

Do Unto Others

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ABSTRACT

Where radical women are featured in fiction of the Russian revolutionary movements, how is their political agency portrayed? Are these accurate reflections of a revolutionary woman's lived experiences and, if not, how can we ensure the historical fiction we produce better mirrors historical reality, particularly in light of the way they've been ignored in the canonical historical record?

My PhD novel, *Do Unto Others*, explores the way women's emotions, especially social anger, led them to revolutionary action in early twentieth-century Russia, its influence on their political agency. Exploring a woman's socialist conversion and radicalisation in the Russian revolutionary underground in the years leading up to Bloody Sunday and the 1905 revolution, it focuses on her relationship with rage, learning to understand, control, and utilise it in a political (and, to a lesser extent, personal) context. While most fiction of the Russian revolutionary movement centres on upper-class, apolitical heroines, I wanted to address the gap where their radical sisters should be. In order to more accurately reflect the complex nature of Russian revolutionary women, it was vital to use as a foundation lives of their real-life counterparts, particularly in the form of memoirs, to gain insight into their thoughts, feelings, and motivations throughout their political careers, with particular interest in ways the female revolutionary experience was similar or distinctly different to that of her male comrades.

The critical component explores the representations of women's revolutionary anger, or lack thereof, in novels by Andrew Williams and Simon Montefiore, and how the denial of women's political anger is both problematic and misleading. I explore how anger is portrayed within the context of the novels and compare them against the female radicals' first-hand accounts. The wider social representations of women's anger, both in a historical and modern setting, becomes a means of understanding how these authors developed their impressions of female anger.

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SYNOPSIS

Seamstress **Margarita Kasyanova** is infuriated by the injustices of Tsarist Russia. She fled a forced marriage with the help of her boarder **Elena** and now lives with her fellow seamstress and unregistered prostitute **Varvara**. In the summer of 1898 Margarita witnesses a hanging and is outraged that the criminal's working-class victims are overlooked by the intolerant narcissist **Governor Suetsky**. When she meets **Roman Kedrov**, leader of socialist propaganda cell *Trezubets*, the two soon become both comrades and lovers.

Despite struggling for respect in the male-dominated coterie, Margarita is energized by her involvement. She implements changes making *Trezubets* accessible to workers and women like her new friend **Katya**, but the shifting dynamics cause friction within the group, even between Margarita and Roman. Then, Margarita is arrested.

Nearly two years in solitary leave her drastically altered, consumed by grief and anger. Recuperating in Roman's bourgeoisie home appalls her and she's reticent about her imprisonment, particularly the birth of their daughter and her abduction by **Officer Sokolov**. Politically and domestically frustrated, she leaves Roman to join the Socialist Revolutionary terrorists with Katya.

After much training and planning, Margarita assassinates Suetsky; but when her vendetta against Sokolov ends in carnage, she realizes too late that her motives are corrupted, fuelled by personal rage. Upon discovering Varvara registered as a prostitute to obtain Margarita's freedom, thereby losing her seamstress position, Margarita slips into depression. Amidst her crisis of faith, Roman finds her and suggests they marry and leave Russia, a proposal she unequivocally rejects.

Desperate to regain some sense of self, she travels to St. Petersburg to stay with Elena who brings her to worker meetings led by Father Gapon. Organizing and educating women workers with **Vera Karelina** allows her to channel her rage into nonviolent action, and reaffirms her dedication to revolution.

DO UNTO OTHERS

A Novel

Dedicated to my mother
with love

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

August 1898

All her life they'd said she was trouble. Her mother, teachers, friends. Wrong temperament, they'd said. As the gendarme scowled at her, hand on his rifle, she realised there might be some truth to it.

Margarita had left for work early to finish beading a dress. Bleary men and women squinted against the sun as they passed, trudging to the factories and mills which had made the city – certain parts of it, at least – so prosperous.

She loved the city like this, half-asleep and rich with potential. Clouds smooth and iridescent as pearls hung heavy over the rooftops, grown fat on soot smoke and mournful locomotive wails. Light bled between the ramshackle buildings and Margarita followed it happily through side streets and back alleys to Memorial Square.

Radara had given an inordinate number of her sons to the cause in 1812, and in a fit of patriotism erected the *Doblestni Nayeزدnik* monument in their honour. The soldier on snorting steed pointed west – to France, Europe, the world – but looked back to the vast expanse of the Russian empire. An iron eyesore, it dominated the square, blocking the grander spectacle of the six-columned library and marring the view from cafés and shops.

Today the streets which converged on the square like the points of a star were cordoned off, and behind them soldiers in green uniforms mingled with police in blue. The wheeze and grind of workmen's saws were punctuated by clacking hammers. Sawdust wafted on the breeze. Margarita leaned over the barricade but couldn't make out what they were building. She swung her legs over and made to cross, but hardly made it ten paces.

'Halt!' A soldier jogged toward her, cap askew and sword bouncing against his leg as he reached for her. 'Get back from there, go on.'

‘Let go of me.’

‘Do these look like decorations?’ He gestured at the barricade she’d climbed over.

‘The square is closed. You’ll have to go around.’

‘But I’ll be late!’ She pulled her arm free. ‘Why have they closed it?’

‘That isn’t your concern.’

She’d pointed over his shoulder to a man in a fine suit standing with another officer and watching Margarita’s confrontation. ‘Why’s he allowed in and I’m not?’

‘You’ll find out if you keep on like that. Run home, *devachka*.’

‘Excuse me, I’m going to work!’

‘Really?’ The soldier turned her around and as he nudged her forward she felt a pinch on her backside. ‘How much?’

And there it was: the familiar hot swoop in her stomach. Face tingling, fingers numb, a hiss in her ears like the whip of a birch rod. Hallmarks of her fury. She whirled back, fists clenched in her skirt. ‘Don’t touch me. You have no right!’

The gendarme glowered and she knew she’d made a mistake. Wrong temperament.

‘*Izvinitye!* Begging your pardon Your Noble Captain, is this child troubling you?’

Margarita turned. Varvara, mousy hair bursting from under her hat, waved to them as she straddled the barricade. Something was almost confrontational about her seedy good looks. Full-lipped, broad-shouldered, and too voluptuous to be fashionable, she flaunted all the outward markers of sensuality which Margarita begrudgingly admitted she lacked herself.

Mollified by the promotion, the gendarme puffed out his chest. ‘Is she your responsibility?’

‘Yes sir, terribly sorry. She’s due at Madame Glazkova’s.’

‘Then get her out of my sight.’

Varvara gave a quick bob before hauling Margarita back toward the barricade.

Molten outrage still burned through her. She kicked at a pebble and huffed; it felt good, so she did it again. What she wouldn't give to have told him off! Imagining his shocked face, she let out a nasty 'ha'.

'I don't see what's so funny,' Varvara snapped. 'A member of His Imperial Majesty's Special Corps of Gendarmes, and you decide to give him trouble.'

'It's not my fault! He grabbed my – he grabbed me!'

'All the same, Margo.'

'What? The uniform means he can do what he pleases?'

'Yes, naturally. Your tongue is your enemy, it speaks ahead of your mind.' Varvara sighed and linked their arms. 'God didn't give you much sense.'

'It's not my fault,' Margarita repeated. She looked back. Her soldier had joined the others by the monument; the man in the fine suit still watched her, smiling.

Varvara regaled the girls with the story. Now they were safe in the shop, her irritation turned to indulgence and she painted Margarita like an impetuous child.

'Alright, alright,' Margarita called over the laughter, curling in a chair and draping the train of the gown over her lap. 'Let it all out. Go on, laugh yourselves sick.'

'What were you going to do, Margarita?' Ekaterina wiped her eyes. 'Put up your fists to block the bullets?'

'Of course not,' she said, holding a bead to the light to admire its glitter. 'I was planning to catch it in my teeth.'

Fresh waves of laughter broke. They made her outrage look so small, perhaps she *had* overreacted. None of them seemed as indignant as she.

The bell clanged in tinny protest as the front door slammed, stifling the chatter and Madame Glazkova's strident tones sent the women running for their projects, keen to look

busy. Margarita untucked her legs and righted her posture. ‘Ladies! We’ve a great deal to do today, I expect you aren’t socialising.’

Glazkova, flanked by well-coiffed assistants, bustled through the purple velvet curtain separating the dingy chaos of the back room from the airy shopfront and regarded them from pouchy eyes. Not for the first time, Margarita marvelled at the way her resemblance to raw dough, from sagging jowls to inflated ankles, was minimized by her exquisite dress. It was a better advertisement than any mannequin: if her wares flattered *her* ample frame, what couldn’t they do for *you*?

Four smiling seamstresses greeted her, hands folded prim in their laps. ‘*Dobroye utro, Madam.* Good morning.’

Glazkova’s eyes landed on the heavy train spread across Margarita’s lap. ‘Princess Sharpova is coming at ten-thirty. Aren’t you finished, Kasyanova?’

‘Nearly, Madame. I thought some green, to offset the black –’

‘Hurry up! We cannot keep her waiting if we expect to retain her patronage. Razorova!’ She rounded on Varvara, who dropped her tape measure. ‘Have you the Kristovsky order at last?’

‘It will be done today, Madame.’

‘So you’ve been saying for three days! And what have you to show for it, eh? Honestly, your sluggishness is matched only by your ineptitude.’ Glazkova lifted the garment from Varvara’s lap with two fingers as if it were tainted. ‘Look at that stitching. I could see it from across the street.’ The bell over the door tinkled to signal the first customer. ‘Finish it today or you’re out,’ she hissed, tossing the dress back.

Madame crossed the room and parted the curtains with a flourish. Once on the other side, her voice transformed to a silvery lilt. ‘*Bonjour, et bienvenue dans la Boutique de Paris!*’

An assistant crossed her arms, face creased in condescending lines. ‘Out.’

Varvara, red-faced, made an obscene gesture at their retreating backs. ‘Old wasps,’ she muttered, retrieving the measuring tape and winding it firmly around her fingers. ‘Bet Glazkova’d sing a different tune if she found out I know how she got her start!’

Margarita smirked, some of her bitterness on Varya’s behalf subsiding.

Sealed off from the world, the girls settled into the steady pace of work: measuring, cutting, stitching, pressing. Madame rarely showed her face unless to inspect an order or oversee a fitting, and the assistants on the shop floor did not socialise with the seamstresses. Neither group cared to breach the rift between service and labour. Only Nadezhda, the freckled child whose sole function was to fetch drinks, ever approached the women in the back room, hesitantly offering refreshments at mid-morning and after lunch.

‘What’s the matter, Nadya?’ asked Margarita, accepting a cup of tea. ‘You’re wearing a gloomy face today.’

Nadezhda opened her mouth as Glazkova rang the bell to summon her. Lips clamped tight, she fled through the curtain.

Eva set her glass down. ‘I hope she’s alright.’

‘Can you blame her, having to serve those pompous blowhards?’ Margarita said. Pretentious clients were exactly the sort Glazkova wanted. Her efforts to appear upscale and European left the storefront resembling a brothel or child’s dollhouse: a suffocating hodgepodge of overstuffed seats, mirrors, and pastels. It was nothing like the back room, littered with stray threads and scraps, tape, and glittering pincushions.

She soon forgot Nadezhda, forgot the soldier and the mystery he guarded, like she forgot everything when she sewed. The world reduced to fabric, pierce of needle and pull of thread, invisible stitches in and out, in and out. As a girl she’d discovered she could shut out life’s unpleasant aspects and create something from nothing the same way she could with

paper and charcoal. At Glazkova's she could marry sewing with her gift for design. Not a proper artist, perhaps, but close as she'd ever get.

After Madame's final dressing down that evening the girls waited on tenterhooks until the shop bell jingled for the final time. Alone again at last, they burst into conversation, complaints, laughter.

Margarita nudged Varvara and gestured to where Nadezhda skulking glassy-eyed within the folds of the curtain. By a series of delicate changes in feature which only Varvara would understand, Margarita insisted something be done.

'Hey Nadya.' Varvara giggled brightly and turned to the girl. 'You didn't hear about Margo's escapade this morning.'

'Oh Verushka, drop it already!' moaned Margarita.

'Nonsense, she'll love it!'

Varvara rehashed the tale, emphasizing the ridiculousness, bringing tears of laughter to everyone's eyes, but Nadya still stared, unsmiling. 'Did he tell you what they're building?'

'No,' Margarita said, tucking an unfinished sleeve into her satchel.

'Gallows.' All the air was sucked from the room, taking the good humour with it. They looked to Nadezhda, paler than ever beneath her freckles. 'For Petukhov,' she said.

'About time.'

'How do you know?'

Nadezhda kept her eyes on a length of chartreuse linen, folding and unfolding it. 'My cousin Anton's a policeman.'

Her other cousin had burned to death along with nearly 200 others in the fire which raged for two weeks in April. The fire set by Grigory Petukhov.

Ekaterina put her hand over her mouth. She'd lost her oldest friend, had sought her among ashes and debris until she'd collapsed. For the hundredth time, Margarita imagined

searching for Varvara's body knowing it was hopeless. She reached out and squeezed her hand.

'So,' said Eva, handing Ekaterina a handkerchief. 'When?'

'Tomorrow morning,' Nadezhda said. 'I'm going.'

Ekaterina's jaw clenched but her voice still trembled. 'Me too.'

'We'll all go.' Eva nodded, patting her shoulder.

While Margarita had no desire to spend her morning watching a man die, the stony faces drawn together in solidarity gave her no choice. For days they had searched, skin blistered red and soot-blackened, dripping sweat, the stench of burning flesh woven into their clothes and hair. She couldn't abandon them now. She had to see it through to the end.

After tomorrow, surely, it would all be over. Life would go back to normal.



The Bodrovs lived in flat 20 of the building affectionately referred to as the Warren, identical to Margarita and Varvara's tiny flat downstairs but with twice as many occupants including a new-born. As their son sold newspapers, it was the logical place to gather for gossip.

So Margarita and Varvara squeezed in with the Bodrovs, the Yerkhovas – the mother and daughter from the first floor – and the three tobacco factory workers from flat 10. Each vied to glimpse the front page of *Radara Daklad* declaring that Grigory Petukhov, the April fires arsonist, was to be hanged.

'Good,' said Natasha, spitting over her shoulder. 'That monster deserves it.'

Her mother Lutza shook her head and sighed. 'It'll just make these radicals angrier.'

'Pah! So what? We'll hang them as well.'

Lutza turned her back on her daughter. 'Shame on you. Use your head, girl.'

'You're the one using your heart.'

Margarita, a seasoned veteran of mother-daughter squabbles, rolled her eyes and reached for the paper.

They'd reprinted the portrait of Petukhov published after his arrest. Such a young man. What could have prompted him to do such a heinous thing? She read the article aloud, as much to keep the Yerkhovs quiet as anything else, but it offered no new information beyond the headline announcement of his upcoming execution in Memorial Square. Before she had the chance to question the choice of location Yakov snatched the paper from her.

'Doesn't say when it starts,' he grumbled.

Margarita pointed to the bottom the page. 'It does, there, if you'd let me finish.'

'We'll have to miss it, we'll be at work,' said Ilya.

'Glazkova's errand boy says she's giving us the morning off,' said Varvara, 'because a few of our girls lost someone in the fire.'

'Kind of her,' said Valeria Bodrova.

Margarita scoffed. 'Kind, nothing. She knows the whole town will be in the square. If she thought for a minute there'd be any business, we'd be open just like every other day.'

'Makes me glad I'm independently employed,' said Natasha.

'Ha!' Lutza wagged a crooked finger. 'Don't put on airs, miss.'

'*Bozhe moi*, would you give it a rest?' said Margarita.

Lev took the paper, rustling it with great importance. 'Well, I might skip work for it.'

'You'll get the sack!' said Ilya. 'Remember when Bozhkov attended his grandmother's funeral instead of his shift? Fired as soon as he next came through the door.'

'But this is history being made,' said Lev. 'There will always be another job.'

Timur Bodrov laughed, adjusting his youngest son on his shoulders. 'What country are you living in, my lad, where you can catch jobs like herring?'

Yakov nudged Lev in the ribs. 'Don't think we'll cover your rent just because you wanted to witness history.'

Lev merely shrugged. 'I'll never see anything like it again.'

To them it was a grand and curious spectacle, better than a day at the fair. None of it seemed remotely strange to them. Then why did it unnerve her so?

Lutza tried to smother a yawn, but Natasha was too sharp for her. 'Right, it's late, and some people need more beauty sleep than others.'

'Just wait till you're my age, and then we'll see.' But her frown was affectionate, and she allowed Natasha to take her arm, leaning her head on her daughter's shoulder.

Timur stood, too. 'Perhaps we should all get some rest.'

Margarita and Varvara undressed in silence. Skin-prickling stillness had enveloped the building, but that wasn't what troubled her. 'Who do they think they're fooling?'

'Who?' asked Varvara.

'The Yerkhovas. Everyone knows they live at each other's throats, so why do they put on such a show cuddling up to one another as if they're the best of friends.'

The springs creaked under Varya's weight. 'You see what you expect to see. All mothers and daughters fight sometimes. Doesn't mean they don't love each other.'

Margarita scoffed, throwing herself on top of her blankets for it was too hot to get under them. 'It's obvious Lutza despises her daughter. Look how she belittles her!'

A strained sigh emerged from behind the screen separating Varya's bed from the living space; if Margarita angled her neck just right, she could see the top of her bushy head.

The lights dimmed to black, the springs creaked again as Varya rolled to face the wall and say softly over her shoulder: 'Not everyone's mother is like yours, Margusha.'

Stung, Margarita turned to the window, moving the curtain aside with her pinkie to peer into the alley below. Moonlight spilled down the crumbling bricks and lit scraps of paper and discarded rags playing in the breeze. Nothing like the open countryside surrounding the house in Zhorzhino.

Her mother had been furious when Margarita reappeared on the doorstep of their single-story *izba*. She had saved so long to provide her daughter a real education, only for her to run away. Her friends the Dyogtins moved in following the death of their son – an act of kindness as much as financial savvy, since the famine was at its height and money was thin – making space limited. But there was no other choice. Her mother exhausted herself sending aid east. Margarita earned her keep sewing. Elena Dyogtina gave her lessons.

It was no secret that Margarita was a burden; her healthy appetite and growing body were challenging enough, but her temper and sharp tongue sometimes got her into trouble with the neighbours who then withheld work. Those were hungry years defined by bickering.

Then a guest came to dinner. Her mother so often bemoaned the struggle of feeding four people, it seemed odd she'd freely invite a fifth. The Dyogtins were quiet throughout the meal, glancing from one another to their guest, a man in his mid-forties who was, so he said, a butcher just outside Zhorzhino.

He'd asked Margarita questions without waiting for answers. Told many unfunny jokes. Rambled through dry anecdotes. It was tedious to the point of stupor.

The only thing which made it distinctive was her mother's face as they cleared the plates once their guest had gone. Despite her straight spine and square shoulders, she looked old and tired. 'You'll marry him, *lisitsa*, and you'll make him a good wife.'

Margarita remembered sinking into a chair when her legs wouldn't support her. She'd

shouted that she couldn't marry anyone so boring – a childish objection to a stranger more than twice her age. When screams didn't work, she'd begged and cried, even thrown plates, but the harder she resisted the more adamant her mother became. 'Go on, smash everything we have! You'll leave me destitute and yourself spent, but you'll marry him all the same.'

Elena and Boris Dyogtin knew this was the way of the world. The butcher was not unkind, would provide security and pay a good dowry. But Margarita, who spent the following weeks alternating between dazed silence and indignant, frightened rage, spurred them to action.

Elena obtained false papers including a forged passport permitting Margarita to travel without father or husband. It was Elena who brought her to the station, who told her to go to Yablonskaya Street and seek a room from Fomichyova the proprietress. Elena who reassured her there was always work in the city for a pair of willing hands.

And where were they all? Still stuck in Zhorzhino. The fat old butcher was probably dead – and good riddance. She pictured her mother still trying to scratch out an education for the local peasant children, fighting to keep her head above water. No doubt it was easier without Margarita dragging her down.

Life might have been more comfortable with the butcher. More money, better food. But that was *his* life. Hers was here in Radara. She'd built it, and for all its meagre simplicity she was proud of it. Letting the curtain fall back into place, she buried her chin deeper into her pillow.



The fire had destroyed the telegraph office, a newspaper, and several housing blocks; even now there were cadaverous ruins, gaps in the facades like missing teeth, and ash-

smudged walls. For months the papers condemned ‘Jews! Anarchists!’, but once arrested it was never revealed which group, if either, Grigory Petukhov belonged to. By then it didn’t matter. People only wanted retribution for the carnage he’d inflicted: the fluttering confetti of charred paper, machinery melted, mangled, fragments of domestic life rendered unrecognizable by smoke and flame...rows and rows of bodies lined under sheets, identification impossible.

So it came as no surprise he was to be hanged.

But a public hanging was something else entirely. ‘Not been one for fifteen years!’ whispered a man behind her.

‘Nearer twenty,’ replied his friend.

The city had flooded the confines of Memorial Square that muggy August morning, making it easy to overhear snatches of conversation.

One dirty man scratched himself. ‘Wasn’t it terrorists they hung last time?’

‘*Narodnaya Volya*. The People’s Will. Killing the tsar warranted it, but a fire?’

‘Government buildings burned. Treason is treason.’

‘Should’ve hanged those strikers in ’96, eh?’

‘Shush, Yuri.’

Sweat rolled down Margarita’s sides and she shifted from foot to foot. Varvara stood pressed close on her right, wiping sweat from her brow and tugging her shirtwaist to aerate it; the rest of Glazkova’s staff clustered in front. Servants huddled near their respective families, clerks rubbed shoulders with military officers, priests and factory workers and bakers and students milled about, equalized by uncertainty. Speculation flowed between furtive glances at the newly-erected gallows.

‘Not sure children should see this,’ said Ekaterina.

‘Not sure *I* should see this,’ replied an old man beside her.

‘But why hang him in public?’ Margarita wondered.

A woman beside Varvara shrugged. ‘Set an example, I guess.’

‘Motivation is irrelevant: it’s illegal.’

Margarita turned, and it took her a moment to recognise the speaker as the well-dressed man from the previous morning. Though his suit had changed she recognized his fair, wavy hair, straight, sharp nose, and cloudy blue eyes. The primary difference was now he scowled.

‘That is the reason there’s not been a public hanging in two decades. Not to mention it upsets the public, makes them sympathetic to the criminal. Leads to unrest.’

‘It’d be difficult to sympathize with Petukhov.’

He leaned close and muttered: ‘That’s assuming he actually *is* the perpetrator.’

Goosebumps prickled up her arms. She inched nearer to Varvara.

The wait was interminable. She avoided looking at the inverted L-beams in the Valorous Rider’s shadow. Instead, she analysed faces with her artist’s eye – drawn, wary, whispering to deter unsympathetic ears. She wanted to turn and run, but even if she dared bodies and murmurs hemmed her in on all sides.

Applause rose around her, heralding the arrival of Governor Suetsky. Having never seen him up close, Margarita hadn’t realized he was so tall. Or so fat. His flaccid toad face stretched around a smirk which reduced his eyes to slits, hair curiously weightless like an auburn cloud whose colour, she noticed, neither matched his eyebrows nor his age. He swaggered onto the platform and she pretended to gag, only to be elbowed by Varvara – hard.

Everything she knew of Suetsky made her despise him. He’d proffered no aid for the famine or the victims of the stampede at Nicholas II’s coronation fête at Khodynka Field two years ago; both he blamed on the dead themselves. When the pacifist Doukhobors

refused conscription and the tsar summoned his Cossack army, Suetsky had quipped: ‘If a man won’t pick up a sword for his country, he should expect the swords of his country turned against him.’

Margarita watched him settle into his seat through narrowed eyes.

A security cadre followed; some in Suetsky’s private employ, the rest for crowd control. One sinewy officer took centre stage waving his arms and called for quiet.

‘*Damui i gaspoda*, you are here to witness an historic event as we set an example for all Russia, uniting against the malicious, cowardly attacks of Polish radicals, Jews, and anarchists.’ Which was Petukhov, Margarita wondered? The officer paced the boards as the low hum of the crowd became a rumble. ‘We apprehended the culprit and brought him to justice. That is why we’re here today: Justice.’

Soldiers dragged a scarecrow – surely not a man – onto the stage. He lolled like a hunchback on legs which couldn’t support him, wrists bound, bowed head turned away. Great patches of dark hair were missing, exposing the pale scalp underneath.

The soldiers heaved him under the rope which yawned empty, hungry, and looped it around his neck. He looked into the crowd, and Margarita gasped. ‘*Vot der’mo!*’

‘Ssh,’ someone hissed.

‘Watch your mouth,’ snarled another.

She wanted to swallow her tongue.

Petukhov stood like a bundle of twigs awaiting a match. Cheeks concave. Skin waxy. Eyes weighed down with bags. He kept his left leg raised as if the least pressure hurt and winced each time he inhaled. Margarita was no stranger to beatings – how many times had her teachers applied the rod for her misdemeanours? – but she’d never come out of them looking the way Petukhov did now. She tried not to imagine what the gendarmes had put him through.

‘Grigory Iosifovich Petukhov, you have been convicted on four counts: treason, arson, possession of illegal literature, and –’ He paused, a master showman whose audience hung on his silence. ‘...the attempted assassination of His Excellency Arkadiy Ivanovich Suetsky and a number of Radara police!’ The crowd went mad, tearing at the air as if at Petukhov’s flesh.

‘Who cares about Suetsky?’ Margarita said over the din. ‘What about all those unfortunate people who *actually* died?’

The man beside her chuckled darkly. Glancing at him, she again inched nearer Varvara who snapped, ‘For once, Margo, shut up!’

Onstage, the drama continued. ‘Have you anything to say before your sentence is carried out?’

Petukhov stared into the distance and though his voice cracked he said, faint but clear, ‘Only that this, like so much in Russia, is a farce. Our definitions of innocence are irreconcilable.’

The crowd transformed, claws and fangs bared, hair on end. Spurred by their fury, the officer punched Petukhov in the stomach. Suetsky, sitting to one side, crossed his legs and went on smiling his smug, lizard smile.

Only the combined pressure of dozens of bodies kept her upright. Panic flickered at the base of her skull recalling the merrymakers trampled to death at Khodynka Field. Suppose she died in the crush? Suppose one day she was impudent to the wrong soldier and found herself on a scaffold? Gripped by vivid visions and packed against her neighbours she struggled to breathe, floundering in anxiety like a sea.

Petukhov’s calm was unsettling and the officer, tired of playing cat to a disinterested mouse, addressed the crowd. ‘You see the cunning of these liars, traitors, and saboteurs. I ask you: can – you – allow it?’

‘Nyet!’ they cried, as one.

Voices rose above the clamour: ‘String him up!’

‘Hang the bastard!’

Petukhov fell with a crack, swinging a moment before jiggling like the finale of a macabre harlequin, head lolled on one shoulder, unseeing eyes rolled up to the sky. Blood oozed from his mouth, nose, and ears. Cheers and whistles were drowned by the uneven thump of her heart.

When they cut him down they found the body unmanageable. It undulated, serpentine. Any unsupported limb slithered to the ground, noose still knotted around his neck like an ornament; a soldier near the head lost his grip and the corpse dropped backward onto the steps, spine arcing from hips to shoulders. Giving up, they dragged him the rest of the way, holding the rope taut like a leash perhaps to prevent the head from bouncing as the body hit each stair.

‘Come away, Margo. Time to go.’ Varvara’s voice was soft and distant. Someone tugged her sleeve. The square emptied fast as people hastened back to their real lives, but Margarita stared at the empty gallows with a queer, hurt feeling, as if it had unexpectedly betrayed her.

Glazkova was fighting to weave her corpulent figure through the throng toward her staff still huddled in place. ‘Girls! Come along, don’t dawdle. You there, Kasyanova! What ails you?’

‘I...’ Truthfully, she couldn’t name it. The horror of Petukhov’s body towed away, of those charred, unidentifiable corpses lining the sidewalks, filling this square. The injustice done to them at this farce – who had said it was a farce? – choked her.

‘That’s enough, girl, come along.’ Glazkova beckoned to the streets which were no longer barricaded. ‘You’re wasting time, there’s work to be done.’

‘Yes.’ The man in the fine suit crossed his arms, nudging Margarita as he did. ‘Russia is fuelled by the strength of her workers. We’ll show the bastards.’

Glazkova nodded once and ushered her girls away, but where Madame heard support, Margarita heard mockery. She almost smiled.

‘Yes.’ She met his eyes and lifted her chin. ‘We will.’

CHAPTER II

August – September 1898

‘Do you suppose they’ll hang more people?’ Margarita clutched her glass between her palms. She wasn’t in the mood for tea, but its heat was reassuring.

‘Not unless he had accomplices.’

‘That man said it was illegal. To hang people in public, I mean.’

Varvara propped up her feet and closed her eyes. ‘I don’t know about that. But I remember when they hanged the terrorists, even the Perovskaya girl. ’81, that was. I was ten. I’ll never forget it.’

...it upsets the public... Leads to unrest...

Margarita blew on her tea, staring through the steam. *Narodnaya Volya* had thrown a bomb at Tsar Alexander II and killed him, and they’d been hanged; Petukhov’s fire had killed over 200 people...if he’d set it....but he’d died for the government’s agenda. The small lives of the dead were already forgotten.

Such small lives. She looked at the woven rag rugs, worn thin, scattered across the floor and nudged the open door of the empty stove with a sigh. Six weeks until the cold set in – eight at a push. She set her tea on the table still cluttered with breakfast detritus; Varvara rested her feet beside a bowl crusted with *kasha*, big toe poking through a seam in her stocking. Their one-room flat was partitioned by screens to carve out a living space and two sleeping areas. One in a building full of similarly cramped flats, not unlike the ones lost to the fire in April.

Margarita scooped some of the soiled crockery from the table and dumped it in the washtub but couldn’t face the effort of scrubbing them, retreating instead to her bed by the

window. Curling her legs under her, she brushed aside the patched curtains. Pressed her forehead to the glass. ‘Are you going out tonight?’

‘Too tired.’ Varya drained her glass. ‘My neck is killing me, and the young Miss Nikolaeva wants that ball gown finished by Friday. Would’ve been done weeks ago if she hadn’t wanted it altered with every whim that blessed her idiot head.’ She stood and stretched. ‘Probably tomorrow. Fomichyova will be expecting rent soon. Why?’

Margarita watched her undress in the reflection of the window. ‘I just like to know.’

‘You worry too much.’ She smiled as she spoke.

*

It was a crisp autumn day in 1894 when Margarita arrived at the Warren, letter of introduction and false papers in hand, to present herself to the proprietress. Radara’s industrial boom was perhaps not to the same scale as in nearby St. Petersburg, but factories, mills, transit lines, and brothels had sprouted like mushrooms, and with them demand for accommodation. And as a result, old Fomichyova had only one bed available – in flat 17.

Varvara Semyonovna Razorova had taken one critical look at her clutching her small bag, pronounced her too thin, and immediately forced a bowl of watery *kasha* down her throat.

‘Running away?’ she’d asked.

‘What of it?’

‘*Nichevo*. I don’t dig into what’s not my business. Just looks as if you’ve come a long way on short notice.’ She’d squinted at Margarita, busy wolfing down her buckwheat.

‘What can you do?’

‘Hmm?’

‘Have you got a job?’

‘No, but Elena says there’s always work in the city for someone who wants it.’

‘Who’s Elena?’ Margarita had lowered her face to her bowl, and Varya shrugged. ‘Well, your Elena’s right – mostly. It’s a damn sight easier to find work if you’re actually skilled. The factories are desperate for hands, so if you’re not likely to go back where you come from every harvest –’

‘I’m not.’

‘They’ll snap you up. Or there’s shops looking for help. Can you sew?’

Margarita nodded. ‘I sewed at home, and in the village for extra money’

‘What was mother dearest doing?’

‘Teaching.’

‘And papa?’

She slurped. ‘Dead.’

‘I see. Well, a dead papa never held a determined woman back, but luck doesn’t hurt either. I’m gainfully employed with Madame Glazkova, of Madame Glazkova’s *Boutique d’Paris*. Awful snooty place, but it pays. I’ll ask if she’ll take you on. Beats a factory, and at least you’d know someone.’

‘You would?’ She hadn’t dared get her hopes up – it was too easy.

‘Sure thing *malen’kiy*. What’re friends for? Now, get some rest. You look horrible.’

Her employment with Madame Glazkova was as gruelling as it was fortuitous. Incomplete projects were finished at home by lamplight, and Glazkova’s critical eye missed nothing. ‘Rip it out, start again!’ ‘Lopsided as a beggar’s shack! Stitch straighter!’ Her fingers grew callouses over callouses. She came home with stiff fingers and sore eyes, neck and back aching. Glazkova’s perfectionism was relentless and the clientele insufferable.

But Margarita was grateful. She liked the other seamstresses and their pride in their labour, even stitching their initials on the hems of their creations. Varya was right, it was better than rising before dawn to sweat in a factory until past nightfall. Those residents of

the Warren who did so resembled little more than faded impressions of people. Though they, too, were lucky; some people lived, ate, loved, and died in the same grimy room in which they worked.

