Alexander Feodorovich, I was thinking.” Irina looked at him seriously. “Maybe all this, what’s happening, outside and right here,” she glanced around the hall, “is *A Feast in Time of Plague*? Remember? ‘We are not afraid of the darkness of the grave...?’”

Kerensky frowned, shook his head and then raised his glass again.

“To you, Irina Sergeevna!” He avoided the political talk. “I look at you and regret that I’m old. Were I younger, I’d steal you, I swear! I’d take you far away! Really, I mean it. By the way, there is someone I’d like you to meet. Where is he… ah, here!” He waved his hand at a pale-skinned, blond man with a short-cropped beard standing nearby. He was about thirty years old. Irina had caught his eye several times earlier that evening. “Nikolai Sergeevich, come here!”

The man, who seemed to have been waiting for the invitation, came over, limping slightly.

“Nikolai Sergeevich, I’d like to introduce you to the loveliest, the most gracious…“ Kerensky paused for a moment, choosing the right words, “… young lady.”

“Nikolai Rakelov.” The man’s introduction was short and clear-cut, military-style.

“As a friend, I suggest that you keep your ears open with her. She won’t cut you any slack!” continued Kerensky.

“Irina Yakovleva.” She held out her hand, sensing, to her embarrassment, that she was blushing.

“In real life,“ Kerensky turned to Rakelov, “I’ll tell you a secret – this lovely lady’s nickname is Iren. What about you, Nikolai Sergeevich, how do they call you at home?”

“Nicky,” said Rakelov, slightly uncomfortable.

“So, Iren, this is Nicky, my assistant and good friend. When he was a child, Nikolai Sergeevich, as far as I know, was a daredevil and loved to climb trees. One time he had a less-than-soft landing and as a result acquired this Byron gait.

“Alexander Feoderovich, “Rakelov said awkwardly, “Really, don’t make a romantic hero out of me. I’m not indifferent to poetry, of course, but I don’t write poetry. God didn’t give me the talent.”

“Well, about your talents, don’t belittle yourself. And sophisticated young women like romantics,” he looked at Irina. “So, Irina Sergeevna, please be kind to him. As we say, ‘love and favor!’”

“Love I don’t promise, and favor…” surprising herself, she looked Rakelov straight in the eyes, “that depends on Nikolai Sergeevich!” She lowered her eyes, examining the bubbles in her champagne glass.

“Great! You’ll be friends.” Kerensky looked around the hall wanting to leave them alone. “Iren, you do know Mr. Guchkov,[[19]](#footnote-19) don’t you?” He indicated a man who had just entered the hall, accompanied by Piotr Petrovich Troyanovsky.

“Yes, I met Alexander Ivanovich briefly. He came to meet my father as I was leaving.”

“I apologize, I must speak with him, and so I leave the two of you alone.” Kerensky bowed his head ceremoniously and walked towards Guchkov and Troyanovsky.

*’Now would be a good time to find a mirror,‘* Irina thought, fixing a strand of hair over her right ear.

“He’s such a rare man; he’s brilliant!” Rakelov said loudly, breaking the pause.

Irina looked at him questioningly, not following to whom he was referring.

“Yes,” continued Rakelov with admiration. “Just think about it, Irina Sergeevna! He was brought up in a strict Old Believer[[20]](#footnote-20) family. Then, all of a sudden, he ran off to fight in the Anglo-Boer War on the Boer side. He was captured by the British. Then he participated in the Macedonian uprising! He’s a hero! And when he returned to Russia…”

“He became the Chief Executive of the Moscow Commercial Bank,” Irina finished his sentence, realizing that Rakelov was talking about Guchkov. “And a member of the State Duma, and all that... Nikolai Sergeevich, why are you telling me Alexander Ivanovich’s biography? Don’t you have any other topics to entertain me with?”

Rakelov seemed embarrassed.

“So, Irina Sergeevna, why are you not drinking your champagne?” He pointed to her glass.

“How can I drink it when all the bubbles burst after being bored with serious talk? And champagne without the bubbles is not fun!”

“That’s true,” Rakelov smiled. “There is no fun in champagne without the bubbles. And without serious talk.”

They laughed and became silent again.

“Tell me, Nikolai Sergeevich, have you been to Paris, this year, for example?” Irina decided to help him.

He nodded with relief.

“So, what are the latest fashion trends?”

“Fashion?” Rakelov asked with surprise. “They don’t care about fashion now. The war is going on.”

They stopped the conversation, hearing a sudden commotion by the entrance. Sophie Troyanovsky, a redheaded beauty in a dazzling dark green dress, flowed inside, surrounded by a loud posse of admirers.  She slowed down and looked nonchalantly at the guests. The music stopped, as if someone had given the musicians the sign. Irina was surprised to see her father in Sophie's entourage. He was unusually joyful. Suddenly, he walked around Sophie and kneeled on one knee in front of her.

Irina froze. She’d never seen her father like this. Sergey Illich opened up his arms.

“Sophie, my dear! I want to give you the gift of my love! Please accept it!”

Irina could not believe her ears.

“Sergey Illich, here you go again.” Sophie looked down at her suitor. “You and your love!” She lightly tapped his shoulder with her fan. “Actually, no.“ Her smile was captivating. “Please put it there.” She pointed to the other end of the hall with her fan.  “In that corner. When I have time, I’ll think about what to do with it.”

With a royal gesture she extended her hand to Sergey Illich for a kiss, walked around him, and gave a sign to the band to keep playing.

Irina’s face blushed red.

*’Thank God, Nikolai Sergeevich’s back is turned to them and he doesn’t see all this,’* she thought. She hastily took Rakelov by his elbow and walked away with him, closer to the billiards room where passions were still seething and snatches of phrases could be heard:

“Rasputin, Rasputin! All this talk about ‘Tibetan medicines’ is baloney! The Emperor is possessed by some kind of internal weakness! Oh, if he could only get angry! The Empress would be hysterical, but who cares! It would be much worse if Russia starts convulsing hysterically!”

“My God, what is it, Nikolai Sergeevich?” Irina asked with disbelief. “Anywhere you go, you hear about this Rasputin. Aren’t there any other topics? Don’t you think this is like a soap bubble? Lots of empty words without substance?”

Rakelov considered her remark as he rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“You know, Irina Sergeevna, I did see Rasputin once. I’ll tell you the truth; he’s really powerful. He’s got some kind of magnetism and sorcery an ordinary person can’t resist.”

Irina looked at him with surprise.

“And it’s not right to judge the Tsarina, “continued Rakelov. “The Elder is her last hope to save the Prince.[[21]](#footnote-21) And how do we know what’s more important for her: her son’s life or Russia’s fate.”

“Are you saying that Rasputin has spiritual gifts?” she asked in disbelief.

“He does,” Rakelov nodded. “He definitely does. Would you like to sit?” He pointed to a small leather couch by the wall. “Prince Felix Yusupov recently said in a very small circle,” Rakelov lowered his voice so that it was clear that he was part of that circle and that the story was first-hand, “that the Elder had healed him of some kind of malady.“

Irina sat down and straightened out the folds of her dress.

*‘Why am I wearing dark navy today?’* she thought. *‘I should have worn light blue.’*

“And how did Rasputin cure Yusupov? Tell me, Nikolai Sergeevich, since you started!”

“How?” Rakelov turned towards her. “According to Yusupov, the Elder told him to lie down. He passed his hand over Yusupov’s chest, neck, head…”

Irina suddenly felt Nikolai Sergeevich’s gaze on her chest, her neck, her head, although he was only looking her in the eyes.

“Then,” Rakelov continued, “the Elder kneeled beside him and prayed. Then he got up and started to make some passes with his hands.  And while he did all that, he was staring Yusupov straight in the eyes... And he started to talk slowly… just like this….slo-w-ly, and without stopping…"

Irina painfully clinched her fingers.

“He stared into his eyes…..”

Rakelov’s voice was quiet and soft, and his words had charm. They penetrated her.

“He looked like this? He stared into his eyes?” mumbled Irina, not recognizing her own voice. A warm and unusual longing suddenly filled her body. “And what about Yusupov? What did he feel?” she exhaled.

“Yusupov?” Rakelov asked and looked away. “Yusupov says that the Elder’s hypnotic power is limitless, and therefore dangerous.”

Rakelov called over a waiter and took a glass of champagne from the tray. He drank from the glass and rolled it between his fingers in silence.

“Please, continue, Nikolai Sergeevich, this is fascinating! What happened next?” demanded Irina impatiently. She sipped from her glass and took a fan out of her purse.  “It’s so stuffy in here.” She waved the fan.

*‘What happened next?’* Rakelov thought, trying to remember. “Numbness. Yusupov fell out of reality. He wanted to speak, but his tongue couldn’t move. His body went numb. He only remembers Rasputin’s eyes sparkling above him like two phosphorescent rays. Poor Felix…”

“He’s not poor, and he’s so handsome!” Irina tried to return to the conversation’s previous tone.

“Unfortunately, he’s married!” Rakelov smiled.

“Indeed, unfortunately,” Irina feigned a sigh and looked around the hall, waving the fan.

“Looking for someone?” Rakelov asked.

“Yes, I’m looking for Lenochka Troyanovsky. I’m worried about her, you know, lest she fall under someone’s bad influence.” She looked at him ironically, feeling that she was slowly regaining her equilibrium.

“Irina Sergeevna,” he said.

“Iren,” she corrected him.

“Thank you.” Rakelov carefully touched her hand. “So, my dear Iren, as one of my good friends says, bad influence can only affect a person predisposed to elements of evil. People of firm character, far from egoism, are absolutely protected against any bad influence.”

“Aren’t all people predisposed to evil? Aren’t we made of black and white and we’re constantly struggling between the two opposing inclinations within ourselves?”

Rakelov looked at her with undisguised interest but couldn’t answer because Lenochka Troyanovsky appeared next to them, in the company of several men. Her lush, pink dress made her look like a delicate flower surrounded by bumblebee admirers, buzzing, pushing each other aside.

Lenochka glanced at Rakelov, and then at her friend with intrigue. “I hope we’re not intruding on you,” she smiled knowingly.  Rakelov rose from his seat and lowered his head greeting her.

“Where have you been?” Irina asked, wanting to appear fussy in front of her companions. “I’ve been looking for you all night! I was worrying about you. I hope you haven’t promised your hand to anyone yet!”

“No, Irenochka, unfortunately, no.” Lenochka sighed theatrically, trying to look like her older sister. “And you want to know why? I just can’t decide between them!” she laughed. “By the way, I have news!” She sat down in the space vacated by Rakelov.

“Come on, thank me! I decided that it was enough for you to be living like a hermit, so I convinced Sergey Illich to let you live with us. Surprisingly, he agreed rather easily. Our house is huge; we have company every evening, so you won’t be bored. By the way,“ she whispered into Irina’s ear, “I’ll tell you a secret. Your dear Papa,“ she put the emphasis on the last syllable, as in French, “surrendered to Sophie almost without a struggle. Just like that! And you, Nikolai Sergeevich…” Lenochka looked at Rakelov with faux seriousness, “you know, from now on, that this beautiful girl will be living in our home under our protection.”

The music burst out. Strauss’ waltz whirled through the hall.

“Alright, I’m leaving!” Lenochka rose. “I want to dance!” She took both of her companions by their hands and was gone in an instant.

“Iren, do you like the waltz?” asked Rakelov, holding out his hand.

“I do, Nikolai Sergeevich.” She took his hand and got up.

 He led her to the hall where couples were whirling, lifted by the waves of music. “Nicky...Let it be Nicky. I think in your mind you agreed to call me by this name?” He gazed at Irina, lightly touching the curve of her back.

“You can read thoughts… Nicky?” She placed her hand on his shoulder, savoring the name.

“Sometimes.” His eyes shone with delight.

*‘He will be my husband,’* Irina knew with sudden clarity, happily whirling in the dance.

                                                                         \*\*\*

 Rasputin walked over to the mirror.

An unkempt beard. Piercing, prickly eyes. But, power radiated from them! Only now, at forty-seven, had he fully realized the magnitude of his power over people. The power that was forged by his own will was multiplied by his closeness to the royal family.

*’Nobody can stand my gaze,’* he thought smugly. He looked closely into the mirror and staggered back. The reflection was staring back at him. No, no one was allowed to do that, not even his own reflection.

He heard a quiet knock on the door. He pulled down his silk shirt and turned around. The servant, an eighteen-year-old, redheaded boy, brought in a flower basket, put in on the table, lingered hesitantly waiting for new orders and, not receiving any, left quietly.  Rasputin opened the little note attached to the bouquet.

“*You are God! You bring calm and assurance to our souls. I pray for you. If you disappear from our lives, all will be lost. Be careful. A*.”

He grinned, folded the note and put it in his pocket. He knew he was God. And he knew everything would collapse without him. That’s what he had told the Empress the day before. “If I’m killed, the Prince will die.” The Mother was obviously frightened and ordered police protection outside his house.

He entered the dining room. The samovar was already boiling. On the table, under the bronze chandelier, there were plates with biscuits, cakes, nuts and candy. Fruit jam shone in small glass jugs.

The clock struck loudly five times.

’*Felix will come soon. A pretty boy. Really, no kidding, he’s pretty. A pleasure to look at. He thinks he’s strong. He thinks I don’t know how he resists my influence. And why would he resist? It doesn’t matter, resist or not, everything will be the way the Elder wants*.’ He grinned again. ’*The Elder, ha-ha… I’m only forty-seven! Whatever, to hell with them, let them call me what they want!*’

The ringing telephone interrupted his thoughts. Rasputin frowned and reluctantly picked up the receiver.

“Well, hello to you, too… Drinking tea…. I have guests….My dear, I don’t have time….well, you can come….. no, without him, I have nothing to talk to him about…..no, eleven is no good…. You got the address? I’m on Gorokhovaya, number sixty-four. I moved out of English Prospect but the telephone number is still the same, you see…. Six four six four six…. Good-bye, my bumble bee…”

“Sick of them,” he muttered, irritated, “Tired of their begging. It’s time for Felix to come.”

As soon as he thought it, the door opened and Prince Yusupov entered the room. He was a young man with a high forehead, tranquil eyes and beautiful, as if they were painted, lips.

’*Blue blood*,’ Rasputin thought, wanting to spit.

“Felix!” He opened his arms and walked towards his guest. “I’m glad, so glad! Sit down; sit at the table,” he said with exaggerated cordiality.

“Hello, Grigory Efimovich!” Keeping his back straight as usual, Yusupov sank into a chair. I’m here for the séance, as we discussed,” he explained for some reason.

’*He’s too tense today. Why, I wonder*?’ The Elder penetrated Yusupov with his gaze.

“Listen, Felix, to hell with the tea!” Not waiting for an answer, Rasputin turned to the door.

“Hey, Proshka, bring wine! Hurry!”

The servant came in immediately, and quietly placed two carafes on the table, as if the wine had already been prepared.

Rasputin leaned forward, his head almost on the white tablecloth, and examined his guest through the crystal wine carafe. Alarming red flickers of light flashed on Yusupov’s pale face.

“Look, Felix, it’s just you and I. And this here, between us,” Rasputin looked out from behind the carafe, “a jug of blood,” he said quietly, and hid his face again.

Yusupov listened silently, his face paler than usual.

Rasputin paused, and then peered out again.

“See, Felix, if I look at you, I see you all in blood.  And if you look….“ He did not finish the phrase. “Shall I pour you some of this wine?"

Yusupov shook his head vaguely.

“Well, as you wish.” Rasputin put the carafe aside. “How about some Madera? Madera is gentle, that’s why I like it.”

He poured the amber wine into two glasses, and emptied his in one gulp.

Yusupov didn’t drink. He lifted his glass and looked at it through the light.

“Why aren’t you drinking? Afraid of something?” A grin slipped across Rasputin’s face. “Don’t be afraid. With me, Felichka[[22]](#footnote-22), you don’t be afraid of anything, food or wine. Wine is God-given to strengthen the soul.”

He poured himself more wine and gulped it down with pleasure, smacking his lips.  He reclined in his chair. “Wine and herbs, are from Nature. I draw from them that great strength God gifted me.” He glanced at his guest.

Yusupov sipped from his glass. “Your Madera is great, Grigory Efimovich.  What about the Emperor and the heir – do they also take these herbs?” He put a piece of chocolate in his mouth.

’*Felix is not so simple*.’ Rasputin squinted. ’*You want to play? I’m always ready to play. I’m not so simple either*.’

“Of course they take it. Why not?” he smiled. “Only I instruct them not to tell anyone about it. If any of the doctors, Botkin[[23]](#footnote-23) for example, find out about my methods, that will be the end of the treatment and the boy will only suffer. So, they keep quiet about it. And that’s good.” He eyed Yusupov slyly.

’*Well… why are you silent? Are you scared? Go ahead, ask. I know what you want to ask me. You want to ask me, as if you don’t care, what substances the Father and the Mother take. You’re too cautious, afraid to scare me off. Don’t be afraid, my dear! Look, I stand in front of you as innocent as God’s lamb. What a pleasure it is to be playing this game with you. The other games have already been played, so they’re boring. Well, pretty boy, ask, don’t be afraid*,’ Rasputin thought.

“So, what type of substances do you offer the Emperor and the heir?”  Yusupov finally drank from his glass, rolling it in his fingers.

“*Good, pretty boy, finally you got the nerve. But why are you so anxious?*”

Rasputin scratched his beard.

“What substances, you ask? All kinds. A mixture that brings God’s grace and delight. See, if the heart is at peace, everything seems sweet and joyful. He slid the wine carafe to him and put his hands around it. Although, to tell you the truth, what kind of Tsar is he? He’s like a babe! I’ll tell you, my dear friend, the Tsarina, and you probably know this, draws funny pictures. She likes it.  There must be a reason why she always draws the Tsar as a baby in his mother’s arms.”

Noticing the uneasy expectation in Yusupov’s eyes, he smiled.

“My dear, don’t be upset, everything will work out. You’ll see.”

Yusupov looked at him inquiringly. Rasputin smiled faintly.

’*Go ahead, ask me what will happen. I’ll tell you. And you can be assured it’ll work out. Whatever we deserve, it’s going to happen.*’

“What will happen? How?” Yusupov looked around the table and bit off a biscuit.

“What will happen, you ask?” Rasputin paused. “Enough of this war! Enough! Aren’t the Germans our brothers?” He noticed the surprise on Yusupov’s face and explained, “Even Jesus taught: Love your enemy like your own brother.” Glancing slyly at his guest, Rasputin licked some jam off his spoon and threw it on the table.

’*What are you looking at? You think wine should go with cheese like in France? No, my dear, if you eat sweet after sweet, you’ll have a bitter aftertaste. You never noticed? Try to notice. Notice everything. It’ll do you good. The same goes about people. Beware of sugar sweeties. Otherwise, you’ll be bitter*.’ He wiped his mouth with his palm.

“So, about the war….We’ll end it soon. We’ll announce Alexandra the Tsarina, until the heir is grown up… And *Nikolasha*[[24]](#footnote-24) – we’ll send him to Livadia[[25]](#footnote-25). He’s very tired. Let him rest… take photos…. You know, he likes that. The Tsarina is a smart woman, that’s why the people hate her.”  He stroked his hair, watching with pleasure how Yusupov’s face changed.

’*What are you looking at? Don’t you know, here, they only love fools and the miserable?  I’m neither miserable nor a fool. So, I shouldn’t expect love from people like you. That won’t happen.  And now you’re wondering if the Tsarina knows…Go ahead, ask me, my dove, and I’ll tell you*.’

“And does the Tsarina know what she’s doing?” Yusupov asked quietly, staring at the host.

“She knows.” Rasputin scratched his beard. “And she also knows what she needs to do. She promised to disband the Duma. Those chatterboxes.” He carefully examined Yusupov’s tense face.

’*I think we’ve played enough today. Time for this fool to lie down for his treatment. It’s not his weak mind, it’s his weak body. Healthy minds and weak bodies don’t get along*.” Rasputin stretched lazily.

“Alright, Felichka, enough business. You’re still unwell. Go ahead, finish your wine and go lie down.  I’ll come over…to heal you…“ The Elder poured himself more wine. “Is it, what, your third time here? Go. I’ll heal you.“

Yusupov hastily finished his Madera and walked into Rasputin’s bedroom. He sat down on the narrow bed and looked around. During his previous visits he had been too preoccupied to do that.  The Elder was always next to him and he was in a hazy state then.  The room was small and furnished simply.  A large, ornate chest stood next to the bed.  In the opposite corner of the room, there were icons with a small lamp lit in front of them. Lurid prints with biblical scenes and portraits of the Emperor and the Empress hung on the wall. Yusupov heard steps in the dining room and lay down on the bed.

*’Is it possible that what Rasputin said today is true, and Russia is up for a new upheaval?’* Yusupov closed his eyes, trying to understand what he had heard. He felt an insurmountable apprehension because of such rare good luck, or bad luck: he was fated to touch the absolute Evil, which was pushing the country to her demise and to find out its plans. It was clear to him now that, in order to save Russia, this Evil needed to be destroyed. Today his last doubts disappeared. Yusupov realized that there was no alternative. As a religious man, loyal to the Emperor and to Russia, he was chosen by Fate and entrusted with the mission to fight Rasputin, the Devil’s embodiment. He was absolved of the ancient commandment, “Thou Shall Not Kill”, to do evil for the sake of good and to live with this sin.

*’Rasputin will come now and will do his passes again. And again, it will be necessary to mobilize all my strength to keep my consciousness. The Elder does have the power. He calls it godly, but it’s really from the Devil.’* Yusupov crossed himself.

4

 The foyer of the Army and Navy Hall on Liteiny Prospect was full of people. It was the intermission of the new Meyerhold[[26]](#footnote-26) play and everyone was talking about it.

Irina walked arm in arm with Rakelov and, all of a sudden, stopped.

“Nicky, look, look! Right here, it’s Esenin![[27]](#footnote-27) I told you about him!” She pointed with her eyes to a short young man with blond curly hair standing nearby. He was surrounded by a flock of female fans.

“Iren, my dear, I can’t keep up with the speed of your thoughts! Haven’t you been critiquing Meyerhold with such passion just now?”

“I haven’t critiqued him at all! It’s just that I don’t understand this art. I was brought up with the Alexandrinsky repertoire. By the way, have you seen the “Romantics'' debut?”

“No, unfortunately.”

“Too bad. It was amazing!  The audience insisted to see the director on the stage already after the second act. Merezhkovsky[[28]](#footnote-28) was so happy! Oh, Nicky.” She heard the bell and led him away. “Let’s go, the intermission is over; now the best part starts. I also write poetry sometimes. They say it’s not bad,” she chirped, making her way through the row.

“Will you read it to me one day?” asked Rakelov.

“One day.”

They sat down in their seats.

“I’m sure, Iren, that your poetry is not simply not bad, but it’s actually very good! By the way,” Rakelov leaned towards Irina and pointed to a dark-haired man, who was discussing something with Meyerhold, in the aisle. “Would you like me to introduce you to him?”

“You know Mikhail Kuzmin?”[[29]](#footnote-29) Irina was amazed. “It’s unbelievable! I’m a huge fan of his! His lines come to mind very often, and always just at the right time. For example, do you remember his: ‘Everything that happens is divine’? It’s so true; this is how we should look at everything Fate brings us. He has a beautiful style! What about you, Nicky? What do you like from his poetry? Can you remember at least one of his lines?” She smiled at him. “Come, on, please! Let’s see how much you love poetry!”

Rakelov shook his head with a quick smile.

“Iren, are you testing me? Well, here you go.” Rakelov became serious, rubbing the bridge of his nose, and began to recite softly:

                                    *In the needle-like glare*

*Of tender mirrors –*

*Unearthly quest*

*And the demonic grin…[[30]](#footnote-30)*

 “That is my favorite!” interrupted Irina with delight.

“Have I convinced you then?” asked Rakelov with a satisfied smile.

“You have.” Irina looked at him approvingly. “I give up. Although, honestly, I still don’t understand the full meaning of this verse.”

“I think that the meaning…” Rakelov began to explain.

“My God, Nicky, don’t even think of commenting on this. Poetry can’t be dissected like a frog! Poetry should be perceived not by its taste but by its aftertaste. If the aftertaste is good, it’s good poetry. And the meaning – everyone has his own understanding….and also misunderstanding.”

Rakelov fell silent.

“And I really do want to meet Kuzmin. That’s why I won’t meet him!” Noticing the silent question in his eyes, she explained: I really love his poetry. He’s my idol! What if, God forbid, he won’t meet my expectations! You know Nicky, for women, small things, like a careless word, a condescending look, a simple pimple on the nose, or garlic breath, for example, would be enough to kill all the admiration they have for heroes, something that took years to build.”

“As far as I know,” Rakelov said, “Kuzmin doesn’t eat garlic, and as to…” He didn’t finish the sentence because an ovation broke out and Esenin walked out onto the stage.

Poets came out one after the other. The hall seemed, to Irina, to absorb the sounds of poetry, and she felt herself a part of this being, open to receive the magic.

The evening ended with Akhmatova[[31]](#footnote-31), in a white dress with a Stewart collar, with high black hair and her famous curly bang.

 *No one did I cherish more,*

 *No one tormented me more,
 Not even the one who betrayed me to agony,
            Not even the one who caressed and then forgot me.[[32]](#footnote-32)*

She felt Rakelov gently take her hand, and noticed that he was watching her, as if trying to experience what was happening on stage through her eyes and emotions.

                                                                         \*\*\*

They walked outside into a lively crowd of spectators and strolled leisurely along Liteiny. It was getting dark. The cold air pricked their throats.  They were silent because the music of poetry was still ringing in their ears.  There were less and less people in the streets, and those they met were hurrying to get home, to the warmth of their heaters and fireplaces.

“God, I feel so good!” Irina finally said. “What an amazingly rare feeling for our uneasy times, a sense of calmness and peace of mind!”

“Irina… I’m leaving tomorrow,” said Rakelov.

“Leaving? Where? Why?” she asked in astonishment.

“Irina,” he took her hand, “sometimes circumstances require my absence. There is nothing I can do about it. I have obligations and duty.”

“And what about me?” she asked, confused.

“Iren, my dear, wherever I am, you know that I …. I will come back, and if you say yes, I will go to Sergey Illich and ask for your hand.”

 5

 “Irina Sergeevna, you look pale. Are you tired?” Ivan Ivanovich, an elderly, mild-mannered surgeon sat on a stool and pulled out his pocket watch. “Oh, it's half past seven. The surgery took three hours.”

Irina nodded. Although the emergency surgery took a long time, the wounded man could not be saved. He was a young soldier, almost a boy. The day before, his eyes were filled with pain, and now he was lying on the gurney in the hallway, covered with a sheet. ’*God, how many more will there be? How many boys will be swallowed by the war?’* she thought gloomily.

“Don’t blame yourself, my dear,” said Ivan Ivanovich. “We did all we could. And gut wounds are bad; you know that.”

“It’s hard, Ivan Ivanovich.” Irina began to sort out the medication packs, checking the patients’ charts to see which one went where. “Pain is everywhere… blood, death. When I look at myself in the mirror after my shift, I see right through myself: here are the guts, here is the spleen, and here is the liver. The blood in the veins…and the veins look like they’re about to burst!” She shook her head to chase away the horrible vision.

“Irochka, my dear, you forgot about the heart.” Ivan Ivanovich smiled sadly. Don’t forget the heart. What does the heart tell us, huh?”

“What?” Irina stepped away from the medicine table and put the instrument tray in boiling water for disinfection.

“I’ll smoke, if you don’t mind.” Not waiting for her reply, the surgeon lit a cigarette, took a few puffs and continued, “So, my dear, the heart tells us to live. And to love, to love life in any form, because we only have one life… there won’t be another.” He paused and puffed the smoke out. “And you better remember - you have only one chance to write the book of your life, no drafts. Each page is the final copy. Once you turn it, you can’t rewrite it. You can only reread it in your memories. So, you should find happiness even in the most difficult moments. When there’s nothing to enjoy, just come to the window and say, ‘Hello, Sun!’” He stubbed out his cigarette.  “I’ll go check on the patients.” Ivan Ivanovich left the room.

Irina looked out of the window at the grey scene.

*‘The sun. Where can you find it in this cold city? The New Year is coming soon but the soul feels so sad.’*

In the past, the holiday season would burst into the city, bringing with it the fresh smell of Christmas trees and happiness, sparkling with colorful garlands and smiles.  1917, instead, was crawling into the war-devastated country reluctantly, as if thinking, “Do you really want me to come? Maybe you’d like to live in 1916 for a little bit longer?” Sad.

*’No news from Nicky,’* Irina thought. *’It’s been a month. After he left, the world turned black and white. Ivan Ivanovich is right. I should learn to say hello to the sun, even if it’s hiding behind the clouds, as long as it’s out there. Knowing this, living is easier.’* She stepped away from the window. *’I wonder where Polikarpovna is. The floor is dirty and trash needs to be taken out, the bin is full.’*

Irina came out of the doctors’ room and listened. She walked toward the sound of loud laughter, so unusual for the morning hospital stillness. She opened the door of the recovery room and looked inside. Polikarpovna, leaning on her broom, was standing in the middle, between the beds, her back facing the door.

“…So, boys, you tell me where it hurts and I’ll tell you what it means. And it’s not a joke; it’s serious.” She paused dramatically.  “When I was little, my mom read me a wise book, and I was smart; I remembered it by heart.” She fixed her kerchief. “That book was called *The Trembler*. Come now, quickly, tell me, and I’ll explain while the doctors can’t hear. Where, do you say, it trembles?”

She turned to a redheaded fellow who was wiping off his laughing tears with his bandaged hand.

“Ah, here, the hand.” The old woman nodded. “This is simple; I’ll tell you right away: if it trembles in the left elbow, you’ll have a headache and then a fever, and then you’ll sweat.” She gleamed triumphantly.  “Look, you’re already sweating all over. I’m telling you, it’s not a joke!”

“Polikarpovna!” shouted an old soldier, just recently transferred to the room. “It’s been trembling here since morning.” He placed his hand on his chest. “I can’t take it anymore,” he said with a straight face.

“Why are you laughing?” the old woman asked, looking around at the other patients. “This, my dear,” she turned to the soldier, “if your nipples tremble, you’ll have an important dream! So, close your eyes and wait for the dream.”

The soldiers’ laughter filled the room.

“And me…”

“No, first tell me…”

Polikarpovna noticed Irina standing at the door and hurried up. “No, boys, one more and I have to go. I’m done with you troublemakers. You, where does it tremble?” She looked at the soldier with a bandaged leg. “Ah, this is the meaning: if the left knee trembles,” she looked at Irina, “it means fear and confusion.”

Irina, hiding her smile, went out into the hallway. Polikarpovna picked up her mop and water basket and followed her.

“Polikarpovna!” Irina made a stern face. “Didn’t I ask you to mop the floor in the doctors’ room?”

“Ah, I’m running, I’m running!” The old woman hurried along the hallway, the contents of her basket tinkling as she went.

“She’s probably saying hello to every bird, not just the sun,” Irina smiled.

“What happened? Polikarpovna did something funny again?” Ivan Ivanovich asked when he returned to the doctors’ room.

“She did. Soon she’ll be teaching you how to nurse the wounded. Ask her, for example, how to grow back an amputated finger and you’ll see.”

“Hmm,” the doctor coughed. He opened the door, “Polikarpovna!”

“What?” The lively old woman peeked in the room as if she had been waiting for someone to call her.

“Come in.”

“Well, what?” She stood in the middle of the room, looking first at the doctor and then at Irina.

Irina started meticulously washing her hands.

“Hmm… Polikarpovna, here is the thing,” Ivan Ivanovich anxiously rolled a cigarette in his fingers. “You see… we…how should I say this..,” he had trouble phrasing the question.

“Don’t beat about the bush, I’m not a young girl. What do you need?” Polikarpovna smiled slyly, like a cheeky teenager who enters the classroom wondering whether to smear glue on the teacher’s chair now or later.

“I wanted to ask you, my friend…,” Ivan Ivanovich continued hesitantly while Irina splashed herself with some cold water and covered her face with a towel. “Tell me, Polikarpovna,” Ivan Ivanovich finally framed the question, “Does folk medicine have a method for growing back amputated fingers? That is, a finger that’s been cut off?”

“Why not?” the old woman livened up, ready to help. “Of course it does!   You need this for science, right?” She nodded knowingly. “Listen to this.  You take a frog’s head…” she looked cautiously at the doctor, whose eyes were hiding laughter. “Is this a joke or are you serious? If you’re serious, then write it down.”

Ivan Ivanovich nodded, took a pencil and a piece of paper and sat down at the table.

“You know, I’m busy, I still have to mop the floor,” explained Polikarpovna with an important look. “Are you writing?” she asked sternly, following the doctor’s hand. “So, you take a frog’s head, a bull’s eye,” she glanced at Irina, who was drying her face for a suspiciously long time, “white poppy seed grain, frankincense, camphor. You dry all this and mix it with young goose blood. Are you writing it down?” She looked at the doctor’s hand. “The goose, yes. If you don’t find a goose, don’t worry; you can use a dove. Then, my dear, you have to roll it into small balls.”

Ivan Ivanovich looked up at her with genuine interest.

“And, that’s it!” The old woman finished and proudly leaned on her mop.

“That’s it?” Irina helped the doctor, who lowered his head into his arms and shook with silent laughter. “What’s next? What do you do with this medicine? Chew it? Vaporize it? Dilute it?”

Polikarpovna stopped, clutching the broom handle in embarrassment. “I forgot for some reason. Sorry. Can’t tell you what I don’t know.”

Ivan Ivanovich finally stopped laughing, raised his eyes and looked at the old woman with surprise. She was confused, muttering quietly as she backed up towards the door. “We’re simple people.[[33]](#footnote-33) We mind our own business, just say something and go. We don’t want any trouble.”

She picked up her wastebasket and all of sudden, standing at the door, looked at Ivan Ivanovich and started singing, revealing her toothless mouth, “I’m young, I’m naughty, my heart skips in me, why don’t you kiss me….”

“Go, go, my friend,” said Ivan Ivanovich, wiping the tears off his face. “I’ll kiss you at the end of the shift. I can’t kiss you know, I’m afraid I won’t be able to control myself!”

Polikarpovna stopped briefly.

“Huh, look at him. You promised, don’t forget! You men are all promises!” She walked out of the room proudly carrying her basket.

Suddenly, there was a loud racket in the hallway. Irina, worried, dashed outside. The old woman was slowly rising from the floor, shaking off and groaning, putting the waste paper back into the basket.

“Are you hurt, Polikarpovna?” Irina ran up to her.

“I’m fine, my dear,” she smiled, rubbing her side.  “It’s slippery. I mopped the floor and forgot about it. Nothing serious, just said hello to the floor!”

Irina shook her head and returned to the doctors’ room.

“That’s some grandma! How can she be so positive?”

 “She’s not that old. She’s not even fifty. What else can she do?” He looked sad. “Her husband was killed in action six months ago, then her older son. A month ago, her youngest son went missing on the frontline. He’s just a boy. In Russia, we cry when we’re happy and we laugh when we’re desperate.” Walking up to the door, he paused and added, “This is why she meets the new arrivals of the wounded every day. She still has hope. Yes.”

In a few hours, after admitting several carriages of wounded soldiers from the medical train, as well as two groups that arrived in cars belonging to the Imperial Automobile Club, Irina left the hospital, hailed a cab, got inside, and told the driver, “Nevsky, The Troyanovsky Mansion.” She closed her eyes and thought how badly she wanted to sleep.

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On the hospital stairs, at the feet of the stone lion, her head between her hands, swaying from side to side, sat Polikarpovna, a lonely, fifty-year-old, grey-haired woman.

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Irina walked into the foyer of the Troyanovsky Mansion with only one wish: to go to bed. Tonight there would surely be company at the house and she needed to get some sleep. A yawning lackey opened the door. His uniform had been put on in haste. He greeted her loyally but was still half asleep.

The house was quiet. Irina went up to the second floor and walked through the dining room, past the original Russian paintings on the walls. Piotr Petrovich would buy them out of his sense of patriotism. She walked through the tinted-windowed gallery to the “girls’ quarter”, the new wing Piotr Petrovich had added for his grown-up daughters. Sophie’s door was half opened. She heard two voices – Lenochka’s was excited; Sophie’s was low. Lenochka pulled Irina inside the room.

“Iren, come, come! Sophie has just come back, listen to her! Just promise to keep it secret! Swear it!”

Irina nodded confusingly. Sophie, in an opulent nightgown, was lying on the velvet pillows of a huge Middle Eastern divan. She had a blissful look.

“Come, Iren, would you like some wine?” she waved towards the table next to the divan.

Lenochka crossed her legs and sat down next to her sister. Irina lowered herself into an armchair in front of the divan and looked at Sophie with curiosity. Sophie’s unusual glow of delight pervaded the room.

“Sophie, my dear, what happened next? Go on!” Lenochka asked impatiently. “Iren promised not to tell anyone! Right, Iren?”

“I won’t tell anyone if I’m not allowed to,” Irina said.

“My dear, please forget these silly rules,” Sophie frowned. “After what’s happened, I don’t care anymore!” She stretched out her whole body with an ecstatic smile. “Iren, please pass me a cigarette from that box. Be careful; don’t drop it. These cigarettes are very special and they’re very expensive.”  She lit a match. Acrid, musky smelling smoke reluctantly rose to the ceiling.

“Tell me, Iren, have you ever slept with a man?” Sophie inhaled and looked at Irina. “Did you ever have sex?” she explained, noticing Iren’s confused look. “Lena already has an admirer, so she understands.” She inhaled again, “What I mean is that if you haven't, you shouldn’t listen; you won’t understand anything. It’s going to be like hearing a foreign language. You can guess what it means from the tone, the body language…” She suddenly laughed and stopped abruptly. “So, did you?”

Irina nodded unconvincingly. Sophie looked at her skeptically and gave her an ironic smile.

“Well, good, then I’ll continue.” Sophie fell back on the pillows again. “Where did I stop? Ah, yes. So, girls, I can’t say that I’m completely promiscuous, but sin does live in my body. Anyway, I wasn’t born yesterday, so I know what I’m talking about.” She shook off the ash into the ashtray. “You can’t compare anyone to him. Not a single one! Trust me! He’s completely unique. Not to mention that he’s so powerful…” She blew the smoke into Irina’s face, smiling, “…that you just want to give yourself to him.”

Irina’s throat itched and she could hardly refrain from coughing.

“He’s very powerful!” Sophie said, “very...” Her breathing accelerated and her eyes darkened. “When he entered me… his body became tense from head to toes…” She spoke incoherently. “You understand, he was like one big…” She waved her hand in the air, looking for the right word but couldn’t find it.

Irina noticed that Lenochka was agape, listening carefully, almost breathlessly.

“And all this was on the carpet,” Sophie continued, “in front of the huge mirror standing on the floor! I even felt like there was another couple joining us, repeating our movements… it doubled the intensity.”

Irina saw Sophie’s eyes becoming very dark, like two wells, terrifying in their bottomlessness.  She felt dizzy, her eyes itched, her thoughts scattered. She unbuttoned the top on her dress. Sophie looked at her patronizingly and put out her cigarette.

“He filled me with his power, with his extraordinary abilities, with all his might. And all this,” she said with a lusty smile, as she passed her fingers over her neck, cheek and hair,  “took two hours. He’d close his eyes, breathe and do it again, with all his passion. He was unbelievable! If you only knew what kind of feelings he gives you!”

Irina felt really light-headed. She needed air.  She mumbled an apology, ran to the window in the gallery and opened it. The cold air refreshed her and cleared her head.  *’Something’s wrong with those cigarettes, like it’s some herb instead of the tobacco,’* she thought, and returned to the room.

Sophie stood in front of her sister with a glass of wine. Lenochka looked at her with admiration.

“Oh, it’s you… come in.”

Irina thought that she saw mockery in Sophie's eyes.

“Iren, where did you go? You missed the most important thing! Sophie said something else! You won’t believe it! Sophie, please repeat it! Please!” Lenochka begged her sister.

“Forget it, Lena,” Sophie grimaced. “I can’t repeat everything twice! I think I’ll go take a bath.” She raised her arms, arched her back and turned around at the door. “Air the room, don’t forget. Father will smell it and start lecturing me again.”

Lenochka opened the window and sat down with Irina on the divan.

“Can you imagine!” she whispered loudly, leaning to Irina’s ear. “Do you know what’s inside her, there…” she lowered her eyes, looking at Irina’s stomach. “There, inside…”

“A child?” Irina asked with doubt, trying to understand if this can happen so fast.

“What child, what are you talking about? She’s got a ball there!”

“What ball?”

“Oh my God, a regular ball! Well, not so regular. It’s a stone ball. I think it’s called obsidian. Now she’s going to carry that ball all the time. Not all the time, of course - she can take it out if she wants. But he said it’s good to keep it there for a long time to strengthen the female muscles. Then the experience is much better!” exclaimed Lenochka and closed her eyes.

“Nonsense!” said Irina. “How do you know?”

“It’s not nonsense,” Lenochka said, disgruntled. “He said so!”

“Who’s he?”

“What? Didn’t you understand? Rasputin! Sophie slept with Rasputin himself! Can you imagine it? Now, she’s like the Tsarina.”

Irina frowned. “Why like the Tsarina?”

“As if you don’t know,” Lenochka chuckled, looking at her naïve friend with surprise.

“That’s a lie!” Irina said sternly.

“Why is it a lie? Everybody knows that. Even the wounded soldiers in our hospital say that they heard this at the front. They banned the cinema scene where the Emperor wears the *Georgy* Cross. You know why? Every time they show it, someone in the audience says, ‘The Tsar is with Georgy and the Tsarina is with Grigory,’” Lenochka giggled.

“Lena!” Irina rose from the divan. “How can you? Is nothing sacred to you? How can you all gossip about these dirty rumors and trample the most sacred thing Russia has into dirt? I can’t stand when the Emperor and the Empress are humiliated! And how can you do this now, when enemies are all around, during the worst war Russia has ever fought? Shame on you, really! Don’t you see how shameful and unbefitting this is?”

Lenochka jumped up from the couch, aggravated.

“You shouldn’t be angry, Iren,” she said resentfully. “You don’t believe it but the whole city does. Because of your beloved Emperor, all of Russia’s foundations are crumbling!  Don’t you see it? Don’t you understand it? Russia is dying because of one husband’s weakness for his wife. *That* is terrible! I despise him for it, you hear me? I despise him!”

*‘Yes, the Tsar’s personality is weak,’* Irina thought. *‘But what weakness is there in his love for the Tsarina and his anxiety for the heir. This is a sacrificial weakness of a husband and father, and therefore it’s forgivable. It’s even touching. Why don’t they understand it?’*

“You know, Lena,” she looked at her friend with irritation. “There can’t be winners in our argument, and I don’t want to lose you. So I forgive your annoyance and I should probably go home.”

Lenochka didn’t answer. Half an hour later, the cab took off and Irina fell back on the hard seat.

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 *‘It’s so good nobody is home,’* Irina thought, unpacking her suitcase. Her father was in Moscow on business. The last thing she wanted now was to answer his questions. She opened Nicky’s gift, a flask of *Fleur d’Orange*, soaked the tips of her fingers and dabbed some behind her ears. A tender spring aroma spread across the room. *‘God, how much I miss him.’*

She changed, sat down in front of the dressing table, and combed her hair. The reflection in the mirror looked back pensively. Irina put down the brush and peered into her own eyes. She had always felt that two separate beings lived in her. As one acted, the other observed, only to torment her during the night with questions that could not be answered. *‘Luckily, it’s not night now.’* She tried to cheer herself up, but the reflection looked back with judgment, and so the question was posed as expected:

“*If all that is filth, why did you listen to Sophie*?

“Why are you asking? It’s not night yet!” Irina replied.

“*What’s the difference? You’re alone now. Why wait*?”

 “I admit, I was curious.” Irina was embarrassed.

“*But if you listened, even out of curiosity, why are you better than Sophie and Lena? Doesn’t the sin attract you? You also like to peek through the keyhole*.”

“No, don’t say that. I don’t even know what sin is yet.”

“*But you do want to know, don’t you*?” the reflection said sarcastically.

“No, I want to know what love is!”

“*Love and sin walk hand in hand*.”

“Then love is sinful?”

“*Life is sinful… if you consider it as such*...”

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 Sleep didn’t come. She lay in bed restlessly as the swarm of chaotic thoughts troubled her overexcited brain. Irina didn’t want to think about the previous day. She felt as if she’d been dipped into mud, head to toe.

*‘But is it Lenochka’s fault?’* she thought. *‘The filth is all around us. We’ll all drown in it. There is no more honor, decency and conscience. The idols everyone worshipped yesterday are now being humiliated. People are brave to degrade them now but yesterday they were afraid to even look at them. Looks like the circle vicieux is coming – the time of all-permissiveness, promiscuity, vulgarity and lies. Like a giant vortex it whirls faster and faster, sucking in everything good, innocent and sacred. A satanic delirium! Maybe it’s the end of the world, and it’s begun in Russia? Then it would make sense why Rasputin is here of all places. He can’t be anywhere else but here. And one shouldn’t be surprised that he attracts the like. Like attracts like.’* She turned over to the other side and covered her head with a blanket.

The doorbell rang, forcing her to lift her head from the pillow. *’Goodness, what time is it?’* Irina sat up in bed. *’Maybe Father has returned from Moscow? That would be great.’* She threw the blanket over her nighty and went to the door barefooted.

“Papa, is that you?”

“Iren, my dear, thank God!” It was Rakelov’s voice.

 She froze, and then unlocked the door, holding the falling blanket with one hand.

“Nicky!” Still in disbelief, she opened the door, forgetting that she was undressed and her hair was undone.

“Iren, please forgive me!”

Rakelov, hat in hand, was standing at the door. Snowflakes were melting on his face, his beard and on the fur collar of his coat, making him look perplexed and charming.

“Iren... I called the Troyanovskys. Lena told me you were gone. I called you, but no one answered the phone, so I decided to drop all decorum and come over.”

Irina quietly stepped back, letting Rakelov in. He continued apologizing and talked about the blizzard outside, saying that he was worried because Sergey Illich was away, and that he missed her. Finally, he stepped inside. She listened to his excited words, but did not comprehend their meaning; she was simply listening to the sound of his voice, clasping her shoulders with her hands, looking at his face.

“It’s cold,” she finally said faintly.

“I came straight from the train station…to you... I worried a lot… these times are so…” Rakelov suddenly stopped in mid-phrase.

“It’s cold,” she repeated louder.

Rakelov dropped his coat on the floor, embraced her tightly and kissed her on the lips. “Your lips are so…” His eyes shone with delight.

“Yes?”

“So tender,” he exhaled. “And the air – do you feel the air today?”

Irina caressed him with her eyes.

“It’s thick,” Rakelov said, stroking her hair. “It is so thick that even thoughts have a hard time getting through it, let alone movements. Everything requires effort.” His voice trembled slightly. “And effort is the result of our doubts. If you do something and feel some inner resistance, it means God doesn’t want you to do that; the Devil rushes you but the soul warns you.”

“Does your soul warn you?” whispered Irina, staring at him.

“Maybe it does. But lately I’ve become blind and deaf.”

She stood on her tiptoes, kissing him, and whispered: “Nicky, my dear, let’s split this night in half. You take the light and I’ll take the darkness.”

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 The stars, suspended from the sky on invisible, heavenly cords, shook with curiosity as they peered into Irina’s bedroom. The round, sleepy moon smiled with its pearlescent face. At times, the moon also allowed itself to peek into windows, but only where it was expected, where words of love became the stream of passion, rising to heaven from the sinful earth with the prayer of forgiveness. Forgiveness for mad passion and for what it does to people.

  6

The car approached the mansion on Moika. Rasputin followed Yusupov to the back entrance.

“Felichka, looks like you’ve got guests.” Rasputin frowned, hearing the sound of jubilant voices and laughter coming from upstairs.

“I’m sorry, Grigory Efimovich, they’re my wife’s guests. They’ll be leaving soon. Please, come to the smaller dining room for now, he pointed to the staircase leading to the floor below.

Rasputin took off his fur coat, straightened out his cornflower-embroidered shirt tied with a thick crimson cord, and reluctantly walked downstairs. He stopped at the door and looked inside the room which was divided in two by an arch. Rasputin glanced across the carpets, the red Chinese porcelain vases and the massive oak furniture. He went up to the inlaid secretary with its bronze columns and numerous drawers, and began opening and closing them, with childish curiosity, looking inside each one.

“An interesting chest!” he muttered, playing with the drawers. Then he noticed a crucifix made of rock crystal and engraved silver, standing on top of the secretary. He touched it gently, afraid to damage something fragile.

“This is an Italian work,” explained Yusupov, coming up behind him. Yusupov tried to look calm, although he was a bit more jittery than usual.  Just before meeting Rasputin, he had spent two hours praying in the Kazan Cathedral, and he felt no spiritual anguish. He felt he was the executor of a mission entrusted to him from above.

“Nice.” Rasputin looked at the crucifix, but continued opening and closing drawers.  He walked over to a table laden with a steaming samovar and a large plate of biscuits and other sweets.

