

The Right to Rule
An Alternate History Novella

A Creative Project

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Chapter 1

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Nicholas Romanov knew the successive explosions that shook the windows of the Winter Palace meant pain and suffering for him and his family. He could not explain how he knew, he just knew.

He did not have long to wait before his fears were confirmed.

A pair of uniformed Cossacks brought a litter bearing the bloodied body of his grandfather, Alexander Nicholaevich Romanov, Tsar of all the Russias, into the study and laid it gently on the marble floor at his wife's feet. The Tsar's morganatic wife, Princess Yourievsky, blanched at the sight but kept her composure. She sent for a messenger to retrieve the Tsarevich, Alexander's eldest son and heir, Alexander Alexandrovich, and a doctor. When the runners had left on their errands, she called for bandages and water. The glance the Princess shared with Nicholas' mother conveyed her belief that medical ministrations would prove futile.

As news of the tragedy spread, the sounds of mourning began to drift through the halls of the Winter Palace. The cries of grief reverberated off the gilded walls and suddenly crowded passageways as servants and retainers scrambled about in a panic. Nicholas, oblivious to the lamentation of his household, stared in shock and horror at the mutilated body of his grandfather, Tsar Alexander II.

The state of the Tsar's body held him transfixed. An assassin's bomb had blown one leg apart, nearly severing it cleanly from the thigh at the knee. The exposed tissue and tendons gleamed in the low light streaming through the windows of the study where the Tsar once

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managed the affairs of the empire. Most gruesome and fascinating to Nicholas was the Tsar's face: blood streamed down his bearded cheeks from a deep gash in his scalp, and his left eye dangled out of its socket, resting against the shattered cheek.

His morbid examination of his grandfather's mutilation was interrupted when gentle yet insistent hands moved Nicholas aside. The doctor had arrived to attend the Tsar. Doing as he was bade, but with no conscious effort, Nicholas watched his grandfather's wounds being bandaged – his shattered leg was wrapped in gauze, the blood wiped from his face, the attendant, appearing on the verge of vomiting, carefully avoiding the protruding eye. Princess Yourievsky began winding the bandages around the destroyed leg personally. Weeping while she secured the angry wound, she muttered a prayer for the Tsar's soul.

Nicholas wondered if Grandma Maria, God rest her soul, could have performed such demanding work as deftly as the Princess. He remembered his grandmother as a frail and sickly woman, surly to her servants but sweet as honey to her grandchildren. He doubted she would have been equal to the task.

Before Nicholas could speculate further, he heard a weak voice calling out for the Princess. She ceased bandaging and bent her ear closer to the Tsar's mouth. Exhausted, the Tsar fell silent a moment later. With tears in her eyes, Princess Yourievsky rose and explained, "He wishes to speak to his children." The Tsar's message delivered, she moved away from her dying husband. Nicholas watched the proceedings with a sense of detached dread. He noticed a different kind of pain in the woman's eyes as she turned away from her husband. He did not

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know what it was exactly, but he sensed it was related to the Tsar's last statement. Watching the Princess as she stared out the windows at the gray spring morning, he received no further insight.

His attention was diverted when the Tsar's third son, Grand Duke Vladimir, stepped forward and knelt beside his father. He leaned close to hear the Tsar's words. Vladimir's face came ashen as his father spoke. After less than a minute, he rose and moved to the far side of the room, allowing the doctors to continue their fruitless ministrations.

For the first time, Nicholas noticed someone weeping in the crowded room. Princess Yourievsky, her back turned to him, wept softly as his mother attempted to console her. Nicholas scanned the room. A number of servants, on hand in case they were needed to fetch supplies or further medical personnel, dabbed their eyes with the sleeves of their uniforms, sniffing back their tears.

Curiously, Nicholas had yet to shed a single tear. It was not that he was incapable of crying. He could feel his grief like a hard knot in the pit of his stomach. He could taste the fear the brutality of the attack inspired within him. The shock of the incident had numbed him, isolated him from his emotions. He knew the tears were there, he just refused to allow them to flow. Given his position as second in line for the throne of Russia, he believed it was his duty to show strength, not to hide behind his mother's dress. If he learned one thing from his father and grandfather, it was that the Russian people needed strong monarchs.

For his grandfather he would be strong now.

Where is Father? he wondered. *He should be here by now.*

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Nicholas took two steps forward, coming up next to the stretcher on which the Tsar lay, and reached out to take the dying man's bloody hand in his own small hand. Though he had not been called, he felt compelled to make his presence known, to comfort his grandfather in any way possible.

"I'm here, Mushka," he began. "Sasha's here. Can you hear me?" His voice sounded weak and insubstantial in his own ears; he was uncertain whether his grandfather heard him through the pain. When the elder man's gray eyes turned toward him and a spark of recognition lit within, Nicholas knew he had been heard.

"Sasha." The word was more of a breath than a true word. "Dear boy." Alexander smiled, the movement of the muscles in his face causing the wounds to bleed anew, and attempted to lift his hand up to stroke Nicholas' cheek. Weakened from blood loss, he only raised his a few inches before it fell back to his side.

That his grandfather, strong and able-bodied for a man of sixty-two, was unable to perform that simple act somehow broke through Nicholas' defenses where the tears of his family and the bloody wounds marring his grandfather's face had not. Nicholas began to weep. Silent sobs shook his narrow shoulders as tears streamed down his face.

Tsarevna Maria, having done all she could to console the Tsar's wife, moved to her son's side and wrapped a thin arm around his shoulders. "Come, Nicky," she steered him toward the sofa across from Grand Duke Vladimir's position along the far wall.

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Maria sat with him on the sofa and enfolded him in her arms, allowing him to vent his grief against her shoulder. “My little darling. God knows your pain. Let your tears cleanse your soul.”

His shoulders shaking from continued sobs, Nicholas clung to his mother, fear and anger warring within him. He knew if his grandfather died and, judging from the wounds he received, all indications were that he would, his father, Alexander Alexandrovich would become Tsar. Nicholas would move one step closer to the throne in the process. Had his uncle, the Tsarevich Nicholas Alexandrovich, not died before Nicholas was born, *he* would have become Tsar instead. And Nicholas would not be here to witness this gruesome display.

His father had told him once that he had been named after his Uncle Nicholas, who had died unexpectedly. On his deathbed, Uncle Nicholas had requested that his younger brother, Alexander, who would become Tsarevich upon Nicholas’ death, take his fiancée, Princess Dagmar of Denmark, as his wife. Alexander agreed and the two were married the following year. Princess Dagmar of Denmark then became Maria Feodorovna

Now, with the full force of his grief confronting him, Nicholas wished his uncle had lived.

As Nicholas continued to weep into the fabric of his mother’s dress, a third, much closer explosion sounded. The windows of the Winter Palace rattled with more force than previously. The people in the room let out cries of terror and surprise. Nicholas jerked away from his mother and turned toward the sound, his tears forgotten.

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Through the window above the litter on which his grandfather lay dying, he could see a cloud of white-gray smoke rising from the direction of Nevski Prospekt, just beyond the Neva River.

Though the implications were quite clear, nobody dared voice their fears. None of those present had forgotten the attempted assassination of the Tsar the previous year. Revolutionaries posing as workers detonated a bomb under the floor of the Grand Dining Hall, killing dozens guards and servants and wounding a score more. If not for the tardiness of Prince Alexander of Bulgaria, the honored guest that evening, the Tsar, the Tsarevich and his wife, as well as the Prince and Princess of Edinburgh, would have all perished. The proximity of the explosion stirred fresh memories in the minds of everyone present, preventing any of them from venturing forth to investigate.

A moment later, their caution was rewarded. Four Cossack guards strode in through the doors of the study, a litter bearing a mangled heap of humanity between them. It took only a second for the Tsarevna Maria recognize her husband's balding head and bushy beard. Recognition dawned on Nicholas a split-second later. He turned to his mother, who had separated from Nicholas and was moving toward the apparent corpse of her husband. Releasing a wail that would haunt every person present for the remainder of their lives, the Tsarevna rushed to her husband and, after ordering his litter to be lowered to the ground, draped her small body over the battered and bloodied corpse. "Please, God, no. Please, god, no."

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Nicholas truly saw the carnage assembled in the room for the first time, and recognized the implications of these tragic deaths. He made the sign of the cross and issued a prayer of his own under his breath. "Please, Lord, take this chalice from my lips."

Grand Duke Vladimir, the Tsarevich's younger brother, shaken but still in control of his faculties, came forward from his position in the far corner of the study. "How did this happen?" he demanded of the nearest Cossack guard.

"Your Highness, a messenger arrived to tell the Tsarevich the news of the attempt on the Tsar's life. His Highness was en route to the palace when a man appeared from out of nowhere and hurled a bomb through the carriage window. Before we could react, the man dove into the Neva and disappeared. The next moment, as the Tsarevich was attempting to exit the carriage, the bomb exploded." He held his hands out, palms up. "There was nothing to be done."

"Nothing to be done!" the Grand Duke yelled. "You were assigned to protect him! With your lives if necessary!" He directed his gaze at each Cossack in turn. Each man lowered his gaze, afraid of the vehement anger and accusation in the Grand Duke's tone.

"You have failed in your duties. For that your lives are forfeit." Vladimir, having spent some of his ire, regained control of his temper. He scanned the room, pausing to consider his next words. His eyes glided over his brother's torn remains, saddened by the sight of his sister-in-law's grieving form clinging to it. He took in the person of his father and the doctors diligently working to sustain his life. The bandages, already soaked through with blood, were illuminated by the pale light shining through the window above the stretcher. For a brief moment, Vladimir entertained the idea that his father would survive, albeit as a cripple with one

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leg and severely disfigured through the face. As he watched the grim expressions on the doctors' faces, that idea soon crumbled.

Vladimir's eyes came to rest on his twelve-year-old nephew. Short, slight of frame but possessing a sharp intellect and a passion for history, Nicholas was the polar opposite of his father, whose robust frame, hearty laugh and love of the common people made him appear, more often than not, a peasant himself rather than the Tsarevich and heir to the throne. At that particular moment, despite his station, Vladimir thought Nicholas resembled nothing more than a frightened little boy.

Vladimir's sympathies went out to the young man. The Grand Duke was a realist. He recognized the blow the monarchy had just suffered: after seven attempts on his father's life, the terrorists, under the whimsical name The Will of the People, succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. The Tsar and the Tsarevich assassinated on the same afternoon! An unprecedented act of treason.

One that leaves Russia without a leader, Vladimir realized.

His eyes strayed from Nicholas to his dead brother, then to his dying father.

Vladimir returned his attention to the Cossacks who stood, heads bowed in shame, awaiting the Grand Duke's orders. With the carnage around him fresh in his mind, Vladimir decided enough blood had been spilled. An execution of these loyal men would serve no useful purpose. "Return to your posts," he ordered them in a subdued voice.

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For their part, the Cossacks took the news with measured surprise. “Yes, Your Highness,” they answered in unison. Turning on their heels, they exited the study in single file. A servant closed the door behind them, allowing the family to grieve in private.

Vladimir turned to Nicholas as the doors clicked shut. “Today . . . is a dark day, lad. Russia is without a Tsar. And the House of Romanov is without a leader.” Vladimir paused, judged Nicholas' reaction to his words. Nicholas appeared stunned, shocked by the days events. “Darker days are ahead, I can assure you,” he continued, placing a hand on his nephew's thin shoulder. “But we shall face them with the stoicism and courage God granted Job.”

As Nicholas was born on the day of Job, the 6th of May, he found this an especially portentous comment. “Yes, Uncle,” Nicholas answered, uncertain whether a reply was needed, but feeling the need to speak, to show that he was strong, that this event had not robbed him of his sensibilities.

“Russia will survive as it has always survived,” Vladimir continued. “A new Tsar will be crowned and the Dynasty will continue. We will erect monuments to the fallen, and revere their memories.”

Nicholas nodded his approval of this course. He would forever revere his father, a gregarious, affectionate bear of a man who died too young to make his true mark on history.

Nicholas, Vladimir reasoned, is much too young to rule an empire as vast as Russia. He is unschooled, has no military training, no idea of the world beyond Russia's borders. Under the tutelage of the right regent, with the proper training and encouragement, he might make a

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fine Tsar . . . in time. With the blood of the Tsar Liberator and the martyred Tsarevich Alexander Alexandrovich, the boy could be a great ruler, a ruler for the ages.

Yes, Vladimir agreed. In time.

Two hours after the explosion that mortally wounded Tsar Alexander the Liberator, and an hour and a half after a fleeing terrorist hurled his bomb into the Tsarevich Alexander's carriage, killing him instantly, the Grand Duke Vladimir turned to Nicholas, who sat on the sofa in the parlor where Tsar Alexander and his heir lay. "The people have gathered before the palace. They will want to know who leads them, whether the Tsar Liberator or his heir. I will go before them and tell them that neither man rules Russia. That the empire is without a leader." Nicholas' eyes widened at his uncle's statement. Russia without a leader? He had not thought about it in those terms. He naturally assumed he was the leader, as the heir's heir. Was that not the case? We wondered.

"Wish me luck." Vladimir exited the room before his nephew could do so.

Grand Duke Vladimir announced the tragic news to the crowd that had gathered outside the gates of the Winter Palace. In a loud and clear voice, the words "Godusar Imperator Vam Prikazal Dolga Jit!" rang out to the throng twice.

A murmur of shock rippled through the crowd. They knew of the previous attempts on the Tsar's life; no attempts were made to conceal the truth from them. On the contrary, the police, in their efforts to find those responsible for the violence, decreed that such acts of terror would incur swift justice: incarceration, conviction and execution.

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Confusion as to the reason for the successive bombings was not immediately clear. Though the third explosion had been heard by many and the news of its occurrence spread quickly throughout the capitol. When the bewilderment subsided, and the significance of the event became apparent, the assembled peasants and workers moaned and lamented Russia's loss.

Talk amongst them was frightened, uncertain. Would the monarchy survive? Who would sit the throne now that the Tsarevich was dead? Would the empire have a capable leader on the throne or a despot?

Their uncertainty made the rabble excitable. Was this the revolution the students and anarchist foretold? Was this the end of the Russian Empire?

When the police arrived to disperse the crowd, their lamentation could be heard all along Nevski Prospekt to the Anichkov Palace.

Chapter 2

The family was subdued as they gathered in the mortuary chapel of the Winter Palace to view the bodies of the Tsar and Tsarevich. The customary mourning period had begun and would last for the better part of a year. After which, Grand Duke Vladimir believed the Council of Ministers would name him Tsar Vladimir IV Alexandrovich. Though he grieved for his father and brother, he felt better prepared to be Tsar than was Alexander. His brother was a peasant at heart: he dressed like a peasant, wearing his clothes until they were shabby and threadbare, and he was uncouth, with a vulgar sense of humor, without a single shred of refinement or culture.

Vladimir focused his attention on the corpse of his brother. *He was never meant to be Tsar anyway*, Vladimir told himself. *Nicholas had been the eldest, the heir. If not for his death, Alexander would never have been Tsarevich.*

By tradition, the caskets would remain open in the palace for a period of two weeks before being transported to the Cathedral at the Fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul for burial. Given the state of both corpses, he believed the ritual period should be waived in this instance. To his consternation, Tsarevna Maria and Princess Yourievsky both insisted the customary rites be observed. Maria, he believed, had a legitimate right to insist, but his stepmother was essentially an outsider, and an unwelcome one at that. Nevertheless, the Tsar had loved her, had married her in secret shortly after his mother's death – a move that created a rift between the monarch and his children.

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Vladimir could not recall seeing her attend her husband's casket even once in the three days since the assassinations. His sister-in-law, the Tsarevna Maria, had dutifully attended for several hours each day, leaving only after Nicholas had insisted she eat something, if for no other reason, than to keep up her strength for the vigil. She ate sparingly – a crust of black bread and a small portion of borscht – then returned to her husband's side and remained there until she fell asleep holding his cold, disfigured hand.

Constantine Pobedonostsev, Nicholas' tutor and Procurator of the Holy Synod, entered the chapel and made his way over to the family. Nicholas looked up from regarding his father's mutilated countenance, tears welling in his eyes. Vladimir respected the boy's courage under these circumstances: he was putting on a brave face for his mother and siblings, no doubt. Vladimir would have bet that, alone in his room at night, the boy cried himself to sleep.

Procurator Pobedonostsev leaned toward Maria and whispered in her ear. "Majesty, the Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh have arrived. They request an audience with Your Majesty and the Tsarevich."

Nicholas, seated next to his mother, upon hearing this message, turned his head to regard the messenger. His face registered his surprise at the news. Maria, deep in her grief, barely reacted, except to nod slightly.

As the Procurator turned to leave, Nicholas laid a small hand on his arm. "Father, has Uncle Alexei returned from Greece yet?"

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“Not yet, Highness,” the tutor answered, appearing crestfallen. “Word has preceded His Highness that the railroad tracks impassable. Crews have been dispatched and should arrive soon. I’m certain the Grand Duke will arrive as soon as possible.”

Nicholas was not convinced. Grand Duke Alexei was his favorite uncle by far. Ten years Vladimir’s junior, Alexei was adventurous, and witty, always ready to indulge his nephews and nieces in a caper. Unlike Vladimir, he seemed to relish the moments of levity he could snatch whenever possible.

Prior to the Tsar’s death, Grand Duke Alexei was on holiday in Greece with his brother, Grand Duke Paul. Word had been sent via telegram for the Grand Dukes to return immediately. Transport from Greece, through the Balkans to the Crimea was efficient. Travel across Russia was hampered due to unusually severe winter storms the previous month. Trains were often delayed for days while Work crews removed snow from the tracks. Given the vast openness of the Russian plains, these crews often had to be dispatched from towns fifty kilometers or more distant, further adding to the delays.

Nicholas hoped Alexei would arrive soon. He desperately wished for his uncle’s council and presence.

Apparently having no more news to share with the family, Pobedonostsev exited the chapel. As he disappeared into the bowels of the Palace, Vladimir made his way over to the grieving widow and her children. “Is something wrong?” he asked. “Has something else happened?”

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“No, Nicky. Nothing is wrong.” Maria pasted on a forced, but sweet smile. “Sergei and Paul haven’t arrived yet. That’s all.”

Vladimir nodded his understanding. Though there was still eleven days before the interment would take place, the ceremony could not commence until all of the late Tsar’s children were present. “Have faith. God will see them home safely.”

Maria smiled, “Yes. God is good.”

Nicholas was not convinced. Recent events had placed him in a pessimistic frame of mind. The people had assassinated his father and grandfather. News coming in from Moscow and southern cities spoke of unrest, of growing disaffection with the monarchy and its policies. Even young and unaware of the ways of the world Nicholas could sense trouble was brewing. The winds of change were blowing within his beloved Mother Russia. And he feared those winds might sweep them all away.

His grandfather had been the sternest, yet most liberal-minded ruler Russia had seen in a century. His reforms had greatly benefited the peasantry and they killed him like a dog in the street. Could he, a mere boy, contend with such hostility? Could his uncles? Nicholas had his doubts.

Vladimir left the chapel without saying anything more. Maria ushered her children out a few minutes later.

Pobedonostsev reentered the chapel close to midnight, after the Tsarevna and the children had gone to bed, to close it up for the night. He saw the Princess Yourievsky prostrated over the corpse of the late Tsar, sobbing. Beside her, holding her quivering shoulders was her eldest

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child, Prince George. Seated on the same couch Tsarevna Maria and her children had occupied earlier were the Princesses Olga and Catherine, huddling together, sharing in each others' grief. To the Procurator, they appeared small and fragile in their fear.