She had her little flat, she had Varvara, and she had a safe, clean job. She counted herself lucky.

*



In the back room of *Boutique d'Paris*, needles flashed through colourful fabric in lieu of conversation. No one made eye contact. Petukhov's hanging had obliterated the usual jocularity and replaced it with something frighteningly alive and malicious although, nearly a week later, Margarita still struggled to understand what exactly unsettled her.

The man in the suit had said the hanging was illegal, but it wasn't quite that. Petukhov was a very young man, his whole life and potential erased, but that wasn't it, either.

What was it he'd said with the noose around his neck? *This, like so much in Russia, is a farce. Our definitions of innocence are irreconcilable.*

The other women were guarded, almost dazed, but not upset. No, more than that: they weren't *angry*. She was. She shifted in her chair, eyes on her motionless needle. Petukhov had been angry, too, about something. That much was obvious. Enough to set the city alight? If he'd done it...the man in the suit didn't think so. Why hang him if he wasn't guilty?

No, it had nothing to do with Petukhov. It was because hundreds of bodies had lain under sheets which glowed among the black wreckage. People had screamed for help from their windows and jumped when no help came. Survivors were homeless, jobless, or both.

Everyone had lost someone or knew someone who had. Bodies never recovered, like Nadezhda's cousin, were marked missing – a gentler term for incinerated. Hardly a word said for them! Suetsky would receive a state funeral, but all they got were sheets for shrouds in a common grave. Justice had been served. That's what the papers said, and Suetsky, and many others besides. But justice for who, exactly?

'Oh, Margo, must you be so grim?' moaned Eva.

'Yes, stop with your horrible questions,' snapped Ekaterina.

'There's nothing we can do about it,' Varvara said, 'so take yourself in your hands and let's put the whole thing behind us.'

Margarita opened her mouth to argue, thought better of it, and settled back into her seat.

It was a relief when Glazkova arrived to signal the day's end. Receiving little criticism on her current piece, Margarita packed her bag in weary pleasure.

Outside the ladies exchanged kisses and warm wishes as if they would be separated for months instead of a few short hours. Varya hovered to one side curling her hair around her fingers and tilting her hat over one eye, its piteous feather drooping. 'I don't suppose I should wait?' Margarita asked.

She squeezed Margarita's arm. 'Your concern is worth more than money my love. I'll manage. Don't I always?' Her dark form merged with the dimness of the alley and disappeared.

Whoring began as a temporary measure for Varya, an independent income to escape her brutal, squalid life in the factory district. Discovering her French industrialist patron was Glazkova's lover and financial backer, she'd snapped at the opportunity for respectable employment. But she was a mender at best, not a designer. Lacking speed and imagination,

she couldn't guarantee steady pay. Even with Margarita's contribution, a supplementary income remained necessary.

Varvara wasn't registered with the 'yellow ticket' required of a professional prostitute – 'I don't intend to make it my whole life.' – but that meant anything might happen to her. Even the most naïve girl could guess the dangers of whoring illegally, not least that it left her vulnerable to unsavoury coves and police. But Varya refused to brand herself as something she wasn't, and Margarita couldn't change her mind.

Pulling her jacket tighter around her throat, Margarita adjusted her bag and headed for home under a blood-red sunset.

She chased fading rays down the street, past shops with darkened windows and locked doors, through the alley, and was halfway across the square before she was certain: someone was following her.

At first she'd thought the footsteps were echoes of her own, but the timing was off. She swallowed hard, avoiding the half-dismantled gallows and reminding herself, with little conviction, that there was no such thing as ghosts. As she sped up, so did the footsteps; the thought that she'd be the one found with her throat slit and not Varya didn't soothe her nerves.

What was to be done? She slipped behind the plinth bearing the Valorous Rider and pressed herself against it; the steps came closer. Slower. Hesitant. Margarita slipped her bag off her shoulder, wound the strap around and around her clenched fist, and held her breath. The seconds passed, she steeled herself not to shake, not to run... *Just a little closer...a little closer...*

When the steps came level, she pivoted from behind the plinth and swung the bag hard as she could. It connected with a heavy thud, there was a man's hoarse cry and she swung again and again, keeping her distance so he couldn't grab her. His arm was up,

shielding his face, but she noticed his curly, golden hair – that'd be a fine detail for the police! – and noticed, too, his very nice suit...

She dropped her arm, bag falling mid-swing. 'It's you,' she said, for want of anything better. '*Bozhe moy*, I could've really hurt you!'

He stood straight and smoothed his jacket. 'Unfortunately I missed my opportunity to introduce myself at the shop. Though I ought to have been more cautious, after the way you handled that officer.'

How had she missed him? He was quite tall, broad and heavyset, a series of squares and rectangles even to the shape of his head. She smiled, a little sheepish. 'You're bleeding. Just under your left eye.'

He lifted a hand to his face and looked at his stained fingertips. 'A price worth paying.'

'For what?'

'Your company. May I escort you home, seeing as your friend has deserted you?'

She took a step back. 'I'm not deserted, and I don't need an escort.'

'Conversation then. I've wanted to speak with you since the hanging. Luckily for me, I overheard where I might find you.'

'Why would you want to talk to me?' she asked.

'There were thousands of people in that square, and you're the only one who recognized it for the travesty it was.'

She didn't know what a travesty was...but she bet it was something like a farce. Slipping her bag back over her shoulders, she stepped to one side. 'Come on, then.'

'Roman Vladimirovich Kedrov.' He actually bowed as if she were a lady.

'Margarita Dmitrovna Kasyanova. Kedrov...' She pointed across the way. 'Do you work at that fancy firm?'

He fell into step beside her, hands in his pockets and the sunset pinkening his hair.

‘Indeed I do. It’s my firm, in fact.’

‘You mean you own it?’

‘I founded it, yes.’

‘So, when you said it was illegal...’

‘I spoke on good authority. Suetsky was in no danger, and Petukhov was guilty as you or I. But when you’re in urgent need of a scapegoat, any crisis will do.’

‘What makes you think he was innocent?’ she asked.

‘I have friends in high places. Low places, too. While my firm wasn’t directly involved with the case, things...filtered through. If you know only one thing about *advokati*, Margarita, know that proof is not always their stock in trade.’

He still used *vuy*, the formal ‘you’, but had already dropped her patronymic as though they were long-time friends. It gave her a funny feeling of being brought up short, like missing a step going down stairs. Even though she knew she ought to be indignant, she didn’t mind the familiarity.

‘Then why didn’t you try and stop it?’ she asked.

‘To whom would I have dissented?’

‘I don’t know. But you can’t do nothing if they’ve killed an innocent man.’

‘As if the state killing an innocent man were unusual. And what about you? What have you done about it?’

She folded her arms and scoffed. ‘Nobody’s going to listen to me. A poor girl’s opinion is worth about as much as a shit in a dung heap.’

He laughed like thunder from the pit of his stomach and it redoubled between the buildings as if she amused a hundred of him. Margarita, mortified, looked over her shoulder to check they weren’t being observed.

‘Not worth an empty eggshell, I believe is the polite idiom,’ he continued, once he’d caught his breath. ‘Though there’s much to what you say that bears consideration. Should a woman’s opinion be worth less than a man’s? How much value should wealth carry in determining a person’s value? If an individual is helpless, would a larger, united group wield more power?’ He stepped into her path, expression earnest. ‘Would you want to do something?’

Her palms were damp and she realized she was holding her breath. She sensed that he didn’t want her to agree or disagree; he wanted her to discuss, even argue. Well, she was plenty capable of that.

‘That all sounds fine, but so what? The government ignores us and Suetsky only props himself up. And everyone just...carries on. That’s even worse. I guess if you can hardly afford food you don’t have energy to worry about fairness.’

‘People haven’t the tools to question it,’ said Roman, resuming his long strides beside her. ‘Poverty breeds poverty, making escape a near impossibility. And as you so rightly point out, if one struggles to provide necessities, luxuries fall away. Education is usually the first thing to go, and without education people lack the ability to articulate injustices committed against them. When times are lean, man cannot eat knowledge.’

Margarita smiled sadly. ‘My mother was a teacher. She’d gone to the peasants in the early seventies, before I was born –’

‘She was a *narodnik*?’

‘I suppose. Anyway, she never got through to them. She always said they had the capacity but not the context to learn. I didn’t understand what she meant, then.’

‘Do you now?’

‘I think so.’

‘With a mother like that,’ he smiled, ‘it’s no wonder you turned out as you have.’

She bristled. ‘And how’s that?’

‘Insightful and compassionate. What did you think I meant?’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘Varya – that’s my friend – she says I’m too temperamental, that it gets me into trouble.’

‘But it isn’t temper, it’s passion. If you hone it, it can be useful. To you, and to others.’

A strange, not unpleasant sensation rolled through the pit of her stomach. No one had ever considered her volatile spirits an asset. ‘You’re certainly a fine talker. You must be an excellent *advokat*.’

‘I’m inclined to think I’m proficient.’

She stopped. ‘This is me.’ Lighted windows peppered the Warren’s shadowy façade. Hers was still dark. There was time. Margarita looked sideways at Roman. ‘We could keep walking. If you like.’

He smiled, slow, wide. Dimples either side. A handsome smile. ‘The pleasure would be mine.’

For weeks they did keep walking, always meeting at the monument when Varvara was out and always choosing to circle the block once they reached her flat. Those brief visits, never much longer than an hour, were like climbing into a warm bed on a rainy night, or a spree in the art supply shop: liberating, and a little indulgent.

He’d come to Radara from Orekhovo, outside Moscow, turning his back on his staid, affluent upbringing, to open his own firm in ‘92. He’d travelled across Europe. Like a book brought to life, he brimmed with clever phrases and new ideas which emboldened to voice things she otherwise kept to herself. And he was interested in her thoughts – that, alone, made him appealing. They surely looked ridiculous, he in his light, summer suits so finely

tailored, she in faded, twice-hemmed skirts. But she enjoyed these exchanges, so met him again and again.

‘Did your mother ever say religion posed an obstacle to her teaching?’ he asked one evening.

‘She said their superstitions caused her trouble, not so much their religion.’

‘What’s the difference?’

A frisson leapt between them, a pulse of recognition. What kind of man blasphemed to someone he hardly knew? A brave one, a reckless one...or a perceptive one, who trusted his instincts about his audience. Lawyers had to be good at reading people. It excited her to think he’d gauged her, accepted her, because he was like her.

‘Don’t you believe?’ she asked as they rounded the corner.

‘No – not anymore. I discarded religion some years ago, for I found no proof.’

‘You said proof wasn’t always your stock in trade.’

‘In this instance I made an informed decision, as a younger man, having studied a great deal, observed the world around me. I rejected the notion of a vengeful god, a merciful god seemed impossible, and an indifferent god was crueller than any other possibility.’

‘Are you sorry?’

‘Yes, in some small way. Faith in something which extends beyond the limitations of one’s own senses or experiences can be great comfort. Yet I cannot lie to myself for the sake of comfort. I find worship...disconcerting. Watch how they prostrate themselves before their god. Surely an omnipotent, omnipresent being such as what man perceives as god would have no use for that blind, abject grovelling?’ He considered her through the gloom. ‘*A vuy?*’

She shrugged. ‘Papa taught me about God and the angels and the devil.’

‘But?’

‘I wasn’t interested.’

‘It was that simple?’

‘I wouldn’t say simple.’

She tried to think when it had started; she’d been about four, home from visiting a peasant friend’s hut. Worshipping at their *krasniy ugol*’, their beautiful corner, full of stained golden icons reflecting flickering candlelight. Leaving dinner scraps as offerings for the house god, the *domovoy*. Her mother had dismissed it all as backwoods ignorance. Yet the peasants believed so deeply! Doubts plagued Margarita ever since: what was, and what wasn’t?

‘Papa died,’ she said, ‘Mother went back to teaching and we took on boarders to survive. I went away to school, but the teachers and caretakers were horrid, so I came home. Nothing was certain, or permanent. God felt like an apology, a consolation for how brutal life is.’

‘I believe the standard position is that God put challenges in place to test one. To find one’s strength.’

‘To break you.’ Bitterness seeped from her as if from a wound, sticky as sap. ‘I took a beating better than all my schoolmates because I had the most experience. Caught in the river catching tadpoles – caned. Caught reading after hours – caned. Caught not reciting morning prayers – caned.’ Pinching fingers and open palms could be ducked, but birch switches couldn’t be avoided.

‘It appears you hardly went out of your way to avoid incurring their wrath.’

If anything, he seemed pleased by her childhood pot-stirring. ‘Maybe not. But would God make you who you are and then let the world punish you for it?’

He cleared his throat. ‘May I ask what happened to your father?’

‘Overwork, my mother said. Tuberculosis. He – he took a long time to die.’

‘I’m sorry. You must miss him terribly.’

‘I hardly knew him.’ Doubtless a question about her mother would follow; not wanting their walk spoiled, she hastened to change the subject. ‘Anyhow, you said something about people wielding power when they’re together. People are together now. They love God and the tsar and everything how it is. So...if they’re already powerful...’ She frowned. The idea was close but struggled to reach it.

Roman, though, understood. ‘Perhaps. We Russians do love the chains that bind us. But those least benefitted by the status quo conversely have the power to upset it. Why else would the autocracy endeavour to keep them in the mud? And I’m not convinced the people are as united as you think. Dissatisfaction lurks everywhere, beneath the surface. The least thing might awaken them to their real potential.’

‘If they didn’t realize after the fire, or the hanging, when will they?’

They’d circled the block and once again stood outside her building. She made no motion to go inside – she wanted to carry on talking – but she didn’t dare invite him up. Trouble lay that way. Any of her boyfriends might have become husbands; at least they might have had some kind of future. Roman must have been at least ten years older, a well-bred *advokat* with money and power; he’d only want one thing from a bony seamstress, and much as she may want to give it, it could never go further.

But he didn’t ask to go in and did not say goodbye. Instead he leaned against the wall, hands in his pockets.

‘Russia is in a unique position. We’re following in the industrial, imperialist footsteps of capitalist Europe, yet our citizens are predominantly peasants still working with mules and scythes! We’re adapting to the nineteenth century only as we enter the twentieth. It would be laughable if it weren’t so tragic. But for all that...there’s hope.’

Roman’s face was partly lit by the flats above, gazing into a distant future she couldn’t grasp. The way he talked left her lightheaded, so uncompromising, determined to

see things as they were even if it made him seem arrogant. What little she understood she agreed with. What she didn't understand, she wanted to learn.

'You know,' he said with a smile, 'you never answered my question the other day.'

'You ask so many, it's hard to keep track.' But she smiled too, and in a fit of daring leaned against the wall beside him, her arm brushing his. 'You asked if I wanted to do something.' She dug her toes into the dirt, compared the scuffs on her shoes with the bright polish on his. 'Of course I do. I'm tired of feeling helpless. We work and struggle only to die paupers, while they drink champagne. All the problems of life, from education to marriage to wages...I'd never connected them, never viewed them as parts of one problem. But aren't they?'

Roman nudged her. 'I'm glad to hear you say that. You understand.'

'So what? What can I do?'

Peeling himself from the wall, he leaned in until there were mere inches between them. He had an earthy smell of fine tobacco and the woods at night. She tipped her face up. Roman reached into his jacket pocket and handed her a little book – a pamphlet. *Trezubets*. Trident. Its cover bore a poorly rendered trident and the phrase: *The only difference between a tool and a weapon is power.*

Fear bracing as a shock of ice water prickled her skin. People were arrested, exiled, executed, for less than this, yet it felt...anticlimactic. It was ridiculous, almost schoolboyish in its effort to shock. She wanted to laugh. It was so dangerous, she didn't dare.

'Read it,' said Roman. 'When you have, we'll meet again.'

By the time she had slipped the pamphlet into her bag and clasped it shut he'd nearly reached the corner. She called, 'Suppose I don't have your talent for tracking down strangers?'

He laughed. 'My office. We may speak privately there.'

‘I’ll find you,’ she said.

‘I look forward to it.’

Margarita fought back a smile as her fingers travelled over the clasp of her bag, tracing the chipped button. *Illegal*. And it had all been so mundane, so polite.

She was grateful Varya wasn’t home; she’d have hours to devote to this *Trezubets*. She took the stairs two at a time up to flat 17.

CHAPTER III

October 1898

The door of flat 17 clicked shut. Margarita gripped the edge of her bed, counting slowly as her impatience would allow.

...vosem...devyat...desyat.

She sprang up and pulled her copy of *Trezubets* from beneath the floorboard under her bed, giving her favourite passages one final scan in the hopes that reciting it from memory would impress him.

Once satisfied, she threw on her most presentable coat and rushed out before realizing she hadn't checked the mirror. No time to turn back. Varya had gone to Radara Station market following a rumour of reasonably-priced cutlets, giving Margarita an hour – hour and a half, at most – to finally see Roman. There had been no opportunity before now; their work hours overlapped, and Varya was always nearby. It was now or never. She pinched her cheeks so hard her eyes watered and gnawed her lips until they stung to bring them colour, hurrying out the front door, down the cracked steps, and toward Memorial Square.

Two weeks had passed since he'd handed her the pamphlet in the soft light of The Warren. From the first page she'd recognised it as the solution to her anger, her confusion, her helplessness, but it had been hard work. Each page was an overwhelming wall of text, which made the reading difficult; understanding what she'd read was harder. Essays on the conditions of factory workers and the bloody history of the tsars and their ministers were easy enough. Everyone knew those things. A great deal more energy went into unpicking the excerpts from Wilhelm Liebknecht's *Marxian Socialism in Politics* and *Woman Under Socialism* by August Bebel, neither like anything she'd encountered before.

Education was a woman's strongest weapon in this world – at least her mother said so, often enough that it made Margarita roll her eyes. The edict was strict; her classroom was open to all the peasant children, even the girls, offering a reasonably liberal curriculum. (What would her mother make of *Trezubets*?) Margarita had been a pupil from the moment she learned to sit upright. When she'd outgrown those lessons, conveniently around the time her mother tired of her attitude, she'd been sent away to school. To have her horizons broadened.

Not that schooling achieved this. She'd read whatever she could get her hands on. An older student even taught her to pick locks so she could access those texts deemed inappropriate for a young lady. Her keen interest hadn't been appreciated. Nor her habit of sneaking out of bed to read in odd corners. When beatings failed they simply took her books – hardly an effective education, in Margarita's opinion. That's when she'd honed her artistry with unflattering portraits of her most despised instructors, and withstood those beatings, too. By then it was clear she wouldn't get the education she wanted, so she returned home to a mother furious, among other reasons, because her daughter had squandered a rare and enviable opportunity.

She passed the milliner, the bank, *Snegurochka Kafe*, the Ozwiena Theatre, and tried to calm herself as she neared the square, imagining the pamphlet's words branded on her face and the sticky feel of suspicious eyes. *Nonsense* she scolded herself, and quickened her pace.

Her education was paltry, but she'd been proud of it; none of it had prepared her for *Trezubets*. It was like reading an important message in another language...delivered around a stick of dynamite. Elusive as the specifics were, the gist was clear, and she was equal parts afraid and exhilarated.

Everyone knew what happened to critics and free-thinkers in Russia. Two years earlier, when the strikes were hot in the summer of '96, Margarita knelt at a baroness' hem and kept her head down while the baron raged that the workers should be shot as traitors for their ingratitude and insolence. 'Darling, do be compassionate,' the benevolent baroness had replied, 'Siberia is as good for them as for the other *prestupniki*.' Criminals, she'd called them. Margarita had no desire to wind up facing a gendarme's rifle or shivering in some forgotten Siberian wasteland.

And yet...

Overlaying fear and the apprehension that this was illegal, perhaps immoral, she nevertheless identified a fundamental ring of truth. As though her mind had been turned inside out onto paper, she'd been surprised by the comforting familiarity therein.

'Socialism' was a new term, but knowing what society was and what it meant to be social, the word took on connotations of compassion and equality – words she wanted associated with her. And it wasn't unreasonable, she thought, that those words might apply to the man who had given her the pamphlet too.

Which was why she now mounted the stairs of Kedrov, Teterevko, Nikitin & Partners with rubbery knees. In the thousands of times she had seen this building, she had never properly considered its grandeur. Beautiful red sandstone bleached by the sun, columns thick as oaks and their names – his name – plated in gold over double doors.

Eyeing the dark patch left on her skirt by Varvara's careless ironing and the button missing from her jacket, she suspected they mightn't even let her in.

*

Ekaterina had found Lyubov burnt and crushed under the rubble. She'd spent searching, herself singed and exhausted, and now pulled away beams and bricks and broken furniture with superhuman effort until her fingers bloodied, as if alleviating the pressure

would somehow revive her oldest friend. Her screams...Margarita heard them still. She and the others had tried to console Ekaterina, remove her, but she'd fainted right there amidst the pandemonium. They lifted her and carried her away, leaving whatever was left of Lyubov's body to its fate.

Ekaterina had been briefly hospitalized; the doctors were too overwhelmed by more pressing injuries to keep her beyond a few days. Margarita had visited with the others but something lured her back even after Ekaterina was discharged. Guilt, perhaps. Chastening. Men and women moaned and sobbed, those bundled like mummies occasionally revealing viscid red flesh crusted with black patches. Ill-cooked lumps of meat. Even with the fires extinguished, they kept dying. Eventually, she stopped going. What more could she do?

When they'd arrested Petukhov, she'd felt as if something had lifted from her. Now there would be justice. There would be peace. Things would be made right for those who had suffered so gruesomely.

*

Margarita lifted her chin and opened the door.

Sunlight soaked the lobby which bustled like a train station despite it being a Saturday. The enormous clock behind the clerk's desk fanned her anxieties. Perhaps if she got a rail-car home or hailed an *izvozhik*...but the cost, Varvara would notice when she did the accounts...

That was a problem for later. Bag firmly in hand, she approached the desk and asked to see Roman Vladimirovich Kedrov.

'He is terribly busy this week, he won't see you without an appointment.'

'I think he will. You let him know Margarita Dmitrovna Kasyanova's here.' Without waiting for an invitation, she dropped into an empty seat.

The clerk raised his eyebrows. 'He's in meetings all day, it's impossible for him to fit you in.'

She blinked, placid but unmoving. She'd hold her ground even if he summoned the police.

'*Devyushka, pozhalusta*, you must leave.'

Glancing at the clock, distress mounting, she said, 'If he tells me he can't see me, I'll go.'

The clerk narrowed his eyes and retreated to a nearby office.

The foyer's frenetic energy matched her mood. Incessant typewriter keys clattered like hail. Young men shouted across the lobby and swooped past in black and grey blurs. She sat squashed between a baby-laden woman and a man obsessively checking his watch, neither of whom looked much better dressed than she. Fingering the clasp of her bag, she fought the urge to check the clock. Time was running out. For all her steely assurances that Roman would see her, the longer she waited the more doubtful she grew.

The door at the far end of the foyer opened. The clerk glared at Margarita as he passed into another office; a bedraggled man tottered out after him, followed by Roman who grinned and gestured her forward. So he hadn't forgotten her. The man turned Roman's handshake into a kiss, and as she approached heard him murmuring thanks intermingled with prayer.

Roman turned to the fellow checking his watch and consulted his own which dangled from a gold at his side. 'Apologies, *Gaspodin* Shchekochikhin, for delaying a man of your eminence. If you'll grant me just five minutes I shall be with you promptly.' The man harrumphed but inclined his head.

Stepping to one side, Roman swept her into the small side room, sparsely decorated, and closed the door. 'I was beginning to despair of ever seeing you again,' he said, leading her to a chair before the fireplace.

‘Did you want to?’ She spoke without thinking but hoped it came across more coquettish than desperate, perching on the edge of the seat as she’d seen ladies do in Glazkova’s.

‘You must know I did.’

Fighting a smile, she watched him lean against the other chair. ‘Work doesn’t leave much free time. Today’s the first moment I had to get away.’

‘I see. Had you any time for reading?’ He noticed her glance to the door. ‘We shan’t be disturbed. Everything said in my offices is confidential. It’s an ideal cover.’

‘I did,’ she said.

‘And?’

Once she spoke, there could be no going back. She paused a moment, making him wait...making sure of herself. ‘I understood...even what I didn’t. Does that make sense?’ She took a deep breath. ‘I recognized it as what I’ve always felt. I’d never had words for it before.’

‘I knew you would!’ he said, bringing his hands together.

‘But I’ve so many questions. What does – ?’

‘As my poor, beleaguered clerk will have informed you, I haven’t the time today which I’d like to devote to you. But we could speak this evening, if you’re able. Have you been to *Plod Znaniya*? It’s quite discreet, they primarily cater to students and artists.’

The Fruit of Knowledge. What an apt meeting place. ‘I’ve never been,’ she said, ‘but I know where to find it.’

‘Eight o’clock. Will you meet me?’

‘Yes,’ she replied, almost before he’d finished speaking.



In the preceding weeks she'd thought of Roman often, and the more she'd wrestled with his literature and its meaning the more filled out he became in her imagination. He offered knowledge and power she'd assumed would always be out of reach, and he shared her passion and conviction. This made him desirable. Once she read Bebel – knowing Roman, too, had read him – he became irresistible.

The men of the upper classes look down upon the lower; and so does almost the whole sex upon woman. The majority of men see in woman only an article of profit and pleasure; to acknowledge her an equal runs against the grain of their prejudices: – woman must be humble and modest; she must confine herself exclusively to the house and leave all else to the men ... woman must, to the utmost, bridle her own thoughts and inclinations... What absurdity is it to speak of the 'equality of all' and yet seek to keep one-half of the human race outside of the pale!

To exclude woman from equality on the ground that she was born female...is as inequitable as would be to make rights and privileges dependent upon the accident of religion or political bias; and as senseless as that two human beings must look upon each other as enemies on the ground that the accident of birth makes them of different stock and nationality. Such views are unworthy of a truly free being. The progress of humanity lies in removing everything that holds one being, one class, one sex, in dependence and subjection to another.

Bebel felt like an old friend, comforting in his honesty. He articulated the confusion which coloured her experiences, recognised that the barriers erected by womanhood only fortified those raised by poverty. It was true for herself, Varvara, her mother, for all the women she knew. She'd never understood why; it simply was.

'An article of profit and pleasure' – it sucked her right back in the house in Zhorzhino, presented as her mother's bargaining chip for the butcher's lustful appraisal. But, she thought as she wiped her eyes, if Roman had read this...it must mean he didn't see women that way. *Such views are unworthy of a truly free being...*

Her productivity was ruined. At the shop she'd sit, needle still and eyes unfocused, lost in thought for whole minutes at a time. Suetsky only cared about his own power, and the tsar was no better; Roman's laugh; the world over, workers like her operated under – what

had Liebknecht called it? – ‘expropriation made a permanent system’; Roman’s eyes, Prussian blue.

Privacy was an unobtainable luxury. Varya noted the dwindling candle after Margarita’s late-night study and no doubt noticed her preoccupation. Now and then Margarita intercepted the odd searching look, but was otherwise confident the truth was well-hidden.

Hiding it now was hopeless.

She made it home minutes before Varvara, who was so excited about her market haul she noticed nothing amiss. ‘This loaf is the size of my head, Margusha! It’ll feed us all week if we’re careful. And I convinced the butcher this gammon was too fatty, haggled him down to a reasonable price.’

‘Shows you won’t get hit in the nose for asking,’ Margarita said.

‘I’ll make us something nice, to celebrate. Soup, I think. Might even scrape together some butter for our bread.’

‘A real treat!’ She waited a decorous interval, watching Varvara whizz about their kitchen nook, before asking: ‘What time are you going out tonight?’

‘I don’t think I will,’ said Varya, pulling down an unlabelled jar and sniffing the contents with a wrinkled nose.

Dismay clanged through her. ‘Oh?’

‘I was out last night, and I’m in too good a mood today.’

Leaning deeper into her chair, Margarita listened to the distant factory clock chime the hour. She’d been counting on Varya’s absence to cover her tryst. If she stayed in...

The soup scalded the roof of her mouth as she gulped, and she only savoured the precious bread when she caught Varvara’s narrowed eyes. She chewed the gammon slowly until only gristle remained. The clock chimed.

Seven o'clock.

Choking down the lump, she carried her bowl to the kitchen and crossed back to the door.

Margarita's dedication to her appearance usually didn't exceed a glance in the glass, assuming she remembered at all, but now she scrutinized her reflection refracted in the cracked mirror with a furrowed brow. Fussing with her temperamental hair so not one dark lock was out of place. Turning this way and that in search of flattering angles, experimenting with the buttoning of her coat and the positioning of her hat.

Her eyes were her pride: tilted slightly at the corners, almost feline, they were her only pretty attribute and as such needed to be the focus of her efforts. This hat, with its green velvet ribbon and teal flowers, was the nicest thing she owned and set them off perfectly. She pulled the wrinkled brim down on one side and fluttered her lids. Varvara often applied charcoal to her eyes when she went out, and Margarita was on the verge of asking for some when she materialised in the reflection.

'Going somewhere?'

Her shoulders straightened with the same defiant guilt as when her mother caught her stealing rolls or her teachers confiscated her caricatures. She tugged her hat more firmly over her forehead. Stuck out her chin. 'Yes.'

'Anywhere interesting?'

'Oh, not particularly.'

'I see. Then it's probably nothing to do with that little booklet you've been reading.' Margarita turned. Varya folded her arms as if trying to hold herself back. 'Not to mention you toss and turn all night and moon about at work. But all that's quite interesting. So it must not have anything to do with wherever you're off to.'

She reached out to Varya and adopted an airy smile. '*Nye volnooisya, milaya*. I

promise it's nothing. I just want some fresh air. You know once I start Furmanova's dress I won't have a moment's peace until it's finished!'

Varvara dropped her hands. Her silence radiated stinging disappointment.

After looking forward all afternoon to this moment, she left the flat in a fog. It would have delighted her to tell Varya the truth, but her juvenile infatuation embarrassed her. Besides, she could reveal nothing about the philosophy she only half-understood – after all, it *was* illegal.

Approaching the gauzy glow of the café she discerned a man's hazy shape backlit by the window, triggering a new surge of contrition. Of course Varvara noticed. Of course she worried. And perhaps she was right. Margarita might not be the only person – the only woman – he'd made an offer to. And what kind of offer, anyway?



Smoke dimmed the already soft lights of *Plod Znaniya*. Her first impression, once her eyes adjusted, was a den of confusion. There were two chandeliers on the ceiling while oil lamps flickered on odd tables, and the assemblage of chairs, stools, and sofas in every conceivable size, hue, and textile were as eclectic as their occupants. Writers, actors, artists, students posed in attitudes of deep thought and shouted over their equally voluble friends. She felt contemptuous...and a little out of her depth.

Roman offered her a seat at a table draped in a red cloth. He smiled at her through the haze: he hoped she didn't mind the informal atmosphere, might he smoke, how did she take her tea. Solicitous but business-like. Margarita smiled politely as she removed her hat, unable to decide what his tone might mean, or whether it mattered. Joining his movement hinged on nothing more than her own will, but she still hoped there might be more, besides.

'I'd like to apologize again for being unable to speak with you properly this

afternoon,' he said, handing her a frail, porcelain teacup nestled in a mismatched saucer, keeping the intricately engraved *podstakannik* for himself.

'We're here now, at least,' she said. She eyed the mound of delectable round *sushki*, wondering if it was rude to take one right away.

'Thank goodness. I couldn't keep my eyes from the clock today.' He chuckled over his glass, and Margarita hoped he couldn't see her flush through the steam. 'You said you had questions,' he said, setting his tea aside and lighting a cigarette.

She glanced around at the men – so many men! – in getups ranging from flat, ragged caps to cravats, the odd apron-clad woman, the roving waiters, and back to Roman. 'Are you sure this is safe?'

'Half these people are no doubt involved in radical activities themselves, and we have all night if need be. If there is anything you didn't understand, you need only ask.'

Dazed, she pondered where to start. Suppose he thought her a fool for asking something simple or not explaining her thoughts correctly? Unlike him, she did not have all night, so she'd need to be judicious.

'I think I'm most curious,' she said, spooning honey into her cup, 'how you joined this movement.'

The way he smiled, eyes down, strong hands swirling his cup, was so endearing she wished she could take out her sketchpad, right now, so she'd never, ever forget the contours of his head or the ease of his expression. 'I assure you it isn't uncommon. Standing behind the beguiled workers and peasants are those of the educated classes aware of the damage they've done and seeking to rectify it.'

'But why did you become involved?'

Roman leaned back and observed her, evaluating her perhaps, puffing on his cigarette. He'd brought her this far, surely he wouldn't deflect her now.

‘For that,’ he said, flicking ashes into the tray, ‘I am indebted to my friend Savva. We grew up together, and while I love my brother...well, Savva and I were very much of one mind. And what do young men talk about as they come of age?’

‘Women?’ She fluttered her lids for good measure.