“Are we going to drink tea?” he looked at the host.

“Please make yourself comfortable, Grigory Efimovich,” Yusupov warmly addressed his guest, pointing to an antique chair. The luxurious objects in the room, each one different from the other, seemed hastily assembled in the same space.

“Well, I’ll sit if you want.” Rasputin sat down on the chair and stared at his host. Yusupov resisted speaking and did not look away.

‘*Look how his eyes shine*,’ Rasputin thought and lightened up. ’*I see you haven’t had enough playing your games. Well, then, I’ll mess with you a little, my dear*.”

“By the way, Protopopov[[34]](#footnote-34) came over today,” he said matter-of-factly. “Asked me not to leave my house for a couple of days. And do you know why, my friend?” He looked at the plate of cakes.

“Why?” Yusupov sat down on a chair in front of the Elder.

‘*Ah, Felix, Felix*,’ thought Rasputin, hiding a smile, ‘as *if you don’t know why*.’ He leaned towards the plate, studying the cakes.

“They’ll kill you, he says.” He looked straight at Yusupov.

“So, what did you tell him?” Yusupov moved the plate closer to Rasputin. “Please, Grigory Efimovich, have some cake!”

“You see…” Rasputin finally picked a pastry and brought it to his mouth. “I came to you secretly. No one saw me. I’m not afraid.” He looked at the Prince mockingly and ate the pastry, noticing that Yusupov had tensed up, as if expecting something to happen.

‘*Felichka is waiting for something*,’ he told himself. ‘*Did he put something in the cake?  It’s all good. I’ll tell him something he’ll remember all his life*.’

He took another pastry from the plate and, looking tenderly at Yusupov, pronounced slowly, as if engraving the words in his brain.

“I cannot be killed, Felichka.”

Yusupov listened to him calmly.

“Now pour me some wine. I’m thirsty.” Slowly, savoring the crumbs, he licked his fingers as the Prince watched.

Yusupov readily poured the wine into Rasputin’s glass, as if trying to speed things up. Doctor Lazorvert had laced the bottom of the glass with poison right before Rasputin came.

Rasputin emptied the glass and wiped his mouth with his hand.

“Good wine!” he approved.

“I’m glad you like it,” Yusupov filled the glass again. “This, Grigory Efimovich, is our house wine. We make it in Crimea. We have cellars full of it. If you like it, I’ll send you some!”

“That’s good.” Rasputin picked up another pastry, but didn’t eat it. He studied it carefully. “My enemies are trying to kill me.” He looked at the Prince, as if seeking empathy. “But here is the thing – I’m what holds everything together.”

He sounded tired and hopeless, like a man who’d like to abandon his hard work but has to carry on because of a sense of responsibility and the heavy burden he’s doomed to carry.

“If I’m removed, everything falls, will fall with me. And you…” He stared at Yusupov. “…you’ll fall. Just know that. And all this slandering against me, and all the schemes… Well, my friend, Christ was also persecuted like this. He also accepted suffering for the truth. Humiliation is joy for the soul, you understand?”

Yusupov listened quietly, waiting.

“And I told the Tsarina the same thing. As long as I’m with you, don’t worry about yourself and the monarchy. Oh, Mother is a smart woman, she understands who I am for her,” he said in a penetrating tone.

“And what does the Tsarina understand?” Yusupov bit into a cookie.

“She understands, my dear man,” Rasputin smiled, “that the House of Romanov is cursed. You know how they killed a babe three hundred years ago? And through his little body, pinned to the gate, they came to power. Ah, you’ve got good cakes, Felichka. I’ll have more.” He reached towards the plate.

“Well, Grigory Efimovich, that was like a sacrifice. Take Carthage, for example.” Yusupov’s eyes followed the cake disappearing into Rasputin’s mouth.

“Why are you quiet? Cat’s got your tongue?” Rasputin drank some more wine.

Yusupov smiled, embarrassed, and pulled his ear nervously, as if trying to escape from his thoughts.

“In Carthage, Grigory Efimovich, they sacrificed newborn babies. They even had special places for that.”

“And what did they pray for, when they did?” Rasputin squinted and stroked his beard.

“They prayed that God would accept their sacrifice and give them power. And if they sacrificed more than forty of their children, I don’t remember the exact number, they could approach their god, Baal, and become saints.” Yusupov quaffed his wine as if he had suddenly become thirsty.

“Their own children?”

“Their own. They had many wives and concubines.”

“So, what happened to this Carthage?” Rasputin asked in such a way that it was unclear whether he really didn’t know or was only pretending.  “Remind me, Felichka, I forgot.” He looked at Yusupov and suddenly lamented, reaching for another cake, “Oh, Felichka, I’m so old, so weak, so worthless, I don’t understand anything, don’t feel anything. I’m just a fool.”

“Carthage was destroyed, razed to the ground.” Yusupov looked mournfully at his guest.

“That’s right.” Rasputin touched his stomach, leaving cream stains on his shirt. “When you bring gifts to God, don’t ask for anything. And they asked for power and holiness. Those were murders, not sacrifices. That’s why the blood of the innocent children poured death on their heads. The same is with the Romanov family. There is a curse hanging over them for three hundred years and it’s about to pour blood on their heads.  You see, Felichka, I’m like a lightning rod that protects a house from lighting during the storm. I’m trying to deflect the lightning from the royal house and save the monarchy. You yourself know, I’m not your average man. Have you heard what they call me? The Holy Demon.”

Yusupov shook his head ambiguously.

“I see that you have. But you still don’t believe it.” Rasputin sipped more wine. “You still doubt it?”

“Grigory Efimovich, please! Irina’s been asking me to introduce her to you. She says that you are an interesting person!”

“Really?” At the mention of the gorgeous Irina, a carnivorous gloss appeared in Rasputin’s eyes. “Will it be today?” He looked doubtful, then reclined on the back of the chair and closed his eyes. “I feel good here at your place, Felichka, very relaxed. Like I was born again.”

“To be born again, one needs to die first,” Yusupov said.

“Die first to be born again, you say?” Rasputin suddenly opened his eyes and looked at the Prince. “Well said,” he approved. ”That’s right. I’ll remember it.” He leaned forward. “Pour me some Madera, Felix. You know, I like it sweet.” He handed him the glass. “Pour!”

“I’ll use a different glass.” Yusupov took a clean glass that was also laced with poison. “Let’s not mix wines. It’s not good for the bouquet.” He poured carefully, trying to steady the tremor in his hand. Then he watched Rasputin drink the wine.

“It’s stuffy in here, Felichka.” The guest opened his shirt collar. “No fresh air.” He swiped his forehead with his sleeve.

Yusupov nodded in agreement, took out a handkerchief from his pocket and tapped the treacherous perspiration on his forehead.

“So, Grigory Efimovich, I heard our military strength is increasing as never before!” he said to break the pause. “We’ve made an unbelievable amount of artillery shells…. The preparation for the big offensive in February or March is underway!”

“Ah….” Rasputin waved his hand in dismissal. “This war is senseless. Blood is being spilled for no reason. Think for yourself, my dear, that’s the most important thing sometimes… Remember when I lay wounded in Tyumen? When that noseless bitch … stabbed me?[[35]](#footnote-35) That scum Guseva... let her drop dead! She started this whole thing. Do you remember the trouble with the Bulgarians? The Tsar wanted to protect them, but I told him, ‘No, no, don’t get involved in this mess… what do you care about those Bulgarians?’[[36]](#footnote-36) He listened to me then, and how glad he was, later, that he did! And he’d listen again and wouldn’t go to war if not for that noseless bitch! I sent the Tsar telegrams when I was sick, so many times, but it’s useless; paper is good only for wiping. The word is alive! Only the word matters! Yes...” He scratched his beard. “This war’s brought a lot of suffering and will bring much more. This war is a sin, you understand? Murder is always a sin, an unforgivable sin. Remember this, my dove: you can do anything, but you cannot kill!”

Rasputin looked, with his burning gaze, at the Prince. Yusupov, unable to bear it, fidgeted in his chair, then got up abruptly, walked around the chair and stood straight.

’*Ha, Felichka jumped like somebody stuck hot coals in his pants*.’ Rasputin looked at him knowingly and sardonically, as if inviting the question about when and how is it permissible to sin.

“So, Grigory Efimovich, how can one do that? To sin, I mean,” Yusupov asked.

Rasputin laughed hoarsely: “Do you remember, Felichka, how Christ was talking to the whores and brought them around with him?  ‘Who amongst us is without sin?’ he asked. Remember? And what did he tell the thief? ‘Today you will be in Paradise.’ How do you understand that? Who’s closer to God - the one who sins or the one who’s sitting on the fence and waiting his whole life, not choosing between God and Satan? I’ll tell you, my dear, if you won’t sin, you won’t repent. But you also won’t know joy… and you won’t know love. You think you can find the truth hiding in the corner? No, there you’ll only find cockroaches. The truth is in sin!” he said firmly. “And you will find Christ in sin. You’ll cry, you’ll repent, and you will find him. Understand?” He preached graciously. “Everything is permitted, Felichka. But not murder. Got it, my dear?”

Yusupov didn’t answer, but suddenly hastened out of the room. “I’ll go check if the guests are leaving, Grigory Efimovich.”

“Go, go, my dear,” Rasputin followed him with a heavy look and reclined in the chair.

’*What an interesting thing it is to watch people*,’ he thought. ’*They fuss and flounder in their vanity. They think they’ve got me in a mousetrap. Only I’m not some poor mouse. I am my own judge. I judge myself; I sentence myself; I carry out the sentence. So, my dear, if you wish, well, we’ll play this game to the end. But I will have the last word. And I will not be forgotten. Not in ten years, not in a hundred. I will make sure of that… when I return*.’ He laughed hoarsely and filled his glass with the sweet Madera.

  7

A white tablecloth, the special-occasion silverware, crystal champagne flutes, elegant candelabra, and the pine aroma from the Christmas tree in the corner, as in everyone’s early childhood, evoked the expectation of a miracle. The hand on the mantel clock was approaching eleven.

Sergey Illich sat at the head of the table. He was cutting meat, quietly watching his beautiful daughter in her dark green dress, and their young guest sitting across from her. Nikolai Sergeevich Rakelov was a well-mannered man with a calm and friendly face. He spoke softly and expressed himself crisply. To Sergey Illich’s delight, Rakelov was also a Moscow University alumnus and an attorney.

Irina was very excited. Her eyes radiated with happiness.  Nikolai Sergeevich, on the contrary, was very reserved, focused, like a man who is about to do something very important. Ambiguous expressions passed over his face without revealing his inner feelings.

“This is how a real lawyer should be,” remarked Sergey Illich with satisfaction. “Emotions are not good in our profession.”

The guest’s face seemed familiar to him, but he could not remember where he had met him, and it would not be polite to ask now. Rakelov behaved as if he knew Sergey Illich well. Suddenly, the young man fell back on his chair. Irina blushed and looked at her father to see if he had noticed anything. Sergey Illich bowed his head, hiding his smile and thinking, *‘Ah, youth! They probably think they invented this game of footsy. Well, this fellow sure is quick even though he looks timid!’* He glanced at Rakelov.

“So, Nikolai Sergeevich, you handled your last case really well.” Sergey Illich finished his meat and put down the knife and fork parallel to each other. “The defendant was an unbelievably terrible human being. Not everyone would have defended him!” He caught his daughter’s reproachful look and added: “It was a very complex matter!”

“Yes, everything worked out well, thank God!” Rakelov wiped his lips with a starched napkin.

“My friend, never depend on God’s providence in our business! Although, I must say, here you’re not alone. In English courts, as in ours, judges always mention God. As in ‘May God have mercy on your soul.’

Rakelov nodded.

“But think about it,” continued Sergey Illich, “what a paradox! The judge, a man who calls himself Christian, addresses another man and says, ‘In punishment, we will hang you and let you hang until you die. May merciful God accept your soul!’ This is incomprehensible! Justice is not of God but of men. We conduct justice in our name and not in the name of apostolic teaching. Although judicial violence is necessary to maintain society, my dear Nikolai Sergeevich, it’s still violence and a violation of the biblical commandment of ‘Judge Not.’

“Well, Papa*,”* Irina joined the conversation, “according to you, Rasputin’s murder wasn’t a godly deed.  Remember the public reaction both here and in Moscow when they announced his death in the theaters? Audiences rose as one and demanded a national anthem! We saw it, right, Nicky? In Alexandrinka, the actors and the audience were standing and singing ‘God Save the Tsar’ and cried with happiness. And they cried! I also cried!”

“By the way,” Sergey Illich lowered his voice, “I was at Rodzianko’s[[37]](#footnote-37) when Prince Yusupov visited them. He’s their nephew. He and his wife hugged Yusupov right in front of me. They were congratulating each other: ‘It is God’s will that our common mission is finally completed and the Emperor’s eyes have seen the truth!’”

Sergey Illich pointed his index finger at the ceiling and added, “I’m sure Russians will now unite to save our country. Everybody is talking about our army’s upcoming offensive. I think it will start soon!”

Irina removed a plate from the table. “Glasha, where are you?” she called towards the door.

The maid quickly walked in and began to clean the table.

“Yes,” Rakelov smiled, “this is the right time to attack! This reminds me of the story about General Foch.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

“Remind me, please,” said Sergey Illich.

“In 1914, as you remember, the French were in a bad position.  Foch telegrammed General Joffre: ‘My center is retreating. My right flank is retreating. This is an excellent position.  I will attack.’

            Sergey Illich laughed, looking at Rakelov approvingly. He liked him more and more.

“And so?” Irina fastidiously watched Glasha arrange the tea set on the table.

“And so?” Rakelov looked at her. “That attack saved Paris.”

“And so what is the conclusion from all this? I didn’t understand.”

“The conclusion is that even when all seems lost, one should be able to say, ‘This is an excellent time for an attack!’ This applies to everyday life and also to our present situation in Russia. Now it’s important that there is a man who will repeat General Foch’s words and will lead our soldiers forward. Then we have nothing to be afraid of!” Rakelov smiled.

Sergey Illich finally remembered. Of course! He had seen Nikolai Sergeevich with Kerensky! He’d seen him several times, but the young man always stood in the shadows. ‘*This means he's also modest. Commendable!’*

“And do you think, Nicky…Nikolai Sergeevich, the Tsar is not such a man?” inquired Irina.

*‘Oh, he’s all ready ….this Nicky fellow is indeed quick!’* thought Sergey Illich, wanting to light a cigarette.

“You need to be careful with my daughter, Nikolai Sergeevich. She’s a big believer in the authoritarian government, and to her the monarchy is sacred! I sometimes think she’s in love with the Emperor! Right, Iren? Tell your father the truth!” He burst out laughing.

“Papa!” Irina blushed. “Seriously, I’m tired of hearing how everyone feels bad for Russia and blames the Emperor. Why should we feel bad for Russia? War… yes, war! But look how it shook up the nation! Look at the emotions it stirred in people’s souls! Remember, even Pushkin wrote that the Tsar revived Russia with war. So now, too, Russia is revived by this war! Don’t demean her with endless pity and distrust for the Tsar!”

“Papa! Nikolai Sergeevich, it’s ten to twelve. We’ll miss the New Year!”

“Yes, indeed.” Rakelov rose slowly, as if collecting his thoughts, straightened out his jacket and walked around the table to stand next to Irina. “Sergey Illich…” He placed his hands on the back of her chair.

Sergey Illich saw his daughter’s face suddenly become pale, and he understood everything.

“Sergey Illich! I have taken upon myself to tell you…” He inhaled deeply and said, in one exhalation: “I love your daughter and I ask you for her hand. Please don’t deny it to me. I can’t live without Irina.” Rakelov lowered his head.

“What is it….”  Sergey Illich, always reserved and balanced, jumped up from his chair and ran around the room, waving his arms. “Glasha, Glasha!” he called through the opened door. “What is it…. How is it….Bring champagne! Quick!”

Rakelov took Irina’s hand.

“Children….” Sergey Illich almost knocked Glasha down as she walked into the dining room carrying a tray with a bottle of champagne and an ice bucket. “What did you bring?” Sergey Illich clasped his hands, “Bring the icon from my study, quickly!”

Glasha, who had never seen him in such a state, ran out and returned a minute later with an old silver icon. Sergey Illich made the sign of the cross and took the icon. Irina and Rakelov kneeled and held out their hands.

“I bless you, my children.” Sergey Illich lost his breath. “Live in peace, love and harmony. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen.”

He crossed them and waited for them to kiss the icon. Then he burst out crying, tears rolling down his face. He took out his handkerchief and quickly turned away. He remembered, as if it were only yesterday, when he and Nastya were blessed with this same icon. He remembered how he had placed his hand on the belly of his beautiful wife and felt the beating heart of a new life he created… how little Irochka made her first steps… how happy the three of them were… And now he would be cut off from everything, he would be alone and no one would need him. No one…

“What a pity your mother couldn’t live to see this day,” he said bitterly, putting away the handkerchief.

Glasha, wiping her tears, brought the icon back to the study. Rakelov helped Irina rise from her knees. Her cheeks were burning.

“Irina, here, allow me…” Rakelov took a small diamond ring from a box, and put it on her finger. “Good, it fits!” he said cheerfully, kissing her hand. “We’ll announce our engagement tomorrow.”

“My children, my children…” Sergey Illich hugged them clumsily. Tears were still choking him. The chiming of the mantel clock and the maid’s joyful shouting brought him out of the daze.

“Sergey Illich! Irina Sergeevna! It’s the New Year and you didn’t even pour the champagne! Here, I’ve opened the doors, to let happiness in!”[[39]](#footnote-39) Glasha looked in the room with a smile.

“Yes, yes, of course!” Sergey Illich began to pour the champagne into the glasses. “Open the windows! Come in, 1917!”

“Come in, happiness,” said Rakelov, kissing Irina.

Happiness hesitantly crossed the doorstep.

                                                                       \*\*\*

Irina lay in bed, looking at the weird shadows on the ceiling. *‘What a wonderful night!’* she thought. *‘The sleep didn’t come.’*

Nicky was sleeping in an adjacent room, partitioned by a wall. Sergey Illich had offered him to stay there for the night so that he would not have to go home alone. The streets had become dangerous. Something strange had happened. People became afraid of people.

A recent chat with Chaliapin came to her mind. Feodor Ivanovich had said that talent was needed not only for the theater stage but also for living life! *So true! The role you play in life is much more complicated than any imaginable theatrical role. How often people, just like bad actors, unwittingly say false words in false voices; they make false gestures – living false lives! This falsehood is the source of all misfortune.*

She sighed and pulled up her blanket. And the Tsar? She always defended him from judgment. As Chaliapin had said, “the Tsar is a role of Shakespearean caliber.  You need to know how to play the Tsar! People won’t forgive falsehood. If you don’t understand your role, if you can't play it, if you failed it and got booed, just leave! The Emperor’s stage is his empire and his theater is burning.

It was getting hot. Probably the blanket was too warm. Irina threw it off. Now it was too cold.

*’Enough of this. The most important thing is that Nicky is here.’*

She remembered herself as a heart-broken, tearful fifteen-year-old girl, having experienced the bitterness of love for the first time. ”Mama, I’ll never love again! I hate love! I’m afraid of it!“

Mother was smiling and stroking her hair tenderly. ”You silly… Don’t be afraid of love, your own or someone else’s. Love can be unexpected, and that doesn’t mean it can’t be yours.  Did you need the touch of its light wings? You can only know that after it leaves you. But your soul may also leave you at that moment, and you won’t even realize that you’re not alive anymore. Love will tinkle like a gentle bell somewhere high in the sky.”

“Don’t be afraid of love, your own or someone else’s. Although… love can’t be someone else’s…,” Irina whispered, and dived under the pillow as if hiding from thoughts. But the thoughts strengthened, now that no one would hear them. *’He’s here, in the next room….’*

She sat on the bed and threw the pillow on the floor. She painfully pinched her arm. Then she rose, walked to the door and listened. It was quiet. She slipped through the hallway and touched the handle of the study’s unlocked door. The creak of the door grated on her ears. Stepping in without a sound, she walked over to the sofa in the corner. The sofa was a good old friend. How many times she had sat on it, reading romantic novels she found in her father’s law library, seeking answers to her questions! She had grown up, and the sofa was getting older, but it didn’t lose its soft pleasantness and gentleness. Now she saw Nicky sleeping on it and it made her happy.

A cold draft came from the open window.  Moonlight flooded the sky, casting a glare on the curtains' veil.

“Nicky, are you sleeping?”

“No, my love, I was waiting for you.”

His soft lips touched her face, her neck. Surrendering to his caresses, she marveled at how bold and demanding his lips were, and that, surprisingly, she did not want to think about anything else.

9

The *Kontant* Restaurant was not busy. The unoccupied waiters were quietly chatting near the kitchen door, ready to serve customers at any moment. A grey-haired man with a round beard and deep, tenacious eyes slowly walked into the richly decorated, golden hall.

 “Please, your Grace, here, in this room!” The *maître d’,* bowing deferentially, drew the curtains, revealing an important guest. “Mister Guchkov is waiting for you.”

The War Minister Guchkov sat in an armchair, his back to the door, and he didn’t notice the man. He was stroking a large, red cat.

“Aleksander Ivanovich, let the cat go! I can’t watch how you’re torturing her!”

Guchkov lowered the cat to the floor and rose to greet Prince Lvov. He smiled, “Georgy Evgenievich, please, how am I torturing her? Petting her fur? That’s nothing. She’d better be used to the changes of fortune! Good times may come to an end!”

“Not funny, Aleksander Ivanovich!” The Prince sat in an armchair in front of Guchkov, crossed his legs and tapped his knuckles on the wooden armrest. The cat stretched, extending her claws for a moment, and rubbed against Guchkov’s foot. As soon as Guchkov sat down, the cat jumped on his lap. He looked at the Prince expectantly, as it was the latter who had asked for an immediate tête-à-tête.

In his public life, Prince Lvov was the Chairman of the All-Russian Union of *Zemstvos*,[[40]](#footnote-40) and in his private, but equally important life, he was the Worthy Master of the Brotherhood of the Freemason Lodges of Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Guchkov had known him for a long time, but they had become very close in January, 1916, when secretly planning to exile the Tsarina to Crimea. The Prince was a follower of Count Leo Tolstoy. He was a pacifist and opposed war.

The private dining room curtains opened and two waiters appeared, accompanied by the *maître d’*. “Gentlemen, please! What will you have?” The maître d asked the guests, as the waiters set the table.

“The Olivier salad and vodka. Nothing fancy.” Lvov sat down at the table and unfolded the napkin on his lap.

Guchkov rose and tossed the cat onto the floor. “Georgy Evgenievich,  I don’t believe my eyes! Vodka? I thought you didn’t drink.”

“I don’t.  This is for you!” the Prince said.

 “Go! Go, all of you!” The Prince shooed away the waiters and turned to the maître d’: “And make sure that no one disturbs us.”

He poked the salad with his fork, smelled it with suspicion, and began to eat.

“Well, my dear Prince, let’s drink to all the good things!” Guchkov gulped down his vodka and ate a piece of bread.

“What good is there? What are you talking about? You spend most of the time at the front, but here we have God knows what….” Lvov waved his hand. “Rasputin is gone but things have only gotten worse! Before, everything was blamed on him. They killed him but nothing has changed. Just the opposite! Things are getting worse with each day. We’re speeding towards the abyss. The railroads are failing catastrophically. Until now they somehow managed, but now, with this freezing weather… the schedules are delayed. We have serious food shortages in Petrograd.[[41]](#footnote-41) This is what’s happening!” He set aside his fork.

“They call this Olivier salad? This is a disgrace, not an Olivier! The potatoes are frozen and sweet, and the meat… I guess it's a dead horse. Besides, as you know, there are no potatoes in the Olivier salad.” He pushed the plate away. “If not today, then tomorrow the city is going to run out of bread. Demonstrations have been going on since November. The army is unhappy. The Petrograd garrison is unreliable,” the Prince continued. “They are planning an offensive for the spring, but I doubt we can wait until the spring.

“Well…” Guchkov took out a cigarette and lit it. Exhaling a puff of smoke, he answered, “It seems that the people’s mood has shifted to the left, over our heads, and it’s already to the left of the progressive block. We need to have momentum to keep our position. You know, in sailing, when you go on a port tack, you have to take more to the left to make the move…. If the spring offensive is successful, we turn around and go on starboard, more to the right. But to be able to make this maneuver, we have to first bear left.” He looked at Lvov. “For this, if we finally come to power,” he shook off the ash into an ashtray, “I’d call Kerensky. I heard that you doubted him. I’m sure it’s much better to have him with us than against us.”

“He’s already been included in the cabinet. Why are you worrying?” grumbled Prince Lvov, shifting his eyes and unbuttoning his jacket. “By the way,” he continued, changing the focus of the conversation, “he’s friendly with that lawyer, what’s his name… Arakelov, I think. A very promising young man… also one of us… a mason. We can use him more often. No, I remember … Rakelov! Nikolai Sergeevich.  Do you know him?”

“I met him once,” Guchkov paused and added, “with Kerensky. By the way, he has just announced his engagement. Need to congratulate him.”

“Kerensky?” asked Lvov, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

“Not Kerensky … Rakelov. And do you know who the special lady is? Irina Yakovleva. Sergey Illich’s daughter.”

Lvov put his napkin down on the table. “Aleksander Ivanovich, let’s move to the armchairs, since you have no appetite for this food. So, this is why I invited you.” The Prince lowered his voice. Guchkov leaned towards him. “I came upon information that the Emperor has begun… allegedly, to make some interesting plans. He plans to abolish the Duma[[42]](#footnote-42) by manifesto, before the new session, and to restore unlimited autocratic rule. He plans to declare martial law in both capitals[[43]](#footnote-43) and, if necessary, even emergency military law all the way to court-martialing. The manifesto text has been drafted already. This is the news.”

“What’s the source? How do you know it’s not a bluff?” Guchkov frowned, rolling the cigarette between his fingers.

“It’s not a bluff. Rodzyanko has spoken with the Tsar. He said, ‘As Speaker of the Duma, your Majesty, I beg you, save yourself! What you and your government are doing is making the population so angry that anything is possible. If you abolish the Duma, in three weeks’ time, there will be a revolution so powerful that it will sweep you off the throne. You can’t play with the people’s pride, their will and their self-awareness!”

“He said that? And the Tsar?” Guchkov lit another cigarette.

“The Tsar?” The Prince’s face grimaced with disgust. “Nothing. He said, ‘God willing, everything will work out.’ Then Rodzyanko lost control, ‘God is not going to help anymore! You and your government have destroyed everything! The revolution is inevitable!’ And I’m afraid he’s right. He’s right, Aleksander Ivanovich.”

“Well…” Guchkov started to pace around the room. “The first and the most important step is to save the country.” He stopped in front of a large mirror in a golden frame, fixed his tie, and abruptly turned towards Lvov. “Then, to get rid of the non-entities in the Cabinet and in the General Staff.  We’ll select better people. It will be much easier to do that without Rasputin. If we can’t,” he turned back to the mirror, “I’m afraid we’ll have to raise the question of the Tsar’s physical elimination,” he said coldly to his reflection.

“Forget it, Aleksander Ivanovich!” Lvov took out his silver-chained pocket watch and looked at the dial. “That would be just another attempt to solve the problem with the traditional Russian remedy, a palace coup. Time is working against the Emperor. He’s a sluggish man. It takes him ages to decide to do something, to get ready to do it,” said the Prince annoyed, hiding the watch in his pocket. “However, I was obliged to let you know. Possibly, our plans will need to be corrected. And now, I must apologize, I have to go. I have another meeting.” Lvov rose, put several bills on the table and left the room.

Guchkov stood unsteadily. *‘We are speeding towards the abyss,’* Lvov’s words echoed in his mind. *‘And the Tsar, it seems, doesn’t think that.’*

The cat rubbed against his feet, leaving its reddish fur on the dark navy fabric of his pants. “Go away! Stupid cat!” He kicked the animal away with the tip of his shoe and walked to the exit.

  10

It was snowing for the second straight day. The snowdrifts grew large, blocking the streets. Irina was walking along the snow-covered sidewalk. The raised collar of her fur coat was covered with frost. The cold wind raged, throwing bristly snowflakes into her face. The frost pinched her nose and cheeks. She walked by the gigantic dark Cherbatovsky House, towering on the other side of the street. She thought with nostalgia about the past.

*‘Goodness, it was all just yesterday - the balls, the lights in all the windows, the red carpet outside the foyer across the sidewalk, the policemen regulating the cab traffic, the doorman in his long dark-blue livery that almost reached the floor and the cap with golden lace, the servant helping the formally-attired, laughing guests out of the carriages… And now… All the windows were dark, like in many other buildings… signaling impending doom.*’

Her feet felt underground tremors, as if some mysterious power were bursting to the surface with a deep, gutsy growl. She remembered how, a few days prior, the Baroness Botmer's daughter tried convincing her that it was time to flee Russia, before it was too late. Could it be that she was right?

Irina walked through the alley and turned right onto her street. At the end of the street she saw a large, dark crowd. The crowd was swaying and humming like a disturbed beehive.  Even from afar she could hear the noise and the shouting. Her building was just a block away. There was no way to turn back. To walk around the block would have taken a long time, and she couldn’t know what kind of people she might meet on the way.

Irina slowed down as she came closer. The crowd grew bigger. Irina could hear its anxious and loud breathing. The faces of the people crowding the entrance to the grocery shop were distorted with hatred.  The owner, a short stout man in a coat, and his clerk, a young redheaded boy with a terrified pale face, were standing at the door steps, pressed to the door, trying to explain something, but no one listened to them. The crowd was turning into an unrestrained, brutal, faceless mass. Irina, to her horror, understood what was about to happen. The street was blocked, but she saw a narrow passage that looked like a mountain path. She remembered Porphyries’ teaching about the invisible hat. Remembering something would be the best solution.

Irina moved ahead slowly.

“*Last night Nicky brought me a small jar of honey, delicious, aromatic honey, and*...”

“Hey! They’re full of shit, those bitches! They’re hiding the bread!”

*“….and I took some of that golden nectar with a spoon; I was fascinated and delighted with the magic taste of summer*…”

“My husband’s at the front line. My kid hasn’t eaten anything in three days, and these fucking bloodsuckers are enjoying themselves!”

“…*and Nicky leaned over and kissed my lips*…”

“I’ll rip their throats out for my kids!”

“….*and his face was so close that its features blurred, turning into something flickering and intangible*.”

“If they don’t want to give it, fuck them, let’s take it!”

“…*and I closed my eyes when he kissed me*…”

“Go get them!” a shrill voice called.

The crowd swept away the storeowner and the clerk, and pushed into the store. The door gave in, but a scuffle erupted on the doorsteps.

Irina, pressed against the building wall, continued to move forward. Rocks flew from the back of the crowd. She heard the sound of a broken window and a woman’s scream. She stopped. A woman with a bloodied face was trying to get away from the store door. She gasped, sat on the ground and fell to her side. For a moment, the people trying to force their way through the broken storefront paused, looking at her senselessly, but then the loud scream from inside the store “Here is the bread!” threw them forward over the collapsed body. More and more people pushed from behind. Irina thought that she heard the poor woman’s bones breaking under the feet of the crowd. She couldn’t restrain herself and ran into the thick of stampede.

“Let me go, move, move, you’re killing her!”

No one heard her. The crowd closed around her like a terrible multiple-faced monster. She almost went blind from the sudden blow to her head.

The familiar shrilling voice yelled somewhere close, “That rich bitch also wants to eat! You want to take our bread? Give it to her!”

Blows from all directions knocked Irina to the ground. Next to her, in a puddle of blood, lay a young woman. Her eyes were wide open. She could not be saved anymore. Irina tasted blood in her mouth. It was warm and salty. Her senses began to leave her. Lying on the snow, she felt that someone was trying to take off her fur coat.

“I know you! You! You threw my husband out into the street!” A puffy pockmarked woman’s face hung over her. “Big deal, her fucking silver spoons were stolen! Here’s your silver, bitch!” She hit Irina in the face with a man’s force. The red contour around her eyes blurred, turning into something indefinable. She closed her eyes, with her last strength trying not to let in the pain, forever remembering the sa0m\*\*\*

Nikolai Rakelov liked order in everything. All things had their place. That habit was very useful in his work. The documents were sorted out in folders. The pencils were sharpened. He kept a special notebook for jotting down short notes about business conferences, clients and contacts. He even had a notebook in which all entries were made using a code of his own invention. He was making an entry in the notebook when the telephone rang.

“Nikolai Sergeevich!” He did not immediately recognize Kerensky’s high-strung voice. “It looks like it’s begun!”

“What do you mean, Aleksander Feodorovich?”

“It began…the Tsar ordered the Duma disassembled.  There are riots in the city. I’m at the Duma. Come!”

“The Revolution?” Rakelov asked quietly. He felt a light fever coming on and turned towards the window hoping to find some kind of denial of what he had heard.

It should not have been a surprise, though. A few days ago, when forty thousand Putilov factory workers were fired, Kerensky was protesting on the Duma floor, but Rakelov understood that an eruption was imminent. The workers protested at the factories because there was no work. Masses of people streamed into the streets accompanied by revolutionary songs. Army and Cossack units were mobilized against the protesters. The Tsar, who had been living in the Tsar’s Village[[44]](#footnote-44) after Rasputin’s murder, left for the front.

“Looks like that.”

“So this means the end?”

“The end? It’s the beginning! Come quickly! You’ll find me here, but be careful; it’s not safe in the streets. They’re saying there is a thirty-thousand-strong mob moving in this direction.

“I’m on my way.”

Rakelov went back to the desk and started to put away his folders and papers.  *’The world is falling apart,’* he thought. *’But it shouldn’t affect my routine because I’m always true to myself. Always.’*

He changed into a brown three-piece suit, fixed his tie and looked in the mirror. He saw the face of a confident, strong man. The scratches on the right side of his face had begun to heal. A few days earlier he had suddenly felt anxious and went out to meet Irina. He had barely managed to pull her away from the frenzied mob. He was afraid to imagine what would have happened if the police had not come just in time. Irina came to her senses surprisingly quickly and even joked, lying on the sofa with ice on her face.

“If I decided to go into the meat grinder head first, it’s not its fault that it ground me!”

*’It looks like the whole country is about to fall into the meat grinder,’* thought Rakelov, marveling at his own calmness.

                                                                        \*\*\*

It took Rakelov an hour to get to Tavrichesky Palace.  Streetcars were not running. The streets were flooded with people. He had never seen so many excited and aggressive people ready to wipe out everything in their way for the sake of destruction. He felt a terrible, tangible awareness of nearby death, and, what was even stranger, his readiness for it.

The Duma building was surrounded by a dark, sticky human mass, hungrily waiting for violence. The Palace was unrecognizable. It looked like a military encampment. Soldiers flanked the perimeter, guarding ammunition boxes. Although no one in the old government had the stomach for violence against the people and the Duma, everybody was ready – for offense or defense. Violence was ready to erupt at the slightest signal.

Inside the Palace, there were nonstop debates. Rakelov saw Kerensky, far in the crowd of representatives and other bystanders. He was saying something to them in a decisive and imperious tone. His words and gestures were commanding, and his eyes were glowing.

“He’s one of the leaders,” Rakelov heard a respectful voice behind his back.

Rakelov made his way through the crowd and walked over to Kerensky.

“Aleksander Feodorovich! I barely made it. It’s getting crazy out there!”

“It’s good you came. I need you. We can’t wait. The troops are getting anxious. I’m going to the regiments now. Come with me. We’ll talk on the way.” Kerensky sped towards the exit.

“Alexander Feodorovich!” a disheveled man in a pince-nez came running to them. He held a folder of papers at his chest. “Need your help! There is a newly formed Soviet of workers’ representatives. They need a room. Do we have a room for them?” His forehead was covered with sweat.

“They should take the thirteenth… let them take room thirteen,” Kerensky said.

“Aleksander Feodorovich, please take a look at this. I’d like to make sure everything is correct!” Prince Lvov walked over to Kerensky with a sheet of paper in his hand.

“Look at him, he’s growing fast! We’re only learning to walk through this revolutionary swamp and he’s already running around in it!” Rakelov heard a voice declare. He turned around and saw Vasily Shulgin, a famous monarchist, greeting him.

“I don’t know. He’s a showman. There is something hysterical about him,” an older man with a grey goatee answered Shulgin. “Although, perhaps it’s what’s needed now; time will tell.” He leaned towards Shulgin and added, “I’d much prefer a machine gun. When I look at the mob, I want a machine gun.  Only lead can force those animals back to their stables.”

“Mister Bublikov!” Kerensky nodded approvingly, returned the sheet to Lvov and called over a short man with a tired, pale face. “Take some soldiers and go to the Central Railroad Telegraph. As a Duma representative, take control of the railroad networks. Remember, not a single train can leave the capital without your permission. Go to room eleven and take an Interim Committee order for this. Once you get to the Telegraph, send the message to the entire country about the revolution. Go.”

“Let’s go, Nikolai Sergeevich!” The crowd split in front of Kerensky. He quickly left the building and walked towards his car.

Rakelov sat next to him in the back seat, took out a cigarette and lit a match, shielding it from the wind with his hand. The car moved slowly, honking from time to time.

“The Interim Committee has been elected. We need complete unity, regardless of party affiliation. The Committee has dictatorial powers,” Kerensky said.  “Practically all the members are the brothers. Out of thirteen, only three are not masons. It’s very appropriate today. The most important goal is to avoid bloodshed. There are bands of ‘volunteer gendarmes‘ roaming around the city.  Usually some student is the leader. They break into homes and grab the ‘regime lackeys’ at their own discretion.”

“Lynching?” Rakelov asked, “It’s madness!”

Kerensky looked at him and said, “They drag them to us. To the Duma. They brought former Justice Minister Cheglovitov. And I told him, ‘You’re under arrest!’” Kerensky said theatrically and paused, as if reliving the experience.

*‘He’s really changed,’* Rakelov thought with admiration. *’The posture, the voice, the gestures…. Obviously, he’s a great actor, what a talent!’*

“…and then,” Kerensky continued, “so that everybody heard, I said, ‘Your life is safe. Duma doesn’t shed blood!’ I gave them the slogan. Hopefully, it will save many lives. It’s important. There should be no bloodshed.”

They went over the Troitsky Bridge. The sound of the Marseillaise came from somewhere. Several gunshots popped off far away.  *‘We asked for it,’* Rakelov thought.

“Blood is already being spilled, Aleksander Feodorovich,” he said. “Officers and the gendarmes are being killed. My fiancée was almost beaten to death the other day. Luckily, I saved her just in time! I’m afraid to imagine what could have been…”

“So, this is why I asked you to come,” Kerensky said, as if he hadn’t heard Rakelov. “We have a delicate mission to accomplish.”

Rakelov tossed the cigarette out the window.

“There is a secret liaison agent between me and the French armaments minister Albert Thomas. His name is Eugene Petit. I need you to do the following…”

They saw two trucks filled with armed people going in the opposite direction. According to the initials on their sides, the trucks belonged to the Imperial Automobile Society. The trucks’ canvas roofs were ripped off and red flags were raised on top. Rakelov saw two bodies covered with overcoats lying on the snow-covered sidewalk. By the look of those overcoats, the men were commissioned officers. Kerensky followed Rakelov’s look and said with sadness, “A lost war always carries the risk of revolution. But a revolution is much worse than the lost war… and it never comes without bloodshed.”

11

The knife sliced her index finger, drawing blood. Irina paled and grasped the edge of the table. After the attack at the grocery store, she could not get rid of the image of the bloodied woman who died in front of her eyes. She’d become afraid of blood.

Ivan Ivanovich, the kind doctor from the hospital, helped her come to her senses. Holding a cotton ball soaked in ammonia in front of her nose, he confidently said that it was the temporary effect of her traumatic experience and that it would go away shortly. Irina had to quit the hospital job, but she didn’t mind.  This helped her avoid inevitable contact with Lenochka Troyanovsky. They were still friends; at least they acted as if nothing had happened, but a layer of ice now blanketed their relationship. The former sincerity was gone. Still, Irina’s last sad day at the hospital brought joy. In the morning, a young blondish soldier walked into the doctors’ room. He was wearing a very long overcoat and was holding a soldier’s bag. Seeing Irina, he became shy, smiled, and asked where he could find Anna Polikarpovna.

“Polikarpovna? Are you related to her?” she asked, afraid to believe in the miracle.

“I’m her son. My name is Alexei,” the soldier muttered quietly, looking at Irina with admiration in his clear blue eyes.

Irina gasped and ran into the hallway. “Polikarpovna! Here, quickly! Son… your son...”

Polikarpovna walked her son throughout the entire hospital building, showing him to everyone - the doctors, and the nurses, even to the wounded soldiers. She held him tightly by his hand, as if he were a child, as if afraid to lose him again. She tried to kiss Irina’s hand, as if it were Irina who had returned her dear boy to her.

Irina set aside the knife, covered the finger with a cotton ball, smiled, and thought that she should check back on the hospital one of these days.

During the past month she had been working as a secretary at the Special Cultural Committee, at the invitation of the industrious Feodor Chaliapin. Irina liked the job. Interacting with Alexandre Benois,[[45]](#footnote-45) Igor Grabar,[[46]](#footnote-46) Nikolas Roerich,[[47]](#footnote-47) and Alexei Shchusev[[48]](#footnote-48) was not only enjoyable, but distracted her from the turmoil in the city.

Time coiled like a spring. The events of one day were enough to fill weeks, if not months, of the previously slow-paced life. First, there was Rasputin’s murder, which gave some ephemeral hope for a change for the better. Then, there was the Tsar’s abdication. With Grand Duke Mikhail’s refusal of the throne, the monarchy, which had seemed immutable, finally fell. Then came the February riots, now called the Revolution; the red bows were worn by everyone who wanted to. Even Sergey Illich and the pragmatic Feodor Chaliapin gave in to the general hype and attached the red bows to their coats. But Nicky did not do it, although he, being in the center of the events, working side by side with Kerensky, should have been the first to do so. On the contrary, he looked concerned and even a little gloomy.

Irina herself was not convinced whether what was happening was a good thing or a feast during the plague. It certainly did not look like a feast when the Provisional Government declared a bread monopoly in March and food shortages in the city became a norm. Nicky explained to Irina, citing the French Revolution, that it was an absolutely necessary measure, which would force the farmers to give over the extra grain to the government and allow them to set food prices. Irina listened to him and shook her head in doubt, noting that Russia was not France and that it would be impossible to feed it with the bread of equality.[[49]](#footnote-49) Nicky said that, in these difficult times, they should learn to live in the present because no one knew what the future would bring.

She remembered her mother’s words: *’Everyone experiences as much as he can handle.’* She thought that, now, she had nothing to be afraid of because she had Nicky.

Chaliapin had promised to come for lunch that day, and Irina was glad, hoping that there would be no political talk in his presence. She rolled out the white tablecloth, set the china plates, and laid down the silver cutlery and napkins. She looked at the table with satisfaction and went to change into her favorite deep blue dress with an elegant neckline. The sound of the doorbell made her hurry, donning a pearl necklace on the way out of her room.

Sergey Illich and the guests entered the dining room. Irina went into the kitchen. She had to do all the housework by herself: poor Vasily suddenly died a month earlier, of a heart attack, a few steps away from the building, and Glasha had left for a week to visit her ill mother. Soon, there appeared on the English porcelain plates fragrant, crumby buckwheat with sunflower oil, and small slices of meat bought for an obscene amount of money from food speculators.  That was the entire meal.

The guests drank some of the wine that Vasily had stored and Irina’s father carefully safeguarded. They ate slowly, savoring the flavor. Looking at the men eating buckwheat with meat, Irina thought: *‘Was it a dream? Maybe I’ll wake up and all this will disappear: the Revolution, the Tsar’s abdication, the dual powers,[[50]](#footnote-50) the hunger, the fear, the anarchy, and the uncertainty. Nothing. Just a dream.’*

“Irina Sergeevna, this is so good!” Chaliapin ate his last spoon of buckwheat. “The porridge was great! I’ll tell you the truth, I love to eat and my biggest fear, ever since childhood, is to go hungry. I love food as much as I love the stage!”

He looked at Rakelov, picking up on the conversation that had begun outside. “So, I’ll tell you, Nicholas II never treated us actors as Nicholas I. The latter would even come see the actors backstage; he’d even chat with them. I’ll tell you a story. One time, Karatygin[[51]](#footnote-51) boasted in the Tsar’s presence that he could play beggars just as easily as kings. So the Tsar laughed and said, ‘Well, brother, why don’t you play me?’”

“And what happened?” Rakelov smiled.

“He did. He turned over to Gideonov, the Director of Imperial Theaters, and said in the Emperor’s voice: ‘Listen, Gideonov. Order to pay Karatygin double monthly salary tomorrow at noon!’”

“And the Emperor?” Irina asked, cleaning the table.

“The Emperor? He applauded,” Chaliapin smiled.

“And the salary?” Irina stood at the doorway and, with her eyes, signaled Nicky to follow her.

“He was paid at noon the following day. The double salary, as he ordered.”

The men laughed. Nicky rose, excused himself, and followed Irina. Chaliapin followed him with his eyes, knowingly, and exchanged glances with Sergey Illich.

“Nicky, I don’t see you at all. I miss you!” Irina cuddled up to him. “We should get married soon. Why did we listen to Papa and agree to wait this long! We’d be living together now.”

Rakelov hugged her. “I miss you too, my dear, but I have so much work! Being next to Kerensky, I feel drawn into this powerful historical process!” He stroked her hair. “We live in this strange time when we don’t belong to ourselves.”

Irina placed her head on his shoulder, enjoying the touch of the man she loved.

Rakelov quietly stroked her back. Irina’s appearance completely changed the usual order of his life. He was a man of habit and loved to analyze and calculate the future. Somehow, he had avoided romantic infatuations in his youth, but did not regret it. He used his free time to educate himself. That, in his opinion, was the foundation of future happiness. Of course, before he met Irina, he knew that love existed, and he thought that he was ready for it. He believed that love was a necessary prelude to marriage and married life was a necessary part of every man’s life.

And then Irina walked, or rather burst, into his life. Rakelov was confused. He experienced strange emotions. With Irina something had appeared in his life that he could not calculate.  Before her, he thought that physical intimacy was a good thing because it served the purpose of having children, but Irina opened for him the world of tenderness, sensuality and wildness.

However, her love scared him. He was supposed to belong to her only, and anyone seeking his time and attention risked becoming her enemy. Even working for the new government, knowing his significance in the all-important task of creating the new Russia, Rakelov felt Irina’s presence, realizing that he was distracted by thoughts of her and seeing her this night. This dependency, which made him romantic, and therefore vulnerable, at times irritated, upset, and even burdened him. Marriage would solve the problem, he thought. When they officially married, everything would fall into place and become predictable and understandable.

Now he had to find a way to tell Irina that he had to go away, perhaps even for several months.  He could not refuse the trip. It was Kerensky’s personal assignment for him. The Provisional Government could not operate without the support of local peripheral districts, especially when it came to food supplies. *’Well, how should I say it?’* he wondered.

Rakelov turned to the window. The clouds were smeared across the sky as if by the brush of a lazy artist. “Iren, I’m being sent on a trip to the central districts. It’s going to take several months. As soon as I return…”

“What?” Irina backed away from him. “What about me? I can’t live that long without you. I’ll go with you!”

“Iren, it’s dangerous. Don’t you know what’s going on out there?” he said sharply. “A railroad trip today is not like it was before. And also, what will your father say?”

“God, what can he say? As if he doesn’t understand. We are husband and wife, just not officially married. Let’s go and tell him. Father should know about it.”

She grabbed his hand and led him back into the dining room. Sergey Illich and Chaliapin had moved to the armchairs with a wine decanter.

“The Provisional Government is functioning on its last breath, believe me, Feodor Ivanovich. The conditions are absurdly horrific. Sometimes we can’t even sleep or eat.” Sergey Illich anxiously threw a pill into his mouth.

Irina had noticed that lately, working at the second Provisional Government, her father had aged a lot. Before, he’d been energetic, optimistic and strong. Now, he resembled a tired old horse. He lost weight; his eyes had wrinkles around them, even his gait changed. He was no longer that daring fellow who publicly announced his love for Sophie Troyanovsky.

“We’re passing laws, falling from fatigue…” Sergey Illich waved his hand in desperation.

“Yes,” Chaliapin nodded sympathetically. “When Gorky and I visited Kerensky, I realized that the government is about to give in. Kerensky was running around the halls in the Ministry of Justice, he was very anxious and was staring at everyone like he didn’t know them.” Chaliapin widened his eyes in a funny manner.

“He’s just nearsighted,” Irina defended Kerensky. She held Rakelov’s hand.

“The weirdest thing,” continued Chaliapin, “is that there was a man following him. He was even more anxious, and he was carrying a bottle of milk, offering Kerensky to drink it. It would have been funny if it hadn’t been so sad.”

“Alright, it’s enough! I’m bored of this!”  Irina let go of Rakelov’s hand and slammed her hand on the table. “All the politics… when are we going to live? Anywhere you go, it’s all the political talk.”