Quietly backing out of the chapel, the Procurator allowed the Tsar's second family their time to say farewell.

The Grand Dukes Alexei and Paul arrived in St. Petersburg one week after the assassinations. Carriages were waiting for their train as it arrived to rush them to the Winter Palace. Nicholas was in the chapel alone, praying for the souls of the departed, when Alexei and Paul entered. Seeing his favorite uncle enter, Nicholas popped up off the sofa and rushed forward to embrace him. Alexei returned the embrace, caught off guard by the depth of the boy's affection.

Alexei did not know what to say to the boy. Words seemed so hollow during times like these. Yet, he felt compelled to say something, anything. "There, there, Nicky. Everything will be all right. It is the will of God, and God is good. You must trust that."

Nicholas, his face pressed into the fabric of Alexei's great coat, nodded weakly. He disengaged from his uncle and, tears glistening in his gray eyes, stood straighter, wiped the tears away with the back of his tunic sleeve, and gave the Grand Duke a crisper, more resolute nod. "Yes, God is good," he repeated.

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Grand Duke Paul, a tall, lanky man eight years Nicholas' senior, stepped forward and offered Nicholas his hand. "We are all mourning with you, Nicky. All of Russia is mourning with you."

"You're right, Uncle. I'm being selfish. Please forgive my tears."

"There is nothing to forgive. Tears are the soul's way of cleansing itself. Never be ashamed of your tears," Paul advised.

A comfortable silence followed, lasting a moment only. Nicholas was first to break the silence. "You've come to pay your respects?" It was an inane question, he knew, but he could not think of anything else to say.

Alexei smiled at his innocence. "Yes, Nicky. You are welcome to remain if you wish. I have no desire to disrupt your prayers."

"I'm finished. Anyway, I was just waiting for you." Nicholas admitted.

Alexei patted him on the shoulder, understanding the boy's need to feel connected during such times. For his part, Alexei was fond of Nicholas as well. He saw in the boy a great man yearning to emerge. "I missed you too, Nicky.

"Now run along. I'm certain your mother could use your strength right now."

"Yes, Uncle," Nicholas said. As he left the room, Alexei and Paul were advancing toward the caskets side-by-side.

Chapter 3

When Nicholas received the news that he was to be the next Tsar of all the Russias, he could barely believe it. He knew that the line of succession dictated that he should become Tsar but, given the circumstances – that his father had died before being crowned – he was certain uncle Vladimir would be the next Tsar. With experience in administration and as oldest of his surviving uncles, common sense would dictate that he would be the logical choice. He voiced his concerns to his tutor later that day.

“Why me, Father? Why did they choose me to be Tsar?” Nicholas paced back and forth across the study, the day’s lecture forgotten. Even before this latest development, Nicholas had not been able to concentrate on his studies. Too much had happened too quickly for him to completely process everything. He had no end of questions, foremost of which was: how was he supposed to be Tsar of all the Russias when he did not have the faintest idea of what it meant to be Tsar, nor the inclination to be one?

“As the son of your father,” Procurator Pobedonostsev began, “you are next in line for the throne. Regardless of whether your father was ever crowned, as the eldest son, you are the Tsarevich. Barring another tragedy, you will be Tsar. Your uncle Alexei, as your regent, will guide you until you are of sufficient age and experience to rule on your own. Until then, he will make policy, approve appointments, and administer the empire.”

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Upon hearing he would not be expected to make such momentous decisions alone, a fraction of the anxiety gnawing at Nicholas subsided. “What will I do while Alexei is administering the empire?”

Pobedonostsev considered his words for a moment before answering. His gray eyes searched the face of the boy who would soon be Tsar, searching for the correct manner in which to phrase the truth that he knew the boy must know. “Your job will be to learn: to learn about your land and its people, and the larger world of which the empire is a part. You will have to learn all that you can. Knowledge is power, Your Majesty: the more you know, the more powerful you will be. And you will be more likely to make informed decisions, decisions that will benefit your empire and its people.”

To Nicholas it seemed strange for this aged and wise holy man to be addressing him as 'Majesty'. That title had belonged to his grandfather for as long as he had been alive. Now, though, Nicholas would wear the title along with the crown.

Rather than dwell on it, Nicholas scanned the portraits adorning the walls of the study. Surrounded by the images of over two-and-a-half centuries' worth of Romanov Tsars, he considered his tutor's words. *Where will I fit in, among these great rulers? Will I be remembered as another Tsar amongst a dynasty of Tsars? Or will I be forgotten, a minor ruler who was swallowed up by the vastness of Russia?* Nicholas could not help but wonder. Nicholas' eyes fell on the portrait of his grandfather, painted the previous year. Gazing into the eyes of the Tsar-Liberator, a question he could not contain formed in his mind. He turned his tutor, worry

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and fear making him look even younger than his twelve years. “Father, will I be killed like Papa and Mushka?”

The question caught the older man off guard. He had prepared himself to provide what answers he could for his charge, but he had not prepared to answer *that* particular question. Cursing himself for not having anticipated it, he searched within himself for an answer that would not frighten the boy further but would not lead him to believe that the possibility did not exist.

As he struggled to find the words, Nicholas, nodded his head, looking suddenly much older than his years – older and sadder than a twelve-year-old boy had any right to appear. “Never mind. It does not matter. It is in God’s hands now.”

The note of fatalism the Procurator detected in Nicholas’ voice concerned him. If not countered by confidence and optimism, he could clearly see the boy becoming melancholic. He vowed to speak to Grand Duke Alexei about these concerns.

* * *

The Winter Palace hosted scores of mourners over the next week. Dignitaries, relatives and celebrities filed in to view the decomposing bodies of the Tsar and Tsarevich as they lay in state. Count Leo Tolstoy, one of the late Tsar’s favorite authors, made a brief appearance, as did Feodor Dostoevsky. King Christian X of Denmark arrived to provide solace to his daughter, the grieving Tsarevna. The sheer volume of visitors was a security nightmare and the palace guards

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all appeared anxious at their posts. Vladimir assured them there was little or no risk of an attempt on the family or its guests as the successful attempt on the Tsar and Tsarevich had resulted in the incarceration of the majority of the revolutionaries involved. Those who escaped were in hiding. They knew there would be repercussions for their actions and they were on the run, enjoying their success while they still had time. The guards were not convinced; they remained alert, vigilant in their duties, until the guests were all escorted safely out of the palace and into their carriages, bound either for their homes or for the Anichkov Palace, which had been opened to the visiting dignitaries.

The French ambassador to Russia, Maurice Paléologue, visited the palace to express his condolences to the family. Emotionally taxed by the constant influx of mourners and well-wishers, and the constant reminder of one possible future that lay in store for him as Tsar, Nicholas decided to retire to the Green Parlor for some peace and quiet.

Ambassador Paléologue, after conferring briefly with the Tsarevna Maria, sought Nicholas out. The boy was seated on a Louis XIV divan against the west wall, staring absently at the intricate patterns sculpted into the pale green walls.

“May I have a word with you, Your Majesty?”

Nicholas turned in his seat to regard the diplomat. “Of course. Please, sit.” He gestured toward an ornate chair, a companion piece to the divan on which he sat, directly across from him. As Paléologue took his seat, Nicholas, asked, “What can I do for you?”

“I require nothing, Your Majesty. I simply wished to speak to you for a moment, away from the grief and gloom of the chapel.” The ambassador paused, collecting his thoughts.

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“I respected your grandfather,” he explained. “He had vision and drive. Despite the setbacks caused by the Crimean War, he made significant progress toward developing Russia into a modern industrial power. Unfortunately, he created turmoil among the peasants and lesser nobility in the process.”

“Yes,” Nicholas agreed. “I’ve heard about the problems the peasants face. I hope I can do something to ease their suffering . . . when I’m able. For now, I think Uncle Alexei will do what he can for them.”

“I’m certain he will. Just as I’m certain you will do what is within your power when the time is right.” The Frenchman paused, wondering how best to phrase his next words. “Might I make a suggestion, Your Majesty?”

“By all means,” Nicholas replied, sitting forward on the divan, his attention undivided. “Any advice you can offer is welcome, sir.” Nicholas loosed a mirthless laugh.

Ambassador Paléologue continued. “Beware of providing too much freedom in too short a time. The suddenness of change could overwhelm those you hope to help and create a dangerous backlash. Believe me, we French know of what we speak.” He laughed at the obvious truth of the statement and Nicholas joined him, his laughter more sincere this time.

“Your grandfather, God rest his soul, granted the serfs their freedom, they did not have to take it, as we French did. As a result, they don’t appreciate that freedom. They take it for granted and seek to gain further freedoms. But they still don’t believe themselves free: they resent that the government continues to control their destinies.”

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“But they have more freedom now than before my grandfather freed the serfs. How could they have anything but love for the monarchy?” The innocence inherent in the question was almost painful for the ambassador. This young boy, who would soon occupy the throne, was a sensitive, caring child. One day, he would feel great compassion for the plight of his people . . . if he survived to do so.

“The liberator’s job is a dangerous one, Majesty. As is that of his successor, apparently. All the strife and confusion brewing since their world has irrevocably altered will find release on those whom they see as the cause: he who holds the reins of power. As Tsar, you, and your regent, will hold those reins. Beware that your regent does not attempt to take long strides too soon. Caution is the better part of valor, as they say.”

Nicholas was silent for a few moments, absorbing the advice this skilled and respected politician offered. Much of it made no sense to his young mind. Some of it made perfect sense, though. He believed the diplomat was sincere in his warnings. “I thank you, Ambassador. I’ll take your advice to heart and hope God will allow this danger to be avoided.”

The ambassador nodded his thanks and understanding. “You honor me, Majesty.”

“No, Ambassador,” Nicholas rose and his guest rose with him. “You honor Russia with your concern for her people. And by talking plainly to me. I appreciate your honesty. Thank you.”

The ambassador bowed deeply. “It’s been an honor speaking with you, Majesty. Thank you for your time.”

Nicholas nodded, dismissing his guest.

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Nicholas regained his seat as a servant closed the parlor doors behind the ambassador. With more weighing on his mind than a few minutes prior, Nicholas sighed. Soon enough he would learn whether the man's advice was to be heeded.

Chapter 4

The funeral procession for Tsar Alexander II and Tsarevich Alexander Alexandrovich, wound its way through the streets of St. Petersburg. Because tradition demanded it and because of the threat posed by the revolutionaries still at large, the soldiers of the St. Petersburg garrison lined the streets of the route the procession would follow. Beginning at the Winter Palace, where the coffins containing the autocrats were loaded into matching funerary carriages, the train would move from street to street, allowing the citizens to pay their last respects to their Tsar, gaining stragglers along the way.

Mounted guards, majestic in their Imperial uniforms, halberds held aloft, led the procession. Their powerful stallions had been draped with black horsecloths for this solemn occasion. Behind them, trumpeters and drummers playing the funeral dirge. Behind them, largely unimportant in these ceremonies, were the gentlemen of the court. Draped in the mourning clothes – black cloaks and wide-brimmed hats, they served as a separator between the heralds and the masters of ceremonies that followed, carrying the coats of arms for Siberia, Finland, Poland, Astrakhan, Kazan, Novgorod, Vladimir, Kiev and Moscow, as well as the Emblem of the Great State of Russia. In front of each banner two equerries led a horse covered with a black cloth bearing the regional coat of arms. Two knights followed these banners – one in gleaming golden armor, mounted atop his powerful warhorse, with sword unsheathed; the other on foot, sword unsheathed and pointed toward the ground beneath his mailed feet. His

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black armor, though polished to a high shine, was dull, bleak. The opposition of the two – light and dark – was intended as a representation of the duality of the Russian state.

Delegates of the estates, universities and the Senate and State Councils followed with the high dignitaries carrying the cushions on which the late Tsar's formal decorations were carried. Behind them the regalia – the swords, orbs and scepters – that signified the royal symbols of Russia's monarchy, among them Siberia, Astrakhan and Kazan.

The royal hearses followed, the father's in the lead, preceded by the choir, their voices raised in angelic hymnal. High-ranking members of the clergy accompanied them. Tsar Alexander's hearse, black lacquered wood gilded with gold piping and emblazoned with the Romanov double-headed eagle, was pulled by eight magnificent Arabian stallions, their sleek coats covered by black horsecloths.

Because the funeral was for two members of the Imperial Family, the Council of Ministers agreed to alter the traditional cortège, dividing the pages and generals among the two carriages so that father and son were represented accordingly. Rather than the customary sixty pages – children of the nobles of the court – forty pages flanked the late Tsar's carriage, carrying torches representing the eternal fires of Mother Russia's Empire. Three adjutant generals stood to either side of the carriage, accompanying the pages throughout the procession. The Tsarevich's hearse followed directly behind the Tsar's. It was represented in identical order but with less grandeur than his father's. Six Arabian stallions pulled his hearse, likewise clothed in black, and presaging the halls of death itself. Ten pages and an adjutant general gathered on each side, their torches burning brightly for the dead royal.

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Nicholas, positioned directly behind the hearses, sat astride his mount, his emotions conflicted. The boy inside watched the spectacle around him with wide-eyed wonder while the heir to the throne felt detached, distanced from the pageantry of the ceremony. His uncles rode three abreast, in order of seniority, behind him: Grand Dukes Nicholas, Constantine and Michael, the late Tsar's brothers, in the first row; Alexei, as Crown-Regent moved up in seniority over his two elder brothers, rode in the second row with Vladimir and Sergei. The remaining Romanov Grand Dukes followed, arrayed in a similar fashion. Nicholas could feel all of their stares boring into his back as they rode. Protocol demanded they not acknowledge the crowd on this solemn occasion. Instead, they were to direct their gazes forward, in reverence for the departed monarch. Since Nicholas was, for all intents and purposes, Tsar of Russia, despite the fact that his coronation would not take place until the official period of mourning had ended – one year – he led these elder nobles, and in doing so, earned their enmity. He wished he could be in the carriage, behind the Grand Dukes, where his mother and siblings rode. Behind them rode the Guards, bringing the procession full circle.

Nicholas could not help but turn his eyes toward the guards protecting the procession as it made its slow way from church to church along the route to the fortress. He hoped they were up to the task of securing the lives of the Imperial Family this day. He heard that one of the leaders of the fanatical Will of the People, Vera Figner, had disappeared before the police raided the apartment she was sharing with her fellow conspirators. Minister of Police Plehve assured him that one revolutionary, one lone fanatic, could do nothing against the well-protected Royal Family. Nicholas was not about to dismiss even one of the revolutionaries, however. The ability

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of these anti-monarchists to murder members of his family taught him that to do so would be a grievous mistake.

Nicholas' musings were disrupted as the procession came to a halt in Trinity Square. The mourning flag had been raised on the flagstaff above the Narishkin bastion, where it would fly until the end of the funerary proceedings. The commandant of the fortress approached the leading troops and they peeled off to return to their barracks, allowing the guards within the fortress to take charge of protecting the Imperial Family. An unseen orchestra began to play *The Prayer*, the traditional funerary dirge. The hauntingly beautiful melody wafted back toward his position and Nicholas fought to hold back the tears threatening to break his composure. That particular song provided a note of finality to the occasion. It strains brought the reality of the situation back with renewed emphasis.

Nicholas offered a silent prayer for strength and, with a resolve beyond his tender years, sat straighter in his saddle. There would be time for mourning later. For now, he must appear strong.

Servants came forward to take the reins of their horses. They would be fed and watered after their long journey through the capitol, and prepared for the return trip to the Winter Palace, following the funeral.

Having dismounted, Nicholas' uncles clustered around the hearses. By tradition, the Grand Dukes would carry the coffin containing the Tsar up the cathedral stairs. Since there were now two coffins, more strong arms were needed. A troupe of Cossacks, in ceremonial dress, came forward to assist in carrying the Tsarevich's coffin into the cathedral. Before being placed

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in the hearses, a pall bearing the crest of the deceased was draped over each coffin. These were removed by eight aides-de-camp and carried ahead of the caskets into the cathedral. Once inside, the palls would once again drape them over the caskets.

The burial cortège made their solemn way up the steps to the west entrance of the cathedral. The members of the Holy Synod, led by the Metropolitan of St. Petersburg and Ladoga, Isodor, and including Procurator Pobedonostsev, came out to meet them. Preparations had been made in advance to accommodate the double funeral – a second table had been added for the Tsarevich's remains.

Nicholas walked slowly behind the coffins, wearing his most solemn and dignified expression. Beneath the calm exterior, his mind churned through a range of emotions and uncertainties. Seeing the pomp with which his father and grandfather were being buried reminded him of the complex and never-ending ceremony with which the nation was governed: state visits, formal receptions and Imperial Balls were a fact of Imperial life. Not to mention the Grand Dukes and their needs, both political and financial. Each of which, according not to his merits but to his station was to receive an appointment of significance. Uncle Alexei would make these appointments, as the occasion arose. And Nicholas trusted his judgment.

He had heard stories about Alexei's romance with Countess Zhukovskaya, and the child she bore him. Alexei had hoped to marry the woman but Alexander forbade it, and encouraged him to embark on a mission of good will to America to keep his mind off the Countess. While there, he hunted buffalo with the likes of “Buffalo” Bill Cody and General George Armstrong Custer, with whom Alexei continued to correspond until Custer's death at the hands of Cheyenne

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Indians at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. He would occasionally regale Nicholas and his siblings with tales of the hunt and the sights he saw in America. Nicholas was fascinated by these stories and could sit for hours listening to his uncle describe the nation across the ocean. He wished he could hear one of those tales now. He needed an infusion of fantasy in his life: the truth he faced was harsh and unsettling.

The cortège filed past the members of the Holy Synod. Their floor-length, black robes, hats and grizzled beards exuded an aura of officialdom and reverence. To a man their heads were bowed in prayer, an Orthodox cross with its double cross bars clutched to their chests. As Nicholas reached the landing at the top of the stairs, the coffins had already passed into the chapel proper. The soldiers selected to guard the entrance stood at stiff attention, their uniforms immaculate. Nicholas inwardly congratulated the officials and servants who worked behind the scenes to ready the men and material for this ceremony.

Procurator Pobedonostsev, from his position amongst the Holy Fathers of the Synod, ventured to glance at the young sovereign as he passed. He allowed the expression on his face to show nothing but respect for the deceased and piety for the solemnity of the ceremony as the cortège passed. Despite his outward calm, he could not prevent the tears he wished to shed for Nicholas' loss, for Russia's loss, from moistening his eyes. He could not express the pain he felt for his pupil for having been visited by such tragedy and for having such responsibility thrust upon him.

I fear the gentle soul which God has granted him will be crushed by the weight of his responsibilities. I fear the empire will suffer for the loss of such a pure soul, the Procurator

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lamented. *Yet, I see the potential for great strength in him. The potential to be a true Tsar, a leader of his people and a force around which the monarchy can rally.*

Nicholas, the Grand Duchesses and the attending dignitaries filed in to take their seats while the Grand Dukes and the Cossacks placed the caskets on the catafalques. Attendants came forward to remove their lids, setting them against the sides of the biers. Inside, the remains of the sovereigns lay peacefully, their wounds concealed as best they could given the extent of their wounds. Still, their features were distorted, giving their faces a surreal quality in death that neither had possessed in life. The effect was unnerving to Nicholas who, as the new Tsar, would have to approach the coffins to place the Imperial cloak over his grandfather and the cloak bearing the crest of the Tsarevich over his father. This was a duty Nicholas did not relish, and had nearly rejected when Procurator Pobedonostsev had informed him this was his role in the ceremony.

“But I can't do it, Father,” Nicholas wailed. “I can't look at their faces, seeing them like that will only haunt my dreams. How am I to maintain my dignity when I can't even recognize my own father?”