Roman laughed, that same explosive guffaw she remembered. ‘Oh, certainly! *Au point d’ennui!* But a man cannot marry without a career. I had always wanted to be a lawyer, but Savva...well, as last in a long line of factory owners, his cards had been dealt. His father expected him to adopt his methods, treating his workers worse than animals, like machinery, without feeling and deserving none. Savva is a rational and empathetic man, so you can imagine the tension between father and son. Then, the workers rebelled.’

Margarita’s tea went down the wrong way. ‘A strike?’ she coughed.

‘A riot.’ A deep, straight line appeared between his eyebrows. ‘An outside agitator incited them to destruction and violence. Counter-productive, but you must remember the indignities they suffered under the elder Morozov. Retaliation was irresistible.’

‘But what does this have to do with you?’

‘I’m just coming to that. Shortly thereafter Savva went to England to study and to assess the running of factories and mills in the north of England, seeking humane ways to make his birthright produce. I visited him there. Met his friends.’

Roman leaned forward and Margarita did, too, thirsting for every murmured word. ‘He moved in liberal circles – shockingly so, for young men used to the censorship of the Russian state. They’ve a free press in England, you see, granting me unfettered access to the works of great thinkers whom I’d have been arrested for reading here, and while it pained me to reckon with my complicity in the conditions of my fellow men, I also discovered my capacity to apply my power, my privilege, in amending those conditions. It took time to build a cell of trustworthy comrades, of course, but launching *Trezubets* four years ago is my

proudest achievement.'

Just then he seemed a hundred things to her, a labyrinth revealing new paths, richer secrets. How happy she was to be lost in it! She lauded his courage and intelligence, his compassion, but he waved her words aside. 'One should not be praised for doing the right thing.'

'But if no one else is doing it...'

'Ah, but they are. And that's why I want to hear what you, the woman who stands up to soldiers and condemns state violence, make of socialism.'

Now was the time to pose her questions, but she mustn't appear ignorant. He mustn't think he'd been mistaken choosing her. She plucked a *sushki* from the pile and dunked it into her cup, watching the tea soften its edges. 'I think one of the things that most stood out to me was hierarchies. How we're stifled by arbitrary, rigid divisions. It reminded me what Elena said about school, about power and control and that school was a micra- microcosm of our society.'

'She was your boarder, wasn't she?' he asked. Margarita nodded, pleased he'd remembered. 'A very wise lady. I can see she had a tremendous impact on you.'

'She saved my life.' Only Varvara knew about the butcher. Yet surely she could tell him. It underlined Bebel's philosophy. And it would test him, prove whether he really was all she hoped. 'He was a widower, he wanted a...a younger wife.'

Eyebrows up, lips drawn down, he was the picture of sympathy. 'How old were you?'

'Fifteen.' He muttered an oath and slumped in his seat. 'They got me out of Zhorzhino. I don't know what I'd have done without Elena and Boris. Married the butcher, I suppose.'

'Well then.' He covered both of her hands with one of his. 'In that case I'm very grateful to them.' How did he mean that? She wanted to ask, coy and aloof, but he'd already

retracted his hands and moved on. ‘And you’ve not seen your mother since?’

‘No, or spoken to her. She’s in the past where she belongs. But when I read Bebel... It all made sense. It isn’t only my family, it’s everywhere.’

Bebel’s future was brighter than she’d ever dreamed, evolving beyond personal concerns. *In a Socialist society all enjoy equal conditions of life and opportunities for education; all are furnished the same opportunities to develop their knowledge and powers according to their respective capacities and inclinations.*

But her words dried up with her confidence now the time had come to broach the most important question. ‘Roman...what *is* socialism?’

He crossed his arms. Weighing her up again. The café all at once felt dim and cramped and her palms went sticky. ‘Imagine a trident. Three separate prongs connected to form one whole, yes? So...’ He held up three fingers and tapped each as he spoke: ‘a theory, a movement, an objective.’

‘Is that supposed to be an answer?’

‘The start of one,’ he smiled. ‘Do you remember the strikes two years ago?’

‘Of course.’

‘And do you remember how the workers said the prices in the factory store, owned by their bosses, were so exorbitant it left nothing to live on? How thin and dirty they were from hard work and sparse living only to endure further brutalisation from police when they dared take to the streets? Was that fair?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘Why not?’

The answer was so obvious that saying it aloud felt silly. ‘Because it’s inhumane.’

He leaned forward, face still. ‘What would you say if I told you socialism was a system which would render such abuses and inequities a thing of the past?’

‘I’d say it was too good to be true.’

‘That is the popular opinion – among those too frightened to work to achieve it. But I don’t think you’re frightened of much.’ He rubbed beneath his left eye with a rueful smile. ‘I’d hate for anyone to cross you or your bag.’

But she was not in a joking mood. ‘If it’s possible then why haven’t we got it already?’

‘Because the billions it would benefit have not yet realised their potential as more than tools of wealth creation for the ruling classes. Profit – that’s merely a grand term for exploitation.’ Outrage propelled him from his seat and he slapped the table so the cups tinkled. ‘The exploitation of cheap labour, selling wares for more than the cost of production and pocketing the surplus-value. And where does that leave you, my dear?’

He pulled his chair around beside her, sitting shoulder to shoulder, holding his knees as if to anchor himself. Eyes hard as metal. ‘Madame Glazkova’s is highly reputable, serves a niche clientele, and of course only hires the best seamstresses – putting you in an advantageous position compared with other women in your industry. And yet, even given your skill and obvious worth, can you afford anything you make?’

Margarita had struggled to keep up with the abstracts and now, finding herself the focus, was brought up short. ‘I – I take scraps sometimes. I’ve a sharp eye for colour, I’m quite a good artist so I remember patterns and design some lovely small things which I can –’

‘But can you afford, on the wages Glazkova pays you, to buy the things you make for her shop.’ The hairs on his right eyebrow stuck up at chaotic angles and she resisted the urge to smooth them with her thumb.

‘Don’t be absurd.’

‘That says it all. Without control of the industries they operate, a worker is always cheated. Take not from the mouth of labour the bread it has earned, as a wise revolutionary once said. My cell is comprised of people like me, like you, striving to build a better future by liberating those oppressed by the tsar and his ministers.’

‘Suetsky – ’

‘Is but one man in a flawed system. It’s the system we must focus on. When it changes, they change.’

She felt herself dancing at the edge of a precipice, testing her daring and trying not to slip whilst hoping to fall. ‘So...you’re trying to overthrow – ’

‘First, education. Then, revolution. Did you read Liebknecht?’ He raised his head, shoulders back and chest wide the way he must look in court: a proud, passionate orator.

It is not our object to conjure up before the workers the phantasm of the State of the Future, but to enlighten them upon the process of...what is necessary to make an end of exploitation and enslavement, to show them how bourgeois society itself in its further development more and more puts into our hands the means of abolishing it.

These lofty ambitions had merit and would require the efforts of every man, and yes, she thought, every woman too. The possibilities and promise of useful work left her with a funny fullness in her chest which she didn’t recognise at first: hope.

But...

The word *revolyutsiya* gained a sharper edge after the strikes, and people still considered them responsible for workers’ discontent. Even though their workday was now only eleven and a half hours, and even though Roman said the April fire wasn’t set by agitators –

Her head felt heavy. It was safer to feel these things without articulating them, to know her status, despise it, regard it as an injustice, and never voice it. *Trezubets* offered a choice: remain as you are, or demand your liberation. Just having the choice was frightening.

‘The lion dances but the tamer collects the money,’ she muttered.

‘An apt assessment,’ he said, reaching across her for a *sushki*, ‘though I’ve always heard it was a bear.’

‘No, no. It was something Elena always said after...’

*

One July afternoon the Dyogtins had brought her to a travelling exhibition, Beasts of the Jungle. It was like stepping into some other, happier girl’s life full of blazing sunshine and excited crowds. She stared in slack-jawed novelty at animals she’d only imagined: gargantuan elephants huddled around a hay mountain, apes who tumbled and leapt in a happy pantomime, a waterlogged hippo gazing at them through beady, malevolent eyes.

Then there was the mighty lion, terror of her storybooks, king of beasts and all he surveyed. Except this lion was nothing like his fictional counterparts. A listless lump in the corner of the cage, yawning through his black and tawny mane, nothing more than an oversized housecat in costume.

Murmurs of disappointment. A man with a stick – an exhibition employee or a frustrated guest – prodded the lion in his hindquarters. The air vibrated with the power of his roar and there was a burst of applause, screams of delighted terror. Here was the king they expected! Approving whistles pierced their cheers as the beast stood and paced, growling audibly even over the din and shaking his shaggy head.

Only Margarita was neither frightened nor amused. She looked at his thunderous paws and the long, curved fangs, muscles rolling under his pelt. ‘He’s stronger than that man, why doesn’t he attack and set himself free?’

A woman turned to her, crossing herself. ‘D’you want that thing running around mauling us all? Think before you wag your tongue, foolish girl. Besides,’ she added in a superior tone, ‘they’re born in cages. Never been free, wouldn’t know what to do with freedom if they had it. It’s a kindness to them to keep them locked up.’

*

Margarita hadn't thought about that lion in years, but she understood him now. If all a creature knew was captivity then of course freedom was frightening...but they were nevertheless worthy of it.

Roman stroked the ends of his moustache. 'That's a visceral story. We could use it in the next pamphlet if you'd be agreeable.'

This was it.

A collage of faces and memories swirled around her, threads in a tapestry whose picture was suddenly clear.

Her father's gentle, swarthy face splotched fever-bright against the pillow, reading her an oversized book and pausing only to take wet, racking coughs into a handkerchief and remind her their savings were for winter and not a doctor.

Her wide-framed mother working to distraction baking for the peasants dying in the famine, worrying because Tsar Alexander III did not.

Caretakers at school with truncheon arms who, between blows, said she'd find herself in jail before long.

The good-humoured butcher who looked at her over his scraggly beard and saw a service to purchase rather than a person, a partner, to know and love.

Dark-eyed Elena full of conviction, embracing her at the station, whispering hurried instructions and prayers for her happiness.

Varvara smudging her exhausted eyes with charcoal, preparing for a long night wandering the city.

Stampede victims dumped in mass graves, slaughtered Doukhobors, workers downing tools to demand better conditions only to meet the same fate as so many dissenters before them.

Six months ago the sky over Radara turn hellish. Men with eyes puffy from smoke and tears dragged charred corpses from rubble and those bodies, too, had found their way to mass graves. Grigory Petukhov, dead eyes open in an accusatory stare.

Directly or indirectly, the ‘capitalist autocracy’ made victims of them all.

‘I’d like to help, if you’ll have me.’

He stood and held his hand out to her, gracing her with that slow, appraising smile which made her feel exceptional. ‘Come to my office. I have some things for you.’

‘But the tea – ’

‘Don’t worry, it’s been paid for.’

She waited until his back was turned before dumping the remaining *sushki* into her bag. No sense wasting them. Besides, Varya might be placated with a little bribe.



In addition to leaving their tea unfinished, they took an *izvoschik* the few blocks to Memorial Square where Roman poured coins, more than necessary, into the driver’s open palm. The wanton expense was staggering, and he thought nothing of it. Such thoughtless gliding through life made for a nice change; certainly better than counting kopeks.

She followed him through a side street to the back of the building, inside and down a dark hallway leading her once again into the foyer of his office. Dim and spooky now, the ticking of the oversized clock was unnaturally loud in the emptiness.

‘This way,’ he said, unlocking the door he’d emerged from earlier.

Every wall in Roman’s office excepting the far window was covered in leather-bound books stuffed with bits of paper as if their pages sought to escape. She didn’t know one person could own such a library! A globe, a bust of some anonymous thinker, a mantelpiece

cluttered with trinkets and bric-a-brac – the standard décor for a gentleman. Two inviting armchairs waited by the empty fire and two more guarded his chaotic desk.

‘It’s...beautiful,’ she said. Couldn’t she think of anything wittier, more charming?

‘I hoped it would appeal to you.’

She moved closer. Now it would happen!

But he seemed to check himself, retreating across the room to gather thin books from within larger ones, lifting bits of the window frame and pulling out booklets, collecting literature from a dozen different hiding places which he dumped into her arms.

‘Read these,’ he said, guiding her to the door, ‘and we’ll meet again.’ He squeezed her arm and murmured, ‘Soon, I hope.’

His touch made her nerves hum. It was too much, the intensity of it, so she turned her attention to the texts in her arms. *The Communist Manifesto* by Marx, *What is to be Done?* by Chernyshevsky, and, with a little ‘ah!’ of delight, *Woman Under Socialism*. Daunting though the stack was, hope now outweighed fear. And she would see Roman again. She imagined them huddled over steaming glasses of *chai* deep in conversation more intimate than flesh on flesh.

They were at the door. He smiled down at her. Yet still he made no move.

Well, she thought, if he won’t do it...

Margarita stood on tiptoe and pressed herself against him, kissed him, smiling into his mouth as his hands came up soft and strong on each side of her face.

CHAPTER IV

November 1898 – February 1899

The library was not what she was expecting.

Margarita wasn't sure what a meeting of revolutionaries entailed, but hiding in a library was low on her list. A tavern perhaps, or an abandoned building, but not this staid storehouse of knowledge.

'Is this normally where – ?'

'Ssh.' Retreating deeper into the shadows, Roman surveyed the narrow street from over his collar like a threatened turtle. He pointed to an old globe in the window. 'That's the signal. Means it's safe. Remember that.' There was no time for questions.

He unlocked a service door and disappeared inside. At the threshold she scanned the street – not for a police tail but for Varvara. She knew Margarita was up to something and no doubt suspected a man was involved, treating her flimsy excuses with the appropriate contempt which smothered the flat in a cloud of anger and suspicion. If she wanted to repair the gulf she'd have to tell the truth, or most of it, and soon.

In the four years Margarita had lived in Radara she'd never set foot in the library, where stacks bearing gilt titles opened to an atrium full of desks and chairs, a place of study for those rich in time as well as money. A trail of half-lit lamps lent a recently vacated air as if someone skulked just out of view. The massive space looked ominous in the gloom. She tiptoed between the furniture, spooked by the echoes of her footsteps raining from the domed glass roof. Petukhov's corpse had danced right outside this building... Ridiculous! Ghosts were peasant nonsense!

Roman stopped at a door on the far side and reached for the knob, but she grabbed his wrist. 'Wait. Are you sure? Suppose...suppose they don't want me?'

Despite her tenacious reading, she wasn't confident that the theories had sunk in or that her logic was strong enough to join experts. She had rehearsed a speech about the enfranchisement of workers and the toxic autocracy a dozen times, but it didn't feel like enough. Underneath her new vocabulary and justified outrage she saw herself masquerading as a socialist. These strangers would laugh at her ignorance. She would prove useless.

'Don't fret. They have to accept you: you're with me.'

Margarita didn't want acceptance on his reputation alone but had no chance to say so. The door opened to reveal a narrow landing and a long, uneven staircase, badly lit. She clutched the banister, holding her breath at every creak, following him into a vast basement. Lightheaded with the musty, living smell of thousands of books, the figures huddled over the far table looked like phantoms, backs black as shadows and faces fiery above the lamp's glow.

Some frail, insecure voice impelled her to run, go home to her rightful place, forget this madness; another voice, nearer and clearer, demanded she stand her ground.

The figures stood. Their smiles faded as Margarita and Roman approached.

'*Tovarishchi*. Good to see you. As promised, I bring reinforcements. Allow me to introduce Margarita Kasyanova.'

She took a deep breath, lifted her chin, and met the eyes of the four men.

After a far longer silence than she thought necessary, the fellow furthest from her, lanky, bespectacled, and grey-haired, extended a hand. '*Zdravstvuyte, tovarishch Kasyanova*. Welcome, comrade.'

A young man in pince-nez glowered. 'Bit soon to call her comrade, isn't it Mikhail?'

'Roman trusts her, that's good enough for me Grisha.'

Margarita said, 'Then I look forward to proving my merit.'

Grisha moved so close she could smell the product he'd used to flatten his hair on either side of a rigid part. Unfortunately the ends had curled into ringlets, giving him a ridiculous, foppish look. The longer he examined her the deeper his frown became as he squinted, rubbed his chin, and bent closer still so she had to lean back to stop their noses from touching. 'How old are you?'

'Twenty.'

His lenses glinted in the lamplight. 'A child! You're not in the nursery now, little one. This is the real world.'

He couldn't have been much older than her and his barb stung something sensitive and quarrelsome in her, making her square her shoulders. 'I've as much stake in this work as any of you, maybe more.'

'Ritochka's input would be invaluable. She's a seamstress, *un symbole des déshérités*. We've been lacking that perspective.'

'You overlook the most important thing, Roman. I'm a woman. That is the voice most needed here.'

'Oh, my dear!' A man much older than the others shook his head. 'Sex is no reason to include you – not on its own.'

'Yes, that's right Stepan.'

There was a general murmur of agreement, although Mikhail remained silent.

Face hot and prepared speech long forgotten, she snapped, 'And is your money reason enough to listen to you? Who's more oppressed in Russia than the worker? Only the working woman. We've more to lose than you – and more to gain.'

'Men and women suffer equally under capitalism my girl.'

'Ha! After toiling in factories and fields fourteen hours a day, our menfolk get to drink and put their feet up while we tidy and mind their children and cook their meals. We

bear the dual yoke of the wage and the home. The accident of our birth is no reason for you to keep one half of the human race outside the pale. If you really want to change Russia, our voices – *my* voice – need a place alongside yours.’

The stacks of books absorbed and amplified the spiralling silence. She cursed herself. No chance they’d accept a woman, a poor woman, with a temper. Sweat gathered under her arms, and to ensure they did not mistake her shaking hands for weakness she clasped them behind her.

Though silent, Roman wore the smug smile of a man used to being proven right. Almost as if she’d done exactly what he’d hoped.

Mikhail rushed around the table and clasped her shoulders, kissing her cheeks three times and pumping her hand with such enthusiasm his spectacles slipped down his long nose. ‘Bless you *Tovarishch* Kasyanova!’

Grisha’s expression was hard to read, incredulity battling awe. ‘You’ve read Bebel.’

‘Yes.’ That would teach him to underestimate her!

‘Well, you’re certainly cleverer than you look.’

‘I can’t argue with ardour such as that,’ Stepan said, chin in hand, twiddling a pencil against the table. ‘Better to have you on our side than against us.’

Margarita looked at the final man whom she’d hardly noticed. He was average: in height, in weight, in features. Entirely unremarkable. Leaning across the table balanced on his fingertips he said ‘Sasha,’ by way of introduction. ‘Young lady, this work will be hazardous for you.’ Spoken with grave patience as if she were too thick to have realized this herself.

‘No more or less than for you.’

‘Have you any children? A husband?’

‘No.’

‘Good. It’s easier if you’re not...encumbered.’

Before she could unleash more hot words, Grisha cleared his throat. ‘You’ll be doing secretarial work: keeping notes, managing correspondence, that sort of thing. Can you handle that alongside your domestic duties?’

A corkscrew of disappointment burrowed through her. Grisha’s sarcasm, Sasha’s assumptions...she had expected better of these men, readers of Bebel and Chernyshevsky. Did they apply their strictures to themselves, she wondered? Not likely! She realised with no satisfaction that a man could claim to be enlightened whilst still entrenched in his preconceptions.

Now she saw what struggle lay ahead.

‘I’m ready.’

With the meeting concluded they packed their things, storing pages and prints in among the dusty shelves, falling into individual conversations. Margarita piled and rearranged papers needlessly, watching Roman laughing with Sasha, Mikhail, and Grisha. They’d worked together for years, knew and trusted one another with their very lives – only a fool would expect to simply walk in and be one of them.

‘You’ll find your feet,’ said a voice over her shoulder. Stepan stood smiling at her, light sparkling off his bald head.

‘It isn’t that,’ she said, ‘it’s more that I – ’

‘None of us trained for this, of course. Me, I’m a factory inspector, so I see what conditions you work in.’

‘Oh,’ Margarita said, ‘I’m not – ’

‘Mikhail trained as a carpenter, he’s got several shops now, a very successful merchant, caters to the very best in Radaran society. Grisha’s the librarian, that’s how we

get in here, and he's the one you want to consult with references. And Sasha, well he's an engineer of some sort, at least that's what I understand. So, you see, though we come from different backgrounds we all work for the same goal.'

'And I'm not?' No wonder he looked affronted; his effort at kindness didn't warrant such hostility. 'I'm sorry. I was so keen to join you – I *am* keen. I just didn't expect...'

Pouting as if sorry for her, he patted her shoulder. 'There, there, little girl. Perhaps we were too harsh. Speaking for myself, it's only because I'm worried for you.'

'That isn't necessary.' She forced a smile so as not to seem aggressive.

Stepan's face stiffened. 'Oh, I think it is. Okhrana agents, the tsar's political police, they're everywhere. You've no idea what you're getting yourself in for.'

'I know well enough the price I might pay.'

'But you've not lived it. I have.'

She studied his face, the wrinkles and...scars. The bald patches... 'Were you imprisoned?' she asked, dropping into an empty chair.

'Almost six months. That's where a revolutionary gets his real education...so long as you don't go mad in the interim.'

Petukhov's shattered body, limping, struggling to breathe. 'Did they beat you?' she whispered.

'Oh, certainly, but that isn't the hardest part. It's the silence. The cold.' It seemed to live in his very voice, making her shiver. 'You're starved for company, for touch. Beatings become a mercy before long. No. Loneliness is what unhinges you. The mind goes soft like *paskha*. Smart ones end it all before then; the clever ones don't let it happen at all.

'Let me impart some wisdom to you, young lady.' He looked at her with the tender firmness of a benevolent uncle. 'I exercised. Kept my body fit. Where the body goes, the mind follows. And my mind stayed active. Reciting poetry, writing my own, performing

calculations. Most importantly: routine. When I woke, when I ate, when I exercised or did my sums, I never deviated from it. If you slip and grow lax...' He tapped one long, knobby finger to her forehead. 'Then you will go lax, too.'

'When...when was this?'

'Oh, many moons ago, as a student. So I sympathize with these young rascallions in the capital, you see. I was lucky that...well, my father made sure my youthful idealism didn't exclude me from my chosen career.'

'You talk as if it were yesterday.'

'One doesn't forget. It lives with you, inside you, always. A cell is a truly lonely place, child, and certainly no fit place for a woman.'

'Perhaps they won't bother with a cell,' she snapped, unable to rein in her irritation any longer. 'Remember, they hanged Sofia Perovskaya.'

'Yes.' His face turned hard. 'And she was lucky.'



Recognising her disadvantage, she'd initially refrained from commentary or debate, and when she finally gathered the courage to ask whether demands had been made Grisha's pricking contempt deflated her. 'Who, exactly, are we making demands of? Besides, in order for a demand to have any significance one must have some power to leverage.'

Without demands, she thought, all we're doing is complaining.

She, for one, was sick of complaining: she wanted to put these inspiring new ideas into practice. Prior to this, the extent of her knowledge came from the school's incomplete set of encyclopaedias and the guiding values of her mother and the Dyogtins. These fresh perspectives rejuvenated her.

Margarita had never asked for much: a place to live, work to do, a husband near her own age who cared enough not to beat her. None of it was guaranteed. Life was expected and accepted to be rigid, unforgiving, and she had never felt powerful enough to confront these conditions head on or knowledgeable enough to name them.

All at once, the world tilted on its axis.

Roman shined a light on her small wants, showing her how much more there was to want and how much more she deserved. Realizing others shared her drives, her principles, unlocked the parts of herself she'd tried hardest to suppress or discard. Those were the parts of her which he loved most, and rather than scorn them she learned to love them, too.

Young ladies received the same warning from mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and caretakers: never, under any circumstances, be led astray by a man with low intentions. Every woman carried an arsenal of stories of seduction and desertion; weak-willed, naïve girls were easy targets for predatory men of the upper-classes.

But this was different. This was love.

*

'A man's birth does not entitle him to wealth any more than it should condemn him to poverty. If he can sit on the veranda of his estate and watch the peasants toil and die at his feet and feel unmoved because he sees it as his due, as the natural order, then he has lost sight of what it means to be human.'

She kissed him, not to stop him talking – she wanted him to talk forever – but because she couldn't keep herself from him. When he slipped into oratory she became so swept up in his conviction, their kindredship, that the content no longer mattered. No other man had such a fire driving him forward. A fire like hers. She'd drawn him a dozen times, but her favourite depicted him with a glowing furnace for a chest, a man propelled by – what had he called it? – egalitarian principles.

He smiled down at her, thumb stroking her cheek and oh he couldn't leave, not this time. Holding one of his hands in both of hers, itching to press it to her hip, her backside, her neck, toying with his fingers and grateful that there were no rings, no markers of him belonging to anyone else. He could belong to her. She wanted to belong to him. 'Come up,' she said, quietly, wary of the nearby windows of other flats. 'For tea, or...' She choked on the *please* but she'd beg if she had to, if he didn't agree, he *had* to agree, she couldn't stand it –

He kissed her again...barely, a suggestion more than a presence, a tease of warm air against her lips. She wanted to sink her teeth into him, devour him. 'Alright,' he said.

Somewhere on the three flight journey to flat 17, leading Roman by the hand, the sickening strength of her desire grew polluted. She noticed gritty slush tracks left by other tenants. Dark, spreading growths in ceiling corners. Paint flaked from the banister which wobbled at the second-floor landing, the stairwell smelled distinctly of acrid *mahorka* tobacco and pickled cabbage. What was she doing, bringing him here? They should have gone to his home; even a public room would have been nicer.

Bracing for disaster, she opened the door of the flat, trying to see it from his point of view. Not only were the rugs made of rags but they were dingy. Curtains bleached in vertical lines from their frequent folds. Crusted crockery piled on the kitchen bench and one open cupboard revealed half a loaf of bread, four sprouting potatoes, and a spilled bag of buckwheat. The flickering candle before the icon of Christ and the Theotokos in the *krasniy ugol'* was proof of their backwardness. She hoped the pile of soiled stockings and undergarments at the foot of Varya's bed didn't smell.

The only thing she could change was the temperature.

'I'm sorry it's so cold.' She hastily stoked the stove, wincing at this display of poverty. What must he think, this man she adored, with his fine clothes and a law firm in his

name. Brushing her hands clean on her skirt, she watched the fire rise. Varya would throttle her for wasting so much of their precious supply, but it was better than letting him freeze when surely he'd never felt so much as a chill in his own home.

His arms wrapped around her waist from behind, fingers unbuttoning her coat, mouth at the nape of her neck, and she felt him, his readiness, and her laugh was a moan. 'Then we'll have to get closer. Keep warm...' And he had come closer, and they had been warm, even though the blankets were sheets of ice and the frozen springs put up a great deal of protest.

*

After long shifts at Glazkova's, when Varya went out, Margarita went to the library for *Trezubets* meetings; then she and Roman walked to flat 17 to carry on talking, and stopped only when they physically could not go on, when their bodies took over where their minds couldn't follow.

After, they made tea and resumed their interrupted discussion. Her bed was ill-suited to two people, especially a man of his size. One had always to be half on top of the other to fit comfortably, which suited them fine. It would have been easier at his rooms, no doubt, but she'd yet to pluck up the courage to suggest it. She wanted to keep him happy. She wanted to keep him. Besides, she enjoyed the necessary intimacy, pressing her icy feet against his, counting his heartbeats under her ear, watching her dark hair tangle with his fair curls while he drew incomprehensible shapes up and down her sides.

But tonight she thought of Varvara, bundled against wind and snow, seeking a man for shelter as much as money. It was hard not to feel ashamed of her happiness.

She lifted her ear from Roman's chest. Youthful voices floated up from the alley under her window. 'Do you suppose our students will rebel, too?' she asked, settling back into the warmth of her blankets and his skin.

His voice made her skull vibrate. ‘That is dependent, I suppose, on what transpires in St. Petersburg.’

Every year students in the capital commemorated their university’s founding with a celebration, long a source of tension between them and the police. This year university rector had published a condescending letter forbidding a congregation under threat of arrest. On the 8th of February the students had left their assembly, peacefully, to find themselves surrounded by police at Rumiantsev Square. The crowd grew, had nowhere to go, became unsettled. Were met by mounted police. Rumour was, students had lashed out with snowballs; fact was, the police had retaliated with *nagaikas*, barbed whips. Now the students were on strike, demanding recognition and protection under the law.

‘There were more arrests,’ she said.

‘I heard.’

‘Eva, from the shop, her brother was picked up.’ She looked out at the falling snow. ‘I guess it’s a fine line between monarchy and despotism.’

‘You’re nearly right. It’s a fine line between authority and despotism, Ritochka.’

His clarity of vision, his insightfulness, made her insides soft like a *vatruskha* pastry not quite set. And she had him! There would be years and years, a lifetime, of such conversations, and she was breathless at her luck.

She slipped one leg over him, matching her dips and curves to his. ‘I never did feel myself with any man before you,’ she said, hiding her face to mask her embarrassment. ‘Not even Yuri. When I’d try to talk with him about things which troubled me he’d put the pillow over my face and tell me to go back to sleep, like I was silly. He’d be snoring before I even moved the pillow back. He didn’t care.’

Roman sat up; the cold air slipped under the blanket and rippled her skin with gooseflesh. ‘I thought you weren’t married.’

‘I’m not,’ she laughed. ‘Never was.’

‘Then who’s Yuri?’

Margarita pulled the blanket back over her shoulder. ‘He was years ago – ’

‘A boyfriend?’

‘Ha! Not quite.’ She laid back and prepared to explain their meeting during the city-wide celebration for Tsar Nicholas’ first child – which one was it, Tatiana or Olga? – and how she had found him amusing, wanted him, taken him to her heart and her bed but never failed to be disappointed by him. He was so...external, so purely physical. All he wanted was to eat, drink, sleep, take her to bed, and work just enough to get by.

She would tell Roman how little patience and even less interest Yuri had in her questions and opinions. ‘So what?’ he’d asked. ‘The sun will still rise and we’ll still work.’ How she’d avoided confrontation rather than risk losing him. Denied herself. Cast him aside even though it crushed her to do so because she’d had a terrible, sickening suspicion that she was too much to keep a man happy or be an acceptable wife (not that he’d considered marrying her). She’d tell Roman that now, thanks to him, she knew it was the men who hadn’t been enough.

But her story faltered. He looked so surprised and...what was that? Hurt? Disappointment? The deep lines around his mouth etched by smiles now appeared around a frown. She propped herself up on her elbows. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘I hadn’t realized... You said you weren’t married, so I presumed...’

Margarita blinked and swallowed hard, ignoring the tightness creeping across her chest. There it was: she was too much. ‘Does it make a difference?’

‘No. No, of course not.’ Said too quickly, too assuredly, to be altogether believable.

She rubbed her feet against the bed trying to recover feeling in her toes. ‘I’m certain you had women before me.’

‘Only one serious one.’

She chuckled. ‘And how many *not* serious?’

‘It isn’t funny. I nearly married her. It’s odd to think on now, but I did...’

Curious though she was, she dreaded rebuff. ‘When?’ A neutral question.

‘’91. We’d been together for years, since I’d returned from England. I believed she loved me, but...my ambitions, my philosophy, were not to her taste.’

‘She wasn’t a socialist?’

‘Oh, Lyudmilla Konstantinovna didn’t know about that. I see now I could not trust her. It was my career she was critical. Delighted, of course, that I would go into law, but insisted that to start my own firm was unsound. Suppose I lost everything? And when she discovered I would offer advice to the needy, she gave me no peace for months. We seemed to be always at loggerheads. She doubted and carped and rejected my every decision. Then...she broke off our engagement. I was too much of a risk, she said, to be a suitable husband.’

‘But don’t you see?’ Margarita stroked his cheek and smiled despite herself. ‘That’s what I mean. She didn’t understand you, the way you view things. Just like Yuri never understood me. But we understand one another. No one else matters.’

He leaned over her and cupped her face, the tips of his fingers brushing the hairs at her temple. ‘But you never loved them, did you? Did you, Ritochka?’

‘No.’ Roman wrapped limbs like vines around her. ‘I never loved them. You...’

It was a lie, but what of it? He asked as if asking made it so. In a way, perhaps it did.

The peasant boy, Timofei, whose grandmother she stitched for when her arthritis flared up: he was the first to pay her attention and she’d loved him for it, as much as she’d been capable then, and enjoyed their inexperienced fumbling in the fields.

A sailor, Ilya, who'd come to the flat one night looking for Varvara but, finding her out, accepted Margarita's invitation to wait over tea: he regaled her with stories of his adventures and happily answered her incessant questions. He'd taken her out – the only times she had ever been out with a man – and she had loved him for all he taught her about the exhilarating possibilities of travel and of sex.

And Yuri, who appeared in the tavern like an apparition with a glass of beer and a compliment to her eyes: Yuri who made her laugh, Yuri who worked with steel and regarded her sewing as art, Yuri with whom she could never find pleasure but to whom she submitted again and again and again because she loved him so. Yuri whom she'd wanted to marry, once.

Did their presence in her past undermine or invalidate Roman's presence now? Was their love worth less because she had felt it, in some form, before? She loved no two the same; Roman was no exception. She loved him for himself and because he was different. He was cleverer, funnier, kinder, his understanding of the world surpassed even Ilya's, and his understanding of her surpassed them all.