Irina stood behind Rakelov’s chair. Her face flushed a little.  “I don’t want this. We have the great Chaliapin at our home…”

“My thanks, oh beautiful lioness!” Chaliapin placed his hand on this chest and bowed slightly.

“Yes, the great Chaliapin!” she continued excitedly. “And what are we discussing? Theater? Art? No! Feodor Ivanovich, please tell us the latest theater news.”

Chaliapin, not having fully enjoyed the angry outburst of the “beautiful lioness”, smiled.

“Well, Irochka, some types show up during our plays and interrupt them by speaking with the audience. ‘It’s time to end the shows and the entertainment,’ they say. ‘Poor people are dying on the frontline while you are singing and dancing!’”

“Feodor Ivanovich, are you doing this on purpose?” Irina pouted with annoyance.

“It’s interesting,” Sergey Illich unwittingly played along with his guest. “In the trenches they’re saying the same thing in reverse order: here you’re dying and in the capital they’re dancing and singing.”

“Papa, Feodor Ivanovich, I’m asking you! Enough! I can’t listen to this anymore!”

She rushed to the grand piano, opened the lid and started to play bravura.

Sergey Illich looked at Chaliapin, walked over to Irina, hugged her and said, “Alright, say what you wanted.”

Irina leaned away from her father and raised her sorrowful eyes towards him.

“Papa, dear, I want to go with Nicky to the central districts. He has business there and I… well, I’m his wife. Understand?”

Sergey Illich raised his eyebrows in surprise and looked at Rakelov.

Irina pulled his sleeve, “If you don’t let me, I’ll still go. I want to be with him, I must. I will be with him. Will you let me go?”

A deep silence fell over the room.

“I’ll let you go,” said Sergey Illich wearily, hugging his daughter. “But you must get married before leaving.”

Chaliapin looked at Rakelov, who hastily pulled out a cigarette and rolled it between his fingers without saying a word. There was something about him today that he didn’t like.

12

The autumn of 1917 was sunny and cool. The trees had put on gold and crimson attires, as if expecting a holiday.  But there was no holiday. The wind, flying over from the Gulf of Finland, annoyingly convinced them that there would not be any holiday. But the trees did not believe it, parting with their leaves in melancholy after each gust, like people parting with calendar pages.  Soon it was drizzling. The wind never told the trees what it was crying about day and night.

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The train that Irina and Rakelov took from Moscow to Petrograd suddenly moved to the side track because the locomotive broke. For hours, hundreds of people were waiting in the small railroad station in Tver. Irina was sitting on a hard bench across from her husband. She loved to call Nicky her husband and think of herself as a married woman.

They had married only a month and a half earlier, a day before leaving, in a small church near her home. The priest, Father Seraphim, the same one who baptized her nineteen years earlier, was pleasantly surprised and moved by the couple’s wish “to perform the sacred rite of the divine union of souls in the heavens – in these dark times.” Only the closest people, just a few of them, were present in the church. Nicky’s parents were not able to come from Perm so quickly.

During the trip, Nicky and Irina had grown so close that they became one whole, Irina felt. She smiled, thinking how naïve and silly she was only a few months ago. Today, she looked at many things differently. She understood that love was not words. Love was the absence of words. In love everything should be clear without verbosity.  Being in public all the time, she learned to hide her feelings. That became their game and it had its own charm; it was their small family secret. Even now, sitting across her husband in a packed, dirty waiting room, she carefully touched his foot with hers. No one noticed; not the women with their crying children, not the two young fellows with rifles, not the elderly priest sitting next to them, not the old man reclining on his large dirty bag. No one.

Irina slightly lifted and lowered her eyebrow: “Enter me.” A short smile formed on his lips: “What about the people around?” Her head hardly shook: “They won’t notice. We’ll do it with our eyes….do it!” Nicky leaned forward a bit and entered her with his gaze. Gradually, his eyes became larger and larger and the space around them became a narrow corridor, its borders defined by the pulsating dotting lines of their gazes, and the train station noise, the voices and sounds dissolved beyond these borders. Time stopped. Irina leaned forward. Looking at each other, they were moving their bodies so that it was invisible to others. Again and again... Her lips opened a little. Inside there grew a warm pulsating ball, growing in size.

Her heart stopped beating and the ball exploded, filling her inside with hot sunlight. A wave of delight, a slight body convulsion… her mind melted into feelings. The feelings were picked up by languor. The languor wrapped around her, becoming a golden cocoon.  She tasted a honey aroma in her mouth. She closed her eyes, threw back her head and quietly moaned.

“Are you tired, dear, dear, dear…” she heard from far away. “Really, how many hours have we been waiting and waiting, waiting…for the train.”

She was quiet, trying to maintain the feeling a little longer.

“Why are you snooping around here?” a stern voice broke through.

“Looking for the Jew.”

“What Jew?”

“There was a Jew here. Did you see him?”

“What did he do?”

“Nothing, he’s just a Jew!”

Irina turned her head and saw the foggy, stoned stare of the soldier with a rifle. She turned her eyes away.

“Your wife is tired,” the old priest in a coat over his black frock said to Rakelov.  “Let her lean over you, she’ll feel better.”

“No worries, Father, everything is fine!” Irina tenderly looked at her husband, slowly fixed her hair, catching the eye of a pale man with unkempt hair and short black beard. The man was sitting next to the priest. He had a large birthmark on his face, visible even through his beard; it looked like a blood-filled leach. *’God marks rogues,’* she remembered the proverb her mother used to say.

“So, holy father? Your time is ending, eh?” the black-bearded man said to the priest.

“Why is that?” the priest glanced sideways.

“Because socialism is replacing your Christianity,” saying the last word, the black-bearded man slapped his leg with his hand. “Socialism is like your Christianity, only the earlier one. Aren’t you scared?”

“What’s there to be scared about? Cranberry juice looks like wine but it’s not. All you have to do is taste it.”

“Under socialism we’ll ban the wine, there won’t be anything to taste,” the black-bearded man grinned. “Everybody will drink cranberry juice.”

“Man should do everything by his own will, not by force. Then all will be good,” the priest remarked.

“If you allow me, I’d say this,” Rakelov chimed in. “Christianity has freedom, and it’s what socialism lacks. Christianity is kinder and more merciful because it teaches us to give away our property; socialism, on the other hand, teaches to take others’ property.”

“Exactly!” The priest was energized, feeling support. “Christ taught indifference to material wealth. If your brother asks you for a coat, give him the shirt too!”

“Under socialism, we won’t ask anybody!” The black-bearded stranger suspiciously looked at both men.

“Of course you won’t.” Rakelov turned toward the man. “According to Marx, whom I read carefully, you will secure your rights in a struggle, meaning by force.”

“Nicky, what are you discussing? Why?” Irina whispered, feeling anxious. “The railroad station is not the best place for conversations like this, especially with strangers.”

The piercing bell and the engine whistle signaled that a train was coming. People jumped up, grabbing their things and rushing to the exit. There was a crush at the door as people tried squeezing in, yelling, swearing, children were crying.

Irina paled, gasping for air, and grabbed her husband by the hand. The human wave picked them up and threw them out onto the platform. In the doorway, someone snatched her small suitcase. *’You will secure your rights in struggle.’* The thought flashed through her mind. She didn’t feel bad about the loss, even though all her basic necessities, including the documents, were in the suitcase. The air was saturated with the feeling of loss.

*’The world is crumbling. Who cares about smaller things now? We just need to get home safely and soon‘,* she thought.

The train stopped, panting hard, as if it really did not want to. It was already overcrowded with people, mostly the poor with their heavy bags. Some of them were even sitting on the roof of the train. Windows were broken. The sleeper car Irina and Rakelov had taken from Moscow at least had some dirty curtains dividing the compartments, but this train had nothing.  Hundreds of people with bags, suitcases, and baskets stormed the train, trying to board.

Irina looked at her husband, “Now what?” Nicky was sweating in confusion.

“Hey, you, climb over here! Fast, the train is going to depart now!” In the window there appeared a familiar face with a red birthmark. Somehow, the man with the black beard managed to get into the car before them. Rakelov threw his suitcase on the ground and lifted Irina. Several hands picked her up and pulled her inside. She was hit with a strong sour-sweet smell and a hot wave of male sweat. Irina was offered a hard bench between the men, who didn’t mind moving to give her some room. But as soon as she sat down, they pressed tightly against her thighs. Blackbeard, so helpful just now, suddenly closed the window and indifferently turned away from it. Nicky’s surprised face was on the other side of the window. Blackbeard looked at Irina and smirked. The car shook and screeched. The train jerked forward.

“My husband is still on the platform!” Irina rushed to the window with a desperate cry.

An older man sitting by the window in a soldier’s overcoat got up and muttered in a hoarse voice, “Don’t worry, lady, I’ll pull your man in.”

He extended his arms and helped Nicky to climb inside. One of the travelers sitting next to Irina was not happy when Rakelov asked him to swap seats so he could sit with his wife. He moved away reluctantly and sat next to Blackbeard, who pulled his hat over his eyes and reclined against the wall, completely indifferent to everything.

“Nicky! Thank God! I thought I lost you!”  Irina leaned on his shoulder, feeling happy and calm for a moment. She remembered that she’d noticed the train number, 137. Porphyries had once said that it was the number of death.

She heard screaming on the platform outside. Several soldiers used their rifle butts to beat an old grey-haired man in a general’s overcoat. One of them was the stoned-eyed man she’d seen before. When the old man fell to the ground, they kicked him in the head. The poor man, screaming, attempted to cover his head with his hands. His face was swollen, covered with blood; then it became a shapeless, bloody mass of flesh with eyes popping out. Soon, he stopped resisting and lay motionless.

Irina watched in horror. A sickening wave rose up from her stomach. The train slowly moved away from the platform, leaving the horrible scene behind. She could not avert her eyes from the dead body, as if a strange and hard voice was telling her, *’Look and remember!’*

The travelers were sullen and quiet. Irina looked at her husband with tearful eyes.

“This, my love, is called a coup,” Nicky whispered in her ear.

“What?” she shuddered.

“My dear…” Nicky said, putting his arm around her shoulders. “I didn’t want to tell you in Moscow. The Provisional Government has collapsed. The party of Lenin and Trotsky has seized power. All government posts are taken by Jewish commissars. They’re hiding behind Russian surnames. There are rumors about riots and pogroms in Petrograd. Bands of soldiers and sailors[[52]](#footnote-52) are breaking into homes, robbing, killing…. The mob controls everything now and it looks like no one knows how to stop it.”

The train accelerated. The cold car, assailed by the bitter wind and permeated with coal smoke, appeared to be entering a timeless dimension. Irina, still leaning against her husband’s shoulder, suddenly wanted to pull the brakes and stop the train. She could have sworn that in the darkness of night she heard the train faintly moaning, racing into the unknown along a thin blade, slicing time and people in two.

                                                                         \*\*\*

The car was cold. The rain was drizzling inside through the broken window covered by a soaked canvas. Rakelov could not sleep, although the monotonous clattering of the wheels had lulled all the other travelers to slumber. Irina was napping uneasily on his shoulder. She looked like she was dreaming something. Her body was shuddering and her lips were moving, muttering indiscernible words. Only Blackbeard was sitting back with his eyes half-closed. It was not clear if he was awake or asleep.

Thoughts raced through his mind. Soon they would be home. What next? Kerensky’s mission was completed but Kerensky himself was gone.[[53]](#footnote-53) Should they have leaned even farther to the left, closer to Trotsky and Lenin, who were feeding the crowd with irresponsible but simple and very attractive slogans? Unlike the social democrats, these two called for mass, not individual, terror, playing on the mob’s lowest instincts. They called the mob itself “the people’s masses.” How did Kerensky lose control of the situation?

The upcoming Bolshevik coup was not a surprise. Beginning in mid-October many newspapers had been publishing a regular column, “On the Bolshevik Uprising.” The media took pleasure in discussing the thrilling topic, although no one really took it seriously. At the same time, the media took turns criticizing the government for failing to keep order, supply necessities, organize society, and everything else. In reality, and Rakelov firmly knew it, the Provisional Government’s only unsolvable problem was its inability to win the war or exit from it with dignity.

Was it possible that he had made a mistake? Could he have chosen the wrong combination? In these turbulent times of social change, being close to the head of the government, he could have become a deputy Minister of Justice, and then maybe even… No, of course, not. Rakelov never considered himself a leader, but he was an educated man with organizational and executive skills. If necessary, he was ready to place the common interests above his own. People like him were in demand in any government. It was therefore unlikely that he would remain without a job. He hoped he did not have to ask Kerensky for a recommendation letter to Lenin. Both were from the city of Simbirsk, and rumors had it they even went to the same school.

*’Well,’* he thought with a sigh, *’it’s not the best and the most pleasant thing to be stuck on the road during a political cataclysm… Soon I’ll be home, and then we’ll see.’*

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The brakes screeched. The train slowed down. Everyone woke up and started to move, speaking quietly. Irina opened her eyes.

“Are we there?”

“Are you cold?” Rakelov brushed his hand against her cheek.

The older soldier sitting by the window moved the canvas. In the window, in the dim platform light, appeared the sign “Town of Bologoye”. One last push, a metallic clap shuddered through the entire train. Finally, it stopped.

Irina wanted to go outside onto the platform and stretch, but it was impossible. The passengers, who had barely managed to get on the train, did not want to lose their hard-won seats.

“The train has been stopped for revolutionary inspection!” a harsh voice boomed outside. A short, stout man, holding a revolver, appeared at the door. Several sailors, armed with rifles with attached bayonets, accompanied him. “Everybody, out with your belongings!” the man shouted.

The older soldier shook his head with concern. “It doesn’t look good. Before, they used students for this, and now look – they’ve brought soldiers and sailor thugs.”

The sound of hasty footsteps came from the train car roof. Someone yelled, “Stop! Stop right there, you bitch. I’ll shoot!” Two gunshots popped. The people in the car panicked. Everyone grabbed their baggage and rushed to the exit.

“Careful, you animals! You’ll crush the baby!” screamed a redheaded woman holding an infant in colorful swaddling clothes. She stood sideways in the middle of the corridor and struggled to turn around in the crowd.

“Nicky, I feel sick…” whispered Irina, grasping her husband’s arm.

Rakelov, remembering that after the grocery store incident, his wife was afraid of crowds, looked around in confusion and asked the person next to him, “Excuse me, could you please help us? My wife is unwell… she’s afraid of crowds… I will jump out the window and you could pass her to me….”

“Why not? Exit the same way you entered!” Blackbeard looked into the window, shoved some people with his shoulders and helped Rakelov jump outside.

“Irisha, come to me, my girl! Don’t cut yourself with the glass,” Rakelov said and immediately felt the sharp tip of a bayonet at his back.

“Are you trying to run away, asshole? You can’t run from us, you bourgeois motherfucker!”

 “No, no, Sanya[[54]](#footnote-54), look at his mug! He’s a fucking German spy! I can feel them in my gut!” The soldier noisily drew some air with his nose and spat. “You wanted to slip into Petrograd with them bagmen, you piece of shit?”

“This is a misunderstanding,“ mumbled Rakelov, turning to the men in shock. “I’ll show you my documents!” He reached for his inside pocket and immediately gasped and hunkered down from a rifle butt hitting his groin. As he was suffocating from the burning pain, another blow hit the back of his head.  The wet, dirty ground shook under his feet and rose vertically. Losing consciousness, he heard his name in a heart-rending, female scream…

Irina did not remember how she got outside, how she pushed through the crowd and through the cordon, ignoring the cursing and the soldiers’ warnings. She looked for the two men who had dragged her husband away, but couldn’t find them - not on the platform, and not in the station. She rushed back to the train and crawled underneath it, to the other side, scraping the skin off her knees and hands. Once there, she looked around, not knowing where to go next.

Suddenly, she heard voices from behind the neatly stacked railroad ties. Finding a narrow passage, she approached it quietly, and carefully peeked out. In the dim light of an electric bulb hanging from a pole, she saw her husband a few steps away. Nicky, bareheaded and bruised, was standing against the pile of railroad ties. His coat was dirty; one of the sleeves was missing. Two soldiers with rifles stood in front of him. One of them was very young. A third man with a puffed face stood to the side. He seemed drunk. He was wearing a peakless navy cap and a navy peacoat. A little further down – Irina could not believe her eyes - there was Blackbeard. The drunken sailor, swaying on his feet, was going through Nicky’s pockets.

“Hey, brother, take a look at this! He’s got a wallet! And what do we have in the wallet?” He opened it and shook out its contents into his cap, which he gave to one of the soldiers. “Money!” His face contorted with a drunken grin. “The money you bourgeois bloodsuckers were sucking out of the working people together with their blood!” he poked Nicky’s face with his revolver. “These papers are worthless.” He crumpled up the documents and threw them to the ground.

“You have no right…,” said Rakelov quietly, hardly moving his swollen lips.

“Are you going to argue, you bourgeois scum?” The sailor, swaying back and forth on his feet, pointed the revolver’s muzzle to Nicky’s chest.

Irina saw a tattoo on his wrist, a large, dark-green, claw-like anchor.

The same harsh voice commanded again, “*Look and remember this*!”

“I remember,” said Blackbeard, smiling with all his teeth, “back in Tver you were agreeing with the Christian idea of giving your shirt to your neighbor. Now, when it comes to action, you refuse to ignore material pleasures. This is very unseemly, don’t you think?” he shook his head.

 “I wasn’t resisting, I didn’t reach into my pocket for a gun, I...” Rakelov tried to explain.

“You reached for your fucking watch,” the sailor laughed loudly as he pulled out Rakelov’s pocket watch by its gold chain. It was Irina’s wedding present.

“Looks like gold…” murmured the younger soldier indecisively.

“Under socialism, we’ll use gold to build shithouses, hehe?”[[55]](#footnote-55) Blackbeard took the watch from the sailor and threw it on the ground. Hitting a rock, the watch shattered.

The only thing Irina could do as she watched her husband being terrorized and humiliated was beg God to have these monsters let Nicky live.

Suddenly, Rakelov straightened out. “Who do you think you are?” His voice, soft and imploring until now, became stronger.

The younger soldier pointed his rifle at Rakelov’s stomach and racked the slide.

“Don’t waste a bullet; we’ll use it for other things. Do him with a bayonet, stick him once, it should be enough,” the older soldier said quietly, looking at Rakelov indifferently. He was stroking his bayoneted rifle with his short, almost amputated fingers. There was a tattooed letter on each one.  “SASHA,” Irina was able to read it. Understanding that there was no time left, she jumped out of the passage, ran up to Blackbeard and shook his arm.

 “Let him go, I beg you! You know he’s my husband and he’s not guilty of anything!” she screamed. “He… we’re on our honeymoon!” she clung to the hope that simple, normal words could move these people and have them return to human reality. “Our honeymoon!” she appealed to each one of them. “I beg you, let him go!”

Blackbeard, taken aback by the woman, saw that she was alone and grabbed her by the arm.

“And wives will become common property under socialism!” he smiled lustfully.

The sailor nodded agreeing, opened his arms and floundered towards her.

 “…and honeymoons are a relic of the past. We won’t need them in our beautiful future!”

“Ira, run away! Run away now!” Rakelov screamed.

 “Nicky!” Irina pushed the sailor away and rushed towards her husband thinking, *‘if they want to kill, let them kill both of us. I’m his wife!’*

  “Where are you going, bitch?” the short-fingered man hit her on the face with an open hand.  Irina lost her balance and fell back, landing with her shoulder on a sharp piece of iron lying on the ground. The spike ripped through her thin coat and penetrated her flesh. Gasping for air, she lay on the ground helplessly, about to faint from the unbearable pain, humiliation, and despair.

“Ira!” Rakelov ran towards her.

 “He’s running, shoot him!”

She did not hear the gunshots. At the last moment, she only saw flashes coming out of the rifles and the revolver, and Nicky falling down, his astonished eyes wide opened. His body convulsed in a frightening death dance, releasing the soul to where it had come from.

She did not hear the gunshots, only a strange sound, like the sound of a torn string. As if heaven cried out for their unborn child.

13

Irina opened her eyes. The autumn sun was breaking in through cracks between the boards covering a small window, near the ceiling. She saw brick vaults, straw dust, sand, and a heavy door with a window.  Someone was groaning… no, crying.

“Thank God! You’ve come to, my dear!”

Irina didn’t recognize the voice. She saw the kind, wrinkled eyes of an old woman in a black kerchief.

“I’d lost hope. You’ve been here three days.”

Irina tried to lift herself. Her shoulder responded with dull pain.

“Where am I?” She didn’t recognize her own voice, cracked and dull.

“Where? In prison, where else! You’ve been out for three days. I thought you’d never wake up. Your shoulder’s wounded. It’s not healed yet. The first night, you had a very high fever. I thought you’d die. Thank God we had a doctor here with us for two days. He was kind. If not for him, those beasts would have just dragged you out and dug you in. He wouldn’t let them. Last night, they took him out, and he still hasn’t returned. I worry they’ll torture him to death. God willing, they’ll let him go.” She crossed herself. “What’s your name?”

“Irina.” Her own name sounded strange to her.

“Thank God.” The woman crossed herself again. “If you died, I wouldn’t even know who to pray for. I’m Darya. The priest in our village, the one who baptized me, said it’s a Persian name. It means the sea. And I’ve never even seen the sea. And probably never will. I wonder what it’s like. I heard it’s azure and wide. And the water is salty. How is it possible – a lot of water and it’s all salty? A miracle… Ah, I wish I could see it once!”

Irina forced herself to raise her head and look around.  The huge basement was filled with people - men and women, all together. Where is Nicky, she thought? She closed her eyes, painfully trying to backtrack the events in her memory. Moscow…The railroad station in Tver… A black-bearded man with a red birthmark on his cheek… drunken soldiers killing an old man on the platform… Bologoye… Nicky’s confused face behind the window… Piles of railroad ties… Blackbeard… The drunken sailor and the soldiers… The blow to the face and the pain… gun flashes… Nicky’s body in death convulsions… and their faces, their calm faces with empty, indifferent eyes.

“Nicky is gone….,” she suddenly understood. “He will never come back…never.”

‘Never’. The most frightening of all existing words. Frightening, no matter what language it is spoken in. A killer word. Like an ax in the executioner’s hands, you can only exhale it in the last moment before death.

Irina choked. Her lips quivered, but tears did not come. There was only one question burning in her inflamed brain: *’Why?’*

“I talk too much,” Darya said. “Don’t get angry at me. Better pray. Talking brings life back and praying brings strength. I have an icon, here: the Holy Mother.”

Darya pulled out a small icon, crossed herself and kissed it. Irina shook her head.

“If you don’t want to, it’s up to you. Lie down. If you need to… we have a women's toilet over there,” Darya pointed to a canvas closing off the far corner.

Irina nodded and closed her eyes.

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The overcrowded basement looked like a warehouse made into a makeshift prison. Every day it was replenished with more unfortunate souls, mostly the passengers taken off the newly arriving trains, during the “revolutionary inspections”. A sign of a new train arrival was the loud engine bell, the commotion, desperate cries and gunshots coming from the station. The detainees were nearly all well-dressed people, acting with dignity; they believed their detention was a misunderstanding that would soon be resolved. Some of the prisoners, mostly the poorer “bagmen,” were led away for questioning almost immediately and they never came back. Others, like Irina, had been there more than a week and seemed to be forgotten. Those who were brought back after interrogation were dejected and silent as if they had encountered something unexplainable, frightening, something beyond the realm of human comprehension.

At night, Irina tried not to sleep. She was tormented by nightmares. Unwillingly, she listened to quiet conversations between the basement’s inhabitants. Her hearing sharpened and she was able to hear even the faintest whispers between the two men not far away from her. “If they beat us…I’d understand... Physical pain is better than mental suffering… But they absolutely want to degrade us… I don’t understand why the torture… Money, jewelry…. For pleasure… Mad, hungry dogs….I heard rumors they invited some Chinese torture specialist… Now the shadow of Marquis de Sade is walking around here at night…. Honor is the last thing we have left.”

Irina marveled at the behavior of the men who became her cellmates by the whim of Fate. Many were embarrassed about their circumstances in front of each other, especially the women. They reminded Irina of a host who invited some guests, but right before their arrival suddenly lost the refreshments, the tableware, the clean clothes and even the home itself, only to become perplexed and saddened, although still trying to save face and not reveal anything, as a good host should.

Each morning the detainees were given “coffee” – warm brownish-tinted water. Sometimes the water wasn’t even tinted, and it was renamed “hot water.” Lunch and dinner consisted of soup that was greyish, lightly salted water with a few boiled potatoes. The potatoes were hardly washed.  There was a layer of dirt on the bottom of the rusty bowls.  Irina ignored Darya’s pleadings and preferred not to eat at all. She only drank water.

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Lying on the dirty mattress filled with straw dust, she retreated into herself and realized that the hunger, which had bothered her for several days was gone. Her mind was remarkably clear, her senses heightened, and she discovered, to her surprise, that even the greyness, in the dim light of the basement, had hues that were no less clear or bright than the most vivid of colors.  This discovery amazed her. She had always thought that grey was only a mix of black and white.

The bolt on the door rattled. The heavy oak door creaked open, and a tall, sickly looking soldier walked in, holding a rifle. He carefully examined the detainees.

“Hey, you!” he pointed his finger towards Irina. “You woke up? Get out!” His voice was coarse, accented, strangely prolonging the vowels.

Irina got up but wobbled on her legs and grabbed the wall.

“Move, fast! Get out, I say. Keep your hands behind!”

“Go, my dear, go… may God protect you!” said Darya and hastily crossed herself as Irina left.

Irina walked along the long brick-laden corridor, quietly whispering, “*O holy angel who stands by my wretched soul and my passionate life, do not abandon me, a sinner, nor depart from me because of my lack of self-control. Leave no room for the evil demon to gain control of me through the violence of this mortal body*.”[[56]](#footnote-56)

The interrogation room was at the end of the corridor. The guard knocked on the door.

“Bring her in,” said a dull, coarse voice inside.

Behind the massive wooden desk, lit by a desk lamp, sat a man. He was reading from a sheet of paper. Irina looked around. A bookcase turned side-to-wall divided the room in two. Behind it was a metal-frame bed covered with a silk blanket patterned with Chinese dragons and flowers. This homey, cozy, pink blanket, so absurd here, seemed like a sign from a former life, a thin thread, which could help her get out of the present. She would think about everything else later.

“Come along, sit!” the interrogator ordered without raising his head.

Irina came closer and sat on the chair, which immediately wobbled and fell over to the side.

“Ha, ha, ha!” The man burst out laughing. “You like my special chair?”

Irina rose from the floor, rubbing her injured elbow. She stood up, looking at the man in silence. *‘This didn’t degrade me. This degraded him. Nothing can humiliate me. I must leave this place,’* she thought, biting her trembling lips and holding back her hands so as not to slap the giggling villain.

“Well, well….” The interrogator stood up and walked up to Irina. “Damn, look at that! I’ve seen these furious eyes…. Hmm, yeah, a familiar face! Show me your face, bitch!” He lifted the lamp and pointed it at Irina’s face. The light hurt her eyes, which had become accustomed to the semi-darkness in the basement.

She also recognized him: the disproportionately small head on a large body, thick lusty lips, crossed nasty eyes. Only now he was wearing a leather coat and polished boots.[[57]](#footnote-57) They had met once. She remembered that the cross-eyed man had promised then to get to her body. *What was his name?* What difference did it make? It would have only made things worse. She wanted to cry. Just to sit on the floor and howl – from desperation and misery – for her beloved husband murdered in front of her eyes - and for herself, for she would certainly die now – quickly, at best - and for her past and for her non-existent future….

“Madame! What an encounter! You recognize me, huh?” The interrogator pressed his body against hers, dousing her with his bad breath, grabbed her hand and placed it on his groin. “Do you remember, eh? It wasn’t very nice of you to kick them. Now you’ll have to make them feel good. Why are you quiet? Say something, make me happy! Fucking bitch!”

Irina pulled her hand back with disgust. The interrogator stepped back, his hand on the holster.

“Are you going to fight me again? Or ask for something? Better ask me nicely. It’s either the guards or me. They just came from the front… they haven’t touched a woman’s body for two years.” He smirked, sat on the edge of the desk and lit a cigarette, looking at Irina. “Yet… you’re so dirty, like a filthy street whore. Why the fuck do I need you? Look at yourself in the mirror. Go ahead.” He pointed behind her.

Irina turned around. There was a large, dirty mirror in a carved, gilded frame hanging on the wall.  In the mirror there was a strange woman with dirty, disheveled hair, chapped lips and an abrasion on her forehead. Her face was blackened with soot or locomotive smoke. Only her eyes seemed familiar, although they looked like the scared eyes of a small animal about to be shot by a hunter.

“So, did you decide? You’ll fuck either me or the soldiers. If you please me, maybe I’ll let you go… later…” The interrogator put out the cigarette in the glass. “What’s your decision?”

‘*My center is retreating. My right flank is retreating. An excellent position! I will attack*,’ she heard her husband’s voice from far away. She raised her head and turned around slowly.

“What did I decide? I’ll please you if you promise to let me go.”

The cross-eyed man gave her a cautious look and nodded.

Irina continued, “This is how it will be. To begin with, I must take a bath, change clothes and eat.” She enjoyed her own brazenness. “I will take a bath with soap, naturally. I prefer light food. I don’t drink vodka. Find a proper place. We won’t do it here. And, one more thing, I almost forgot. I wear simple but elegant clothes. Can you find something nice?”

The interrogator was quiet, playing with the holster buckle. His face was motionless.

*‘Probably, this is how rams look,’* Irina thought.

“Guard!” he yelled towards the door.

A soldier’s head appeared right away. “Need something, boss?”

“How many times did I tell you to call me ‘Comrade’? Anybody who’s fighting against exploiters for the victory of the world revolution is a Comrade! Understood? Take her away,” he ordered, studying Irina with a suspicious look.

She turned towards the door. She thought that she could be shot in the back right now. With her back straight, she slowly walked to the door. The shot did not come. This means everything is only beginning. *‘An excellent position, I will attack,’* whispered her cracked lips.

“Hey, guard, watch it, no fooling around!” the interrogator’s voice sounded from behind her. “I will interrogate the suspect again later.”

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In the evening, two soldiers came for her. One was the familiar, sickly-looking man with a strange accent; the other had a very long overcoat. In the semi-darkness of the basement, he looked a little confused - perhaps he was new. They led her through the long corridor into the backyard, then through the gate into the street. Irina ravenously breathed in the intoxicating, fresh, frosty air full of aromas she did not know before.

It was getting dark. Light snowflakes were whirling in the air, melting as they reached the ground. Mixing with the dirt, covering the wooden sidewalk, the snow engendered melancholic thoughts of how it would always be like this from now on – the slush, the dirt, and the frosted puddles reflecting the grey, hopeless sky.

At the entrance, the guards exchanged words with the soldiers who brought Irina inside. It was a well-built two-story yellow house with columns. They entered the dining room. The sickly soldier, loudly stomping his boots on the wooden stairs, went up to the second floor. Irina looked around. There were some paintings on the walls, some small knick-knacks in the cupboard. There was the smell of food, and smoke was coming from the oven. It felt like the owners had just left for a minute and decided not to return.  Someone was coughing on the second floor and the boots stomped on the stairs again. The soldier sized Irina up from head to toe, curled his thin lips in a nasty grin and said, “Go there, fast!”

Irina went upstairs and found herself in a heated room that looked like a bedroom, judging by the large canopied bed. A heavy woman in a brightly-colored dress approached her. She smiled and gave Irina a tenacious, appraising look.

“Take off your old clothes, my dear, and put them in the corner. I made you a bath. I’ll go check if the water is still hot. It’s been waiting for you.”

Heavily panting, the woman disappeared into the adjacent room and came back with a large sheet. Irina quickly undressed under the hostess’ watchful eye, wrapped the sheet around her body and walked through the stained-glass door, stopping in front of a small bathtub on curved legs that stood on the rose, marble-tiled floor. Irina dropped the sheet and immersed herself in the hot water. She closed her eyes with delight, hearing the woman’s murmuring: “What a beautiful girl, what a wonderful girl…”

As if in a dream, she felt a soft tender sponge with aromatic foam slide over her emaciated, exhausted body. She could not escape the feeling of absurdity of what was happening: her hair was combed with a wooden comb; she was attired in a long, grey wool dress, and was seated at a table with fresh bread, soft lard, and hot smoking potatoes with sunflower oil and pickles.

“Will you have a shot?” asked the hostess, putting a bottle of yellowish liquid on the table. “Girl, don’t be afraid. Have some to calm down. If this is the first time… it helps a lot.”

Irina shook her head, unable to stop eating.

“Well, if you don’t want to, it’s fine. I’ll have some though.” The woman emptied her glass with gusto, bit off a crunchy pickle and poured another shot. “I see the dress fits you well. It belonged to the mistresses’ daughter.”

“Where are the owners?” Irina put more potatoes on her plate.

“You know where.” The woman lowered her eyes. “Where everybody else is. Maybe they’re alive, maybe not. Disappeared…last week. Your man…came here with some papers from the new government…told them to get out, but they refused. And you can’t make him angry….he’s so nasty. Oh, our grave sins…” she sighed heavily and raised her darkened eyes to Irina. “Look, your hair is dry. Go to the mirror, my dear, and make it the way you want. I’m not good at that.  I’ll go check if the samovar is ready.” With effort, she rose from her chair and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Irina quickly walked over to the window. *’It’s not too high. I need to find a coat. In this dress and these shoes I won’t be able to run far. But it doesn’t matter as long as I can get out of here.’*

She opened the window and met the eyes of a guard with a rifle, who watched the front door from a tent. Stepping away, she went over to the dressing table with a large mirror, gathered her hair and fastened it with a long metal hairpin she found lying on the table.  She heard something. The floor creaked, then again. The door slowly opened and the interrogator walked in. He approached her carefully. Without turning her hair, she clenched the hairpins with trembling fingers, hiding one of them in her hand.  Suddenly she thought, ‘This is my death. It can’t be anything else.”

“You’re beautiful,” the voice came from behind her.

She smelled a pungent cologne.

“I know,” she said calmly and turned around. “And?”

“And?” He looked her over, licking his lips, inhaling deeply, and took half a step towards her. “Now, you will undress and lay yourself down on the bed, and...”

The hairpin, like a snake, prepared to bite. The cross-eyed man stopped.

“Hey, don’t do anything crazy! You’ll sleep here till morning.” His mouth stretched out into a smile, revealing his yellow teeth. “At eight, there is a train to Petrograd. One of our men will go with you. He’s got papers for the revolutionary committee there. He won’t hurt you and will protect you. Tomorrow, you’ll be home. I see you’re surprised.” He grinned, looking at her stony face. “A promise is a promise. I liked you so I decided to let you go.” He squinted. “Aristocrat girl…. don’t try to run. The house is guarded; you’ll get shot. Well,” he looked at her again, “have a good night. I’m leaving.”

Hearing the door shut, Irina lowered herself onto the bed, exhausted. She could not understand how she could have made such a mistake - that this man, who she thought would definitely hurt her, was better than she had thought. She lay down in her dress, covering her legs with a blanket. The soft, downy bed welcomed her body.

She was half-asleep until sunrise, holding the hairpin in her hand. Her sharpened hearing was ready to react to any noise but the house was quiet. When the first rays of the rising sun dispersed the night’s darkness and illuminated the window, she relaxed and lost the hairpin in the silk blanket. Falling asleep, she felt as if someone was looking at her, but the look was harmless…

…She didn’t hear the door open, and didn’t even have time to scream when a heavy male’s body pinned her down and someone held down her head. Somehow, her hands were tied to the bedpost.

Wet, alcohol-soused lips hungrily kissed her mouth, not letting her scream or even breath. Her wrists, tied over her head, helplessly quivered and fought like the wings of a captured bird.  The hem of her dress was moving up with sharp jerks.

“A promise is a promise!” The familiar voice sounded triumphantly. “Bitch, did you think that I’d wash you and feed you and let you go just like that? You think you outsmarted me? No, first I’ll fuck you myself with all the revolutionary hatred…”

‘*How did I allow myself to fall asleep?*’

“…this is for that time… and then my friends will have fun with you, too…” His knees were pressing, forcing her legs open. “Let them enjoy themselves… they’ll mix your bourgeois blood with our proletarian…”

She began to pass out. The last thing she heard and felt was a strange crunch, a wheeze, and something warm pouring over her chest.

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 “The rain… Drops on my face…”

“Irina! Irina! Wake up! Wake up already!”

Irina reluctantly came to her senses.

“Why is it raining …who’s calling my name…that face, the blue eyes…..”

“Irina, thank God! The bayonet is long, you’re covered with blood. I thought I had killed you too.”

“What bayonet?” Irina could hardly speak. “Who are you?”

“We need to leave now. Don’t you recognize me? I’m Alexei, Anna Polikarpovna’s son.”

“Alesha!” She forced herself to raise her head. “How did you get here?”

“It doesn’t matter.” He put a half empty bottle with water on the table and helped her sit up on the bed. “We have to go. The guard is changing in an hour, and a military train should be in the station in thirty minutes. We have to make it. Here is a coat and a pair of felt boots. Put them on now. If they’re too big, never mind, you’ll be warm.”

Irina got up and tripped over a body lying on the floor face down with a large bloodstain on the back.  She remembered everything. The cross-eyed man. She felt sick and turned away, carefully stepping over the body, leaning on Alesha’s arm. She stuck her feet into the felt boots and wrapped herself in the military overcoat he put on her shoulders. On the stairs, she saw the sickly soldier. He was sick no more. Now he was lying on the floor with his arms spread out. His eyes were wide open.  She squeezed by, pressing herself into the wall. She could hear quiet wailing and sobbing from behind the closed closet door and looked at Alesha questioningly.

“She’ll be fine, let her sit there,” he said calmly, pushing Irina towards the exit.

They quietly walked to the train station, warily looking around. Alesha was holding his rifle in one hand and supporting Irina with the other.

The train arrived on time. Alesha exchanged some words with someone on the platform and helped her into the freight car. They were silent all the way to Petrograd, sitting across from each other on empty ammunition boxes. Irina hid her face in the raised greatcoat collar. The train stopped half a mile from the station. They decided not to wait.

“The station is filled with patrols. As my mum says, better safe than sorry,” Alesha said, helping Irina jump down onto the snow-covered tracks.

They stood motionlessly in front of her building, as if finishing a silent dialogue.

“God save you, Alesha! You are my guardian angel.” Irina kissed his cheek.

“Maybe I’m a guardian, but starting this morning I’m not an angel anymore.” He looked at her with his sad, blue eyes.

“Who knows, Alesha… Maybe this is what a white angel should do when he meets evil.”

 14

Sophie Troyanovsky was half-reclining on the sofa with a teacup in her hand and watching her sister, who was pacing back and forth across the room.  Lenochka had just recovered from pneumonia; she had lost a lot of weight during the previous month. Her sickly face was flushed.

“Why are you driving yourself crazy, Lena? I don’t understand you at all. You need to learn to accept life as it is, and be happy. You won’t have another life. The collapse of the Empire, big deal! As if it’s the first time! It was foretold a thousand times and it finally happened. The coup, the new government, so what? The good thing is that there will be a peace treaty with the Germans. Some people say it’s humiliating, but it’s still peace.”

“How can you not understand, Sophie?” Lenochka clapped her hands. “We’re on the verge of a civil war! Russians are killing Russians! It’s horrible!”

“Well, my dear, you’re wrong about Russians. First, it’s not only Russians who are killing, and not only Russians who are getting killed.  Some people just need to be killed. And second… war, as all sins, is only a passion.  The passion of the body, the nerves, the muscles, created for tension and release.” Sophie stretched and yawned.

Lenochka stopped and looked at her sister with resentment.

“I don’t understand you! How can you remain so calm when everything is crumbling?”

“My God, what’s crumbling, girl? These men grabbed power from those men, that’s all. But they’re all just men! Don’t worry, they won’t hurt us. By the way, Papa has already introduced me to Trotsky.”[[58]](#footnote-58)

“Papa? To Trotsky?“ Lenochka’s eyes rounded with surprise.

“Sure. And his real name is Bronshtein. For some reason they all changed their last names. Like they’re afraid of something.  Didn’t you know that father had financed them before the coup? Why do you think now he’s in charge of the State Bank depository audit?”

“Trotsky, big deal…” Lenochka looked at her sister with poorly concealed interest. “So, what kind of man is he?”

“What kind?” Sophie half-closed her eyes and smiled. “Curious, eh? If you stop running around and sit down, I’ll tell you. I’m already dizzy with you going back and forth.”

Lenochka coughed and sat down at Sophie’s feet. Sophie reached out and covered her with a blanket.

“What kind… short, skinny, brunette, ugly. Yellow face. Crooked nose. Disgusting, small mustache. Piercing imbecilic eyes. His hair is unkempt. Really, my dear, the chieftain has no time to comb his hair when he’s so busy with a revolution,” she added sarcastically. “What else? Thin lips. You know,” Sophie livened up, “he’s got a very developed skull over his temples. That alludes to…” Sophie laughed and formed horns at her temples with her fingers, “yes, horns. All that, together with his goatee makes him look like a demon. A demon, yes, I just realized that!”

“Terrible!” Lenochka crossed herself. “Why are you drawn to all that evil? First Rasputin, now Trotsky! I hope you didn't sleep with him?” she looked at her sister and started to cough.

“Not yet,” Sophie waved her hand dismissively. “Didn’t have time for that, but I certainly will. This I promise you. You see, I’m attracted to powerful men. There is something appealing in power. Although, I highly doubt that this Bolshevik goat, God forgive me,“ she crossed herself carelessly, “is as good in bed as the late Grigory Efimovich. She paused to think. “Though, you never know. Really, he does look like a demon.”

“I’m sorry, Sophie, but that is too much!” Lenochka stood up. “Look who you’re turning into! You…”

The sound of the doorbell interrupted their conversation. The sisters glanced at each other. Sophie quickly got off the sofa and looked into the hallway.

“Timofei!” she called the old servant. “Don’t open the door, first ask who it is.”

Timofei, groaning and grunting, went to the front door.

“It’s a woman,“ he shouted from downstairs. “She’s asking for you. She’s says she’s Irina Yakovleva, but I don’t think it’s her.”

“Iren?”

The sisters rushed downstairs. Timofei opened the door. Irina entered the hallway, shaking off the snow. Hardly recognizable, she was wearing a scarf, a soldier’s greatcoat that reached her heels and felt boots. Her face was unnaturally pale and thin; her one-time emerald eyes were now almost black with black rings underneath them.

“Iren, God, where did you come from!” Lenochka rushed to her. “Where is Nikolai Sergeevich?”

Irina silently untied her scarf, as if not noticing the sisters. She took off the greatcoat, hung it on a bronze hook and pulled her feet out of the felt boots, leaning against the wall without strength.

“Irochka…..you’re alive!” Lenochka kneeled down and hugged Irina’s legs, crying and pressing her face to the torn grey dress with brown bloodstains. “We didn’t know what to think…” She choked, coughing, gasping for air.

Timofei hobbled over and handed her a cup of warm water. Lenochka drank the water and looked at Irina, who was staring into space and not answering. “You need to warm up.”

“Timofei! Bring some clothes and hot water for a bath,” ordered Sophie, who until now was silently looking at the unexpected guest. “Let’s go, Iren,” she firmly grasped Irina’s hand and led her to the dining room.

Timofei soon returned with warm, knitted socks and the dress that Irina had forgotten when she had last left the Troyanovsky house.

“Timofei, you’re great!” Lenochka exclaimed. “Iren, dear, let’s go. You’ll wash and change, and we’ll have tea.”

“Lena, wait.” Sophie walked over to the cupboard and took out a crystal carafe and two shot glasses. She poured them all some vodka.

“Sophie, Iren doesn’t drink this! Not even champagne,” mumbled Lenochka watching her sister.

Sophie walked over to Iren and handed her the glass.

“Here! Drink! To your return from the underworld! And I’ll drink with you.” She sipped from the shot glass.

Lenochka watched with amazement how her friend gulped down the vodka in a single movement, like a man, without changing her face expression and then returned her glass to Sophie for a refill.

“Lena, bring some food from the kitchen. She needs to eat something,” Sophie ordered.

Lenochka realized that her sister wanted to be alone with Irina and reluctantly left the room. Giving Timofei some orders in the kitchen, she returned to the closed dining room door to eavesdrop on her sister and Irina. She heard some barely audible scraps of sentences:

“Bologoye…Nicky was murdered…the basement…the guardian angel…the train…made it….the door is sealed….what happened to Papa?”

Lenochka quietly walked away from the door.

“You see…” Sophie lit a cigarette.

“Is he alive?”

“He was arrested with the other members of the Provisional Government,” she exhaled, covering her face with smoke. “They were held in the Peter and Paul Fortress. He became very ill. Pneumonia. They took him to the hospital together with two other ministers, Kokoshkin and Shingarev, and…” Sophie lowered her eyes.

“What?” Irina cried, already knowing the answer. She could not believe it; she simply refused to believe it.

“Killed… The sailors… Right in the hospital… So cruelly, so painfully. The whole city was shocked.”

“Why?” asked Irina, raising her eyes.

Sophie spread out her arms with sadness, looking at Irina, whose eyes were surprisingly dry and hard.

“I’m sorry. No one could find you or your uncle to tell you… You’ll live here with us again. You have no one left. But you have us.”

“No one,” Irina repeated quietly.  “Where is Papa buried?”

“No one knows. Even my father couldn’t find out.”

The door opened and Lenochka walked in.

“Let’s remember Nikolai Sergeevich and Sergey Illich,” she said sadly and froze, looking at Irina, who was so unrecognizably grown up.

 Irina slowly rose from the sofa, walked to the door and suddenly stopped in front of the mirror. Sophie embraced her sister and walked her out of the room. Irina stared into the mirror, falling into a cold abyss.

*“Why?”* she whispered, either to herself or to the blurry spot, which was supposed to be her reflection.

“*Not ‘why’ but ‘for what purpose*,’” echoed Porphyries’ voice.

“For what purpose?” she asked, hardly moving her lips.

“*Everyone finds their own answer*.”

“Where should I look?” she cried out in despair, staring into the mirror until she finally recognized her own face, divided by the lamp light into two parts: light and dark.

**PART TWO**

**1**

**France, Summer of 1925**

The trip from Paris to Sisteron was actually planned for her. The beautiful Provence nature, the relaxing atmosphere and the games were all meant to help the mysterious and silent Mademoiselle Iren open up and talk about herself.

The sun was tired from the day’s work and from the cheerful hubbub of the young men and women who had decided to have a picnic on the steep bank at the bend of the river. Their noise disturbed the majestic tranquility of the Durance River, the old park and the mountains about to go to sleep, following the eternal laws of nature.

“Iren, perhaps you can help me with the fire?” Bernard turned to the young woman who was sitting on a green tartan, watching the others play.

“Why not, Monsieur Bernard?” She turned to him. “Would you like me to gather some kindling for the fire?”

“Only if I come with you,” Bernard smiled. “I won’t let you go alone. Legend says that evil spirits live in this park.“ He made a scary face. “And they’re just waiting for a beautiful girl to grasp with their claws.”

“Spirits don’t have claws,“ said Iren. “Only misbehaving men do.”

“Then I will go alone,“ Bernard sighed theatrically. He slouched and walked towards the woods. “Don’t cry for me if I don’t come back.“ He looked back to check if Iren was following him. “Whatever happens, it will be on your conscience.” He looked again at the tragic woman, who was still sitting.

Despite all his attempts, Bernard was only able to learn that Iren was a Russian émigré, and that she had miraculously boarded the last steamboat leaving Crimea, several hours before the Bolsheviks arrived in Sevastopol. She never talked about it. She always avoided the topic, making it seem she was hiding something…

Bernard had known Iren for more than a year. They had met in the eastern outskirts of Paris. His car had stalled and he walked into a small café to ask for some water to cool off the radiator. A dishwasher gave him the water. Having ample experience with women, he immediately recognized a rare beauty. There were many of them in Paris after the Bolshevik coup. They stood out with their special traits and class, like an Arabian stallion in a stall with draft horses.  Bernard asked the café owner about her. The fellow praised Mademoiselle Iren for her cleanliness and hard work, but was upset that she didn’t want to be a waitress. Waitresses made more and got tips. But she refused, explaining that she preferred to deal with dirty dishes rather than customers.

That night, Bernard waited for the cutie’s shift to end. He met her at the café entrance and directly asked her to spend the night at his place, offering more than the going rate. The Russian’s refusal surprised and annoyed him.  He wasn’t used to women saying no to him, but he did not insist. Something in her eyes told him to be careful and stay away. Getting involved with the beautiful dishwasher was probably not the best idea, but he was possessed with the excitement of a butterfly collector chasing an elusive rare specimen.

Bernard learned that she was staying in a small room not far from the cafe. The next evening he met Iren at the café and offered to move her to a large, furnished apartment he had rented for her.