The Procurator sympathized with the young monarch's dilemma, but knew no way of consoling him. “It is your duty, Majesty. The sovereign must perform this last act of respect for his predecessors. It is expected of you and will not be looked upon favorably if you refuse to honor tradition.

The elder man seemed far more troubled than the issue of tradition seemed to warrant, however. Nicholas sensing this, asked the tutor to speak freely.

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“Already the peasants are crowing about how the empire is doomed because of the ill omens under which you come to the throne, Majesty. They believe it is a matter of time before you, too, will be laid to rest beside the Emperor and Heir.”

“What?! Do they speak so freely in the streets?” Nicholas' incredulity caused him to show more of his emotions than he intended. Though he was usually more open with his tutor, he believed even the stodgy old traditionalist was not privy to the inner workings of his heart.

“That is what I am led to believe, Majesty. The people believe the terrorists responsible for the recent tragedy have not all been captured. Minister Plehve reports the Figner woman has disappeared. Raids on known terrorist apartments yielded no clues to indicate to where she has fled. If she is not found, and the demands The Will of the People presented prior to the assassinations are not met, she could become a rallying point for future attempts on your life or Crown-Regent Alexei's life.”

This news had distressed Nicholas as his biggest fear about ascending the throne was that his life would end violently, also. And here, on the eve of burying his predecessors, was his tutor, the Procurator of the Holy Synod and a representative of God's Word on Earth, telling him that, on one hand, if he broke with tradition regarding the ceremony, it would reflect badly on an embattled monarchy, and on the other, if he did not break with tradition, if he continued the traditionalist policies of his grandfather, he was placing the monarchy, and himself, at risk.

Nicholas dropped onto a divan in the corner of the study and placed his chin in his hand. “What am I to do, Father?”

The Procurator considered his response. “You will do as you think best, Majesty.”

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“As I think best,” Nicholas repeated, his voice tight. “I will do as God has ordained.”

Nicholas did not pretend to know the mind of God, nor did he believe anyone should be able to. He simply wished God had mercy on him in the years to come.

Metropolitan Isodor, waited for the audience to be seated before he began the recitation of the prayers for the dead. The members of the High Clergy assembled behind him contributed their voices to the liturgy. The effect was a haunting, multi-tonal quality that sent goose bumps down Nicholas' spine. Having heard these prayers too often for his liking, Nicholas fell into the rhythm of the strangely compelling prayer, and found his thoughts drifting. He hardly noticed when the prayers ended. His uncle and regent, seated beside him, rose along with the other assembled nobles to pay respect to the deceased. A moment later, Nicholas broke out of his daze and joined them.

Nicholas approached the coffins with trepidation. The image of the men battered and bloodied never left his thoughts. His dreams were filled with the bloody images he saw that night several weeks ago. And to see them lying in state, their faces a patchwork, the emblems of office adorning their lifeless bodies, shook Nicholas to his core. He felt as though he were looking upon his own future. *Why did this happen, Mighty God? Why have you thrust this curse upon me? Have I not been a pious servant? Have I offended you in some way? Please, Lord, let me not fall victim to lawless, bloody men.*

Nicholas returned to his seat and waited for the remainder of the nobles to pay their respects. He was cognizant of his duty, aware of what was expected of him, and realized that, despite his misgivings and fears, he would do what was required of him. To do otherwise would

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be to dishonor the memory of his father and grandfather and all the Romanovs who came before him.

The funeral cloths were removed and placed in the sanctuaries designated to each set of remains. Nicholas steeled himself. He glanced at his mother as he rose. The Tsarevna looked pale, worn, and she had made no effort to stop her tears from flowing. The liquid trails they left behind reflected the light of the blazing chandeliers overhead; her tears resembled streams of fire. Not willing to read anything into the image, Nicholas looked away and descended from his seat to take the Imperial cloak from the courtier who came forward to meet him. The image stayed in Nicholas' head as he numbly completed his role in the ceremony then returned to his seat.

The same attendants who had removed the coffin lids came forward and replaced them, sealing them in preparation for the interment to come. The aides-de-camp came forward to carry first the Tsar's coffin, and then the Heir's coffin to the burial vault into which they would be lowered after the Metropolitan performed the rites of absolution. Later, after the assembly had left and only the honor guard assigned to stand watch over the vault remained, workmen would bring in the marble slabs, engraved with the names and dates of the deceased, and seal the deceased into the floor with all the other Romanovs who had been buried there over the centuries.

The canons and riflemen, by signal from a member of the Holy Synod, fired their salute to the late Emperor, signaling the end of the ceremony. Those in attendance rose and began to file out of the cathedral. None of the nobles spoke as they made their way, alone and in groups,

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through the doors and down the stairs. Nicholas' mother waited for him to join her and her other children near the door. Nicholas approached her, allowing her to curl a thin arm around his shoulders and pull him tight to her, burying her face in his shoulder. Through her tears, she said, "Your father would have been proud."

Unable to maintain his composure any longer, Nicholas burst into tears, giving in to the despair and grief that had weighed down his spirit for the last two weeks ago. The weariness he felt seeping into his young bones forced him to slump against his mother for support. His siblings gathered around them, offering their support and mingling their tears with those of their mother and brother. They remained in that posture for several minutes, sharing their grief and not caring who knew their feelings. After being strong for the monarchy's sake, it felt liberating to be able to be a child, to express his emotions as a child would, even if only for a short time.

After he felt his tears had run their course for the time being – he had no doubts they would return on many occasions in the future – he pulled away from his family, straightened his tunic and wiped away his tears. Summoning his most authoritative voice, he said, "Come, mother, the others are waiting."

Exiting the cathedral together, mother and son watched the flag of mourning being taken down and replaced with the standard flag. Nicholas nodded as he watched it being raised to its customary height. *Yes, for Russia, life must go on.*

Chapter 5

Grand Duke Vladimir swilled his wine, a fine Bordeaux, in one gulp then reached for the crystal decanter to refill his glass. He had been drinking since early afternoon and it was now late evening; he was feeling considerable effects of the alcohol and they were not making his mood any brighter.

“A child is on the throne. And his regent is a philanderer. Russia is in dire straits and the court does not seem to care!” Vladimir rose from his chair, decanter in hand, and swayed across the room. Approaching the window, he gazed out across the waters of the Neva River at the St. Petersburg night. The ice had thawed and the frigid waters were flowing with their usual vigor toward the Finnish Gulf. Across the way, gas lamps burned on lonely street corners. The city resembled a well-lighted tomb. During the day, vendors and shopkeepers were subdued in their dealings, the usual caustic bickering over their wares subsumed by the air of fatalism hanging in the air. At night, none of the usual nocturnal riff-raff was venturing out to cause mischief, either. It was as if the city's inhabitants knew the end was near and they did not wish to bear witness to it. The city was in mourning for the empire.

Vladimir, however, had no choice. He was a grand Duke, a member of the Royal Family, and he had an obligation to the empire and its people to keep his head up and watch the demise of the Dynasty with stoic grace.

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“Had I been chosen to succeed father, I would put the empire back on track. There would be reason to rejoice, for optimism about Russia's future.” He downed another glass of wine and stood, silently, contemplating his options in the face of the certain disaster that awaited them.

His guest, content until now to let his host rave, decided the mood, becoming increasingly dark, needed lightening. “At least there is a sufficient supply of wine to see the empire off into oblivion.” He hoisted his own glass in mock salute.

Vladimir wheeled around to face his impertinent guest, nearly losing his balance in the process. “Such flippancy,” he slurred, “is one reason we are in this state. The nobility has gone out of the nobles. Not one of you thinks of what the empire needs, only of your own amusement and pleasure.”

“Of course I consider the empire,” the Prince replied. “And each time I consider, I realize the empire needs nothing more from me than my money. So I pay my taxes and drink my wine and feel as though I have done my part.” He finished the last of his wine and sat the empty glass on the table next to the couch. Leveling his gaze on the inebriated Grand Duke, he asked, “What more would you have me do?”

Vladimir stared at the man, Prince Vladimir Meshchersky, who, along with the rest of the landed and titled nobles of Russia had attended the funeral in hopes of currying favor with the new Tsar. The Prince was an official companion to the late Tsarevich Alexander. Having accompanied him on his travels throughout Russia and Europe, he had come to know the Imperial Family well. Rumors abounded about Alexander and the Prince having been lovers as

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well as traveling companions, but no proof had ever come to light. Despite these stirrings, he remained a close friend of the family.

“I would have you support me in sweeping aside the pretender that now occupies *my* rightful place.” Vladimir stalked across the floor toward the Prince. His face was flushed from drink, his cheeks and forehead scarlet. Spittle flew as he spoke, the wine and his vehemence replacing his sense of propriety.

Meshchersky, normally flippant and aloof, was suddenly serious, the Grand Duke's words and demeanor belying his irrational state. Yes, the man was drunk. Yes, he was grieving the loss of his father and, to a certain extent, his brother, as well; though he never claimed to be overly fond of his elder brother. And the feeling was mutual. But to speak such seditious sentiments aloud demanded a level of commitment not lightly accepted, even by those of royal birth. The words alone were sufficient to warrant a lengthy sentence in Schlüsselburg Prison. Added to this, these words were being spoken by a Grand Duke, a member of the Royal House.

Prince Meshchersky suddenly felt very sober.

He knew he heard the Grand Duke correctly, but his mind refused to accept the words without further clarification. “Excuse me?”

Vladimir sat on the couch beside the Prince. He placed the decanter and glass on a side table. Vladimir's face was frightening, swollen and red, as he turned to face his guest. “Nicholas and Alexei must not be allowed to remain on the throne,” he began in a low, deliberate tone. “They will ruin our country; topple our empire and the dynasty if they are allowed to rule. And I believe I know the best way to ensure that His Royal Highness, Nicholas II Romanov never sits

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the throne of all the Russias.” Vladimir grinned at the Prince, his lips peeling back from his teeth in a macabre imitation of a smile.

Despite the gruesome visage the Grand Duke presented, Prince Meshchersky was intrigued by his words. He sat forward, elbows on his knees, and made a show of studying the pattern in the carpet between his feet for a moment. Did he want any part of an assassination attempt on the lives of the new Tsar and Crown-Regent? Following so shortly after that of Alexander II and his son, the mob would surely treat the bombing as a sign from God that the empire and the Tsar were weak and ineffectual. Would they see it as a sign that a stronger hand was needed to guide them through the crisis? Or would they believe the signs pointed to a need for a different form of government to direct Russia's future? The Prince considered the options but said nothing.

Chapter 6

May, 1881

The Winter Palace was abuzz with activity in preparation for Nicholas' birthday celebration. Attendants and servants scurried through the many rooms hanging decorations and polishing the silver. A grand ball, including a feast and entertainment, was planned. A dark mood had settled over the capitol following the double funeral and a birthday celebration was just what was needed raise the peoples' spirits. A reaffirmation of life, Tsarevna Maria called it.

Nicholas did not feel like celebrating, birthday or not. Still grieving, he felt that a grand gala was inappropriate. His grandfather and father had been dead only two months, buried less than half that time, and yet, the palace was vibrant with life, as if the men who previously occupied this opulent palace, who commanded this family as well as the empire, had already been forgotten. Whenever he saw an attendant draping a length of brightly-colored velvet across a window or wrapping a chain of gems around a column, a keen urge to run up to them and demand that they cease this frivolous behavior seized him. He would have, except for the fact that the sparkle had returned to his mother's eye when she described the extravagance with which this auspicious occasion would be celebrated. Under such circumstances, Nicholas could not bring himself to object. The Tsarevna Maria had found a purpose, something to which she could cling and into which she could pour he grief and forget about the hollowness in her heart, if even for a brief time. Instead of clutching the memories of her dead husband to her like a life vest, she directed her energies into something positive and constructive, into providing her son with a birthday that would allow him to set aside *his* grief and doubts for a while and enjoy being alive.

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For his mother, Nicholas would tolerate the ostentatious trappings; even force himself to appear as though he was enjoying himself as he observed the efforts everyone expended to please him. He regretted his feelings but could not separate himself from them.

His thoughts kept returning to the day of the assassinations, to the state of the corpses as they lay in the study. So much blood. He was amazed and dismayed at how one person could inflict so much carnage on another.

Nicholas was old enough to know that his grandfather was far from an innocent. He had begun an affair with a woman young enough to be his daughter, while his lawful wife suffered from a debilitating illness that kept her convalesced. Alexander II married his mistress, Catherine Dolgoruky, less than a month after the Empress' death. Despite the reforms he implemented during his reign, he had gone to war with Turkey, costing the lives of countless Russians and expended vast amount of vital resources.

His hands were not clean, Nicholas realized, but he did not deserve to die. Neither did my father.

“Nicky?” his mother called. “Nicky? Come here, please, darling. I want to show you something.”

His reverie broken, Nicholas turned to regard his mother. Her face was pale but animated, her eyes filled with life. She looked ten years younger than just a few days earlier. Heaving a sigh, Nicholas affected his most convincing smile and went to see what his mother had to show him.

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Nicholas inherited his stature from his mother. Short and slight of frame, the Tsarevna looked small in her mourning dress. The deep black of her gown made her face appear even paler as Nicholas drew nearer.

“What is it, Mother? What wonder have you for me to behold?” Nicholas asked, half-joking.

“Look there,” the Tsarevna said, directing Nicholas' gaze to the opposite end of the room where a trio of servants were stringing ropes of gold braiding between columns.

Nicholas saw nothing exceptional about the decorations but decided to humor her. “Looks nice, Mother. Very festive.”

The Tsarevna turned an expression of disapproval on her son. “Not the decorations, Nicky. Look above the mantle.”

Above the fireplace, bordered by the half-columns set into the mortar and brick, hung a portrait of Nicholas' family – father, mother and children – before the tragedy. Nicholas felt a lump form in his throat as he looked at the image of his father, appearing strong and fit. His face, hidden beneath the beard he always kept trimmed, was full, his cheeks a healthy pink. The military uniform he wore that day was reserved for ceremonial occasions; he was much more comfortable in a simple blouse and loose-fitting pants.

Nicholas remembered the day vividly. The family usually woke early, exercised then sat down to a simple breakfast after washing up. That morning, however, there was an air of excitement hanging around the table. The painter, Vasily Pavlovich Hudoyarov, who painted Alexander's portrait two years earlier, was coming to paint another portrait. Alexander had seen

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to it that each of his five children was appropriately attired. Nicholas wore an impeccable uniform, complete with epaulets and gold brocade. Alexander and George wore similar, though less flamboyant uniforms, while Xenia and Michael had been attired in frilly white dresses. Xenia wore a lacy bow in her dark hair. Maria, ever the vision, had opted for a gown of blue silk with a single string of pearls. Her hair was immaculately coiffed, piled atop her head.

The family was happy then. Content to be nobility, without the crushing responsibilities of rule lay on their shoulders. Nicholas' father had been stern but gregarious, prone to boisterousness. Though overweight and balding, he was never self-conscious of his appearance.

A single tear collected in the corner of Nicholas' eye as he stared at the portrait. How he missed those days.

Standing silently beside her son, Maria gazed at the portrait lovingly, remembering the happier times she had spent with her husband. Alexander was a massive bear of a man. He was loud and often tactless in his assessment of circumstances. Maria was demure, preferring to concentrate on her family and social occasions.

Now, Alexander was dead and Nicholas was Emperor of Russia. Still a child, he was unprepared for the responsibility. Maria wished her husband could have assisted Nicholas in learning his role.

Maria burst into tears.

Burying her face in her hands, she sobbed uncontrollably until Nicholas, moved by her display, placed an arm around his mother's small shoulders. He led her to a nearby chaise lounge and bade her sit.

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She quickly regained her composure, clearing away her tears with the tips of her fingers. “Forgive me, Nicky. I do so miss your father.”

“There's nothing to forgive, Mother,” Nicholas reassured her. “I miss him, too.”

Maria looked at her eldest child and though she saw the remnants of tears in his eyes, also saw resolve in his young face. “We all miss him. But God ordained his time on Earth at an end. We must believe he accomplished what he had been sent to accomplish. His purpose had been served.” Maria touched her son's cheek, feeling not the faintest hint of the beard he would one day wear. *So young, she thought. So unlike his father in many ways. Please, God, allow my son to live a full life.*

Nicholas, seeing his mother's features slacken, feared she had fainted despite her eyes being open. He made an attempt to distract her from her grief. “How much is left to do, Mother?”

The mention of the birthday preparations roused the Tsarevna. She shook off her torpor, returning to the task at hand. “Not much but I should get back to work.” She leaned over and kissed Nicholas on the cheek. “Off with you. Sire,” she added as an afterthought, smiling.

“You know you'll never have to call me that in private, Mother. In fact, I forbid you to ever call me Sire or Majesty.” He affected a stern expression, which made Maria smile.

Nicholas nodded then stood. Offering his hand, he assisted his mother off the chaise. “Goodbye, Mother. I'll see you soon.”

Maria nodded her acknowledgment, already allowing her mind to return to coordinating the celebration ahead.

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As he walked out of the ball room, Nicholas realized how important allowing life to proceed was, not only to his mother but for Russia as well.

He would cooperate with the celebration for his mother's sake and for the sake of all Russians. *They must see that the monarchy is still strong.*

* * *

As summer approached, Grand Duke Vladimir began to feel the urge to remove himself from the capitol city for a while. Every year for as long as he could remember, he had taken his family away for the summer months, enjoying a few sedate weeks without the stress of court life weighing on his broad shoulders. The situation in St. Petersburg this summer, however, made it unlikely that he would be able to remove himself to the Crimea or anywhere else outside the capitol for that matter. Alexei and Nicholas would be leaving for the Gatchina Palace for summer maneuvers.

The celebration of Nicholas' 13th birthday had been formally festive, with a hint of melancholy underlying the conviviality. All members of the Imperial Family within St. Petersburg attended, as did foreign dignitaries. Most notable among them was Ambassador Paléologue, with whom Nicholas seemed to have established a friendship of sorts. As a Francophile, Vladimir saw no harm in consorting with a representative of that much-admired culture.

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He did worry that Nicholas' relationship with the ambassador signified the boy's political skills were developing at a much faster rate than he anticipated. If that were the case, Nicholas could prove to be more difficult to eliminate than he previously thought. Vladimir decided he needed to distance himself from directing the preparations for Nicholas and Alexei's sudden departure from political life. He would speak to Prince Meshchersky at his earliest convenience.

Prince Meshchersky, who had been making inquiries around the capitol concerning The Will of the People and their known associates, sat across from Vladimir in his study. "I have learned little thus far, Highness. The Jewess, Jessica Hellman, is serving a period of penal servitude in Nerchinsk katorga and the Figner woman has disappeared. With your permission, I'll send someone to question the Hellman woman and see what I can learn from her."

Vladimir considered his companion's suggestion for a moment, sipping his wine. "You have men who can be trusted? Who can be discreet? And most of all, who can't be connected to you and, by extension, to me."

"Of course, Highness. Those katorgas are dreadful places, I have heard. I would not wish to experience such barbarity for myself. Which is why I have a man – whom I trust implicitly – who's prepared to leave on my order."

"In that case," Vladimir drained the last of the wine in his glass, "go with my blessing."

Prince Meshchersky stood, placing his empty wine glass on the end table beside the sofa. "Thank you, Highness."

As he turned to leave, Grand Duke Vladimir called out, "Prince, tread carefully."

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Meshchersky flashed a thin smile at the Grand Duke. “Of course, Your Highness. I always do.”