Margarita listened to the factory clock bong in the distance. If Roman stayed any longer... He gathered his clothes from the floor and scrambled into them, arranged their next meeting as he kissed her goodbye. Only an imprint of his body remained, a tangible memory, and she nestled deeper into his residual warmth.

Nearly an hour later, the scrape of the lock wrenched her from a contented doze. Varya was back, unravelling the scarf from her head, blowing on her fingers and unbuttoning her coat.

'Come sit by the stove, Varushka, get yourself warm.'

Varvara put her hand to her heart. 'You frightened the life out of me! Why are you still awake?'

‘I’m not sleepy.’

‘Hmph.’ She collapsed on the corner of her bed and pulled off her boots which dripped slush on the floor. ‘You’ve not been very sleepy lately.’

‘I know, I...I am sorry...’ It had probably been a long, unpleasant evening for Varvara and Margarita knew she should look after her, but the happiness in her chest sparkled like champagne all mixed up and she felt ready to spill over. Crawling from under the covers and pulling her knees to her chest, she sighed: ‘Varushka, I’m in love.’

‘Oh I know.’ She tossed her damp stockings onto the pile at the foot of her bed. ‘Was it supposed to be a secret?’

‘Um...well, no... Only, I hadn’t said – ’

‘You didn’t need to.’ Varvara unbuttoned her shirtwaist and leaned against the wall, stretching her legs in front of her. ‘You’re no good at hiding things, Margusha, so you needn’t think you’re clever or that I’m a fool, whichever it is.’

‘I never thought that.’ The conversation wasn’t going as she intended, and under the circumstances Varya’s observations about her transparency were deeply alarming. ‘I just needed to be sure. He’s not exactly the first one, you know...’

Varvara leaned forward, pointing first at Margarita and then at herself. ‘You know I don’t care whether he lasts one night or the rest of your life. I just like to be told things, Margusha, that’s all.’ She went to the pile of soiled clothes and kicked them to one side to busy herself in the *krasniy ugol*. Margarita always wondered what she prayed for.

‘I’m sorry.’

The stony expression cracked enough to indicate she would eventually be forgiven. Varya always forgave her, in the end. She came and sat beside Margarita, pulling her close and kissing the top of her head. ‘You’re a strange girl, Margo. Tell me about him, since you’re sure now.’

Certain things couldn't be told, but even what could was difficult to explain. Why should a highly-educated, respectable lawyer want to court a backwater seamstress in a one-room flat? And how did they meet? 'At a Sunday circle,' she said, landing on the first plausible idea.

Varya frowned. 'But...aren't they illegal?'

'No, they're legal. Just about.'

'So that's why you do all that reading and writing at night? I hear you scratching away at all hours.'

Lack of privacy had never bothered Margarita; it was a fact of life she was in no position to change, but it was certainly inconvenient. 'Yes, that's why, and he's so clever Varushka. He speaks French and even some German and English, and he's so well-travelled.' Naturally she substituted details of his political work with praise for his kindness, his generosity, his compassion: his politics in adjectives if not in name.

'*Rad iboga*. Such fuss over a man. He must really be something.'

'He is. I know it's silly –'

'Why is it?'

Margarita picked at her nails. 'It's childish. You and I both know men don't stick around.'

'If it feels good and makes you happy, what does it matter? There's little enough joy in the world, don't begrudge yourself any.' She lay back across Margarita's pillows and yawned behind her hand. 'Take it where you can get it.'

'I still feel foolish. Do you suppose that's why men don't get giddy over women?'

'I expect they do, only they can't show it otherwise they'll look unmanly. More's the pity for them.'

Margarita stifled a giggle imagining Roman in some austere bachelor bedroom gushing about her with equal ardour to a faceless friend. 'I guess that's why men get so much respect.' She nestled next to Varvara. 'Because they pretend they don't feel things.'

'If it is, it's a high price. *You* certainly couldn't pay it.'

Margarita stuck out her tongue as Varvara cackled, a sound like pebbles in a bottle. 'Roman likes my temper. He says it's passion.'

Varya smiled, tender, without mockery. 'Now that's love. I assume you've gone to bed with him.'

'Why?' she snapped, still sensitive after her conversation with Roman.

'Because you love him you goose. Besides, how could he resist?' She pinched Margarita's chin, winked, and cackled again and Margarita shoved her off the bed and toward the samovar.

Varya turned back. 'Is that why you're still awake when I get in? You're bringing him here? Don't sneak him out on my account! I can sleep through snoring.'

Those first months of 1899 were the happiest she'd been since before her father died. She had Varya and Roman, the people most important to her, but more than that she had *Trezubets*.

CHAPTER V

February – August 1899

Now it was easier to devote evenings to discussions at the library. She took minutes, kept track of article ideas, and kept the men focused – they were all long-winded and opinionated, none more so than Roman. Returning home, weary but exhilarated, Varya smiled knowingly and said ‘Been with the *paren*?’ To say yes was not to lie, even if it wasn’t in the context Varvara imagined. (Roman had yet to invite her to his rooms, and she didn’t dare ask: if she made a nuisance of herself by demanding, he would leave. At all costs, he mustn’t leave.)

Secretarial duties were not exclusively relegated to the library. While Varvara slept Margarita edited articles, trimming them for clarity or length; when Varya was out she organized correspondence with socialist groups as near as St. Petersburg and far as Tver, sometimes even while Roman snored behind her until he half woke and summoned her back. Everything was dutifully compiled into notes and hidden in the dustiest corner of the library basement.

Somehow, she hadn’t anticipated the difficulties inherent in living two lives. Every hour spent on *Trezubets* was an hour lost from designing and stitching for Madame. At Glazkova’s she was mentally sorting correspondence, resulting in several pricked fingers and increasingly harsh criticism.

‘I don’t know what’s gotten into you, Kasyanova, but this is unacceptable. The Arksyonova gown didn’t match her measurements whatsoever, she looked frightful. And that design for the Lytkina dress was appalling! What am I paying you for, hmm? I don’t need another mediocre seamstress, I’ve already got Razorova for that!’

Walking down Blok Road, shoes squeaking on fresh snow, Margarita and Varya crossed Memorial Square where Roman's office and the limestone library were beacons in the dark. To hell with Glazkova! Imagine her face when the revolution put bosses like her in their place.

Maybe it was her smile which spurred Varvara to break the silence. 'I understand. You're in love so nothing else matters. But Margusha, you have to care a little bit about your work. You just have to. If you lose your position I can't support us both, even if I took that blasted ticket.'

She made a point to look abashed – because she was – but as she'd listened it dawned on her that her priorities had changed. *Trezubets* was now the focus of life, and if it came to it she would gladly sacrifice her work for Glazkova, of which she'd once been so proud. It was a price worth paying for the difference in phrasing: working *with* and working *for*.

Nevertheless, the fact remained that Varvara was right. Without Margarita's income her already precarious position would become dangerous. A prostitute wasn't in as profitable a position as procuresses and pimps who had more than one body to sell. Varya had done so much. Margarita needed to repay that kindness.

Of course, the best way to repay her, keep her safe, was to work that much harder at changing the society she lived in.

She felt like a dog straining at a lead.



There was an unpleasant smell of fungus and decay in the basement. Winter damp crept through the seams and Margarita's clothes quickly grew clammy as the meetings dragged on.

‘Whose turn is it?’ asked Sasha.

‘Mine,’ said Stepan.

Grisha laid pouches on the table and everyone set about filling them with pamphlets for distribution.

‘Our method is quite ingenious!’ Mikhail said when she asked. ‘We take it in turns you see, strapping these pouches to the bottom of our carriages, and we each have designated drop-off points and agents. Mine is an architect, Roman’s is a banker, though we don’t know each other’s by name so we can’t betray them to the authorities if we’re captured, or vice versa.’

Margarita bagged a pile more firmly than necessary. Ingenious indeed...it was haphazard. And pointless. Architects, bankers... Words of worker empowerment and revolution were written and distributed by, and to, the bourgeoisie. What she’d envisioned as a spiral reaching ever outward appeared to be merely a circle forever looping back on itself.

Cold indignation pulsed in her whenever she thought about it. Perhaps if it were her only complaint it wouldn’t rankle so, but her correspondence with other groups had revealed deeper cracks.

‘*Privyet* from Krasnoyarsk!’ wrote Lyubov.

‘From your comrades in Fishovo, greetings!’ wrote Alena.

‘Warm wishes to you! Sincerely, your comrades in Divenskiy!’ wrote Vasilisa.

Their stories read as if composed from a template. Secretary...safe house organizer...secretary...secretary. Margarita thought if she saw one more letter from an eager, idealistic woman relegated to taking minutes she would burn it on sight.

From the start she’d felt herself a mongrel: a *zhenshchina sotsialist*. Some kind of aberration, neither one thing nor the other. Intellectually she knew this to be unreasonable;

didn't Bebel emphasize the intrinsic nature of the woman socialist? Even Engels touched upon it. Yet all the great thinkers were men, and all her immediate comrades were men. She was a wolf among bears.

Secretary had never been her imagined role. Notwithstanding its importance to the smooth running of operations it was least respected. Where would they be without her linking to groups in other cities, monitoring finances, arranging pamphlets? Yet they thought themselves clever for stating the obvious in flowery language. Whether or not writing articles was too great a responsibility for the newest and least educated member, she resented spending more time logging other people's contributions than contributing herself.

Looking at the letters piled around her – 'Much love from Moscow.' 'Sending best wishes from Tosno.' – she made a vow to transcend the confines of the library. There had to be more she could offer. Something hands-on, direct. These distant women gave her courage.

When Mikhail came slipping down the basement stairs, grasping the banister to keep himself upright and shaking snow from his cap, the meeting had been underway for twenty minutes. 'Apologies, comrades,' he panted, hands on knees. His spectacles had fogged over. 'I nearly...didn't make it...'

Roman stood and patted Mikhail's hunched back. 'Breathe, comrade. What's happened?'

'P-police tail...*Nikolayevskaya Ulitsa*...'

No one moved or even breathed. Margarita half expected an Okhrana agent to leap from behind the stacks.

'Were you followed?' Roman murmured. Margarita steeled herself to run, to gather anything incriminating. Would it all burn? Would they be arrested? Confidence had made

her lax, it was incomprehensible that she could be stalked by police spies or locked away for fifteen years in the Schlüsselburg fortress like Vera Figner.

Mikhail straightened and wiped his spectacles on his coat. 'No, no, I...I lost him.'

'What were you doing that side of town, anyway?' asked Stepan, relaxing back into his seat.

'My contact has fallen ill. I've been to see him, he's in no condition to distribute this week.' Mikhail slumped into the nearest chair, hands limp at his sides. 'Apologies, everyone.'

Margarita patted his knee. 'There's nothing to apologize for.'

'It's this weather,' said Sasha. 'Half of Radara's come down with it.'

'But,' Mikhail croaked, 'what are we going to do?'

Roman resumed his seat at the head of the table, resting his chin on his clasped hands. 'We'll adapt. It isn't as though we've no other agents we may rely upon.'

Grisha shook his head. 'At such short notice?'

The men debated, discussed, reassessed around Margarita who sat very still. It was so simple, so perfect she was almost frightened to say it aloud. They wouldn't allow it...at first. She'd have to coax them the way one gained the trust of horses and dogs.

'If it would help,' she said, pure sweetness and light, 'I could do it.'

Grisha spluttered like a suffocating fish and she made a mental note to sketch him with gills and a fin. The others were not openly hostile but neither did they rush from their seats to accept her offer.

Roman cleared his throat. 'I can't allow you to do that.'

She clenched her fists under the table but kept her face blank. 'Why not?'

'Because it's dangerous, Ritochka.'

'Yes,' Stepan said, 'you could find yourself picked up at any moment.'

As if they dealt with a wilful child! ‘What little I do now is dangerous. Besides, no one will notice me. I could bring pamphlets to the factories and the university without anyone questioning my presence.’

Grisha, under furrowed brows, had finally collected himself. ‘Why there?’

‘That’s who we’re trying to reach, isn’t it? The working class and the radical element?’

Roman shook his head. ‘Darling, the students aren’t truly radical. Their anger is very much focused on their own concerns.’

‘Anger is an excellent starting point; we’ll take them the rest of the way. It’s no good convincing the bourgeoisie to secede their power if there’s no one to hand it over to. We have to get to the *root* of things.’ She took a deep, shuddering breath and pressed her palms to the table. ‘Before the proletariat takes power, they must *want* to take power!’

‘Alright, alright, don’t get hysterical!’ Grisha flung his hands up. ‘We get your point.’

Mikhail intercepted Margarita’s look in the hopes of stifling an outburst. ‘I think it’s a fine idea.’

Stepan nodded. ‘It’s not the generals we must convince, but the common foot-soldier.’

Sasha idly swirled his glass of tea. ‘And the practicalities?’

‘I can dress as a textile worker, or a student. And I can make the disguises myself, so it won’t be any burden to you.’

‘You’ll just stand there with an armful of illegal literature, will you?’ laughed Grisha. ‘There’s a difference between bravery and recklessness, you know.’

‘They can be disguised. Rolled-up in newspapers, or...well, Madame Glazkova often makes flyers. If pamphlets were hidden inside...’

Roman's eyes gleamed with pride even as he shook his head. 'It would be too easy to trace to you.'

'He's right. It would be a tricky lie to wriggle out of if a gendarme cornered you or someone gave you away.' Mikhail gnawed his thumbnail. 'Wouldn't you be frightened?'

Only her great affection for him stopped her losing her temper. 'If fear stopped us, would we be sitting here at all?'

'There's a woman's natural stubbornness, and then there's Margarita's obstinacy.' Sasha crossed his arms but he didn't sound angry.

'Or...' she said, 'if they were hidden... I could pretend to sell trinkets, or bring food to the poor. A nice enough dress and a spook will believe anything.'

Outside, meeting finished, Roman kissed her briefly but declined to come back with her. Too much work to do, he said. It hardly mattered; she was so pleased with her victory she practically floated home, the threat of Okhrana tails already forgotten.

She would distribute the next issue! There was much to prepare – making costumes, sourcing wares, scouting locations. But that was later. Tonight she only wanted to bask in fantasies of handing pamphlets to crowds of workers, making grand speeches to rally them behind the cause.

Her daydreams evaporated at the threshold of flat 17 with the quickness of morning fog. 'Varushka!' Slumped in the low chair, she hid her face in her hands; a futile gesture given the volume and violence of her sobbing. Margarita dropped to her side in a helpless flutter. 'Varushka, what's wrong? What's happened?'

She flung her arms around Margarita's neck, nearly knocking her down. 'Christ preserve us, where have you been?'

‘I thought you were out, Varusya, I didn’t –’ Guilt snuffed pride like a candle. Varya’s upper lip was cut and her left eye was the colour and size of a beetroot, almost swelled shut.

Margarita snatched a cloth from the cupboard and used it to snap an icicle off the windowsill and hit it with a pot until it broke into fragments. Tying the corners, she handed it to Varya who pressed it to her discoloured eye. ‘What happened?’

‘*Kozel* stole my money. I always get paid first, ever since...you remember that one who did his business without giving me a kopek. Anyway, I took the money and did what he wanted, then he pinned me against the wall in the stairwell and I couldn’t fight him off otherwise I’d have fallen, and I couldn’t call for help or I’d get picked up.’

Bringing up the yellow ticket was pointless. Registered prostitutes didn’t have much more in the way of protection or justice than unregistered ones in circumstances like these – it wasn’t the men who were arrested.

‘He started tearing my clothes and finally found it in my shoe, and he says, “Filthy whore, was no good anyway.” That fired me up, and I said, “I might have done better if I’d had more to work with.” Which is why...’ She lifted the cloth from her face. The eye looked worse glistening with melted ice. Like tainted goat meat. ‘So I start yelling, calling him every name I could think up and hitting him with my shoe. He pushed me and I hit my head on the stairs and then he was gone with his money and the man’s before him too.’

Tears overwhelmed her narrative and Margarita, kneeling powerless beside her, felt swamped with a killing rage. ‘We’ve got to do something,’ she said at last.

‘Oh, we do, eh? I came home scared half to death, and where were you?’ Tears streamed from her right eye and oozed sporadically from her left.

The truth crowded her lips, stymied by the consequences of speaking it. She'd wind up mouldering behind a cell door like Figner or dangling in Memorial Square like Petukhov. No, she couldn't break her oath of secrecy with *Trezubets*. But inaction was unacceptable.

On Saturday she bought a knife, small and easily hidden in a dress pocket, and held it out to Varya. 'Gut any man who tries to take what's yours.'

'I don't have the stomach for that.' She looked almost sorry.

So the knife went under the floorboard with the illegal literature and Margarita designed disguises with new fervour. The more recruiting she did, the better. Socialism promised more for women, after all.



Considering she hardly recognised herself in her mulberry dress, black pinafore, and long braid, she was confident no police spies would recognise her, either. The costume of the Radara University *studetka* featured a delicate white fichu wrapped across her bust and over her shoulders in a tight x, and engageante sleeves with intricate Broderie Anglaise. Such a getup left her feeling trifle ridiculous...and a little wistful. Born to a different family, in a different life, she might have worn such a uniform legitimately.

If she were picked up as an imposter it would be her shoes which betrayed her. Tattered heels and scuff marks weren't serviceable for girls who could afford higher education. When seated, like now in a far corner of *Plod Znaniya*, she was careful to keep her ankles crossed and tucked as far back as possible.

St. Petersburg's students decision to strike for corporate rights ('to be recognized as students and thus morally and legally treated with respect as Russian subjects, not publically whipped like peasants') had sparked a wave of similar demands and student strikes across the Empire these last two weeks. While Margarita thought their platform needed work – a

peasant was more deserving of a lashing from a *nagaika*-wielding officer than a student – she set her reservations aside. Now was the crucial moment to infiltrate the student movement, while they were riled up and edging toward action. *Trezubets* could be their bridge to revolution.

A change had come over the café since her visit with Roman in October. Not quite five months and the atmosphere had evolved from an intellectual salon to a radical hotbed. Young men debated, discussed, vacillated about what they should do and why they should do it; she transformed their words into a coded sketch to jog her memory.

‘Are our goals political?’ asked one fellow, round of body, face, and spectacles. ‘Or are they academic?’

‘Why not both?’ asked another.

‘Because,’ said the round student, ‘our goals will dictate our terms and our concessions.’

‘Concessions be damned!’ said a hothead. His peers shouted him down.

‘We must decide,’ said one. ‘We want to be treated as equal citizens across Russia, a class of our own. Do we confine ourselves to attaining our academic, corporate rights and eschew larger political demands? Or do we embrace the call for governmental reforms and changes to the law?’

‘I think,’ said a man with unkempt, dark hair and a serious expression, ‘we’re ignoring the most important question of all.’

‘And what is that, Sergei Vladimirovich?’

‘Is it possible to achieve any of these demands, even the most moderate, within the inherent confines of the autocracy?’ A murmur circled their table and Margarita leaned nearer, impressed by his candour and perception. ‘Our society is structured around one specific aim: keeping the common man in the muck where he belongs. We may argue we are

not common men, but in the eyes of the government and police I'm afraid we are. Are we strong enough, as a class, to force them to meet our demands? Concede their power? I'm not sure.'

'What's this, Sergei? Are you turning revolutionary on us?'

When at last Sergei responded it was in measured tones. 'If I sound angry, it's because I am. I've a cousin on the Vannovskii Commission investigating what transpired at Rumiantsev Square. He said that one officer tried to convince his fellows to use restraint by pointing out that students are not workers. And do you know what his fellow replied? "The orders are to beat."'

They murmured again, gravely this time. But Margarita, lips to the brim of her cup, gasped and took in a lungful of hot tea.

Choking, she tried to mop up the mess which had ruined her sketch and no doubt stained her fichu, cursing her lack of revolutionary discretion. Every man at the student table turned to watch her scramble.

'Are you alright?' asked Sergei.

'Y-yes,' she wheezed. 'Terribly sorry.'

The round student squinted over his spectacles. 'Do you also attend Radara University?'

She nodded through another cough, blinking back tears.

'I've never seen you before,' said the hothead.

'As though you knew every girl on the campus!' laughed his friend.

'What is it you study?' asked Sergei, ignoring the raucous jeers of his friends.

Margarita swallowed hard, throat still burning. '*Akushertsvo*,' she said.

'That explains why we've not seen you,' chuckled the round student. 'Not many midwives on architecture and engineering courses.'

She looked at Sergei, at the quiet strength in his face. ‘Did the police really say such a thing?’ He nodded. ‘Monsters. A worker does not exist to be whipped, and only a coward harms a fellow human being simply because they were ordered to!’

They stared at her. Perhaps she’d pushed too hard, too fast – Sergei’s chair scraped the floor as he moved to one side. ‘Come join us, little sister.’

‘Yes,’ said the round student. ‘Come and help us decide.’

‘To strike or not to strike? That is the question,’ chuckled the hothead. Margarita brought her chair over, careful to keep her shoes hidden.

One greasy-haired fellow with a face to match lit a cigarette. ‘Striking is futile. It’s as Sergei says, in an autocracy such acts have no meaning because we’ve no *rechtsstaat*, as they say in the west, no rule of law, no justice.’

‘Pity there’s not an *advokat* among us,’ laughed the round student. Margarita clamped her teeth over her tongue.

‘On the contrary,’ Sergei said. ‘It has all the more meaning because of the autocracy. *La vérité est en marche et rien ne l'arrêtera.*’ He smiled at Margarita, who smiled back...not quickly enough. ‘Zola,’ he said, as if in explanation. Letting on that she did not speak French, too, would reveal her as an imposter.

‘A strike shall only hurt us, in the end,’ said the greasy student, ‘not the university or the government.’

‘I disagree,’ said the round student. ‘It would be an excellent opportunity to publicise our position, gather ground support.’

Now was the moment. ‘And how, exactly, do you publicise them now?’

They looked around the table, each waiting for another to speak up. They might think her a spy, but it was vital to gauge their receptivity to publication in *Trezubets*, although she suspected most would find even that too radical.

The greasy student said, 'Posters, mainly.'

'Unfortunately they're taken down almost immediately,' added the round student with a heavy sigh.

The hothead stood again, banging the table. 'Pah! Leave the posters! If we take to the streets they'll – '

'Oh shut your mouth, Stanislav.'

'Yes, do pipe down.'

The greasy student pulled the hothead back into his seat, and Margarita's shoulders drooped. This ground was fertile, but cultivating anything sustainable would require tremendous effort.

Rundown footwear presented no problems when visiting the tenements since her boots, though not as fine as her bourgeois costume required, were hidden by the snow.

This disguise wasn't perfect. Margarita had access to fabrics and materials but couldn't source the required accessories. Perhaps workers wouldn't see the difference. A fine dress and a clean face might be enough. Certainly it would keep the police from suspecting her.

Their complacency would be their undoing.

On her arm hung a basket filled with rolls and cakes Mikhail had secured from a sympathetic friend. Each pastry was wrapped in a layer of paraffin paper, an issue of *Trezubets*, and another layer of paraffin paper. Ingenuity tasted sweet as the treat she carried, and she watched the clock tower as if she could will the hands to strike the hour.

Discovering she expected no payment, they thrust filthy, chapped hands into her basket, nearly toppling her, and devoured whatever was in their fists. Her basket was empty in under half an hour. 'Will you be back, *barinya*?' one man had asked, his chilblained nose

dripping into his beard, jaw working side to side like a cow with cud.

The honorific made her cringe but the others chimed in before she could speak. ‘Yes, do come back!’ said a woman whose jacket was now speckled with crumbs. Others trudged to their tenements, waving to her with paraffin paper clutched in their hands. Success, she’d thought.

Fool.

Her visits to the university and various barracks and tenements were necessarily sporadic in order to avoid detection, especially as the mood on campus reached boiling point. It was nearly a week before she returned to the factory district, basket in the crook of her arm.

This bunch were less frantic than the first. They wanted to compliment her kindness, to tell her of their lives, and she listened gladly.

‘Why are you here, *barinya*?’ The woman bit into a roll and observed through her mouthful, ‘Ladies don’t come to this part of town so often.’

‘You’re a lady,’ she replied.

The woman eyed Margarita’s coat and gloves. ‘In the way a wolf and a lapdog are the same, perhaps.’

‘But surely – ’

‘*Barinya!*’ A bearded man came running back with a copy of *Trezubets* clenched in his fist, waving it over his head, oblivious to Margarita hastening to quiet him. ‘What is this, *barinya*?’

She took the man’s fists in her hands. ‘Hush now. Bring this home and read it. Read it to your friends, your family. Ask yourselves: What is to be done?’

The man looked down at it, puzzled. The woman discovered her copy pressed between the paraffin with equal bemusement.

‘I’m sorry, *barinya*.’ The man handed the pamphlet back. ‘I can’t.’

‘Me either,’ said the woman, also returning hers.

Margarita closed her eyes, momentarily dazed by her own stupidity. Within her own building only a small fraction of residents were literate; why had she not considered that? She was becoming as blinkered as her comrades. ‘Do you know anyone who can read?’

After quite a long silence the man said: ‘Pyotr, from the steelworks.’

‘Excellent. Find him. Find anyone who might want to learn the truth about Russia, how to cure her ills and put an end to our misfortune.’

Neither appeared to notice that Margarita included herself among them. The man stared at the pamphlet as if it held answers he’d been searching for, but the lady shook her head. ‘I’ve a job and a roof over my family’s head, *barinya*, so I am very fortunate.’

It hadn’t occurred to her that she deserved more than an unsafe job for meagre pay to maintain a dirty, crowded room, all of which could be taken from her at any moment. Margarita left the courtyard a good deal less confident than she’d walked in.



In March, Radara’s students called for solidarity with their fellows in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and across the region. They walked out of lectures, occupied an auditorium, and set up a *khodka*, a student committee, to discuss demands and concerns. Having achieved consensus, they took these concerns to the street, posting flyers and calling for the right to assemble, to be recognized as Russian subjects, and even demanded independent checks on police brutality.

‘Of course it’s a shame those students were hurt but they rather brought it upon themselves,’ said Princess Oleneva. Kneeling at her feet to hem a spring skirt, Margarita listened in strained silence. ‘It didn’t happen here, so why all the fuss?’

Glazkova offered her another lump of sugar. 'My heart is with those poor *jeunes garçons*. I might have been inclined to sympathy if they'd better comported themselves.'

'Hooligans!' snapped the princess. 'Every last one deserves expulsion. They don't like the way of things they can go to Siberia with the rest of the radicals. That will change their tune.'

No doubt a jab to the ankle would change yours, Margarita thought. To prevent this becoming reality, she snipped the thread and pocketed the needle far from Oleneva's soft flesh then leaned back on her knees, sure to look the princess in the eye. 'You're finished,' she said.

On her bed in flat 17, she and Roman watched from a blanket cocoon as students streamed through the alley below. She'd never seen anything like it. 'Look at them!' she gushed, squeezing his hand. 'I wonder how many of them have read *Trezubets*?'

'Mm. Is that likely?'

'I hid them all over campus, and I've heard it mentioned in the café.'

'Mm,' he said again.

Another group flowed by waving rolled-up posters overhead. Her heart beat with their enthusiasm, their determination, and she unwrapped herself from the sheet.

Roman rolled over. 'Where are you going?'

'I want to be with them,' she said, scooping up her skirt and wondering where her other stocking had gotten to.

He held her wrist. 'Don't be ridiculous, Ritochka, of course you can't.'

'What? If we worked together, in solidarity, we could achieve –'

'Now's not our time. This is impulsive action, not political action. We must be patient.'

She shivered slightly in the damp air. ‘But...it could lead to more.’

‘Even if it did, it would mean nothing. They aren’t prepared, and nor are the workers, to make real change. Come back to bed, my *tsvesti*. Forget them.’

Reluctantly, she dropped her clothes and swung her legs back into bed, accepting his caresses but unable to focus on them. There was potential here which the socialist movement and *Trezubets* specifically should embrace and capitalise on.

So why wouldn’t he?

CHAPTER VI

April – November 1899

From Tomsk to Warsaw, Kazan to St. Petersburg, the Okhrana arrested any student they reasonably linked to the strike movement – and plenty unreasonably. Once the government adopted conscription as punishment for strikers, the movement was curbed with no tangible achievements. Suetsky had been a particularly vocal champion of this punishment, which Margarita thought a bit rich considering he'd paid his way out of service as a youth, to be replaced by a peasant who couldn't afford to do the same.

Female students, of course, could not be conscripted. So after a scant 15 years of admission, Suetsky revoked women's access to Radara University, expelling them all regardless of their involvement in the strikes and barring them from future enrolment.

Margarita burned with such hate she expected to crumble to ash.

The rest of that spring was wasted trying to re-connect with the student contingent. She crisscrossed campus at night – she no longer had any right to be there during the day – depositing leaflets hoping to single-handedly rally them back to action. Shrubs, benches, and dainty fences were perfect hiding places, but more and more often she discovered them rumpled or shredded or trodden underfoot and had to accept that, for now, they were beyond her reach.

With summer's arrival the students dispersed and she turned her attention to the factory district. 'I don't see why you bother,' said Sasha. 'They aren't ready, it will accomplish nothing.'

'And it's not safe,' Roman said, not for the first time. 'The students have gone quiet but the Okhrana are more vigilant than ever. Have you forgotten what happened to Grisha?'

He'd been trailed for nearly an hour by two different sets of Okhrana agents and only avoided arrest by disappearing over someone's back wall, which would have been more farcical than infuriating if he hadn't been carrying *Trezubets* documents in his coat at the time. 'I'm not *that* careless,' she huffed.

'You'll slip up one day,' Grisha said, the lines of his face hard, 'and when you do —'

'What Grisha means is that we all must be cautious of police traps.'

'Yes,' Mikhail nodded. 'We're all human, and all prone to missteps.'

But distribution had lost its allure. Aside from being harder to balance against shifts at Glazkova's than secretarial work, it had shown her irrefutably that a good deal more groundwork was necessary before *Trezubets* could even apply to the very people it was meant to liberate.

The pamphlets weighed her down, sweat itched under her arms and down her back. The first indication that she'd crossed into the factory district was the odour: a rotting breakfast smell of sulphur, offal, and wilted vegetables, with a distinct undertone of unwashed bodies. High, foreboding walls rose around the factories like little prisons behind which the Medelny River wove varicoloured as a chameleon with runoff dyes from textile and ceramic plants. Churning machinery made a constant percussion under the quarter's clamour, and as she moved aside for a woman driving a cart of dirty washing, she thought of Varya.

It was obvious in a way it hadn't been before (perhaps proximity made the difference) that when she criticised Margarita for neglecting her work, this was what goaded her. Any of the narrow streets Margarita wandered might be where Varvara had played as a girl. Any shuffling drunk might be the parents she'd wanted to escape. Varya's tight-fistedness and hatred of taverns were bound up with her fear of returning to this place. Their life in flat 17

was a step up, if only by half, and she understood now how vital it was to Varya that they not lose it.

The road was pocked by puddles although the weather had been dry. She hitched her skirt to avoid dragging it through the unidentified liquid and caught the eye of a man in an oversized coat, his gaze steady on her under the brim of his cap. Her breath hitched in her chest.

Shpion.

Face and hands: smooth, scrubbed clean. Cap: new, no patches, no frayed fibres. And there was meat on him; he'd eaten well, and recently. He looked positively healthy. A devilish impulse urged her to offer him a treat from her basket, dare him to reveal himself as a spy – but she carried on as if she hadn't seen.

Where could she go? To abandon her mission was unthinkable, but if the only alternative was arrest... She took a hard left. Onwards past the tavern, full even at this hour, and the tannery whose perpetual metallic fug thickened to suffocating levels in summer. Eyes watering, she retched into the crook of her elbow.

*

Growing up, they had kept chickens and the odd goat; the cloying stench of blood and warm entrails filled the kitchen and coated Margarita's nose and throat like paint, her mother's burly arm rising and falling, hunched like a blacksmith at the anvil, hacking through bone with unholy fury. The moist resistance of tendons, the splintering crunch, the animal grunts from her red face slicked with – sweat, tears? Her father had been dead six months; it was the first time she'd feared her own mother.

*

While it was unlikely the *shpion* would follow her here she had no desire to linger. Glancing back, she thought she glimpsed him but poor timing meant she saw only bricks. A cocktail of desperation and dread sloshed through her. She must get home, somehow.

The chimes of the little church – the cleanest, sturdiest structure in the district – were swallowed by the bonging factory bell marking the hour like a death knell as the spy materialised at the other end of the street. She sank to one knee and inspected her shoe, fiddling with the laces as if to tie them. Think, think! Her breath came in flitting gasps. What could she do? She couldn't run, a society lady on a mission of mercy should have nothing to fear from the police. He'd pursue at best, shoot at worst.

But if she dawdled –

She rose, smoothed her skirt, and retraced her steps, too frightened to look back. Her heart beat *hurry hurry*, yet she tensed every muscle to keep a leisurely pace. Such heedless confidence in the face of her comrades' warnings, with Grisha so recently tailed. *Stubborn bitch.*

Footsteps rounded the corner behind her. There was an alley nearby whose entrance was blocked by rubbish; so long as he didn't know about it, she could slip past and get out through the market behind the station. She might lose him yet, if she was fast...