The coy girl responded: “I won’t pretend that I wouldn’t be glad to quit this job and accept your offer. But I would have to pay for the apartment, isn’t that correct, Monsieur?  I would not be able to become a kept woman and pay for it with my body. That contradicts my principles.“

The truth was that this answer pleased him. The harder the chase, the more interesting. Wounded pride always excites the body. He temporarily distanced himself but did not forget her. While pursuing other butterflies, he sent her bouquets and trinkets. After some time, he showed up at the café again to make her a better offer. However, when he walked in, he saw his last bouquet in a vase on the bar. The owner handed him a bag with the presents Iren had refused, and informed him that mademoiselle did not work there anymore, that she had moved and he did not know where she lived.

Several months later, Bernard was very surprised when he saw Iren’s reflection in a foyer mirror in the Theatre des Champs-Elysees, where he had come to see a ballet. He quickly turned and looked in amazement at the knot of dark hair pulled tightly at the back by a sapphire hairpin, a slender neck decorated with an expensive necklace and well-groomed shoulders in a lavish low-cut dress. He thought this might be a mirage, but the beautiful vision looked at him, smiled, and walked up to him. “Good evening, Monsieur Bernard.”

Asked about the miraculous transformation, Irina said that she was surprised he did not guess immediately that she was a GPU[[59]](#footnote-59) secret agent from the Soviet Union. A dishwasher yesterday, a socialite today. She was on a secret mission! She laughed, seeing Bernard’s jaw drop.

Then, a short, bald, fat man in a tuxedo holding a theater program appeared out of nowhere. He gave Bernard a wary look, but then saw Iren laughing and reservedly introduced himself. The fat man was Iren’s father’s cousin, a banker from New York. He had come to have a good time in Paris. Walking down Montmartre, he wanted to get acquainted with the woman who turned out to be his niece. He hadn’t seen her for ten years and only recognized her because of her amazing resemblance to her late mother.

After the encounter at the theater, Bernard had no problem finding her. She lived with her uncle in a huge apartment on Champs-Elysees.  He sent her bouquets, but this time very expensive ones, hoping to meet with her. However, Iren politely refused him every time – until she finally agreed to go with him and his friends to Sisteron in the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence. He was a member of the wealthy Tarner family, which had an estate there…

“I’m back,” said Bernard, dropping a pile of brushwood on the ground next to a large boulder. “To your joy, which you are not even trying to conceal!” He turned to Iren. “I suggest that we all drink to my return!“ He took out a bottle of wine from the basket. This time, his words were heard. Jacques and Marie hopped over, and out of the bushes came Victor – a disheveled, skinny, long-legged young fellow who looked like a grasshopper, and usually preferred to be alone. They drank the wine and gathered around the fire.

“My friends,” he began, “imagine that all of us are on an uninhabited island. Very soon, in one hour, it will be destroyed by a giant wave. We don’t expect any help from anywhere and we will all die.…”

“*Mon cher*, this is so crude!” plump Marie curled up her lips capriciously. “Jacques, my dear,” Marie leaned against her friend, “help me climb this rock, I’m afraid to wet my feet. “

“Marie, please don’t interrupt!” said Bernard, “Hear me out. I promise, it will be interesting. Also, who knows, maybe right now you are at…”

“At the first séance of a future psychology star.“ Jacques finished his sentence. “And you will be proud to have known him!”

“If you don’t want to listen to me,“ Bernard continued, “just be silent and count the stars.” He pointed his finger to the sky, already strewn with shimmering diamonds.

“Yes, Marie, this is interesting,“ said Jacques, hugging the girl.

“I’d rather...”

“Count the stars reflected in my eyes,“ smiled Jacques and kissed her temple.

“Alright!” Marie twisted resentfully and sat down on the blanket with Iren.

“Let’s listen to Bernard,“ said Victor. He was sitting on a stump, which was so low that his skinny legs seemed to be folded three times.

“So,” Bernard looked at Victor with gratitude, “just imagine that in one hour we won’t be alive.” He paused for a second, letting that sink in. “There is no priest around who will take your confession and absolve your sins.”

Marie chuckled.

“Therefore, we can only confess to each other. Let's look into our memories and find our most grievous mistakes. Those lodged in our subconscious like splinters. Even when we think we have forgotten about them.” He looked at Iren.

“Honestly, I wouldn’t confess an hour before my death,” said Marie. “I’d choose to enjoy that time. How about you, Jacques?” She smiled at her friend embracing his shoulders.

“Damn!” Bernard was annoyed. “All you can think of on the hour of your death is how to …”

“I can assure you, Bernard,” said Marie, “not everyone would be able to do *that* right before their death,“ snapped Marie. “Right, my love?” She looked at Jacques, whose hand was roaming the basket for another wine bottle.

Irina sat with lowered eyes, indifferently nibbling on a blade of grass, regretting that she had agreed to come here.  These rich, careless, young French, her peers, didn’t know how to kill time. She found their carelessness and detachment from real life strange. Real life, with its wars and revolutions, where blood is shed and empires fall and rise, was alien to them. They had never lost their loved ones; they had known no hunger or violence. Out of boredom, they created artificial hypothetical problems and then tried to solve them. How could they understand the meaning of the “death hour,” not having experienced it with a charred soul? At the same time, she realized that she had come with them because she wanted to shed her old skin, her memories. She wanted to hide from thoughts of the past and the nightmares torturing her every night.

As in her childhood, she wanted a fairytale prince to come and pick her up with his strong arms, bring her home, remove her old wounded snakeskin and turn her into a princess surrounded with love, tenderness and kindness. No, she didn’t want the prince to burn her old snakeskin because then, at night, she would not be able to put on her silver scales and briefly turn into the old Irina from her old life, only to remember that all that’s good can suddenly stop and she should enjoy every joyful day God has given her.

*‘Well,*’ Irina thought sadly, *‘The character in that fairytale was a frog, not a snake. Why did I compare it to a snake? Probably because I just don’t want to be a frog in France. The French treat them heartlessly. And my beloved Russian fairytales where goodness always conquers evil are just a lie… maybe a white lie, but still a lie. We can’t defeat the evil around us, only the evil within us.*’

“Alright, friends.“ Bernard was annoyed. “Let’s decide if we’re going to play the game or turn everything into a regular picnic, finish the wine and the sandwiches and go to sleep. Well?”

“Yes, let’s play!” Victor stretched his legs.

“So?” Bernard looked at Jacques.

“Do as you wish.“ He waved his hand, whispering something to Marie.

“Then we start with you, dear Jacques,” said Bernard. “You’re the biggest player here. Get up and go stand by the cliff.”

“Why do I have to stand by the cliff?” grumbled Jacques. He winked at Marie, who reluctantly let go of his hand. Then he slowly walked over to the riverbank, looked down and sprung back, feigning a startled look.

Bernard approached his friend, pulled a small flask out of his pocket, poured some liquid into the cup and handed it to Jacques.

“Drink this. It’s an herbal brew for relaxation.”

Jacques gulped down the liquid and grimaced. “It’s awful!”

“Now face me, your back to the water,” ordered Bernard with a gloomy voice.

Jacques stopped grimacing, walked over to the cliff again, carefully looked down, and then turned around facing Bernard.

“No, even closer to the edge,” demanded Bernard.

Jacques took half a step back. Everyone was silent.

“And now, look me in the eyes,” ordered Bernard.  “Death is standing behind your back,” he drawled, moving his hand in front of Jacques’ face. “Remember your life,“ he dragged out with a theatrical voice, playing the role of a magician or an amateur hypnotist. “Remember the wrongs you have done. Remember your worst sin, the monster hiding in the bottom of your soul. Call it out and show it to me. If you lie to me, the pendulum of time will throw you into the abyss! What’s troubling you? Tell me and I will help you!”

 Jacques, who was first grinning and making faces, suddenly froze, looking into Bernard’s eyes. His face trembled unnaturally in the moonlight and the smoke from the fire.

Irina watched all this indulgently. *‘They’re so strange,’* she thought. She knew that Bernard was studying psychiatry and hypnosis, but she could not imagine opening herself to another person, let alone many people at once. She was also skeptical about psychological experiments and all kinds of interventions in the human psyche, especially those done by amateurs.

She remembered a story that had made the headlines in St. Petersburg.  Professor Ivantsov, a young but already famous psychiatrist, had a new patient, the wife of a high-ranking government official. She was suffering from horrible asthma attacks. She thought that she would die soon and that nothing could help her anymore. However, the Professor tried to convince her otherwise.  She would not believe him, but the doctor - a healthy, thirty-five year old man - promised her that she would die on the same day with him. The woman recovered. Her illness was gone without any treatment. Five years later she decided to wish the doctor a happy 1916 New Year, and thank him again for her recovery.  “Unfortunately, the Professor died tragically this morning,” they told her on the phone. “He slipped and fell under a streetcar.” The poor woman walked over to the sofa and, in a few minutes, died from an asthma attack. Had she not called the Professor, she probably would have lived many more years.

“My childhood….” It was Jacques’ choked voice. He seemed like he was about to start crying. “My mother was very beautiful and kind. I loved her and…” his voice broke, “I loved her and I betrayed her... I betrayed… my father.“  Jacques’ voice became tense. “I was always afraid of him... He beat me, but I respected him. I wanted to be like him, strong like him. We had a neighbor, my dad’s friend. I hated him. My dad spent more time with him than with me…” Jacques lowered his head and fell silent.

Bernard waved Irina and Victor to come over. Irina shook her head – she had no desire to participate in a stupid game.  Bernard waved again, insistently, persuading her with a beseeching look. Irina reluctantly got up and followed Victor. She stood one step away from Jacques. His eyes were wide open and the expression… he had no expression, only the wide black pupils.

“Jacques, listen to me!” continued Bernard. “I am your father.”

Jacques was anxious.

“Your mother is next to you. Take her hand.” Bernard connected Jacques’ and Irina’s hands. Jacques’ hand was cold and wet and his fingers were soft and relaxed. “And here is the neighbor,” he motioned for Victor to come nearer. “We are all here, in front of you. You are the boy you were then…”

Jacques did not respond.

“Well, rascal, tell me what you saw!” said Barnard-the-father in an angry voice. “Speak, you son of a bitch!”

“I saw mama and the neighbor,“ Jacques forced the words out of himself.

“And what were they doing?” Bernard-the-father moved threateningly towards his son.

“They… he was hugging mama…” Tears were flowing down Jacques’ face. “He was saying that he’d been in love with her for a long time. He kissed her, kissed her, kissed her,“ Jacques closed his eyes and began shaking his head from side to side as if something inside was forcing him to make the involuntary movements.

Bernard leaned over to Victor’s ear and whispered something.  Victor nodded.

Suddenly, Victor cried, “I love you, baby! I’ve been in love with you for a long time!” and grabbed Irina, pulling her to himself.

“Whore! I’ll kill you!” Bernard yelled all of a sudden.

Irina was lost, overwhelmed by the unceremonious touch of some stranger’s hands and the lashing scream. Then she saw Victor’s lusty half-opened mouth with crooked teeth nearing her. She pushed the “neighbor” away so hard that he fell, knocking over Jacques, who grabbed Irina’s wrist and pulled her down the riverbank with him.

The flight was short. There was a frightened scream, either Jacques’ or Bernard’s. They struck the water. It was hard and cold. Someone’s arms grabbed her and pulled her down. She felt the heavy fabric of her long dress and the water relentlessly rushed into her mouth. She gasped for air and thought desperately that life had come to an end so suddenly and so stupidly.

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“Thank God! I think she’s waking up.” It was Nicky’s voice, so wonderful and kind.

‘*We’re finally together*,’ Irina thought peacefully as warm hands rubbed her palms.

“Mademoiselle Irina, can you hear me?”

‘*Nicky’s voice is so nice, but why is he calling me mademoiselle*?’

“Now, bring the girl into the house, idiots!”

‘*Nicky is angry for some reason*.’

She felt the touch of several hands, which clumsily tried to lift her off the ground.

“Move over, all of you, useless idiots!”

“*Again, Nicky’s voice is firm and steadfast, and he has strong hands, hands of a real man… let him carry me where he wants… we’re finally together…* ” thought Irina, falling into darkness again.

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 Irina opened her eyes. She saw a stuccoed ceiling and a painting with a plump, pink-cheeked cupid playfully aiming arrows at a stout, half-naked woman who, judging by the joyful anticipation on her face, would have been very unhappy if the arrows had missed.

She turned her head. There was a huge fireplace with burning logs. The flames performed a barbaric, unbridled dance on the walls and ceiling, turning the objects in the room into participants in some fire ritual.

“Goodness, where am I?” She suddenly realized that she was in a strange place. She sat up in the bed, looked around, and got up, realizing that she was wearing someone else’s silk pajamas with very long sleeves. She rolled up the sleeves and the pants, trying to remember how she had got there. Her memory only went as far as the fall from the bank. Then, nothing.

“Hey, is anybody here?” she called out hesitantly, looking at the massive oak door with carved lion faces.  She repeated the question, then louder, and louder again.

The door opened halfway.

“May I, Mademoiselle?” someone asked in French from behind the door.

‘*Nicky?’* Irina thought*.* “Yes.“ She exhaled and lowered herself on the bed, boring the door with her eyes.

A man walked in. He was about forty, of medium height, with a small, neat mustache and was holding a tray with an antique silver coffee pot. He approached the bed and put the tray on the night table.

“I thought you’d wake up hungry.“ He removed the napkin, revealing some sandwiches decorated with fresh salad leaves.

“Who are you and where am I?” Irina asked.

“I’m sorry, Mademoiselle Iren, I didn’t introduce myself,“ the man said with embarrassment. “My name is Nicholas. Count Nicholas Tarner. I’m the older brother of Bernard Tarner, your friend,” he smiled. “I’m pleased to meet you.“

Irina rubbed her temples with her cold fingers and forced herself to smile back.

*‘It’s a delusion,’* she thought. ‘*It’s a different man but his voice is Nicky’s.’*

“By the way, I recently had the pleasure of meeting your uncle, Monsieur Yakovlev.  May I sit down?” His head turned to the armchair.

Irina nodded.

*‘It can’t be,’* she tried to convince herself, looking at the host.

The door with the lions opened again and Bernard’s curly head peeked in. His eyes revealed only one wish – to be forgiven.

“Ah, here is our psychology enthusiast.” Nicholas looked towards the door. “Will you allow him in?”

Irina was quiet, absorbing the sound of his voice.

“Only to apologize to you, Mademoiselle,” explained Nicholas.

Finally, Irina focused her eyes on the man at the door and nodded.

“Forgive me,” said Bernard, still standing at the door with his head down.

“I hope your friends are safe,” she said.

In the presence of his older brother, Bernard turned into a little boy caught doing some mischief. He even looked shorter.

“They’re fine,” Nicholas answered for his brother. “It’s deep under the bank, but then the river turns shallow. They had swimming races there. I even thought they had some kind of competition in your honor, but they had actually made you a participant.“ He gave Bernard a stern look. “And it looks like it was against your will. By the way, why wasn’t my brother swimming?”

Irina smiled faintly, feeling more like herself.

 “You see, Count, it was a test swim, therefore, the list of participants was short. Unfortunately,” she looked at Bernard.

Nicholas laughed and looked at Irina questioningly.

“At the last moment your brother refused to swim for some reason, although the ‘pendulum of time,’ as he called it, swung in his direction,” she explained.

Nicholas glanced at his embarrassed younger brother, barely hiding his smile.

“Yes, Bernard always prefers to be the referee. In any case, Mademoiselle, you are my guest. That will certainly protect you from participating in psychological experiments. Right, Bernard?” he asked his brother, who gave him a quiet, sullen look.

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“You see how it happens in life.  You’re from far-away Russia. I’m from France. The world had to collapse for us to meet each other.”

Irina paused, losing her breath. Nicholas did not move his eyes.

The river reflected a silver light. The breeze was cool. The air was permeated with the smell of grass. *‘The world had to collapse for us to meet each other,’* she thought. *‘The same voice, the same words, a different person, a different language… But the voice, the voice is the same…’*

                                                                        \*\*\*\*\*

Quick steps behind her made her tense. She clenched her fists. Bernard grabbed her by the elbow and hissed, “You think I don’t understand? Who do you think you are? You’re just like everybody else!”

“I don’t like your games,” Irina said slowly, containing her rage, and freed her arm with an abrupt movement. “And I don’t like you. Don’t ever come close to me again!”

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They arrived in Paris at sunrise. The sun had not quite risen over the roofs yet, but the sky was already glowing. The birds were conversing, lively, happy to greet the new day. The morning haze wrapped Notre Dame, which seemed like a huge ship from the other world, that briefly enters the earthly harbor and freezes at the pier in fascination, watching the polyphony of life bustling on dry land.

They drove up to an old, white stone building with thin, ornate balconies, on the Seine embankment near Saint Michel.

“This is where I live.” Nicholas turned to Irina.

“It’s a beautiful place.” She looked around, then at Nicholas, not knowing what to do next.

“Would you like to have breakfast with me?” Nicholas covered her hand with his.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” She looked into his eyes, trying to guess his answer, although she herself was not sure if she wanted to hear a yes or a no.

“I’ve never been surer that it’s exactly what I want!”

He jumped out of the car, walked around the front and helped her out. Escorting her to the entrance of the house, he saw an old, grey-haired gypsy woman appear out of nowhere.

“Madame!” The gypsy showed a row of healthy white teeth, a rarity at her age.

Irina slowed down.

“Does Madame want me to tell Monsieur’s fortune?”

“No! I don’t believe in these fantasies,” Nicholas said and moved on.

“Please, Nicholas!” Irina held him back by his arm. “In Russia, there is a tradition to heed fortune tellers and give them good tips. Please!”

“Only for you, Iren.“ Nicholas shook his head disapprovingly and turned to the gypsy.

“You’re from a noble lineage, I see,“ said the woman, examining the lines on his hand.

A condescending smile flashed on his face. She didn’t have to look at his hand to guess that. The old woman squeezed his palm to accentuate the lines and looked deeper.

“I see you don’t love life. That’s why you travel a lot,” she said sadly.

Nicholas looked up at her, not understanding the connection between the two.

“You have everything,” the gypsy continued. “But you’re poor,” she said as if she was sorry for him.

“Me? Poor? Are you joking, Madam?” He jerked his hand back and stepped away from the old woman, looking at Irina with rebuke for making him listen to this nonsense.

Irina, on the other hand, froze, tensely staring at the fortuneteller.

“Learn not only to listen but also to hear,“ the Gypsy preached. “You can’t pour much into a full glass because it’s already full. The rich are not the ones who have a lot. They are the ones who give to others. The more you give the more you can take back. If you love, love the way you want to be loved. That’s happiness. And human life is short. So, hurry to love. Nobody knows how long he’ll live.“ She looked at Irina with sadness.

“Not even you, Madame?” asked Nicholas jokingly.

“Not even me. A magus can only show the roads. It’s up to you to pick one. This is why the ancients said, “Live today”…

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“It’s nice.” Irina stepped away from the dining room window.

“Make yourself comfortable.” Nicholas showed her to an English-style divan. “I’ll make a fire; it’ll be cozy.” He lit a candle. “Then we’ll eat breakfast.”

A cheerful flame licked the log bark, releasing a thin stream of grey smoke.

“I’d like to refresh myself,” Irina said, “and my clothes are all dusty.”

“Of course, my fault! I should have seen to it immediately. The bathroom is down the hall on the right. You’ll find some robes in the closet. The maid will come in an hour and clean your clothes. You can take a shower or a bath. I still don’t know your preferences. Should I show you the way?”

Irina shook her head and entered the large, brightly lit bathroom, where each item had its own specific place. She let the water run, dropped her clothes on the floor and stood in front of the large mirror.

*‘What was he saying last night? What’s so amazing about me?’* she thought, looking into the mirror as if she had never seen herself before. The reflection looked back knowingly, though unexpectedly. *‘A regular woman, like many others.’* She touched her face with her fingertips, passed her hands across her neck, shoulders, breasts and hips. *’Of course, harmonious features, smooth skin and gorgeous hair will make a woman beautiful.’* She turned sideways, noticing that the small of the back was not bad and the scar on the shoulder was not so noticeable. But real beauty – she moved her face very close to the mirror – is hidden in the shining eyes and the light streaming from them.

*‘The shine comes from passion, and the light from love, because love is the child of the soul, and passion is created by the body.’*

 *‘Love and passion always walk together and are drawn to each other, but when they touch, they almost always cause a burn.’*

 She grimaced painfully. She didn’t quite recognize herself and wasn’t even sure she liked what she saw. She stuck her hand under the shower stream and splashed the water onto the mirror and got into the shower.

When Irina, wrapped in a long, black silk robe, returned to the dining room, the logs in the fireplace were crackling. The table was set for two: snow-white napkins, silver cutlery, plates and cups bearing a coat of arms with words written underneath.  Irina picked up a cup and read the Latin letters: *Carpe Diem*.

“Carpe Diem?” she asked in amazement, remembering the old Gypsy woman.

“Yes, Live Today,” said Nicholas, entering the room with a wine bottle and two glasses. “It’s interesting that the fortune teller said that.”

Nicholas sat next to her on the divan and poured the wine into the glasses.

“To you, my dear!” he raised his glass.

“And to you, Nicholas.” She sipped the wine, but it had no taste. “Listen, Nicholas,” she touched his hand gently, “what happened last night doesn’t oblige you in any way.”

“Iren,“ Nicholas took her hand and kissed her wrist. “Honestly, I still don’t believe that you are some phantom who came into my life, only to disappear. Neither are you some kind of magical bird that just flew into my window. You know, with your appearance, I… this morning I noticed that flowers are beautiful, the sky and… well, the morning itself seems to be a gift from God. Don’t disappear from my life, Iren, please.“ He squeezed her hand, “I feel that I’ve known you for a very long time, all my life… although I know nothing about you. And what happened…” he put down his glass and caressed her face, “and what happened, does oblige me….”

Irina tensed. She knew that obligation could not make anyone happy.

“It gives me the pleasure,“ Nicholas corrected himself, “of making happy the woman I love, the woman I have finally met,” he exhaled, touching her lips with his.

She closed her eyes, listening to the sound of his voice. *‘This cannot be,’* she tried to convince herself. *‘It’s a hallucination, delirium, madness. I should leave right away, or else…. No, let him continue…’* She relaxed and reclined on the divan.

‘*What am I doing*?’ she wondered for a fleeting moment, but didn’t really care about an answer.

She felt his warm hands, a light prickling of his short-cropped mustache on her neck. She heard him whisper, “I love you, Iren…”

Was she dreaming or did he say it in Russian? *Although, what’s the difference? Let him continue…*

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Irina slept with a blissful smile, her hands under her cheek. She was dreaming about a forest clearing covered with yellow dandelions. Carefree, multi-colored butterflies hovered over it. She smelled the green grass. She heard grasshoppers chirping and, even as she was dreaming, she was surprised, after so long, to dream in color, with sounds and smells, so bright and happy. She felt like a child again.

A booming gong resounded. At the edge of the clearing, there was a huge clock that looked like an old tower. The clock showed the time, and on its swaying pendulum there was a tiny….. Bernard. Bernard grasped on to the giant pendulum, his fingers white from exertion. In front of the clock, Porphyries paced back and forth in his silk robe with Chinese dragons. He gave Bernard a stern look each time the pendulum passed by, lecturing him in a monotonous voice: “A life without a higher purpose is not a life, but just a miserable existence and the slow death of the soul.”

When the pendulum returned with Bernard, Porphyries promised him eternal swaying on the pitiless pendulum of time. Flying by the tireless Magus, Bernard looked at him with wide-eyed grief and terror. But suddenly, he saw Irina.

“Iren, I beg you, take me down!” he implored her, flying away with the pendulum. “Forgive me, Iren! If it had not been for me, you would have never met Nicholas!”

*“I love you, Iren,”* Nicky’s voice hovered above her. She smiled happily and reached out towards him with her hands, without opening her eyes.

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The clock struck five times. Irina woke up. Lying with her eyes closed, she felt a smile on her face and listened to the sounds around her. She didn’t want to think. She reached out and felt the bed. There was no one.

She opened her eyes. The evening sun’s rays were coming through the thin window curtain which slightly stirred keeping the light Seine breeze from entering the room. The proud Spanish women were looking at her from the paintings on the wall. She stayed in bed for a bit longer, enjoying the peacefulness. Then she lowered her feet onto the floor and looked for her robe. Not finding it, she wrapped herself in the long silk blanket and took a few steps towards the door.  Tripping on the blanket, she hit her knee against a table, knocking off an apple.

“Right!” She rubbed the hurt knee. “Maybe I don’t like myself either. So what?” She pulled up the blanket and limped over to the large mirror in the bronze frame.  “So what now?”

 “Well, I feel embarrassed!” she said. “I’m going to leave here right now!” She turned around and walked to the door, but the blanket tripped her feet again and she fell into the nearby armchair. She decided to sit awhile, crossing her legs and making herself comfortable.

*‘Actually, why am I embarrassed?’* she thought. *‘Embarrassed by what? Why do I care what anyone thinks about me? Don’t I have the right to make my own mistakes? Who said they are even mistakes?  Depends how you look at it. The brightest feelings in life are born of passion. Passion never works well with logic,”* she rationalized. *‘Where’s Nicholas? I should tell him I’m up and that my clothes are missing….although, that might make him happy,’* she smiled.

Irina rose and walked into the hallway, holding the blanket. She smelled a faint burning smell and heard voices in the dining room. She listened in. Nicholas and Bernard were arguing. She came closer.

“You don’t know her at all! Why do you need her? She’s not so remarkable! She doesn’t know what she’s doing, or maybe she knows all too well!” Bernard was ranting sarcastically.  “All these Russians here are crazy! They’re not in Russia and they’re not in France. They exist beyond time and space. They long for a Russia that doesn’t exist anymore!”

“I love her the way she is!”

“Love? Her?”

“Yes, her, Bernard.”

“A woman you’ve known for only two days? If you want, I’ll bring you a dozen of them, just like her, and you’ll get even a better thrill!”

“How dare you speak like this? Get out of here!”

“You’re telling your own brother to get out? Maybe you’ll marry her, too?”

“Leave, Bernard. I’ll decide what’s best for me.”

Irina clenched the blanket and hurried back into the bedroom.  She dived into the bed and covered herself with the blanket.  She saw Nicholas come into the bedroom carrying several cardboard boxes. He put them down and approached the bed. Noticing the apple on the floor, he picked it up and looked at her pensively.

“I heard the conversation,” Irina acknowledged, to her own surprise. Nicholas smiled, put the apple on the table, and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Where are my clothes?” she asked with a tone that implied she wanted to leave.

“You see,” Nicholas rubbed his forehead, “perhaps you won’t approve of it…”

Irina nodded ahead of time.

“…but while you were sleeping,” he smiled disarmingly, “well, in these boxes on the table you’ll find your new clothes… for your new life. I decided that you shouldn’t be wearing what you wore before. I think the size is right,” he smiled. “And also,“ he covered her mouth with his hand, not letting her object, “I was wondering…. if I should speak with Monsieur Yakovlev… I mean, should I ask him for your hand or we’ll do it without the formalities?”

“Nicholas, my love!” Irina pushed his hand aside, “I think we’ve done well without extra formalities so far, no?” She caressed his cheek. “Or do you think we should ask someone’s permission to do this impulsive and thoughtless thing? By the way, where is my old dress?”

“Don’t you smell it?” He drew some air with his nose. “I burned it in the fireplace,” he said calmly without doubting his decision.

“You didn’t want to clean it?” Irina wanted to make a joke but didn’t. She thought, *‘Aren’t my dreams coming true too fast?’*

“So, what do you say?”

“Me?” She got out of bed, covered in the blanket. “I say yes!” Becoming serious, she extended her hand to Nicholas. “And the dress…Forget the dress.”

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 They came home late at night. After the civil ceremony at *City Hall*, they sat at a cozy café on Boulevard Saint Michel, and then walked along the embankment, where they bought all the violets they could find, and threw them into the water for luck. They sat down on a bench by Notre Dame, fantasizing about coming back with their future grandchildren to remember this beautiful day.

Back at home, Nicholas took her hand with an aura of mystery, and led her to the dining room. He turned up the lights. The room was bedecked with flowers – in vases, large and small, on the tables, on the windows, in the baskets on the floor and on the mantel shelf. There was a champagne bottle on the small table next to the fireplace, along with two glasses and a bronze candelabrum. Nicholas lit the candles, walked up to the window, and opened the shutter wide…

“Come in, happiness!” he cried joyfully in Russian, obviously wanting to please his wife.

Irina froze…

…Happiness cautiously walked into the house and looked into the woman’s pale face. It looked like they had met before, on New Year’s Eve in 1917, far away, in snow-covered Russia. But the man who invited happiness in was not the same.

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Night… a time when men’s souls confess to God. And God is all Merciful. He understands and forgives. Who else if not Him?

The dark sky watched through the yellow monocle of the moon, looking into the bedroom where a man and woman lay in bed. The man slept calmly. The woman did not. She lay with her eyes open and, curled up, and listened to the silence of the night.

The clock struck four. Irina opened her eyes. Her heart pounded and felt as if it would burst out of her chest. So many years had passed since Nicky’s murder, and still, she would relive it from time to time. In the early morning, something large and heavy, like a python, wound around her body, squeezing her throat, not letting her breathe, run away, or even cry.

And their faces, their calm faces…. Nothing could be changed…

For some reason, she never saw Nicky in her dreams, only a vague pale spot of light that strangely moved away and disappeared like a mirage each time she tried to approach it.

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A soirée organized by Prince Lvov, in the Russian Embassy, normally would not have attracted her attention, if not for the rumor that a rare guest would be attending: the writer Kuprin, who rarely appeared in front of the émigré audience. Another prominent guest was also expected: Prince Felix Yusupov, the one-time heartbreaker of many a heart at the *Smolensky* Institute.

*“What is a body? It’s but a piece of beef!*

*The hair, the skin, the eyes, the lusty mouth*

*A lifeless box for the soul.*

*It’ll rot in the ground, we know that of course!”*

A strange looking man on the stage was reading his bizarre poetry, waving his hands.

“My dear, don’t you think these horrible verses are just Lvov’s attempts to turn us into vegetarians?” said a soft purring voice next to Irina. “After this, who’d want to go to the dining hall and have meat?”

“Vasiliy Alexeevich, my dear, instead of enjoying the lofty and the spiritual, you’re worrying about gluttony?” She playfully looked at Maklakov, a man trying to look younger than his age, with a mustache that seemed glued on, carefully twisted upwards, over his soft lips.

Maklakov had been the Provisional Government’s Ambassador to France. He arrived in Paris on October 25, 1917, the day the government fell. The French Foreign Ministry received the notice of his arrival but he did not have a chance to present his diplomatic credentials to President Poincare, so he simply lived in the Russian Embassy for more than five years. The French did not know what to do with him. They did not recognize the Soviet government and they could not do business with Maklakov, who represented the nonexistent Provisional Government. Vasiliy Alexeevich had nothing to do except enjoy himself in the city, respond to invitations, attend official events and host parties at the Embassy.

“And where is your spouse, Irina Sergeevna? I heard you became a Countess, correct? Congratulations!”

“Thank you, Vasiliy Alexeevich. Are you sure Yusupov is coming?

Maklakov smiled conspiratorially. “Who would know better than me,“ he replied. “And Yusupov *will* be coming because of me! It can’t be any other way. We’re bonded by a great crime! I was the one who got him the poison for Rasputin. It wasn’t my fault the poison didn’t work on the villain, but still, my role in Russian history is significant, although not well known.”

The audience in the hall applauded and the poet left the stage. Everyone rose from their seats.

“So, is he coming?” Irina asked again.

“He is,“ promised Maklakov. “Don’t doubt it. And for now, Countess!” He offered her his arm, “Please allow me to offer you to leave this stuffy place and move on to another hall.  Thankfully, there won’t be any poetry and we can taste some delicious meat.”

“Vasiliy Alekseevich, unfortunately I have to say no,” Irina pretended to be sad. “I think my husband is looking for me!” She saw Nicholas standing in the door, waiting for the crowd to disperse.

“Of course, of course,” sighed Maklakov. He quickly turned around and took his leave, noticing another object of his attention.

“Irina Sergeevna, my dear!” sounded a low, hoarse voice.

Irina saw a plump woman approach her in a dress that seemed to be taken out of an old chest. A shy girl followed her reluctantly.

Irina smiled politely, trying to remember where they had met.

“Imagine, Irina Sergeevna,” said the plump woman, cooling herself with a fan, as if trying to get rid of a mothball smell, “my daughter is driving me crazy asking me to introduce her to Countess Irina Sergeevna.”

The girl blushed and lowered her eyes.

“Don’t blush.” The mother looked at her strictly. “Didn’t you ask me?”

The girl lowered her head.

“Nothing to be ashamed of! Here, look at the Countess now!” the mother ordered her daughter. “You are a remarkable woman, Irina Sergeevna.” She smiled cordially at Irina. “Everyone is talking about you saying that you’re so lucky because you married Count Tarner!”

Irina grimaced.

The plump woman respectfully continued, “You’re young, beautiful, and rich! Young girls melt at the mention of your name!” Her fan worked faster. “You’re an example for them, I should say. By the way, I heard Count Tarner has a younger brother? And he’s also single, I think?” she asked.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” Irina switched to a confidential tone, “the Count’s brother is… Well, you understand me, of course…“ She looked empathetically at the young girl. “It will be a bad party for your daughter.”

“Seriously?” The fan in the plump woman’s hand froze and the interest in her eyes dwindled. “Well, you,” she tapped her daughter’s hand with the closed fan, “say something!”

“Pleased to meet you, Madame Countess,“ mumbled the girl, raising her eyes.

“I’m also pleased to meet you,” Irina addressed the girl. “God willing, everything will work out well for you, too! And you, Madame,” she told the plump woman.  “I thank you for the kind words. I’m sorry, I have to leave you. My husband is coming.“ She waved to Nicholas.

“Look how quickly you’ve been substituted,” he smiled, indicating Maklakov with his eyes, who was in the process of reeling in the young Duchess Belsky, who was already under his arm, listening to his whispering.

“The most important thing is that Monsieur Maklakov doesn’t start riding his hobbyhorse!” Irina said in Russian. “Then we can only feel sorry for the poor woman!”

“My dear, please explain to me the meaning of the “hobbyhorse” Monsieur Maklakov shouldn’t ride? I can’t follow some of your Russian idioms.”

Nicholas’s ancestors lived in Russia, as Irina found out, but he was born in France. He liked Russian and had memorized many Russian proverbs and sayings, which he was happy to use, sometimes making funny mispronunciations.

“You see, Nicholas…” She walked her husband to the window. “Monsieur Maklakov loved Count Leo Tolstoy, and even visited his home. They spent a lot of time together. So, he loves telling everyone that they were big friends.”

Nicholas nodded.

“So, when the conversation turns to Count Tolstoy, he’s unstoppable. He can talk nonstop and it’s impossible to interrupt him – all of a sudden he has a hearing problem and doesn’t hear anything he doesn’t want to hear.”

“…..there was nobody closer to me than old Tolstoy…” Maklakov’s voice drifted past them. He bowed politely. Although he had lost Duchess Belsky, he found a good listener in the person of the plump woman with a fan.

There was commotion in the room.

“The Prince and Princess Yusupov!” announced the major-domo.

Irina rose on her tiptoes to get a better look.

“Yusupov hasn’t changed at all. He’s still just as handsome,“ she noted, feeling her long-forgotten anxiety. “His wife also looks better with time.”

“You Russians are so strange!” Nicholas said, puzzled. “Actually, not only you Russians but the whole world’s gone crazy! Yusupov, this child of fortune, became a celebrity, a national hero in Russia because he’s committed murder! Iren, do you realize that you’re all admiring a simple murderer?”

“Not a simple murderer, but a very handsome one,” Irina smiled.

Nicholas looked perplexed.

She pressed her cheek against his shoulder. “And you, it seems like you’re having your first jealousy episode!”

“Me? Jealous? You think that anyone could be jealous of him?” he asked sarcastically.

“My God, Nicholas!” Irina asked in shock, “How can you believe all the rumors and gossip?”

“No, I don’t believe rumors and gossip, and I’ll be happy to be jealous of you and Felix, if you want me to be jealous!” He kissed her hand.

“Of course, I want that,” said Irina with delight. “So, my dear Othello,” she said, satisfied with her husband’s proper reaction, “Yusupov is not a common murderer. He destroyed the absolute evil. That was his mission.”

“The absolute evil, you say?” Nicholas was surprised. “And who determined that? Yusupov? Or those who joined him to kill an unarmed man? How many heroes were there? Four? Five?”

Irina froze, listening to Nicholas, not because she agreed but because she remembered something.

“He was an accomplice in killing an unarmed man,“ Nicholas continued. “A man who posed no danger to him and didn’t kill anyone. Therefore, the Prince’s actions were immoral. And Rasputin’s character is a completely different question,” he said compromisingly, seeing that Irina wanted to object. “So, your wonderful hero, Yusupov, should be punished according to the laws of a civilized society.”

“Society doesn’t punish its heroes,“ Irina said. She touched her throat. Something squeezed it from inside, not letting her breathe. “On the contrary, it adorns them with laurel wreaths and builds monuments in their honor, even if their hands are soaked in blood.”

“That’s because personal morals and societal morals are different,“ Nicholas said.  “A nation that praises a hero or leader with blood on his hands is walking a false path, isn’t it? And this hero is no hero at all; he’s a creation of perverted social morals that are required at a particular time.”

“Nicholas, people follow the path they’re led on, with promises of something rosy, like paradise on earth, or something simpler, like food, meat, for example,“ she smiled, “or alcohol…or they’re led by violence and fear. But enough of that!”

The dreadful suffocating sensation did not go away. Irina felt cold hard tentacles around her throat, about to squeeze the air out of it.

“Want to hear something entertaining?” she asked.

“Sure, but I can’t say I’m bored,” Nicholas called over a waiter and took two glasses with red wine from the tray, giving one to Irina.

“*Merci*. So, should I tell you something funny?” Irina took a sip of the wine, breathing somewhat easier.

“Of course,” Nicholas smiled.

“There was a funny thing that happened to Yusupov in America. Some woman organized a reception in his honor, at her home.“ Irina sipped more wine. “And she warned all her guests that there should be no mention of Rasputin, God forbid.”

“Right, you see, he doesn’t like this topic,” Nicholas interrupted.

“So, imagine what happened?”

“Yusupov didn’t come?” laughed Nicholas.

“No, he came. But when Felix and his wife showed up, the anxious host announced them as “Prince and Princess Rasputin!”

Nicholas and Irina burst out laughing so loudly they attracted attention. Seeing that Lvov was puzzled and Yusupov surprised, Irina hid her face behind her husband’s back and laughed silently.

The guests gathered around the tables with Lvov standing at the head of one of them. He looked tired and unwell. To his right were the Yusupovs; and to his left, the merry ambassador of the nonexistent Russian government.

“Gentlemen!” Lvov raised his wine glass. “The first toast, as always, is to Russia! To our poor, torn Russia. To the delivery from evil and the satanic invasion!” He looked around the crowd and drank his wine.  “Please, help yourselves! I can’t treat you with delicacies like in good old days,“ he spread out his arms, “but please, the caviar, the *viziga* pies, the salads, the turkey in jelly, this is all according to traditional Russian recipes. And the vodka, please! Enjoy yourselves!”

The buffet was great. The drinks and the refreshments accomplished their task. The guests loosened up, split into smaller groups and were talking in a lively manner, and making jokes. The talk about “poor Russia” gradually died out.

Nicholas and Irina went outside by the balustrades, enjoying the night’s scents. They were silent. Irina still was not able to calm down after the conversation that had stirred her memories.

“Well, my dear Prince, I hope you didn’t forget how to greet your brothers?”

She heard Maklakov’s voice. The Ambassador walked out onto the balcony and approached Lvov, who stood next to a palm tree in a flowerpot.

“With a full chalice…” Lvov answered. He stopped a waiter and ordered two glasses of wine.  “Make sure they’re full!” he told the waiter as he was leaving. He turned to Maklakov, “With a chalice full of burning charcoals.”[[60]](#footnote-60)

“Correct, Georgy Evgenievich.”

“How are you getting along here, Vasiliy Alexeevich? Is it hard?” asked Lvov.

“It’s not easy. It’s not America. How was your trip?”

“It went well. The brothers have an understanding of Russian affairs, but I think they’re playing their own game. I hope they don’t outsmart themselves - with us.” He went silent, not wishing to continue the topic.

“Well, here we are on our own; we’re trying,” Maklakov boasted. “Looks like the Russian Embassy has become the center of attraction for all of us. Everyone ends up in Paris, trying to save something – with conventions, meetings, organizations…I’m only tired of one thing – having to play the fool. Also, that idiot Trotsky, the goddamn leader of the international proletariat!” He was irritated.

“What do you mean?” Lvov coughed, took a handkerchief out of his pocket and placed it over his mouth.

Irina glanced at Nicholas and realized that he was listening to the conversation.

“Freemasonry must be swept away with an iron broom from Russia, France and other countries!” Maklakov cited, mimicking the revolutionary tribune’s hysterical intonations.  “Freemasonry, the bridge connecting class enemies in peaceful cohabitation, is a bourgeois tool which dulls the proletariat’s conciseness and is the lever of the bourgeois mechanism!”

“Have you memorized comrade Bronshtein’s speeches by heart, my dear?” Lvov laughed and waved over the waiter for more wine.

“Please,” he took the glasses and handed one to Maklakov. “You’ll appreciate it!”

Maklakov sipped the wine.

“An excellent wine, Georgy Evgenievich, thank you. So we need to study our enemies. The news from Russia is sad - arrests, executions, intelligentsia being exiled…”

“Well, Vasily Alexeevich, don’t generalize. Take the latest mass exile in 1922. How much new fresh blood it gave you, how many lives it saved! Exile is not the same as being tortured in Solovki.[[61]](#footnote-61) And also, I’ll tell you…” Lvov started to cough again.

“Let’s go inside, Georgy Evgenievich.“ Maklakov took the Prince by the arm. “You’ll catch a cold here. By the way, how’s Guchkov? I see he lost all his allies.”

“Alexander Ivanovich besmirched himself with his German connections and his involvement with Cornady, Vorovsky’s killer.[[62]](#footnote-62) Even though that scoundrel should have been killed….but also, I think….” They walked inside.

“Do you know what all this means?” Irina looked at her husband.

“What exactly?”

“The chalice is full of burning charcoal?”

Nicholas hesitated and didn’t answer. A noisy group of guests spilled out onto the balcony.

“Do you know and don’t want to tell me?” she persisted

“Let’s go somewhere.” He took Irina’s arm.

They moved to the opposite side of the balcony.

“So, what does it mean? Explain!” she insisted.

“Well, I’m not sure how to say it.” Nicholas smoothed his hair pensively. “Judging by their conversation, Prince Lvov and your famous ambassador are Freemasons, and…”

“That much I understood. What are the burning charcoals?”

“Well, that’s simple. There are questions asked during the initiation into a particular degree in the Lodge ceremony. I think that question was not the most complicated one, about the second degree. My dear…“ He suddenly changed the topic. “…maybe we should go inside too. I remember you wanted to meet Kuprin.”

“But he didn’t come,” Irina sighed. “Tell me more.”

“Let’s go home. We’ll talk there…and not only about that,“ he put his arm around the waist.

“Alright, but don’t forget, you promised.” Irina smiled and pressed her head to his shoulder.

At the exit they walked over to Lvov who was seeing the guests off.

“Monsieur Prince, allow me to thank you for an excellent evening,“ Nicholas shook Lvov’s hand.

“Thank you, Count,“ he nodded and turned to Irina taking her hand.

“Irina Sergeevna, I often remember your father, the late Sergey Illich. There is a great need for men like him, brilliant and active.”

“Thank you, Georgy Evgenievich. We will be happy to see you at our home,” she said, and feeling her eyes filling with tears, hurried to the exit.

Coming down the stairs, she saw the weary Yusupov standing by the rail. Maklakov was telling him something. She glanced at Yusupov. He bowed his head slightly with a warm smile.

’*So handsome! Can’t stop looking at him,’* she thought, getting into the car.

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“*Nicholasha*.” His name, changed in the Russian manner, sounded affectionate. “How do you know all this?” Irina asked Nicholas, who was blissfully lying on his back.

“What are you talking about?” he opened his eyes.

“The freemasons, of course.”

“O-la-la! Nicholas stretched and turned his face to Irina. “I love female questions! Just love them! You’re not interested in anything else right now?” He kissed her neck.

“Right now it’s very important for me, so tell me, you promised!”

“You know, sometimes I think that the most important thing for you is to make me talk.” Nicholas rose on his elbow and looked into her eyes. “And then you relax and turn into a murmuring kitty. When I’m silent, I don’t interest you much. Am I correct?”

“No, you’re not correct!” she said impatiently, smoothing his hair. “First, I’m not a kitty, I’m a lioness.” She paused, letting him appreciate the importance of the distinction. “Second, I like something else in you.” She passed her fingers over his thigh. “For example, how your navy blue suit fits you.”

Nicholas opened his mouth to say something, but Irina interrupted, “You’re a good driver.” She laughed. “Nicholasha, but I’m really interested in what you were telling me about the masons. How do you know all this?”

“’If you know too much, you’ll grow old sooner.’[[63]](#footnote-63) Was it I who said that?”

“Yes, you,” Irina caressed his hair again and cozied up to his shoulder. “Talk, talk, *Nikolasha*, I’m not sleeping. I’m listening.”

“By the way, I know a lot of things. Very interesting things, not just about masons.” He stroked her back. “Because I am a smart, handsome, well-read and educated man.”

Irina nodded and closed her eyes.

“Some see me as dry, calculating, pragmatic, but…” he mused.

‘*How sweet his voice is, how sweet*,” she thought.

“If you want to hear about freemasons, they have this secret greeting - they touch the left shoulder with the right hand. Michelangelo was a member of one of these secret societies. There is a theory that this is the reason why his David on Piazza della Signoria in Florence has his right hand raised to his shoulder. Also, as far as I know…”

‘*Let him speak, his voice is so sweet*…’ Irina thought, falling asleep.

Nicholas raised his head and looked at his wife.

“Iren,” he asked quietly.  “Are you sleeping, my love?”

Irina did not answer. She was dreaming of the statue of David, with the head of Felix Yusupov, coming alive. The statue was sitting at the edge of Piazza della Signoria and crying out in Maklakov’s voice, “Who wants beef? Who wants fresh beef from Leo Tolstoy’s estate? Come, ladies, hurry! I’ll sell it cheap! I’ll exchange it for forks, spoons, and silver knives!” There was a long line of women who were devouring his body with their eyes; they were throwing silver cutlery to his feet without bargaining. Only one of them, the plump woman with the fan, lingered a little, inquiring if David had a younger brother.

2

It had been drizzling, miserably and endlessly. The trees complained to each other about the bad weather. Yellow chestnut leaves, thrown by the autumn wind against the window, looked like squeezed colorful pears. The blurry contours of Notre Dame were begging to be transferred onto an impressionist’s canvas.

Irina opened the window and let the water from the roof fall into her open palm. *‘How different is French rain from Russian rain?’* she thought, bringing her hand close to her nose. *’Probably, it’s the scent. Russian rain smells of sage, French rain smells of vanilla.’*

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The rain, which had seemed endless, suddenly stopped the following day, as if someone had turned off the faucet in the heavenly shower.  Sunrays pierced through the thick, slow clouds and shimmered gold and silver on the wet sidewalks, tile roofs and windows.

Irina could not stop herself from getting out of the taxi and walking all the way to Café Saint Benoit on Boulevard Saint-Germain, where she was to meet the great Henri Mongault. Meeting him was a bit of luck --- a gift, truly, allowing Irina to escape the feeling of uselessness and boredom, the true harbingers and companions of depression, the traditional Russian malady.

Mongault had translated Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Kuprin into French. In his youth, he came to Russia as a sales representative of a perfume company, but soon succumbed to the enchantments of a pretty Russian girl, got married, moved to Saint Petersburg and Russified himself. With the beginning of the World War, being a patriot, he moved back to France and, after the war, he decided not to return to the perfume business, which bored him, trying his hand as a literary translator instead. His talent was divine. Mongault was ridiculously scrupulous.  He could spend a week looking for a French word equivalent to a Russian word or idiom; he was prepared to talk to anyone, from a beggar to a scientist, often creating dozens of translated versions, meticulously checking and choosing the most accurate one, always doubting his ability to really feel all the subtleties and nuances. Actually, that was how they met, when he asked Irina for a consultation.

“Look, Madame Iren,“ Mongault said, as soon as Irina settled down at the table. He spread out his notes, made with small, accurate handwriting. “I’d like to know your opinion. For example, here Kuprin writes that his character ‘*completely lost his mind*.’ But,” he raised his eyes from the notes, “if the character lost his mind ‘completely,’ meaning finally and irrevocably, it’s one thing; however, if he did not lose his mind ‘completely,’ meaning it was temporary, and soon, after realizing that the object of his love was not worthy of such a sacrifice, his mind returns to normality, what then is the meaning of ‘completely’? Also, look here.” He pointed to a page with a sharp-penciled stroke, “’*Sometimes there would be a fragile, prematurely old man nestled in the corner of the tram*.’” He looked at Irina. “I’d like to understand the words ‘fragile’ and ‘premature’? Before I show my work to Monsieur Kuprin, I’d like to know how to convey that properly in French….”