After Prince Meshchersky had left him alone in his study, Vladimir began to ponder the enormous ramifications of this scheme he concocted. One thing was certain: following the recent deaths two more in such a short span would unhinge the already shaky lid on the Russian government. There would be outrage, fear, dissent, disaffection. And Vladimir would step in, the stern but fair father, to reconcile it all.

The plan did have merits, he decided.

It also had risks. Vladimir considered those risks as he moved across the room to the buffet where his wine decanter sat, half drained despite having been filled the previous day. If discovered, he would hang, like the revolutionaries who committed the deeds against his father and brother. His wife and children would be exiled, at the very least. His sons would know nothing of the privilege of being nobility, of the pleasures of court or of the wider world. Paris in Spring: the cuisine, the theater. All of it, snatched away because of his actions.

The monarchy would suffer also. Scandal would strain the government's already tense relationship with the people.

A small but persistent gnat of fear began to buzz around his ear. The consequences of failure were enormous. He had to be absolutely certain the benefits outweighed the risks.

As he poured half a glass of wine, the Grand Duke decided the risks were indeed worth the rewards.

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He replaced the stopper into the decanter but suddenly felt the need to top off his glass. Removing the stopper, he poured more of the burgundy liquid into the vessel.

Chapter 7

July, 1881

Nicholas exercised in the courtyard behind the Winter Palace in the chill early morning hours. The heady perfume of the lilies and chrysanthemums and the fragrant lilac bushes his mother planted in the Grecian urns all around the small space and lining the pathway mingled with the smell of damp earth to create an intoxicating scent. The calisthenics helped him clear his mind, though. The movements allowed him to focus on something other than the lessons his tutor and uncle were drilling into him every day. The intricacies of Russian finances, nuances of foreign policy, productivity, and projections for the steel and textile industries: all very dull stuff, Nicholas thought. The only aspect of the endlessly tedious lectures was the military reports. Nicholas had always enjoyed matters martial. His grandfather had insisted that his father maintain a strictly regimented routine. His father had continued the tradition with his children, insisting they exercise regularly, sleep on military-style cots and eat frugal meals. In this way, he hoped to instill the same sense of discipline in his children as his father instilled in him.

Despite the limitations one usually associated with military life, Nicholas believed it offered a tremendous amount of freedom. Parades and maneuvers, patrols and duty watches were perhaps a tedium most aristocrats would not welcome, but Nicholas knew these duties were temporary, occupying a finite amount of a soldier's day. Afterwards, based on the stories he heard from soldiers standing guard duty in and around the Palace, they were free to carouse with their fellows. For a young man who suddenly found his life arranged in advance, that sort of

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freedom was very appealing. And he hoped he would still be able to join the Guards. As Tsar, he would need first-hand experience of matters military as well as politic: one day, when he was allowed to assume the full responsibilities of ruling the empire, without his uncle guiding his every move.

In the meantime, Nicholas would continue his studies. He would learn everything his tutor could teach him about being an effective ruler.

Nicholas finished his exercises. He sat on a bench situated along the walkway that bisected the courtyard, feeling energized by the chill air against his sweaty skin. In less than an hour, he would report to Procurator Pobedonostsev for another lesson on Alexander Nevski or Tsar Ivan I or some other figure from Russia's glorious past. These long-dead rulers were important to understanding the present character of Russia but there was so much more Nicholas would rather be doing.

His father and grandfather had been buried six months previous and he had six months more before the coronation ceremony that would install him on the throne as Tsar. In the intervening period, he wished to enjoy his childhood while he could. Whether he would be able to do so remained to be seen.

Nicholas entered the palace to clean up and get some breakfast. He headed toward the Jordan Staircase to begin the climb to his bedroom, nodding to the towering Kushite guards in their gaudy ceremonial uniforms as he passed. His feet and heart heavy, he methodically rose stair by stair to the second floor of the massive palace. He never wished to bear the burdens of rule. His dream was to be a military officer, like uncle Alexei, leading men into battle, mounted

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on a fearless, muscled stallion, saber raised and glinting in the sunlight. The picture of heroism, he wished to find adventure and romance, to slay the Huns and liberate Saracen-enslaved Slavs. The realistic side of him knew this was nothing more than a fantasy, a child's dream. As a member of the Royal Family, he knew he would fill a prestigious but ultimately noncritical post while first his grandfather reigned, then his father. Eventually, if he and the monarchy survived long enough, he would be called upon to serve the empire as Tsar. His father's death precluded that progression, though. There would be no captaincy in the Preobrazhensky Regiment, no cavalry charges into the teeth of an enemy. He would sit behind the lines, sometimes hundreds of miles back from the action, and direct his soldiers, like chess pieces on a global board, and let them reap the glory he desired.

Nicholas, having reached his upper floor apartments, entered his bedchamber. As usual, the wash basin had been filled with fresh water, fresh towels flanking the ceramic basin, and his clothing had been laid out for him. He sighed. "Why can't I have just a little privacy?"

As he began to disrobe, stripping off the simple tunic and breeches in which he exercised, Nicholas vowed to speak to Uncle Alexei about his concerns. *Maybe he will take me on maneuvers at Gatchina this summer. Or better yet, make me an officer!* The idea lifted Nicholas' spirits and he washed up with a lighter heart.

Clean, dressed and feeling able to face the day, Nicholas paused for a moment at a table near a small window opposite his bed. Atop the table lays a wooden soldier. Swaths of blue paint mar its surface and one leg is detached, laying askance beneath the torso. Nicholas picked up the soldier, and turns it over in his hands. He had been repairing it, as a gift for his father, the

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day the explosions rocked the palace. Understandably, it had been forgotten in the chaos that followed. Forgotten and neglected. Nicholas retrieved a simple slat back chair and sat down at the table.

Nicholas lifted the severed limb and reached for the glue. He uncorked the jar and slathered a generous portion on the shoulder joint. Gently, almost reverently, he placed the arm back into its socket and pressed down to make sure it was securely in place, then set the soldier down, the repaired side up so the glue could secure the arm in place without having to contend with gravity. He gazed at the soldier for moment, wishing it were that simple to repair people.

Before he could be overwhelmed with emotion, he stood, pushed the chair in, and with a last glance at the soldier, strode out of the room. It was time for breakfast.

* * *

Following that morning's lectures, Nicholas strolled through the halls of the Winter Palace, examining the décor and the clashing styles. Each successive generation of Romanov rulers had added their own touches to the elegantly designed structure. Nicholas could trace the lines of his ancestors. A series of paintings, collected by Catherine the Great, hung throughout the palace until a fire destroyed the interior nearly fifty years earlier. Afterward, the palace was rebuilt with an eye toward the eclecticism popular in the nineteenth-century.

Nicholas could discern no signs of fire damage as he passed through the corridor. To his untrained eye, the palace appeared as solid as the day it was completed, over one-hundred and

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fifty years earlier. He wished he could have seen it then: the newly painted facade and honeycombed interiors smelling of fresh paint and stucco; the fine masonry dust hiding in the deepest corners; the electric buzz of excitement at unveiling a new Imperial Palace. *What a sight it must have been*, he decided.

Nicholas approached the Jordan Staircase, the last remaining vestige of the original structure Bartolomeo Rastrelli designed for Her Highness, Catherine the Great. An impressive achievement of solid marble curving up from the egress of the Rastrelli Gallery to the upper floors. Elegant classical statues of nymphs guard the landing, their grace and fluidity serving as a perfect compliment to its organic construction.

Nicholas was observing one of the nymphs when his uncle sauntered up beside him.

“Good morning, Majesty,” he greeted Nicholas, his tone light despite the formal address.

“Good morning, Uncle. Sleep well?”

“Yes, thank you. And you? How did you sleep, Nicky?” Genuine concern laced the Grand Duke's tone. Nicholas had been dejected, morose as of late and Alexei feared for his health if it continued.

“Well enough, I suppose,” he replied, not looking at his uncle. “Dreams keep me awake mostly. I close my eyes and father is there, staring at me.” Nicholas shivered at the memory of those nocturnal visions.

Alexei nodded. “In time, the dreams will subside, Nicky. Trust me. After my shipwreck, I dreamed I was drowning nearly every night for months. As time passed, they came less frequently. Now,” he shrugged, “I dream of more . . . pleasant things.”

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Had Nicholas looked at his uncle at that moment, he would have seen an impish gleam in the Grand Duke's eye. Nicholas continued to examine the statue, admiring the craftsmanship, pondering the cost of producing such a masterpiece.

Alexei, unfazed, proceeded to the topic for which he sought the Tsar. "How does Your Majesty feel about marriage?"

Nicholas, his thoughts suddenly derailed, turned to his uncle, curious. "Excuse me?"

"How do you feel about marriage?" Alexei repeated.

"Why?"

"I ask because, as Emperor, you will need a consort, an Empress, to provide you with heirs. Sons to carry on the Romanov Dynasty."

After a brief pause to center his scrambled thoughts, he replied. "I haven't really thought about it."

"Nor should you have to. Not yet, anyway. You are a boy yet, far too young for marriage."

"I'm not a boy," Nicholas protested.

"Well, you certainly have had to grow up quickly, but you need not worry about marriage just yet." Alexei paused, sitting on the third step of the staircase. "But the time will come. Five years from now, you'll be Tsar. You won't need me to serve as your Regent any longer. You'll be Tsar in name *and* responsibility. You'll be expected to produce heirs."

"I will still need your advice, Uncle."

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Alexei smiled, placed his hand over his heart and gave the young Tsar a seated bow. “I thank you, Sovereign. And appreciate the faith you have in my wisdom. I'll be happy to serve the empire however I may.”

Nicholas giggled at his uncle's silliness.

“For now, I think we can leave the issue of marriage alone . . . after this one consideration: the Royal Families of England, Germany and France each offer daughters of appropriate lineage to be an Empress of Russia.”

Nicholas could not help but laugh at his uncle's suggestion. *I'm only thirteen and he's already talking marriage to a Princess of this or that country. Ridiculous!* “I'll think about it,” Nicholas promised.

“Excellent!” Alexei clapped his hands together and stood.

“I'm glad that is settled. On to the next item of business then.” Alexei's tone shifted slightly, taking on a more serious note. The change caught Nicholas' attention. “I believe it is best to retain the current cadre of Ministers . . . for the time being at least. Loris-Melikov and Abaza are drafting a proposal my father believed was of grave importance for the future of the Empire. The particulars have changed since his death but I believe you should consider allowing its implementation.”

“What sort of proposal?” Nicholas asked.

With your permission, Majesty, I would prefer not to get into details just now. Suffice it to say that it would present a momentous step forward for Russia.”

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“Whatever you think best, Uncle.” Nicholas was intrigued but he trusted his regent's judgment. He would wait until Alexei deemed it appropriate to divulge the details of this mystery proposal.

“Also,” Alexei continued, “Prince Gorchakov is negotiating a treaty with Austria-Hungary and Germany, a renewal of the Three Emperor's League which, if completed, would increase the need to cement the alliance.” Alexei looked pointedly at Nicholas as he said this. The young Tsar did not miss his point. “Even Minister Tolstoy has his hands full with the reforms in the universities. As of right now, I see no reason to disrupt the status quo by reshuffling the Council. What do you think, Majesty?”

Nicholas thought about the question for a moment. “Yes. Let's not make any hasty decisions.”

A silence ensued, during which Nicholas resumed his examination of the marble nymph. The lull in conversation lasted only a moment, however, before Alexei once again caught Nicholas off-guard.

“I think Constantine Pobedonostsev should be replaced, though.”

Nicholas was stunned. He could not believe the suggestion. “Absolutely not. He is an excellent tutor. A bit stuffy but he has an excellent grasp of Russia's history. I've learned much from him.”

“He is a stodgy old prune who hates everyone and everything that disagrees with his opinion of the way the empire should be.” Alexei clasped his hands behind his back and leaned back, considering his next words.

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“He opposes the proposal my father hoped to unveil within weeks, maybe even days, of his death. He hates Jews and anything progressive. Such a man can only hinder Russia's efforts to modernize.”

Nicholas could not argue with his uncle's points. On more than one occasion, Nicholas thought the old tutor's opinions very bold, even brazen, and he was intolerant, *especially* of Jews. Yet, the Procurator was a man of God, a holy man, and the only person with whom Nicholas could share his innermost thoughts. He was a confidant, a friend. “Who did you have in mind to replace him? Or are you going to be my regent and my tutor?”

Chuckling, Alexei shook his head. “No, Nicky, I am no tutor. I can advise you in political matters and perform state functions, both diplomatic and military, but I'm no teacher. I did have a replacement in mind, though: Count Lev Tolstoy.”

Nicholas sat up very straight. “The writer?” he demanded. “Have you asked him already?”

“No. I hoped you would approve so I could soon, though.”

Nicholas was silent for a moment, considering the ramifications of releasing his honored tutor and friend in favor of the famous, revered author. His father had read him *The Cossacks* many times when he was small. Alexander adored the simplicity of Cossack life, imitated their style of dress and mannerisms. Nicholas had grown up dreaming of joining a Don Cossack regiment and fighting off the Tatars. Nicholas nodded his approval.

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I am to learn from Count Tolstoy! I hope he'll tell me stories about the Cossacks and the Caucasus. How exciting! Nicholas could not help but smile at the unexpected good news his uncle delivered.

That evening, before turning in for the night, Nicholas inspected the toy soldier. The glue had dried and the arm was once again secured in place. *Good*, he thought. “We’ll soon have you good as new, Misha. You’ll be on parade with the rest of the soldiers before you know it.” He set the soldier on his feet. “That’s better. No soldier should have to lie down if he doesn’t have to.”

That night, Nicholas slept fitfully. He woke before dawn feeling more tired than when he went to bed. Still, it was too late to go back to sleep. Instead, he rose, dressed and went out to perform his morning exercises.

Chapter 8

September, 1881

Nicholas could not stop expounding on the wonders he experienced while observing the military maneuvers at Gatchina Palace that summer. After the emotional stress of the previous months in the capitol, the move, albeit temporary, from the Winter Palace to the smaller, secluded provincial dwelling buoyed Nicholas' spirits.

"That was incredible!" Nicholas beamed. "The cavalrymen were splendid in their uniforms, leading their horses perfectly, wheeling around, moving as one, through every exercise. And all those soldiers, moving as one across the parade grounds: it was absolutely amazing!" The spectacle had been everything Nicholas hoped it would be. Everything and more.

Grand Duke Alexei smiled at the boy's enthusiasm. "I'm pleased you enjoyed yourself, Highness." Alexei watched the proceedings with rapt interest, a gleam in his gray eyes the likes of which Nicholas had never seen before. Those were his men, under his command. He was responsible for their training and morale.

If their efficiency during maneuvers was any indication, Alexei was providing exactly what the men need, Nicholas thought.

"Oh, yes. One day, I hope I can join the ranks of those proud men." He paused as his uncle turned to regard him. The expression on Alexei's face told him he would never have the chance as long as he occupied the throne.

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This did not please Nicholas. He understood the reasons for not allowing him to enter military service. That did little to alleviate his disappointment, though. He would have to content himself with being Commander of the Imperial Army in name only. In the event of a war, Alexei would lead the army in the field.

The esteem with which Nicholas held his uncle, though already favorable, had only increased since he had been named Nicholas' Crown-Regent. Already, in the few months that followed the state funeral, Alexei's advice had proven invaluable. The decision to replace Procurator Pobedonostsev with the liberal Tolstoy proved wise as well. The author's approach to teaching the young Tsar was diametrically opposed to that of his former tutor. Procurator Pobedonostsev was a strict traditionalist, believing in Monarchy and Orthodoxy above all else. God was in Heaven and the Tsar was his representative on Earth. Count Tolstoy, though a member of an ancient noble family, knew of the people and their plight. He wrote of the circumstances under which noble and peasants alike toiled every day. This knowledge and his natural inclination to sympathize with them colored his teaching style. Tolstoy also brought with him a unique spirituality, a connection to God and those around him that went beyond Orthodoxy, beyond the need for the intermediaries of the priesthood. Tolstoy did not disdain the church, he respected it and its teachings; he felt as though it was too stringent in its practices.

Nicholas enjoyed the author's stories of the rough, enigmatic Cossacks as well.

“Nicky?” Alexei had taken a seat on the divan in the Green Room, which had quickly become Nicholas' preferred place of relaxation and contemplation within the Winter Palace.

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“Yes, Uncle?” Nicholas, his eyes still sparkling from the weeks spent away from the capitol, turned to face Alexei.

“Remember when I told you about the proposal the Ministers were drafting? We need to discuss a subject which was very dear to your grandfather but which would cause much change within the empire. For better or worse, nobody can say for certain. I say it's a necessary step Russia must take in order for the empire to survive.”

Nicholas listened to the Grand Duke with interest. As Nicholas' regent, Alexei offered nothing but sound advice and never attempted to bully his young nephew to his way of thinking. Most important, to Nicholas' way of thinking, he did not treat him as a child. He spoke plainly and honestly to his charge, allowing the young ruler to assess the situation for himself, guiding him through the process of reaching his own conclusion. His ministers did the bulk of the actual work at this stage, debating the issues and deciding upon a course of action. Nicholas and Alexei were there to grant the projected policies their seal of approval, after careful consideration of the matter, of course: Nicholas was Tsar after all, and was the final say in all matters politic. Still, he did not carry the weight of a functioning monarch. Alexei, even in an advisory capacity, exercised more influence on policy than Nicholas.

That would all change after his coronation, he knew. *Six months from now, I will officially be installed as Tsar of all the Russias. Even though I'll be dependent on Uncle Alexei for advice, I'll have the authority of the title to back up my decisions.*

“It must be really important to interest you so much.” Nicholas said.

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Alexei did not answer immediately. Instead, he stroked his beard, gazing at the gilt edge of a painting of Tsar Nicholas I, Nicholas' great-grandfather, hanging opposite the staircase. He wondered if he would achieve even half as much as his namesake.

“I propose you grant the people the constitution they've been demanding, the constitution my father – your grandfather – and his Ministers were drafting before he was killed.” He said no more for a moment, allowing the young ruler to absorb the information before continuing.

“The violence won't stop until their demands are met. More of our family and friends will die horribly until these fanatics are appeased.” Alexei locked eyes with Nicholas. “The Empire must be allowed to continue, or else we are all lost.”

“I . . .,” Nicholas began but could not continue. His uncle's proposal was as unexpected as a punch in the face. And the words his regent spoke had a similar effect: he felt as though he had been dealt a physical blow.

“I know it's a departure from tradition. A radical suggestion, really. Tradition dictates the Tsar be the absolute ruler, the father and leader of his people. But the world has changed so much since the Romanovs ascended the throne.” Alexei's voice rose, emotion fueling his speech. “The days of autocracy and absolutism are gone, Nicholas. Russia must change to meet the tides of change washing over her or it will fall into ruin and chaos.”

“Count Leo has spoken on several occasions about autocracy and its place in the modern world. He thinks the government is archaic and outmoded. But he doesn't approve of American democracy either. Too many ideas: not enough action for his tastes. He believes a representative form of government, similar to England's constitutional monarchy, is the best way

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to rule an empire: the people have a voice in the government but they also have the King and Queen as . . . what did he call them?" Nicholas paused, recalling his lessons. "Figureheads, that's it." His voice slipped into an imitation of his tutor's prosaic style. "A constant symbol of power and tradition. A constitution might be just the thing to keep the empire intact. Or at least to keep it from falling apart."

Alexei chuckled at the imitation. He was pleased to hear the progressive attitude Tolstoy was instilling in the young man. Procurator Pobedonostsev had been a loyal servant of the empire. He fulfilled his role as mentor of the sons of the monarchy for decades. During such rapidly-changing times, his traditionalist philosophy no longer served the empire's purposes, however.