Relief swelled as the heap came into view. Running the last few meters, she slipped behind a lumpy mattress but two figures appeared at the other end of the passage, features obscured by the shadows of laundry airing overhead. Retreat was impossible, the spy would nab her. But if she went forward – A weight clamped across her chest, she couldn't breathe, she mustn't faint no matter what she mustn't faint not here.

'Excuse me, you lost, *barinya*?'

She stumbled, caught herself on the bricks. Two women, arm in arm and heads together, goggled at her beneath faded headscarves. One was so fair-haired she had neither

brows nor lashes. Margarita reached for her with a shaking hand. 'Please...a man, he's following me –'

'Ugh!' The leftmost woman rolled her eyes. 'Some drunk from *Garshok Meda*? I wish that tavern would burn down, eh Gashka? Save us a world of worry.'

'Probably my husband, he's wild at the best of times.'

'He's – still after me. Please.'

'Bring her to our building Anna,' said the browless woman. 'Don't you worry, we'll see to him.'

Anna remained outside while Gashka stood guard in the hall, blocking Margarita's hiding place under a crumbling tenement stairwell. 'Don't worry,' she smiled. 'Anna will sort things. The brass of him, daring to approach a lady! He ought to know better.'

Gashka's voice filled her head and the smell of mould from under the stairs made her dizzy. She closed her eyes, trying to calm the pulse jumping in her throat. Then – the pamphlets! If he found her he'd search her basket, find the literature – why hadn't she hidden them better? But where to keep them instead? Where, where –

She dropped to her knees so abruptly that Gashka cried out and tore the wrappings apart so crumbs scattered across the filthy floor, pulling leaflets from between paraffin sheets and stuffing them anywhere she could reach, up her breeches, down her shirtwaist, up her sleeves, shredding them in trembling fingers.

Gashka took her wrist. 'Stop, stop! Whatever it is, we'll burn it. Up the stairs, come. Top of the landing.'

It was even smaller than flat 17, darker, with a stronger odour of cabbage, fetid lard, and its placement directly above the privy infused the very walls with an inescapable reek of faeces and ammonia. It took everything in her power not to retch. 'My husband and my older sons, they'll be drowning in drink for hours, same for the two lads who moved in last

month.’ An old woman lay in the bed, staring from eyes glassy as marbles. ‘Mother-in-law,’ said Gashka, ‘looks after the little ones but she’s half-senile, won’t even know you’re here. Give me those papers.’

Kneeling at the little stove, Gashka took pamphlet after pamphlet and, dracontine, blew on the pages so the flames leapt and belched a black, acrid cloud into the room. Margarita ran to the window and shouldered the warped frame open which cleared some of the smoke but the stink of shit was more pungent than ever and from deep in the gloom came the cries of frightened children.

The flat door opened and slammed shut again. ‘*Presvyataya Bogoroditsa*, has the room caught fire?’ Anna coughed.

‘No,’ said Gashka, waving the air clear with a soiled rag, lashless eyes closed. ‘The lady needed something burned in case the man caught up with her. Did you get rid of him?’

‘Aye, scared him to death I think.’

‘Good riddance.’ Gashka relit the candles in the *krasniy ugol*’ and crossed herself. ‘There now, *barinya*, you look a horror. Sit, catch your breath. He’s gone now.’

Margarita sat on the space Gashka made by the old mother-in-law’s feet and did her best not to meet the vacant stare, declining the watery tea and rye bread offered her. It might be all they had, and besides she felt sick to her stomach.

Anna picked up a singed piece of pamphlet which had fluttered to the floor. ‘What didn’t you want him seeing?’

Margarita looked at Anna’s patched skirt, at Gashka tucking an infant onto her hip and letting it suckle something from the smoky rag. A tiny girl peeped from behind her skirt, wiping the back of her nose with a soiled hand. ‘I wanted to...I’d hoped...’

Anna leaned forward. ‘Are you from the Sunday Circle?’

‘W-what?’

‘Yes, they come round sometimes, talking about – what was it, Gashka?’

‘Economic conditions.’

‘Yes, that’s it, and reading and history and such. We want to go, eh Gashka, but who has the time? Are you from the Circle?’

Margarita pulled wrinkled pamphlets from her sleeves and smoothed them over her knee. ‘Take these. Perhaps they’ll help you.’

Anna looked at the stack, squinting. ‘I can’t read. But Pyotr from the steelworks can.’

‘Kristoff,’ said Gashka, peering at the cover over Anna’s shoulder. ‘My husband, too.’

‘Ask them to read it,’ Margarita said, ‘to share it with you, with others. Give it to your husband.’

Gashka shook her head. ‘No use doing that. Kristoff doesn’t think it’s right.’

‘What, exactly?’ Watching Gashka shake her head, a roar mounted in her chest because she knew what.

Gashka wiped her crummy hands on her skirt. ‘You read it to us, *barinya*.’

‘Yes!’ pealed Anna. ‘Like a classroom, eh Gashka!’

It was a bad idea, not least because if they proved unresponsive it would be difficult to escape the quarter and impossible to return. Except...this enthusiasm, this hunger for knowledge couldn’t be ignored.

Margarita flicked through the pages, trying to find a piece which would best speak to their circumstances. A loud clang made her jump; Gashka was scrubbing a heavy pot, Anna picking sprouts off unwashed potatoes. ‘Don’t mind me,’ said Gashka, thick arms straining to steady the pot. ‘I need something ready for when the fellows get back. Carry on.’

One of Gashka’s children, a completely colourless little girl, put her hand on Margarita’s knee and stared from protuberant, jaundiced eyes. What sort of future would this

child have if things carried on as they were?

She began to read.



‘You stayed in her room after you’d been followed?’ Roman put his hands over his face and drew a long, slow breath, then dragged them down so the skin pulled around his eyes and lips. ‘Have you taken leave of your senses?’

This was not going at all as she’d planned. She’d avoided meetings the past two weeks while she decided how best to confess that the latest issue had gone up in smoke, focusing instead on neglected work for Glazkova and extra chores around the flat. ‘I don’t know what sin you’ve committed,’ Varya said, looking at the washed and stacked crockery, ‘but if this is your apology then by all means do it again!’

The solution to her *Trezubets* troubles came unexpectedly whilst lying in bed designing a new pattern for Glazkova’s fall line. Free drawing always helped her think and she’d doodled in the corner of her page, first a figure, a small crowd – a strike, she decided, giving one a little flag. Poor fellow. He’d doubtless be hanged for his pains. He was the base of a pyramid built on his back, a back broken by industry and –

She’d jolted upright. Grabbing a clean page she’d set to it, tongue between her teeth. The bent backs of her strikers now bore a heavily laden table surrounded by glittering men and women; above them, the military, armed and murderous; above them, corpulent bishops and priests swathed in opulent robes; above them, straight-backed and haughty aristocrats and ministers. And at the very top, the tsar and tsarina on thrones bedecked with the autocratic eagle.

This was how she’d get through to the workers.

But her comrades were focused on the context and not her idea. ‘You’re positive her

lodger didn't recognize you?' asked Grisha again.

'How could he? I was on my way out and he was too drunk to see straight. Thought I was an assistant at Petrov's, some shop or other. I said it was kind of him to remember me and slipped out.'

'Petrov is a milliner,' said Stepan, 'Exclusively hires young ladies; they advise the women and flirt with the men. A not ineffective business model.'

Mikhail frowned, twisting his goatee. 'Margarita, you mustn't be so foolhardy. Suppose he goes to Petrov's and you aren't there?'

'Why would he go to a milliner when he can hardly afford to keep body and soul together?'

Roman kept his eyes on the table. 'If you were flirting with him...'

'I was friendly, that's hardly flirting.'

A flicker of scepticism crossed their faces. 'Even so,' said Sasha, 'a low profile keeps us out of prison.'

'Or worse,' added Grisha. 'I'd gladly sacrifice myself for the cause – we all would – but we're not much good as exiles or martyrs. And you risk that making a spectacle of yourself.'

'I gave him a platitude, nothing more.' The anger in her chest crystallised into barbed words which crawled up her throat. 'Who knows, perhaps seduction is the way forward. A wink here and giggle there, a man will tell me anything.'

Roman banged his fist on the table. 'Damn it, Margarita, be serious. We're worried for you. Yes, for you,' he said, predicting her accusation of self-interest. 'If you won't think of yourself, or us, consider our movement. A raid would spell the end of *Trezubets* and endanger comrades in other cities. We may pride ourselves on discretion but there's no

telling what a man might say under tor –’ His searching look left her small and contrite. ‘Do you understand?’

She picked at her sleeve. ‘Yes.’ Any suggestion she broached now would be considered a deflection or compensation for her mistake. Instead, she waited until the meeting ended and asked Roman to speak with her. Privately.

Safely locked in his office next door, he lit a lamp and sat on the corner of his desk, expression inscrutable, a smile masking a scowl or the other way around. She straightened her shoulders. ‘Roman, I’d – I want more.’

He clasped his hands tighter. ‘From me?’

‘No, darling, don’t be silly.’ She settled beside him and wormed her fingers between his knuckles. ‘Within *Trezubets*. I want more responsibility.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Don’t misunderstand, it’s an honour being in charge of correspondence and funds, and distributing. But I’m doing an awful lot of work for no credit.’

‘Are you looking for fame?’

Roman’s voice had never gone hard like that when addressing her. Cold dread prickled up her neck. ‘Of course not.’

‘This is not a movement of individuals. We must work together as equals to pave the way for an equal society.’

‘I agree. I’m not asking for special treatment.’

‘Yet you’re demanding credit, as if to make a name for yourself. Millions have toiled, and will toil, in total anonymity. Only martyrs have names, you know...’

Margarita crossed her arms. ‘Then I guess you’ll all be happy to take your various names *off* the pamphlet?’

His heel tapped the desk. ‘What did you have in mind?’

‘Drawings.’

Roman pushed himself up and moved to the fireplace, taking a small metal case from the mantle. ‘And who would distribute?’

‘Me.’

‘Mm. And secretarial work?’

‘I could still take minutes and balance finances, but Grisha could resume correspondence and editing.’

‘We don’t typically feature illustrations.’ He sat behind the desk and opened what she now saw was a cigarette case, shining silver and enamel beautifully etched with an unfamiliar skyline. ‘It’s never been part of our purview, it distracts from the words.’

‘How are we meant to reach people with only words?’ The match flared in the gloom, and she watched it shiver in anticipation, watched his cigarette glow at its touch. ‘Most can’t even read, Roman, the literate ones read to the rest. If we want them on our side we need to be on theirs, reach them at their level.’ From her skirt pocket she produced the shaded, detailed final draft of her hierarchy sketch. ‘One or two each issue, just to summarize the main articles, will expand readership and our impact.’

He tipped it to the light and analysed every detail, scowling smile back in place. She chewed the inside of her lip; an age passed.

‘This is...excellent. You’ve a gift, truly. And you’re right.’ He exhaled a stream of smoke not unlike the factory chimneys. ‘We’re relying on Sunday circles to educate the workers rather than connect with them ourselves. Well, you’ll require materials, and we’ll have to rearrange the layout, but if that’s a responsibility you’re willing to take on...’

‘You mean I can do it?’

All traces of displeasure disappeared. ‘Certainly, my love.’

‘Oh!’ She threw herself in his lap, arms around his neck. ‘Thank you! I promise it will make all the difference.’

‘The revolution will start at the stroke of your pen, I’ve no doubt.’ His nose grazed the edge of her ear, his breath a sighing sea. ‘Is Varvara home tonight, or...will you be alone?’

Margarita set her teeth against his shoulder, hungry enough to draw blood. It had been weeks. ‘She’s home but...well, we could –’ she stroked his face and interspersed her words with kisses to soften their sting, ‘go to your home. I – haven’t seen it yet, and – we’d have more privacy. I could – stay – all night...’

‘Or,’ and he lifted her, awkwardly, depositing her too hard on top of his desk. ‘We could stay here.’

‘What – in your office?’ she squealed, torn between excitement and vexation.

‘Why not?’ He chuckled. Flipped her skirt over her knees. ‘Then, when I’m trapped here tomorrow, whenever I touch this desk it’ll be as though I were touching you all over again.’

‘And if someone hears?’ Somehow she pulled him in by his high collar despite her conflicted feelings, yanked the purple satin puff tie from his throat.

Roman’s lips were so close they shared a breath and the words he spoke might almost have come from hers. ‘Then I shall have to keep you quiet.’

Trips to the cafés and factory district were dedicated more to observation than interaction now, armed with sketchbooks to record their strain and worry, pockmarked cheeks, faded

clothing. From a dark corner of *Plod Znaniya* she captured a huddle of students but, exercising artistic license, depicted them as more enthusiastic than in fact they were.

Subjects studied, she'd turn to invention. Workers straining at oversized machinery (whose details proved too technical and had to be abandoned) or crowded in dingy lodgings; students gathered in an auditorium or apprehended by gendarmes. She captured the tsar's aloof, pointed face and Suetsky's reptilian simper. When deadlines loomed she limited herself to archetypes: fat, indolent capitalists or sturdy peasant women made of iron.

'It's nice to see you drawing again.' Varya spared a glance from her sewing with a wistful smile. 'There's something...I don't know, comforting about you over there with that look you get, somehow dreamy and focused at the same time. I missed it.'

'I'm glad to be back at it.' Margarita blew away some errant dust. 'Truthfully, I never feel quite myself without a pencil in hand.'

'What's your latest project?'

'Nothing, just a sketch.' She angled her pad from Varvara's prying eyes. 'Go on, you've a long way left on that sash. Perhaps I'll show you when it's finished.'

Varya clicked her tongue, and once her eyes were safely down Margarita resumed her portrait, blurring the ethereal light of the beautiful corner behind Varya's very earthly labours, making her an ikon of domestic toil.

Incorporating images required new machinery for the *Trezubets* apparatus, new skills and a new space; Mikhail sourced the necessary tools for storage in his workshop. Indignation at her initial awkwardness with the drypoint spurred her to quick mastery. After a design was etched onto a copper plate it was daubed with ink, covered with printed pages, rolled through the press, and there it was: her picture in print, capable of infinite

reproduction.

She signed each with a pseudonym – every member had two to make the Okhrana believe they faced a revolutionary hydra. She'd chosen Argunova after the serf-turned-painter whose work Roman had shown her one Saturday in the gallery, and Morevna after the Warrior Queen from her father's fairy tales. Her indelible marks on the movement.

Even in the city the foraging activities of her girlhood stood her in good stead, revealing abundant delicacies in the woods outside town. Her favourites had always been the juicy blackberries her mother had transformed into her beloved *vatrushki*. She'd thrived on the challenge of harvesting around biting thorns and stinging nettles, learning young that taking risks others wouldn't yielded the sweetest fruit. Mushroom hunting, with its myriad flavours, shapes, and textures, was more peaceful, exploring an autumnal limbo land where summer's insect chorus was long gone and the woods descended into winter's sleep.

As a small gesture of thanks, she headed to Gashka's flat armed with a basket of mushrooms she'd picked that morning across the river, plus some boiled sausage and a still-warm loaf of *stolichniy* from the market. Hopefully she would enjoy it...and the latest *Trezubets* featuring a comparison of the tsar's opulent palace against the dark, dilapidated rooms of the workers.

A bird of fear fluttered in her stomach; guards were stationed throughout the district, swarming the barracks. Her spy could be somewhere among them, seeking her out. Sunlight bounced off the sabre of an approaching soldier and she clenched her fist, the bark strands of the basket handle biting into her palm.

Confidence might lower suspicion. 'Good day.' She smiled, fluttered her lids, blithely attempting to pass the guard who had hair like an oft-used copper pot.

He raised his hand. 'You can't go in there.'

‘Whyever not?’

Propaganda had flooded the city, he said. Factory managers demanded results and since the police had, thus far, failed to turn up the source, guards were posted at the barracks to search the workers. Nothing inflammatory would get in or out. And obviously a young lady in decent clothes had no business in the barracks.

‘If I didn’t have business here,’ she said, very slowly, ‘I wouldn’t have come.’

‘You don’t live here and I ain’t letting you in. Two irrefutable facts.’

She wasn’t going to waste time arguing and she refused to go home having achieved nothing; two more facts. But what could she do? Workers trudged down the planks which passed for sidewalks, faces shielded from the sun by flat caps and headscarves. And then, from far away, he said: ‘I’ll have to search your basket, and you too, before I can let you leave.’

He could search the blasted basket all he liked, and if he was as hapless as he looked he could even search her person. He wouldn’t find anything. But if he was clever, or thorough...or if he summoned a female officer, who would have no qualms about rifling through her petticoats and who may well find the little pocket she’d stitched on the inside...

‘But it’s just a picnic,’ Margarita said, swishing the basket.

‘Ah,’ he smiled, ‘then perhaps you’ll share some before you make your way.’

Greedy bastard, demanding a bribe from Gashka’s gift! A girl not much younger than her shuffled forward with the other workers. Underfed and angular. Pretty eyes framed by strands of dingy brown hair straggling from her pink headscarf. ‘But it’s for my sister!’ Margarita pulled her from the line and looped their arms. ‘Darling, this big idiot doesn’t believe I’ve come to see you!’

‘What the hell are you on about?’

The girl sneered under creased eyebrows, and Margarita lifted the basket on her free arm. 'I've brought us a picnic, but you can't eat any of it if he doesn't let me in.'

A flicker of mischief, or hunger, lit her brown eyes. '*Durachit*' she said, laughing at the guard. 'Can't you see the resemblance? Go on and let her in, Volodya, we don't hardly ever see each other.'

'Is that so, Katya? You've never mentioned any sister before.'

'Sure, but you and I don't *talk* much, do we?' Katya cooed, running a greasy finger down his brass buttons.

'Hey,' he blushed, stepping back. 'She don't look like a Barshkova.'

'Sissy here's married – it's why she's dressed so nice.'

Volodya's face crinkled, suspicious that he was being duped but too dim-witted to see how. 'You ain't trying to pull one over on me, Katyushka?'

'What would I have to pull?'

'If I let her in, will you visit me later? It's been so long...'

Katya waved her hand. 'Don't start your begging! I got time between study circle and bed, I can meet you out back by the slop shed.'

'The slop shed, but Katya – ' She put her hands on her hips and glared at him, a look he was clearly familiar with. 'Yes, of course I'll meet you there. Go on, away with you,' he said to Margarita, thrusting his hands in his pockets and slouching away.

Katya squeezed her closer. 'Come on then, sister dear.'

Only in the corridor of the barracks could Margarita relax again. 'I can't repay you enough for what you did for me just now,' she said.

Katya eyed the basket. 'I reckon you can, since you look like a girl with plenty of secrets...and maybe some food?'

'Only what I brought for Gashka.' Now this little wench was after it!

‘She won’t notice if half of it’s gone. She’ll be grateful enough for scraps.’

‘Half! When there’s one of you and nine in her room.’

‘I got family of my own to feed, haven’t I?’ They moved aside for a man holding a huge jug of *kvass* which sloshed onto the floor as he tripped. ‘Watch it, you goat, can’t you see there’s a lady visiting?’ When Katya turned back it was with a charming smile and softened tone. ‘Okay, okay, so only a little then. Unless you’d rather share with Volodya?’

She plunked on the stairs and held her hands out, cupped and ready to receive. Impudent, Margarita thought with unwilling admiration as she portioned out some of Gashka’s bounty. Katya nibbled the bread like a mouse, clutching it with two hands and guarding it with her body.

‘That Volodya...he’s your boyfriend?’

‘Strong word for it. He’s just fun. Well, when he’s not sulking.’

‘And you aren’t a bit young for that?’ She had forgotten that she’d been much younger the summer she and Timofei had pawed each other in the ripe wheat.

‘No one’s young in the barracks. And I’d rather he did a thorough search of me than anyone else doing a quick one. Besides, I got a right to a little leisure same as anyone. So don’t worry, sis. I can handle myself.’ She sucked each finger clean, making vulgar little noises of pleasure. ‘What business you got with Gashka that you’re bringing her meat and bread? You from the church?’

But an idea had clicked into place and Margarita was no longer listening. ‘Katya...what a pretty name. Did you say you were going to a study circle tonight?’

‘That’s right, a few of us go every Sunday. We’re learning to read and write proper, and about our place in the world.’

‘What place is that?’

‘Scraping away, trying to stay alive. Work’s like a lifeboat keeping us from drowning, but it’s got plenty of holes in it.’

‘So what *should* your place be?’

She pondered this as she picked the last bits of bread from under her jagged nails with her teeth. ‘Well, I like working. It keeps me busy, and I’m good at what I do. Papa’s a basket weaver and I do the same in the factory, only with cloth. But it’d be nice to maybe earn a little more, do better for me and my family, you know? Live somewhere clean.’

‘Fixing the holes in your lifeboat.’ Margarita joined her on the stairs and tore off another piece of bread. ‘Does your group ever talk about how to make that happen?’

Katya took the offered bread slowly, wary of a trap. ‘Sometimes. But we don’t have time for much besides talking.’

‘Except with Volodya,’ Margarita smiled, and Katya laughed.

‘Oh, that’s a break from the talking.’

‘Katya, would it be alright if I sat in on your circle? I’m interested in what you talk about.’

The girl tucked the wad of bread into her cheek. ‘Sure. Why not?’



Perhaps it was her approach. Several times since meeting Katya she had mentioned to her comrades, almost in passing, how much easier things would be with more members. Maintaining correspondence, gathering information, writing, illustrating, printing, distributing: every facet of their operation could be improved by extra hands.

Stepan rubbed his beard, shivering in the cold basement. ‘I’ve given that some thought.’

‘Oh?’ She donned a polite, bland smile as if this had not been her intention all along.

‘Yes, and I think it’s a fine idea.’

Her surprise this time was genuine. ‘You do?’

‘Absolutely. With a few more like you I think we could make real progress!’ Such praise was rare, and she took a moment to savour her pride, warm and fortifying as rum-spiked tea.

Roman sipped his slowly, much too loudly. ‘Does that mean, Stepan, we have previously accomplished nothing?’

‘What? Certainly not, how preposterous.’

Mikhail observed Margarita with smiling eyes over his folded hands. ‘Who shall we include?’

‘Factory workers,’ she said. ‘And students. Some of those expelled after the strikes would be more than happy to work with us.’

Grisha demanded to know what use factory workers would be. ‘If they can’t read they won’t be much use on a *pamphlet*, will they?’

‘You hear second-hand of what happens in the factories – why not direct from the source? Besides, we can pick from the Sunday schools. Lots of workers there looking to raise their consciousness, and some said they were there because of us, because of the drawings.’

At that, even Grisha conceded the idea had merit. No small miracle, and she was grateful in a way that felt strangely malicious.

She turned to Roman, expecting the indulgent look of pride he always reserved for her, but instead found him fuming down at the table top. ‘Were we going to discuss this matter before deciding upon it?’

‘What is this, if not a discussion?’ said Sasha.

He dropped his spoon with a clatter and spoke in the strident, superior tone she knew he adopted for difficult cases. 'We are each of us partners in this enterprise. When I started *Trezubets* I had hoped it would operate more like a democracy.'

'Don't you approve?' she asked. Heartbreaking to think he rejected her idea, particularly when she'd been so proud of it.

His wrinkled brow cleared. 'Of course I do,' he murmured, 'I only wish you'd followed proper procedure.' She wasn't sure what he meant by that – people simply made suggestions and they were debated – but before she could ask he said, 'It's alright. You'll know better next time.'

'Then it's decided,' said Sasha, and the group broke into an excited babble. 'Have you any candidates lined up?'

She knew just the people.

CHAPTER VII

April – June 1900

Passing up a windswept, rainy street, she swooped across the pavement, came to an intersection, and stopped.

‘Shit.’ Peeling back the edges of her hood, Margarita craned her neck to get a better sense of her surroundings. She checked behind her and up the side streets, replaced her hood and resolutely took the rightmost path.

Materialising at the door of a butcher’s a few streets over, she shielded her eyes from the rain and looked to the third floor window where a chipped teapot sat in the window, indicating that it was safe to enter. She spared a glance at the skinned rabbits dangling in the shop display and gave them a respectful nod before entering.

Trezubets’ pride over their role in increased worker agitation was tempered by its adverse effects on their operation. The Okhrana stepped up their efforts, tailing them more often and the agents were harder to shake. In addition, the influx of new members necessitated a change of venue; so many people convening in a closed building was no longer viable.

It had been Katya’s idea to secure a safe house and manage operations from there, a central point for both working and living. She was tired of the barracks, she said, and of the factory, and willing to throw herself wholeheartedly into the work of *Trezubets*.

Margarita wrestled against a pang of self-reproach. This child, at only seventeen, had identified the socialist cause as the most important thing in her life and unreservedly placed it in a position of primacy. She quit her job, left her home without a goodbye to her family or Volodya, and assumed the mantle of dedicated revolutionary.

‘I couldn’t have done it without you,’ Katya said one evening.

Margarita was flabbergasted. ‘How so?’

‘When we met, you said about having time for Volodya and how it detracted from other things. Time’s too precious to waste on a man when I have work to do.’

There’s a lot of courage in that girl, Margarita thought...unlike me.

Balancing her responsibility to Glazkova, and by extension Varya, drained her. At the shop she was distracted, dwelling on the mountain of *Trezubets* work awaiting her; no sooner had she become engrossed in correspondence or illustration when her thoughts turned to the ever-mounting backlog of alteration work; before she got to grips with anything it was time for bed to do it all again the next day. An automaton with no purpose, she ran in circles accomplishing nothing.

Yet the prospect of giving it up was unthinkable. Going underground meant cutting ties with everything from your former life. It would mean the end of her work for Glazkova, which had brought her so much joy, and parting with the lovely girls she worked with; it would mean goodbye to the little flat which she’d made into something resembling a home; it would mean losing Varya.

Varya sympathized with her work, as much as she knew about it, but had no wish to become involved. And deep down Margarita knew what that meant. In no rush to hasten the inevitable separation she delayed week by week, month by month.

But Katya’s wholehearted dedication, her prioritising of the cause over personal relationships, was a bitter reminder of all that a revolutionary woman should be and all Margarita was not. Threw into relief Margarita’s limitations by her exemplary behaviour. Katya took what work she was given and did not demand more. She clung to no vestiges of her former self. And male comrades were not viable romantic partners. There, certainly, Katya might have a point.

Her affair with Roman made her embarrassed to speak up when their ideas diverged. As if she were duty-bound to side with him. Worst was the night, three months ago, when Katya had asked about weapons. 'For protection.' The Okhrana's increased presence made it only a matter of time before one of them was cornered and it was better to be safe than sorry.

Roman had unilaterally dismissed the idea. 'That's terrorism, which is just cowardice enacted by the inarticulate. That's not what we do.'

Katya, still new and unsure, accepted the rebuff without argument, but Margarita had pressed on. She wasn't sure he was right, she said. 'Shooting at a gendarme who would as soon arrest or shoot you is defending yourself.' Terrorism had a different definition, in her mind, a broader context. 'Katya's right, we're risking a good deal leaving ourselves unarmed.'

They'd been restrained in front of their comrades, debated rather than rowed, but his temper simmered beneath the gentlemanly exterior, like a pot about to boil over. Ever since there had been moments of tension between them and tonight...well, she couldn't think about it now. There was work to be done.

In the third-floor apartment above the butcher's a table had pride of place in the main room although there weren't chairs enough to go round. Those too slow to claim a space on the sofa remained standing. The six new agents were a mix of factory workers and students, most pulled from the Sunday circle, but some she had met while distributing. Everyone looked up when the door opened and breathed a collective sigh of relief when she stepped in. Still safe.

'Kasyanova. About time you joined us.'

'I'm sorry, Grisha, I tried a shortcut to get out of the rain. Went down the wrong road.'

He made an ugly sound bordering on a laugh.

Mikhail adjusted his spectacles. 'For a moment I was worried you'd been apprehended.'

'Not likely. Not in this getup, anyway.' Cloak hung up to dry by the stove, she admired the clean lines of her dress. 'Anna's done an amazing job.'

Anna, whose expert hand ensured her a position of comparative authority in the textile factory, lowered her ample backside into a chair. 'Nonsense. I was happy to take the job. Besides, it was your design.'

Grisha rolled his eyes. 'You hens cackle over fashion on your own time.' He frowned, peering over her shoulder. 'Where's Roman?'

*

Sex that afternoon was more perfunctory than passionate and didn't distract from her mood, which she suspected was his goal. He'd sat up and opened the window slightly, cautious of the spitting rain, before lighting his cigarette. He knew how much Varya hated the smell of smoke.

Margarita pulled the blanket up against the blade of cold air and stared at the ceiling, waiting for him to make some sort of overture. None came.

'If we were at your home,' she said at last, 'you wouldn't need to open the window every time you wanted to smoke.'

'It doesn't bother me,' he said, still facing the glass.

She pulled her legs away from him. 'You know what I mean. Whenever I ask, you put me off. It's been over a year, what on earth are you hiding?'

'For the last time, I'm not hiding anything! I've told you, it would not feel right having you there.'

'Yes, and how am I meant to feel about that?'

He dragged too hard on his cigarette so that it crackled and shed ashes onto the sheets. 'Flattered, I assure you. I feel more myself here with you than I ever do at home, as if I'm only truly awake here.'

'On the other side of the glass, where we aren't all *v shokolad*?' she sneered.

'That isn't at all what I meant. I – I wouldn't want you to see me differently. You'd look at me then and see Roman Vladimirovich Kedrov of the landed nobility, with his title and his family estates, and that's not the man I am.'

A flare of pity went up in her, dampened somewhat by the sense that he didn't deserve it. She reached out and put a hesitant hand to his back. 'Is that it? Why not let me decide that?'

He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead so the sheets received another shower of ash. 'Oh yes, you love to be the one deciding everything, don't you?'

She propped herself up and twisted round to look at him. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'I started and successfully ran *Trezubets* for four years before you came along,' he flipped the cigarette out the window as if it had offended him rather than her, 'yet you seem to think you have all the answers. Change the whole system of distribution and its audience! Include illustrations! Bring on twice as many agents including that feral little harpy. Pah!'

Blindsided, she watched him climb over her and snatch up his clothes from the floor, so flustered he confused his jacket for his trousers and nearly put his foot through a sleeve. 'What on earth has gotten into you?' she asked, blinking hard and fast to keep any tears in check. 'You went along with everything, you said they were good ideas!'

'Was I consulted, or even informed? You've practically shut me out of my own operation when we were meant to be equals. Well, you think you know what's best for this group? You lead them and see how easy it is.' Brocade vest flapping, jacket clutched in

white-knuckled fists, he crossed to the door and the clack of his shoes sounded so terribly final.

‘Wh-where are you going? What about the meeting?’

‘Damn the meeting, and damn you!’ he shouted from the hall.

A man deep in the building called, ‘That’s right, you tell ‘er!’ Roman slammed the door behind him.

Too stunned for tears, they turned hard and smooth as river stones, anchoring her to the moment, the minutia of re-dressing, tidying the bed, closing the window, rearranging the room to erase any trace of him. The floor creaked under her, the floorboard where all the letters and drafts were stored. She knelt and lifted the board, hardly knowing what she did, papers, sketches, old issues. That, and...

The knife Varya had rejected bumped reassuringly against her leg as she descended the narrow stairs. Self-defence was not terrorism, no matter what Roman said.

*

‘I’m afraid he’s not coming. But I’m well aware of the agenda.’ Without preamble, she lowered herself into Roman’s empty place.

As he opened his mouth Marfa stood and unleashed a spill of papers. ‘I’ll fetch the samovar.’ A move equal parts tactical and tactful. Expelled under Suetsky’s edict without any participation in the university riots, she’d volunteered to take over secretarial duties and Margarita was glad to free up time for illustrations and editing.

Unsweetened tea served, they set to business. She presented her latest sketches for the editorial on the five-year anniversary of the textile strike and Grisha’s translation of a Liebknecht speech. He was actually pleased with her effort, particularly her rendering of the theorist’s determined squint.

Katya proposed printing a letter from her cousin outlining the mood in the south among the peasants.

‘Have we become *narodniks*? The peasants aren’t nearly the revolutionary force the workers are.’

Although his lover Marfa agreed with him, Margarita thought Pyotr’s perspective tainted by a lifetime of 16-hour shifts in the steel mill. She considered Katya’s idea sound, provided names were changed or omitted.

Sergei suggested balancing it with a similar letter from a factory worker to showcase the extent of public dissatisfaction. ‘Testimonials are always better than browbeating people with theory.’ He smiled at Katya. His adoration for her verged on sickness, but his support tonight was taken in the same spirit as ever: comradeship.

Debate eventually led to consensus. It was the first time a suggestion of Katya’s had been accepted, even with revision, and in her still, soft smile and squared shoulders Margarita read triumph. That was how she’d felt, too.