After Mongault left, Irina moved to the table outside and ordered another coffee.  The air smelled of baked chestnuts and hot charcoals. She drank her coffee and watched a young girl of about twelve, playing with a white kitty in front of the building across the street. The girl tried to lure the kitty with a crispy piece of paper tied to a long thread. The girl looked like Lenochka Troyanovsky when they had first met at the same age.  Lenochka had also had a white kitty. Once, the kitty became too playful and scratched Irina’s hand, and Lenochka felt sorry for both of them.

*‘Oh, Lenochka, Lenochka…’* Irina thought sadly.

Her friend’s death, two years ago, was the last bond connecting Irina with her previous life. She and Lenochka had escaped from Petrograd to the south of Russia, survived the hunger and whirlpool of the civil war, but lost each other in the stampede on the pier, trying to get out of Sevastopol before the Reds arrived. They accidentally met a year later in Paris, where Lenochka had already managed to rent a small room on Rue Jacques Offenbach in the Passy District, home to many Russian immigrants. Soon she found a job as a dishwasher in a cafe and insisted that her friend not worry and take her time looking for a decent room – luckily, they then had enough money for the two of them. Irina was talking to one of the newly opened fashion houses about getting a job as a model when Lenochka suddenly fell ill with high fever. For two weeks she was delirious, suffocating from the coughing – literally wilting right before Irina’s eyes. Irina took her job at the café. They could not afford to lose that position.

Lenochka died quietly, in the middle of the night, covering herself with a blanket, not wanting to inconvenience her friend…

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“Marie! Lunchtime!” a high-pitched woman’s voice came from a window above. “Leave this stray cat! Come home now!”

The girl sighed, passed her hand over the animal’s furry back and sadly walked home, looking back. The kitty followed her to the door, meowed pitifully as it shut and then crossed the street, to Irina, rubbing against her foot.

“Come, my kitty!” Irina picked her up. The cat immediately snuggled up on Irina’s lap and murmured so loudly and devotedly that in an hour, after Irina bought some *foie gras* at the Saint Cloud market, she ended up in Nicholas’ house. He could not partake in the joy only because he was in London on business.

The kitty liked the *foie gras*.

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 “My dear!”

Irina could picture the smile in Nicholas’ voice even through the phone static.

“The day after tomorrow we’re invited to the reception at the Soviet Embassy. Considering that you refuse to speak with these…” he paused, “Soviet Russians, should we decline?”

“Absolutely. I won’t go. Even if they execute me.”

“Even if Kuprin will be there?”

Irina wobbled.

“I knew you weren’t scared of the firing squad,” Nicholas remarked with humor. “I’ve confirmed our attendance. And Monsieur Kuprin will definitely be there.”

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Feodor Chaliapin, with royal greatness, was accepting compliments and accolades from his selected admirers who had been invited to former Russian Ambassador Maklakov’s private apartment on Rue Peggy, a few steps from Boulevard du Montparnasse. Maklakov was forced to move, with his unmarried sister Maria and an old French servant, from the building on Rue De Grenelle, after France recognized Soviet Russia, with Lenin’s death.

“Oh, I see the sweet baby lion has become an adorable lioness!” Chaliapin looked Irina over and brought her hand up to his lips, hardly even touching it. He made the observation happily, but in a detached manner, as if many years had not passed since their last meeting when he left their Saint Petersburg apartment, and returned a minute later for the hat he’d forgotten. She was ready to fall on his neck to feel, just for a moment, the touch of that past life.

He saw her grimace painfully, as if someone had stuck a hot needle into her heart. She even smelled the burn.  ‘Baby lion’ was what Nicky used to call her. The invisible noose choked her throat again. She smiled, touching her neck, said a few meaningless words to Feodor Ivanovich, and walked away, finding a lone chair in the corner.

Although Chaliapin seemed happy and told jokes the whole evening, Irina felt his glance; and with it came pain, agitation, and detachment. His soul seemed to be covered with a patina, protecting him from unnecessary worries and anxieties. As she watched him, she thought that not only Chaliapin, but also many of her compatriots, had left their souls in the Motherland when they escaped. They had lost their warmth and brightness, watered down like paint diluted by too much water. Many former Russian idols found themselves under the magnifying glass when they became immigrants, and sometimes they did not display their best qualities.

Before leaving, she went to Maklakov’s study to see the “wonderful Mona Lisa copy,” praised by the host. The painting was by an “unknown but highly promising artist, which the great Tolstoy would definitely like.” She stood in front of the painting, looking into the mysterious half smile.

“You, Irina Sergeevna, seem to be upset with me,” Chaliapin said quietly, at the threshold of the study, causing Irina to turn around. “May I?” He stepped into the study.

“You’re asking me, Feodor Ivanovich, as if you’re in my house. I’m a guest here just like you.” She looked at the tenor.

“Irina Sergeevna,” Chaliapin came closer to her. “You belong to that rare type of women who fill any space with themselves, wherever they are.” A long-forgotten warmth from that long-passed life flashed in his eyes.  “Yes,” he continued, “let it be a hut, a cabin, a tiny room, a palace, an ocean shore or a starry sky, you are at the center, and everything else is in addition to you. Please forgive me for the lofty style.” He took her hand and kissed it this time. “Are you trying to solve the Giaconda mystery?” he pointed to the painting. “I’m afraid it’s impossible.”

“Why, Feodor Ivanovich?” she asked. “I think….” She paused, looking at the painting.

“Well, Irina Sergeevna, why are you silent?”

“I think everyone tries to solve the mystery of the Mona Lisa’s smile as the smile of a woman, but her smile is the smile of mystery itself. She looks at all of us with this cunning because she knows that the mystery is unsolvable.”

Chaliapin listened with great interest.

“It’s like your voice,” Irina continued. “You probably also laugh when someone tries to figure out its secret and describe it with words? Even tonight, your voice was so fluent, and the passion you sang with was so great, that you created a miracle in front of the audience! This miracle is priceless and to understand it, let alone explain it, is impossible.” She smiled.  “As you said, forgive my lofty style.”

“Thank you, Irochka,” Chaliapin kissed her hand again. “But the difference between the great Leonardo and me is that I will depart one day with my voice.  I will only live on old, crackling gramophone discs, and the Giaconda will remain in all her original beauty with all the hues and half-tones,” he said sadly. “And you, Irina Sergeevna, are a Countess, I’ve heard?”

“Yes, Feodor Sergeevich, it happened somehow.” She smiled, and all of a sudden remembered their old conversation on the boulevard. She hid her smile and haughtily raised one brow.  “Therefore, I can’t but notice that you kissed my hand without due respect. Please, try it again!”

“Ah, you also remember our conversation?” Chaliapin livened up. He took her hand and touched her wrist with his lips. “Back then you were categorically saying, ‘Vengeance? How could Monte Cristo do that? How can one dedicate himself to vengeance?’”

“And you told me,” Irina freed her hand and touched her forehead, which had suddenly become cold, “that I should never say these words because Fate could place me in a similar situation when I’d be forced to answer my own question.” Her voice trembled. The dark tentacles around her neck tightened. “But, as you can see, I’m not Count de Monte Cristo. Yet.”

“But you are a Countess,” laughed Chaliapin, “Just as I predicted. By the way, Count Monte Cristo, before he had cause to change the lives of others, had the chance to spend some time in prison, where he had time to think about his life. And you…”

“I also had the chance…and I also escaped,” Irina said and rubbed her temple. “And I also had time to think about life,” she said very quietly.

“Feodor Ivanovich, where are you?” Voices came from the hallway. “We miss you!”

“I’m coming, coming!” Chaliapin cried out towards the door. “Just like that?” He looked at Irina.

“Where are you, Feodor Ivanovich?” The voice approached the study.

“Such serious coincidences?” he said, turning towards the door.

“It's a joke, Feodor Ivanovich. You remember; I’m a big joker. Go.”

“I know, Irina Sergeevna. Well, God willing, we’ll see each other again.” He hurried to the door.

She followed the singer with her eyes, mentally turning another page of the book called the past.

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Paul Poiret, the famous fashion designer, despite his weight, hurried down the carpeted marble stairs of his Champs Élysées store to greet Irina. He pricked her with his shortly cropped beard and casually hugged her like a good, old friend or relative. Perhaps he had a reason to be so joyful. She had bought clothes from him on prior occasions, without asking about the price. Well, Nicholas had told her to buy whatever she wanted….

Finding out that the beautiful Countess Tarner was going to the reception at the Soviet Embassy the following day, Poiret took his time selecting the right dress for her…

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 A short, brown-eyed man with a neat, red beard greeted the guests at the entrance to the Embassy’s reception hall.

“I’m glad to greet you, Count.” He shook Nicholas’ hand. “Pleased to meet your charming wife.” He nodded with a polite smile, eyeing her bright red dress, her ruby necklace and a hat of the same hue.

“You like the color red, I see.” He broke into a smile. “By the way, it’s the color of our revolution.” He studied Irina, trying to ascertain whose side she was on.

“It’s also the color of rebirth,” Irina replied with a cold smile.

“Are you a student of alchemy?” The man demonstrated his unexpected knowledge.

“As well as symbolism and coloristics,” she added casually.

“Oh, the great Goethe taught colors! It was my hobby when I was young! It will be interesting to continue this conversation.” His demeanor was pleasant because he could not know if he was speaking with a friend or the enemy. “Please, come on in,” he pointed towards the hall full of guests. “I think you’ll meet many interesting people.”

Irina took Nicholas’ hand and went inside, catching many looks, both male and female, which confirmed Paul Poiret’s genius.

“You’re attracting attention,“ Nicholas whispered in her ear. “I told you, this dress wasn’t the best choice….”

“Breaking rules is much more pleasant than abiding by them,” Irina interrupted him. “Didn’t you know? What did you say the Ambassador’s name was?”

“Krasin, Leonid Borisovich. Didn’t you read the invitation?”

“Didn’t even touch it,” she frowned. “Is it possible Kuprin won’t show up again?” She looked around.

“I’m sure he’ll come. Tell me,” Nicholas switched to Russian, “the word ‘Krasin’ derives from *krasniy*?[[64]](#footnote-64)

Irina nodded.

“And *krasniy* means *krasiviy*?”[[65]](#footnote-65) He smiled at his wife.

“If you mean the dress, yes. But lately in Russia the word red is associated with blood,” she said sarcastically.

“O-la-la!” Nicholas laughed. “Now I understand why you’re wearing this dress! It’s a protest!”

“Everyone understands what they want to understand, depending on their values. For some it’s a protest, for some loyalty, for some it's a hint of a future rebirth.” She smirked. “I think Krasin understood it the way he wanted to.”

Nicholas called over a waiter and took two glasses of wine from the tray. “I’m sure you prefer the red today.” He gave her the glass. “You don’t have to drink it, just hold the glass. It suits the dress!”

Irina looked at him dejectedly.

He laughed, “You’re so funny!”

“If you don’t like me,” she said, seeing Nicholas was becoming desperate, “you didn’t have to marry me!” She ended her thought on a somber note.

“I love you any way you are.” The precarious phrase left his lips, but he hurried to correct it with a smile. “Do you know anything about Krasin?” He changed the topic. “I know that he was the Soviet trade attaché in England, and before the revolution he was the Bolshevik Party’s financial manager.

Before answering, Irina looked at her husband so that he would understand that the phrase “I love you any way you are” was not forgotten, and that the subject would be addressed later.

“Krasin…” she said reflectively. “Krasin, I think, was the friend of the writer Maxim Gorky and the actress Maria Andreeva. I think he had some kind of relationship with Savva Morozov.[[66]](#footnote-66) Morozov committed a very suspicious suicide in Cannes in 1905, I think. Yes, I remember now. Andreeva was Morozov’s mistress. He had bought life insurance, with her as beneficiary, in case he died. When he did die, about a year later, a hundred thousand rubles,[[67]](#footnote-67) the insurance payment, went to the lawyer Malentovich, who was connected to the Bolsheviks. My father represented Zinaida’s estate. She’s Savva’s widow. By the way, the Gorki estate, where Lenin died, had also belonged to Zinaida until the Bolsheviks confiscated it.”

Irina went silent, remembering suddenly that she’d heard the name Krasin from Lenochka Troyanovsky who told her, back in Petrograd, about the secret financial dealings her father had with the Bolsheviks. Soon after that conversation Piotr Petrovich Troyanovsky disappeared. He left one morning for a meeting in the *Narkomat[[68]](#footnote-68)* of Agriculture and never returned. That evening Sophie had a phone conversation with someone, after which she told Lenochka and Irina, without any explanations, to pack only the necessities because they were to leave the city immediately. They caught their breath on the train heading south.

“Monsieur Krasin is like a layered cake with a surprise. You can accidentally break your tooth.” Irina sipped her wine. “You know, when you’re not sure if you should be laughing or crying. Did you see his eyes? They’re like a mouse trap.”

“Too bad Henri is not here!” Nicholas laughed.

“Seriously, don’t laugh, Nicholas. Look at him – his eyes are soft, his look envelops you; he lets you in and boom! - The door is shut, your back is snapped! And he looks so kind, polite, so charming.”

“Is that what you call in Russian “*devils live in still water*?”

“Yes, still waters run deep,” she said. “But, my dear, Krasin and company are not devils, it’s not their level. It’s too small for them. These people were able to destroy the entire empire.“ She suddenly squeezed Nicholas’ hand, “Look, there’s Alexander Kuprin. He came! Let’s go meet him!” Irina pulled her husband to the famous writer, who was already surrounded by fans.

“Are you going to argue?” someone asked. “Let me tell you, the revolutionary impulse of the masses squashed the bourgeoisie in Russia like a louse!”

*Are you going to argue, you bourgeois scum*? – The phrase from the distant past burned through Irina’s mind. As if suddenly struck in the head, for a moment, she lost her orientation and fell out of reality. A black nothingness rose from the depth of her soul and swathed her, gripping her throat with the familiar hard, cold tentacles. She choked and put her hand on her throat. The sensation only lasted a moment. She turned her head and met the look of a stout man with short fingers standing next to her.

“No, no, of course not, Comrade,“ a reporter with a notebook and a pencil replied with a friendly smile. “On the contrary, the Russian re-vo-lu-cion is ex-amp-le of right social org-an-izacion for all the world!” he said in broken Russian. “And I will write a big report for our new-s-pa-per!”

*‘Familiar prickly eyes. And the hands… I’ve seen these hands with the short fingers before,’* Irina thought feverishly.

She felt Nicholas squeezing her elbow.

“My dear, is everything alright?” He was concerned. “Are you unwell?”

“No, no,” she waved it off. “Everything is fine, Nicholas, let’s go. It’s a little stuffy here.“ She tried to smile. “Introduce me to Kuprin!”

“Gooood eveeeniiiing, Moooonsieeeeur Kuuuupriin!” Nicholas’ voice floated in the thick, uneasy air. “Weee meeeet at Henriiii’s, dooo youuu remeembeer….”

*‘Are you going to argue, you bourgeois scum*?’ The phrase kept pulsating in Irina’s right temple, splitting her brain.

“Allow me to introduuuce my wiiife, yourrr biiiiig faaan, Counteeeess Iriiina Tarneeer….”

*‘Why is Nicholas speaking like that?’* she thought.

“I’m veeryyy pleaaased, Maaadame,“ Kuprin’s voice also sounded strange.

*‘I think he’s taking my hand.’* Irina felt a touch.

“Henriiii toold meee abouuut you….Thaank youuuu for youuuur heeeelp wiith the translaaatiiiooon, I’m sooooryy I neeveer haad theee chaaance beefooree…”

‘*I think Kuprin is saying something*,’ she told herself, trying to concentrate.

“Hellooo, Aleeeksandeeeer Ivannovich.“ She hardly heard her own voice. Her throat squeezed. She saw Nicholas’ worried look and noticed that he was firmly holding her elbow.

*‘Nicholas asked Kuprin something and he’s answering.’* She shook her head, trying to restore her hearing.

“You know, my dear Count, existence in emigration, especially the Russian emigration, is the same as living in a small room with a dozen broken rotten eggs!” said Kuprin. “In the old days, I stayed away from the intelligentsia. I preferred biking, gardening, hunting, fishing, a warm talk in cozy company, my own company.

*‘He’s watching me.’* Irina felt anxious. Shivers ran down her back, as if from that one long forgotten terror.

“And now I’ve had an immeasurable taste of all the abominations, the gossip, the bickering, the pretense, the suspicion, and most importantly, the unbelievable stupidity and boredom. And the literary backstage kitchen? God, what an abomination it is!”

“Excuse me, Alexander Ivanovich,“ Irina interrupted Kuprin. “I’ll leave you for a little bit.” She smiled at her worried husband, went over to a table and hid behind the guests. Taking a glass of wine, she drank without tasting the flavor and, looking around attentively, found the short-fingered man.

*‘He had a tattoo with his name on his knuckles,’* she remembered. *‘I have to check…need to come closer…and if it’s him…’*

“I don’t understand,“ Nicholas said quietly behind her. “You wanted to meet Kuprin for so long; you helped translate his works, only to act so rudely. I really don’t understand.”

She grimaced. “Nicholas, I beg you, I have a migraine.” She touched her temple. “But it’ll pass. Let me be, please! Don’t worry about me. Didn’t you want to speak with Krasin? Go, my dear, please,“ she pleaded with him.

Nicholas shrugged his shoulders and went to the other hall where Krasin was supposed to be.

Irina studied the short-fingered man, squeezing her glass. It appeared he was responsible for the reception. He called over a waiter, gave him an order and the waiter hurried away. Then he shook the reporter’s hand, saying farewell. Finally, he was alone. Irina moved in his direction. The man noticed her, fixed his tie and smoothed out his jacket.

Irina stared at his hand.  SASHA was tattooed on the knuckles. It took her a split second to decide. She did not know when and how, but she knew she would do it …when she found all of them… but first…

She came up very close to him and clumsily tripped.

*‘Black suit, white shirt, red stain on the chest,’* she noted mechanically to herself.

“Oh, pardon me, Monsieur, how clumsy of me! Please forgive me!”

Their eyes met. She felt her blood racing from her face. The man fumbled a napkin and pressed it to his chest.

“I’m sorry,“ she smiled, acting confused. “I became dizzy, it’s so stuffy here! It’s so crowded, and I can’t stand crowds. ”

“You know Russian?” the man froze.

SASHA. She looked at the letters again.

“I’m Countess Tarner,“ she introduced herself, still displaying confusion.

“Are you Russian?” The short-fingered man helped her sit in an armchair.

“I am.“ She tried smiling. “Do you work at this Embassy?”

“Yup,“ he responded. “Maybe you want water?” He bent over to her, smelling her sweetish perfume.

“Yes, please, if you can.” Having clenched her fingers, she saw the short-fingered Bolshevik walk over to the waiter, tell him something pointing at Irina, and return.

“He’ll bring it now,“ he said casually. “You asked me about my work. I’m the embassy’s new technical advisor,“ he said with an important look.

The waiter returned with a glass of water. Irina took a sip. The water was cold.

“Thank you, Alexander…?” She looked at him hoping he would tell her his surname.

“Just Alexander.“ He waved his hand. “And what’s your name? The first name, without the Countess?”

“Irina.” The name sounded foreign to her.

“I saw you right away,“ he smiled, showing his crooked teeth. “Your dress is very noticeable.”

“Only the dress?” She decided to take the simple approach, smiling flirtatiously.

“Well,” Alexander was confused, “…you are also… an attractive woman.” He looked at her, unsure if he said the right thing. “I’m sorry if something’s wrong or if I did something,“ he apologized, just in case. “I’m a simple man, a working man. I wasn’t taught etiquette.”

“On the contrary, Alexander, you said everything correctly.” Irina followed his manner of speech. “I was very pleased to hear that, especially from my fellow countryman. Do you have friends in Paris?” She looked for Nicholas.

“What friends? I’ve only been here for a week.” He glanced at her with concern. “I see you’re feeling better. Maybe you want something. Let me know, I’ll get it right away.”

“If it’s not too much to ask for, Alexander, I need to find my husband, Count Tarner. He went to speak with your ambassador. If you find him, tell him his wife feels weak and wants to go home. Actually, how can you find him? You don’t know him.“ She made an attempt to get up.

“No big deal.” He stopped Irina. “I’ll find your Count. I noticed him when I was watching you.” He walked to the other hall, covering his chest with the napkin.

“Sasha,” she said quietly, following him with her eyes, “We finally meet again…”

A minute later the short-fingered man came back with Nicholas.

“Iren, my dear, how do you feel?” he asked, leaning to her.

 “Love,” she extended her arms to him, “take me home, please. You see what I did.“ She pointed at the dark spot on Alexander’s shirt and switched to Russian. “I spilled wine on Monsieur Alexander….” She waited for him to say his surname.

“Seregin, Alexander Seregin,” he said hastily.

“You see, I spilled red wine on Monsieur Seregin,“ she continued in French. “And he’s only been here for a week. Imagine what his impression of Paris will be. Horrible.” She rose from the armchair. “Nicholas, why are you so quiet?  Say hello to Monsieur Seregin. At least be kind and invite him over to our house so that I could make amends for my clumsiness. Maybe even tomorrow?”

Seregin listened carefully and nodded, showing that he had understood everything.

Nicholas offered him his hand and said in Russian “Count Tarner. Pleased to meet you. Please forgive my wife’s carelessness, and do come tomorrow for lunch.” He handed Alexander his card. “Call me in the morning and I will explain how to find our home. We will be waiting. Again, please forgive the Countess.”

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They were both silent on their way home. Nicholas helped Irina take off her fur coat and finally said:

“How am I to understand this, my dear? Is this what Russian women do? Insult their countrymen? Or, maybe this is your dissatisfied and suddenly awakened thirst for destruction? Right!” He smiled. “Now I understand! The red of the dress incites you to revolutionary behavior!”

Irina listened in silence, sullenly looking at her husband.

“By the way,” he continued, “instead of inviting Monsieur Seregin, we should have invited Monsieur Kuprin!”

“Nicholas, please.” She walked over to him. “Not today. My head really hurts. Don’t be upset. We’ll talk tomorrow. ‘The morning is wiser than the evening,’”[[69]](#footnote-69) she said in Russian. She kissed him on the cheek and went to her room, as Nicholas thought about the new Russian proverb. She fell flat on the bed.

*‘Nicholas is right,’* she thought, squeezing her head with her hands. *‘What I’m feeling is really thirst, unquenched and suddenly awakened. It’s been torturing me all these years…the thirst for vengeance.’*

“The thirst for vengeance,” she said out loud. “How is it possible?” She mimicked herself, the Irochka from 1916. “This is how it’s possible!” she cried, hitting the mattress with her fist.

“*Bologoye, Bologoye, you’re so far away*,” a silly melody sounded in her head. She rubbed her temples. The melody did not go away. *“Bologoye, Bologoye…”*

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Nicholas approached his wife’s door. He sensed that Iren was not sleeping and he could not sleep himself. He opened the door slightly and was startled to see her kneeling before the icon of the Virgin, with her back to the door.

“Extinguish the flame of my passions, for I am poor and wretched…”

 He could hardly understand the old Russian words*.*

“…and deliver me from my numerous and wicked memories and fantasies. Free me from all evil acts….”

The meaning of the prayer slowly dawned on him.

“For Thou art blessed by all generations, and thy most honorable name is glorified unto ages of ages. Amen.”

Irina crossed herself several times. Suddenly, she bent over and her fists struck the floor with rage. She moaned in a voice Nicholas had never heard before.

“Help me find them! Help me find them all! Help me!”

Nicholas walked away.

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*‘Looks like I won’t fall asleep tonight,’* Irina realized. She got out of the bed, wrapped herself in a blanket and opened the window wide. Breathing in the chilly night air, she returned to bed and lay quietly, watching the cryptic play of shadows on the ceiling and walls. The wind moved the gauzy curtains and the shadows came alive in the light from the street, moving faster and slower.

*‘The game of shadows is like the game of secret desires, already alive but not yet realized,’* she thought, turning on the nightlight. The shadows ran away and hid in the corners, waiting until it would be permissible to resume their night dance.

She sipped from a cup of water on the nightstand.

*‘Well, what happened today was just the way it should have happened. You did well, Irochka.’* She mentally reviewed the evening and was proud of herself, even patting herself on the head, which brought tears to her eyes. *’God sent me this encounter. Or maybe it was the Devil? What’s the difference now?’* She was angry. *’I only want Seregin to come tomorrow because I need all the names. All of them.’*

She took another sip. It did not help. The invisible noose was still wound around her throat. The black nothingness still enveloped her. Thousands of cold black tentacles tried to grab her from the darkness.

*‘Wine…That’s what I need when there is no vodka,’* she thought as she left the bedroom.

It was dark in the dining room – the thick curtains let in no light from outside. She didn’t light the lamp, in order not to wake Nicholas and have him see her. She moved around the room like a blind person, hands first, feeling the objects, which seemed to enlarge in size and bristle with sharp edges.

*‘Damn, where is the bottle?*’ She carefully searched inside the buffet, trying not to drop anything. Her fingers finally came upon a cold glass. She decided not to look for a wine glass in the darkness, and poured the wine into a cup. Gulping it down, she poured another. This time she drank slowly. It felt much better.

“Sash-sha…” she said so as to feel the taste of the name on her lips.

“What did Chaliapin say about enjoying vengeance?” She laughed. “He was right, a thousand times right. Vengeance must be a pleasure. Vengeance must be enjoyed or experienced, no matter the cost…”

The remaining wine in the bottle was enough to fill half a cup.

’*Love like mine is punishable. It’s sinful, because it’s stronger than the love of God, and I’ll have to pay for it, with body or soul. Or both, I don’t care*…’

“Forgive me, God,” she whispered. “Oh, Nicky, Nicky…” She fell on the pillow and cried, covering her mouth with her hands. “Why don’t you come to me in my dreams?”

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Nicholas’ question came as soon as Irina appeared in the dining room the following morning, holding the murmuring kitty, washed, groomed and with a pink collar on her neck.

“I’m waiting for explanations!” Nicholas was standing by the fireplace, his arms folded across his chest.

The kitty tensed and stopped murmuring. Irina lowered it on the sofa, passed her hand across its soft, furry back and looked at her husband with innocent eyes.

“You won’t believe me, love, but I didn’t expect that from myself,” she said.

Nicholas’ face slowly began to relax.

“Just imagine, Nikolasha, I’m sitting at a café with Henri, discussing the translation…”

Nicholas rounded his eyes in surprise.

“….and all of a sudden, this beauty walks over to me.“ She pressed the cat’s face against hers. “And she looks at me so helplessly, as if saying ‘please take me with you, I’m dying….without love’. So I took her and washed her. Just look how beautiful she is!” Irina picked up the cat, turned her on her back and scratched her stomach.

The kitty stretched out in delight, folding her front legs behind her head, showing that she liked the owner, the food, and the general disposition to cats in this house.

“I don’t see anything beautiful here,“ Nicholas decided to demonstrate his position on the issue of stray animals being taken into the house.

The kitty immediately turned on her stomach and assumed an aggressive position, arching her back and anxiously swaying the end of her tail.

“I can’t stand stray cats!” Nicholas grabbed the cat by the back of its neck and carried the unhappy animal towards the door. “They don’t belong in my house!” He opened the door and bumped into the maid, a pretty dark-eyed girl in a blue dress and a white lace apron.

“Did you call me, Monsieur?” she asked in an angelic voice.

“Lily! Take this out of my house! Immediately!” Nicholas ordered angrily, giving the cat to the maid.

The girl took the animal, looking at her mistress in bewilderment. Irina shook her head almost unnoticeably. Lily nodded, letting her know that there was nothing to worry about, and disappeared, petting the cat.

Nicholas followed the maid with a suspicious look, shut the door and started to pace around the room, stopping by Irina.

“How do you women find common language with each other? The education, the upbringing, the nationality, the social status, all those things don’t matter when you need to unite against your common enemy, the man. Just to have something to talk about over your morning coffee.”

Irina reclined on the back of the sofa and watched her angry husband with interest. She had never seen him like this before and she decided not to touch upon the subject of stray cats.

“Monsieur Count, allow me to observe…“ she said with the most obedient look and in the most submissive tone, although she had never called Nicholas ‘Monsieur Count’ when they were alone.

“I won’t allow it, Madame Countess!” Nicholas stopped, looking at her angrily. I won’t allow myself to be made a fool of!” He shook his index finger.

Irina lowered her head, smiling.

*‘Nicholas is such a kind and good person. And he really seems to love me,’* she thought.

“I broke relations with my only relative, Bernard!” Nicholas continued to fume, “And why, may I ask? Because…“ He raised the chair by its back. “…because he was against my marriage with a woman I only knew for a few days!“ He slammed the chair on the floor. “I considered that to be jealousy and envy on his part, but it turns out that the woman is really surrounded by mysteries. She’s all troubled, unpredictable, and… and…” He lost his train of thought looking for a word.

“Amazing?” Irina helped him with a serious look.

Nicholas almost nodded.

“And also, darling, you forgot to say, ’beloved’.”

Nicholas was confused.

“A beloved woman,” Irina explained with a smile. “So, please, don’t fight; better sit down here.” She motioned for him to sit next to her. “First, you shouldn’t worry so much, and second, no secrets. Come on, don’t be childish, come sit next to me!”

Nicholas looked away and stubbornly shook his head.

“Nicholasha, you say we should have a son… or daughter…A little baby girl with a bow. That is good.”

“Girls are not born with bows,“ he snapped.

“But imagine this, my dear,“ Irina fixed her hair. “What if the boy has the same terrible temper as his papa? He’ll grumble, stamp his feet, terrorize poor animals, and then he’ll grow up and marry some crazy Russian girl…” she said with ironic horror, getting off the sofa and putting her hands on his shoulders. “…Convincing her that it’s love at first sight!”

Nicholas’ lips trembled. Irina stared into his eyes.

“Is there love at first sight, Nicholas? What do you think? Does it happen? Or is it all fairytales?”

“There is, of course,” said Nicholas, hugging her. “But, in that kind of love… how do you say in Russian,“ he switched to Russian, “the farther you go into the woods the more….” he paused, looking for the right word.

“Confusion!” Irina laughed.

“No, no,” Nicholas smiled conciliatorily, “the more firewood you’ll find!”

“Darling,” Irina looked at him. “I’ve always wanted to ask you, who stuffed you with all these Russian proverbs? It’s amazing! You can provide our folk wisdom on any occasion. If I leave you…“ She paused to let him imagine the significance of the loss. “…what will you say then? ‘When Madame falls from the cart, it’s the horse’s holiday?’”

Nicholas smiled triumphantly. “No, you said it wrong! The right way is: ‘When a wench falls from the carriage, it’s a relief for the mare.’”[[70]](#footnote-70)

Irina touched his cheek with her lips. “Soon I’ll have to take classes from you.”

“I agree to teach you, but don’t leave me, please. I love you so much, but for some reason, I know almost nothing about you.”

She buried her head in his shoulder. “Nicholasha, sometimes I think that I know nothing about myself either, and that my life is a crazy story written by an insane playwright.”

“So tell me! You’ll feel better!” he cried. “And if you need anything, I’ll help you!”

Irina looked at him with gratitude.

“You still didn’t tell me what upset you last night,” he said.

She stiffened, understanding that she could neither tell him the truth nor say anything at all. Besides, she would need Nicholas’ help in this.

“Well… let’s sit down. I’ll tell you…“ She pulled him to the divan, still deciding whether she should tell him or not. She took his hand. “You know, Nicholas, I lost my roots. No, that’s incorrect.” She shook her head. “I was uprooted so violently, so painfully, that nothing was left. But a person can’t live without the past, without the little trinkets that remind him of pleasant moments, like the letters, the notes, the old photos. Without the tangible and visual pieces of past life… You can’t appreciate their importance until you lose them. These tangible memories can be locked up in a box for years, but they still exist. You can peruse the book of the past by touching its yellowed pages with your fingertips. You can even smell scents and hear sounds…It’s because these trinkets have their own memory and they can talk in silence. Without them, the person’s soul is poor, and he’s alone even in the crowd….”

“I understand,“ said Nicholas, stroking her hand.

“So when Father and I moved from Moscow to Petrograd in 1917, we left all our valuables in a safe, hidden place in our Moscow apartment. We never returned. Even my mother’s jewelry is there. Besides me, only Father and our servant Vasily knew about the place. Both of them passed away…. So, to make it short, I will need to go to Moscow and find my family valuables.”

“What’s the problem? Why can’t we just ask Krasin?” asked Nicholas.

“So that he inquires about me in the OGPU and finds out that my father was a Provisional Government member and was executed by the Bolsheviks? It’s enough that, to them, I’m… how do they call that… ‘a declassified person, a former person.’[[71]](#footnote-71) What will I tell him? Dear Leonid Borisovich, you see, it so happened that right before the October coup and the civil war I forgot a bag of jewelry at this address. Would you please help me go there and find it? No, Nicholas, I can’t go to Russia under my name. I need papers for a different name.”

“Yes, but why do you need this Seregin?” Nicholas asked.

“It’s simple, dear. If I go to Russia under a different name…it’s not even Russia anymore, it’s the Soviet Union…I haven’t been there for years. I need to know what’s going on there, how to behave. I need to know from the horse’s mouth, not from emigrant papers. Seregin is a godsend!” she said convincingly.

’*Or from Satan*,’ the thought flashed in her head.

“I’m probably making it all complicated, but please, try to understand me!”

“But how will you get inside the apartment? Someone probably lives there, no? There is no private property in Soviet Russia, so they must have confiscated the apartment.”

“Nicholas, dear, don’t ask me to explain now what I can’t explain. I don’t know the future. Just help me with this. Maybe Seregin won’t help me, but I don’t need him as an ally, I just want to use him as a source of information. I think I can do that. Our encounter with him is a sign of Fate! And also….”

Irina kept on speaking. The story was becoming more and more detailed. She was clearly at her best. Nicholas listened, nodding from time to time.

“…I need you to trust me and help me!” she finished her monologue.

“Of course, my dear, I’ll help you,“ said Nicholas. “Your uncle has left, hasn’t he?” He rose from the divan.

“Yes, he sailed to America last week. He has business there.

“Don’t worry, my dear, I will definitely help you,“ Nicholas repeated. He looked at her gently, turned around and walked towards the door.

“But… but won’t you tell me anything?” She rose in a sort of daze.

“I will!” He stopped at the door, smiling. “Last night you were the most beautiful woman at the embassy.”

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*‘It’s hard to imagine him today as that drunken merciless animal he was in Bologoye. I’ll be able to tolerate him if I don’t look at his hands with those short ghastly fingers. Hope it won’t take long,’* Irina thought*. ‘I have an advantage. I know more about him than he knows about me. And I know something else he doesn’t know.’* She looked at the guest with a polite smile. *’His future’.*

“Would you like some coffee before we sit down for lunch? I think you like it,” she picked up an elegant china coffee pot from the silver tray.

“Why not, eh?” Seregin smacked his lips. “This coffee is good but I’m more used to tea. So, your husband’s not home yet?” He looked at the dining room door.

“Oh, he’s on his way. He had an important meeting with someone in the government. He should be here soon.”

Seregin nodded.

“You know, I try to stay away from men’s business,” Irina continued. “It’s not for women. I think a woman’s purpose lies in something else, don’t you agree?”

“Hm-hm... Depends on how you look at it.“ Seregin coughed into his hand..  “In the Soviet Union, for example, women are equal to men!”

“Equal to men? In everything?” Irina inquired.

“Completely and in everything!” the guest said proudly. “What a man can do, a woman can do. There are, of course, some bourgeois leftovers, but we’re going to root them out soon.” He showed with his hands how that will be done.

“How long are you staying in Paris, Alexander Vasilievich?” She rose from the sofa and walked over to the window.

This way, she thought, he’d be able to see her figure in the snug soft dress.  She stood by the window, her arms wrapped around herself, under her chest. *‘He probably likes women with pronounced curves,’* she guessed, as she caught a thieving glance slither all over her body. *‘That’s good. He’s biting.’*

She gave him a flirty look, slightly bowing her head.

“You didn’t answer me. Will you be in Paris long?”

“For now they’ve sent me for half a year.“ Seregin didn’t know what to do with his hands and grabbed his knees. “To organize working conditions for embassy employees... Then we’ll see.” He coughed again, glancing at the door.

“I miss Russia!” Irina sighed. “You know, I even dream about Nevsky Prospect, the Summer Garden, Peter and Paul….Do you dream?”

“No, I don’t dream about that.”

“That’s because you just left Russia,” she said.

“Also, I live in Moscow!” he said proudly but then frowned. “If you miss it so much, why don’t you go home?” He looked at her reproachfully.  “We don’t have all this Paris stuff, but what we have is all our own. We’ve got it all.”

“You know, my friend,” she wrapped her arms around her shoulders, “in life we don’t always do what we want. Sometimes we don’t belong to ourselves to the degree we would like. Do you agree?”

The guest shrugged his shoulders.

*‘I’m making it too complicated for him.’* She mentally stopped herself and looked out the window.

“Here, look...” She motioned for Seregin to come cover.

He grasped the armrests and seemed to press into the armchair.

‘*Get up, you bastard, how long should I wait for you?*’ Irina thought with irritation and gave him a loving smile.

“Come, Alexander, don’t be afraid, I don’t bite.”

Seregin reluctantly rose and approached her, stopping in mid stride.

“You see…” she pointed her hand to the window, moving aside so he could see.

Seregin walked over and cautiously looked out.

“So?” he looked at Irina.

“There, look, Alexander, you see that lady leaving the automobile? She’s beautiful, well kept, and wealthy. See?” She forced herself to touch his cheek with her finger, turning his head in the right direction. Seregin stiffened but did not move away.

“No way can she compare to you,” he complimented her.

‘*There’s no way you could compare her to me, bastard*,’ Irina thought. ‘*She hadn’t been beaten; she wasn’t imprisoned; she didn’t barter her last belongings for food; she wasn’t raped by some drunk scum; her husband wasn’t executed in front of her eyes; and her father wasn’t tortured to death, and*….” Irina broke into a polite smile.

“Thank you, but I mean something else…” she said in a languid voice and moved closer to him. Their eyes met. She saw the carnivorous gloss in his.

“So,” she continued, looking at his lips. ‘*Like two slugs, what an abomination*,’ she thought, involuntarily leaning back.

Seregin leaned towards her but stopped. Caution flashed in his glossy eyes and he quickly looked at the door.

“I’m sorry…” Irina touched her temple and shook her head in confusion. “Alexander, you looked at me in such a way that I lost my thoughts…What was I saying? Ah, yes. So imagine a lady like her lives in Paris. She seems to be comfortable, happy with everything, she has no anxieties, no worries, she doesn’t know how to entertain herself, and maybe she’s secretly dreaming of meeting a man who would take her some place where there is adventure, risk, danger, where she can feel the spice of life! We only live once, no?”

Seregin nodded.

“You can’t eat only sweets all your life. Sometimes you want something spicy, hot! Bloody meat… Do you understand me?” She looked at him excitingly.

“Not really,” drawled Seregin, squinting his eyes.

“Why don’t you understand me?” Irina cried out with annoyance. “I don’t remember who said that ‘it’s better to drink blood once than to eat carrion your whole life.”

“About drinking blood, you said that well.“ He perked up. I get that!”

“Have you ever killed a man, Alexander?” asked Irina, looking at him with wide-eyed naiveté.

“Things happened during the war.” Seregin squared his shoulders and assumed a dignified air.

“Tell me, Alexander, please!” she asked with admiration and walked to the sofa, inviting him to follow. She sat next to him. “Tell me, Alexander, but be honest. As an experienced man.” She looked at him with respect. “Is it hard to kill a man? Not in passion, not in a fight or at war, but simply because you can? Simply to take someone’s life? The one and only, God-given life? Is it scary?“

“God? There is nothing to be afraid of there. Religion is just opium for the masses!” Seregin declared. “I don’t remember who said that, Comrade Lenin or Comrade Trotsky, but he said it right. So all these stupidities about God – we don’t care about them. And about killing? Well, what’s so hard about it if it’s not during war and he’s unarmed?” He looked at her bewildered. “Once….”

Irina froze, clasping her hands.

“I hope you’re not bored here!” Nicholas appeared at the door.

Irina reclined in the sofa.

“Nicholas, my dear.” She forced herself to smile. “Finally! Our guest is here.”

Seregin rose hastily.

“Glad to see you again,” Nicholas extended his hand to Seregin as he switched to Russian, “Monsieur, sorry, Comrade Seregin. Thank you for coming. The Countess misses Russia a lot. Your visit is a good present for her. Let’s move to the dining room.

“A drink?” he asked the guest as Irina went to tell Lily to start serving lunch.

Seregin livened up and said, “I prefer to take in some *vodochka*.”

“I’m sorry?” Nicholas asked him

“Ah…,” Seregin looked at the slow-thinking host. “I said I would prefer some vodka. To that I won’t say no!”

“I’m sorry.“ Nicholas spread his arms out, “but I don’t have any vodka. Perhaps you could…,“ He thought for a second, using the expression he had just heard, “*take in* something else?”

Seregin nodded confidently. Nicholas got up and walked to the bar, stocked with many bottles.

“Would you like to *take in* some cognac?”

Seregin grimaced and rubbed his nose with his index finger.

“Won’t say no.”

Nicholas poured the cognac from a short, dark bottle and handed a glass to his guest. Seregin brought his glass close to his face, examining the dark amber liquid. Then he stuck his nose inside, smelled the liquid, and looked at Nicholas.

“It smells like….” Seregin pulled his ear, choosing the word, “smells good.” He wrinkled his forehead as if trying to remember something important and then attempted to get up, as if to make a toast.

“Sit, sit!” Nicholas stopped him. “Try the cognac. I think you’ll love it. Good aroma.” His Russian was almost perfect.

“To our Soviet and French friendship!” said Seregin. He exhaled the air and emptied his glass in one gulp. His face became thoughtful, as if someone had asked, *‘Tell me, Seregin, my dear friend, what’s the meaning of life?’*

Nicholas sipped his cognac and, holding his glass in one hand, asked, “More?”

“Yes, why not. How should I say… I still haven’t felt the effect.”

Nicholas took the bottle and was about to pour more into Seregin’s small cognac glass when Seregin enthusiastically exclaimed, “No, no, pour it here, please.” He pointed to a large glass.

“Well, let’s drink to us, so that we have a lot and others have nothing!” he downed the entire glass.

Hearing the new saying, Nicholas’ eyes shone with the excitement of a collector who sees a new item, the purpose of which he does not understand, although his instinct tells him to take it immediately.

“Who should have nothing?” he asked.

“Hold on, wait...” Seregin placed his hand on his stomach. “I think it’s starting to work. Need to digest it, so to speak!” His cheeks flushed and his eyes glossed. “Who? You know *who*. *Them*!” he said categorically, and having reflected for a moment, added, “Everybody!” He looked at his empty glass. “They say this drink is very expensive?” He pointed to the bottle.

Nicholas shrugged his shoulders.

“Yeah,“ Seregin continued, swirling the glass in his fingers. “Money is not the most important thing in life! Under communism, we’ll do away with money… because it’s useless!” he declared enthusiastically.

“What is the most important thing in life?” Nicholas could not refrain from asking.

“The idea! All the power is in the idea!” the guest vociferated without even blinking, reclining on the back of the armchair.

“Which idea?” Nicholas was genuinely interested.

“Everybody knows which idea.” Seregin looked at the Count, surprised he didn’t know such obvious things. “Our idea!”

“Understood,” Nicholas said seriously and turned to Irina, who walked in the room.  “Do you need help, dear?”

“Don’t worry, dear. Please let’s go to the table.”

Irina lit the tall, slender candles and turned off the electric lights. The dining room became narrower, at first appearing very dark. But soon, the eyes grew accustomed to the dim, flickering light. Lily started to serve lunch.

“Have you visited any other countries besides France?” she asked Seregin who was eating quickly and hungrily as if he had been starving.

“Well… Ukraine….” Seregin’s face displayed pleasant memories. ”Comrade Budeny’s Cavalry Army. Then Poland.“ His face became sad. “With Tukhachevsky.”[[72]](#footnote-72)

“How do you find Paris?” Nicholas asked, setting down his glass.

“It’s a rich city…” Seregin’s eyes shone with greed. “Very rich! But,” he pointed his finger to the ceiling, “there is inequality everywhere you look!”

At the end of the meal, the telephone rang, prompting Nicholas to rise and answer the call in his study.

“So, Alexander, have you seen all the sites?” Irina continued with her questions.

“No, not yet,” Seregin said after a moment’s pause. “Didn’t have a chance. Besides, how can I do this without a guide? All our people at the embassy, they’re all busy.” He looked at Irina and crossed his legs. “Can’t do it without a guide.”

*‘Good, he’s getting bold,’* Irina thought.

“What a coincidence!” she exclaimed with enthusiasm. “It so happens that I am free this week, so I can offer you my services…” She gave him a hasty look. “…as a guide.”

“Wonderful,” Seregin said quickly, even nodding a few times.

“I can’t hear you, speak louder.” Nicholas raised his voice, speaking into the phone.

Seregin thievishly pulled his head into his shoulders.

“But, my dear Alexander Vasilievich…” Irina repeated his movements by leaning back and crossing her legs. “…to maintain the necessary etiquette, you will have to ask the Count’s permission.“ She glanced at him promisingly.

Seregin sullenly nodded and poured himself another glass of cognac.

Irina realized that her glass was empty and thought that in the new Russia, where men and women are equal, everyone pours their own glasses.

“Here is the Count.” She smiled at her husband.

“Mister Count!” Seregin coughed and rose to his feet. “Mister Count!” – he repeated again rubbing his hands. “Eh….hum... your… wife…the Countess…” He seemed to be losing his train of thought, so he decided to finish the phrase more resolutely, “…offered to show me the city.”

Nicholas looked at Irina with surprise. She nodded and switched to French, trying to help the guest.

“Nicholas, my dear, can you imagine, Monsieur Seregin hasn’t had the opportunity to see the attractions of Paris. As hospitable hosts, we should help him. Allow me to show him the city myself, so as not to take you away from your business. Also, this way I could speak more with my countryman about Russia!”

“Dear, are you sure our hospitality should extend to this…“ he paused, searching the right word, “rather unusual man?”

Irina looked at him pleadingly.

“Of course, Comrade Seregin,” Nicholas said in Russian. “We would be happy to show you Paris. The Countess knows Paris very well.”

“Just bear in mind, Alexander Vasilievich,” Irina added quickly, “that it will be a very superficial tour. To see all of Paris, one needs not only time but also the desire.”

Seregin listened to her tensely, nodding with understanding.

“Sorry, but I have to go. …” He hastened to leave. “Our ambassador, Comrade Krasin, is going to Cannes tomorrow. I have to make sure they don’t forget anything.”

“I wish you a great tour, Comrade Seregin.” Nicholas held out his hand. “I hope you will come to love our… wonderful city! Please allow me to walk you out.”

Seregin looked at Irina, and then, as if he had remembered something very important, at the Count.

“Merci! Your cognac is good…and your so-to-speak…as well as your wife.” He made for the exit.

Irina stood by the window, watching Seregin leave. Nicholas walked up and hugged her.

“Iren, explain to me what he meant by ‘your so-to-speak wife.’”

 “You see, Nicholas, in Russian, like in other languages, there are parasite words…”

“Pa-ra-sites,” Nicholas laughed and hugged her tighter, stroking her back.

She laughed with him, but then became serious and said, “No, my dear, the tragedy is that, for them, the parasites are those like you and me.” She looked him in the eyes. “Thank you, Nicholasha.”

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“And now, Alexander Vasilievich, look to the right.“ Irina wiped the fogged car window.

Seregin, hardly containing a yawn, reluctantly moved his head.

“Do you see that mansion? Do you know who owns it?”

Ignoring the tourist’s dejected expression, she continued, “The Pearl King, Leonard Rosenthal. By the way, he often organizes receptions for Russians here and provides lots of help for emigrants.”

Seregin grimaced at the word “emigrants.” It clearly annoyed him.

“The story is that his huge wealth is all thanks to a small pearl he found inside an oyster when he worked at a restaurant as a boy. It’s just a story, of course, but a nice one!”

Seregin shrugged his shoulders. It was clear that the Paris tour made him bored and miserable. Irina could read the writing on his forehead: *“Why the hell do I need all these useless names and stupid stories about stuff I don’t care about? Who gives a damn if some rich parasite lived here and did this or that? Why should I be listening to this and what use do I have for this information?”*

His attention was stirred only once, when the taxi stopped at a wide square where the Bastille once stood.

“Destroyed, you say? Without a trace?” he asked Irina, and hearing the affirmative answer, he mumbled with surprise, “Where did they keep all the arrested bourgeois and the other scum, so to speak, after the revolution? I think the French comrades rushed too quickly.” He was upset and fell into reflection.