"You'll support the constitution then?" Alexei asked.

Nicholas did not reply immediately. He thought about the alleviation of responsibilities implementing a constitution would signify. His power would be limited, but the blame for poor decision-making would be shared with the elected representatives. He would be a symbol of Russia's proud tradition. "I will," Nicholas answered. "When will you inform the Council of our decision?"

Alexei considered the best course of action on this sensitive subject. Many of the nobility would oppose anything that raised the peasants above their current station, the traditionalists, such as Pobedonostsev, vehemently so. Others, such as Abaza and Loris-Melikov, who were involved in its creation from the beginning, would welcome the chance to continue the late Tsar's program of reforms. There would be much debate on the parameters of that document, however.

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And on the composition of the representative assembly to be created in order to effectively exercise the constitution. Weighing these factors, Alexei decided sooner would be better than later.

“I’ll speak to them tomorrow if you’d like.”

“Tomorrow then,” Nicholas agreed, smiling at the obvious pleasure his uncle received from his agreement.

Chapter 9

Nicholas entered the study where the bodies of his father and grandfather had lain in state and was surprised to find his mother sitting on the sofa, beside her the Princess Yourievsky. Both women were clad in black from head to toe – the traditional mourning clothes of widows. Both women had been crying.

“Mother, is something wrong?” Concern edged his voice, for his mother never cried unless the situation was dire.

“Nicky, my angel. I'm fine. Come. Sit with me.” She patted the sofa beside her with her free hand. Nicholas, ever the dutiful son, sat where she indicated.

“Princess Yourievsky and I were just talking. She wishes to leave Russia.”

“Why?” Nicholas asked, astonished anyone would wish to leave such a beautiful place.

“Your Highness,” the Princess began, “I feel there is no longer anything left for us in Russia. My beloved Lexi is dead and our children together are not in the line of succession. Here they will be “the Tsar's bastards”. Noble by birth, but not noble enough to be considered for the throne.” She paused, looking Nicholas in the eyes. “Their opportunities are limited,” she finished with sincerity.

Nicholas was attentive and sympathized with the woman's plight, but uncertain if there was anything he could do for her. “Where will you go?” he inquired.

“Paris, most likely,” she answered, wiping tears away with a silk handkerchief.

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Nicholas nodded. France was a popular destination for Russian émigrés. The culture, the climate and the ready acceptance of all things noble made the country an attractive place to live.

“We'll be sad to see you go, Princess,” Nicholas offered. “But I understand you must do what you believe is right for your family.”

“Yes, of course,” the Tsarevna agreed, alternately patting and rubbing the woman's hand.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” Princess Yourievsky began to weep again, her tears flowing freely.

Tsarevna Maria placed an arm around the woman's shoulders, pulling her tight to her small frame. “There, there, my dear. There, there,” she cooed.

Nicholas rose, nodded to his mother in lieu of a good-bye. Tsarevna Maria acknowledged the nod with one of her own and Nicholas could see the compassion spilling over in his mother's eyes.

With nothing demanding his immediate attention, Nicholas stole away to his rooms to work on the soldier for a while. He found the process of restoring the figure relaxing, despite the obvious resemblance it bore to recent events.

He had painted the coat and hat thus far: they were a wonderfully martial Prussian blue. He painted red sashes crossing over the chest and a gold stripe bisecting the cylindrical hat. Unable to decide whether he should paint the pants red as well or green – he preferred green but wondered if that was against regulations or not – he decided to ask Alexei before proceeding.

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The intervening months had been hectic and his question had gone unasked for weeks. Now, at last he had his answer. Green was the color of choice. That made him happy.

Nicholas sat at the little table, uncorked the jar of green paint. He dipped the brush in, wiped off the excess paint, and with loving strokes, began to dress his soldier according to regulations.

* * *

Alexei's carriage came to a stop before the Ministry Building. Not bothering to wait for his driver to descend and open the door, he stepped out into the cold Russian morning. The sky was gray, the streets were gray, even the building's facade was gray, he noted. *Winter in Russia should be called the Gray Months, even the sun doesn't properly rest at night here.* Pulling his cloak tighter about him, he climbed the stairs to the large, ornate double doors. Before he reached them, the left side swung open and a well-dressed gentleman emerged into the gray day. Alexei recognized him as Prince Vladimir Meshchersky, publisher and one-time companion of Tsarevich Alexander's. "Good morning, Vladimir Petrovich. How are you this fine morning?" Alexei asked.

The Prince, started as he recognized the Grand Duke, but recovered quickly. "Well, Your Highness. Thank you."

"How is the newspaper business these days? I trust the empire is not too dull for your liking?" Alexei chuckled.

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“Not at all, Highness. I find there is plenty afoot to keep my newspaper running.” he replied, then realized he might have said too much.

Alexei noted the man seemed harried so decided not to keep him. “As long as you're not printing scandalous lies, I suppose.” Alexei remarked, gazing at the young man in mock severity. “Tell your father I send my regards.”

“Yes, Highness,” Prince Meshchersky bowed, relieved that he was being dismissed. “Please pass my regards to His Majesty and Her Highness, the Tsarevna.”

Alexei nodded in lieu of a reply. He proceeded through the door Prince Meshchersky was holding for him.

As Grand Duke Alexei disappeared into the interior of the building, Prince Meshchersky heaved a sigh of relief and scurried away from the building, not looking back.

Crown-Regent Alexei entered the offices of the Council of Ministers and stalked directly to the offices of Mikhail Loris-Melikov, Minister of the Interior. His secretary ushered Alexei into the minister's office without delay. The former Tsar's most trusted minister sat behind his oak desk, a stack of papers piled before him. His spectacles were pushed forward on his nose, perched precariously on the tip. He looked up from his work and his dark eyes were alive with intelligence.

“Your Highness,” he greeted Alexei, rising. “A pleasure as always. Please, have a seat.” He extended a hand to indicate the high-backed leather chair across the desk from him.

“Thank you, Minister.” Alexei removed his hat and gloves and sat in the offered chair.

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Count Loris-Melikov regained his seat, removed his spectacles and folded his hands together on the blotter before him. “To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, Your Highness?” Despite their obvious age difference, the Minister treated Alexei with the utmost respect. And Alexei returned the favor. His father valued the Count's intelligent and perceptive mind, and considered his judgment sound and his political knowledge astute.

The son of an Armenian merchant, he distinguished himself as an able cavalry officer and administrator during the Russo-Turkish War. On these merits, Tsar Alexander II appointed him Governor-general of Kharkov following the war. In this role, he swept the city of revolutionary elements, conducting raids, expelling and arresting dissidents, even executing them when it was deemed necessary. For his success in defeating the kramóla that gripped Kharkov, the Tsar appointed him Minister of the Interior. The Count's experiences during the war and afterward, in Kharkov, led directly to his interest in political reforms. The previous year, Tsar Alexander II had appointed him chief of the Supreme Executive Commission, and was charged him with formulating legal methods of dealing with revolutionary unrest in general. To that end, he was the chief architect in the creation of the constitution the late Tsar was preparing to enact before his assassination.

“Count, Tsar Nicholas and I have decided it would be in the best interests of the Russian people if we implement the constitution you were drafting on behalf of my father.”

The Minister's side whiskers quivered as he realized the meaning of the Grand Duke's words. His eyes widened, appearing nearly black and he leaned back into his chair as if he might fall out without its support. He did not speak.

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Alexei, concerned for the old man's health, sat forward, prepared to rush to his aid if necessary. "Are you well, Minister?"

"Ah . . . yes. Fine, Highness. Just . . . surprised. Yes. Surprised, indeed." Forgive me," he replied. Sitting straighter in his chair, the Minister smoothed his whiskers with trembling hands. Once he regained his composure, he assumed his earlier attentive pose. "Sorry, Highness. I was taken aback by the suddenness of your words. I had expected the work your father and I did to come to naught following his death. Forgive an old man his emotional excesses, please."

"No apologies necessary, Minister. I was rather blunt in coming to the point of my visit. I shall endeavor to use more tact in the future." Alexei flashed his disarming smile at the minister to show his good humor.

Minister Loris-Melikov was temporarily struck dumb. He simply sat staring across his desk at the Grand Duke. Questions and concerns swirled through his mind as he contemplated the enormity of the task the Imperial government would be undertaking should they truly wish to replace the autocratic system with a constitutional monarchy.

The Minister recovered quickly, however. "Does His Majesty realize the implications for the monarchy of granting the people a constitution? Does he understand he will not wield absolute authority if he chooses to implement this reform?" he could not keep the skeptical edge from his voice.

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Alexei nodded before the Minister completed his questions. “He does. I have discussed it with him at length, and he is willing to accept the limitations if they offer the empire its best opportunity to survive.

“He is young and unspoiled by the absolute power of the throne. Now is the best time to adapt the changes we both know are necessary. And since His Majesty has never had the power of an autocrat, he will not miss it.

“The timing is perfect.”

Minister Loris-Melikov agreed completely. “Excellent, Highness. Your appointment has indeed proven to be the correct choice. I highly doubt Vladimir possesses the foresight to see the necessity of making such a sacrifice.”

Alexei frowned at the mention of his brother. He was disappointed when his elder brother informed him of his decision to stay in St. Petersburg for the summer. His excuse, of some theatrical matter or other needing his attention, somehow rang hollow to Alexei. He did not recall seeing him since returning to St. Petersburg the previous week, either. Nor had there been any gossip of the latest ball given by the Grand Duke and Duchess Vladimir. As far as Alexei knew, the Grand Duchess had not returned from abroad yet.

Alexei resolved to look up his elder brother to determine if all was well with them. “No, Minister, I don't believe Vladimir would be well pleased with the idea at all.” Alexei rose from his chair and gave the Minister a brief bow.

“I must be on my way, but I will be in touch to confirm the details. I suspect your familiarity both with the resolution and with the persons on whose shoulders the bulk of the work

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will fall will leave little for His Majesty and myself to do.” He smiled his engaging smile again and the Count, having risen with Alexei, returned one of his own, though it was lost in the steel-gray whiskers covering his cheeks and upper lip.

“Thank you, Highness. I look forward to our next visit with anticipation.”

“As do I.” Alexei donned his hat. “Good day, Sir.”

“Good day to you, Highness,” the minister replied.

Alexei stepped into his carriage, the image of his elder brother's face the day Nicholas was named Tsar and himself Crown-Regent foremost in his mind. He looked like he just bit into a rotten potato and it bit him back. His displeasure was understandable: as the elder brother, the regency should have gone to him. Based on the impressions Alexei received from the various ministers and officials with whom he had spoken since the appointment, the snub was not a personal affront but a political move. And Alexei was beginning to see to what ends this decision was made.

The carriage pulled into traffic as Alexei considered the possibilities before him. How much should he tell Nicholas? Should he tell the boy anything at all? Were some vague impressions enough to reach a conclusion? He did not know whether it was. Neither could he disregard the nagging tingle of intuition in his gut.

Chapter 10

Nicholas paced back and forth across the Green Room, hands clasped behind his back, his head down. He was agitated and confused. His tutor, Count Tolstoy, had broached the subject of the emancipation of the serfs. Tolstoy lectured about the effect the sudden lifting of the peasants' servitude had on the population of rural Russia. Though they had been bound to the land of their wealthy overlord, the serfs had a purpose: they worked the land and fed their families, knowing that each day would bring more of the same. Celebrations were truly causes for joy, as their lives consisted of so little happiness. When his grandfather freed the serfs from their bonds, many were dispossessed, no longer able simply to live the lives they had known for generations. They were landowners, responsible for their own lives and for the taxes that accompanied them. The Tsar's government instituted reforms that allowed former serfs to pay for the tracts of land on which they lived, but often the annual payment was larger than their incomes could afford.

They were confused: the Emancipation Manifesto, intended to liberate them, made their poverty more profound. And in the months that followed, chaos and violence marred the advances such an edict presaged. Believing their Little Father's true intent was being corrupted by the clerks and administrators, the people retaliated.

Count Tolstoy defended the chaos. "The freedom supposed to have been granted the serfs was nothing more than an ill-conceived and vicious attempt by the government to further enslave the peasants. By imposing its will, in an attempt to lighten its conscience for generations

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of oppression, the regime had ensured their coffers would grow fatter, and at a faster rate, while the misery of the people would increase.”

Having just allowed Alexei to reinstate the Executive Committee his grandfather had employed to formulate a constitution, this lecture alarmed Nicholas. “If my grandfather had not freed the serfs, Russia's progress toward industrialization would have halted. By emancipating them, which was the correct course for the future of the empire, he freed many workers to enlist their services in production. Much as the American President had known it was time to allow the African slaves to live as free men, to allow them the opportunity to better their lives, and the lives of their families, by providing them with opportunities that would not have been available to them otherwise, my grandfather knew it was time to allow the Russian people to experience the freedom to decide their own futures.”

“Yes,” the tutor admitted, “Russia has been in a medieval state of progress for far too long. I agree the time had come to allow the peasants the freedom of choice. The Tsar had the best of intentions, I'm certain, yet the bureaucracy in place to administer the reforms handed down to them did not. Their corruption allowed them to twist the words of the Tsar and give the people false hope about their future. He gave them wings then forbade them from flying.” He raised his arms, imitating a bird in flight. Nicholas smiled at the ludicrousness of the image.

“Russia is an ancient and complex state,” Tolstoy continued. “Inspired by Constantinople and the laws of the Holy Church, it has endured for centuries as a powerful force in the world. However, even the mightiest giant can be laid low with a single, well-aimed blow. That blow was the Emancipation Manifesto and the giant laid low by it was Russia.”

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Nicholas considered the comparison for a moment. “Do you believe that Russia, or, according to your analogy, the monarchy, is an evil, lumbering bully that needs to be humbled? To be toppled?”

Noting the disapproval evident in the young ruler's tone, Count Tolstoy quickly assessed his position before continuing. Had he gone too far, professing the virtues of dictating policy from below? Did the young Tsar believe he was advocating insurrection and revolution against the monarchy? “Majesty,” Tolstoy's tone became conciliatory, “I am simply stating that reform without regard for the consequences can be devastating. The ramifications of change to a society as mired in tradition as Russia can be dire. One must be certain the new way is superior to the old way, and is able to compensate quickly and efficiently for any shortcomings it may contain.”

The Count had gone pale. Beads of sweat formed on his brow and nose as he spoke. Nicholas could see that the man believed he overstepped his boundaries as tutor. His student was no ordinary pupil, after all. He was the Tsar. Despite the fact that he was a thirteen-year-old boy, Tsar Nicholas II Romanov held the power of life and death in his hands.

Tolstoy's words hit a nerve with the young Tsar, however. Since he was intent on implementing a reform which would, to continue Tolstoy's analogy further, dwarf the Emancipation Manifesto in scope and consequences for the common people of the empire, he needed to be certain allowing the masses a constitution, providing them with a voice in governing the empire and, by extension, curbing the authority the Tsar exercised over the empire's policies, was the proper course of action.

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Nicholas had been pacing for over an hour, replaying the scene over and over in his head. He was no closer to knowing anything for certain than he was an hour earlier. He simply wanted to go back to being Grand Duke Nicholas Alexandrovich, son of the Russian Bear, as he had heard soldiers refer to his father. He missed his father greatly, he realized. Following his return to St. Petersburg after summer maneuvers, he had been so consumed with matters of state and the grandiose displays of the military; he had not had time to think about the losses he suffered.

“Oh, *Batiushka*,” he sighed, stopping his pacing and claiming the nearest seat. He sank his chin into one hand while the other dangled limply at his side. “If only you were here now. You would know what to do.” Of that, he was fairly certain: his father always knew what needed to happen in any given situation. He was a man of the people, a worker, whose hands were always dirty with the soil of an honest day's work.

The image of his father's corpse flashed into his mind at that moment. The mangled corpse, barely recognizable as a human, had once been the man who had given him life . . . until a group of these self-same people he was duty-bound to protect, decided to kill him.

Nicholas shook his head, wishing he could confront the person responsible for the carnage so he could throw something at him. *Like a grenade*, he thought.

* * *

Grand Duke Alexei was disturbed as his carriage rolled through the wrought-iron gates of the Winter Palace. Disturbed both by the suspicions his visit to Minister Loris-Melikov had

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raised in his mind and by the fact that he could even have suspicions about another member of his family. His attempts to convince himself Vladimir would never involve himself in anything untoward only served to further agitate his mental state. Would Vladimir put his own ambitions above the needs of the empire? Was he jealous enough of Nicholas to plot against the monarchy? Alexei had not thought so . . . until now.

The carriage pulled up to the entrance of the Winter Palace and a coachman came out to open the door. Alexei stepped out, paused to stare up at the facade of the imposing palace, before proceeding into the structure proper through the multi-columned portico. He intended to see the young Tsar but not until later. He needed to be alone with his thoughts for a while, to collect himself, before engaging in affairs of state.

Setting off toward the throne rooms, Alexei sought respite in the Military Gallery. As a youth, he had studied tactics at university, and was an avid follower of the campaigns of the great generals in Russia's military history – Pyotr Bagration, Ivan Paskevich, Mikhail Miloradovich, and Matvei Platov – all distinguished men who performed admirably in the service of the Tsar to protect Russia from its enemies. Each of these men had fought in the greatest struggle the Russian Empire had ever faced and emerged victorious. They and Mother Russia together had defeated the Napoleon Bonaparte.

Now their portraits hung in the Military Gallery, a place of special honor within the hallowed halls of the Winter Palace. Each portrait was framed in simple yet elegant gold-embossed frames against burgundy walls. A slight overhang blocked enough of the sunlight filtering down from the skylight in the barrel-vaulted ceiling to protect the pictures, as well as to

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cast the portraits in diffused shadows. The effect was striking: it provided an air of gravitas to the stern visages in the paintings.

Alexei stopped in front of the portrait of his great-uncle, Emperor Alexander I. Grandson of Catherine the Great, he endured much hardship in his early days. Taken away from his father, Emperor Paul I, by his grandmother, he was utilized by each as a political tool in their battle for power. He learned, therefore, how to manipulate people at an early age. Despite his contradictory character, he made great strides in legal and social reform during his reign. He found success as a military strategist, also, adding Finland and a portion of Poland to the empire.

He knew the trouble caused when family members battle for position, Alexei thought. Perhaps he can provide some insight into how to deal with my dear brother.

The idea shocked him. Not until this moment had Alexei realized that he had already decided his brother was involved in something untoward against the crown, against Nicholas specifically. *And perhaps against me, as well*, he thought. More than anything, the idea that his own brother could harbor ill-will toward him unsettled Alexei. Granted, they had never been particularly close but they were still brothers, members of the Royal Family and sons of the late Tsar. That had to count for something, did it not?

Crown-Regent Alexei hoped so.

He spent another half-hour examining the portrait, searching for answers, before setting off in search of Nicholas. There were serious issues to be discussed and the longer he waited, the more difficult the discussion would be.

Chapter 11

Grand Duke Vladimir stepped into the carriage waiting for him outside the Mariinsky Theater. Rehearsals for Anton Rubinstein's opera *The Demon*, based on Mikhail Lermontov's poem, had just concluded. Through most of the day, Vladimir had sat and patiently listened the singers repeat their verses over and over, making certain the pitch and tone and tempo of every word, every line was perfect. Impressed by the level of dedication evident in this latest troupe, Vladimir basked in the beauty of the production. Though the sets had not been placed for this rehearsal, he could see the finished production in his mind. He anticipated a grand opening to the opera, a revival of a much-maligned work that was just coming back into fashion after being banned for two decades.