After over an hour of discussion and dispute, they arrived at the most important item on the agenda: the printing press. ‘When we were an operation of half a dozen it was manageable, but now we’ve grown we need more hands and, most importantly, a less suspect location.’

‘Next door might suffice,’ said Stepan.

‘The jeweller’s?’

‘It won’t be a jeweller’s much longer, you see.’ Anna leaned forward, hands splayed on the table top. ‘The couple next door are moving and they’ll be closing up shop. Lots of space, roomy basement, and we couldn’t hope for a better location.’

Pyotr nodded from the far corner. 'We can keep the press in the cellar, there may even be room for two if we wanted to expand. But if we also took over the flat above we could connect it to this one.'

'How? A hidden door, something like that?'

'Precisely, Margarita.' Evgeniy rumbled his wild tussock of hair as he always did when excited. He worked in the steelworks with Pyotr, and envisioned grand schemes for the pieces he crafted; day and night he pestered Sergei to teach him all he knew of engineering. 'We could slip from one flat to another if the shop is watched or raided. Guarantee an escape route.'

She imagined scurrying between walls, down stairs and out the back door, outmanoeuvring gendarmes as the field mouse evades the fox. 'Well,' she said, 'we can worry about that if we can get the space. But *how* to get it. We need a business we can run at least passably which will give us adequate cover and not interfere with the printing itself.'

A dozen suggestions were offered: bakery, dress shop, even another jeweller's. But in the end it was Grisha who said: 'What about a bookbinder's?'

The hubbub ceased as if a switch had been thrown, enthusiasm lighting face after face.

'Go on, Grisha,' said Marfa.

Margarita nodded. 'Yes, go on.'

'Well, we would already be printing on the main floor, which would cover any noise from the basement. Storing spare parts on-site would be innocuous enough, and we could obtain supplies under professional pretences.'

'And if we're inspected?' asked Marfa, jotting down Grisha's points. 'How would we explain two working presses downstairs?'

He shrugged. 'Overflow. It will help to have backups for busy periods.'

Katya shook her head. 'It's not that the presses are running but *what* they're churning out. That'll be more important to hide, and harder too.'

'We could rig some sort of warning system,' Evgeniy said, scooting forward, fingers entangled in his chaotic locks, 'allowing upstairs to communicate with downstairs.'

'Like bells in servants' quarters,' said Margarita.

Excited murmurs filled the room, amplified by the sparse furnishings and accented by the clink of empty cups. Seeing them unite around a plan revitalized her.

Anna broke away from her huddle with Sergei, worry folding her two brows into one. 'Who'll run it?'

'With respect, if it's all the same to anyone else, I'd be glad to take that role,' said Mikhail.

'But...you're a carpenter,' Margarita said. 'Bookbinding is a bit delicate –'

'It's measuring, cutting, and gluing. If I've mastered any skills, it's those. It may take practice, but I'm a quick learner. I'm precise. I'm fastidious. Begging your pardon, I didn't intend to boast.'

Katya laughed. 'Was that boasting?'

'Excellent, Mikhail. I rely on you to arrange it.'

The end of her sentence was swallowed by a hoarse rumble. 'It ought to be me if anyone!'

'Why you, Grisha?'

'I've worked at the library for nearly a decade, surely I'm better qualified than the carpenter.'

She was sick to death of insecure men whinging that they weren't best at something, as if it were somehow their due. 'You're an intellectual, not a craftsman. Moreover, we need someone able to handle day-to-day business as well as police inspections. That requires

someone calm under pressure, someone friendly.’ Her voice was cold, just shy of disdain. ‘You, Grisha, are neither.’

Behind his pince-nez, his eyes narrowed. Nostrils flared. ‘You bitch.’

Katya and Mikhail leapt from their chairs; Anna pounded the table. Shouts overlapped but Grisha ranted on through clenched teeth. ‘What gives you the right, hmm? Think you know best?’

‘I don’t – ’

‘You may be under Roman but that doesn’t make you superior to the rest of us, it doesn’t put you in charge. You’re merely his puppet, and you’d do well to remember your place.’

She punched him. Drops of blood splattered from his nose to the table and smeared her knuckles, both swearing as the room heaved, bodies pressing in from all sides, lifting him, grabbing her, creating a wall of flesh between them. Grisha was lugged to the bedroom. Margarita massaged her fingers and gasped for breath, every nerve in her body taut like fiddle strings tuned too tightly.

Mikhail touched her shoulder. ‘I’ll bring you home.’

At the door, Katya retrieved Margarita’s cloak, a hard little dimpling her cheeks. ‘You did right. When a man’s a bully, and a pig besides, it’s not wrong to give him a hiding.’

Margarita patted her arm and slipped out.

In the dark *droshky* Grisha’s words grew larger and louder in her head until there was room for nothing else. She stared at her swollen, discoloured knuckles which ached as she flexed them and too late remembered the knife in her pocket.

‘I’m sure you don’t want to hear it,’ Mikhail said, ‘but I do wish you’d have let us handle the situation.’

‘It was my problem.’

‘Even so, you oughtn’t to have taken things – if you’ll pardon me – into your own hands.’

‘You agree with him?’

‘Certainly not. From the very beginning, I’ve had nothing but respect for you – in your own right. You proved yourself with words which is why I wish you’d tried to reason with him.’

Margarita remembered Katya’s comment and thought there were some instances where reasoning was futile. And Roman... ‘Have I ruined everything?’

‘No, dear. Although I advise you keep your head down temporarily. Perhaps miss a few meetings. Let things cool before making peace.’

Why must he be so kind? It eroded the defences she’d built around the scene that afternoon, its implications, the fact she had lost the man she loved – driven him away. Yet why should she have to make peace? It was Grisha who had lost his temper.

You love to be the one deciding everything, don’t you?

Mikhail’s nervous pats and words of consolation only made more wretched. Did it matter that Grisha was a hothead, more child than man, if Roman agreed with him? Her bullheadedness cost her a comrade, a lover, and now *Trezubets*.

‘Stop here, please,’ she said, pulling the shawl over her head.

Mikhail looked out at the dripping trees and ill-lit road. ‘Is this really necessary? I assure you, I’m trustworthy enough to see you to your door.’

‘No one in my building can afford a cab. Mikhail...thank you.’ Taking his hand and giving it the briefest squeeze, she hopped down into the dark and the rain.

Varvara sat hunched over the ledger scratching away at the accounts, brooding expression erased by Margarita’s return. ‘You know my love, I’m always a little afraid you won’t come

back...' Chuckling, she stood to give her usual sharp-eyed appraisal. 'You're soaked.' She took off Margarita's damp shirtwaist and slung it over the back of a chair, tutting at the state of it. 'You'll catch your death carrying on this way.'

Strain began to set in and her tired body gave out. If she could just sleep, sleep until everything stopped, she'd be alright. She kicked her shoes off, stretched one foot toward the fire and wriggled her toes. 'Varushka, do you think I'm...' What was the word? 'Above myself?'

'No, darling, you're the very soul of timidity and compliance,' Varya cooed into the ledger she'd pulled onto her knees. 'Why, who's said that?'

Keeping her face to the flames, she gave an abridged account of the evening, skating over the specifics and minimizing the shock of her argument with Roman but adding, with breezy indifference, that he was probably finished with her. Reluctant to dwell on the scuffle with Grisha and hoping a light presentation would remove the sting, she made a great show of airing her petticoats. As if repeating his words didn't rekindle the urge to beat him bloody.

No such feeble attempts would distract Varya. Hands on hips, talons out, she zeroed in on her prey with vicious precision. 'What kind of muttonhead can't see all you've done? An animal bites hardest when it's injured, and his man's vanity certainly took a knock when you came along.'

'But he's right.' In her stockinged feet, arms coiled around herself, she trembled with cold fury. 'I'd be nothing without Roman, everything I've achieved is because of him, everything I know, everything I believe, everyone I've met. And now I've hurt him, too.'

'That's bullshit, Margo, and you know it. You had all these mad thoughts and ambitions already. So Roman helped you understand them. So what? You're still you, your own woman.'

‘You know that, and I know that, but he considers Roman responsible for my successes, and Roman thinks...I don’t know, that I’m taking the lead and leaving him behind.’

‘All the more reason you mustn’t roll over.’ She held Margarita’s arms in a firm, affectionate grip. ‘Anybody who thinks you take second place is a fool.’

She wiped her nose with her arm and tried to smile – when a knock rang through the room. She slipped behind her screen to hide her undress while Varvara went to the door.

‘Who’s there? You know what time it is?’

‘Humblest apologies for calling so late Varvara Semyonovna. It’s Roman Vladimirovich. I don’t suppose Margarita Dmitrovna is home?’

He’d come back! Almost, she’d be inclined to believe in miracles. Peeking around the screen, she gestured to Varya to let him in and stepped hastily into her nightdress, heard the door open, heard Varya say, ‘It’s about time I had a good look at you, *barin* Kedrov. Come in, then. You nearly missed her, she’s just getting ready for bed.’

‘I am terribly sorry, Varvara Semyonovna, I wouldn’t dream of intruding so late but you see it’s...it’s quite urgent.’

‘Mm, yes.’ Margarita emerged in time to see her cross her arms. ‘I bet it is.’ Varvara looked between the two of them and, suddenly awkward, rubbed her hands down her skirt. ‘Well, luckily for you both I was just off to flat 23 to check in on Alena so I’ll leave you to it.’ Behind Roman’s back she mouthed *knock if you need me*, glancing to the ceiling where she’d be just overhead. The door clicked behind her.

The room was painfully quiet now. Margarita didn’t know where to look or what to do with her body or what to say. Nothing clever or cutting came to mind. ‘Hello,’ she said.

‘Hello.’

‘Would you sit, or...?’

‘Yes, please.’

She closed the ledger so he wouldn’t see the pitiful numbers therein and tossed it onto her bed, curling up on the free chair and wrapping her nightdress around her toes. He fiddled with the chain of his pocket watch, eyes downcast and left leg jiggling, and she realized she’d never seen him uncomfortable before. In all their previous interactions, even their most intimate, he had always been so utterly sure of himself, so confident, and she found this agitation all the more endearing for its novelty. But she mustn’t let herself hope...

‘I didn’t know if I’d see you again,’ she said, voice jarring in the stillness. ‘Or whether I would be welcome at meetings, or...’

He shook his head, and she thought he almost smiled. ‘There are only two things I could never give up: *Trezubets*, and you. On my life, I cannot bear that I made you think for a moment I could do without either one.’

When he looked up she was sure – absolutely sure – that his eyes were dewy. He was sorry. More than anything she wanted to reach out to him, take him in her arms, but...he had dredged up that old paranoia she thought she’d done away with, that she was simply too much. He must account for it.

‘You’d certainly had enough of me this afternoon,’ she said.

He twirled his watch-chain around his fingers until the tips turned purple. ‘I think it’s myself I’ve had enough of and I egregiously took it out on you, though when you pushed and pushed it did get my back up. You see, all these changes have left me...doubtful of my own abilities. It’s not that I am upset by the success of your ideas, my love, or even that you’ve had them. But I should have had them. This is my life’s work, and while I love and respect your knack for it I did feel...ashamed. Rather as though I’ve been holding my own creation back.’

Margarita shook her head. ‘That’s what a partnership is, Roman. I’m strong where you’re weak, and weak where you’re strong. It’s why *Trezubets* has evolved – not because I joined but because of us. Together.’

‘Yes, and the best thing I can do for *Trezubets* and for myself is to selfishly keep you by my side, always. Supposing, of course, you can forgive my foolishness?’

Somewhere a needle of hot anger pricked her, goaded her to push him farther, force him to...what? He’d come to make it up with her; what more did she want? Whatever part of her was dissatisfied, for whatever reason, she ignored, because what was the alternative? Dragging it out. Risking losing him, losing *Trezubets*, for good. He would ask, *what do you want me to say, to do*, and with no answer to give she would look mad. Demanding. Contrary, impossible to satisfy. Too much. And of course he was sorry. That’s why he was here.

‘Were you afraid I wouldn’t?’ she asked, and smiled for the first time all day.

His whole demeanour changed, face bright, back straight, hands relaxed, leg still. She held her hand out, and to her delight he lifted it to his lips, bringing his chair closer. ‘You are an anchoring goodness you know, and I’d be utterly adrift without you. Did I miss much this evening? I trust you handled everything admirably.’

Flexing her free hand, she said, ‘I wouldn’t go that far,’ and displayed the evidence, bruises dappling her knuckles like the blackberry stains of her girlhood.

‘Oof. His face must be dreadful. If you’re my puppet, I do a poor job of controlling you.’ Rueful smile mocking both Grisha and himself. ‘That coward dares say such things only behind my back. I shall pay him a visit tomorrow and that will be the last we see of him.’

Margarita shook her head. ‘It will only reaffirm everything he said if you cast him out. Besides, he’s been with you from the beginning; it’s too risky to let him go.’

‘Perhaps you’re right.’ He stroked his trim moustache. This was how she loved him best, when she could see his wheels turning. ‘And perhaps, too, the timing is wrong. We could use him. You see, I’ve had news this evening which may change things for us.’

‘More arrests? Or –’

‘There’s a rumour Muravyov is considering stepping down as Minister of Foreign Affairs. They say Nicholas is terribly unhappy with him, considering Muravoyv’s agents practically incited the rebellion in China.’

‘What’s that to do with us?’

‘Who do you suppose is vying to be Muravyov’s replacement?’

She puzzled a moment over her hazy register of powerful men but couldn’t think what difference it would make to them if any were selected. Unless they were particularly ruthless, or reactionary, or – ‘Not Suetsky?’

‘The very same. The man has delusions of grandeur, can you imagine anyone so uncouth and bellicose at court? Nicholas could never bring a man like that to a peace conference as he could Muravyov. But merit rarely plays a role in Nicholas’ appointments. If Suetsky gets that position, it will be the first step of a slippery slope.’

‘So what can we do? A targeted campaign? Articles, illustrations, perhaps a few small leaflets. We could liaise with the St. Petersburg branch, see what they know, a coalition with them would give us more leverage.’

A smile crept across his face, widening and brightening into a laugh. His lips on her palm sent a shiver up her arm. ‘Whyever did I worry? You’ve never wasted a moment on needless dithering, have you, when the crisis was hot. What I wouldn’t give for ten of you!’

‘I would be terribly jealous of the other nine,’ she said.

‘Yes, and I should be exhausted. But these are the sacrifices we make for the cause, no?’ He opened his watch and sighed. ‘It’s late, and there’s much to attend tomorrow. We’ll

let the dust settle for a few days and allow Grisha's face to heal before we meet again. But would you put together some preliminary sketches? You always capture Suetsky's blowhard buffoonery so well, and it will give the next issue direction.'

The prospect of new, vital work stirred her, imagination already whirring with depictions of Suetsky and Nicholas in various poses of incompetence. Roman kissed her goodbye, hands to her face. She clutched his wrists to keep him near.

Once he'd left, she knocked the broom handle on the ceiling to give Varvara the all clear, climbed into bed, and seemed to float above the sheets. A lover and a comrade both, neither more than the other. These sides of her didn't need to conflict. She could be both.

Following Mikhail's advice to lay low was impossible; it was not in her nature, particularly now things were changing so rapidly. The landlord was keen to fill the vacancy at the jeweller's and happy to take the offer of the young couple Dmitry and Eva Paskov – Sergei and Marfa armed with false papers and disguises. Katya had been Sergei's first choice of partner, and Margarita's too; no doubt he hoped such close proximity would yield more than political results. But Katya politely declined, though she did not look pleased to have done so.

The shop itself was rented by Yegor and Agafya Tsvetayev – Mikhail and Anna, an odd couple given their drastic differences in height and weight. Her skills as an overseer and his as an artisan were strong recommendations, and though there was some competition with a young man looking to open a bakery, the Tsvetayevs offered a higher bid and were snatched up.

The shop and the flat above were now in the hands of *Trezubets*.

Margarita helped dismantle and reassemble the printing press in their new location, relishing every sore muscle, each smear of ink and grease marking her skin. She helped

Marfa organize the safe house, nominally occupied by the Paskovs but home to Sergei, Marfa, Mikhail, Anna, and Katya, spread across the basement and the second floor. Only Pyotr remained in his own flat, acting as an intermediary between his comrades and his colleagues.

Grisha kept his distance, careful never to overlap with Margarita's visits. Roman said nothing about it, and she did not ask why. He had been so amenable since their argument, spending more of his evenings in her flat and her bed, letting others take charge more often. It didn't seem worth undoing his good mood to ask what had become of a comrade whose use, frankly, was massively diminished.

Since relocating from the library Grisha had far less to do. What, Margarita thought with a spiteful giggle, was he good for now? Yes, he could order and receive literature from abroad without it rousing the suspicion of the censors. And, yes, his quick understanding and explanation of those texts had often been beneficial, especially with the new members. Moreover...whose idea had the bookbinders been in the first place? There was no point pretending he was fit to run it, she maintained her position on that. Nevertheless, he'd thought of it when none of them had a single idea worth a damn.

'Don't worry,' Roman yawned, brushing the hair from her face and fighting to keep his eyes open. 'It'll be fine. Don't worry...'

A faint snore slipped between his lips. She chewed the edge of her thumbnail and burrowed deeper beside him, imagining a necessary apology in the near future. She was not sorry for her rage and resentment – which probably echoed his – but she was sorry for how she'd handled them. Or at least about their consequences. There must be a way to apologise which maintained her dignity and authority but which restored him to the fold, ego unbruised.



Birds chittered and warbled in the gold-green trees. Translucent insects swarmed in silver clouds. Flowers erupted through cracks in the pavement, nature's revolution against the tyranny of man.

On the brightest, warmest afternoon of the newly born summer, Margarita crossed Radara with her trusty basket, recently improved by Katya who, with her expert weaver's eye, had pointed out that a false bottom would make transporting pamphlets easier and safer. No contraband today, however. Today it contained blankets and odd bits of clothing for Pyotr in preparation for his new role as distributor.

Not a single cloud marred the periwinkle sky. Roman said that was an omen of good fortune in Japan. They'd been discussing Japan just yesterday, chewing over the leasing of Port Arthur from the Chinese and Japan's increasing outrage about Russia's proximity...and their armaments. Using his gift for language and hers for art, they had brainstormed methods of incorporating this bold, imperialist move into their campaign against Suetsky until they were carried away by one another, unable to keep their hands to themselves as in the old days.

She thought she'd never been happier.

Humming along with bird song, she fantasised about the impact of their next pamphlet. Trees blossomed and riots of flowers burst like splotches of paint against houses and over sidewalks. Impulsively, she picked some and buried her nose in their discordant perfume, and as she ambled through the buttery afternoon wondered if any summer had been this beautiful.

A book lay in Pyotr's window, face down and badly bent. An odd choice for an all-clear.

The blue uniforms of the half-dozen gendarmes in the living room, with their silver

buttoned greatcoats and coloured medals and braids, froze her to the spot. The officer furthest to her left had lost control of his beard and his face was more hair than flesh; the feathered cap on the officer in back looked cartoonish; she hoped Roman was safe, so intensely that it felt imprinted in every chamber of her heart.

That was the first second.

Papers, rubber stamps, clothing, money, scattered across the floor. A stocking dangled frail and flaccid over a curtain rod. An entire life in debris, and the peripheral lives of a dozen others. Who else was caught? Was she next or could she, somehow, bluff her way out?

That was the next second.

How sudden was this raid? Had everything incriminating been removed beforehand? Would she see Varya again?

That was the third, and last, second of freedom.

‘Excuse me, I must – ’ Must what? Was lying better? She was in trouble regardless, but what story she chose would determine the degree.

She took a deep breath. ‘I’m here to see Pyotr Ivanovich.’

The gendarme with the excessive beard pulled her inside and shoved her into a still-intact chair. ‘And how do you know him?’

The moment of untruth. ‘From the factory. I’ve come to give him his things.’

One of the shorter officers took her basket, probing its contents. ‘Blankets. Clothing. You were going to help him into hiding.’

‘Hiding...what from? Wouldn’t need wildflowers for that, would he?’ She brandished her haphazard bouquet at the officer nearest her, who snatched it and tossed it to the floor.

‘So you know Pyotr Ivanovich Klangin from the factory?’

‘Y-yes.’

The man in the feathered cap gave her such a keen stare that she shrank into herself.

‘You don’t look like you belong in a factory.’

‘Unless she’s one of them. Is that where you distribute your radical propaganda?’

‘My – what? No.’ Here, at least, was a kernel of truth. She’d graduated beyond that.

Thank goodness her basket was empty!

‘You don’t work in the factory?’

‘Of course not.’

‘That isn’t what you said a moment ago.’

‘I said I *know* him from the factory. I take in sewing.’ She could have bitten off her tongue – offering information they hadn’t even asked for!

‘And associate with factory workers!’

‘Even radicals need their clothes mended.’

‘W-what?’ Her genuine confusion lent her some credence...but not enough. ‘I just want my money and then I’ll go.’

The man in the feathered cap resumed his terrible, penetrating glare, seeking out the evil in her. ‘Who do you work for?’

Dear God, she couldn’t implicate him in this...assuming he wasn’t already. For an instant his smiling face swam before her and she heard herself blurt: ‘No one.’

The men’s laughter boomed in the compact space. Only the comically-bearded man narrowed his eyes. ‘Names.’

Real tears sprang to her eyes. They’d search the flats, find the press, her pictures, the books – everything. They’d search his office... What would become of the others? She covered her face and let out a few pretty sobs to stall for time. ‘Please – my mistress’ll beat me.’

‘That’s no business of ours – no doubt you deserve it. What’s her name?’

‘If you won’t talk we’ll have no choice but to arrest you. If you cooperate...’

Her fingers dug into her hairline, but she neither moved nor made a sound. It couldn’t be happening. It couldn’t be, not like this.

‘She might have weapons. We ought to search her.’

Twelve hands descended at once, lifting her from the chair. She shrieked, bracing for the sting of the switch but there was no switch, only strangers’ rough hands in the pockets of her skirt, inside her shirtwaist – her knife tucked safely under the floorboard, a blessing and a curse. Finally they retreated with nothing to show for their efforts.

Indignant and frightened, panting hard, she cried, ‘Animals, pawing a girl like that. What’d I tell you?’ Underneath her panic, vague relief stirred. Nameless, she had some leeway, a narrow margin in which to spin lies just strong enough to support her but not so strong she’d become trapped in them.

The man in the hat looked down at her. ‘If you refuse to give us a name or address, we’ll have no choice but to arrest you. Understand?’

‘I can’t – ’

They thronged her, each vying for a hold on any part within reach so she screamed again, lashing out with her free arm. One shouted something to the rest, a rough hand latched onto her hair and pushed her through the door.

Sunlight still glimmered overhead, impossibly bright and cheerful under the circumstances. In this last glimpse of it, she only had time to wince as it pierced her eyes after the dimness of Pyotr’s apartment. Vision clearing, a figure materialised across the road – Marfa, cigarette dangling from her lips, bug-eyed at the spectacle. In the scuffle, Margarita managed to mouth: ‘*Skazhite Roman! Tell Roman!*’

Whether Marfa understood or not, Margarita couldn’t know.

At the police station, she sobbed and sniffed and whined about money with such ardour that they left her in a holding cell to calm down. An impossible demand. If anything, her agitation grew with time to ruminate: no act of heroism or even illegal activity led to her arrest, nothing so slipshod as being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Minutes slipped away, she must take herself in her hands. What few moments of privacy remained must be used wisely to unravel the tangle of what the police needed to know and what must be kept from them at all costs.

Failure to supply her name, an officer said, would result in imprisonment – not in the local, criminal prison, but a political prison, perhaps even the Petropavlovskaya Fortress in St. Petersburg. She'd burst into real tears at that; no prospect could be more terrifying unless it involved blindfolds and firing squads. In that place, it was the inevitable way out.

Presuming an answer would grant her freedom, she wiped her nose and, with a bowed head, gave them the first name that sprang to mind: 'Mileva Arkhipova.'

'At last, a little cooperation! So tell me, Mileva, why you were across town with spare clothing...visiting a man.'

Margarita looked up and read in his leer the basest of accusations. 'I mended those items for Pyotr Ivanovich. That's all.'

'I shouldn't imagine workers could afford to hire their mending out, particularly not to strangers.' *Shit*. Under such pressure her rapid-fire lies were unravelling fast. She wiped her dry eyes in an effort to distract him, garner sympathy. It didn't work. 'Does Pyotr Ivanovich live alone?' he asked.

'No.' Rushing on in the hopes that he wouldn't detect her slip, she asked, 'How could I know? I've never met him.'

He leaned over, hands on the arm of her chair and his face uncomfortably close, insinuation lingering in the curl of his lip. 'Shall I tell you what I think? I think your sewing

story is just that: a story. Mileva Arkhipova... We found quite revealing papers signed M. A. in the flat.' Marfa Alexandrovna... Damn their lack of discretion! 'You are Pyotr Ivanovich's lover, and doubtless know about his illegal activities. You may even be complicit yourself.'

The proximity of his suspicion to the truth shook her. Deep breath. So long as she was suspected of only being Pyotr's mistress and not also his comrade she was comparatively safe. Freedom was only another small lie away. 'Illegal...you mean he was some sort of spy? I'm not the man's lover – how many times must I tell you I've never met him?'

Margarita made to stand, but the officer kept her boxed in, a jolly smile hitched in place. 'We can't let you go, I'm afraid.'

Hope wiped away in seven short words. She tried, unsuccessfully, to command an authoritative tone. 'You must. You said if I gave my name I wouldn't be detained.'

'That was before we realized how valuable you are, Mileva Arkhipova.' He stood, and turned to his comrade at the door. 'Restrain her. It'll be a long journey to St. Petersburg.'

'I demand a female officer! I demand a female officer!'

Over her screams she was informed none were available, and timing was of the essence. Three men stripped her and searched her, taking their time – for the sake of efficiency. Eyes closed, she struggled to cover as much of her narrow frame as she could, shaking with humiliation and the cold from the stone floor.

She refused to cry. Tears did nothing, neither conveyed her innocence nor preserved her dignity. They wouldn't see her cry again.

PART TWO

CHAPTER IX

December 1901

White light flooded her eyes. Curled like smoke. Blinking once, twice, it settled into something coherent, a square. A window. Clear glass, curtains, sunlight. She closed her eyes...

Opened them again.

Softer light. Through the window, an unfamiliar street latticed by barren branches weighed down with snow.

Kira had gone in spring.

This wasn't her window. Too near, too clean, too bright. No bars.

Wood-panelled walls. Framed paintings. A grand fireplace and colourful carpet. Thick, upholstered chairs, shelves of books.

Impossible.

She spread her hands. She was in an enormous bed sandwiched between pillows and a heavy coverlet the colour of fire. Silky. It smoothed and billowed under her fingers.

Hot tears gathered at the corners of her eyes, fell, pooled in her ears. *Smert'*. Death had come. They'd killed her after all.

A voice, underwater: 'She wasn't at a health spa, *Barin Kedrov*.'

She woke – when had she slept? A shape, a man, something shiny in his ears – a stethoscope. 'Bastard!' She pushed his hands, shouts deteriorating into wet, gritty coughs.

‘Ritochka!’ Another voice, also underwater but different. Familiar. A second face, contours watercolour blurred but unmistakable. Arms around her, strong hands stroking her hair. Soothing murmurs. ‘Darling, it’s alright. You’re home, you’re safe. Please don’t cry.’

Water rises around her ankles her shins her knees. Now at her thighs she climbs atop the plank of wood which is her desk and punches through the barred window. ‘Kira!’ She keeps calling but her voice is lost in the tumult. She tries to squeeze through the bars her prison dress catches on shards of bloody glass and then a hand clasps her ankle. Him. Grinning so his mole peeps out of the merry wrinkles around his right eye he holds a bundle by two corners as if to drop it in the water and she can’t let it fall but he’ll drown her if she turns back. He lets one corner slip and she sees it’s empty. She screams –

– and opened her eyes.

‘Ritochka?’ A man’s voice in the dark, tentative. She looked for the plank of wood under her barred window, her metal bed frame without a mattress, the buckets, damp stone walls. Instead: a fireplace, bookshelves, plush bed heaped with blankets. Windows without bars. Eerie blue darkness, but clear. Twilight, or dawn.

The light on the table flared and Margarita blinked against the unexpected brightness. Roman leaned over and took her hand, face more distinct now. ‘It’s alright darling,’ he whispered, ‘you’re safe. It was just a dream, it can’t hurt you.’

She frowned. It already had.

He brushed strands of sweaty hair from her forehead; she flinched, and his fingers retreated as if singed. ‘What is it?’ he whispered.

She peeled her fuzzy tongue from the roof of her mouth. ‘Thirsty.’

Liquid sunshine poured from the pitcher on the bedside table, filled the glass, thick as paint and so...*clean*... She tore the cup from his outstretched hand and guzzled until orange rivulets dribbled down her chin and stained her nightgown.

‘Margarita, stop!’

It puckered her cheeks and stung the raw sockets where teeth had recently been, but she sucked every last drop from the rim. Her empty stomach issued a watery gurgle of complaint. She leaned over and vomited on the floor.

‘God Almighty,’ Roman grumbled, rifling through the closet and pulling down towels. ‘Doctor Aminev explicitly said not to rush it.’

After what he’d done, what he *hadn’t* done, she got pernicious pleasure seeing him on his hands and knees, mopping up her sick...except the edge in his voice summoned the icy dark nothingness which still threatened her. It was just outside this room, waiting for her.

‘Don’t cry, my love. I didn’t mean to upset you.’ Roman rose and dabbed her face with a handkerchief. She swatted him away.

How long had she been here, under his watch? Judging by his rumpled suit, haggard face patched with uneven stubble, the purple smudges under his eyes –

His eyes. Last seen seven months ago in the light from a grimy window, his eyes but not in his face.

She held her hand out. She’d forgive anything for those eyes.

In the silence he toyed with her fingers, waxy and skeletal. A burgundy-black bruise wrapped around her wrist to disappear under her frilly cuff. ‘What...?’

He stared at his knees, hold firm on the hand she’d offered. ‘Scurvy causes bruising.’

‘Scurvy? Like...a sailor?’

‘You weren’t at a health spa,’ he said, and she frowned, recalling those words from somewhere. ‘And Aminev said you’d not been eating, some kind of hunger strike. You could have died.’

‘I...it was...’ Too many words had to filter through a pinprick of focus; she couldn’t concentrate enough to form a response.

‘Was that what you wanted?’

The moment came to tell him everything. Then – it had already passed. The truth was too heavy, too complicated. Unwieldy.

Instead, she said: ‘Juice, please. I’ll drink slow.’ She felt lighter with his eyes off her. Clear enough to think a little. ‘Aminev...wasn’t my doctor.’

‘No, Pudovkin –’ she balled the blankets in her fists ‘ – took, er, personal leave. Aminev was chosen as his replacement. From *outside*. Or so I understand. It was all quite clandestine.’

‘So he’s a...colleague?’ she asked, carefully tipping the glass to her lips.

‘Not of mine, no. One Miss Razorova.’

The fog lifted. ‘Varushka?’ She pushed herself up, voice breaking. ‘She’s free, she’s alright?’

With one hand he took the glass back and pressed the other to her shoulder, pushing her down. ‘Let me get you some fruit instead. You can’t spill that.’

‘No – my teeth – give me the juice. Where’s Varya?’

Roman grudgingly returned the glass. ‘Do they hurt very much?’

‘A bit. Where is Varya?’

‘If only you’d missed me so much!’ His chuckle was painful, but she held his gaze. ‘Varvara is alive and free. She escaped suspicion, although I don’t know how. Still at flat 17, still at Glazkova’s. I know they searched the flat a dozen times –’

‘The floorboards –’

‘Between the two of us, we collected it all before gendarmes came snooping.’

Margarita let out a long sigh and sank back into the mass of pillows, savouring this moment the way she’d held sugar cubes on her tongue as a child, letting melted sweetness coat her mouth. ‘She’s safe.’ Every day she had thought of Varya, worried for her, hated herself for bringing trouble on her oldest, dearest friend. Not only was she free, she had somehow saved Margarita who hardly deserved saving. ‘How?’

‘I’ve no idea how she avoided suspicion, she must have –’

‘How did she save me?’

‘She has a connection with Aminev. I can’t imagine what she promised, or what she exchanged. It was terribly risky for him. If they find out he’ll wind up an inmate instead of an employee.’

‘Connection?’

He flushed under his scraggly beard. ‘He’s an examiner. Works with – *prostitutki*.’

Panic seized her. ‘Has she registered?’

‘I don’t –’

‘Did she take the yellow ticket? Tell me!’

‘I don’t know! Margarita, I’m sorry, I didn’t want to – frankly, it was safer for me not to know.’

Coward, she thought. Too frightened, or too ashamed? ‘I must see her.’

‘When you’re better.’

‘Now.’

‘You’re in no state for visitors.’

‘If I can see you, I can see her.’

‘You expect me to bring a prostitute doubtless monitored by the Okhrana into my home?’

Rage, hot and sticky as treacle, clogged her chest. She pushed herself up again, blood trickling from her nose. ‘Fine. I’ll go to her.’ She flung the covers back and gasped; withered matchstick legs jutted from her nightdress dotted in a rainbow of bruises.