*‘What next?’* Irina wondered, glancing occasionally at Seregin, who sat next to her in the rear seat of the taxi. *‘It’s hard to get him to open up during a tour. Who can blame him for not wanting to talk about his past with a bored, rich bitch flirting with him, looking for adventure?’* She frowned, surprised that the epithet “rich bitch” flashed in her thoughts, against her will. *‘No, I can’t let his words into my head. His speech is contagious like cholera or plague.*’

After spending two days with Seregin, she began adapting to him, using the words she would not normally use, copying his movements and gestures, as if trying to enter his world, win his trust, get him to open up. And then do what she needed to.

“How about lunch?” she asked Seregin and ordered the driver to stop by a café.

“Can’t say no.” Seregin got out of the car in a better mood.

At the entrance to the café, a sad blind musician was singing a song with a trembling voice:

                       *Madelon, fill up the glasses*

*And sing with the soldiers.*

*We won the war.*

*Can you believe that we beat them?*

“What’s he singing about?” Seregin asked.

“He wants to drink to celebrate the victory in the war.” Irina decided not to bother with a detailed explanation.

Seregin made an approving sound with his throat and pushed open the door.

“But don’t you think, Alexander, that just because we stopped to eat, our tour is over. Not at all!” Irina walked in after him and gave her coat to a teenager who smiled at them and called her by name.

“Good day, Jacques,” she said.

“You come here a lot?” Seregin looked around alarmed as they walked towards a small, cozy area with tightly packed tables. The café was not busy; there was only a couple in the corner and an old man with a newspaper, puffing a pipe.

“Let’s sit by the window,“ Irina offered. “The view is amazing from there!”

Seregin quickly walked around her and sat down at the table facing the entrance. She sat on the chair offered by the waiter, and opened the menu, watching Seregin, who carefully studied the descriptions of the French dishes.

“What would you like?” she inquired after a while.

“Hum… well… you order,“ he said unsurely, putting aside the menu.

“Well, then, I can recommend the shellfish, the Armorica lobster, a calf kidney sautéed in Armagnac, hooves in Chablis, a sea urchin in…”

“I’m not so hungry,” Seregin interrupted her, “as to eat hooves and urchins.”

“Well, how about pheasant Pate?” Irina said, explaining that it was a meat dish served with vegetables.

“You can get that,” Seregin said with an important look. “If it's their national food, of course.” He took out a pack of cigarettes, looked around and asked, “Can I smoke here?”

“If the ashtray is on the table, you can,” said Irina.

“See, all these bourgeois rules,” he grumbled. “In Russia you can always smoke, whether or not there are ashtrays.”

He pulled out a filterless cigarette, tapped it against the table and blew some air through it. The waiter appeared right away and swept the tobacco crumbs off the white tablecloth.

“As always, wine, cheese, and pate,” Irina ordered.

“Of course, Madame Countess,“ the waiter nodded.

“*Merci, Pierre*,” she smiled to the waiter and looked at the window pane, on which raindrops were racing each other. “Well, shall we continue the tour, Alexander?”

Seregin, coughing on the smoke, looked at his tireless guide with disbelief.

“There’s a building across the Seine,” she indicated with her hand. “You can’t see it from here, but I’ll show you later. That is Hotel Lutèce. It’s also a point of interest, and not because of the name, which is the old name of Paris, but because they organize large charity fundraisers for Russian orphanages and old age homes, a few times a year.

Seregin reluctantly nodded.

“The tickets are given out by wealthy, emigrant benefactresses.” Irina saw that he did not know the meaning of the word “benefactress”, even though he didn’t ask for an explanation.

“A lot of people attend,“ she continued, “Young, beautiful girls selling flowers…” She saw dread in his eyes. “It’s beautiful there, you would like it.” She cut it short.

“Hm-m, I doubt it, so to speak,” he said, letting out a cloud of smoke. “Because I’m not an emigrant,” he said proudly. “I didn’t run away from my Motherland. So I don’t care about their beauty.”

‘*They also wouldn’t have run away if scum like you hadn’t driven them out*,’ Irina thought and lowered her eyes.

The waiter set two glasses down in front of them and showed them the wine bottle label.

“I don’t think we have to taste it. You trust me, don’t you, Alexander?” she smiled.

Seregin slowly brought the cigarette to his lips and squinted at her, making sure she understood that the question of trust still hadn’t been settled.

“It’s great!” Irina motioned for the waiter to fill the glasses.

Carefully wrapping the bottle in a white napkin, he poured the wine.

“French national wine?” Seregin inquired, and, without waiting for the response, exhaled and emptied the glass in one gulp.

The waiter filled up the glass again and Seregin gulped it down another time, seeing that Irina was taking only a small sip.

“I was thirsty,” he explained, dropping ash on the white tablecloth.

Irina moved the ashtray towards him and asked, pointing at his glass, “Did you like it?”

“Not bad,” he approved, “but cognac is better.” He bent over and blew the ash from the table. “Vodka is the best, though,” he added. “So, what are we going to do now?” he asked, playing with the glass in his hand.

“What would you like, Alexander?” she raised her eyes, pretending that she did not understand the question.

“Me? Why me?” he was suddenly confused.

“If you want, I’ll tell you more about Lutèce,” she offered.

“Go ahead,” he waved his hand.

“So, Lutèce was the first place to have beauty pageants. The most beautiful girl would be titled “Miss Russia.” I think it was started by the *Illustrated Russia* magazine.  Do you know it?”

Seregin grimaced, “I read other papers. Ours. Pravda,[[73]](#footnote-73) for example.”

“What an interesting name!” Irina exclaimed.

“Yeah, of course,” Seregin livened up. “Each word is the truth. Our truth, the people’s truth. When I read it, I think it was the right thing we had the revolution and kicked out all the capitalist scum who lived like parasites, getting fat on the people’s blood. Soon we’ll get to the world’s bourgeois! They have it coming!” He suddenly hit the table with his fist, so hard that the couple in the corner jumped up and the old man lost track of the line he was reading in the newspaper, puffing his pipe with annoyance.

“I don’t like that magazine, *Illustrated Russia*,” said Irina quickly, just in case. “Their editor-in-chief, Mironov, is disgusting. Imagine, his whole mouth is filled with gold teeth. Horrible.  A very unpleasant man!”

Seregin smiled. “Gold teeth are a good thing. You don’t need to look hard where the bourgeois hid their gold.” He laughed at his own wit.

The waiter brought a plate of cheese and a bread basket with freshly baked rolls, which had a fragrant aroma.

“I love this aroma!” Irina inhaled with delight.

Seregin looked down at the basket, lifted the napkin and sniffed the dough, examining the cheese.

“What is that green stuff?” he pointed his finger at the Roquefort. “Is it rotten? It stinks, too.” He grimaced. “Are they trying to poison us?” he said suspiciously. “I’m not eating this. How do you eat this, anyway? With these?” He picked up his knife and fork. “Or simply, like the normal people?”

“Simply,” said Irina, hiding a smile. “Eat as you want, Alexander.”

Seregin picked up a roll and bit off a piece, dropping golden crumbs on the table. He mumbled something approving with a full mouth, emptied another glass of wine and reached for the second roll.

They both sat silently. Irina took a sip of her wine and sullenly looked through the window. She had spent the whole day with Seregin and still did not know how to make him talk. Actually, she did know, but was afraid to acknowledge that she could not find another way.

‘*I can’t believe I’ll have to go to bed with this scum*,’ she thought, looking at the man chewing.  *’Ah, Sophie, Sophie…’* she remembered Lenochka’s older sister, the irresistible socialite and the tireless acolyte of Eros. Her one look was enough to make men follow her anywhere, like rats following the sounds of the magic flute.

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She had last seen Sophie in 1919. After many ordeals they ended up in Odessa, where one of Sophie’s many admirers was transferred to reinforce the local *Cheka*.[[74]](#footnote-74) There, on the seashore, under the kind southern sky, Irina thought that the worst was behind her and nothing else would happen to her. Sophie and her “Daddy”, as she called him, lived in a house on the French Boulevard. One of Daddy’s conditions was that Sophie could not have contact with the girls, and so Irina and Lenochka had to rent a tiny room not too far from the boardwalk.  The landlady, a dirty, constantly grudging creature of uncertain age, made a living doing laundry for the comrades from the local *Cheka*, sent there from across Russia to fight the counterrevolution and banditry in the South.

She washed the *Cheka* underwear with such frenzy that it appeared she wanted to rub it into oblivion. She talked endlessly to herself, moaning and grumbling in a cranky voice. Her grouchiness stopped only at night when her body, exasperated, gave up, and she fell asleep in seconds. It looked like someone invisible had struck her on the head with a heavy object. She would fall asleep immediately, but even in her sleep she would cry out about those “damn assholes” crawling around, hoping both the Reds and the Whites would drop dead.

The landlady hated Irina at first sight. The bourgeois broad, as she called her, was too finicky, with unpleasant reactions to the ways of simple people, such as a sick stomach and vomiting.  *Who cares about lice in laundry bags! Big deal if there are cockroaches in the room and the sleazy, fish-smelling, aluminum bowl!*

After a while, the girls moved to another apartment, which Sophie found with Daddy’s help. The apartment was tiny, but relatively clean and there were no other tenants. Their days were busy: The first several hours would be spent in line waiting for kerosene; then they would run to another part of the city to spend another few hours waiting in line for bread. Then they did cleaning, the laundry, and dozens of small errands. Sophie helped them with food. She arranged for them to register at a public eatery where for eighteen rubles they could eat soup or borscht without meat and “buckwheat” or “wheat” kasha with a piece of bread.[[75]](#footnote-75) The money gradually ran out and so did the things they could sell. Their future looked grimmer with each day.

Sophie was depressed. Daddy was too busy at work. Although they had suspended the death penalty in Moscow, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic made full use of its independence.[[76]](#footnote-76) A memorandum from Kharkov[[77]](#footnote-77) explained that all this did not apply to Ukraine; counterrevolution still existed there, therefore the terror had to go on.

Sophie, who had become plump, authoritatively enlightened her friends:  “Odessa is a nest of thieves and robbers,” she would say, chewing something all the time. “The immediate objective is to liquidate all the criminals. White officers will get mandatory prison sentences, but those who surrender will be shown leniency.” Daddy constantly left her alone, travelling to the provinces when duty called, and begging her only one thing: to stop feeling too good for her own good.

Lenochka was looking for a job. In the evenings, she talked about the rumors she had heard during the day. First, the entire city was saying that the Ukrainians were advancing and were somewhere close. Then the Ukrainians turned out to be the Romanians, who had become some kind of ally. Then it was the Serbians or the Bulgarians. After the Bulgarians, it was the Polish army, and then the Germans….

The money finally ran out and the girls had to use their last remaining Denikin thousand-ruble *bluebells*.[[78]](#footnote-78) While officially banned, they were still traded on the Odessa black market. But even that did not last long. They were saved from hunger by Education Minister Lunacharsky himself, although he did not actually know it. More precisely, they were saved by his order to “take necessary steps to develop humanitarian sensibilities amongst the workers and the soldiers and to soften class hatred.” To that end, Lunacharsky invited educated persons to lecture the proletariat on liberal arts topics of their choosing. The “educated persons” were not paid for the lectures, but they were given food-rationing tickets, which allowed them to survive. At the end of the lectures, the attendees particularly liked to sing their favorite revolutionary song with Irina’s piano accompaniment. The song was about Sten’ka Razin.[[79]](#footnote-79) When the brave ataman was throwing the princess overboard, the walls were shaking from cheerful cries. In their minds, the princess was a bourgeois.

Lenochka’s constant health problems were worrisome. She had some strange lung illness. No one could diagnose her, and therefore no one could help. To top it all, Sophie started a “glamorous” affair with former Cossack Ataman Stepan Tersky. One night she showed up at their apartment and cheerfully announced: “Girls, I fell in love and my Daddy is coming tomorrow from Kiev and he’ll kill me. I must get out of here. It’s not safe for you here. I hope you’re ready?” She looked at the girls, frozen in surprise. “Why are you looking at me like that? Ah, you want to know who my friend is,” she smiled dreamily. “You won’t believe it, but I’ve never had anyone like him before!” She rolled her eyes. “He’s a mix between Rasputin, Trotsky and Tolstoy.”

“My God, what does this have to do with Tolstoy?” Lenochka coughed.

“My dear, why don’t you understand? It’s wonderful when they’re all together - Rasputin and Trotsky and Lev Nikolayevich with his nonviolence! It means with tenderness, girls, with tenderness and kindness,” she said languidly. Seeing reproach in her sister’s eyes and amusement in Irina’s, she quickly opened her purse and asked, “Girls, do you want some cocaine?”

“Thank you, Sophie, we’re fasting!” Irina answered with a straight face. Sophie looked at the laughing girls with tears in her eyes. She cried as she hugged and kissed them.

“Don’t be mad at me, girls! Is there anything more beautiful in this life than love! God willing, we’ll meet in Crimea.”

The escape from Odessa was organized by Sophie’s new boyfriend, and proved to be a complicated affair. The Bolsheviks established a no-traffic zone along the shore, two miles into the sea. It was forbidden to sail beyond that line.

Two strong Cossacks, pretending to be late night fishermen, were rowing all night. After twenty-four hours on the water, exhausted from the high seas and the thirst, they saw a lighthouse. That was their destination, Tendra Island.  Soon they were sitting in the wardroom of the yacht “*Lucullus*” and drinking tea with Admiral Sablin, a cabinet member from Baron Wrangel’s[[80]](#footnote-80) government and a good friend of Irina’s father….

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‘*Sophie, Sophie, I really need your advice now*…’ Irina thought sadly, taking in the early dusk through the restaurant window, with Seregin in front of her.

“I’m so tired of winter,” she said quietly.

Seregin, finishing the food on his plate, looked up at her.

“What goes on here in wintertime?” he asked, picking up the crumbs from the table with his fingers and stuffing them into his mouth.

“In case you haven’t figured that out yet, Alexander, winter is awful here. It rains in the morning, snows at noon, and then again, rain in the evening. And the nights are freezing.  Everyone is sick, cold, coughing, sneezing…”

“Hah, that’s not normal,” Seregin said without malice and blissfully lit a cigarette. He seemed very relaxed.

“By the way, see those lights? Would you like to go to the cinema? I know the movie director, Marcel L’Herbier. He has a studio in Paris. He even offered me a role in one of his movies! Can you imagine that?”

Seregin inhaled the smoke.

“Yes, I can imagine,” he said, envious. “Not bad. You, so to speak, are very attractive. So…” he rolled the empty glass in his fingers.  “Listen, Ira…I’m a simple man, I’m not used to jumping around like this. I’ll tell you directly. I like you!” he said firmly, eyeing her with a lusty grin.

Irina froze. ‘*Finally! He’s caught on*!’ she thought cheerfully. ‘*I thought I’d have to dance on the table for him! Thank you, Sophie. Even my thinking of you excites men*!”

The waiter wanted to refill his glass, but Seregin took the bottle himself.

“I can do it myself. Am I not a man?”

He was about to pour, but met Irina’s eyes and halted. “You first.” He poured some wine for her and the remaining part for himself.

Irina made a sign to the waiter to bring another bottle.

“Well?” he looked at her with reddish eyes.

“Alexander, remember that if you’re not used to wine, it may seem like water, but then…you can lose control….”

Seregin chuckled contemptuously as he finished his wine, wiped his mouth and said smugly with a slightly tangled tongue, ”Don’t worry about me being drunk. It won’t hit me. I've been doing this since I was a kid. During the civil war, you know how many times we drank grain alcohol? It just made me angrier….I used to chop them… I made mincemeat out of them…” He made a chopping motion with his arm. “And control …. people who have a grudge should control themselves. I’ve got nothing to hide. I am the way I am. I say whatever I think.”

Irina felt tired and empty.  *‘He’s already getting drunk,’* she thought, analyzing the situation. *‘What next? Is this going to happen tonight?’* She felt chills.

 “How about we go to the theater?” she smiled.

Seregin almost choked and stared at her in amazement.

“There are many Russian actors,“ Irina continued as if not noticing his surprise. “Many don’t speak French….but even if they did, who needs them...”

“Oh, Ira, here you hit the bull’s-eye!” Seregin turned over his glass and put it down on the table.

The waiter arrived with the new bottle and opened it.

“Pour, pour!” Seregin turned the glass back and slid it over to the waiter. “Pour, I tell you!” he said in Russian.

The waiter threw a sad look at the red wine stain on the white tablecloth, brought his left arm behind the back and started to pour.

“Is Monsieur from Russia?” he asked Irina

“Yes,” she smiled.

“What’s he saying about Russia?” Seregin asked suspiciously.

“He said that you were probably from Russia.”

“Ah, that’s what I thought.” His face softened a bit. “He probably sympathizes with us. Even though he’s not a worker, he has to serve the bourgeoisie, so he’s still one of us.” He turned to the waiter. “Comrade!” he said with a smile, using up his entire French vocabulary. He raised his arm, bent at the elbow with a clenched fist. “Workers of all countries, unite!”

The waiter smiled politely. Seregin’s face radiated with glee.

“Here! You see, Ira? He gets it. A Soviet man, can’t mistake him for a bourgeois. We have our own pride!”

He suddenly got up, knocking over a chair, and raised his glass.

“To the World Revolution!” He gulped the glass of wine. “In the entire world!” He returned to his chair, supported by the quick waiter.

“You said it wonderfully, Alexander. I even wanted to cry,” remarked Irina.

“Sorry I interrupted.” Seregin put his elbows on the table and placed his chin on his hands.  “So, what were you saying?”

“I was talking about the theater. Just think, the actors found a sponsor who rents them a theater once a year. And they practice all this time. They work at night, some are drivers, some are waiters…”

Seregin smoked as he listened to her, lost in his thoughts.

“Alexander, are you listening to me?” She tinkled the glass with her nail.

Seregin nodded and looked at Irina, pretending to be paying attention.

“They live the whole year for the sake of that one day – those who act and those who watch…to look nice in front of each other, like in the old days.”

Seregin angrily hit the table with his hand. The fork and the knife clinked pitifully, jumping up from the vibration. The couple a few tables down got up and headed to the exit, looking back, displeased.

“Stupid clowns,” Seregin said through his clenched teeth. “I’d give them a shovel and make them do something useful!  March them home across Europe! Let them work for the working people’s good!”

“Yes, you’re right, that’s what I mean,” said Irina. “Look, Alexander, the rain is over, maybe we should go.”

“Maybe we should. Listen, Ira,” Seregin covered her hand with his. “Let’s go to my place, eh? Right now. We’ll drink some vodka…. I still have some *salo[[81]](#footnote-81)*left, and black bread. We’ll talk about life and all that…I want you a lot… so to speak. Even though you’re of the blue blood, but in my gut I feel you’re our kind.”

‘*God*,’ Irina thought miserably, forcing herself not to remove her hand. ‘*Is it going to be tonight*?’

Her chest ached. Nausea rolled up to her throat. She raised her free hand, asking the waiter for the check. Then she pulled her hand from under Seregin’s and opened her purse.

“Hey, no!” he protested. “I also have money, I’m not some beggar! I’ll pay!” He pulled out an envelope from his jacket pocket, opened it and counted the money with his short fingers tattooed with the letter S-A-S-H-A.

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”Tushkevich and Maltsev are in Moscow… they run the unions. Yakov Rakelov, a namesake, with the birthmark, the *Cheka* boss… Rakelov…what an incredible coincidence… Fate’s cruel joke.  Tushkevich is in contact with everybody,“ Irina whispered as the hot shower rained on her head and shoulders. She was dying to get rid of the nauseatingly sweet cologne odor entrenched in her skin. She wept from the joy of learning their names and also because Seregin, wrecked by the vodka, had suddenly fallen asleep, able to do nothing more than smear his saliva on her face, shoulders and chest, and defile her skirt.

“Tushkevich and Maltsev are in Moscow…the unions. Yakov Rakelov, a namesake, with the birthmark, the *Cheka* boss… Tushkevich is in contact with everybody,” she kept on whispering as she sponged herself fiercely.

Already in bed, curled up as in childhood, in a fetal position, she relived the events of the evening. She was nauseous. She had never drunk so much Russian vodka. Also the cigarettes.

*‘It’s great that Nicholas won’t be coming home until tomorrow and I won’t have to explain anything,’* she thought. She still could not believe that she had done all that. Was it a chance? No. Most likely someone was helping her - someone in heaven or maybe in hell.  Who could have thought that the key would be the small birthmark on her cheek and Seregin would have suddenly remembered his war buddy with a birthmark on his face? Blackbeard, the one who looked like a leech full of blood. She remembered that.

“Hey, Ira, you won’t believe it. I have a friend, a war buddy, so to speak. He’s got a spot on his mug that big,” Seregin had said. “If you meet him at night, you’ll get a heart attack.”

She mentally replayed the rest of that conversation: “You probably lost contact with all your war friends?”She had asked.

“Nah, we’re four best buddies. We can’t be separated, ever! We went through the entire revolution together. Since 1917. The civil war, too. Everybody’s alive.  We became friends in Bologoye...”

‘*Bologoye, Bologoye, you’re so far away*!’ Again that silly song… It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered anymore. A timer had been started. It would measure the remainder of their lives. This timer could not be stopped. Even she couldn’t stop it now. Even if she burned in Hell… although this human waste would get there before her, she decided!

She got out of bed and opened the window. The cold, wet air burst into the room. The trees complained to each other about the weather. The stars glanced at the rain-soaked ground and hid from the wind, behind the crumpled grey clouds. The Seine, like a stretched cord, trembled, anticipating the touch of dawn.

“*Bologoye, Bologoye*…”

3

Spring arrived in Paris, boldly and unexpectedly. It pushed through the clouds, opening the way for nourishing sunrays. Their tender touch awoke the grass, the tree leaves, and the flowers, which all burst with bright, kaleidoscopic colors on the boulevards and windowsill flowerpots, permeating the air with the scent of revival. People were rejuvenated, along with nature. Crowds filled the Seine promenades and the square in front of Notre Dame.  Irina stood by the open window, breathing the spring air. She heard Nicholas’ steps behind her and turned, looking into his eyes.

“You know, my dear,” he said, as if picking up a recently stopped conversation, “I’ve just understood why you like to stay by the window for so long.”

“Have you?”

“It’s because you, my love, were a bird in your former life. “

“Was I?”

“A rare bird,” he added.

Irina nodded sadly.

“Birds need the sky and the open space. So now, in your human form, you’re struggling because you want to break free from the cage of your body. Although you’re not sure you’ll have more freedom if you do.”

Irina shrugged. Nicholas hugged her.

“It may not be the flight itself, as much as its hypothetical possibility that you like.” He looked at her with a sly smile. “My dear, please keep in mind that the door of your cage is always open.” He held her tight against his body. “Do you still want to go to Russia?”

Irina sobbed and hid her face in his shoulder.

“Well, well, what’s wrong?“ Nicholas shook her gently. “You can’t get soft before that trip!”

She looked up at him, unable to believe that she had understood him correctly.

“Get ready, get ready,” he smiled, “before I change my mind!”

“Nicholas…” she could only utter, choking on her tears.

“Aren’t you happy?” he asked. “Didn’t you ask me to organize a trip to Russia?”

“Nikolasha!” she exhaled.

“Here, hold this.” He handed her an envelope.

Irina grasped the envelope and held it to her chest. She then rushed to a table and spilled out the contents. There was a passport, train tickets and some documents in English.

“Listen and memorize…” Nicholas said instructively. “Now you work for an American charity fund. Your name is Zinaida Blumendorf. Get used to the name. You’re an American with Russian roots. Your English is good; it won’t raise questions in Moscow.” He paused.  “So, my dear Zinaida.” He looked at the documents over her shoulder.  “Here, on this page, is your biography and the information about the fund and its managers.  Memorize it and burn the paper. This is the ticket to Berlin. The train is leaving tonight at ten.” He looked at his wristwatch.  “In Berlin you’ll join the delegation of *SocRabIntern*.”[[82]](#footnote-82)

Seeing her questioning eyes, he explained, “It’s short for the Socialist Workers International. It’s a communist organization, which was started in Hamburg three years ago.”

“In any case,” he smiled as Irina listened carefully on a chair, like a good student with her hands on her knees, “you’ll find the details in that memo. From Berlin you’ll head to the Soviet Union. I hope you’ll remember that this is how your Russia is now called?”

She nodded.

“You’ll get your Moscow tickets together with the other delegates. Try to get everything done in a few days, don’t take risks. When you’re done, pretend to be sick and leave. Remember? Good.” He looked at her carefully. “So, aren’t you going to say anything?” he asked in Russian, “or silence is golden?”

“Thank you,” she replied so quietly that Nicholas could hardly hear her. “Thank you.  I really couldn’t have imagined this.”

“Yes, it wasn’t simple. It took some work,“ he said in Russian again. “Water does not flow under a lazy stone.”[[83]](#footnote-83)

“Of course, dear.“ Irina finally spoke. “Water flows only under the hard working stone,“ she said, and wrapped her arms around her husband’s neck.

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After he returned from the train station, Nicholas picked up the phone and dialed a number.

“She’s gone,” he said brusquely. “Do as we agreed.” He hung up the phone.

4

 The train slowed down as it crawled closer to Moscow. Irina was standing in the car corridor looking out the window. Small wooden houses covered with flowers streamed past.

“Comrades! Our train arrives in the Soviet Union capital in thirty minutes!” The smiling, pink-faced conductor walked through the compartments of the international sleeper car, which was filled with delegation members. She repeated the same phrase with the same intonation in Russian, German and English.

There was a lively commotion in the car; not only because many people were coming to the mysterious Soviet Union for the first time, but also because they found out that the things they had taken out of suitcases during the trip could not fit back in.

 “We’re getting close!” a thin, elderly Frenchman happily informed Irina. The old man was travelling in the adjacent compartment. Always in a good mood, he had been humming opera arias to himself. “Thirty minutes, we’re almost there! Have you ever been to Moscow, Madame Zinaida?” he asked her for the hundredth time, gleaming with his colorless eyes.

“Yes, Monsieur Paul, I have,“ Irina smiled. “With my parents, when I was a child. I don’t remember much, just a few Russian words.”

The old man listened carefully, as if it was the first time she had said that.

“My grandma was born in Smolensk,” Irina repeated her story again.

She took the long cigarette holder and a cigarette from her purse, apologized and went to the car vestibule to join two men. One was Fredrick, a tall, thin, loud, redheaded German. He was from the delegation. On the first day of the trip, he casually sat next to her at the restaurant car table and told her that he was ready to go all the way to China in the company of such a charming frau.

The other man was a blond, middle-aged, heavyset man with missing eyebrows and a suspicious look. He appeared in the car soon after the train had crossed the Soviet border. Irina did not know his name. She nodded to them and lit her cigarette, staring out the window. The upcoming rendezvous in Moscow was making her anxious.

She had tried to stay out of conversations and shun the company of strangers since the train departed from Berlin. Listening was more interesting anyway, especially in the restaurant car where heated discussions in English, French, German and Spanish were in full swing. Spanish was the only language she did not speak well. She would sit somewhere in the corner, although staying invisible was difficult. A single young woman always provides inspiration for many a man who equates a trip away from home with a temporary divorce.

The conversation in the vestibule was in German. The blond man was fluent but spoke with a slight accent; German was not his native language.

“Listen, Herr Moiseev,” said Fredrick, “let’s ask Frau Zinaida, let her tell us her opinion.” He motioned for Irina to participate in the discussion.

She gave him an inquiring look, noticing Moiseev’s quick, evaluating glance.

“Frau Zinaida, we’re discussing the ethical aspect of the death penalty,“ Fredrick explained, but the Russian interrupted him:

“No,” he said firmly, “we were not discussing the ethical aspect of the death penalty. We were discussing the death penalty as the highest form of revolutionary defense against individual political adversaries and mass terror as the necessary tool of the revolutionary struggle.”

“What a serious discussion!” exclaimed Irina. “And the gentlemen would like to know a woman’s opinion?” She fixed her hair and smiled playfully - she knew she looked great with the short hairstyle she adopted in Paris right before leaving.

“Yes, yes!” nodded Fredrick, looking at her with delight.

Moiseev stuck his hand into his trouser pocket and smiled skeptically. Irina slowly pulled the cigarette out from the holder and put it out.

“Well, as far as I know, revolutionary ethic accepts no punishment for murder and violence if they’re committed for the common goal and the common good and if they are conducted within the context of political reasonableness.” She looked at Moiseev who nodded reluctantly. “In this, revolutionary ethic is different from the commonly accepted Christian ethic.”

“We don’t believe in God!” Moiseev said sarcastically. “We have a different belief. We believe in the bright future of the entirety of mankind; and to us, mankind is more important than the interests of individuals and the exploiting class.” He looked at her challengingly.

“Well, although the new religion is being spread in the Soviet Union,” she said, seeing the surprise on Moiseev’s face, “the one of scientific atheism, I hope you still remember the Old Testament commandments relevant to this topic?”

Moiseev grimaced and stuck his other hand into the pocket.

She continued in the lecturer’s tone she learned from her father. “*A man who injures his countryman – as he has done, so it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. Just as another person has received injury from him, so it will be given to him*. Well, it appears the Russian revolutionaries are devoted followers of the Old Testament, isn’t that so?”

Moiseev was puzzled.

“Remember, wasn’t the so-called White Terror the excuse to begin the Red Terror?”[[84]](#footnote-84)

Fredrick livened up, looking ironically at Moiseev and delightfully at Irina.

“But there is something else written in the Book of Genesis,” she continued, “’*Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.*’ In other words, if you spill other people’s blood, you can expect that your blood may be spilled, perhaps even according to your own rules, or maybe without any rules, if you have none. Therefore, murder.” Irina gave Moiseev a charming smile. “If it’s intentional, no matter the reason, must be punished without question. That is the fundamental principle of justice.”

“I see you’re well prepared,“ Moiseev remarked through his clenched teeth.

“Oh, yes!” Irina smiled. “This question has occupied my mind for a long time.”

“And now?” Moiseev asked.

“And now,“ Irina rubbed her throat, “it doesn’t bother me anymore. I’m sorry, comrades, I need to pack my things. The train’s approaching the station.”

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In the automobile, on the way to the hotel, Irina eagerly peered at the streets and buildings she’d known since early childhood, recognizing them but not entirely. The buildings peered back at her, trying to decide if she was that same happy, careless *Irochka* they knew. All these years in emigration, she thought that if she had seen Moscow again she would not hold back her tears. She thought she’d weep and her heart would shatter. But now, back in Moscow, she did not weep and her heart did not shatter. Her sensitivity had been dulled. Or perhaps this was not her city at all. New people lived there, according to new laws, practicing the new faith.

The delegation was staying at the Hotel Savoy. Having settled in her room, which still retained its old splendor and luxury, Irina left her things and hurried outside. She was dying to slip through the back alleys, to go to her home in the Archangel Lane, just to see and touch the memories, to walk into the Antioch Priory to pray and light candles for the deceased and the murdered, to pop into the bakery on the corner where she had bought fresh *kalachi* as a little girl….if the bakery was still there. But she couldn’t do any of that.  She couldn’t risk it. Although many years had passed and she hardly looked like the old Irochka, there was the possibility of meeting people who knew her. The consequences of such a meeting were difficult to foresee. That was not why she had come here.

She walked along the Kuznetsky Bridge to Kamergersky Lane and stopped in front of the Art Theater. The swimmer painted on its facade still struggled with the stormy waves, trying to swim to a shore known only to him.

*‘He’s just like me,’* Irina thought. *‘I’ve been swimming to a shore only I knew about. I even saw its shape far away, and then I realized it was the wrong shore. No one is waiting for me anywhere in this city. The bits of the ripped-out roots are still in the ground but they can’t sprout anymore.’*

She turned right, around the corner, and walked up Tverskaya, staring at passersby. She noticed that not only had their clothing changed, but also their expressions – their eyes were alert and wary. The way they walked had changed too. Some ran by, as if they were terribly late to places they couldn’t be late to, under penalty of death; others, on the contrary, walked with heavy and measured gait, like loaders carrying heavy bags along a narrow bridge. You couldn’t trip or slow down because that would break the rhythm set by the strict supervisor. There was also a third group: those dressed in military uniform and leather coats. Theirs was the master’s gait.

She crossed the street and stopped in front of the Pushkin monument. The bronze poet was sad. He stood, hat down, as if having seen Russia off - gone forever on her last journey. With gloomy disdain he watched from his pedestal the bustle of the new masters and the new slaves, not yet aware of the fate prepared for them by their leaders.

*’Dear, dear Alexander Sergeevich,’* Irina thought, studying the bronze face.  *’How does it feel to watch this ‘new poetic vanguard,’ so boldly shrieking with impunity? All these futurists,[[85]](#footnote-85) imaginists, the nichevoks….[[86]](#footnote-86)  The arrogant offspring[[87]](#footnote-87) trying to push you away from the ‘ship of modernity’. They hang posters around Moscow, declaring Akhmatova dead; they call Blok[[88]](#footnote-88) a corpse that needs to be buried.  In reality, they besmirched the Golden and Silver Ages of Russian poetry and ended up in the Stone Age. Time will be their judge, of course, but its judgment will take long. Not everyone will live to see it.“*

 She walked to the Arbat. An empty bench was next to a lilac bush that had lost most of its blossoms to passerby’s fingers. Careful not to stain her coat, she sat down on the edge of the bench.

*‘Some time ago, the great, the only, Porphyries de Twait lived here,’* she remembered with a smile. “The Magus,” she said quietly, feeling the taste of the long forgotten word on her lips. “The wise friend I miss so much!”

A crow cawed over her head. Irina looked up. The bird perched on a dry tree branch, bent its head, and gazed at Irina with its black, witchy eyes, as if to say, *“I know why you’re here…. I know all about you.”*

Irina chuckled.  ‘*Should I go to Porphyries’ building?’* She felt an obsessive and persistent longing within her. *‘Why not?’* She rose from the bench, stepped forward, and suddenly felt someone’s stare behind her. She turned and saw two men, not far away, looking at her with interest.

*‘You jinxed it,’* Irina thought, annoyed, looking at the crow, which was cleaning its feathers, unperturbed. *‘OGPU goons are all I need! Too bad. I’ll have to go back to the hotel. Makes no sense to go to Porphyries’ place while they’re watching.’*

She made for the Nikitksy Gates, becoming rigid as she heard the quick steps approaching from behind.

“Sweetie, hey, sweetie! Wait!” a man said with a hoarse voice.

She kept on walking, repeating in her mind, *‘Easy. I’m an American. Zinaida Blumendorf. I have an American Passport. I don’t speak Russian.’*

The man caught up with her.

“Sweetie, wait, wait! Let’s talk. My name is Ivan.” He beamed, “and this is Serega.” He pointed to his friend who was now walking next to her, on the other side.

Serega opened his mouth with a grin, showing his crooked teeth.

“And what’s your name, sweetie?”

Irina stopped, giving them a perplexed look. “I no spe-ak Rus-skiy, I no und-ers-tand,” she said slowly.

Serega grimaced with disappointment.

“Shit, Vanya,” he said to his friend. “You never listen! Good-looking broad, good-looking broad,” he mimicked his friend. “I told you - look at her clothes, she’s not from here. Fuck it!” He waved his hand and left.

“Sorry, sweetie. I thought you were Russian.” Serega also walked away.

Irina smiled at the unsuccessful ladies’ men, and moved on, suddenly realizing that her legs were shaking.

*‘This is it; everything is fine, relax.*’ She tried to calm herself down. Only now did she understand why people were looking at her, men and women. *‘What did you expect?’* she asked herself. *‘A single woman, dressed according to the latest Parisian fashion, walking around the boulevard and not get noticed? Well, what should I do now – walk around in a Russian sundress or burka?”*

Coming to the conclusion that strolling down the boulevard wouldn’t end well, she headed towards Big Afanasievsky Alley, to Porphyries’ building. The crow on the tree cawed again, this time approvingly.

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A few minutes later, inside the semi-darkness of the foyer, smelling sauerkraut and cats, Irina walked up the chipped, once-white marble stairs. Here and there she noticed the tarnished brass rings that kept the carpet runner in place, but the carpet itself was gone. To the right of the familiar door, next to the loose doorbell wire, there was a sheet of lined paper with the current tenants’ names.[[89]](#footnote-89) The paper hung on a bent nail. The list was written in print, informing the visitor how many times he needed to knock for the particular tenant. Porphyries’ name was not on the list. Irina stood thinking, and then knocked on the door three times.  She heard shuffling steps, and a fat man appeared at the door, in striped pajamas pants and a stretched wife-beater of unknown color that revealed his hairy shoulders and chest.

“Hello, lady,” he said cheerfully, to her surprise. He wiped his wet hands on his pants. “Who are you looking for?”

“I… me…,” she stuttered. “I may be mistaken. But someone lived here before, a scientist, an orientalist…” Irina decided that was the best way to describe Porphyries, “a Chinese translator.”

“When did he live here? In which room?” The man’s eyes became wary.

“He didn’t live in a room, he lived alone,“ Irina said, confused.

“Before the revolution?” The man’s wariness gave way to suspicion. “And who are you? You are not from here. Are you a foreigner?”

“Yes!” she grasped the idea. “A foreigner. From a newspaper. I wrote an article about him. Now I’d like to see him again. But if he doesn’t live here…”

“Who’s there, Ivan? Who are you talking to?” A woman in a colorful robe and curling irons peeked from behind the hairy man’s back, studying Irina with interest.

“Go, Nura, go,” he mumbled, annoyed. “Whoever she’s looking for isn’t here. Not here!” He shut the door.

*‘What did you expect? Miracles only happen in fairy tales,’* Irina thought, walking down the stairs. She was about to push the heavy door open, when she heard groaning and coughing behind her. She turned around and saw a hunchbacked creature, her head wrapped in a grey, woolen shawl. The woman could hardly move her feet as she walked up the basement stairs.

“Hello, my dear!” the old woman’s creaking voice greeted Irina.

“Hello, grandma,” Irina smiled sadly reaching to open the door. “It’s dark here.”

“Darkness is not scary,” the old woman muttered, “as long as there is light inside you, my child.”

Irina froze.

“Why, oh fair maiden, have you come to the Kingdom of Death?  Looking for something? You’re too young for the elixir of youth, I think. Maybe a book?” The old woman pulled off her shawl and suddenly became a foot taller. Paracelsus or Papus, for example?”

‘*It can’t be!*’ Irina thought.

“You can also come with me to my cellar.“ The voice trembled with laughter.  “We’ll take a look at your dynamic nerve fluids.”

Irina let go of the door handle and covered her mouth with her hands.

“That’s right! Be quiet, my dear…” Porphyries pressed his finger to his lips. “Let’s go, my sunshine!” He held out his hand.

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 Down in the cellar, in complete darkness, Porphyries clinked his keys and opened a creaky door. They walked into a small room with a lightless little window below the ceiling. He lit the wick of the kerosene lamp and the flickering light revealed the old drawer without doors, the jars, the bottles and the glasses on top. In the corner stood piles of old newspapers and magazines held together by a rope; nearby, a rusty iron water dispenser with dirty dishes in the sink underneath it. There was a broken mirror somehow hanging on the wall, a broken stool next to a small, round, scratched-up table, and a trestle bed made of planks of wood, with a thin, rolled up mattress and a patchwork quilt.

“Well, hello, my sunshine!” Porphyries smiled, opening his arms.

Irina wrapped her arms around his neck, tears rolling down her face. She couldn’t believe that her dream, which seemed impossible just a minute ago, had come true.

“Well, enough, enough, my child,” Porphyries caressed her back.

“My God, do you live here now?” she asked through her sobs.

“Why?” he grinned. “Poverty is not a vice! Poverty, my child, is often given to poor people to look for changes, or…,” he smiled, “to hate the rich. And it’s given to the rich in order to understand the unpredictability of life. But the truth is…sometimes the rich…hold on a second…“

Porphyries bent down to the lower closet shelf, pressed something that moved the closet aside, and revealed a narrow passage. “Please,” he invited Irina to follow him, took her hand and walked inside. “So, as I was saying, sometimes, when wealth is considered a vice, poverty becomes a ruse used by the rich to survive.”

Irina followed Porphyries and found herself in the past. She was in a spacious room with an arched ceiling and floor covered with rugs.  The room was illuminated by many candles. The room had a constant flow of air, judging by the flames that all flickered in the same direction. There was the faint smell of molten wax and oriental incense, along with the familiar bookcases - everything was almost the same as in the distant year 1916.

Her heart ached because she imagined, for a moment, that time had turned back and, after leaving this room, she’d take a cab and go home where her father would be entertaining his guests…with their usual long talks about Russia’s fate, over house wine. It was as if the future hadn’t happened yet.

She turned to the old mirror in the curved, wooden frame … the same mirror that had been in Porphyries’ apartment, expecting to see her old reflection, the careless and funny *Irochka*, yearning for love and happiness. Irina thought that she saw that young Irochka, for a brief moment, but then a different woman stared back at her from the mirror. She looked like Irochka but was not her. She saw a cold beauty with hard, sad eyes, a wrinkle across the bridge of her nose, and tightly sealed lips. Perplexed and astonished, she looked at Porphyries, as if he were guilty of the change.

“Such is the feature of mirrors, my dear - to keep reflections,” he said, immersed in thought. “The mirror remembered the old you, and it showed that; and then, it reflected the present you. Well, make yourself comfortable.“ He pointed to a place on the wall, covered by an old rug with complex oriental patterns, and disappeared behind the rug.

He returned a minute later, wearing the familiar old robe with silky dragons and the round hat that made him look Chinese. He sat in front of her, crossing his legs, and peered directly into her eyes, as if momentarily releasing and retrieving his invisible tentacles.

“My God, I still can’t believe it’s really you.” Irina touched Porphyries’ hand.

“No, this is all that has remained of me.” He smiled at her.

“How did you end up in the cellar?”

“Where else was I supposed to wait for you? The cellar is neither damp nor cold, and luxury, as we know, distracts from contemplations. How did I end up here? This little space I prepared for myself back in 1915 with the help of our late servant, Timofei, after I had a vision. I was told everything then. I wasn’t the first one. Everything that happened was destined to happen. Have you heard of the Seraphim Sarovsky[[90]](#footnote-90) letter?”

Irina shook her head.

“I knew an old nun who said that in 1903, when his grave was opened, she was present when they gave the Emperor the Elder’s letter. The letter was addressed to *The Fourth Tsar who comes here.* Nobody knew the content, of course. The Tsar read the letter in solitude. When he came out, his face was in tears. The nun looked at him and said, crossing herself, ‘Maybe, Your Majesty, Seraphim is wrong this time….’” Porphyries paused. “Well, he wasn’t wrong.

And there were many other signs…Yes... In October of 1917, I quietly brought the most important things here. Then some nice people from *Revkom[[91]](#footnote-91)* came to my apartment. They pushed a paper into my face, together with a revolver, and asked that I vacate the apartment for one of their leaders. So, I just moved to my cellar and put on the invisible hat. Nobody cares about cripples and the simpleminded,” he chuckled. “That leader disappeared soon enough, don’t know where. They filled my apartment with the new fighters for the higher good. All the old tenants in the building are gone. Some left, some were evicted like me, some were ‘squeezed in,’ some ‘wasted’ as they now call it.“

Porphyries fell silent, then looked at Irina.

“I was waiting for you, my dear. I knew you’d return. Well, my sunshine,” he took her hand, “now is your turn to talk.”

Irina sighed and touched her throat with the other hand, not knowing where to start. She realized what she had been missing all these years – the opportunity to speak her heart out, to cry and get rid of the tormenting pain, to spill it all out with the stream of words and tears, without the fear of being judged for her weakness.

“Ah, my dear, I see you have problems with the center of your will?” Porphyries shook his head and indicated her throat with his eyes. “You touch your throat all the time. It’s not good to carry it all in yourself. You need to let it go, don’t torture yourself. Otherwise, God forbid…” He kept quiet, not wanting to continue.

Irina inhaled as if she were about to jump into some water, and started her story. She talked inconsistently, frenetically jumping in and out of the sea of memories, as if the time allotted to her was about to end and no one would listen to her anymore. The more she spoke – about Nicky, her father, Lenochka, and the other people close to her whose lives were broken, mangled, completely blotted out by the merciless will of the multi-headed monster spewing forth the revolution, the terror, the civil war, the destruction, the starvation, the emigration, and all the other evils people caused other people – the more she understood that this tale was necessary not only to ease the burden of her memories, and to see the compassion and understanding in Porphyries’ eyes, but to finally convince herself of the righteousness of her plan.

“And Sevastopol….” She leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes as tears rolled down her cheeks. “Do you know what happened in Sevastopol?”

Porphyries listened quietly as his fingers went through his rosary beads.

“First, when we got there, to Wrangel’s, after Odessa, it seemed like paradise. Beautifully dressed people walking the streets, the open stores, the beautiful storefronts… Officers in uniforms with shoulder straps. The laughter, the jokes…Peace. Then, in November, we heard about Sivash[[92]](#footnote-92) and what the Reds were doing in Simferopol… Do you know what everybody wanted? To escape! But how? We could only escape by sea. Thousands and thousands of people crowded the embankment. We stood there for three days to get on the ships.  But there was not enough space for everyone.  The embankment looked like…” She paused, looking for the right word, “…like one organism with the same thoughts and pain. No one left. We were all standing shoulder-to-shoulder, body-to-body.

There was a young officer next to me. He kept apologizing for pressing against me.  Yes… The lifeboats from the ships came to the pier to pick up people and bring them back to the ships. The lifeboats were overfilled - the ships, too. Moaning was hovering over the city. It felt like the whole world was moaning. Then this officer pushed forward to some sailor next to the lifeboat. I saw him saying something to him, pointing at me. We were standing by the water but there was no more room in the boats. The officer pushed through the crowd, back to me. I thought he wanted to bid me farewell. He told me, ‘Come quickly!’ and pulled me by the hand. We hardly made it to the water. To make it short, he gave up his seat for me. He said, ‘Let me kiss you’…in the end…and he kissed me on the mouth…” Irina breathed convulsively. “The lifeboat left the pier. It was the last one.

The sailors were pushing people away with oars. Many went crazy, jumping into the water. And I saw him… the young officer. He went alongside the wall, to the right of the embankment, put a gun to his head, and pulled the trigger. Many officers shot themselves by that wall to avoid capture by the Bolsheviks. We were sailing away and all this was in front of our eyes….”

She wiped her tears.  “You understand, Porphyries, those young, healthy, handsome men…the words ’honor’, ‘Motherland’, ‘being faithful to their oath’ – these words meant something to them…they took their lives. And my father and Nicky were just murdered…for nothing…” She looked at Porphyries in despair, “And I’m alive…why, Porphyries?” Her voice sounded metallic. “Maybe I was kept alive for revenge? Vengeance for what they did to my country? You understand, Porphyries? Understand?” she cried, hitting the wall with her fist.

“Yes…Russian officers always knew how to die gallantly…” Porphyries said softly, stroking her hand.

Silence settled in. The candles burned quietly. Porphyries sat silently, his eyes absorbing her sorrowful words and dark tears.  When she finished, Irina knew that although she put a period to the story for Porphyries. For herself, the story had an ellipsis.

“What can I tell you?” said Porphyries. “I see that you have grieved beyond measure. I also see that you’re carrying deep hatred in your heart.” His voice became stern. “Why did you come to Moscow?” he asked as if he did not know the answer.

Irina looked away. No, she would not tell him why she had come.  She would not tell him that she was now the judge, the witness, and the executioner. No one had the power to make her change her mind. This was not why she had squeezed the mercy from her soul, and replaced it with hatred. This was not why she had kept living, hoping to administer justice to the monsters that had turned her into a monster … to repay them their dose of evil.

She raised her eyes to Porphyries and suddenly thought, *‘Why did he come into my life?’* The answer came faster than she had expected: *’Porphyries is my mirror. Yes, a mirror, but not the type that lets you see your outer reflection. He is the mirror in front of your eyes that says, “Look inward.” But today the mirror, brought to the unsuspecting soul, has warped and dimmed.’*

“Business. I came here on business, Porphyries,” she answered in a muffled voice.

“Is your business very important? Can someone else do it for you?”

“No,” she said firmly and shook her head. “Only I can do it. By myself.”

“Well, you’re a big girl.” Porphyries looked at her. “But, my dear, think about your soul!”

He pulled out the familiar Tarot deck, shuffled it, and handed it to Irina. She hesitated and then moved the cards.  Porphyries took one out.

“The Scale and the Sword,” he answered her mute question. “You still remember what they mean?”

Irina nodded, feeling unusually light, as if only now she had thrown off the burden of doubt.

“It’s time for me to go, Porphyries.” She sighed and rose.

“I think it's time for me to leave here, too,” he said, still sitting. “I was only waiting for you. Now I’ll go to Egypt. Isis is calling… Here, take the cards.“ He handed her the deck. “It’s a gift… God willing, you’ll need them.  Just don’t let anyone touch them. Remember the rules?”

Irina nodded and carefully took the cards.