His driver sat impassive in his seat, as Vladimir stepped into the coach. The coachman closed the door behind him, and took a step back as the driver lashed the horses. With a slight jerk, the carriage began to move forward along the Teatralnaya. Vladimir sat back on the cushioned bench to enjoy the ride home.

Since he began talking to Prince Meshchersky, he had found little time to enjoy moments of calm. His mind was ever in turmoil, revisiting his discussions with the minor noble. Four meetings with the man over the course of ten months had produced surprising results in seeking out the revolutionary woman, Vera Figner. He gave Prince Meshchersky permission to send someone to talk to Miss Hellman, though Vladimir secretly hoped the woman had died while in

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the katorga. The prospect of their covert operations being surreptitiously discovered was unpleasant to say the least.

Vladimir felt trapped. A rash, drunken decision, followed by an ill-conceived notion of his own importance led him to a situation where he could not back down, nor would it be wise to move forward. If he backed down, he left himself open to scorn from the young Prince. He could not allow that to happen. Should the need arise for him to assume the throne – accident or illness, like the one that claimed the life of his elder brother, the true heir to Vladimir's way of thinking – he would begin from a low position, possibly subject to blackmail or scandal. Should he continue forward with his plans, he could find himself on the throne, and subject to the same predicament that would harrow him if he backed down, but beginning from a position of power.

Or, if my plans are discovered, I shall find myself exiled or executed. There really was no upside, as far as he could tell.

Vladimir heaved a sigh of resignation. *Best to see it through and hope for a satisfactory conclusion. I will deal with extortion if the need arises,* he decided. But the decision sat in his belly like a raw lump of potato.

The carriage passed over a rut in the road and bucked wildly, tossing Vladimir into the air and banging his head against the ceiling. “Watch yourself, driver. Are you trying to kill me?”

“Apologies, sir.” The driver, Uly Maninov, sounded genuinely contrite. He had noticed the increasing sourness of his employer's moods of late and feared a reprimand. He needed this job to support his family – his wife Elena and their three daughters.

“The thaws have left the roads in bad shape.”

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“Just drive more carefully, if you please,” Vladimir growled, knowing the condition of the road was not Maninov's fault. Still, he was perturbed, and his head was beginning to ache from the impact with the wooden ceiling: he needed to lash out at someone. Why not the driver? “Just get me home, fool.”

Maninov gulped at being addressed in such a manner. Fearing for his position, he replied in as determined a voice as possible, “Yes, Highness.”

For the remainder of the journey, Maninov yelled curses at pedestrians and conveyances alike that passed too closely in front of the carriage, intent on providing the most comfortable ride possible to his employer.

As the carriage approached the Vladimir Palace, both Maninov and the Grand Duke were irascible – the driver more so than the Grand Duke. He was certain he would lose his job after this and the prospect scared him; he did not want to work in a factory. He heard tales of the conditions in those places. Filthy, dangerous, full of disease and misery. He would never allow his family to suffer such despair.

Turning his options over in his mind, he was surprised when the carriage rocked from the weight of the Grand Duke's exit. He shook off the nightmarish images in his mind and remembered he still had a job to perform.

Vladimir felt he had treated Maninov too harshly under the circumstances and decided to offer an appeasement. “I will be breakfasting with my brother and nephew tomorrow morning, so be ready early, driver.”

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“Yes, Highness.” Maninov nearly fell out of his seat. He would not have to find another position after all. Not yet, at least. But that could change at any moment. The death of the Tsar and his heir last year proved that life was anything but certain.

Maninov whipped the reins, directing the horses toward the stables.

As Vladimir entered the palace, he shed his coat and hat, passing them to a servant stationed near the entrance. His beloved Miechen had returned from Paris with their children the previous week and was waiting for him. Vladimir kissed her affectionately on the cheek, rubbing her swollen belly.

“How are you, wife?” he offered her a wan smile.

“I am well, husband. Thank you.”

“Where are the boys?” he asked, looking around, his eyes and ears peeled for signs of his three sons.

“They are upstairs, with Katya.”

Vladimir nodded, knowingly. Katya, the children's nanny, was a strong-willed woman of the Caucasus who dominated the lives of his children as if she were their mother. Neither Vladimir nor Grand Duchess Maria minded, however: before Maria learned she was pregnant with their fifth child, their social lives kept them busy most days. During the evenings, except when the theater was premiering a new opera or ballet, the family was together, sharing meals and reading to each other in the Persian Room. The children seemed to enjoy Vladimir's storytelling: he assumed the air of each character as he read their parts.

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“You have a visitor,” Maria told him, indicating the study where Vladimir held meetings with important people.

Vladimir's stomach lurched as if it meant to break free of his body. “The Prince?” he asked.

Maria nodded.

“Very well. I will speak with him.” He started toward the study until Maria stopped him.

“Husband, how much longer will we enjoy the pleasure of the Prince's company?” Her eyebrows knitted, creasing her forehead into a series of parallel wrinkles.

Vladimir understood what she was asking, and did not have a definitive answer for her. “As long as he desires to remain,” he said as he moved toward the study.

Prince Meshchersky sat in his customary spot on the sofa, a snifter of brandy in his hand. “Welcome home, Highness,” he greeted the Grand Duke. “How is the opera progressing?”

“Well, thank you. All is proceeding apace. How is your father?” Vladimir made his way over to the buffet, reaching for the decanter of wine that seemed to be his constant companion of late.

“Well, thank you. I shall tell him you asked about him. He will be pleased.”

Taking a seat on the sofa opposite the Prince, Vladimir asked, “Has there been a development then?”

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His bluntness caught the Prince off guard. “Yes. My source has spoken to Miss Hellman at the Nerchinsk katorga. Dreadful place, he tells me, by the way. No place to raise a child.”

Pausing to take a drink, the Prince watched the amber liquid ripple as he sipped it.

“What a shame,” Vladimir replied. “And what did your man discover about Ms. Figner?”

“She apparently has family in the Tetyushy area. She acted as assistant to a physician in Samara after attending the University of Zurich. Her mother recently returned from Switzerland with her two sisters, and now resides in Kazan.” The Prince gulped his brandy down. “She also has a sister, Lydia, who lives in Odessa. She was arrested in Moscow for revolutionary activities and released shortly after for lack of evidence.”

“Sounds like a very interesting family.”

“Quite,” the Prince agreed.

Contacts with foreign influences, schooling abroad in the sciences, ties to executed revolutionaries – the perfect background for an assassin, Vladimir thought. He finished his drink and set the glass on the sideboard with more force than he had intended. “Tell your man to go to Kazan and find Ms. Figner. Bring her to St. Petersburg.” Vladimir paused, considering his options.

“And bring her sister along, as well.”

“Thy will be done, Highness,” the Prince replied, regaining his feet.

Prince Meshchersky headed toward the door but Grand Duke Vladimir stopped him.

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“And, Vladimir Alexandrovich,” the Prince turned back to face the Grand Duke, “remind your man to be as discreet as possible. The last thing we want is undue attention.”

“Don't worry. My man is a professional. He knows his business.”

“I hope so . . . for both our sakes.”

Prince Meshchersky exited the study via the main entrance, closing the double doors behind him. Vladimir remained in the room for a few moments, staring blankly at the door, hoping the decision to have those women brought to the capitol was the correct one. He had faith in Prince Meshchersky's discretion: he faced the risks as Vladimir did.

* * *

Maninov was waiting with the carriage as Grand Duke Vladimir emerged from his residence the following morning. The coachman held the door for his employer, closing it as he gained his seat. Three taps on the coach's side told Maninov that his cargo was secure. He whipped the reins against the horses' flanks to get them moving.

Maninov had not slept well the previous night for fear of oversleeping and incurring the Grand Duke's wrath. He lay in bed listening to the soft sounds of his wife and children sleeping soundly around him instead. He fell asleep sometime after midnight but awoke with a start an hour later. He dozed for a few minutes before drifting off to sleep again, this time waking up just before dawn. He rose quietly and prepared the samovar for a cup of tea to wake him up.

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When he left, his wife was just beginning to stir, feeling the absence of his warm body beside her.

Despite the import of performing well this day, Maninov felt himself becoming drowsy, the soothing sway of the carriage lulling him toward sleep. Shaking his head, he fought to stay awake long enough to deliver the Grand Duke safely to his destination, and then perhaps he could catch a quick nap while he waited for his next orders.

Vladimir was in a fine mood this morning. He had fought with himself and his decision to have the sisters brought to the capitol. Was he flirting with disaster by allowing them to return? He had no way of knowing. Since he had committed himself to this course, he decided he needed to make his peace with it. Any doubts he harbored were dispelled this morning when, as he was preparing to leave, Miechen asked him, “Why do you trust in Prince Meshchersky to keep this plan of yours in confidence? He was a companion of your brother, who you admit, never held much love for you. How can you be certain he will not inform on you to the authorities or to Alexei even?”

Vladimir, having considered this question most of the night, simply answered, “I do not. I do know that it doesn't matter, though.”

“How can you say that?” Miechen demanded. “Everything is at stake if you fail. We stand to lose everything.”

“And if I am successful, we stand to gain everything,” he retorted. “I will not settle for less, wife.” He caressed her cheek gently, looking into her deep amber eyes. In his gaze, she saw a serenity that convinced her that he was correct in his conviction. As the next eldest son, he

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should have been made Tsar instead of that stripling who would no doubt bring the empire to ruin.

“I understand, husband.” Marie bowed her head so Vladimir would not see the tears glistening in her eyes. “You must do this for your honor's sake and for the sake of your legacy.” She covered his hand with her own small hand, pressing it tighter against her cheek, savoring the warm and strength she felt there.

Vladimir, after another moment, removed his hand, lifted her face toward him, and kissed her before sweeping out of the palace to his carriage.

Passing through the iron gates of the Winter Palace, Vladimir smiled, remembering his conversation with his wife. *Yes, I deserve this. And I will sit the throne before Nicholas is crowned.*

The carriage came to a halt before the sprawling Rococo edifice and Vladimir stepped out, noting that nobody was waiting to greet him. It was of no moment, he decided. *Soon enough, such trivialities will be a long-forgotten memory, just like my nephew.*

Chapter 12

October, 1881

“His highness, Grand Duke Vladimir,” a servant announced as the Grand Duke entered the dining hall.

“Vladimir,” Alexei greeted his elder brother, rising to meet him. The men embraced, kissing each other on each cheek.

“Come. Partake of our feast.” Alexei said making a sweeping gesture at the table.

“Thank you,” Vladimir replied, taking a seat opposite the Tsarevna Maria, to the left of Nicholas.

“Welcome, Uncle Vladimir. We haven't seen much of you lately. Are you that busy at the theater?” Nicholas took a sip of tea as he waited for an answer.

Vladimir, instead of responding right away, looked around the table at his late brother's family: his pretty young widow and their children, each of which resembled either their father or their mother: there was no middle ground.

Maria smiled at her brother-in-law. “Hello, Vladimir. Good to see you. How are Miechen and the children?” Maria was none too fond of the Grand Duchess Vladimir, though for civility's sake, she would pretend. She had always felt Marie was a haughty Prussian bitch. She was at least partly responsible for the tensions that had existed between Alexander and Vladimir.

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“They are well, thank you. Miechen sends greetings. And little Elena commands her attention at all hours. Katya is a great help but the child needs her mother, it seems.”

Maria nodded, knowing full well how children changed a person's lifestyle. She glanced over at Michael to her right. For a change, he was sitting quietly in his chair.

Vladimir returned his attention to his nephew and Tsar. “The theater is quite demanding of my time, Nicholas. This latest production is quite involved, requiring long hours of rehearsals and detailed costuming. Rehearsals for a single role often take an entire day,” Vladimir chuckled.

Alexei raised an eyebrow, finding his reaction intriguing. He feigned interest for the sake of propriety, though. “It must be enormously tiring. How are you managing to stay on schedule?”

“I have no doubt it will premier as planned,” Vladimir nodded as he spoke. “No need to be concerned on that account. As for my schedule, I manage just fine.”

Alexei nodded sagely, empathizing with the sentiment. *We must all do what we can to get by.*

A short period of silence ensued, during which the breakfast was brought in: kasha, warm bread, fresh from the oven, butter and jam, and a samovar of hot water for more tea.

Vladimir scanned the offerings and forced himself to look pleased. Such austere dining was not in his nature though he knew his brother preferred to live a simpler lifestyle.

Nicholas served himself a bowl of kasha and a piece of black bread. He tore into the bread as though he had not eaten in days, and Alexei, wanting to talk rather than eat, sipped his

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tea. For propriety's sake, he selected a piece of black bread and smeared butter sparingly across its surface.

Vladimir, though accustomed to finer fare, ate his kasha as if he had eaten it every morning of his life. Selecting a piece of bread and ladling a generous helping of cherry preserves onto it, he consumed half the plank in one bite.

Alexei chose that moment to address Vladimir. "I asked you to breakfast because I wanted to talk to you about something of great importance."

Vladimir, his mouth full, turned to face his brother, an inquiring and suspicious expression on his face.

"Nicholas will be crowned Tsar soon: the period of mourning is nearing its end." A flash of something unreadable passed before Vladimir's eyes. Alexei noted it and continued. "And, though he is only thirteen, he will need an Empress to sit beside him."

"Excuse me?" Nicholas blurted from the head of the table.

"What?" the Tsarevna asked at virtually the same instant.

"As you know, Vladimir, Maria," he looked from the first to the latter, "Russian custom dictates that a Tsar must be married at the time of his coronation. Under the circumstances, however, I believe it will be sufficient to satisfy tradition if the young Tsar is betrothed."

Vladimir, attempting to swallow the bread that had become a solid lump in his throat, nodded weakly. He reached for his tea and gulped down the entire glass, hoping to force the bread down. Once he was able to speak, he agreed with the Crown-Regent. "I believe so. Since

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he is unable to rule alone until age eighteen, he should not be forced to marry until then either. A long engagement is a perfectly suitable situation under these circumstances.”

“To that end,” Alexei continued, “I have compiled a short list of candidates. “Princess Margaret of Prussia is an obvious choice. Such a marriage would further strengthen ties with the Prussians and your wife's family.” Vladimir nodded but said nothing. “There is also Princess Helene of Orleans. Her older sister Amelie, though three years Nicholas' senior, is a possible candidate as well. A marriage with the French Comte would serve to cement relations with France but alienate England. And, there is Alix of Hesse-Darmstadt, granddaughter of Queen Victoria. Though German-born, she is more British than German.”

“Victoria is a staunch Protestant, and her beliefs will be firmly instilled in her granddaughter also,” Vladimir chimed in.

“Yes, there's that. The Comte and his wife are devout Catholics. That leaves Margaret as our best option.

“To that end, I would like you to speak to your wife,” Alexei said, holding his brother's gaze, hoping to read his reaction. Vladimir nodded noncommittally then finished his bread, lowering his eyes.

This in itself was telling as far as Alexei was concerned. His brother had always been a confident man, full of opinions and vociferous about them. Now he was practically cowed. *He can't be that hungry*, Alexei thought. Sipping his tea, he watched his brother devour his kasha in increasingly larger bites. To Alexei, Vladimir had the look of a condemned man eating his last meal before being led to the gallows.

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His observations were disrupted when Nicholas spoke up. “Uncle Alexei, why do I have to get married? Can’t I wait until I am Tsar first, and then find a bride?”

“Unfortunately, Majesty,” Alexei began, placing his tea cup carefully into its saucer on the table, “custom dictates you must have a prospective wife by the time you ascend the throne. The theory is that a Tsar must be married so that he can produce heirs. Should anything happen to him . . .,” he paused, almost afraid to say the next words that came to mind. “Just as your father, our brother,” he indicated Vladimir and himself, “died before he could become Tsar, the Emperor must produce heirs to succeed him should any tragedy befall him.”

At the mention of his father, Nicholas lowered his head as a sign of reverence for his dead father’s memory. Tsarevna Maria also lowered her head; the pain from her husband's passing still very fresh in her mind.

When Nicholas raised his head, he looked first to Alexei then to Vladimir and back to Alexei. “I understand. And it wouldn’t be an immediate marriage, as I’m too young. There’d still be time for me to learn to rule more effectively. For the empire,” he nodded, accepting the necessity of the situation, “I will pledge myself to a future Empress.”

“You show more wisdom than your years warrant, Majesty,” Alexei said, genuine respect in his pale eyes. “We still have time before the coronation. I’d like to send enquiries to the Comte de Orleans, Queen Victoria, and to Kaiser Wilhelm. Is Ambassador Paléologue still in the capitol?”

“I believe so,” Vladimir answered. Alexei noted he looked decidedly uncomfortable.

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“Are you feeling all right, brother? Does the food not agree with your sophisticated palate?” Alexei asked, mocking his brother’s love for haute cuisine.

Vladimir shot Alexei a glance of purest venom. “I’m fine. I just ate too quickly. The bread is disagreeing with me.”

Alexei nodded knowingly. “Sorry to hear that. Would you like me to send for your carriage?”

“No, I’m fine. Please, continue.” Vladimir held his cup up to have it refilled. Alexei noticed his hand shook slightly.

This line of discussion was decidedly uncomfortable for Vladimir. Given the plans he had set in motion, discussing the future bride of the Tsar whom he was plotting to assassinate seemed beyond his ability to pretend. The implications of the alliances that would result from any betrothal of Nicholas and a daughter of a European noble house would greatly benefit Russian interests globally. Should that betrothal be suddenly severed by such a traumatic event as another assassination, the empire would find itself in a poor position to negotiate further alliances. The European powers would be afraid to betroth their daughters and sons to Imperial children for fear of violence.

Also, Alexei’s constant sideways glances were beginning to disconcert him. Did he suspect something was amiss? Had Meshchersky informed on him already? And why were Sergei and Paul not present at this meeting? As sons of the late Tsar, they should have been in attendance at such an important meeting.

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“Alexei, why are Sergei and Paul not here to discuss this issue?” Vladimir asked suddenly.

“Sergei is abroad, on training maneuvers and Paul has returned to Greece. Besides, Sergei couldn’t care less who Nicholas marries, and Paul will approve whatever decision we make here.”

“I see,” Vladimir said, unconvinced. “Very well then. If there is nothing more, I will take my leave. I have to attend the preparations at the theater.”

“That’s all. Do be sure and speak to your wife about dear Margaret, though, would you? If she believes it to be a bad match, we’ll forgo contacting the Kaiser and concentrate on the other candidates.”

“I will speak to her, Alexei.” Vladimir sounded nonplussed as he rose from the table. Alexei rose with him, intent on seeing him to the door. “Majesty. Tsarevna.” He acknowledged his relations with a nodded farewell. “A pleasure. I hope we can do this again soon.” He offered a pained smile.

“Absolutely, Uncle.” Nicholas rose and approached his uncle, hugging him and kissing him on both cheeks. “Perhaps next time you could bring the family.”

“Thank you, Majesty.” He bowed and turned to leave with Alexei, who came to stand beside him as Nicholas said his good-byes, matching him stride for stride.

As they exited the dining hall, Alexei walked with his hands clasped behind his back. “We’re living in exciting times, brother. The future is just around the corner and Russia is

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making great strides to meet it. I am pleased you're here to meet those challenges with me."

Alexei was sincere, despite his misgivings about his brother's loyalty.

"I can see much of father in you. I believe you can be of great service to the empire during these difficult times of transition. And I would be grateful if I could rely on your counsel from time to time."

This unexpected confidence made Vladimir's stomach flip. He did his best to keep his reaction from Sergei, though. He hated the deception, the subterfuge of this conspiracy business. He was not of a suitable temperament for intrigue, he decided.

Alexei stopped as they approached the outer doors. Vladimir stopped as well, turning to say his good-byes to his brother. Alexei noted how pale he looked. "You look terrible. You should go home and lay down; the theater can wait until you're feeling better."