Roman covered her legs without looking at them. ‘You can’t go, you can’t even walk. Aminev said it will be at least another – ’

‘Then...bring her to me’

‘Not tonight, but... If you promise to stay put I’ll send for her tomorrow. When she’s finished at Glazkova’s. Agreed?’

The tightness in her chest abated, left her wooden, heavy. Even her eyelids, which slipped closed and would not open. ‘Good,’ she muttered.

From beyond her haze he murmured, ‘Are you going back to sleep, Ritochka?’

‘Mm.’

‘I’d hoped you’d tell me...’

‘...mmm?’

‘Nothing.’ He leaned over her and pulled the curtains together.

‘No.’ Margarita swatted at his sleeve. ‘The sky. I missed the sky.’



Rain dripped off the eaves onto her fingers, pooling in her palms. Cold, fresh, clean. Incredible.

It had been a gruelling morning. She’d dragged herself from bed to examine her new body: bony, scarred, discoloured, hideously incongruous in the gold leaf pier-glass. Five

teeth missing, three from scurvy. Of course, the worst damage wasn't visible. When Roman appeared with fruit and fresh water he'd guided her back to bed. 'Rest.' It wasn't a request.

He'd spent the day with her while she dozed, but the thought of him hovering all evening too, watching her like guards at the 'Judas' window, was too much. Finally she'd suggested that, once he'd summoned Varya, he give himself a break. See the friends and colleagues he'd been neglecting. Otherwise they might suspect...

The moment she was alone she'd opened the window.

She pulled her wet hand back through the curtains and sucked icy drops off one finger, drew one across her forehead and another along her neck. Patterns of rain she'd forgotten, falling sometimes in a continuous hiss like a silk train dragging across the floor, other times lazily, hitting the pavement with intermittent slaps. Regenerative, earthy – she didn't think she could ever again fill her lungs deeply enough with *air*.

This room... Tatyana, pain and blood, Kira, interrogations and punishment cells, hazardous points on a map she had traversed, leaving a staggering trail behind her. How could Roman read it? When *this* was how he lived.

But – she'd always known his ideals opposed his class. Should seeing it, in a bedroom the size of flat 17, make a difference? If he'd just visited...

The click of heels...the catch of the door handle as it turned...

'Lord Almighty, shut that window before you freeze.'

'Varushka!'

Weeping, laughing, kissing. They were together.

'From prison to a palace, eh? I must have walked into six rooms before this one! Pisses on our little flat.'

Margarita lifted a bruised arm. 'Scurvy, Varushka, like a sailor!'

Varvara kicked off her boots, closed the window, and crawled into bed beside her, stroking her sunken face. Almost, Margarita felt human.

‘Varusya...how?’

‘How what, my little bee?’

‘You didn’t take the yellow ticket, did you?’

‘Oh, that. It was just making the right connections with the right people. Same as anything else.’

‘But did you take the ticket?’

‘Other women might brand themselves forever, not me. But needed to figure out how to get you out – Oh!’ She squinted at Margarita from under a furrowed brow. ‘So your little study circles were socialist meetings! Kept that titbit from me, didn’t you? If you’d told me my own mother was tsarina I couldn’t have been more surprised.’

‘Anyway, there’s some rule about how long they can hold you without proof, but since we couldn’t find out why they were holding you we had a hard time proving they had to let you go.’

‘Who had a hard time?’

‘Well your boyfriend is a lawyer, you ninny.’

‘Oh.’

‘So I said, this is taking too long, we have to get her out now. You looked half-broken when I visited you, and it had been over a year since then so I was sick with worry.’

She did look thinner. Strands of silver even gleamed in her mousy cloud of hair. ‘I love you,’ Margarita said.

‘Obviously, but don’t cry about it.’ Varya wiped first Margarita’s cheek and then her own. ‘We had no information, then we lost you – did they move you, or what?’

‘Yes, for the – after eight months, they moved me to the House of Preliminary Detention.’

‘And then to the Castle?’

‘I was in the Litovsky Castle first, then the House of Detention, and they moved me back to the Castle after...’

‘Ah, I see. They said it was for medical reasons, but Doctor Aminev said the scurvy wasn’t till after you were back at the Castle so it couldn’t have been that. Was it an operation? They said something about an operation, I think, or a procedure?’

‘It wasn’t a health spa.’ She tried to smile; didn’t succeed.

‘Margusha, *pozhalusta*. Please. Talk to me.’

‘Tell me your story first. Every day I worried for you, it’ll do me good to hear it.’

Varya scooted further up the bed and rested her head on Margarita’s. ‘We thought you’d died. They would tell us nothing, you’d simply disappeared. Once we found out you were alive and Doctor Pudovkin said the transfer was for health reasons, that’s when I started thinking. Aminev owed me a favour, and the girls say he’s a decent sort.’

‘Why did he owe you a favour? You didn’t...’

‘I did a little job for him, long time ago now. But I saw he could be useful if I collected my debt.’

‘If he examines registered girls, how’d you find him?’

‘Some of my friends have tickets and I borrowed one. The descriptions aren’t so specific. He had his back to me, and he says, ‘Lift your skirt and sit on that table. Spread your legs.’ We were in a little room – Margo, you wouldn’t believe, freezing and dirty, and he hadn’t even wiped off whatever he’d put in the last girl and he was about to put it in me!’ Body rigid, matching her voice: ‘I told you, taking their yellow ticket makes you less than human.’

‘Varya...you shouldn’t have, what if – ?’

‘Well I did, and aren’t you glad? Anyhow, he recognized me alright. Thought he’d kick up a stink when I told him what I wanted but he agreed. No choice really. I let him and Pudovkin arrange it between themselves. Amicably. Or else I’d manage it myself, my way.’

Once, Varvara had declined Margarita’s gift of a knife, looking sad and almost squeamish, saying she didn’t have it in her to gut a man. That Varya was far away. ‘You’d have been in the cell beside me if you weren’t careful,’ she said.

‘I’d have had good company. They did work it out in the end, Pudovkin took some kind of leave, Aminev went in and did the rounds, found you, and...here you are.’

‘They let me go because he said to?’

Varvara’s lips moved against her hair. ‘You were going to die, Margusha. Aminev said another week would have finished you. He said they’d put – put you in some kind of punishment cell? Underground, no windows, no lights. The scurvy... You weren’t eating.’

‘Wasn’t much to eat, when they remembered to feed me.’

Varya sniffled. ‘He brought your case to Suetsky, but he wouldn’t even look at it. Too busy cleaning up his mess with the students. Then Aminev – ’

‘What mess?’

‘Oh please don’t worry about that now, Margo. Then Aminev took the case to Grösser, Governor-General of St. Petersburg. Grösser, praise God, saw sense. You’d never been charged with anything, you’d been detained for over a year and a half under suspicion but without cause. He set you free.’

Free. *Svobodna*. Margarita buried her face in Varya’s chest, smothered herself with the comforting, familiar scents of flat 17, of everyday, real, *free* life. ‘You set me free,’ she whispered into the folds of her shirtwaist.

Varvara embraced her as if frightened she'd shatter. 'It was a group effort. Me, Aminev, Pudovkin.'

'Roman said it was safer if he...didn't know your plan.'

'That's what he said to me, too.'

She was quiet.

'Margusha?'

'I...I still have questions. Why didn't you get caught? What did Glazkova say? And you said the group helped you, were there other arrests?'

'Easy, you won't heal if you work yourself into knots. I didn't get arrested because I'm not a fool. I wasn't part of that racket, I didn't know anything and wasn't about to endanger myself. Roman warned me and we cleared all your papers and such.'

'Mind, I worried a little when they questioned me. You see those uniforms and truncheons and your brain practically goes blank.' Margarita's heart beat harder; behind her closed eyes, she saw them. 'Well, if there's one thing I know, it's how to read a man and keep him dangling. I played along with a little of what he said, shrugged and got stubborn about the rest, and finally they let me see you.'

There had been a total of two happy days. The first was when Varya had come.

*

'Get up.' A guard wrenched her from her bed, a metal frame with no mattress. His lips, too close, blew wisps of hair along her neck so she shuddered. 'Wouldn't want to keep your friend waiting, eh?'

Navigating a dozen identical corridors lined by a hundred identical doors, she began to suspect a trap. Perhaps the room would be empty, or full of guards, to build her hopes and break her morale. What if – *no no* – they'd captured one of her comrades and she was being brought to identify them, to confess their crimes in complicity with her own?

And then, part of this thought yet distinct from it, was hope: Roman. He'd found her, come for her. *At last!* How many weeks had passed already, hanging on only because she knew he'd get her out? Between his legal and extralegal contacts she knew that, somehow, he'd free her from this place.

Fears of torture and confession vanished. She saw him as he'd looked that night they'd spent together...just two days before her arrest. Perhaps, before day's end, she would be home! Relief turned her knees weak. The guard propped her up and shoved her along.

This new room was smaller and brighter than her cell. Dazed by the light, deposited into a chair, she looked up.

A pair of pale green eyes; wispy, sandy curls; hands folded on the tabletop, lacquered nails catching and scattering the light like broken diamonds.

'V...Varya...? How...?'

'I don't know,' she said, attempting to smile.

'Did they...?'

'Oh, they wouldn't dare.' She did smile this time, a brutal twist of the mouth. 'They say you're mixed up in some bad business, my magpie. I told them they had it wrong, but do you suppose they listened?'

Margarita leaned in, keeping her voice low, widening her eyes so Varya would understand. 'You know I take in sewing to make a living. I'd done some darning for Pyotr Ivanovich, went to see him. They arrested me, said I was part of this...ring...' Margarita shook her head. 'They've no proof but... Varushka I want to go home.'

'Oh!' Fighting tears of her own, Varvara rushed round the table and pulled her in tight.

'Hey! Keep your distance there!' A guard did his best to separate them, but Varvara batted him away and gathered Margarita into her body like a ruffled mother grouse.

‘Keep away. You want to deprive this child of any comfort when you’ve done God knows what to her. And what for? You don’t even know, yourself.’

He grabbed Varvara’s arm, slammed her back into her seat which almost tipped with the force. Thrust his finger in her face. ‘You get up from that chair once more, I’ll make sure you never see your friend again. Understood?’

Varvara met the guard’s gaze with a slow, defiant smile. ‘Oh, you don’t intimidate me. And I don’t imagine I’m the first woman to say so.’

In the small space his slap cracked like gunfire. Margarita leapt up but Varvara just carried on smiling, never lowering her eyes. Another guard approached. Dismissed the first, who pushed Margarita into her seat as he left.

The women stared at one another as if to memorize each other’s faces, although she was reluctant to be remembered with snarled hair and dirty clothes. Varvara stretched her hands across the table and, greedy for human warmth, Margarita slipped hers between them.

‘I’ve...’ Varvara swallowed hard. ‘I’ve been to see an *advokat* for you.’

White light flooded the world. She closed her eyes and squeezed Varya’s hands until the sensation passed. ‘What...what does he say?’

‘He is – disturbed by the case. Of course I couldn’t tell him the whole story; I didn’t know it myself. But I will tell him now, today. He’ll help you.’

‘Is he safe?’

Varvara nodded, slow and deliberate. ‘One of the best, apparently. Specialises in this sort of thing. Who knew that sort of speciality was necessary, eh? Says something about our country.’

‘Can...can I...see him? Will he come to me?’

‘Soon, I’m sure. But he wanted me to give you a message. He says he loves his work and his clients, which means he loves you. And because he loves you, he’ll do everything in his power to get you out.’

She tried to fix herself in the room with the guard and Varvara but felt herself floating through light and shadow, an uncertain otherworld where she must convey truth through lies. ‘Tell this lawyer...that I love him. For everything I know he’ll do for me. Tell him if I live another hundred years or just – just till morning, there is no one who matters more. Except you.’

‘Yes, darling, I know. And it’s mutual.’

The guard stepped forward. ‘Time’s up.’

Their eyes met, they clasped hands. Margarita’s skin was taut, full of screams – *it isn’t fair! It isn’t fair!* Lifted and bound again, she refused to cry, absorbing every detail of Varya’s shape and colour to paint in her mind. ‘When will I see you again?’

‘Soon, my love. Soon.’

‘And you’ll see my lawyer?’

‘Yes.’

‘Tell him, one hundred years or just till morning.’

Varvara’s hands pressed to her mouth. ‘Yes.’

The guard tugged her arm. ‘Let’s go.’

‘Oh no, no.’ Varvara took her by the shoulders, tried to hold her. Through the tussle, Margarita caught fragments of encouragement: ‘Stay strong – no proof – can’t let them hurt you – can’t sink my love. You’re better than that!’

And then Varya was gone.

*

‘When they questioned me I had to say I was glad to be rid of you, curse you for bringing trouble on my head and so on. They believed it. Roman wanted to teach me how to tell if I was being followed and how to ditch a police tail.’ Varvara snorted. ‘As if I haven’t been doing that for years. I know how to keep myself out of trouble. One of us has to!’

No perk of freedom was better, not fresh food, soft beds, books, or even rain, than Varya’s voice.

‘Did you have to miss work? Glazkova must have hated that, she despises truancy.’

‘Told her I’d been sick – bad food. She wasn’t happy, but...well, she was short-staffed so kept me on, even if she docked my pay.’

‘And the others?’

‘You mean your comrades? The ones I met were very helpful, or tried to be. There was an older gentleman with little spectacles and a funny beard – ’

‘Mikhail! Isn’t he wonderful?’

‘He’s very kind, and...inventive. He wanted to take a guard job and smuggle you out, but it was too dangerous. Truthfully he was too old, but we couldn’t tell him that! And that bloodthirsty little hellcat, she wanted to organize a prison break rescuing you and every other political in the Castle, taking out any guard we came across. I liked her.’

‘Katya. She has fire.’

‘An understatement.’

‘Was Pyotr there? Or Marfa?’ She still hadn’t entirely forgiven their reckless love notes.

‘I don’t know. I never heard those names.’

‘And Grisha?’

‘Is that the one you punched? I was there when they found out what happened.’

‘Was he arrested?’

‘No.’

‘Killed?’

‘Ran away. Went abroad.’

‘He – what?’

‘Pilfered the group’s papers first. Took some articles and a few of your drawings. They think he’ll start a paper of his own, from Geneva or maybe London. Roman reckons he was scared when you were picked up, he must have thought you’d break.’

‘I can’t believe it,’ Margarita said.

‘You didn’t like him but you wouldn’t have given him up. You’d never have given any of them up.’

Varya’s misplaced faith burned like a whip lash. At the end, during that last interrogation before returning to the punishment cell... Yes, she’d have named and traded every single one of them for information on Kira. Who’s to say she hadn’t?

Well, that was behind her. She intended to go forward, get back the time she’d lost, be Margo again. She took Varvara’s hand, told her she couldn’t wait to go home, laughing at how shocked Glazkova would be when she walked in.

But Varya’s face fell. ‘Margusha...you...can’t come back. I’m so sorry my love, there’s nothing I could do. I couldn’t afford rent, it would’ve been impossible come winter. You know Fomichyova doesn’t care about circumstances, only money.’

‘Circumstances?’

‘I told her you’d be away indefinitely nursing your sick mother. Can you imagine?’

‘My mother...’

‘I didn’t know what else to say.’

Something superstitious slithered up her spine as her heartbeats thudded firm, persistent: *mo-ther, mo-ther*. So often during her sentence she had wondered about her

mother, craving that tenderness, that indulgence and understanding she remembered from before father died, before her mother changed. Before Margarita had understood what loss did.

‘So,’ she said, ‘someone else lives with you?’

‘Yes. Old bat. Husband’s dead, children are off working. Unencumbered and pays her rent on time; Fomichyova loves her. She’s a crass loudmouth, very nosy about where I get to at night. Think she’d report me if she had the proof.’

‘Oh, no, Varya –’

‘As for Glazkova, precious, why would you think she’d take you back? You said yourself she despises truancy. I told her what I told Fomichyova but she said the same thing, she needed a seamstress that doesn’t disappear without warning. I’m so sorry.’

‘So who’s replaced me there?’ she demanded, louder and higher than expected.

‘A girl named Sonya. Not as skilled as you but she fills the post.’

‘How nice for her. I’m sure she’ll enjoy it.’

‘Margusha, please, calm down.’

‘You ought to kick your new roommate out and bring Sonya to live with you!’

‘Margo.’

Her pitch broke. ‘Yes! She can come live with you, take my whole life. Why not?’

‘Margarita that’s enough. I’m not responsible for what happened, you can’t take it out on me. You chose to get mixed up in all this, so you must accept the consequences.’

She wanted to kick the coverlet off, smash anything within reach, take everything inside her and throw it out. Yes she’d chosen this path, known the risks and consequences but – but –

Wiping her nose left a faint pinkish smear across the curve of her hand. ‘I just want my life back. I thought everything would – I want my life back.’

‘This is your life, Margo. Even the bad bits, even the bits you don’t want.’

Margarita covered her face. Freedom was as a dead end, no different to prison. It wasn’t worth getting out.

For a long time she cried uninterrupted. But Varvara was still there. That was one difference, at least: she was not alone. Eventually her breathing slowed. Tears dried. Body stopped shaking. And Varya was still there.

Margarita wiped her face again – no nosebleed this time, at least – and Varya’s patient concern answered something frightened at the pit of her. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘For what?’

Wrapping her arms around Varya she said, ‘Please don’t leave.’

‘Yes. I’ll stay, for a little. I’ve got work in the morning.’

When Margarita woke again, frosty stars glittered through the muslin curtains and the silence was no longer broken by the patter of rain but by Varya’s snoring.

CHAPTER X

December 1901 – January 1902

Less than a week later she was disturbed from a particularly deep sleep by the clatter of crockery and tinkling teaspoons. Presumably a dream – so much still felt unreal – until a hiss of pain and a high, breathless ‘Blasted thing.’

Margarita sat up so quickly her vision went white, pulling the sheet to her chin with one hand and groping at the table with the other until she found the silver candlestick. Wrenching it up with a grunt she brandished it at the figure bustling over a tray of – Margarita swayed slightly. Tea, queer-looking eggs, blinis, roasted meat.

The figure stood and became a girl in a blue striped shirtwaist and white pinafore, beige plait down her back, face round and red as a currant. Her enormous grin hitched when she saw the candlestick aimed at her.

Margarita set her teeth. ‘Who are you?’

‘Fedosia, *barinya*. I tried to knock quietly so as not to disturb you. *Barin* Kedrov says I’m to let you rest, but to be here whenever you need me.’

‘A...servant?’ Arm shaking, the candlestick lowered a fraction.

Fedosia giggled as if the question were obvious. ‘I’d have been here to mind you sooner, only *barin* Kedrov sends us away for the Christmas holidays.’

Christmas... ‘Why should I need a servant?’

Her arm gave out, and the candlestick thundered to the floor. Fedosia ran forward with a little cry, inspecting the candlestick and peeling back the fringed edges of the carpet to run a finger along the shining wood. ‘Not a mark, praise God.’ She replaced the candlestick and fetched the tray, placing it across Margarita’s lap.

Butter, jams, cream sauce, smells and colours she'd never envisioned on a breakfast plate. She didn't want to touch it in case it was a mistake.

'Do eat, *barinya*. The master says you're to try.'

The master. This couldn't be real. The master – how ridiculous!

'He says your frocks and things will arrive this evening, won't that be lovely?'

'My – what?'

'From Yaroslavl, *barinya*, since you'll be with us for some time.'

Yaroslavl? Frocks? Either she was mad, or Fedosia was. 'Is it...just you, here? With Rom – with the *barin*?' The word was slick and heavy in her mouth.

Fedosia's jolly face fell into serious lines. 'Certainly not, *barinya*! Such a scandal it would be! No, there's Semyon, that's his butler, and Lada does the cooking – it's lovely, do eat something – Vanya who drives the carriages, although the master prefers to take his horse himself generally, and me and Marfusha the housemaids, but the master's said I may be promoted to your maid, mistress, for as long as you're with us. I do hope you'll stay!'

There was something almost...suggestive in her simper as she spoke. She said she knew how to dress a lady properly, how to accompany her out in the town, that it would be an honour to help her recover. White light seeped in at the edges of her vision the longer the maid spoke until a harsh voice from the door said: 'Fedosia! I believe your instructions were *not* to disturb Natasha Arkadyevna?'

Who? And the way he addressed her using *tuy*, the informal 'you' reserved only for lesser beings like dogs, servants...criminals. He spoke with the same assurance she had always loved in him but it was wrong – all wrong. Misapplied.

Fedosia dropped into a curtesy so low and so fast Margarita thought she'd fainted. 'Apologies, *barin*.'

'Tend your duties, Fedosia, and leave me with Miss Barinova.'

Fedosia ducked her head and slipped from the room, glancing back at Margarita to mouth *I'm sorry* before pulling the door closed.

He moved the tray and settled beside her, taking her hand. Posing as a distant cousin of his old friend Savva Morozov, recuperating after a troublesome illness, no one would suspect her true identity or circumstances. This arrangement was necessary and safest for both of them, or so he said. Words hovered around her, understood in isolation but gibberish strung together.

‘You have servants?’

‘Yes.’

Things were falling into place faster than she could grasp them and she fought to keep her eyes open, to concentrate on what she had to say. ‘That’s why you never let me come here. It wasn’t the...the nice apartment at all. It was because you...own people.’

‘I don’t own them,’ he frowned. ‘They aren’t serfs. A man of my class, in my position, is required to have servants. What would people say if I didn’t?’

‘That you’re a socialist?’ she jeered, but if he caught her tone he didn’t find it funny.

‘Yes, that’s exactly what they’d say. I’m not one for running unnecessary risks, Ritochka, and so I have servants. Not so many as most men, but enough to stop people asking questions. It protects me as it will protect you.’

‘And this girl is meant to dress me?’ She recoiled from the thought. The scurvy bruises had cleared, but not guard-inflicted scars. She was too thin to be a lady, too jittery, and the thought of being coddled like some sort of invalid was revolting. ‘She’ll know there’s something off the moment she gets a good look at me.’

The corners of his moustache drooped. ‘Mm. Yes...’ He brought a hand to her face with a soft, bracing smile. ‘Well, it’s irrelevant for the moment. You need to recover – you need to eat,’ he added, pulling the tray nearer and handing her one of the dainty china plates

loaded with blinis under dollops of crème Fraiche, curls of smoked salmon, dill sprigs, and cascading black caviar. She pursed her lips so she wouldn't heave. 'By the time you're ready to be up and about, it will no longer be a concern.'

He leaned over and kissed her, slow, tender, the way he used to. Her irritation melted into a warm purr of affection and a sense of safety so strong she welled up – which sparked a flash of rage. Why was everything so muddled? Things had been so narrow, so straightforward in the Litovsky. Now sensations assaulted her every moment, too overwhelming for interpretation, she was so tired...

She assured him she would eat, but once he'd left it was easier to nudge the tray to one side and disappear under the embroidered coverlet, taking selfish pleasure in the novelty of warmth and softness, to sleep.

None of the dresses from Yaroslavl fit, of course. Her proportions were all wrong. Too thin, too flat. But they were easy enough to alter, a project which unexpectedly lifted her spirits.

In the precision of measuring she recovered her focus, pulled her fragmented mind to pinpoint upon one simple action. Cutting, trimming away the unnecessary, shed tension she'd held so long she'd grown accustomed to the weight of it. The patience necessary for sewing anchored her in the moment where she'd felt so long unmoored. Needle gleaming, almost hypnotic, how velvet resisted it, silk welcomed it. The soothing pull of thread, the satisfaction of a tight, even stitch. For the first time in over a year she could exercise her creativity, a part of her she thought had surely withered in darkness and silence.

She was home.

Such serenity was short-lived. The expectations of a society lady were new and invasive, Fedosia's hands always on her or fluttering in her field of vision. If she wondered why Margarita's hair was so greasy and matted, she never asked. Cowed by Roman's

criticism, she brushed with steady patience, silently. And if she noted the unfeminine contours of Margarita's body she demanded no explanation, only added extra layers of bustle and bosom pads.

For her part, Margarita brimmed with questions about who Fedosia was outside of the starched uniform and opulence of the apartment, but couldn't ask. Her lips were clamped between her teeth, waiting for this stranger's hands to retreat.

Later that week she was to join Roman for supper, her first meal out of bed. Modification of the dresses complete, she tested her handiwork by trying one on and poor Fedosia couldn't understand why Margarita wept over her reflection in the pier-glass. 'Oh, *barinya*, do you not like it? I'm so sorry, I've never been a lady's maid before.'

She reached for Fedosia's hand, eyes glued to the mirror. 'No, I do, I...look like a lady.'

'Well of course, *barinya*. You're lovely.'

Not lovely, but passable. That was what was so surprising. That was what hurt.

Fedosia had washed her hair with a concoction of egg yolk and herbs so it glistened and then styled it, loosely pinned and gently curled the way Margarita had seen ladies wear it while she knelt at their feet in Glazkova's shop. The high collar of her dress elongated her neck, the absurd undergarments distorted her silhouette like a funhouse mirror.

The peacock blue serge, embellished with black strips and whorls at the trim, brought out green undertones in her eyes, made them sparkle. But the sparkle was hard, the glint of an alley cat squabbling over scraps. She remembered going to meet Roman that first evening three years ago, admiring her eyes in the broken glass by the door. These were not the same eyes.

Time, effort, and resources had practically erased the bony seamstress living in one room and the prisoner who'd become more rat than woman. Like it or not, that's who she was.

Fedosia put a hand to Margarita's back to steady her. 'Are you certain you're well, *barinya*? I can inform the master you'll dine with him tomorrow and you can rest now.'

She shook her head. She had been in this room over a week. What was the purpose of freedom if she was going to spend it in just one room, regardless of its grandeur?

She followed Fedosia out and down a hall decorated like a museum. Enormous paintings, sculptures, trinkets, ornate furniture. *Vot tak tak!* No one need so many things, and such opulence lacked any homely warmth. So many doors, tucked behind elegant, tasselled curtains. Where did they go? Why so many? Fedosia may as well have announce they were actually in the Winter Palace; she'd have believed it.

The whole time she'd been in a bare stone cell he'd been *here*.

'This is the private dining room,' Fedosia murmured, stopping to knock on one of the closed doors. 'The other is kept shut except for functions and such.'

'Other?'

Decorated in warm, rich tones, it was as if encased in a drop of amber, from parquet floors to cherry furniture and heavy bronze curtains of velvet. A dark hutch filled with crystal winked in the corner, plush peach sofas ringed the room. A marble yellow and white fireplace stood tall and plastered like a four-tier cake.

And then she noticed him. Incongruity had always been his most attractive feature: the heavysset man in the fine English suit spouting socialist ideals. But here, now, he snapped into context like a missing piece returned to its puzzle. He rose, wide-eyed and gaping. Somewhere behind her Fedosia giggled. Roman blinked, tried to speak, and failed.

Never for a moment had she doubted that Roman was in love with her – before. Watching him dither over her transformation left her unexpectedly bereft.

He stepped forward, took her arm. Murmured, ‘You look exquisite, my dear.’ The loss deepened. He placed her beside him at the small table, discussed his day with her, dropped nuggets of gossip into her wine – poured by a dour-faced man in elaborate butler’s uniform.

Here was a Roman she’d never seen before, frivolous and charming, a character of overblown gallantry. He kept up a steady chatter insubstantial as meringue since it was impossible to have their usual conversations, the ones she’d cherished and fed on when there was nothing else, around the ever-present ears of servants.

Actually it was a relief. Her concerns and questions, her recriminations, were too heavy for her tongue. It was enough to know that, when she was ready, those things which were too complicated now would still be there.

It was fun, at first, playing house. Safe from the Okhrana and loath to draw their attention, she was in no rush to leave the comfort of Roman’s apartment on Nepodvizhnost’ Street. After everything, she felt she owed it to herself to make this the home she’d so long fantasized about.

He came every morning to assess her improvement and kiss her goodbye, ate with her every evening, endeavoured to cheer her, encouraged her to gorge on the luxurious meals prepared and presented by his servants, and it was possible, at first, to be content. It was all so mundane, so tedious and simple, it was hard to imagine that places like the Litovsky existed. Like a bad dream – on which she was an expert.

‘Natasha Arkadyevna, please! That’s Marfusha’s job.’

‘I like it,’ Margarita said, rotating one of Roman’s jackets in her lap to better access the torn lining.

‘But ladies are meant to embroider or – nice things. Sewing’s for – ’

‘For who?’ She heard the threat in her tone, felt it alter her face even before she saw Fedosia retreat and bow her head. Sighing, Margarita returned to her task. ‘Leave me to it, please. It – makes me happy. Helps me. Not to think...’

Darning and mending, listening to his stories, reading with him in his study in the evenings, all standard domestic things done for a loved one. And wasn’t he a loved one?

Wasn’t he?

Besides, this was the last remnant of her old self. Art seemed entirely lost to her. Imagination stalled, all that came to mind were pictures she wanted to forget: Kira’s impossibly tiny nose, Tatyana’s bruise-blackened skin. Whenever she sat down to draw her hand seized up, resisted memories, would not exorcise them. Sewing kept her hands busy and her mind clear.

And yet...

Each day, now her bruises had faded and her body healed, she grew more restless. She had Roman, improving health, her freedom. So why did it still feel as if something were missing?



Roman’s study was by far the most exciting and beautiful room in the apartment, his mind unbridled. Here her doubts were – not silenced, but soothed. She could swallow resentment and apprehension among his disordered papers and books because she felt closer to him here than in his presence. She tried not to think about why that was.

That was where she found them. To his credit, they'd been well-hidden. If she hadn't been examining a pretty enamel and glass trinket box – filled inexplicably with seashells – her toe would never have nudged the bronze cylinder holding the fire-irons. She'd never have looked down and noticed something wrapped around the tongs and the poker. Paper. Too large to be pamphlets. Fishing one out, she brought it to the desk and weighted one corner with an ashtray and the other with an inkpot then unfurled it, careful not to leave any smudges.

Black letters on white backgrounds, red borders. *Ob'edinyat! Podnimat'sya!*

Unite! Rise up!

She ran her fingers along the bold print. She'd expected proximity to underground activity would be unsettling, disturb her, but it wasn't fear she felt. The smell of the ink, the churning machinery, the passion and excitement of comrades who understood her. She thought she had lost the centre of herself when she'd lost Kira, thought she would never want anything again. But this was more than longing. It was need.

Waiting for him to return was agony, and once he had they were surrounded by servants, leaving no opportunity to speak privately until they retired to his study late in the evening. With the door safely closed, she pounced. 'Since when does *Trezubets* do posters?'

He went rigid over his desk, eyes darting toward the fireplace. 'Since when do you snoop through my things?'

'I wasn't snooping, you hid them poorly. So? When?'

He humoured her with visible reluctance. A new campaign, he said, capable of reaching more people than pamphlets simultaneously. Excitement left her lightheaded, almost intoxicated. Posters needed illustrations, her drawings on a grand scale! Think of their impact! Surely her inspiration would return with an opportunity like this to showcase it.

For days afterwards she waited for an invitation to a *Trezubets* meeting or at least a discussion about the new assignments. Each day she was disappointed.

They dined in companionable silence, Roman with hearty thoughtlessness, Margarita nibbling to keep nausea at bay. Meal finished, he checked his watch and announced that he had business in town. Asked Semyon, the butler, to ready his carriage.

Business.

'*Trezubets*?' she asked when Semyon had gone.

Roman stood. 'Don't worry, it's a brief consultation since the posters go up this evening. I won't be long.'

'I'll go with you,' she said, overly casual, trailing him into the hall.

'*Dorogoy*, you know it's too dangerous. Besides, you ought to rest, you aren't ready.'

'Roman, it's been almost two weeks. I'm much better, and I need to do something.'

She pursued him from room to room, fighting for calm as each suggestion, each request, was met with refusal.

'It's for your own good,' he said, turning his back on her.

'It's as much for everyone else's safety as your own.' Picking up his jacket.

'It's selfish to risk yourself like that.' Tightening his scarf around his neck.

'This is what being underground means,' he said, eyes sympathetic and voice gentle as he took the keys from his pocket. 'This is what it means to be a revolutionary.'

Roman had three bedrooms, plus more for his servants. He had two dining rooms, a parlour, kitchen, and bathroom as well as a washroom. A study where books lived on gleaming shelves behind glass. Every wall papered in stripes or fleur de lys, every room a gallery of photographs, knickknacks, paintings, potted plants, heavy furniture. A marble foyer, actual marble, cold and shiny, reflecting everything it touched.

What the hell did he know about what it *meant* to be a revolutionary?

The lock clicked. Throat tightened. The entryway shrunk around her, her reflection in its floor magnified, distorted. Panic burrowed needle-sharp fingers into her chest, numbed her hands. There would always be locked doors taunting her, trapping her.

Breathe in, slow; exhale, slower. She pulled her scattered head together. Focused. She was safe. More importantly, she was free. Roman's word was not law. She was still a member of *Trezubets* and if she wanted to see their posters in action, then that's what she'd do.