“And Russia?” He looked at her thoughtfully, “Well, Russia… Don’t worry about her. She’s not a young, bullied girl, and you’re not her mom to punish the bullies.  People here are too trusting. They’ve allowed themselves to be fooled by sweet words and promises. They mistook the lies for the truth. They split everything into white and black, which they were fooled into calling red, as if it’s the real revival.[[93]](#footnote-93)

“Does the truth even exist?” Irina cried out.

“Of course, my dear, how can it not?” He rose and stood next of her. “What is the truth? The truth is transparent and it’s always absolute. It’s in neutrality, between black and white. There are no opposing powers Zoroaster was describing. And the lie… the lie, as you know, is multifaceted and multi-headed. Russia will live in lies for many years to come,” he said sadly. “Well, my sunshine, let me walk you out.”

At the exit they paused.

“Tell me something, Porphyries, one last time,” Irina asked, smiling gloomily.

“My dear,” Porphyries moved his face so close to hers that she could see rainbow rays emanating from his eyes. “It seems to me you’d prefer not to hear something from me rather than to hear it. What shall I tell you? Live! Be free in your righteousness and your errors, but always remember that Eternity is ahead of you and also behind you, and your present existence is only a moment in this eternity. Remember, nothing ever dies. Your soul is struggling in the confines of your body. Free it! Your soul is part of the Soul of the Universe. If you can manage it, your life won’t be lived in vain.”

He passed his hand through her hair.  “Cheer up. God willing, we’ll see each other in Egypt. Or somewhere else… in another life.” He smiled promisingly. “And one more thing…” He frowned, as if struggling with doubt, and then removed from his finger a ring, in the form of a book. “Take it.” He handed it to her and looked her in the eyes, trying to see if she understood the meaning of this gesture. “Now it’s yours. It’s up to you if you should read this book.” He embraced her tightly.

“Thank you, Porphyries.” Irina squeezed the ring in her hand.

“Now, go, my child. Go.” He firmly moved her away from himself.

Standing by the stairs leading up to the foyer, she looked back. No one was there. She went outside. The sun was leaning towards the horizon, filling the sky with a huge crimson patch that looked like blood.

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The phone was answered almost immediately on the other end. Comrade Maltsev’s secretary tried to understand why her very busy boss was suddenly needed by an American journalist from a newspaper with such a long and strange name, *The New York Morning Journal*. The journalist spoke passable Russian and said she was on a personal assignment for some American publisher, William Hearst. Eventually, the secretary gave up and put her through to Piotr Petrovich Maltsev, but warned that in ten minutes he would be leaving for an important meeting at *Sovnarkom*.

“Hello! Maltsev speaking!” a deep, hoarse voice boomed over the phone.

“Mister, oh, sorry, Comrade Maltsev, good evening. My name is Zinaida Blumendorf,” said a slightly accented female voice.

“What did you say your name is, Zinaida?” Maltsev’s voice warmed up a little.

“Yes, yes. Zinaida Blumendorf.  From the United States of America.

“I know.” His voice became tense. “Where they exploit blacks and workers!”

“Comrade Maltsev, I want to say that I am in Moscow with the Socialist Workers International delegation,” Zinaida added.

“Ah, so you’re one of us, then?” Maltsev’s tension receded. “You should have said so in the beginning. So, Comrade Zinaida, what can I do for you?”

“You see, Comrade Maltsev…”

“My name is Piotr Petrovich,” he interrupted. “Since you’re one of us, we can skip the formalities.”

“Thank you, Piotr Petrovich. I want to write a big article about your Civil War heroes. Our American readers, they know well what a civil war is, and they want to learn about the Russian Civil War, as you say, from the first mouth. Oh, I’m sorry; my Russian is not so good … from the horse’s mouth. They want to know about real heroes like you and your friends.” Zinaida paused and said slowly as if she was reading from a paper, “Rakelov, Tushkevich, Seregin.”

“Oh, so you know about them too, Zinaida?” Maltsev was surprised. “Interesting! Well, Zina, we’re not heroes!” Maltsev sounded pleased. “It is the Party that gave us everything and made us what we are! That’s why we faithfully serve the Party! But still, how do you know about my friends?”

“Peter Petrovich, who doesn’t know about the four of you and your legendary friendship?  All of Moscow knows about it! I was recommended to speak with you.”

Maltsev sniffed with gratification. “Yes, our friendship is old, from the first heroic days. But now we’re all scattered around. Everyone serves the Party at his own post. Sasha is in Paris protecting the Motherland. Yakov Stepanovich is ill… paralyzed. He’s a real hero… always on the edge of the blade…”

“He’s ill?” Zinaida gasped. “Oh, no! Why? What should I do? Can I see him?”

“Yeah, you can see him, that’s not a big deal. He’s in the sanatorium next to Gorki Leninskiye. You’ve probably heard about that place. My secretary Varvara will give you the address. But what’s the point? Yakov can’t speak at all... Eh, if you had only heard his speeches…” He paused, looking for the right words. “Enemies trembled and fell from his commissar speeches….”

“What about Tushkevich?” Zinaida interrupted. “I’d like to meet you both.”

“Oh, don’t worry about him; I can introduce you to him right away. He’s in Moscow working in my system.”

“Piotr Petrovich, let’s schedule a meeting. Okay? I know you are a very busy person. You probably have everything scheduled ahead of time.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line.

“Maybe you can think about it, and I'll call you tomorrow?” Irina’s stomach tensed but she tried to sound indifferent. “But I’m in Moscow only for three days.”

“Tomorrow? Why tomorrow?” Maltsev sounded worried.  “Let’s see. Ten o’clock is the meeting, then the report… after lunch… no, that won’t work…hmm. Listen, Zina, come to my office towards eight in the evening. I’ll call Tushkevich; he’ll come also. We’ll sit and talk…”

“Oh, no, no!” she exclaimed hastily, and, angry at herself for being impatient, continued apologetically,  “I feel bad about taking your time, so I’d like to invite you and Comrade Tushkevich to a restaurant. That will be my token of gratitude for the time you’ll give me. Do you know the restaurant Paris on the corner of Petrovka and Kuznetsky Bridge? I was told the food there is very good. Okay? Will you come?”

“A restaurant?” Maltsev became pensive. “Haha, you’re a sly one, Zina, so sly! A restaurant you want, haha,” he said.

She heard the rustling of turned pages.

“Well, fine, you’ve convinced me. The time…let’s make it eight. No, seven is good.“

“Excellent, Piotr Petrovich!” Zinaida said excitedly.

“When you come,“ Maltsev continued, “go inside and wait. Tell them to wait for us. If we’re late, don’t leave. You understand, even though we’re not the last people in the government, we also have orders. So, seven...” There was a crackle in the phone. “And you, judging by your voice, are a very interesting comrade. You know, I can read people by their voices. A good-looking woman always has a special voice. We’ll verify my gut feeling tomorrow. That’s all. See you tomorrow, Comrade Zinaida. With an international revolutionary salute!” The phone disconnected.

She quickly redialed the number and wrote down the address of the sanatorium where the great Civil War hero Comrade Rakelov was undergoing treatment. She fell back into the armchair and closed her eyes to get over her feverish excitement.

*’So, the schedule for tomorrow…’* she started to plan her day, *’early in the morning – pay a visit to the sick hero at the sanatorium; Go to the store to get a simpler outfit; dinner at the restaurant in the evening. Tomorrow…’*

5

The birch grove on the hill was lit by the hazy sun. A graceful river bent behind the far meadow. Yellow dandelion lollipops were generously scattered over the green grass cloth. A far away voice of a melancholic cuckoo bird echoed through the fragrant scent of lilac. The fine gravel crunched underfoot.  A sleepy crow, lost in deep thought, looked from the head of an armless marble nymph at a merry sparrow bustling near a puddle. A tiny church without a cross had the sign “Inventory Storage” nailed to its door. A large red banner with huge white letters painted over it read: “*A Communist has no right to be sick!*” It stretched over the entrance to a mansion with manor columns…

“Excuse me, where can I find the head doctor?”

“Straight down the hall, then make a right. And write your name in the visitors’ book.”

“Hey, lady, don’t walk over the carpet! Walk by the rails next to the carpet. That’s what the rails are for, to walk next to them, not in the middle. I’ve got no carpets for everybody!”

“You, comrade woman! Put on the soft shoes. We’re making sure everything is sterile here!”

“Where do you think you’re going? You see all these people waiting in line?”

“You have to make an appointment at least two days ahead to see the doctor! So what that you’re from afar? You come, sign in, then come two days later. Do that again if you have to. Where are you going, lady? Vasily Vasilievich! I’m not letting her through because she's not listening…”

“What’s the name, you say? Rakelov? And who are you? A relative? Just found out? Came from afar? Oh, I see. Yes.  Paralyzed. Not talking but understands everything. Well, as an exception. Go, but not for long. Masha, take her to Rakelov.”

“He’s on the veranda now, taking an oxygen bath.”

“Masha, this is called an air bath, how many times do I have to tell you!”

“I got it, Vasily Vasilievich! Follow me, comrade. Watch out. Don’t drop that. To the right... now to the left…through that glass door…He’s lying on this side, everybody else is under the sun, but he’s not allowed.  He had a stroke. How much time do you need? Half an hour? Good, you have half an hour.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

A thin man with sharp features on an almost wax face, with dark circles under his eyes and a half-opened warped mouth, lay on a metal bed covered by a grey hospital blanket. He had a short, black beard with grey streaks, and a birthmark on one cheek that looked like a blood-filled leach.

*‘That’s him,’* Irina thought. *‘Can’t say “Good day” to him.’*

“We meet at last, my dear uncle!” she said loudly, moving the stool next to the bed and nodding to the assistant who walked to the veranda rails and stood there, watching.

Rakelov stared at her with an indifferent still look, as if Irina was one of the useless, meaningless objects that for some unknown reason appeared and disappeared in front of him. Irina, the former sister of mercy, had seen countless eyes like his. They were grey, brown, blue, green... eyes that were the last drops of life still lingering on lifeless faces - repenting, begging, trying to tell something, crying, asking for forgiveness and forgiving, becoming motionless, becoming frightened of the unknown, resigning to their fate.

“Here I am.” She fixed his blanket. “I see you’re happy to see me. You’re not well. I’ll take good care of you. Don’t you worry. I’ll stay here as long as necessary. Is there a place to stay overnight?” She turned to the assistant.

“I don’t decide that. If they order it, we’ll find something. I’ll step out, won’t get in your way,” the woman said and left, closing the door behind her.

“We meet at last, Yakov Stepanovich,” Irina repeated, bending over to Rakelov. “Recognize me?”

He looked at her indifferently.

“Remember the autumn of 1917? Bologoye?”

Rakelov’s look changed almost imperceptibly.  The corner of his mouth jerked.

“The Bologoye Station, where you murdered my husband,” Irina specified, looking him directly in the eyes.

Rakelov’s eyes became anxious. He moved his lips, trying to say something.

“I see you’re also happy to see me,“ she smiled. “Just like I am. If you only knew how much I wanted to see you again! Sometimes I would wake up at night and imagine how I would walk in to see you, and you… you’re so happy to see me!”

“zu…vu…zu…..u,” Rakelov suddenly mumbled. His eyes were wide open and filled with fear.

“Just like now,” Irina said.

Red spots appeared on his face.

*‘He remembers.* *And what now?’* she asked herself, looking at the disabled body of the man she had killed so many times in her thoughts, and now realized that she could not, in real life, kill an ill and defenseless man.

*’Why am I better than all of them?’* she thought in confusion. *‘But Nicky was also defenseless in front of them,’* she tried to convince herself. *“They were armed and he… What did Nicky have except my love? Mercy? No. Now I’ll pour cyanide down his filthy throat!’*

She looked into her purse for the small *Francois Coty*[[94]](#footnote-94)flask filled with poison*.* That was one of the few small items she had brought with her from Paris, along with a *Coty* powder box filled with crystallized cyanide salt and a tiny revolver she had secretly bought at a gun shop near Bois de Boulogne.

*’What happens when you add one paralysis to another?’*

“Comrade Rakelov, time for your injection!” The door unexpectedly opened, and a young nurse with two funny braids sticking out from under her kerchief appeared on the veranda. *’A shot!’* She walked over to the bed, put down her tray of syringes and removed the blanket.

“Let’s turn him over,” she said as she easily rolled the patient on his side. “Can you help me?” she asked Irina. “You see, he can’t stay put on his own and, for me, it’s difficult.” She took a syringe, held it vertically, tapped it with her nail, getting rid of the air bubbles, and released a thin spray of liquid.

“Here, he won’t even feel anything. I have a light hand; everybody says that…” the girl murmured as she rubbed his skin with a swab of alcohol. “Why are you so pale? You’re probably worrying about him? Yes, I get it,“ she shook her head with sympathy, giving the patient the injection. “He needs to be cared for like a baby now. That’s why they brought him here from the hospital, for the fresh air and the nature. Don’t worry, he’s safe here. He could just lie down and listen to the birdies all day. We’ve got good food here; everything is fresh. Now, let’s turn him on his back.”

Rakelov made an incoherent sound, staring at the nurse. She looked at Irina contentedly.

“See how happy he is to see you! I hope he won’t die from the excitement. It can happen. Look, his eyes are shining; there is even some color in his face.” She smiled knowingly as she bent over to Irina and whispered, “If I didn’t know you were his relative, I’d say you were his girlfriend,” she chuckled. “He’s very happy! I’m leaving; I won’t bother you.” She walked out humming a song.

Rakelov moved slightly, trying to get up.  His dry, yellowed fingers trembled. His dark eyes came alive. It seemed like they were flooded with waves of hate, which spilled out salty splashes of impotence onto his cheeks.

*‘He recognizes me,’* Irina understood, bending over his face, so familiar and strange, seen only once and seared into her memory forever. She shuddered from a wild thought:  *‘What was he, a fanatical believer? A selfless servant of his own idea of justice? He lived in a black and white world. To him it was natural and unavoidable that the means justified the end, that for the greater good, he could kill those who had other ideas, and even more so, because the dead can’t talk and the victors won’t be judged.  And now he lives out his days absolutely sure that his life wasn’t* *lived in vain. He thinks he’s a hero. You can’t* *convince a fanatic to change his mind. You can’t defeat him. You can only kill him.’*

“So, uncle, you look like you’re upset?” Irina smiled. “Don't be upset. I can tell you a story. It’ll help you rest in peace.”

She was surprised at herself, but not because she risked botching her mission by delaying the last step, but because she wanted to see fear in his eyes. She wanted more time for this, to relish and enjoy. It wasn’t Irina anymore, but someone else, someone cold and cruel, enjoying the role of judge and executioner. She met Rakelov’s eyes and held his gaze in hers. He looked like he was trying to suck her into the black abyss of hate, to take one more enemy with him to the Kingdom of Death.

“Since you’re quiet, Yakov Stepanovich, it means you understand and don’t oppose,“ she chuckled. “And if you understand, then listen. It’s a fairytale for small children. You were also a child once, right? You weren’t just born an evil monster. I don’t think you were. So…”

She paused, not knowing what she would talk about.  “Once upon a time, in a faraway country, there was a maiden. She was smart and fair. She loved her country so much, she would give up her life for it. When the time came, she gave her heart to a young man. He was handsome, with an innocent and noble soul. They married and travelled because they wanted to see the world. They wanted to see if there was a land better than theirs.  They travelled to many places and saw many people. But everywhere they went they saw the cunning lying to the simple, taking from them through deceit and false promises. Evil lies ruled everywhere, dressed in words, and the Truth was hidden. It wasn’t hidden because people didn’t seek it, no. It was because if it were revealed, people’s lives would become even worse.  They travelled far and long but nowhere did they find the Kingdom of Heaven, so they decided to return to their country. They wanted to have children and live a good life. But they didn’t return to their land. On the way home, an evil demon attacked them, thirsty for human blood, seeking to rip apart and burn all that’s good and kind. The servants of that dark demon wore red clothes. They hid their evil thoughts with their words about justice and equality, but they didn’t care about justice. They cared about themselves. And the demon’s seal could be recognized in their eyes and their actions.”

Rakelov moaned.

“I see you like my story. Then I’ll go on. They seized the young couple. They stood the young man up and said to him, ‘We don’t like you. Even though you may look like us, there’s something wrong about your eyes. That’s not how eyes should be. Look at us. You see? Our eyes are empty and cold. This is how eyes should be. Soon, everybody in your land will have eyes like ours. And all white will become black, and what is black will be called white. But eyes can’t be changed. This is why we’ll take your life.’ His young wife pleaded with them, she cried and she wailed. ‘Don’t kill my love, my happiness! He’s not guilty of anything!’ But the evil demons didn’t listen to her and ripped the young man apart. And they left the wife for desecration and death.” Irina paused. “But she has survived, as you see.”

Rakelov’s hand shook spasmodically.

“Why are you shaking? I see you don’t like my fairytale anymore? I’m not done yet. This is not the end.” She bent over again and said with sheer disgust, “Do you think Fate punished those fiends?”

Rakelov looked aside.

“Hey, no, look at me. Look me in the eyes. Do you see my eyes? Are they different from yours? My eyes are empty and cold. Just like yours. Do you know what it means? Now I can kill, too!”

Rakelov’s face reddened.  He panted heavily, his tongue squirming inside his mouth, as if trying to say something on the threshold of death.

“Fff…uh…ou...” He spewed out the sounds, whimpered loudly, wildly rotating his blood-shot eyes, confusedly gasping for air. Then he suddenly went quiet, staring at her with a glassy gaze.

Irina touched his hand. There was no pulse. She rose and slowly went to the door.

“Goodbye. Yes, I think he’s sleeping. Yes, I saw he was happy. I’ll come back tomorrow. Thank you.

The fine gravel crunched underfoot.  A large, red banner with huge white letters painted on it “*A Communist has no right to be sick!*” stretched over the entrance to the mansion with manor columns. A tiny church without a cross but with the sign “Inventory Storage” nailed to the door. A sleepy crow, looking from the head of a marble armless nymph, at a merry sparrow bustling near a puddle. A faraway voice of a melancholic cuckoo bird, counting the remainder of someone’s life.[[95]](#footnote-95) A graceful river bends behind the far meadow. Yellow dandelion lollipops, generously scattered over the green cloth of fresh grass. The sweet scent of lilac. The birch grove on the hill filled with sunlight. Motherland….

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The clock showed six. It was late but the meeting went on. More and more people came to the podium, saying the same phrases, in different words. All the speakers agreed and announced that the world revolution’s victory was imminent, that it would bring freedom to the exploited everywhere, and demise to capitalists and their servants.  The old German interpreter, who hardly had time for a glass of water between speakers, ignored the printed pages on his desk and monotonously repeated the same familiar words. Sometimes he substituted capitalists with “exploiters” and “bourgeois.” The exploited sometimes became “proletariat” and “people’s masses”.

“Don’t you find, Frau Zinaida, that they all look like clockwork toys?” Redheaded Fredrick leaned over to Irina’s ear. In the beginning of the meeting, he had been very excited that they were sitting next to each other. “In the morning, the master winds them up and they move their hands, their legs, their heads, full of energy and enthusiasm. They move in the same direction and fall down at night when they wind down, and then they wait ‘til morning for the master to wind them up again. No?”

“No,” Irina answered drily, not eager to discuss this topic with someone she barely knew. She looked at her watch.

Fredrick shrugged his shoulders, turned around and pretended to listen to the next speaker.

Irina was starting to worry. She’d been sitting for hours in the stuffy, crowded convention hall, at a conference organized by the Soviet comrades in honor of the Socialist Labor International’s arrival, but she needed to be at the restaurant ahead of time, before Maltsev and Tushkevich got there. Finally, a loud ovation announced the end of a speech, which itself ended with the call for the proletariat of the world to unite.

“Attention, Comrades! We’ll have a ten-minute break. Comrade Pokrovsky from Pskov, you’re next,” announced Moiseev, whom Irina had already met.

He looked around the audience with tired, red eyes. For a second, he stopped at Irina and nodded to her, as if to an old acquaintance. She slipped out of the smoke-filled foyer into the street.

*‘It’s a twenty minute walk from here to the restaurant. I’ll make it,’* she thought with relief, but suddenly heard a familiar voice behind her.

“Madame Zinaida! What an amazing conference, isn’t it?” exclaimed the old Frenchman, Paul, coming out of the shade of large lilac tree. “How wonderful, sincere, and convinced these Soviet comrades are! How beautifully they speak about the future! Too bad my German is not so good, but honestly, when I listen to them I feel younger, ready to go to the barricades.”

“Dear Monsieur Paul,” Irina impatiently interrupted him. “I’m very sorry that there is no French interpreter. That doesn’t allow you to fully enjoy the depth of their speeches, but their energy is most impressive!”

The old man nodded admiringly.

“Although, no doubt, Monsieur, for people of your energy and tenacity for life, there are no unsolved problems. I’m sure you have barricades in your future! But I must apologize and leave you. I have a very important meeting even a woman can’t be late for. That’s life.“ She gave the old man a charming smile.

“Good luck, Madame!” Monsieur Paul returned the smile. “Too bad that meeting is not with me.” He put his hand on his chest and bent over in a half-bow.

                                                            \*\*\*\*\*

At quarter to seven, Irina walked into the small restaurant called Paris. She glanced around the dining hall and walked by the slow maître d’, to the far corner where she saw a few empty tables. The walls were painted in a bright cherry color with numerous photographs and pictures of Paris hanging on them.  She picked the table under the large photograph of the Eiffel Tower, next to a sprawling ficus tree with dusty leaves, and sat facing the door.

The slow, round-faced waiter, looking bored, wandered over to her table and mumbled something under his breath, alluding to his joy over the guest’s appearance. He handed her the menu. She browsed through the list of entries. The selection was modest. *‘Well, fine, let it be sturgeon fillet with nut sauce,’* she decided. She raised her eyes but could not find the waiter. Then she realized he was behind her, staring at the picture on the wall as if he had never seen a photograph of the Eiffel Tower before.

“Excuse me, Comrade,” Irina tried to attract his attention in Russian. “Excuse me!”

The waiter stopped examining the Tower construction and reluctantly looked at Irina. He slowly opened his pad and looked at her indifferently.

“Two important guests will be coming here soon,” she said meaningfully.

His expression turned sour, indicating that he couldn’t care less.

“Very important,” Irina added, just in case, and even pointed her finger at the ceiling. “Very…” she repeated again, a little lost by the waiter’s indifferent look. “So, when they come, show them here.”

“And how will I recognize them?” he asked. “A lot of people come here.” He swept his hand, showing her the half-empty hall.

“I see, Comrade,” Irina was starting to get annoyed. “But still try, alright?”

“A-hah,” the waiter uttered instinctively.

“For now, bring me a decanter of vodka.”

“The whole decanter?” He looked at her with surprise and respect.

“And for me - a glass of wine.”

The corners of the waiter’s mouth dropped in disdain.

“Any white wine, at your discretion,” Irina said, but understood right away that it was a mistake.

The waiter raised his eyes to the ceiling, as if hoping for a miraculous recommendation about the wine, or perhaps trying to remember if the restaurant even had any white wine.

“Is that it?” he asked apathetically after studying the ceiling.

“Also bring some fish,” Irina pointed at the menu. “For three.” She showed three fingers. “And also, this salad. Then, when they come, they can order whatever they want. Okay?”

“Should I bring the vodka and everything else now?”

“Why now, Comrade? They’re not here yet,” Irina said, surprised, as she took out a cigarette case and holder.

“But you’re already here,” he pointed out.

“Yes, I’m already here.” Irina raised her voice, indicating that the conversation was not over. She inserted the cigarette into the holder and put the case on the table with a loud clap. “I suggest,“ she pointed at the ficus tree, to put him in his place, “that you wipe the leaves from time to time.”

“Why?” the waiter asked melancholically.

“Because the dust can fall on someone’s clothes, that’s why,“ Irina said sarcastically, tapping the cigarette case with her nails. “Maybe my guests have allergies or asthma.”

The waiter frowned, giving the nasty lady a dirty look.

“In New York you’d be fired in a second for this,” Irina continued, now sounding more like a foreigner.

“This is not New York,” the waiter observed. “Here, we are our own masters.”

He looked into his pad, pretending to be taking note, and then, proud of his answer, slowly went to the kitchen, stopping to chat with another waiter along the way. He told him in a loud and unhappy voice about the ficus tree that wasn’t bothering anybody, about the sick men about to come in and the nutty foreign lady who was worried about an ‘incident’ that could happen.

*‘Incident, you think?’* Irina thought as she watched a teenage busboy in a blue shirt trying to move the heavy plant pot away to another table. She was irritated. She raised her hand and called over the grumpy waiter.

“Forgive me…” She puffed on the cigarette.

“It’s fine, I’m not upset.” He waved his hand in reconciliation. “Happens to everybody.“ He squeezed out a smile and was about to leave.

“Excuse me, Comrade, I’m not done. Yet.”

“Yes?” He pulled out his notebook. “Go on.”

“Thank you. I’d like to make sure. You see, my Russian is not so good….”

The waiter nodded in agreement.

“…and my education is insignificant.” She showed how insignificant with her thumb and index fingers. “That’s why I don’t understand the meaning of the word ‘incident’ you said I was worried about.”

The waiter nodded again, this time patronizingly.

“In our conversation,” he lectured, “the expression ‘incident’ means that when a person is sick, he can feel worse because of some reason. Understood?”

“Understood!” Irina said with a happy face. “You probably wanted to use the word ‘crisis’?

“What crisis? What are you talking about, woman? There,” he pointed to the door, “Abroad, you have crises. Here we have incidents. Got it? You want to order something else?” he asked, not wanting to continue the conversation.

“No, thank you,” Irina said, realizing that she was lost again. “Just bring the wine quickly, okay?”

The waiter nodded and walked away.

*‘Incident…’* Irina grinned. *‘You’ll have some incident tonight,’* she thought, marveling at her confidence.

The waiter soon returned with the wine. His whole demeanor showed that the only reason he was doing this stupid woman any favors was an unexplainable and unjust random coincidence, a mistake of fate, which somehow put her at the table, at the place that was rightfully his.

She hardly had a chance to try the wine, when she heard commotion at the entrance and a large man with a fat face, wearing a military style uniform appeared at the door, filling the space with the air of a confident master. Irina even thought that the hall had become smaller and the maître d’ and the two waiters who rushed over to him were shrinking in size like perforated balloons.

*‘Maltsev!’* Irina guessed rather than recognized the sailor from Bologoye*. ‘Is he alone?’* she worried. But then, she saw a head over Maltsev’s shoulder. The head had red hair, a freckled face with high cheekbones, and alert, shifting eyes that scanned the hall and unmistakably stopped at her. *‘He brought him,’* she thought with relief, as chills rolled through her body.

“Your guests, Madame,” the ingratiating maître d’ announced, running ahead of the guests and moving the chairs for them.

At the sight of the pretty American journalist, Maltsev’s face beamed. He even spread open his arms to embrace her, blocking Tushkevich who was mincing behind him. Irina saw the worried maître d’ making signs to the staff to wipe the chairs for the important guests.

“How do you do, Comrades?” Irina asked with a slight accent, smiling politely as she rose to greet them. “My name is Zinaida Blumendorf.”

“Comrade Zinaida!” Maltsev’s eyes were shining. “Well, well! I’m glad!” He extended his hand with the anchor tattoo on the outer part of the palm. “Very, very glad!” he said in bass voice. “Damn, what a mistake I made!” He looked at Tushkevich. “I had a feeling I shouldn’t have brought you with me, Sanya!” he laughed loudly, still shaking Irina’s hand.

“Well, I can leave, Piotr Petrovich, if you want,” offered Tushkevich obsequiously, fixing his thinning hair.

“Come on, Sanya, I’m kidding. Can’t you take a joke?” Maltsev smiled again. “Let’s sit!” He finally let go of Irina's hand and plopped himself on the chair that the waiter had cleaned just a moment before.  “Sorry, Zinaida, we’re a little late. We were busy. You know, we’re important people for the state. We’re running unions. We connect the party and the workers. Politically educating the workforce!“

Irina nodded.

The ex-sailor turned political educator looked over the unset table and turned his head to the waiters standing nearby. Choosing the round-faced one to be his victim, he clapped his hand on the table and said in a loud annoyed bass, “Hey you, with the fat mug!”

The waiter immediately stood alert like a good soldier, peering into his commander with devoted eyes.

“Why are you standing there doing nothing? Why aren’t you moving? Don’t you see we’re hungry after work?”

“Comrade Maltsev, Piotr Petrovich,” Irina said, “I’ve already ordered something to start. Even some vodka. Okay?”

“That’s what I’m telling him.“ Maltsev’s voice softened, as he looked kindly at Irina. “How long do we have to wait?” he roared again at the waiter. “Run to the galley, quickly! Bring everything to the table! Hey, listen, don’t forget the herring and onions,” he ordered the waiters as they raced to the kitchen.

The table was set in no time.

“So, Zinaida, as we say, to our meeting!” Maltsev made the first toast and gulped down the vodka. He snorted, smelled the dark bread and ate a piece of herring. “And now,” he filled the second shot, “to the fairer sex!” Having noticed Irina’s confusion, he chuckled and added the word “female.”

Irina spoke as Maltsev and Tushkevich emptied out the entire decanter and devoured the hors d’oeuvres. Completely at ease, she told them about the problems facing the American working class, especially the blacks, about the worldwide liberation and the urgent need for honest news coverage, in western newspapers, of the lives of average workers in the world’s first proletarian state. She kept on talking, marveling at how easy it was to use the same few propaganda phrases to make them sound like some magical incantations. The words that found their way inside listeners’ ears, cloaking their brains in a stupefying shroud, lulling, bewitching them like the swaying pipe of a snake charmer. *’I’d make a good commissar,’* she thought.

In fifteen minutes, Maltsev was reclining at the back of his chair, satisfied. He pulled out a filterless cigarette, tapped it against the pack and blew some air through it. Lighting it, he looked at Tushkevich, who was finishing his herring, carefully separating the tiny bones and carefully piling them at the edge of his plate.

“You say we’re heroes, Zinaida. But our whole country is full of such heroes,” he said. He inhaled the smoke, but choked and started to cough and sneeze, covering his mouth with his tattooed hand.

The worried waiter, watching the important guest, whispered something to his partner, who immediately removed the pot with the ficus from the hall.

“Piotr Petrovich, if you don’t mind, I’ll be taking notes,” Irina pulled out a notebook and a pen.

“I have no objections,” agreed Maltsev, puffing his cigarette and swelling his cheeks in self-importance.

“Where and when did you meet your war friends?” Irina asked.

Maltsev looked at Tushkevich, “Listen, Sanyok, you’re younger, your memory is better. When did we meet the first time?”

Tushkevich quickly swallowed the herring and looked at the ceiling. He moved his lips, wanting to answer, but was afraid to make a mistake.

“Hmm, Piotr Petrovich, I think about the fall of 1917, no?”

“Good boy, you remember! Exactly, 1917… We met thanks to the police!”

Irina raised her eyebrows in surprise. Tushkevich nodded enthusiastically and started the story.

“Comrade Seregin and I…”

“That’s the one who’s in Paris,” Maltsev explained, interrupting him.

“…we had an assignment from the soldiers’ committee to help find former police officers. We had the list of addresses, so we went to their apartments.” He shook his head and giggled. “There was a proletarian initiative like that, to find former lackeys of the Tsar and the bourgeois Provisional Government. And they all hid, obviously, so we smoked them out of their hiding holes…”

He glanced at Maltsev, who looked back approvingly. “Yeah….well…so we found them behind closets, under sofas, like rats…Their wives and kids would grab us by our feet, like ‘don’t touch daddy.’  And we’d tell them that for some people he’s daddy and for others he's a Tsarist lackey and enemy of the working people! One time we caught one of them and took him to the committee, and right on that street, Piotr Petrovich,” he pointed at Maltsev, “and the other sailors were warming up by the fire. So he asks us where we were taking him. He’ll still get shot, he says… It’s always the same thing, the highest revolutionary protection, meaning getting shot… So why waste time and bullets?”  He looked at the former sailor with admiration.

Irina lowered her eyes, opening her cigarette case and taking a cigarette.

“Come on, Sanyok, that’s enough,” Maltsev frowned, giving Tushkevich an unhappy look. Tushkevich was embarrassed and fidgeted on his chair.

“Well, to make it short, they had a big bonfire…,” he mumbled, finishing his story.

Silence fell at the table. Maltsev coughed, put out his cigarette and turned around, looking for the waiters, who stood nearby watching the guests.

“You, why are you standing like a damn stone?” He picked on the waiter again. “Get over here! Bring more vodka from the galley, and the pickles. And repeat the herring with onions and potatoes. Ah, the herring,” he perked up, “with onions and butter! There is nothing better, together with vodka!” He spread out his shoulders and reclined again in his chair.

Irina forced herself to smile.

“Well, yes,” Maltsev said thoughtfully, lighting a new cigarette. “The things we’ve seen in our lives! For example, take the Eiffel Tower.” He pointed to the picture on the wall. “Everybody says, the Eiffel Tower this, the Eiffel Tower that…but I’ll tell you something about that thing. Remember, Sanyok?”

He started laughing and looked at gloomy Tushkevich. “So, Zinaida, once we were on a train, during the civil war, going south to fight the counterrevolution and crime in Odessa. The train was filled with people. Couldn’t even breathe! One old wench, the former bourgeois, wanted to…uh…take a shit, sorry for my language. She had a stomach ache or something like that. So, she’s begging, let me go to the toilet! That was hilarious. What toilet when people are sitting one on top of the other in the corridor!” He looked at Irina with a look promising incredible fun.

Tushkevich felt better and eagerly awaited the continuation.

“So, we tell her, so to speak,” Maltsev continued, “we understand your situation but can’t help you, although we expect unpleasant consequences.”

Tushkevich giggled and poured Maltsev more vodka.

“And the wench…” Maltsev grabbed the shot glass with his huge hand but didn’t drink it. “…is sitting there, all miserable, wiping her face with a cloth, almost crying. So I offer her – I mean we should help her, right?” He looked at Irina, “I tell her, why don’t you poop out the window? We’ll stick you out and hold you. First, she says, no way, I can’t. Blue blood, for sure.  But then, I guess she couldn’t hold it anymore, so she agreed. Me and a few brothers[[96]](#footnote-96) stuck her out the window, ass first, and we cheered her: ‘Don’t feel bad, it can happen to anyone.’ Then she sat back on her seat and wrapped her head in her hands. Instead of being happy about her relief, she was crying, ‘How could this happen to me? To me, who saw the Eiffel Tower!’ So I told her, ‘You, of course, saw the Eiffel Tower, but we saw your naked ass!’”

Maltsev burst out laughing. “So the brothers, of course, were all bursting from laughing,“ he recollected, holding the shot glass in his hand. “And the wench … listen to this, Zinaida … stopped crying, gave us that look, and kind of froze.” He was silent, then emptied his shot glass.

“Well, she died,” he frowned, “as if she fell asleep. Obviously, she was from the bourgeois class.” He ate a piece of black bread. “Here goes the Eiffel Tower, Zinaida!” Maltsev finished the story and looked at her, expecting some praise for the amusement, but Irina quickly turned her head, pretending to look at the sad-looking guitarist and the dark-haired woman, in a black dress and colorful Gypsy shawl, who walked onto the small stage.

“There’s going to be a concert,” Tushkevich announced, refilling Maltsev’s shot glass.

Maltsev intercepted his hand and directed the vodka into the wine glass. He emptied it in two gulps, snorted and bit into a pickle.

“Maybe…” he said indifferently and picked a potato with his fork.

“Will be for sure, Piotr Petrovich, I’m telling you! They’re about to start,” Tushkevich said watching the performers.

“This is what I’ll tell you, Zinaida,” Maltsev finished the pickle and broadened his shoulders, becoming focused and serious. “Write in your paper… let our American comrades know…we sacrificed our lives for our Soviet state. We were hungry and cold, we were shot at, we still carry inside the white guard bullets, and we’re covered by scars. But if the Party tells us to die today, we’ll die without asking for the reason. For us, the Party’s will is above everything. Above everything personal, above everything narrow-minded, bourgeois, like… some china elephants! Because we know, for our Proletarian Party, we are blood children and it will never send us to die without a good reason, and it knows that each one of us is ready! The Party has given us new life, made us real people. Look who we were and who we’ve become! That’s why there’s a line in the *International*[[97]](#footnote-97), ‘He who was nothing will become everything!’ And we’ve become everything!” He brought his fist down hard on the table.

The maître d’, watching from his station, gave a sign to the waiters, who ran around the hall, not knowing how else to please the guest. The performers, confused, looked at each other, unsure if they should begin to sing.

“And now *we* are the masters! Forever!” Maltsev shot an intimidating look at the maître d’, who shrunk in size and disappeared into the air so masterfully that the former sailor shook his head in surprise. “Now, let these NEP men[[98]](#footnote-98) feed us!” he yelled in the direction where he thought the maître d’ was hiding.

Maltsev shifted his glossy look towards Tushkevich, who anxiously fidgeted on his chair.

“Why are you squirming around and making these faces? You want to take a leak? Just say it; nothing to be shy about.” He smiled at Irina. “We don’t have secrets from our comrades. We’re all doing the same thing!” He poured more vodka for himself and Tushkevich, and wanted to pour some for her too but she firmly put her hand over her glass, making him shrug his shoulders.

He turned to Tushkevich, who had suffering all over his face.

“Before you undock to the loo, let’s drink to our Party and to the Soviet state. To Comrade Lenin!” He rose.

Irina clumsily knocked off the cigarette case onto the floor and bent over to pick it up.

“To Comrade Stalin!” Maltsev continued. “Like this!” He drank his vodka, clinking glasses with Tushkevich. “Go, take a leak!” He waved his hand, sat down on the chair, and reached for a cigarette.

Tushkevich rushed off, but then composed himself and headed towards his destination more gracefully.

“Should we bring the fish?” asked the waiter in an ingratiating voice. Somehow he had managed to approach the table unnoticed.

Irina nodded, following Tushkevich with her eyes, thinking how to send off Maltsev, who was now alone with her, eyeing her with obvious lust. His thoughts were written on his face. He was not sure if he could talk to her straight, without beating around the bush, about the things that a beautiful woman, even a foreigner, inspired in him. He didn’t have the courage. He lowered his head, listening to something inside him, then squashed his cigarette and heavily rose from the table, knocking over the chair.

“I think, Comrade Zinaida, I’ll temporarily undock too. In the Navy we don’t leave our comrades alone.” He pointed towards the door. “But, not for long,” he chuckled. “Behave yourself.” He moved between the tables, towards the maître d’, holding his back unnaturally straight, with a drunken gait. “Hey, brother,” he addressed the maître d’ in a more pleasant voice, “show me the direct course to the loo!”

The sound of the guitar on the stage heralded the performance. The singer, looking around the half empty dining hall, started a ballad about a lover who abandoned her. The waiters quickly brought out the sturgeon garnished with salad and slices of lemon. They wiped non-existent dust off Maltsev’s chair and retreated into the kitchen.

*‘Time to read the book to the end,’* Irina decided. She opened Porphyries’ ring on her finger. Earlier, she had transferred the contents of the powder box inside the ring’s small compartment. Pretending to be fixing the salad on Tushkevich’s plate, she quickly spilled the transparent powder from her ring into the nut sauce.

*‘Now the sailor.’* She reached for Maltsev’s plate but noticed Tushkevich returning with a peaceful demeanor. She pretended that she was reaching for the matchbox next to Maltsev’s cigarette pack and gave Tushkevich a smile.

“It’s good you’ve come back!” She stroked the match and lit the cigarette. “They should stop playing this boring, sad music.” She pointed towards the stage. “Nobody’s died yet.” she said with a charming smile. “Go tell them to play something else!” she ordered him.

“Oh, Zinochka, don’t worry about it, this will be organized right away!” Tushkevich went off towards the stage.

Without taking her eyes off his back, Irina reached to Maltsev’s plate to return the matches and quickly opened the ring again. Maltsev’s dose was larger than Tushkevich’s.

*‘He’s bigger, too,’* she thought.

The song suddenly stopped, as if the singer had choked on water. Tushkevich explained something to the musicians, gesticulating with his hands.

*‘This is it,’* Irina thought. *‘Now I need them to eat the fish and wait half an hour.’*

She checked the clock on the wall. She didn’t feel any fear or remorse. These feelings would come later. Maybe. She simply needed to do this. There was no other way. *‘I had to read the book, Porphyries,’* she thought. Her hatred disappeared; only curiosity remained. Who would be first?

“I ordered *Dark Eyes* for you, Zinochka,” announced Tushkevich sitting at the table.

A familiar tune came from the stage. Tushkevich lowered his head to the plate, examining the food and even smelled it like a dog sniffing a bone.

“Looks like sturgeon?”

“It is sturgeon,” she smiled calmly.

“I love fish,” he drawled. “By the way,” he pointed at Irina’s hand, “what an interesting ring you have!” She thought look was suspicious. “I’ve been looking at it the whole evening. It’s like a book.” His shifting eyes stopped at Irina, piercing through her.

“It’s a present from a dear friend.” She forced a smile.

“Does the book open?” he asked.

“How can you read the book if you don’t open it?” she joked.

“That’s true,” Tushkevich took the fork. “I loved reading books when I was young. A book is a source of knowledge!” He stuck the fork into the fish.  “Sometimes I’d to get so captivated that I thought I was the hero in the book!” He put a piece of the sturgeon in his mouth.

“All hands on deck!” rumbled Maltsev, returning to the table. “So?” He gave Irina a possessive look, like that of a jealous husband. “How are you doing without me?” He glanced suspiciously at his fidgeting friend. “Didn’t get bored?”

“We ordered some music,” Tushkevich mumbled quietly, as if justifying himself.

“Eat, Piotr Petrovich, before it gets cold,” Irina caringly moved the plate closer to him.

“If it gets cold, they’ll warm it up,” Maltsev said, looking at the maître d’ who nodded readily, holding his hands over his chest. “What’s this? Fish?” he grimaced. “Fishy, fishy on my dishy.” He came up with a sudden jovial rhyme. “Honesty, I don’t like fish so much, except the herring with vodka, of course. I had enough of it when I was in the Navy.”

“What’s the problem, now?” Irina took the carafe and, giving him a tender look, poured Maltsev a full glass of vodka. “Okay?”

“Well, if it’s with vodka and poured by your hands, Zinaida, then no problem!” Maltsev emptied the glass with gusto, snorted, and started to eat.

They ate quietly. The fish was delicious, but Irina ate only a little, pretending to be listening to the music.

“You didn’t finish the fish?” the worried waiter asked her when he came over to clear the table. “You didn’t like it?”

“It was delicious, but I can’t eat so much. Thank you.”

“Would you like a biscuit with the tea?” asked the waiter.

Maltsev shook his head.

“No, I don’t eat sweets, they give me diarrhea. I’ll smoke and listen to the musicians.” He turned to the stage where the woman was singing the ballad, glancing at him and Tushkevich, unsure if she was singing the right song.

Tears came to Tushkevich’s eyes as he listened to the song.  He was quite drunk. Maltsev listened carefully, his elbow on the back of the chair. At the end of the song, he turned to Irina.

“Do you like music?” she asked.

“She sings so well, she should be shot,” he laughed loudly.

“So do you like it?” she asked again, thinking that he had misheard her.

“Maybe I do,” Maltsev chuckled. “But I don’t have time for that. We had this guy, Kuklin. He loved music, remember?” He turned to the drunk and smiling Tushkevich.

Irina understood what he meant.

“We have a comrade, Kuklin,” explained Tushkevich in a slurred voice.  “A long time ago, he visited Chaliapin. Oh, damn, that was funny… Yes, Piotr Petrovich? Can I tell the story?”

“Go ahead, Sanyok!” Maltsev rested his head on his hands, closing his heavy eyelids.

Tushkevich livened up. “So, Kuklin was drinking vodka with Chaliapin and this Finnish communist Rahia, and a few of our comrades. It was Estonian vodka, not ours…they make it from potatoes. So they drank a little and started to talk about theater, actors, this and that… Kuklin’s hot-headed, so he says, “Those like Chaliapin should be killed!” They ask him why. He says, “Talent kills equality! It’s not fair when one can do something and others can’t.”

Maltsev opened his eyes.

“By the way, this should be on the slogans displayed in all theaters. A very proletarian idea!”

“And then, Kuklin says,” Tushkevich continued, “what did you, actors, do for the proletariat? What good are you for the Revolution?” And Chaliapin just starts yelling at him with Ivan the Terrible’s voice, “Up! Stand straight! How dare you talk to me like this, you son of a bitch!”

“Bullshit! As if he had heard Ivan the Terrible’s voice…” said Maltsev. He was sweating profusely and his face was covered with large red spots.

“I don’t know if he heard it, but Kuklin jumped up and almost shit his pants,” chuckled Tushkevich, ending his story. “Will you send us the article when you write it?” he asked Irina. He put his hand on his stomach. His face had become pale.

*‘Looks like this is it,’* Irina thought, waving over the waiter. “Comrade, bring some water. And baking soda. I don’t feel good,” she told him. She looked at Tushkevich and saw fear in his eyes.  “Okay, I’ll send you the article. But we need to meet again in two days. I need to ask you about your memories of the Civil War.”

The waiter brought the water, holding the glass with both hands.

She tried to get up, grasping the waiter. “I’m sick,” she screamed and lowered herself onto the floor. She noticed that Maltsev, wheezing, fell on his side, pulling the tablecloth with him. Tushkevich rushed to help him but bent over gasping for air and fell on his knees, then onto the floor.

“Doctor...” whispered Irina and closed her eyes, listening to the sound of breaking tableware and startled cries.

*‘It’s done, it’s done, it’s done…’* she thought, trying not to move and holding back the heavy panting as someone carried her to the sofa and unbuttoned her dress collar. She felt cold water being sprinkled on her face. She heard someone’s quick steps, the worried voices all around her. Someone’s warm fingers touched her wrist.

“I can assure you, the woman is still alive, but these two are dead.”

*‘…Done…’*

She allowed herself to open her eyes only when she felt the sharp ammonium smell.  She coughed.

“Alive!”

Next to her, she saw a young, freckle-faced man wearing a white robe.   “Alive!” he cried. “Thank God at least she’s alive! Lady, you are alive!” he joyfully informed Irina.

She turned her head away from the cotton cloth soaked with ammonium.

“She didn’t finish the fish,” explained the busboy in the blue shirt. “They ate everything and she…” the boy told the uniformed policeman.

“What about the fish? There is nothing wrong with it. The fish is fresh,” the waiter pleaded anxiously with the police.“And we moved away the ficus so they wouldn’t have any incident.”

“We’ll find out; we’ll find out everything,” said the policeman, “It’s obviously food poisoning. The investigation will determine whose fault it is. Everyone except the witnesses, leave now. The woman is going to the hospital!”

Someone put a stretcher down next to the sofa.

“I think I can walk.” Irina sat up, supported by the medic.

“Don’t interfere,” the policeman frowned. “Don’t create disorder. Don’t you know, sick people should die in hospitals!”

“Where are my friends?” Irina managed to stand up and look around. “Where are they? I want to see them!”

“Don’t be in a rush,” the policeman said sympathetically.  “You’ll meet….you know…,” he made a vague gesture with his hand. “They’re gone. They’re on their way to the morgue.”

Irina cried and buried her face in the medic’s shoulder.

“It’s all good; you’ll be fine.” The medic awkwardly stroked her hair.  “Things happen in life. Tears won’t fix anything. You were born lucky. You almost died. We’ll go to the hospital now, and cleanse your stomach.” He put his hand around her shoulder and led her to the restaurant’s exit.

“No, please, I don’t need to go to the hospital. I live right around the corner in Hotel Savoy. Okay?”

“So you’re a foreigner?” The medic stopped. “I noticed you had an accent.”

“Yes, yes, I’m an American citizen. I won’t go to your hospital. I will call our doctor from the embassy.

“Do you understand, I can’t let you go without medical help? It’s against the rules,” the medic persisted.

“Lady, I told you not to interfere,” the policeman barged in again. “Do you have any documents with you?” He looked at her suspiciously.

Irina took her passport out of the purse.

“I am a doctor,” said a familiar voice in heavily accented Russian.

Irina turned around. *’Monsieur Paul? He speaks Russian?’* she thought, surprised, looking at the old man who appeared just in time.

“Madame Blumendorf is an American citizen. I take Madame to American Embassy.”

“Yes, it does say Blumendorf.” The policeman reluctantly returned the passport to her.

“So, you refuse medical help?” asked the medic.

Irina nodded.

“Sign here that you refuse.” The medic gave her a piece of paper.

The policeman shook his head disapprovingly as the old man sat Irina in an old automobile, which emitted a cloud from the exhaust pipe and took off.

“Did she want to go to America?” said the waiter to the medic, who was filling out some papers on the ambulance hood.

“Yep, to America,” the medic nodded.

“So, if she didn’t have a car, would you have driven her?” the waiter asked with respect.

“For sure. What else would we have done?” said the medic as he wrote. “We’d drive her there in our car. What else?”

“With the corpses?” the waiter asked.