"I'll be fine; I just need a brisk walk and some fresh air." He offered Alexei a wan smile as he donned his hat and coat. "Thank you for the confidence, brother. I appreciate it."

"We are brothers, aren't we? Romanovs." Alexei smiled. "We should be working toward a common goal." Alexei hugged Vladimir tightly, kissing him. "Go now, take care of yourself."

"I will. Good-bye."

Vladimir hustled through the double doors and into his waiting carriage, ordering his driver to depart before the door was secured. He felt perspiration crawling across his upper lip, under his mustache, and on his nose. This he wiped away with a handkerchief he extracted from a hidden pocket.

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I have to contact Meshchersky. I must stop this madness!

“Faster, driver!” he admonished Maninov.

“Yes, Highness.” Maninov lashed the horses savagely, coaxing as much speed out of them as the traffic allowed.

* * *

Alexei returned to the dining hall and resumed his seat. Nicholas noticed his uncle looked strained, as if something was bothering him. “Is Vladimir all right?”

“Well enough,” Alexei replied. “I believe his gourmet lifestyle has ruined his palate for ordinary food. He’ll recover, though.” He flashed a charming smile at Nicholas and the ridges in the boy's forehead smoothed.

“Good.” The Tsar sipped his tea, reassured by his uncle's words.

Alexei, however, was anything but reassured. If anything, he was more confused than before. What could Vladimir be planning? Based on his reactions to this morning's meeting, he was certain it involved Nicholas; his cold formality speaks volumes.

Alexei heaved an inner sigh. *A member of the Imperial Family under suspicion for treason?* It was a black day for the monarchy.

He thanked God his father was not alive to see what had become of his family.

Rising from his chair, Alexei excused himself, explaining that he wished to contact Ambassador Paléologue regarding Nicholas’ possible future bride.

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Nicholas' face fell at the mention of the betrothal. "Must you, Uncle?"

Alexei noted how young the Tsar's voice seemed. At times he had to remind himself that Nicholas was a mere boy of thirteen years, despite his august title. There was still much of the world the young man did not know. With sympathy, Alexei replied, "Yes, Nicky, I must."

Nicholas made no effort to conceal his disappointment at the turn of events. He had gone from being a carefree boy hoping to live a life of martial simplicity, to being Tsar of all the Russias faced with the daunting task of finding a future Empress in the relative blink of an eye. "All right."

Alexei smiled, leaning closer to speak confidentially with his nephew. "If it's any consolation, I'll have to marry, too."

Nicholas looked up, his eyes wide and disbelieving. "Really?"

"Unfortunately, yes. It seems that, as Crown-Regent, I must also be married in the event I need assume the throne."

Nicholas blanched. "In case anything happens to me, you mean?"

Maria looked from her son to her brother-in-law, horror stretching her features into a grim mask. "Is Nicholas in danger, Alexei?"

"As Tsar, he is always in danger, Maria," was his grim reply. "But I know of no immediate danger to the Tsar. This is merely a precaution."

Neither Maria nor Nicholas appeared convinced but Alexei was unwilling to divulge any further information at this point. Instead, he bowed to his sovereign and the boy's mother then left the room. His intention was to go straight to the Ministry building where he would speak to

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Inspector Plehve. He needed the Inspector to assign a contingent of the Okhrana to conduct surveillance his elder brother, Grand Duke Vladimir.

Chapter 13

November, 1881

Winter arrived with a fury, blanketing the capitol and most of Trans-Siberian Russia with a dense covering of snow. The temperatures dropped well into the lower range of tolerance yet the people seemed to take it all in stride. This was Mother Russia in all her splendor.

Alexei noted the troikas dashing over the rutted, snow-covered streets, and was pleased with the direction Russia was taking. Lives were being lived, people were going about their business as usual and the country, for the time being was stable. There had been no violence since the deaths of his father and brother, and the Executive Committee Count Loris-Melikov had convened to investigate the idea of granting a constitution had finalized its findings.

Alexei had spoken with the Minister and received assurances implementing a constitution could be affected with a minimum of difficulty. Discussions with Ambassador Paléologue, concerning the marriage proposal to one or the other of the Comte d'Orleans' daughters, proved fruitless. The Ambassador, though confident that an arrangement could be reached, was unable to convince the Comte d'Orleans that a marriage between Tsar Nicholas II and her Highness Princess Helene d'Orleans would benefit both countries. The Comte refused to allow Helene to be betrothed to the young Tsar as she would have to abandon their beloved Catholic Church. "That," he explained, "would be inexcusable."

As expected, Vladimir's discussions with the Grand Duchess produced nothing of consequence. Letters to Her Majesty, Queen Victoria received less than an enthusiastic

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response, though she believed something could be arranged for Alexei to speak with Prince Ernst Augustus, the Duke of Cumberland and Teviotdale. His sister, Princess Marie of Hanover, as a great-granddaughter of King George III, was a suitable match for the Grand Duke. The Duke was pleased to attach his family to the Russian monarchy, though he distrusted its ties to Prussia. Alexei was pleased with the arrangement, also: the marriage would tie Russia more closely to the United Kingdom.

Having secured his betrothal, Alexei devoted himself to securing an Empress for his beloved Russia. Further assurances that Helene would not be forced to convert to Orthodoxy did nothing to change the Comte d'Orleans' mind concerning his daughter. His efforts, however, caused rumors to circulate throughout Europe that the young Tsar was seeking a bride. To Alexei's surprise, a messenger arrived in St. Petersburg bearing a letter from Emperor Franz Josef of Austria, offering his daughter, Marie Valerie, as bride to Nicholas. She was her mother the Empress' favorite. She was the youngest, having been born ten years after their next youngest child, Crown Prince Rudolf, and the Empress had raised the girl herself. She expected nothing less than for her daughter to marry an Emperor, naturally. The Empress jumped at the opportunity Nicholas presented for her daughter, as well as for Austria.

Arrangements were made for both brides and their families to St. Petersburg in late April to allow the couples to become acquainted with each other before the double ceremony was performed wedding Grand Duke Alexei to Princess Marie, and official betrothing Nicholas II and the Archduchess Marie Valerie of Austria, the future Empress of Russia.

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All appeared to be in readiness for the upcoming coronation. Yet Alexei felt a growing sense of unease about the event. Supposed to be a celebration of the pride of the Russian people, the event would mark a change in the empire. Following the coronation, Nicholas would welcome the masses of his subjects to distribute souvenirs, mementos of the beginning of a new era. His first official act as Tsar would be to announce the granting of a constitution to the people of Russia, for which, Alexei honestly believed, Nicholas would be beloved and revered as one of Russia's greatest Tsars, the Tsar who would bring the empire out of its medieval backwardness and into the modern era.

The year 1882 was fast-approaching. The twentieth century was just around the corner. Russia could no longer afford to live in its precious bubble. The vast land with its largely untapped resources, needed to step forward as a dominant world power. Alexei knew that. Timber, oil, grain, ore, salt. These were all resourced through which the empire could generate revenue to modernize its industries, its military and improve the quality of life for its peasants.

This vision of a powerful – and peaceful – modern Russian Empire was the goal toward which Alexei strived.

The only question that remained for Alexei was what to do with Grand Duke Vladimir. Inspector Plehve's surveillance of his brother had been less than revealing. “Aside from his usual trips to the theater and frequent nights in the eye of St. Petersburg's high society, His Highness' life seems ordinary,” the Inspector explained to Alexei as the men conversed in the Inspector's office earlier. “There was nothing exceptional that would suggest the Grand Duke is involved in any subversive activities. The only notable difference in his routine, according to the

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police officers keeping track of his whereabouts was the frequent visitation of a certain Prince Vladimir Meshchersky to the Grand Duke's home.

Inspector Plehve removed a sheaf of paper from his coat pocket and flipped through several pages until he found to the appropriate information. “According to my officer's report, Prince Meshchersky arrived at the palace in the late afternoon via private carriage, and judging by the presence of the Grand Duchess at the front doors upon his arrival, he appears to have been expected. The Prince remained on the premises for an hour before returning to his coach, which had remained parked in front of the palace during his visit. An hour and a half later, Grand Duke Vladimir arrived via coach and was met by the grand Duchess at the door. Approximately forty-five minutes later, Prince Meshchersky returned, entered the palace and remained within for half an hour before leaving once again.

“Their Highnesses remained at home the remainder of the night.” The Inspector closed the pad and returned it to his pocket.

Alexei, upon hearing of this odd behavior, immediately thought that Vladimir's odd behavior could be explained away by the possibility of an affair between Grand Duchess Maria and Prince Meshchersky. As unlikely as it seemed, it was not impossible. The more he thought about it the less sense it seemed to make, though. Prince Meshchersky was rumored, with evidence, to be a homosexual or, according to sympathetic sources, at least bisexual, and known to associate with the most eligible bachelors and bachelorettes of St. Petersburg society – men and women renowned for their loose morals and questionable affiliations. Certainly an affair with the dowdy and irascible Grand Duchess would not appeal to the young noble.

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Unless he was hoping to garner some sort of advantage from it, Alexei thought. That must be it. The Prince hopes to raise his fortunes by associating with Vladimir. To what end, though?

Instead of answers, Alexei only uncovered more questions. “Have your men begin surveillance on Prince Meshchersky? I want to know where he’s going between visits to the palace. With what sort of people he’s associating. What establishments he frequents.

“And continue to observe my brother. Despite his seemingly innocuous behavior, I can’t shake the feeling that something’s not right.”

Alexei stood. “Thank you, Inspector. I would like regular updates on this case and immediate notification if anything significant should be detected.”

“Understood, Your Highness.” Plehve bowed.

Alexei turned to leave but paused. “I pray to God this is simply an affair.”

Plehve directed a quizzical expression at the Crown-Regent. “Highness?”

“Nothing,” he smiled. “Good day, Inspector.”

“And to you, Highness.”

* * *

Vladimir sat on the sofa with his face buried in his hands. Miechen sat next to him, hands flat against the tops of her legs, an expression of stern resolve etched across her face.

“This is madness, Miechen. Madness.” Vladimir’s voice was muffled. “There is little or no

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hope of success. And if we're found out, we face exile. Or worse. You do realize that?" He looked to his wife as he asked.

The Grand Duchess' face retained its stony mask. "I do," she replied in a cold tone. "I also know I would rather face exile in Siberia than have to live here, under that stripling's rule. He will make a hash of the empire, and Alexei will be right beside him, helping tear it down."

Vladimir sat up, his face ashen. "We could always leave, emigrate to France or Germany. We don't have to do this."

"No," she shook her head. "I will not abandon Russia in her hour of need." Miechen turned her severe countenance on Vladimir. "And neither should you. *You* should be Tsar. *You* should be leading the country through this troubled time. *You*, not son pampered boy."

The prospect of living abroad, as repugnant as it was to Miechen, was equally so for him. As much as he enjoyed French cuisine and entertainment, he loved Russia: its people, its heritage. He did not wish to live anywhere else. And he was a Grand Duke of the noble House of Holstein-Gottorp-Romanov, the ruling family in Russia for nearly three centuries.

"Very well," he decided. "We've set on this course and we'll see it through to its completion. And if God is on our side, we shall be victorious." Vladimir stood suddenly. "I must contact Prince Meshchersky and inform him of our decision."

Miechen nodded but said nothing.

"And may God have mercy on us," Vladimir mumbled as he left the room.

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Prince Meshchersky was waiting for him at the base of the main staircase. Leaning nonchalantly against the statues of cherubs in flight his wife had insisted belonged at the base of the stairs, the Prince had one arm draped around the shoulders of the top cherub, a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. "Good afternoon, Highness." He bowed to the Grand Duke. "How are you today?"

"Determined, Vladimir Petrovich. Determined to see events through to their ordained conclusion." Vladimir clasped the Prince's shoulders and kissed him on each cheek.

"Come. Let us retire to the study for a drink, shall we?"

"If you insist." Prince Meshchersky agreed with a sly grin.

Vladimir led the way, opening the double doors to his sanctum. His guest was dispensing himself a healthy portion of brandy into a crystal goblet when Vladimir turned.

"Shall I pour you one as well, Highness? Or would you prefer your usual aperitif?"

"I would, as a matter of fact, prefer something stronger than wine this evening."

Vladimir sat down at one end of the sofa while the Prince poured a second goblet of the amber liquid. He handed this to Vladimir.

"Thank you, good sir," Vladimir said, raising his glass.

"My pleasure, Highness." The Prince bowed then took his customary seat at the opposite end of the sofa.

"Am I to assume my presence here," he indicated the portraits and books gracing the walls around them, "means our plans are set in motion once again?"

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“You assume correctly, Vladimir Petrovich. They are indeed set in motion again.”

Vladimir sipped from his glass. “I do apologize for my behavior of late. I was experiencing a moral crisis of sorts. I have since resolved said crisis, and am prepared to do what is necessary to ensure a satisfactory outcome.”

“Satisfactory for whom?” Prince Meshchersky asked. “For us or for them?”

Vladimir took another drink, studying the Prince over the rim of his glass. When he spoke, his voice had a hard edge to it. “For whomever God has deemed to be the right and proper ruler of Russia.”

The answer surprised the Prince. He sat, glass suspended a few inches from his lips, his eyes wide and questioning. “God willing, that will be you.”

“God willing.” Vladimir echoed.

“I have a bit of good news to that end,” the Prince said. “My informants have located Miss Figner.”

“That is good news,” Vladimir replied. “Where, pray tell, has she been keeping herself?”

“In Kazan. She has taken the name Irina Volkovod, and has been working as a medic in the villages near in the area.”

“And her sister? Have they found her, as well?” Vladimir interest was piqued.

“Yes. She’s in Odessa, also working as a medic for the peasants in the surrounding villages.”

“Very good,” Vladimir said, finishing his drink. He set the glass aside and began rubbing his hands together as if to warm them. Prince Meshchersky would no doubt fulfill his end of the

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bargain by bringing these women to the capitol. From there, it would be just a matter of putting them in touch with their *narodnik* friends and allowing them to make the necessary preparations. Vladimir would impart information about the security measures for the coronation ceremony to the relevant people, who would then pass it along – through channels that could not be traced back to him – to the insurgents. Following a satisfactory conclusion to their mission, the insurgents would be promptly killed “while attempting to escape”. And Vladimir, as eldest surviving son of the late Tsar Alexander II, would be free to step in as the next monarch of the Russian Empire.

“Vladimir Petrovich, send your men to retrieve “Miss Volkovod” and her sister. Bring them to St. Petersburg and keep them under wraps until we need them. They shouldn't be seen until the appropriate time.”

“Yes, Highness.” Prince Meshchersky set his empty glass on the sideboard, and bowed to the Grand Duke. As he turned to leave, a thought occurred to him. “Highness, might I enquire what posting I can expect to receive for my part in this coup, should it be successful?”

Vladimir knew this question was coming eventually and was prepared for it. “I was thinking you would make an excellent Minister of Finance. What do you think?”

Prince Meshchersky's smile split his face wide and lit up his eyes. “I think you are correct, of course, Highness. I trust your judgment completely in this matter.”

“Good day, Highness.”

“Good day, Vladimir Petrovich. Go with God,” Vladimir replied.

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As the Prince left the study, Vladimir sat back against the cushions of the sofa. He wondered how wise it was to allow Prince Meshchersky to hold a high position within his cabinet. Would he serve faithfully, relishing in the glory of the work he would do for the empire and knowing he had played a vital part in allowing it to flourish under a stern but fair monarch? Or would he utilize his participation in the coup as a means to advance within the government at Vladimir's expense? Unfortunately, he had no way of knowing. He did know, however, he could not afford to risk offending the nobleman just yet. *Should it become necessary after the fact, I can deal with Prince Meshchersky*, he decided. *But by then will it be too late?*

Vladimir gazed out the window of the study at the overcast sky, wishing for a sign from God.

Chapter 14

Alexei was seated with Nicholas in the Green Parlor when a servant entered to announce the arrival of Inspector Plehve. Alexei shot an enquiring glance at the young Tsar but Nicholas was as surprised as Alexei at the Inspector's sudden appearance. The boy's face showed concern at this unexpected disruption.

Since the discussion about the necessity of the Tsar to be married, Nicholas had constantly worried about whether his life was in danger. Despite what Alexei said about it being just a precaution, Nicholas did not believe his regent would have made such an issue of the subject if he did not have reason to believe there was a danger. He may be young, but Nicholas was far from stupid. He chose not to question Alexei about it, preferring to see how the situation developed.

The possibility of a threat to his life kept Nicholas on edge, though. He had not slept well. When he did, his dreams were vivid and fevered, rife with images of danger and trauma. Often he saw his father's mutilated face, barely recognizable through the blood and damage, staring blankly at him through useless eyes. He would attempt to question the image, to learn of Heaven and the nature of power, hoping for a ray of hope and a guiding hand. But the image never responded; it continued to stare at him, as if unconcerned by the trials his eldest son would face as Tsar.

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Now Inspector Plehve was at the palace unexpectedly and all the anxiety and fear he had been experiencing over the past weeks came flooding in on him at once. His chest constricted and his heart rate began to climb.

Despite his trepidation, Nicholas nodded to indicate the Inspector should be admitted. Alexei signaled for the servant to bring the Inspector in.

“Why do you think he's here, Uncle?” Nicholas asked, the concern evident in his voice.

Alexei considered whether it was the appropriate time to reveal his concerns about Vladimir and his suspected activities. “I'm not certain,” he began. Before he could continue, the servant arrived with the Inspector in tow.

“Inspector Plehve. Good to see you again,” Alexei greeted the man. “To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?”

The Inspector, realizing the Tsar was also present, bowed respectfully to the Tsar. “Majesty, I apologize for the interruption, but I have come on an urgent matter and could not, unfortunately, wait for a more appropriate time.”

“Has there been a development then?” Alexei asked, sitting forward in his chair.

“Yes, Highness,” the Inspector replied, looking decidedly uncomfortable.

“Please, sit down, Inspector.” Nicholas indicated a chair between himself and his regent. “Would you like something to drink? Some tea perhaps?”

“No, thank you, Majesty,” Inspector Plehve declined as he assumed his seat. “I do not require anything at this time.”

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“As you wish.” Nicholas dismissed the servant with a wave before turning his attentions to his guest. “What's this urgent matter you needed to report?” Nicholas asked.

The Inspector glanced at Alexei. The Crown-Regent looked pale but curious. He expected the news would be bad but decided it was best to know, in any case, what was afoot. Alexei nodded.

“For several months now,” Inspector Plehve began, “the Okhrana has been involved in a covert operation concerning a matter of sedition at the highest levels of the government.”

Alexei, realizing the true meaning of the man's words, sat forward, nearly falling out of his seat. “You already suspected Vladimir?” he asked, unable to keep the ire out of his voice.

“My apologies, Highness,” the Inspector began.

“Suspected Vladimir of what?” Nicholas interrupted. His interest piqued, he sat up straight, attempting to appear as regal as possible.

Inspector Plehve paled, realizing the Tsar was not aware of the situation. “I . . . we . . .,” he stammered, unable to focus his thoughts.

Alexei, taking pity on the man, turned to Nicholas. “Inspector Plehve and I had spoken about a delicate matter concerning your uncle Vladimir's loyalty to yourself, Nicholas.”

Alexei explained the discussion he had with Minister Loris-Melikov and the doubts that conversation had created. He related the concerns he had experienced over the course of the following weeks and the decision he made concerning confronting Vladimir.

Nicholas listened intently, his face slipping from curious to disbelieving to disappointed as his uncle spoke.

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Alexei went on to explain why he had invited Vladimir to the meeting to discuss Nicholas' prospects for a future bride and how his fears seemed to be confirmed by Vladimir's reaction during that meeting. Next, Alexei outline his decision to consult Inspector Plehve about the situation and have his men observe the Grand Duke's movements. Learning of the association of Grand Duke Vladimir with Prince Meshchersky, he instructed the Inspector to maintain surveillance on him as well.

Nicholas listened to these explanations without interrupting. Once his uncle finished detailing his undercover operations concerning his elder uncle, he asked one simple question. "Why did you keep this information from me, Uncle?"

Alexei feared the Tsar might want to know why he had not been informed. "I did consider apprising you of the situation but thought it best not to burden you with unsubstantiated rumors and unfounded fears. It wasn't until Inspector Plehve arrived here this evening that my fears were confirmed. I'm sorry, Nicky."

Alexei looked to the policeman. "They *have* been confirmed haven't they, Inspector?"

Nicholas looked to the policeman, anticipating his answer.

"I'm afraid so, Highness." Inspector Plehve stroked his bushy gray mustache with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand as he considered how best to proceed. Under the scrutiny of the Tsar and Crown-Regent, he found it difficult to concentrate. Eventually his thoughts coalesced and he began his explanation.

"Following the death of His Majesty and the Tsarevich, the Okhrana, under my direction, investigated the revolutionary organization known as The Will of the People. They were

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responsible for the attacks on their Highnesses. Our records indicated that at least one of its senior members escaped following the bombings. And we were hoping to search out this revolutionary and discover any other members who may have escaped our intelligence networks. They are not infallible, after all.”

“That much is obvious,” Alexei said, his tone arch. “Otherwise, my father might still be alive.”

“Yes, well. A most unfortunate event that. Our sources were unable to learn of their plans until they'd already committed their attacks.

“The MVD outlined a plan to conduct sweeps and purges to ferret out any subversive elements within the St. Petersburg district when we received a visit from Prince Meshchersky. He had managed to gain an audience with Grand Duke Vladimir following the funeral, and was hoping to gauge the Royal Family's reaction to the official appointment of Your Majesty as Tsar and Your Highness as Crown-Regent.” He indicated first Nicholas then Alexei with a nod as he mentioned their respective titles.

“Prince Meshchersky was a close friend of the Tsarevich and knew how strained the relationship between them really was. According to the Prince, the Tsarevich often spoke of how Grand Duke Vladimir was jealous of his position in the line of succession and believed he would make a better Tsar when your father, God rest his soul, passed on.”

Nicholas nodded absently, agreeing with the Inspector's assessment thus far of his father's relationship with his uncle. He had not been privy to the details but he knew Uncle Vladimir was not often at the palace.

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“Continue, Inspector,” Nicholas said.

“Prince Meshchersky told me of the mood and sentiments of the Grand Duke and was concerned that, either through his grief for His Majesty or through his own ambition, he might attempt some kind of action against Your Majesty.”

Nicholas' eyes widened. “Do you really think a member of the Royal Family would act in such a deplorable manner? And so soon after the deaths of my father and grandfather?” Nicholas asked, incredulous.

“That is what we hoped to discover. Prince Meshchersky was willing to serve as our man inside and keep us apprised of the intentions of the Grand Duke. When he came to us with information that His Highness suggested using the escaped revolutionary woman, Figner, for more attacks on the monarchy, we felt we needed to increase the manpower devoted to the operation.”

Alexei recalled seeing Prince Meshchersky leaving the Ministry Building during his first visit to the Minister. He had not made the connection until now, though. He shook his head, amused by his own obtuseness.

“A comprehensive investigation commenced and we found the Figner woman in Kazan and have brought her to St. Petersburg to stand trial. Her younger sister, who was not involved in the assassinations, we located in Odessa. She is in custody as well. I allowed the Prince to pass on the pertinent information to the Grand Duke.”

“You now have this Figner woman in custody then? Excellent work, Inspector,” Nicholas congratulated the policeman.

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“Thank you, Majesty. But I cannot take all the credit for the apprehension. I have an efficient team of investigators. They deserve the credit.”

“When you came to me about your concerns, Highness, we were already deeply involved in observing the Grand Duke. I must apologize again for not sharing my information with you, but for the sake of the Prince, I needed to keep the operation as confidential as possible.”

Plehve's pale cheeks flushed a deep crimson, showing his genuine embarrassment.

“I understand, Inspector,” Alexei assured him. “Under the circumstances, I can't fault your reasoning.”

“Thank you, Highness.

Nicholas was silent, watching the exchange with a look of profound bitterness on his face. Alexei could not blame him: his life was on the line and he had not even been informed. Alexei hoped the incident did not irreparably damage their relationship.

“At one point, following your invitation to breakfast, Highness, the Grand Duke was on the verge of calling off the coup. The Grand Duchess Vladimir, according to Prince Meshchersky, convinced him that he was doing what was necessary, and encouraged his attempt to seize the throne.”

“Aunt Maria encouraged him to treason?” Nicholas could not believe his ears.
“Unbelievable. Is there no end to the deceptions?”

“Yes, Majesty. There will soon be an end. With the evidence we now have, we can arrest the Grand Duke and Duchess. With your permission, of course,” the Inspector added, unwilling to overstep his bounds any further.

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Nicholas stared straight ahead, his eyes fixed but seeing nothing. The revelation of attempted treachery by a member of the Royal Family wounded him. He had hoped his family would rally around him, would combine their collective strengths to push through this dark time. Instead, there was division and sedition. The realization of power's corrupting influence was devastating to the young monarch.

“Majesty?” Alexei prodded.

Nicholas did not answer.

“Nicholas?” his voice was strained, his tone indicating the fear he felt. “Please understand that the situation was such that premature conclusions would've been disastrous for the monarchy and for the family personally.”

“So we prolonged the scandal for a couple of weeks?” Nicholas finally said. “If we arrest Uncle Vladimir and Aunt Maria, we risk scandal. If we do not arrest them, and exile them, we risk allowing them the opportunity to attempt a coup at a later time.”

“And if conditions in the empire do not improve, they could be a rallying point for an uprising,” Alexei finished Nicholas' thought.

Nicholas turned to his regent. “What do we do?”

“We approach the Grand Duke and tell him what we know. We offer him a choice of renouncing his titles and royal privileges and emigrating to the country of his choice – outside the empire – or execute Vladimir for inciting treason and exile the Grand Duchess and their children to Siberia for life.”

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“No,” Nicholas disagreed. “I don't want my reign to begin with a scandal. Uncle Vladimir wronged the throne and all the Romanovs by his actions. We won't offer him a choice.”

“Majesty?” Inspector Plehve inquired. “What are you suggesting?”

“Yes, Nicky. What are you thinking?” Alexei asked, his creased brow showing his concern.

“I am saying Grand Duke Vladimir has committed treason. The penalty for such an offense is death, is it not?” He did not wait for either man to answer. “What happened the last time a member of the Royal Family attempted to wrest power through violence?” Alexei and Inspector Plehve both knew the story of Peter the Great's half-sister Sophia, who with the help of the boyars, led a coup by which she had Peter and his brother Ivan named co-Tsars, with herself installed as regent and the real power behind the throne. Eventually, Peter grew up and wrested power from his sister and had her confined to a nunnery for life.

“There will not be a trial, as it would only end badly for the crown. Instead, we will decree exile to Prussia for life and removal of their Russian titles as punishment.” Nicholas stopped, an expression of disgust pursing his lips. “Let them live as Prussian nobles, not Russian.”

Alexei was impressed by the suggestion. That the young Tsar had weighed the options and, despite the danger posed to his person, had been lenient showed promise for the future. Nicholas had not abused his power: he made a sound political decision. The first of many, Alexei hoped.

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Nicholas focused his attention on Inspector Plehve. "Take your men and arrest Grand Duke Vladimir and his wife. Keep them under guard at their palace until the Grand Duke Alexei and I arrive. I wish speak to my uncle before we wash our hands of him and his treacherous wife."

"Yes, Majesty." Inspector Plehve began to rise from his seat to carry out his orders.

"And have Prince Meshchersky brought to the palace. I would like to speak to him."

"Yes, Majesty."

As Plehve left to collect a squad of men to take Grand Duke Vladimir and his wife, into custody, he felt a sense of pride in the wisdom and compassion of the young Tsar. Despite the unenviable duty he was about to perform, Inspector Plehve felt that the future of Russia was in good hands. And that made doing his duty less distasteful.

Nicholas waited until the Inspector had left before addressing Alexei. "Uncle, I hope in the future you can trust me with important information. I am the Tsar after all, am I not?"

"You are, Majesty," Alexei replied, bowing slightly in his chair. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about my suspicions. I knew you were concerned about the possibility of further attacks and didn't want to give you cause for further concern."

"Thank you for attempting to spare my feelings. As your devoted nephew, I appreciate the gesture. As your Tsar, however," Nicholas affected a stern expression, "I must know I can count on my advisors to keep me informed. Especially you."

Alexei was relieved by Nicholas' reaction. He had not expected his nephew to ostracize him or banish him from court, but Nicholas' leniency was greater than he hoped. "Yes,

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Majesty,” he placed his hand over his heart. “I shall endeavor to keep nothing from you from this point on.”

“Good,” Nicholas nodded. “Now, let's go talk to Uncle Vladimir, shall we?”

Alexei swallowed the gorge rising in his belly. “If you wish,” he replied.

* * *

The carriage ride from the Winter Palace to the Vladimir Palace was one of the longest in Nicholas' short life. Every rut and crease over which the carriage passed jounced him back and forth, often to crash into Alexei or the wall or both. His thoughts were also bouncing back and forth as to what he should say to Vladimir. Should he be solemn, extolling the deep regret he feels at having lost an uncle so soon after losing his father and grandfather? Or should he be incensed, fuming over the affront of his uncle's actions? Perhaps a mix of the two? He did not know, nor did he think he would be able to decide until he saw his uncle face-to-face.

Then, Nicholas realized, I will see if I'm made of the same stuff as my father was.

The image of the wooden soldier popped into his head just then. Whether thinking of his father had triggered the image or, given the stress of the current situation, his subconscious mind was telling him he was due some much-needed relaxation he could not say. He could see clearly what sections of the figure remained to be finished: the epaulets and cuffs, the boots and belt, each symbols of rank and status, he realized.

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When this unpleasant business was concluded, he would give the soldier a fitting rank.

Captain, perhaps. Yes. Captain Misha shall have his badges of rank by morning.

Nicholas, having resolved that issue, let his thoughts drift back to the matter at hand.

He still did not know what he would say to his uncle. A host of possibilities flooded his mind. None seemed to fit the circumstance, though. The situation called not for rote declarations of honor and duty but sincerity, impassioned appeals and indignation. Nicholas wondered if he could summon the strength to be as indignant as he should be. *We'll know soon enough, I suppose.*

While Nicolas attempted to assess his emotions, Alexei worried about his nephew's emotional state. He glanced at his nephew from time to time but said nothing, perceiving that to do so would be an intrusion under the present circumstances. He had to trust that Nicholas was capable of handling the situation. In order to do that, he had to know his own mind. That was not an easy task for a grown man. Alexei could only imagine how difficult it must be for a thirteen-year-old boy.

Alexei diverted his attention from his nephew. He watched the haze hanging over the Neva River. Beyond the river, the St. Petersburg sky was black, featureless. *Perhaps I should be more like the night sky*, Nicholas mused. *If I allow myself to be featureless, a blank canvas on to be colored as the people see fit, I can avoid the fate my father suffered. Do I begin with Vladimir? Do I show mercy? Or do I impose fitting justice and make an example of him?*

Despite his misgivings, Nicholas hoped Vladimir was innocent of the charges leveled against him. If it had only been an affair, the situation could be handled discreetly, with the

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world none the wiser. But treason? There was no way to discreetly cover up treason. Word would spread and the monarchy would suffer. Russia would suffer. And the Romanov Dynasty would suffer. Alexei shook his head. *What a fool you are, Vladimir.*

The carriage transporting Nicholas and Alexei arrived in front of the Vladimir Palace and came to a stop beside a pair of coaches Nicholas did not recognize. He assumed they belonged to the MVD men Inspector Plehve assigned this detail.

Nicholas stepped out as a footman held the door, and strolled up to the palace doors, Alexei two paces behind him. Inspector Plehve was there to greet them.

“This way Majesty.” He indicated in which direction the prisoners could be found.

Nicholas nodded, not trusting his voice to hold if he attempted to speak.

Nicholas and Alexei, with Inspector Plehve, passed through the palace's silent corridors to the Persian Room. A pair of guards stood sentinel outside the door as they arrived. Coming to attention as Nicholas' party arrived, they each pulled one of the double doors open to allow His Majesty, the Crown-Regent and their employer entrance.

Inside, the air was oppressively hot, the room's stove generating an intense heat that permeated the ornate room. The Grand Duke and his family, their nanny, Katya, who would go into exile with them to maintain the children, and the children themselves, were seated on a divan upholstered in exotic Eastern fabrics. Two more police stood guard within the room. They appeared uncomfortable in the overheated room.

Vladimir looked up, saw his nephew and brother accompanied by the Inspector, then dropped his head, unwilling to suffer the expressions of disappointment etched across their faces.

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Grand Duchess Maria, however, sat slightly reclined, her swollen belly distended, her eyes unreadable. She did not speak but Nicholas could see she had much on her mind.

The trio stopped a few paces back from the divan. Nicholas wanted to see if Vladimir would offer an excuse or explanation in his defense. Alexei waited for Nicholas to speak first, while Inspector Plehve believed his duty was to witness then escort Vladimir and his family wherever the Tsar ordered, not to speak.

The silence stretched. The children squirmed, glad to see their uncle and cousin but not understanding why they could not go to him, to play with him, and why these strange men were standing around, watching them with their dark eyes. Katya chastised them for fidgeting and they calmed down, but their eyes pleaded with Nicholas.

Unable to stand their innocent, accusing eyes any longer, Nicholas turned away. He walked to the ornately wrought window offering a view of the Peter and Paul Fortress across the river. In the diffuse light he could just make out the lines of the complex where his father and grandfather were buried.

As the image of his murdered relatives invaded his thoughts, Nicholas felt his ire begin to rise. He remained at the window a moment longer before his emotions began to bubble over. He suddenly wheeled on Vladimir. "Why have you done this, Uncle? What possible reason have I given you for such dishonor?"

Vladimir looked up but said nothing. Maria bristled, fighting the urge to speak in her husband's stead. She managed, with commendable effort, not to let the impulse override her judgment and remained silent. Her eyes flashed hatred at Nicholas and Alexei, though.

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“You have tarnished the name of Romanov, blackened the Russian monarchy and doomed yourself and your family to disgrace. Don't you realize what you've done?” He waited for a response. When none was forthcoming, he continued undeterred. “You have undermined all the monarchy has attempted to accomplish in the last two decades. You have made a mockery of its people and offended God by your actions.”

At the mention of the Almighty, Vladimir's head came up. His eyes were wide, his mouth set in a tight line. “God will judge me then,” he said. “For no man, or boy, can do so in this life.”

The conviction with which his words were spoken set Alexei back. He had never thought of his brother as overly devout. A believer, yes, and a regular attendant of services, but not a devotee. To hear him speak of God in such reverent terms was disconcerting. He did not say anything, content to let Nicholas command; he watched and listened, gauging his nephew's performance discreetly.

“God is good, yes. And he's ordained *me* as his agent on earth, not you,” Nicholas jabbed a finger in his uncle's direction.

“Perhaps so, Nicholas, but beware the burden God has placed on your shoulders. It can be a heavy one. Be certain your shoulders can bear it.”

Nicholas continued undeterred. “Maybe I will find that burden lightened considerably as I move forward. God does work in mysterious ways. He will instruct me as he sees fit. And I will obey His words, whether they come from the priests or from closer sources.”

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Vladimir mulled this strange statement over for a moment before grasping the truth behind the words. “What have you done?” he demanded, jumping to his feet. The police rushed forward from their posts to protect the Tsar but Vladimir made no moves toward the boy.

“I haven't done anything yet. But I will do whatever we think necessary for the good of the empire.”

“By 'we' you mean you and those foolish old women you call ministers. Bah! The lot of them aren't worth a pot of piss! Traitors all! They convinced father to give the people more freedom, to allow the people to have an opinion, to give away his power to the ignorant rabble!” Vladimir's voice rose as he continued, his gestures became more animated until he resembled a street preacher preaching the end of the world.

“By 'we' I mean the Russian people. Your father understood that they were the true source of his power. He was about to reward them for their long years of suffering before he was killed. Uncle Alexei and I intend to honor his wishes and give the people what they've been asking for.”

Vladimir's eyes grew wide, his mouth slack. A small gasp escaped Maria and she clutched her belly as if such talk would deliver her baby in an instant. Even the Inspector was shocked by this revelation. Though he was aware that Tsar Alexander had been considering granting the people a constitution, he was not aware of the current state of that document. Nor had he been made privy to the conversations Alexei had with Minister Loris-Melikov concerning it.

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Vladimir, looking stricken, sat down. He shook his head but said nothing. He was stunned to learn how fast the boy-Tsar had moved to destroy the empire. *It's all over. I've failed and Russia will fall to ruin. Russia is doomed.*

Nicholas stood before his uncle, his small fists balled at his sides, his face red from his rage at Vladimir's words. "I hate you," he said in a low voice intended for Vladimir's ears only. Maria overheard the declaration, though, and her eyes narrowed as she regarded the boy. He had changed in the last few months, she realized.

Nicholas returned her gaze, not flinching from the malice he saw there. Eventually, Maria looked away. Nicholas took this as a sign of triumph. He had confronted his demons and emerged victorious.

He slowly unclenched his fists, allowing himself to relax somewhat though remaining alert for any more surprises on Vladimir's part. When his uncle did not even look up, he knew their confrontation was nearly at an end. All that remained were the formalities.

Nicholas looked to Alexei, who nodded curtly then came forward to stand next to the Tsar. He produced a scrolled document which he unrolled and began to read. "Vladimir Alexandrovich Romanov, you are hereby stripped of your titles and privileges as a member of the Imperial Family. You are removed from the line of succession and all rights accorded you under the laws of the Russian Empire have been revoked. You are to remove your person from Russian soil and remain an exile in foreign lands until the end of your days."

Alexei turned to Maria next. "Maria Pavlovna Romanov, you are hereby stripped of all titles and privileges as a member of the Imperial Family. Your children are removed from the

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line of succession and all rights accorded them under the laws of the Russian Empire have been revoked. You are to remove your person from Russian soil and remain an exile until the end of your days.”

Vladimir raised his head, a mixture of sadness and disbelief warring for supremacy of his features. He could not believe he was hearing his rights and titles being stripped. Neither could he believe he was not being tried and executed. He was glad his punishment was so light yet the weight of his punishment felt crushing. He was speechless.

“Inspector, give them an hour to pack whatever they can carry then escort them to the train station. I want them out of St. Petersburg by midnight and out of Russia before week's end.”

“And where are we to go?” Maria asked.

“Go back to Prussia, where you belong,” Alexei answered. “And good riddance to you.”

Nicholas stared at his uncle's bowed head. With this unpleasant duty complete, his ire was spent. In its place, a profound sadness was seeping into his body and mind and he felt very tired. At that moment, he believed there would never again be a time when he would be free of this sensation. Through all his remaining days, he would carry this weariness with him as a reminder of this inauspicious day and the dark duty he performed.

Nicholas, unable to bear the thought of remaining in this oppressive room any longer, turned to Alexei. “We're done here. Let's go home.”

“Yes, Majesty.”