“No, comrade.” The medic stopped writing and looked at him sarcastically. “We’d leave the corpses here. Why do Americans need our corpses? They won’t have enough room for all of them.”

6

Nicholas sat in an armchair, tenderly looking at Irina, who was reclining on the sofa in a green silk robe. Propped up by small pillows, she sipped her coffee from a tiny cup. The bath towel was wrapped like a turban around her wet hair, giving her the appearance of a young prince who had emerged from an elegant, Persian painting, to bring some sweet, exotic bliss to a Parisian apartment.

Just a few hours earlier, Nicholas had met Irina at the station, when her train arrived from Berlin. He was glad she had returned so quickly from Moscow. It meant the end of his worries. The long separation from her had taught Nicholas that this woman had become an indelible part of his existence. She had conquered him with a tart combination of passion and tenderness, prudence and wildness, strength and weakness, and a charm that could not be explained but only felt. She had changed his previously predictable life.

Iren’s face had grown thin, but Nicholas did not worry about that. He did worry about her gaze … guarded, tense and aloof. She moved slowly, but not like the indolent sluggishness of a human being who has nowhere to rush to; it was more like the focus and concentration of a cat stalking its prey. Iren reluctantly answered his questions about her Moscow trip, with simple answers, as if unsure the words were worth uttering.

“What’s new in Russian literature?” Nicholas asked, knowing that his wife wouldn’t be able to get away from this topic with meaningless phrases.

Irina put her cup down on the tray and smiled:

*“Hey, listen, Mr. Oddball,*

*Thou Who Art in Heaven, oui?*

*Wasn’t it Thou who created this bedlam?*

*Merci!*

*Hey, man, is that you with that proud sound?*

*In your face! Pound! Pound! Pound!”[[99]](#footnote-99)*

 She read the poem in Russian.  “It’s Anatoly Marienhof’s,” she answered her husband.  “He was a big friend of the late Esenin. Should I translate it?”

Nicholas shook his head. Irina sat up on the sofa.

“Where I went, dear, there is no more Russian literature and there is no more Russia,” she said bitterly. “There is Soviet literature. Thanks to Gorky it’s now called Critical Realism. But I’m sure, very soon, it will become Socialist Realism. Now the only way to succeed in literature is through stupidity, vulgarity and brazenness. The new Russian writers are out in the streets pleasing the new masters and the mob… and the mob is ecstatic from the language uniformity the literature now has. The mob’s ecstasy, in turn, corrupts the writers. It’s a vicious circle. It’s like an epidemic. There are no doctors, and those not yet infected become crazy and embrace the happily sick. And those few who try to avoid the infection, just hide, waiting for the miraculous deliverance, which will be brought by some terrible angel of revenge. But he’s not coming. They’re afraid to realize that vengeance is man-made, not divine,” she said sternly, turning the ring on her finger.

Nicholas moved closer to her on the sofa. , “I think, my dear, that vengeance is a double-edged blade. It kills the victim and the executioner alike. It takes the victim’s life and the avenger’s soul. One should be able to know how to forgive, my dear.“ He hugged his wife and kissed her cheek.

Irina frowned but didn’t argue. Tired from the conversation, she curled up her legs and put her head on Nicholas’ knees.

“I still can’t believe you’re back,” he said, caressing her shoulder. “You know, I missed you.”

Irina raised her head and attentively looked at her husband.

“I was surprised,“ he continued. “Turns out I love you very much. Had you not gone to Russia, I wouldn’t have understood this.”

“Then tell me how you love me.” She cozied up to him.

“With pleasure.”

Irina was listening, thinking for the first that she was hearing Nicholas, and not the voice that sounded like Nicky’s.

“I’d lie around here all day, without rushing anywhere, without thinking about anything.”

Nicholas’ fingers slid down her hand.

“So, you say you only found this ring? Not bad. You didn’t go for nothing!  Let me see.“ He raised her hand, examining the ring. “It’s old. Good workmanship, very unusual. I should take a look with a magnifying glass. What is this book about?”

‘*I should call Seregin and arrange a meeting*,’ she suddenly thought.

“I’m not done reading it, dear. I only have one more page left,” she joked. “When I finish, I’ll tell you. Soon. I promise.”

“Do you want to tell me anything?” He squeezed her palm.

“Wait.” She pulled her hand from his, got up, and went to the open window. “It’s a nice morning. It’ll be a hot day. Look at the sun. The city’s empty; everybody has left. What are your plans for today?” she asked without turning.

“I’m meeting Baron Mille.” Nicholas pretended not to notice the topic change. “I don’t really want to go, but I need to.”

“What time?”

“Three.“ He looked at his watch. “There’s still time.”

“Great.” She turned to face him. “Then I’ll speak with Monsieur Poiret about the fitting. I ordered a new dress from him a week before the trip. Where are you going after that?”

“We’re invited to a dinner party at the Merezhkovsky’s on Rue Colonel Bonnet. Are you coming?”

*‘No, the sooner the better,’* Irina thought. *‘I must finish everything today. I can’t wait around.’*

“……I can’t.”

“You can’t what?” asked Nicholas.

*‘God, no…did I say the last words out loud?’* she asked herself.

The phone rang, and could not have done so at a better time. Nicholas picked up the receiver.

“Hello. Good day. Of course, I recognize you. Today? Well, if it’s so important, I’ll come, but not before ten. Earlier? No, I can’t. Good. Glad you called me.”

*‘It’s a man,’* Irina thought with relief.

“So, why can’t you?” Nicholas hung up the receiver and turned to her.

“Honestly, my dear, I don’t want to go anywhere tonight. I’m still not myself after the trip and I feel so tired. And also...”

“No need to worry.” Nicholas stopped her. “I had confirmed that I’d be alone when I still didn’t know your return date. If you don’t want to, don’t go. No one knows when you were supposed to come back. If you want, I’ll tell them you’re coming back tomorrow. But after the Merezhkovskys, I’ll have to see someone else. I don’t think it will take long. And then, I’ll come home. I’ll entertain you with horrible tales about Madame Gippius. By the way, aren’t you afraid?”

“Afraid of what? What do you mean?” Irina frowned.

“To let me go alone? There are rumors,” Nicholas said, lowering his voice and hiding a smile, “that the treacherous Gippius demands that her numerous admirers, the married ones, give her their wedding rings, and that she strings them on a thread by her headboard. What are you going to do if I come back without my wedding ring?”

“I’ll kill Gippius,” Irina said.

‘*I hope Seregin is in Paris*,’ she thought.

“I’ll kill any woman because you are only mine,” she said seriously.

“If you want, I’ll cancel everything and stay with you.” Nicholas asked, worried.

“With me?” she uttered absentmindedly. “No, no, love. That wouldn’t be nice. But *merci*. I’m happy you suggested it.”

“Good intentions are the bridge to paradise,“ said Nicholas in Russian.

“Oh, darling, congratulations on the new item in your collection,” she chuckled. “But it would be good to get to that bridge first…”

                                                             \*\*\*\*\*

“Filthy animal! *I torment him*? For this he’s always ready!” Irina mimicked Seregin and hung up the phone. She sat back, closed her eyes and tried to calm down and concentrate.

“So, I need a room, bottle of cognac, sleeping pills, a rope, a gun, and Seregin. Seregin I already have, so the rest is easy. Three hours to go. More than enough time.” She opened a drawer and took out a Tarot deck. She shuffled it and asked herself, “What will today bring?” She pulled out a card. “Thirteenth Arcana. The skeleton with a scythe…Death. So be it.”

She smiled, firm in her desire to end it all today. She kept looking at the card in her hand. “Human heads, hands and feet, emerging from the ground, symbolizing rebirth. And the rainbow over the horizon is the symbol of the soul’s immortality.” She heard Porphyries’ voice.  *’All this doesn’t apply to Seregin, though,’* she thought. She entered her husband’s study, opened the upper desk drawer, and took out the revolver. She had left hers in Moscow to avoid the risk. *’Good thing it’s not too big, it will fit in my purse.’*

She rotated the cylinder.

*’Need to try the trigger.’*

She opened the cylinder. The gun was loaded.  Irina shook out the rounds and closed the cylinder. She cocked the hammer, held her breath, and aimed at the wild boar’s head hanging on the wall. The head stared back with angry glass eyes. She smoothly pulled the trigger. The gun quietly clicked.

*’This is it, so simple. Father had no idea why his daughter needed to know how to shoot.’*

She held the cold, steel revolver against her warm cheek. She slowly inserted the rounds back into the cylinder, examining each one, trying to guess which would be the one…

                                                            \*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Nicholas Tarner frowned, looking at his younger brother, who sat in front of him. In the months they didn’t see each other, Bernard had acquired the look of a vagrant – unshaven face, bags under his eyes, crumpled pants, dirty shirt and, to top it all - Nicholas ascertained again - mismatched socks.

“Do you look in the mirror sometimes? Aren’t you disgusted?”

“Well, Nicholas, you didn’t tell me you’d be coming earlier. Maybe I was just about to take a bath… And you know what? You stole a woman from me and now you’re reproaching me, asking what’s wrong with me. Depression, that’s what’s wrong with me. And stop lecturing me, please. I’m an adult, you hear me? An adult!”

There was a cry in the adjacent room and the sound of broken glass.

“You’re not alone?” Nicholas gave his brother a stern look.

“As you see!” Bernard laughed and turned to the open door where an attractive, slightly heavyset, middle-aged woman appeared. Her beautiful brown hair, held together by a pink bow, did not go well, in Nicholas’ opinion, with the bright green, crepe dress. The woman stood in a dramatic pose, holding the doorpost with one hand, and a broken wine glass in the other.

“Salute, boys!” She gave the men a playful look. “Here I am!” She paused dramatically, giving them time to appreciate what they had seen.  “Damn it,“ she swore in Russian, “I have an unfathomable tragedy!” Her face became sullen. “My glass is totally broken. With wine!” she specified, trying to spread out her arms, but deciding not to risk it, held on to the doorpost.

“Don’t look like that at me, Monsieur.” She read Nicholas’ surprised look. “Or I will kiss you!” she purred in a low, passionate voice, and broke into contagious laughter. “I rarely kiss anyone, right *Bernardchik*?” The woman added the Russian diminutive suffix to the French name.

“I understand your look, Monsieur!” She addressed Nicholas again. “This pink bow does not go with this green dress. But, I’ll tell you a secret! Underneath the dress I have luxurious pink panties. Do you want to see?” She attempted to raise her dress, but started to lose balance and steadied herself against the doorpost again.

“Well, if you don’t want to see it, it’s fine.”  She used Nicholas’ expression as an excuse for the failed demonstration.  “Bernard, perhaps you will finally offer me a seat? Otherwise, I will sit down myself, and I’m not sure if it will be on your lap!” She made another attempt to leave the doorpost, and this time, supported by the laughing Bernard, safely made it to the armchair. “Believe me, Monsieur,” she said, leaning towards Nicholas, slightly lifting her dress, “my underwear really is pink.”

“Bernard, did you invite me to see this…” Nicholas paused, looking for the right words, “judging from her speech, Russian dame?”

“Damn!” the woman repeated the Russian phrase with feigned surprise. “How did you guess, Monsieur? I was jealously hiding it.“ She placed her finger to her lips. “But you revealed my mystery! Hat’s off to you, Mister Sherlock Holmes!” She raised a nonexistent hat. “To tell you the truth, I love having conversations with intelligent and polite men.“ She indulged Nicholas with a charming smile. “*Bernadchik*, maybe you could bring me a new glass of wine, because in this one,“ she rolled the broken glass stem in her fingers, “the wine is gone. Forever.”

“Listen, Madam, without a doubt you have a talent for playing a drunken woman,” said Nicholas. “I take my hat off to you, too,” he mimicked her, also raising a nonexistent hat. “But I’m short of time and…”

“Is this Monsieur really your brother?” The woman brusquely interrupted Nicholas. “Amazing! Stop him, immediately!” She pointed her finger at Nicholas. “He is revealing my secrets one after the other. Soon I’ll be left with none, and therefore, I will stop being a woman!”

“So why did you call me?” Nicholas looked at Bernard, who was hardly holding back his laughter. “And if the conversation is so serious and urgent, perhaps we should go to another room, with the permission of Madame…”

“My name is Sophie, Monsieur,” the woman said haughtily. In a moment she became sober and serious. “Sophie Troyanovsky. Believe me, I would have never agreed to meet you tonight if it hadn’t been for Bernard’s insistence. So that you know…this morning I accidently saw a photograph he has… I know your wife, Monsieur. Irina Yakovleva is now, as I understand, Countess Iren Tarner. She was my sister’s closest friend. I’ve been searching for my sister for many years. Last time we saw each other was in Odessa…”

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Irina carefully removed Seregin’s hand and got off the bed, buttoning the four buttons on her dress. That was all Seregin could open. He was knocked out by the sleeping drug mixed into his cognac. Irina opened her purse and took out the silk ropes. She struggled as she turned Seregin’s heavy body over on his back. He mumbled something in his sleep, moving his massive lower jaw.

“Quiet, Sasha, quiet. Sleep. I’m here,“ she said quietly as she lifted his short-fingered hands, tying them to the metal bed frame.

“Like this… now the legs.“ She grimaced in disgust. “This is it.” She stepped away. “Now I have to wait. At least thirty minutes. ” She rubbed her throat with her hand.

It was stuffy in the room, and Irina drew the faded curtains that had once been red, and opened the window. Distant flashes of lightning illuminated the edge of the horizon, which was covered by pink clouds. She sat across the bed and placed the revolver on her lap.

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*‘How do the Bentley Boys[[100]](#footnote-100) manage to win races with these cars? This Bentley Le Mans with a seventy-horsepower engine is crawling like a turtle,’* Nicholas thought, frustrated. He floored the gas pedal and scared the slow passerby with a blaring horn. *‘So, Sophie said that Iren’s first husband, Nikolai Rakelov, was executed right before her eyes. Monsieur Paul’s detective agency reported about Iren’s trip to a sanatorium outside Moscow to see one Yakov Rakelov, who passed away immediately after her visit. Furthermore, there was the strange incident at a restaurant. Two men dining with Iren died from mysterious food poisoning, after which she immediately left Russia with the help of Monsieur Paul. Sophie also noted that Iren’s husband had been killed by four people. This means, only one was left, probably Seregin. If all this is true, then it explains everything that had been going on during the last months. The most important thing is that Iren is home now! I can’t stop her, and I won’t. She’ll do what she wants anyway. To interfere with her means to lose her. There is no justice for her in Soviet Russia. Justice and dictatorship are mutually exclusive. Their revolution’s goal is the destruction of socially “foreign elements.” I need to help her, or at least protect her.’*

He slammed on the brakes. *‘And the brakes are garbage, too!’* He jumped out of the car and ran up to his apartment on the second floor.

The key did not want to go into the keyhole. Finally, he opened the door. The apartment was empty.

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 Irina sat on a chair next to the bed, watching Seregin sleep.

*’This is the last one,’* she thought, feeling a sudden lump in her throat, and a sense of emptiness. *’The first one, the one who spoke better than all of them, ironically, God punished him by taking away the gift of voice, and he died… from words. My words.’* She smiled bitterly. *‘The other two died suffering, but in ignorance. The fourth one – I won’t let him die easily.’*

“*There is certainly rapture in revenge*.” She remembered her conversation with Chaliapin many years ago.

Seregin moved, smacked his lips, and breathed louder.

‘*What should I tell him when he comes to? Should I read his sentence? That’s a cliché.  Like in a cheap play. Ask him why he killed my unarmed Nicky? How many of the unarmed had he killed in his life? Nobody knows, except him. And he never counted; no doubt about that. So what do I want to hear from him?’* she asked herself. *‘The words of repentance? No. Repentance is for believers who have lost their way. He has no God. Inside him is the evil spirit that pretends to be God. He told him the right words but led him the wrong way, taking his soul. But, you can only take someone’s life. You can’t take the soul against someone’s will. Souls are given away voluntarily. And without the soul, there is no man. And then – the only thing that remains is fear. Only fear!* *And I want to see fear in his eyes, because his fear will become part of one universal Fear which will instill itself in all monsters like him – until their deaths – against their will. And their guilt is that they took from me and the other refugees our biggest love … Russia. And* *Russia is not a country, it’s a memory, part of the blood of any Russian, whether he wants it or not. This is why so much blood was shed in Russia – they wanted to get rid of the love along with the blood, to steal the memory. But they were wrong. The blood, full of love, will saturate the ground and will revive Russia. It is inevitable, no matter how long it takes. There is no other way.’*

“One needs to die in order to be born again. Russia’s spirit is like a phoenix, reborn from the ashes. It will again wear different bodies, the black, the white and the red.” Those were Porphyries’ words.

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 “Monsieur Paul, thank God, you’re there!” Nicholas tried to keep calm. “Do you know where she is? Great! I’m impressed with your professionalism! I’m afraid she’ll attempt to….well, you understand. How do I know? I’ll tell you when I see you, but for now, try to protect her. I’m on my way. Why can’t I? Fine, fine, you’ve convinced me. I repeat what this woman means to me…. I’ll be waiting by the phone. Keep me informed…”

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 *‘It’s time for him to wake up,’* Irina thought. She held the gun in one hand and pushed Seregin with the other. He stirred and his eyelids trembled as he opened his eyes. He stretched out and tried to lower his hands. The silk ropes tightened. He raised his head in panic, trying to free one hand, then the other. He looked at Irina, perplexed, and shook his head to clear his mind.

“Ira, what’s going on? Did you tie me?” He tried to move his feet. “What for?” He grinned. “Ah, you’re right. I don’t need my hands for this. But you’ll have to pull down my pants. I can’t wait!” His eyes shone with excitement.

Irina watched him silently.

Seregin licked his dried lips. “Quickly, what are you waiting for, you kinky girl. I want you!” He winked at her. “It’s much more fun like this. I’ll tell you, I’ve fucked a few tied up broads, but like this, being tied up, never did it before. Come on, get undressed. Don’t make me wait. Look, I’m so hard!” He stretched out in delightful anticipation. “Come to me! Well? Come, I tell you!” He closed his eyes and smiled ecstatically.

“I’m going to kill you, Sasha,” Irina said quietly, raising the revolver.

Seregin opened his eyes again, and laughed when he saw the weapon.

“Damn, Irina Sergeevna, you’re a little pervert!” he drawled, although a slight worry flashed in his eyes. “Damn, you’re exciting me! Come on, get undressed, I can’t wait anymore!” He made another attempt to get up but fell back on the pillow.

*‘He doesn’t believe it. He thinks it’s a game,’* Irina thought, taking the gun with her left hand. She got off the bed and swung a closed fist in his face, with all her force, just like when he had hit her, in Bologoye.

“What the fuck, woman! Are you crazy?” His eyes flashed madly on his red face. “Don’t fucking overplay it, or you’ll really make me angry!” His arms tensed again, trying to rip the ropes.

“This, Sashulya, is for that punch you gave me,” she said calmly, almost indifferently.

Seregin’s colorless eyebrows arched up.

“I see you forgot. Remember Bologoye?” She leaned over him, smiling.

Seregin’s lips tightly pressed together as he tried to remember.

“You don’t remember. Well, I do, as you can see.” She sat down on the chair, feeling chills rolling through her body in waves.  “There were four of you, in Bologoye, and my husband was alone, defenseless.” She paused. “Just like you are now. Remember how I begged you not to hurt him, to let him go? You see, Sasha, he didn’t do anything wrong. He did nothing to you or to your friends or to your Bolsheviks. And you killed him. For no reason… only on your drunken whim and with impunity.”

Seregin’s eyes zigzagged, his nostrils jerked.

“What are you talking about, Ira? I don’t understand. Listen, give me some water.” He tried getting up.

“Lie down, Sasha, I’ll give it you.” She took a jug of water from the nightstand and spilled it on his face. “Drink, you piece of shit!”

Seregin jolted, licking his lips.

“What husband? Are you mad, you stupid woman?” he was getting worked up again.

Irina was breathless.

“Did you drink, my dear? You want more?”

Seregin shook his head.

“Then listen.” She put the jug down. “Listen to me carefully, Seregin. Only the two of us remain, you and me. I think now you remember my husband.

Seregin panted heavily.

“And in case you haven’t heard, Yakov Stepanovich, your talkative friend, the one in the sanatorium, passed away. He heard my little fairy tale and died… from too much excitement. The Lord works in mysterious ways!”

Seregin looked at her without blinking.

“The other two – the sailor with the fat, red mug, Maltsev …the one with the anchor tattoo on his hand - and the second one, the pale one, who looked like a moth,“ she grimaced, “Tushkevich…”

Irina saw that Seregin had clenched his fists. She smiled.

“Yes, I see you know both of them. Of course you do. You’re the one who had told me about them. So, you see, I invited them to a restaurant, and they ate there, and… then they followed your other friend, Yakov Stepanovich. Probably the fish wasn’t the freshest that day. And now, you’re the only one left. And I…” She looked at the revolver.

“You fucking whore!” screamed Seregin, jerking his hands and feet violently. “So you’re that fucking bitch? I’m so stupid! So damn stupid! How did I not recognize you right away? I felt it in my gut, I saw these eyes! You’re fucking *contra*![[101]](#footnote-101) How did you survive, you goddam snake? I told Stepanovich to finish you off, bitch,” he hissed through his teeth. “But he was a kind soul. He said we should take care of the other comrades. Yeah, he took care of them, he did. You bitch, you were supposed to be wasted in jail after they fucked your brains out!” he said, clenching and unclenching his short fingers, unable to grab her throat. “But know this, you cunt, my comrades won’t forgive my death. They won’t. You and your bourgeois Count – they’ll find both of you and rip you to pieces alive. They know that this is my assignment to be with you! This is my assignment!”

“Oh no, I’m a stupid woman!” cried Irina, mimicking him. “And here I thought you loved me! So you lied to me, Seregin?” She looked at the gun, then back at him.

“Let me go, let me go!” His body shook. “You have no right!” he almost cried.

“What?” Irina broke into laughter. “What did you say? I have no right? And you? Do you think you had the right? You thought you had become the master of life and death? That you’d be immortal?” She stopped laughing, bent over and whispered, looking him in the eyes. “No, my dear, everybody is equal before death.”

She stood straight and continued calmly and indifferently, like he did in Bologoye, “But you can’t die in peace. I am your witness, your judge and your executioner. You want to ask who gave me this right? You did, together with your friends.”

She fell silent, gathering her strength to say only that fundamental, hard-earned phrase she lived for all these months. “My decision is this: You are guilty of murder. And the sentence is death.”

She pulled the pillow from under his head and covered the revolver with it.

*‘Still, this looks like a cheap play,’* she thought.

“I will kill you,” she said quietly, suddenly feeling empty and dreadfully exhausted. She cocked the hammer and pointed the gun at his face. She held her breath, as her father had taught her, although at this distance she didn’t really have to aim, and started to slowly pull the trigger.

There was a primal fear in Seregin’s eyes. He squinted, his pale face deformed, his mouth twisted into a silent scream, his hands strained against the ropes, his body arched in expectation of the horrible pain, the last in his life, and… a dark wet spot appeared on his beige pants, spreading between his legs.

Irina first didn’t understand, and when she did, she took her finger off the trigger and lowered the weapon.

“What is this, Sasha?” Her shoulders shook with laughter.  “You….” She could not say it, “you pissed in your pants? In front of a woman? Out of fear?” She dropped the pillow on the floor. “I don’t need to kill you anymore. You’re already dead. You’re dead, Seregin, dead!” She laughed out loud, put the gun into her purse and left the room.

The concierge in the foyer looked at the woman leaving the building like she did at all the women leaving the building.

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The rain fell on the night city, greedily licking the scaly roof tiles, the thirsty tree leaves, the stony armor of the sidewalks impregnated with the daytime heat.

*‘Of course, I left the umbrella at home…’* Irina thought, taken aback by the force of the rain. She looked up and down the street. The taxi, which appeared from around the corner, was God-sent.

“I’m so lucky, Monsieur, that you happened to be here at the beginning of the new deluge,“ she told the driver as she got into the cab. “I thought it was my final hour!” She wiped the raindrops from her face.

“Madame, life has real flavor when it smells of death!” The elderly driver with a mustache turned his bald head towards her.

“Oh, trust me, Monsieur, life is beautiful any time, especially when you achieve your goal.

“And what is your goal, Madame?”

*‘Right now…’* she thought. *’Go home? Nicholas is probably worrying. No, I should be alone for a bit, before I tell him.’*

“…my nearest goal is the Boulevard Saint Michel. You know the café on the corner?”

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“Fuck,” cursed Seregin. “I’m alive!” He arched, barely able to reach the knot with his teeth. “So tight…Where did the damn broad learn to tie knots like that? I can break all my teeth,“ he mumbled, infuriated. “Now, it’s getting loose. Done! The bourgeois Countess is no match for us. You don’t do this with so much talk and drama! That’s how those blue-blooded pricks got fucked up during the Civil War, with their sentiments. Thank God I have good teeth. There, one hand is done!”

He lowered his arm and shook it, trying to restore the blood flow. “If you shoot, you shoot quickly, and without bullshit. This is the power!” he said firmly. “Now, let’s do the other one. You’re good, Seregin,” he praised himself, then cursed right away, “Shit! How did I fuck up like that…with the *contra*! Pissed my pants like a boy,“ he mumbled angrily. “Now, the legs. What if someone finds out? I’ll get kicked out of the Party. Won’t be able to look my comrades in the eye.”

“What a fucking cunt! This is it!” He fell from the bed and jammed his feet into his shoes. “Need to hurry up. What if she comes back?” He tried to tie the shoelaces with shaking fingers. The laces would not tie. “These bourgeois assholes! These fucking shoes…The boots were much better, just stick your feet in and you’re good to go… forget these laces.“

He gave up. “I’ll tie them later. I’ll stick them inside for now. Now, run to the street. Watch out for an ambush outside.” He felt a heaviness in his chest. “I only need to get to the Embassy… Then I’ll find that bitch. She’ll be swimming in her own blood!” He choked from the anticipation. “I’m alive! Alive, alive, alive…”

The old concierge heard the sound of loud steps. She interrupted her weaving and looked in surprise at the disheveled man in wet pants and shoes, with untied shoelaces, running down the stairs. The front door slammed.

“*Чёртовы шнурки*!”[[102]](#footnote-102) She heard a desperate cry in a foreign language.

The headlights’ glare cut through the glass of the foyer door. The roar of an engine and a desperate hoarse cry, silenced after a dull blow, caused the concierge, once again, to look up in alarm.

“Whose idea were these cars? Can’t walk the streets because of them,” she grumbled, rising from her chair and looking outside.

At the edge of the sidewalk, in the middle of a large puddle that sparkled with merry rain bubbles, lay the man she had just seen. His shoeless legs were unnaturally twisted; his mouth was open in a final scream.  His raised hand was convulsing, trembling, as if trying to grab someone by the throat…

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Twelve steps from the fireplace to the telephone. Twelve steps back. How many times had he already walked that distance, unable to stand still? The clock hand was frozen, as if by an invisible power.

*’One, two, three, four, five.’* Nicholas counted the steps in his mind.

A rattling ring ripped through the silence of the hall. Nicholas rushed to the telephone.

“Hello, hello, Monsieur Paul? Oh, Bernard… Yes, I was also happy to see you today….No, no, everything is fine… Yes, of course, I understand. You’re my brother….Listen, Bernard, don’t get upset; I’m waiting for a very important call. Of course, I’ll call you. Later. Take care.”

*’One, two, three, four,’* he started counting again.

For the first time, Nicholas felt that time could be divided into moments. Two more moments were left in the past; the future became two moments closer.

*’Eleven, twelve, turn around… Probably, this is how people sentenced to death count their last seconds, standing on the scaffold, anticipating the indifferent, cold touch of the guillotine blade, or a sword that will inevitably end each one’s unique, but unexpectedly short, life. . One, two, three...’*

The telephone ring pierced the air.

“Yes, Monsieur Paul!” exhaled Nicholas. “I’m not waiting any longer, you hear me? Not waiting! I’m leaving immediately. Where is she? Yes, I know that café. What is she doing there? Forget it; it was a silly question. I’m on my way. Wait for me at the entrance.”

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*‘This car is hardly driving. At this speed, it’s only good for funerals,’* Nicholas thought, slicing through the Parisian night.  *‘Why was Paul’s voice so worried? It’s not like him at all…and this rain…’*

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“Good evening, Monsieur Paul! I got here faster than I thought. Is Iren inside?” Nicholas impatiently asked the old detective who had been waiting for him outside. Monsieur Paul, usually cheerful and enthusiastic, looked dejected and lost.

“You see, Monsieur Count….” He pointed to an elderly, bald man standing next to them without an umbrella. Rain was falling on his bald head, rolling down to his wet, drooping mustache. “Let Pierre tell you. He’s my employee and he witnessed everything.”

“Monsieur Count!” Pierre began, his voice breaking with nervousness as he wiped the rain from his face. “Nobody expected this. She was so cheerful. When I drove her here, she was making jokes… I walked inside that café after the Countess…” He became silent and bowed his head.

“What happened to Iren?” Nicholas did not recognize his dull voice, afraid to hear something that he could never believe, but still mindful that no one had said the unthinkable. “Don’t tell me…Why are you not speaking, damn it? What happened, Monsieur Paul?” He turned to the detective. “Speak!”

“I’m sorry, Monsieur,” the detective finally squeezed out.

“She is so beautiful…” added Pierre and lowered his head. “And happy…. The police are coming; I called them.”

“Who killed her?” Nicholas forced himself to say the word, feeling that his legs were giving out. “Seregin?” He grabbed Monsieur Paul’s shoulder.

“Seregin could not have done that. He’s dead,” the detective said, looking at Nicholas.

“Then who? Don’t you know?” Nicholas’ voice trembled with rage, his fingers grabbing the old detective’s shoulder.

“You see, Monsieur…” Paul began, unsure.

“Take me to her,” Nicholas ordered, still refusing to believe it.

“It’s better for you not to go there, Monsieur,” Paul mumbled.

“My wife is waiting for me!” Nicholas said, making the first, most difficult step.

The café welcomed him with the scared eyes of the waiters and kitchen staff pressing against the walls. On the floor, next to the window table, behind a column, covered by a white tablecloth with a red stain, lay Iren. A revolver was next to her.

Still hoping for a miracle, Nicholas kneeled and slowly peeled back the edge of the tablecloth. Iren’s eyes were closed. Her face was beautiful and calm, as if right before her death she had learned the answer to her most important question.

She died right away. Shot herself in the heart,” uttered Monsieur Paul. “I closed her eyes.”

Irina’s hand, clenched into a fist, was sticking out of the tablecloth. Nicholas carefully opened her fingers. The old, book ring still conserved her warmth. It rolled into his hand.

“*I didn’t finish reading it. There is only one page left. When I’m done, I’ll tell you. Soon, very soon. I promise.*” She had only just said those words that morning. Now, they resonated in Nicholas’ ears.

He bent over her face and inhaled the familiar faint scent, as if her last Parisian evening sprinkled her with Russian perfume, in farewell.

“Why?” asked Nicholas quietly, looking around with a lifeless look. “Why?”

“I had nothing to do with this! Let me go, don’t push me!”

Nicholas turned to see who was speaking.

“This is the waiter who served Madame Countess,“ explained Pierre, lightly prodding a reluctant, young man.  “Come, tell the Count what you saw.”

“I saw what everybody else saw. She walked in, sat at this table. I walked over right away, Monsieur!” the young waiter explained quickly. “She moved the ashtray closer. Not this one, the other one.” He followed Nicholas’ eyes. “I changed it. Twice.” He showed everyone two fingers. “This is the last cigarette Madame smoked.”

Nicholas looked at the cigarette butt with lipstick on it. It had been smashed so hard that it seemed the woman who smoked it wanted to extinguish her pain in the bottom of the ashtray.

“She ordered a glass of red wine,“ the waiter continued.  “As always, I offered Madame the latest issue of the Russian newspaper. Countess always read them here. First she said no, but then took the paper. She was reading it calmly, and then started to laugh. Yes, laugh! I hadn’t heard laughing like this in a very long time. Even our chef,” he pointed to a tall, thin man in a white toque, “came out of the kitchen when he heard the laughing.  Her eyes, Monsieur, they were full of tears…from laughing.

Then Madame went to the ladies’ room, and came back. She put the paper in front of her, smoked a cigarette, finished her wine, and paid the check… left a very nice tip. Then, she opened the newspaper, as if covering herself with it.  And then…this horrible gunshot…Everyone heard it. Even Monsieur here,“ he pointed at Pierre. “He was the first one who ran to the Countess. Later, he covered her with the tablecloth. I have nothing to do with this, nothing at all!”

“The newspaper,” Paul said, “is on the table, in front of you. You read Russian, don’t you?”

The lines were blurry in Nicholas’ eyes and the Cyrillic letters made no sense. Finally, he was able to concentrate. “*The Arrival of The Trade Delegation From Soviet Russia*” the headline read.  The close-up photograph showed wary and focused faces of the delegation members; under each face there was the delegate’s name and title. The third was the Foreign Affairs Commissariat Deputy, Nikolai Sergeevich Rakelov. A handsome, middle-aged face with a small beard looked at Nicholas from the photograph.  Nicholas squinted and fell back on a chair. He gathered his strength and started to read the article about the debt, the treasury obligations, the recognition of Bolshevik Russia by France, wood exports. Then there was a commentary:

*Deputy of the Foreign Affairs People’s Commissariat, Nikolai Rakelov, formerly an assistant to Alexander Kerensky, head of the Provisional government. According to rumors, he was executed by the Bolsheviks in 1917. He miraculously survived, conveniently married the daughter of an influential Bolshevik leader, and successfully found his place in the Soviet apparatus. Today he devotedly protects the interests of his new red masters…*

“This is what I found next to the Countess’s body,” said Monsieur Paul.

Nicholas took from him a card that looked like a regular playing card. But it had a strange picture of a skeleton armed with a scythe, human heads, feet and hands emerging from the ground, and a rainbow over the horizon…

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There were loud voices by the café’s entrance.

“The police inspector is here with the officers….”

“Let’s go, Monsieur Count, I have to show you something else.” Paul put his hand on Nicholas’s shoulder. “You must see this.”

“Yes, of course,” Nicholas got up with some effort and followed the detective to the bathroom.

“The Countess wrote with her lipstick.“ The detective pointed to the mirror. “She probably wasn’t able to write all she wanted. I found an empty tube. Here it is….”

*Forgive me for my love, Nick*. The phrase was swept, as if in a hurry, across the mirror in Russian.

Nicholas slowly passed his index finger over the writing. He looked at the lipstick on his finger and slowly headed to the door. He turned back suddenly, as if hearing a desperate call.

The smooth surface of the mirror stared back at him indifferently.

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“I admit it; you played it well with the newspaper!” The White Angel’s sad eyes looked sternly at his adversary, who reached for the fallen figure of the white queen and removed it from the board.

The two were sitting in a strange room. It was enormously spacious. There was no furniture except for the many mirrors. The mirrors were large and small, of all shapes; they hang on the walls, which were covered with white and black silk. Between the two players stood a small ivory table with the chessboard. The strangest thing was that the pieces on it were alive. They looked at each other from their squares, as if trying to decide where to move and how to get ahead. Their thoughts and emotions floated through their faces in the flickering light of the candles.

“I play as well as I can.” The Black Angel’s voice was smug. “Besides, what could I have done after you didn’t let him tie his shoes?”

“I play as well as I can,” mimicked the White Angel. “Only I think that this girl beat both of us,” he stated sardonically.

“So, what now? A draw again?” The fingers about to touch the white king reluctantly paused.

“A beautiful woman!” said the White Angel, not hearing the question. He picked up the queen and looked at her. The lifeless white figure appeared to have turned crimson in the flickering candlelight.

“Play her again?” the Black Angel asked gloomily, withdrawing his hand. The white king helplessly looked at the square where his queen had just stood.

“That we will! And I think next time, it will be a different ending…”

1. Mikhail Kuzmin. Translated by Norman Spencer. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. **Feodor Chalyapin (Chaliapin**, Chalapine) in full **Feodor Ivanovich Chaliapin**, (1873-1938), was a Russian opera singer and some of the best-known singer-actor of his time. Chaliapin was a world-class star and celebrity prior to the World War I. He left Russia after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and performed in opera houses around the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Alexander Pushkin, *Little Tragedies*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Smolny Institute for Noble Maidens, was a school for girls established by Catherine II (the Great) in 1764. It was named after the nearby Smolny Convent. It was Russia's first women’s school. Until the 1917 Revolution, it was under the personal patronage of the Russian Empress. The school was closed by the Bolsheviks in 1917. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Grigory Rasputin (1869-1916) was a Russian mystic and holy man of low birth, who befriended the family of Nicholas II, the last Emperor of Russia, and gained significant influence in late imperial Russia. Rasputin was murdered by a group of high society conspirators to stop his alleged influence on the Royal Family. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Valery Bryusov (1873 – 1924) was a Russian poet, writer, dramatist, translator, critic and historian. He was one of the main figures of the Russian Symbolist movement. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Translated by Norman Spencer. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Alexander Kerensky (1881-1970) was a Russian lawyer and revolutionary figure. After the February revolution of 1917, he served in the newly created Provisional Government as Minister of Justice, then as Minister of War, and eventually as the Prime Minister. The Bolsheviks overthrew his government on November 7, 1917. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Prince Felix Yusupov, Count Sumarokov-Elston (1887–1967), was a Russian aristocrat, prince and count from the Yusupov family. He is best known for participating in the assassination of Grigori Rasputin and marrying the niece of Tsar Nicholas II. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A type of twisted white bread. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Prince Georgy Yevgenyevich Lvov (1861 – 1925) was a Russian aristocrat, statesman and the first post-imperial prime minister of Russia, from March 15 to July 20, 1917. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Tsar Nicholas II. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Diminutive form of the name Elena, Lena (Rus). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Diminutive form of the name Ira, Irina (Rus). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Daughter (Rus). An informal way of addressing a young female by an older person. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The Tale of Bygone Years is the historiography covering history of the Kievan Rus from 850 to 1110. It is known in English as the Russian Primary Chronicle. It is believed to be compiled by a monk named Nestor circa 1113 AD. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. At the beginning of World War I in 1914 the Russian Government banned the sale of hard alcohol outside of restaurants in order to prevent drunkenness amongst soldiers. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Russian Proverb [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Alexander Ivanovich Guchkov (1862-1936) was a Russian politician, Chairman of the Third Duma and Minister of War in the Russian Provisional Government. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Old Believers are a group of Russian Orthodox religious dissenters who refused to accept the liturgical reforms imposed upon the Russian Orthodox Church by the Moscow Patriarch Nikon in the 17th century.  [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Alexei Nikolaevich of the House Romanov was the last *Tsesarevich* and heir apparent to the throne of the Russian Empire. Alexei was the youngest child and the only son of Emperor Nicholas II and Empress Alexandra. He was born with hemophilia. The healer Grigori Rasputin convinced the Royal Family that he could treat it with non-traditional methods. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Diminutive from Felix [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Eugene Botkin (1865 – 1918) was the court physician for [Tsar Nicholas II](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicholas_II_of_Russia) and Tsarina Alexandra. After the Tsar’s abdication in 1917, he sometimes treated the Tsarevich Alexei for hemophilia-related complications. Executed by the Bolsheviks together with the royal family. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Diminutive from Nikolai (Nicholas) (Rus) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Livadia Palace was a Crimea summer retreat of the last Russian tsar, Nicholas II, and his family. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Vsevolod Meyerhold was a Russian and Soviet theatre director, actor and theatrical producer. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Sergei Yesenin was a Russian lyric poet. He is one of the most popular and well-known Russian poets of the 20th century. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Dmitry Merezhkovsky (d. 1941) was a Russian novelist, poet, religious thinker, and literary critic. He was a nine-time nominee for the Noble Prize in literature. An important figure of the Silver Age of Russian Poetry and the co-founder of the Symbolist movement, Merezhkovsky and his wife, the poet Zinaida Gippius were living in political exile in Paris. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Mikhail Kuzmin was a Russian poet, musician and novelist, a prominent contributor to the Silver Age of Russian Poetry. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Translated by Norman Spencer. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966) was one of the most significant Russian poets of the 20th century. She was shortlisted for the Nobel Prize in 1965 and received second-most nominations for the award the following year. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Translated by Donald Michael Thomas. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. It was customary for the people of lower classes to refer to themselves in the plural form when addressing the more educated and noble-birth people. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Alexander Protopopov, Russian Minister of Interior, 1916-1917. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Rasputin refers to his assassination attempt in 1914 right before Russia’s entry into World War I when he was stabbed by a peasant woman and hardly survived. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Reference to the Second Balkan War of 1913, in which Bulgaria suffered defeat. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Mikhail Rodzianko (1859-1924) was a Russian statesman. He was the State Councilor and chamberlain of the Imperial family, Chairman of the State Duma and one of the leaders of the February Revolution of 1917. He was a major figure in the events that led to the abdication of Nicholas II of Russia on 15 March 1917. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. World War I French military commander. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. A Russian custom. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. The All-Russian Zemvstvos Union was a civil society organization in the Russian Empire to support sick and wounded soldiers. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Sankt-Petersburg, the capital of the Russian Empire. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. The Russian Parliament. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Sankt Petersburg and Moscow were both Russian capitals. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Tsarskoye Selo ("Tsar's Village") was the town containing a former Russian residence of the imperial family and visiting nobility, located 15 miles south from the center of Saint Petersburg. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Alexandre Benois was a Russian artist, art critic, historian, and designer. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Igor Grabar was a Russian Post-Impressionist painter and art historian. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Nicholas Roerich was a Russian painter, writer, archaeologist, theosophist, philosopher, and public figure. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Alexey Shchusev was an acclaimed Russian and Soviet architect. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. This is the reference to the French Revolutionary Government’s decree of November 15, 1793 that everyone in France should eat the same bread so that white bread was no longer reserved for the rich and the bran bread for the poor. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. "Dual power" was a term used by Vladimir Lenin to describe the situation after the February 1917 Revolution, when two powers coexisted with each other and competed for legitimacy: the Soviets (workers councils), and the official Provisional Government of the social democrats. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Vasily Karatygin (d.1853) was a famous Russian theater actor. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. The lower rank sailors of the Russian Baltic Fleet took active part in the Russian Revolution of 1917 along with the soldiers returning from the German front. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Alexander Kerensky barely escaped the Bolsheviks and immigrated to France after the fall of his government. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. *Sasha, Sanya,* diminutive from Alexander. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. This refers to Lenin’s promise that under communism public toilets would be lined with gold. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Russian Orthodox prayer. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. This was a typical uniform of the Bolshevik commissars during the revolution and the Russian Civil War. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Lev Bronstein (1879 – 1940), better known as Leon Trotsky was a Russian Marxist revolutionary, political theorist, and politician. He was one of the key Bolshevik leaders. He is the founder of a variant of Marxism, which has become known as Trotskyism. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. *Glavnoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie,* The Joint State Political Directorate, Soviet secret police between 1923 and 1934. It was preceded by the State Political Directorate and succeeded by the NKVD, the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (later knows as the MGB and then the KGB). [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. A Masonic ritual. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. The infamous Solovki Prison Camp set up by the Bolsheviks on the Solovetsky Islands in the White Sea in 1923. It was primarily used to intern the left wing socialists who opposed the Bolshevik regime. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Vatslav Vorovsky was a Russian Bolshevik and Marxist revolutionary, and Soviet diplomat. In 1923 he was assassinated in Switzerland by a Russian White émigré Maurice Conradi as a retaliation for the Bolsheviks’ murder of his family members. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Here, the Count is incorrectly quoting the Russian proverb “the more you know, the sooner you grow old”. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Red (*Rus*). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Handsome, beautiful (*Rus*). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Savva Morozov was a Russian textile magnate and philanthropist. His family was one the wealthiest families in Russia in the beginning of 20th century. He had initially provided financial support to the Bolshevik movement. He died of a gun wound under suspicious circumstances in 1905 after he had refused to sponsor the Bolshevik party. Krasin was responsible for the party’s finances. The story of his life and death is the subject of N. Viko’s book *Game for The Hunting Comrades*. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Approximately $1,500.000.00 in 2021 US dollars. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. People’s Commissariat, the name for the ministry used by the Bolsheviks. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. A Russian proverb. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Play of words. Both versions are incorrect. The original proverb is “It’s easier for the horse when the woman is off the cart.” The meaning is good riddance of bad rubbish. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. In early post-revolutionary Soviet Russia, terms such as “ex persons” or “former people” were used for certain classes of people who lost their social status such as aristocrats, military officers, clergy members, Tsarist government bureaucrats, etc. Falling into this category subjected “ex persons” or “former people” to all kinds of persecution, from exile to imprisonment to execution. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. References to the 1919 successful campaign by the Red Cavalry Army under Semyon Budenny against the White armies in Ukraine and the 1920 disastrous campaign against Poland, in which the Red Commander’s Tuchachevsky’s forces were defeated by the Polish Army. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Pravda (The Truth) was the official Communist Party newspaper in the USSR. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. The All-Russian Extraordinary Commission, *Vserossíyskaya chrezvycháynaya komíssiya*, abbreviated VChK, or simply Checka, was the first Soviet secret police organization. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. This refers to Russian currency hyperinflation that occurred in the period of War Communism (Summer 1918 to Spring 1921), which was characterized by abolition of banking and the total collapse of money economy in favor of government requisition, rationing, and barter. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Upon the fall of the Russian Empire in 1917, its southern province, Ukraine, split between several warring political fractions, the nationalist and the socialist. The socialist-leaning fraction, led by the Bolsheviks prevailed and established an independent Ukrainian Socialist Republic with the capital in the city of Kharkov, that existed between 1919 and 1922, when it joined the USSR. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Ukrainian capital at the time. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. The Imperial General Anton Denikin was one of the military leaders of the Russian White Movement. He was the commander of the Volunteer Army and later the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of Southern Russia that controlled a large territory in the south of the former Empire. His military government attempted to stabilize and unify the currency exchange and issued the bank notes of the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces of Southern Russia in various denominations. Here, the author is referring to the 1000- rubles bank notes that had the image of a blue bell. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Stepan Razin was a Cossack ataman who led a major uprising against the nobility and the monarchy in 1670. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Peter Wrangel (Black Baron) was a Russian Imperial officer who became a White Movement military commander during the Russian Civil War, and eventually succeeded General Denikin as the Supreme Commander of the Southern Russia Armed Forces. He held the last White stronghold in Crimea until it fell to Bolsheviks in 1920. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Cured or brined slabs of pig fatback; traditional Slavic food. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. The Russian abbreviation of the Labor and Socialist International, an international organization of socialist and labor parties, active between 1923 and 1940. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Distorted Russian proverb. The correct version is *Water does not flow under the still lying stone*. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. The Red Terror was a period of political repression and mass killings carried out by the Bolsheviks after the beginning of the Russian Civil War in 1918. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Reference to the Russian Futurism, a movement of Russian poets and artists in 1910-1920s, who proposed the rejection of the past, and a celebration of speed, machinery, violence, youth, industry, destruction of academies, museums, and urbanism. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Imaginism and *Nichevoki* were Russian avant-garde poetic movements that began after the 1917 revolution. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Reference to Lermontov’s *The Poet’s Death*. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Alexander Blok was a Russian lyrical poet, writer, publicist, playwright, translator and literary critic. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. After the 1917 Revolution, the Bolshevik government seized private apartments and other private property. The owners were either evicted or left the country. The larger apartments were made into “communal apartments” where multiple households lived, usually occupying one room per household. Kitchens and bathrooms were shared. Sometimes the original owners were forced to live in the communal apartments together with the new tenants. Communal apartments still exist in some Russian cities today. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. A Russian Orthodox mystic and saint. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Revolutionary Committee, the local Bolshevik governmental office during the Russian Revolution. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. A system of shallow lagoons on the northeast of Crimea, separating the peninsula from the mainland. During the Russian civil war Crimea was controlled by the White forces. In 1920, the Red Army launched a surprising offensive at Sivash, breaking through the white army defenses, opening the road to the rest of Crimea. That was followed by complete annihilation of the white movement and the end of major Russian Civil War military operations. Upon seizing Crimea, the Bolsheviks proceeded to exterminate “counter-revolutionaries” there. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Here- the reference to alchemical transformation, where the red is the final revival. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. French perfume brand popular in 1920s. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Russian folk belief that cuckoo bird counts the remainder of one’s life. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Here –Pre-revolutionary and revolutionary timeslang for sailors. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. The 19 century left-wing anthem. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. NEP – the New Economic Policy, was an economic policy of the Soviet Union proposed by Vladimir Lenin in 1921 as a temporary measure. It was meant to revive the economy collapsed during War Communism of 1918-1920. NEP included "a free market and capitalism, both subject to state control," while socialized state enterprises would operate on "a profit basis." Here – Nepmen is a derogatory term for the new entrepreneurs. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Translated by Norman Spencer. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. The British car race team in 1920’s who used Bentley cars. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. The slang used by the Reds to define counterrevolutionaries. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Goddamn shoelaces (Russian). [↑](#footnote-ref-102)