She fed Fedosia some twaddle about a headache and retiring early so she mustn't be disturbed. Alibi in place and the coast clear she snuck back to the foyer, and, though out of practice and wary of discovery by a passing servant, eventually succeeded in picking the lock. A few hairpins and a lot of persistence were all it took.

The police arrived before her. From the shadows she watched them rip the posters down, paste still tacky, scattering pieces into the icy wind. White, red, and black fragments fluttered in the breeze and came to rest in the gutter, turned translucent and pulpy. *Mezhdu*, she thought. In between. This had passed. Something else was coming. She just couldn't see what – yet.

Their new year was quiet; he chose to forego the usual round of parties and calls. 'I want to be with you, and only you,' he murmured, kissing the back of her hand. 'A new year and a new start for us both.'

Fat snowflakes drifted so lazily they seemed to rise from the blanketed ground. Someone had decorated the parlour with pine boughs and juniper berries reminding her, with a sharp pang, of how her free-thinking mother always insisted on installing and decorating a *yolka* which filled the house with its peppery-sweet pagan smell.

Nestled with him before a cheerful fire, watching it glance off his crystals and trinkets as he stroked her hair, she sensed his efforts to reaffirm their intimacy. As if by creating a moment of warmth and tenderness he could thaw something in her, or between them. She couldn't resist seizing the moment in both hands and crushing it.

When she lightly suggested that posters might have a shorter lifespan than pamphlets, given their more public nature, his hand dropped from her hair. Though he shrugged as if this possibility bored him she saw his flush in the firelight. 'The duration of their display is irrelevant beside who views them in the meantime. If our call to action inspires even one worker to demand better for themselves and their brethren in toil, we have done our duty.' Chest puffed out, finger wagging, he was the great lawyer seducing a sceptical jury.

The jury wasn't swayed. 'Roman, that isn't enough. You need to give people something concrete to do, to work toward.'

'Concrete, eh? Shall I organize a strike?'

'It wouldn't be the worst idea,' she snapped.

Once she had loved nights like this, talking theory until dawn, striving toward shared goals. Brave words were enough, then. Why couldn't it be like before?

'You know you can talk to me, don't you? About everything.'

'I have,' she said through tight lips.

'Not everything. Let me help you.'

Convenient of him to want to help now, when he'd been no help to her then. She looked into his eyes – Kira's eyes – and wondered: even assuming she could stand to, should she? Margarita had no desire to open that part of herself to anyone, not even him.

Her second chance had come and gone.

'Prison's so boring, your routine is your life. I've told you my routine, morning exercises and reciting poems and theory, so I've told you my life. Simple.'

His eyes looked wet in the wavering light, face drawn. 'What if we went away somewhere?' he asked. 'Somewhere this whole business can't trouble us.'

Trouble *us*? 'And exactly where is safe for us, Roman?'

'Switzerland. Spending a month or two there blending in with the other tourists won't raise any eyebrows, and the authorities can't touch us.'

'And you can liaise with the exiles,' she said, tone sharper than intended. 'Geneva or Zurich? Not that it matters. What's that paper the SDs started? *Iskra*? You hear a good deal in the prison grapevine, even I know about it. I daresay you'll get plenty accomplished while escaping this whole *troubling business*, as you call it.'

'Why are you being so hostile? I thought you'd be pleased.'

Could she not just take him at his word? He did seem sincere. And if she went she could re-join the movement; the police wouldn't be after her in Switzerland, so he couldn't refuse. 'You're right. I'm sorry, it's just sometimes I feel... Yes, let's go away. I'd like that.'

Relief lifted his features and he pulled her close. 'I'll take care of everything.'

Something about the way he said it, about being in his arms this way, the old way, filled her with sorrow. Grief and guilt tugged her toward a pit she'd fall into if she didn't fill it in. 'Roman, I need you to do something for me. I don't know if it's possible, but –'

'What is it? What's wrong?'

'You know people, don't you? Who can find someone?'

He scratched his beard and looked at her sideways. 'I suppose I do. Why? Who're you looking for?'

'My –' Here, a third moment. She could say everything, bring him into the circle, share the truth and love and pain with him, but – 'My mother.'

This way was better.

He jerked back. 'I thought – you've always made it quite clear... You said you left

her in your old life, where she belongs.’

‘And I meant it. Then.’

After her father’s death she had loved her mother differently, less, for her mother had grown harder, incapable of discerning or accepting middle ground. Now Margarita had changed too and found many incomprehensible things made clear. Loss altered the shape of a person. The hurts mother and daughter had inflicted on one another remained, but they deserved an explanation. A conversation owed.

‘Well,’ Roman sputtered, scratching his beard again. ‘I could make enquiries about a Kasyanova in Zhorzhino and– ’

‘No. I got false papers when I ran away, that’s – that’s not my name.’

‘What? But...Margarita?’

‘Margarita Dmitrovna Kasyanova died in the famine. Elena said I couldn’t ever tell my real name otherwise I’d have to go back. You must find my mother. Sometimes – sometimes mothers do things – it’s not their fault. I need to –’

‘Ssh, ssh.’ He put his arms back around her and she pressed her hand tight to her mouth to stem the torrent. Of words. Of sobs. The daughter had repeated the sins of the mother, accidentally, unwillingly. Would it go on forever down the line? Roman’s lips brushed her forehead. ‘What’s her name?’

‘Klavdya. Klavdya Yegorovna Belova.’

‘So you...’

‘Zinaida Maximovna Belova.’



Owing him a debt of gratitude, she vowed to be better. Trusting. More patient, less

belligerent. But if such had ever been her nature, it was less so now. Much as she wanted the smoothness of their daily lives to last, it crumbled in the face of her constant agitation. Her head was fragmented beyond repair.

Turning into the wind, she pulled her coat tight and turned toward town, head covered and face concealed. At a dark corner she pressed against a wall, stilled her breathing and listened for footsteps. Watched for movement in the shadows. Safe.

Radara had changed. Police patrolled more frequent rounds in greater numbers. The streets between the university and the main thoroughfare were peppered with bullet holes and broken windows, posters declaring ‘Re-opening soon!’ and ‘Temporarily closed’. What had Varya said? That mess with the students...

And what about the bookbinders *Trezubets* had opened? It might have been destroyed in the roundups or it might be there still, Mikhail, Anna, or Stepan flying in and out on errands.

She knew better than to investigate.

Instead she stationed herself in the shadows across from Glazkova’s, shivering in the northerly wind. First, Ekaterina appeared, followed by Nadezhda and then...

They went to a cheap room in a cheap tavern. Varvara was well known there. An ikon glittered in the corner, queerly pious in the grime. Shouts and curses wafted from downstairs and, nose wrinkled against the sour stench of stale beer and piss, Margarita avoided sitting on the bed.

‘Zurich will be good for you, Margo. It’ll be a change, calm you down.’

Margarita scoffed and flopped into a lopsided sofa. ‘A working holiday.’

‘What had you expected? Some romantic tryst? You’re the same as him, never happy unless you’re up to your elbows in work.’

Margarita kicked at the sofa's arm. 'Oh, but I won't be working. I'll be kept sheltered in a hotel like a proper mistress while he's off with the exiles drafting more of those damn pamphlets –'

'Stop kicking the furniture. I can't afford to replace it.' Varya handed over a tumbler of something with a medicinal bite and peered at Margarita, who did not appreciate the scrutiny. 'Since when are you critical of the pamphlet? You fought hard to make it what it is.'

'It's just...it's not enough.'

Varya tucked her legs under her. 'Mm-hmm. And what does Roman say?'

'Ha! The same tired inanities he's said for years. How would he know the mood of the people? He thinks he's a revolutionary masquerading as a bourgeoisie when really it's the reverse. And nothing has changed! Well...except me.'

'Yes.' Varvara cocked her head. 'How are you?'

'I don't sleep. That posh food sickens me. I feel I'm going mad, I just want to *do* something. I – I've asked him to find my mother.'

'You *what*?'

She nodded. 'It's time, I think.'

'I'm... I never dreamed...'

'There's so much I thought I understood, but... It wasn't her fault. Or, not all of it. I don't know. It's hard enough growing up with a bad mother, but no mother is worse. Isn't it?' She twisted her fingers until the knuckles popped, sniffing into her sleeve. 'I just – I want to make sure she's happy. I just want her to be happy.'

'Your mother?'

Margarita rocked back and forth and shook her head so hard strands of hair slipped from their coil. Varvara's arm encircled her shoulders. Buried in the hollow of her neck,

Margarita let herself cry in earnest, ugly and heaving and shameless. ‘My – baby. They took her.’

Varya’s tender hands stilled.

‘That’s why they moved me to the House of Detention. I wasn’t sick, I was going to have a baby and that bastard Pudovkin said I needed better conditions. My girl. My poor girl.’ Talking made her throat tight and slick, she had to rip herself open. Gouge it out. ‘I had to get her out. What else could I do?’

*

Doctor Pudovkin had examined her several times, and Kira too. ‘Everything looks fine.’

‘But I’m still bleeding. That isn’t fine.’

He rested an elbow on her desk. ‘I’m sure it’s not that bad; my wife had four babies and never complained.’

Maybe because you’re an idiot. If she ripped off her dingy dress he’d see the wounds signposting her, the bloody milk she poisoned her daughter with. But she couldn’t lose her temper with him. ‘Please, sir, can you bring the midwife back?’

‘I assure you,’ he adjusted his spectacles, ‘I’m more knowledgeable than any midwife.’

Margarita took a deep breath. ‘I just thought she might have experienced...’

‘Besides, this little one isn’t critical yet.’ Doctor Pudovkin waggled a finger at Kira, who attempted to reach for it with a frail, tiny fist. ‘The innocents are always hurt worst... But God grants us miracles. She is yours.’

‘I wish I could do more for her,’ she said.

‘As do I.’

Pudovkin left. Alone again, mother and daughter stared at each other, fascinated by the shapes and contours of each other's face. Kira's lips curved into a crooked smile around Margarita's nipple. A trickle of rosy milk leaked from the corner of her mouth.

'I love you,' Margarita said through teeth clenched around the pain. 'I'll get us out of here.'

Kira dug her fingers into Margarita's flesh.

The doctor's a soft soul. He likes Kira, he's a father. He's no guard who signed up to control people. If I can make him see we need help...maybe...

Long, indeterminate days between check-ups were filled with her daughter, shoring up hope for their inevitable freedom. 'The first thing I shall do is paint you. Like birthing you all over again, if a little less painful.'

Kira wriggled and cooed.

It was impossible, looking at Kira, to imagine anyone not wanting her. Margarita had never given much thought to children; her own upbringing had knocked that ambition out of her. When her condition became obvious, she was utterly devastated. A baby? *Now?* But she'd come to terms with it. Humming the Marseilles and The Thing had moved inside her, seven months in: that's when Margarita first loved her.

It wouldn't be gradual for Roman. Suppose he didn't –

Her train of thought was derailed by the wordless prison communique of coded tapping: 'Doctor coming.'

While Pudovkin settled at her wooden plank desk, Margarita reiterated her complaints, keeping Kira always visible. She was fussy, limbs flailing, but Margarita held tight. *Trust me, Kira. Please trust me.*

'Does she need changing?' Pudovkin asked, eyeing Kira over his spectacles.

‘No, no.’ Margarita added a heavy sigh for good measure. ‘Sometimes I think she just feels cooped up in here, same as I do.’

He leaned back, rubbing his knees. ‘Well, she’ll be crawling before you know it.’

She lowered her eyes; she’d intended to charm him, but imagining Kira’s tender skin on the cell floor made her burn. And then she’d learn to walk...she wouldn’t get far... When her eyes met Pudovkin’s the tears fell, her own weapons turned against her. ‘Doctor, how can a baby grow in a place like this?’

‘I don’t know, child. Most prison babies are weaklings. Their mothers can’t feed them and they wilt without sunlight. You’ve managed to give her a better start than most, praise God.’

Margarita wiped her eyes. ‘Only because you helped me.’

‘It was my duty. We mustn’t let the innocent suffer.’

‘Yes, you’re absolutely right, Doctor. Little Kira is innocent.’ She leaned forward and lowered her voice so no passing guards could overhear. ‘Can’t we help her?’

From elsewhere in the House of Detention there came weeping, clanking that might be doors or chains. Kira wailed, discontent escalating into full-blown outrage. Pudovkin stared at Margarita, his moustache trembling.

Pulses leapt in places she’d never felt them before. ‘Every day, after she eats, I hold her up to the window for as long as I can. Until my arms ache. To ensure she feels the sun on her.’ *This is it.* ‘I want to give her the best, but I cannot do it here. She won’t survive. Help us.’

‘Do you know what you’re asking?’ he whispered. ‘You’ll be ten times worse off if they catch on. I’d be arrested, we’d both be executed or banished to God knows what frozen waste.’

‘Then we’ll have to be careful.’

‘We’d have to *succeed*.’

‘Doctor, you’d do the same in my position.’

‘Please – ’

‘For Kira.’ Margarita held her up so Pudovkin had no choice but to look into her purple, bawling face.

A guard banged on the door. ‘Shut that fucking baby up before I come in and sort it myself!’

She tucked Kira against her shoulder. ‘She can’t stay here.’

*

‘But they took her – left me behind.’

‘It isn’t your fault,’ Varya said at last as she massaged the whimpering head in her lap.

‘If I hadn’t gotten pregnant – ’

‘You can’t blame yourself for what they did.’

Margarita burrowed her face in Varvara’s knees, crushing her skirt in her fist. ‘I loved her.’ As if stating the fact could bring her back.

‘Where did they take her?’

‘I don’t know. They d-didn’t tag her, I don’t know where she is.’

‘Bastards. They’re meant to, or to give her to someone on your behalf! They do it all the time with street girls. Well if Roman will find your mother he can – ’

‘I – haven’t told him.’

‘That they took her?’

‘That I had her.’

‘He...doesn’t know?’

Margarita sat up and wiped her cheeks. ‘No. Why should he?’

‘He – he’s her father! He could find her, he’s got money, influence! I can’t believe –
,

‘What’s the use? She could be in St. Petersburg or Kazan or Lublin by now. Or she might even be – Roman would never find her.’

‘So, what, you’ve given up?’

‘No, I’m being rational. I only want her to be happy.’

‘What are you saying? This isn’t you.’ Margarita opened her mouth, found she had no response, and closed it again. ‘And you won’t tell him?’

‘Never.’

Varya put her hands to either side of her head. ‘*Radi tebya*, why?’

‘What good will it do?’ It was difficult to articulate what had, up until now, been an amorphous feeling rather than fully-fledged thought. ‘What if he’s glad she’s gone? I couldn’t forgive that. What if he didn’t love her? Or felt her a burden?’

‘You’re assuming the worst without giving him a chance. She’s his child, too.’

‘Is she? He can’t miss her, can’t mourn her.’ Varvara went to the cabinet and refilled her glass and Margarita pushed on because she must understand. ‘Knowing wouldn’t help him.’

Varvara didn’t even trouble to look back. ‘Wouldn’t help you, you mean.’

She felt winded as from a blow. ‘What did you say?’

‘You heard. Never mind Roman, you’re the one who doesn’t want her. Probably hard overthrowing the government with a baby on your hip.’ Varya took a long, calm sip of her drink. ‘That poor girl would have just been in your way.’

She crossed the room in two strides, pushed Varvara who hit the wall and dropped her glass, adding another stain to the faded rug. ‘Don’t you dare. You of all people! I don’t want her back because I love her. I can’t feed her, can’t give her a proper home. She deserves

better.'

Varvara straightened. Smoothed her dress. Time slowed, stopped, spiralled. Margarita looked at her hands and wanted to cry: 'It wasn't *me*.' It was that part of herself, compressed diamond-hard, which cut into her until she could think of nothing but relieving the pressure.

Silence saturated the air until it was impossible to interpret it as anything other than condemnation. She should understand. Varya, Roman, it was incredible they didn't see it. Now Varya would despise her and there would be so many long years without her. Another hollow place inside herself.

She squared her shoulders. She didn't need anyone's judgment; she had her own to reconcile.

'Margusha, wait.'

Margarita kept her hand on the latch but didn't turn around.

'These things...it's hard for me... A girl I knew had a baby – risk of the job. It died and she never even cried, I didn't know how to... Maybe I don't understand but...'

Varya's tears were wretched. Wasn't there some way to make it clear without making it worse? Sitting back on the sofa, Margarita folded her hands in her lap. 'He wouldn't understand, either. Any of it.'

Varvara shook her head. 'Can you love a man who can't understand?'

CHAPTER XI
January – February 1902

Could she?

Varvara's words pricked like insistent needles, the question stitched to her mind so she couldn't escape it.

In his study the following evening he blathered about his day in court, offering a blow-by-blow account of his arguments. She remembered listening doe-eyed and soft-hearted to such monologues not very long ago thinking him the most brilliant man in the world. If there was a difference between stupid and naive, which had she been?

Can you love a man who can't understand?

She sank into the well-worn habit of cataloguing everything she'd lost: Kira, her job, Tatyana, her home, her purpose. Must she add Roman, too?

'Ritoch – er, Zinaida? What's wrong?'

The sound of her old name caught her off guard, another thing which had fallen away, and she clenched her teeth. If only he'd leave her to her thoughts without forever trying to read them.

Looking at his face, the shard of resentment blunted. Her daughter was still there. And he was trying. If what they'd invested over the years could be salvaged, she had to meet him partway.

She started slow. 'There was a woman in the cell next to me. Tatyana. We used to tap through the wall – that's how we'd communicate in solitary, we had a system. She was the only person I could talk to about – ' On the precipice again and again retreating from it, Varya's words flared at the back of her head but she dismissed them. Not now. 'She was the only person I could talk to.'

'What happened?'

‘Madness claimed her, as it did so many. Kept saying the prison was a grave and she’d been buried alive, she tapped it over and over and over, then...went quiet. They were taking me out for exercise and Abram, in the cell on my right, was screaming *they killed her, they killed her*. Hanged herself from the bars on her window – by her skirt.’

She lingered over descriptions of the cold, clammy cell, of Tatyana’s body, and wallowed in his unease. She’d make him feel it. ‘Petukov would have looked like that if he’d been left long enough. Bloated, black with blood and shit.’

‘Hush, hush now. You cannot continue torturing yourself this way. They win then. You must put it behind you, give yourself some peace.’

Sound as his advice was, how could she follow it when her nights were broken by memories she’d barely suppressed whilst awake? When the missing teeth in her reflection still startled her? Prison was with her always, locked inside her body as her body had once been locked inside it.

Even if any of that *were* forgettable, Kira was not. Kira would never give her peace.

They could win, as he put it, this time. When her time came their suffering would be worse, so much worse than hers.

‘I missed that smile,’ Roman said, taking her hand. ‘Such mischief in your eyes.’ She hadn’t even realized she *was* smiling before, to her surprise, he kissed her.

Neither love nor excitement made her heart beat harder. Didn’t she love him? Didn’t she miss this? Her old self was within reach...but the panic flooding her was too strong. She drew back.

‘It’s late,’ he murmured. ‘Time to retire, I think. Will you join me?’

He ran his thumb along her knuckles and she braced for his fingers to curl into fists, seeing the hands of guards. Last time they’d slept together Kira had been the result. Even if she could have had another baby, she wouldn’t. Never again.

And he dared, after failing her at every turn? Refusing to include her in meetings, to share any news. He hadn't even visited, not once.

'Perhaps another time.' She slipped free of his hand which retreated to his lap like an ebbing tide. 'It is late, and I'm – tired.'

'Yes, of course. I only thought...' His brows wrinkled. 'I love you Zinaida, and I –'

'Stop it, stop calling me that! I'm not that girl anymore, I...' She regretted what she had said, feared saying more.

The sofa cushion lifted as he stood. 'I'm sorry, I didn't think... Forgive me.' He shuffled across the carpet, the door clicked shut, and she was alone.

Could she love a man who couldn't understand?

She spent the whole next day mulling it over. To end it after all this time would do them both a disservice; she resigned herself to seeing it through to the end. Tonight she would go to him, express her enthusiasm for Switzerland and gratitude for his hospitality and his search for her mother, for the risks he was running on her behalf. All the things she knew she should feel.

He was home late, but when she heard the door she went to meet him with new determination. Fedosia and Marfusha were on all fours, rags and brushes strapped to their hands and knees so, no matter how they moved, the marble foyer received a bright polish. The sight sickened her. 'What's all this?' she asked.

Roman sent Semyon to the parlour laden with packages and edged through a dry patch to come clasp her hands. 'Natasha Arkadyevna! We're to have a party. Upon discovering why I absented myself from my colleagues' celebrations this season, well...I couldn't keep them away! They're terribly eager to meet you.' He bubbled with boyish excitement. 'Apologies for my lateness, but I come bearing gifts.'

As he led her away she glanced over her shoulder at Fedosia and Marfusha rolling their eyes in a fit of giggles.

She whirled to face him as he closed the parlour door. 'A party? Roman, are you mad? I thought I was meant to keep a low profile?'

'And you are. It would look far more suspicious if I kept you locked up here, wouldn't it?' That's just what you do, she thought, folding her arms. 'Besides, it isn't as though it were a grand ball. Just dinner with a few friends. Teterevkov and his wife; Nikitin; young Tarasov – did I tell you we're considering bringing him on as partner? – and of course my brother and his wife, and our dotty old aunt Elizaveta, much to my chagrin.'

Dizzied by the onslaught of names, the blatant risk, she put her hands on her head and cackled, 'Why not invite all of Radara? Roman, your bother? He must know Morozov, he'll know I'm not who I say.'

'Certainly he knows Savva, but not nearly as well as I do. He wouldn't know whether Savva has any cousins, distant or otherwise, never mind any as pretty as you.'

'You're not taking this seriously.'

'Darling, I assure you I am, but when I avoided the estate at Christmas he knew something was amiss. Had I attempted to divert him further, he'd have grown all the more suspicious.'

Was he being obtuse on purpose? 'Roman, please, I don't know the first thing about how to behave at a rich man's party. You all have such fine airs...that isn't me.'

'Ah, but it will be!' He busied himself at the sofa among the pile of parcels and she thought she saw...

He held out a flat box of red oak wide as two palms. 'The moment I saw it, I knew it would suit you. The making of a lady is in the details, you know.'

Margarita took a step back. '*O Bozhe!*' The matte gold pendant was a convoluted

shape, like a lyre with abstract wings, and set with dozens of glittering green stones. Twenty-eight in total. A pendulous pearl framed on each side by dangling flowers, the largest green gems haloed by smaller ones dark as drops of blood. 'E-emeralds? Rubies?'

'Darling,' he laughed, hand to his breast, 'I'm not as rich as you seem to think. Those are garnets. Even the green ones. Demantoids from the Urals, just outside Yekaterinburg. Not emeralds, perhaps, but Fabergé uses them so they're nothing to sniff at.'

None of this especially impressed her, for it went largely over her head. All she knew was she'd never seen anything so gaudy, so revolting. No matter his claims about moderate wealth, this gewgaw alone would feed everyone in the Warren for weeks. Months, if you included the bangles in the other boxes: matching pearl and garnet earrings, hairpins, a brooch, a thick bracelet which would look ridiculous on her bony, wasted wrist.

She wanted to snatch the boxes from him and run through the frozen streets tossing trinkets in her wake. To bearded men with backs permanently bent after lifetimes shovelling snow from the paths of their betters, to women half numb straining to seduce water from frozen pumps in their courtyards. They could turn these jewels into food, fuel, medicine. Margarita could only wear them like millstones.

By now, having set aside a pair of shoes and white kid evening gloves, one box alone remained. He kept his back to her as he undid the ribbons, blocking her view. She knew why.

He lifted the yellow silk gown with finger and thumb, ever so gentle, so it rippled like sunset on a lake. Pale chiffon accented the bust, the shoulders, the waist, skirt hemmed in metallic gold organza. She'd look like a cake. It was not to her taste, perhaps (she'd never cared for yellow and it didn't suit her complexion) and would better suit an autumnal evening than this winter do, but her expert eye recognized craftsmanship.

The birch leaf motif was masterfully executed. Such intricate embroidery across the bodice required an experienced hand, as did the swooping chains of leaves along the skirt in

appliqued golds, reds, and greens. It would have taken over a week, assuming the seamstress had no other tasks, which she certainly had.

Margarita dropped to her knees and reached for the back hem, turning it to the light and counting stitches with her thumbnail. There! Just above the ruching which separated organza from silk, in red thread so small it was invisible to the untrained eye: *EKS*. Eva Konstantinovna Sidorova.

She looked up at him, and his face fell. ‘You got this from Glazkova’s.’

‘I would accept only the best for you. And I happen to know Glazkova only hires the best.’

Razorova! Your sluggishness is matched only by your ineptitude! Glazkova herself would disagree with his assessment. ‘Did you see Varya?’

‘No, I only spoke with Madame.’ Naturally. A client of his importance needn’t consort with the staff, never mind the seamstresses.

She felt on the wrong side of a mirror. She was meant to make this dress – she’d have stitched the leaves at uneven angles and intervals to give a windswept effect, and used different coloured threads to offset the applique – but not to wear it. She was a designer, a creator, not a model. He ought to have known that. Known that a Glazkova gown would hurt. *Can you love a man who can’t understand?*

Perhaps he read her thoughts, or maybe it had at last occurred to him. ‘I thought it would please you. You’ve seemed...disconnected, and I had hoped this might – root you, in some way to...well, whatever it is you feel you’ve lost.’

Rarely was he so inarticulate, and his confusion made her anger feel cruel, ungrateful. She took the dress, impressed anew by the heft of it, and replaced it very carefully before turning and kissing him on the cheek. He was trying, in his way, as she was meant to be. If she truly intended to, she would have to make an effort even when it was hard. ‘Thank you.

It must have cost... And it's lovely. Really. If you say you must throw a party, I'm sure I can pass for a lady for one evening.'

'Ladies are fine companions befitting emperors and grand dukes. I've never wanted a lady, my dear. I've only wanted you.'

Forcing her grimace into a smile, she wriggled out his arms and reconstructed the boxes, but Roman called for Semyon to carry them to her room.

'When is this party?' she asked.

'Saturday evening.'

It was already Wednesday.

She followed Semyon back through the foyer where Fedosia and Marfusha had now reached the furthest corner, sending the smouldering rage in her chest flaming into life. They'd sweated and scrubbed until their knees ached while he'd been shopping! His leisure came at the expense of their labour. Not unlike wives and mothers, she reflected, but exacerbated by poverty, by the imbalance of power. Never mind the old man and his shovel or the wasted woman with her pump, these jewels could benefit people much closer to home.

The household turned itself inside out in a flurry of polishing and dusting and menu planning. She sat with Roman in the parlour while Lada (who was surprisingly thin for a cook) outlined her proposed fare: *solyanka* soup and Olivier salad, roasted boar with stewed apples, honey cake. Margarita couldn't stand to listen; she assured Lada she would be pleased with anything but excused herself to finish taking in her dress.

Fedosia knew now not to argue with Margarita over who should handle sewing duties, nor to question the violence with which she attacked the project. She busied herself retrieving each precious item from its box in preparation for Saturday: long gloves draped over the screen, shoes directly beneath, each piece of jewellery placed on the dressing table

where it would come easily to hand. She opened the last, smallest box with trembling fingers, only to let out an 'oh' of disappointment when the glittering hair combs inside caught the light. 'Was there no...no smaller box, perhaps, *barinya*?'

Margarita looked to the clutter of lids and crinkled paper. 'No. Why?'

'I'd just thought...' Fedosia's scarlet face radiated more heat than the fire, lips drawn so tight over her teeth Margarita thought they'd rip clean off. 'Apologies, *barinya*.'

She watched Fedosia add the clips to the assortment on the dressing table, smiling and sighing the way one did over fairy tales one would never be part of. 'You're an excellent lady's maid, Fedosia,' Margarita said, 'considering you're a parlour maid. Have you trained with the other ladies *barin* Kedrov has had to stay?'

Foolish to think she could disguise the gist of the question from such a romantic. Fedosia pressed a hand to her breast. 'Oh *barinya*, of course not! The master has never, ever had a woman to stay here.'

No, Margarita agreed, he preferred to enjoy his dalliances away from home... 'Not even in the past year or so? I thought he might have...' He had let her down, left her to rot. Perhaps this was the reason.

Fedosia's affront faded to tenderness. She perched on the ottoman at Margarita's feet and chose her words with visible care. 'The master is a busy man. Popular. He attends many functions and parties, and throws them, too. I've seen young ladies, sometimes, be taken in by that way he talks. But, *barinya*, I don't think he's seen it. He's never looked at any of them the way he looks at...' Realizing she'd gone too far, she tried another tack.

'The master has not been well, as you say. Not been himself. Like he was living under a cloud. Then when he told us you were coming, after you'd been unwell and suffered so...his cloud disappeared and the sun came out, spring after winter. He was himself again, *barinya*, because you were coming. I don't know all too much about gentlemen and ladies,

but I know whatever you suffered he suffered with you, on your behalf. No, *barinya*, there were never any other ladies. There's only ever been one.'

Eyes on the silk spread in her lap, she clasped her hands so the knuckles shone like alabaster. Poor, simple Fedosia mustn't see how her attempt to weave a story of ethereal love had left Margarita furious and broken-hearted. 'Th-thank you, Fedosia. That's – kind of you. Please excuse me, my head...' She lifted a hand to her forehead. 'I think I should sleep.'

'Of course, *barinya*. You'll need your rest for tomorrow. All this handiwork must be such a strain on your eyes.'

She'd had the sharpest eyes in Glazkova's shop. Once upon a time she'd sewn till dawn by the light of a single candle. Were society ladies made of glass?

Fedosia hung the dress so it wouldn't wrinkle. It hovered in the darkness, the splash of moonlight over the glossy skirt lending it the eerie quality of a sallow spirit. Margarita believed in ghosts, now. One's mind could become haunted.

She's kneeling on her father's bed telling stories while he sleeps except he isn't sleeping. She knows he's dead yet she keeps babbling. The room begins shrinking and she talks faster she must tell him everything but the walls are tight against her shoulder. The bed and her father on it shrink to nothing and she has no choice but to scramble backwards out the door which closes and blends so perfectly with the wall that she cannot find the seams. It's impossible to go back. So she faces forward. The warm open room which should be here is empty walls smooth soft and pink save for one brown spot on the left. An eye opens in the wall green and brown like a rotted pear blinks crinkles so the brown spot is lost in the folds. Smiling. Sokolov has found her even here where she's meant to be safe. No. She won't have it. She braces herself to run at the eye scratch it pop it close it forever.

But she woke before she had the chance, floating in the space left by her unfulfilled

actions. She stared at the ceiling, waiting for an eye to appear there, too. None did.

Though her eyelids burned and her body was iron-heavy, her mind whirled into action and would not be silenced. She faced the window, the old trick of staring without seeing. How many weeks had she been in that punishment cell without day or night? The pictures in her mind appeared on the walls; asleep and dreaming, or awake and mad. Indistinguishable states of being.

She sat up. She could draw Sokolov's eye, his mole, that malicious glimmer, she could... No, it had no meaning, no depth. Besides, she thought as she lay back down, lines on paper wouldn't erase her memory. Maybe nothing would. Eyes were tricky to forget in the best of circumstances. Kira's...closed... If they'd just been open that last time... Grief did funny things to the body, identifiable as the twist in her stomach, the lead in her bones, the fog in her head.

At least Roman's eyes...Kira's eyes... Was seeing them every day worth prolonging this dismal arrangement? And if Fedosia was right... Her story no longer inspired anger, or even sadness. Only weariness. Did it matter, one way or the other, if it were true? What it was now was not what it had been. She wanted what it had been.

She lay there until long after sunrise, arm across her forehead, staring at nothing and thinking...thinking...

Margarita did resemble a cake, although the elegance of the jewels and her coiled tresses diminished the effect. It was a pity the shoes weren't visible, for their metallic embroidery was beautifully done. She stood at Roman's side as expected of a lady and received his guests, submitting over and over to kisses on her hand and cheeks, pawing at her like supplicants.

'Ah, the famous Natasha Arkadyevna Barinova!' grinned Teterevko, his fat mouth

leaving a hot, damp spot on her glove. He chuckled through his bushy moustache, thumbs hooked behind his lapels. 'I see I cannot blame Roman Vladimirovich for eschewing Radaran society of late, for it is evident he has all the necessary society right here. *Avec le bon, les nombreux sont inutiles.*'

He nudged her as if she were in on the joke. Nikitin and Tarasov were equally complimentary if less voluble, and Helena Teterevkova exclaimed over her in stock phrases. Margarita pinned her lips into what she suspected was not a convincing smile.

When Viktor Kedrov arrived with wife Galina on one arm and aunt Elizaveta on the other, a funny flutter went through her. Romans' family. Viktor's face was a softer, brighter, younger, more handsome imprint of his elder brother's. She'd once hoped to meet him in different circumstances, at Christmases, Easters...when he might have been her own brother.

But how? As a seamstress, or a revolutionary, or in a silk gown worth over a year's wages? Margarita had wanted Roman and revolution, both, but...

A gloved hand yanked her chin down, and the flinty blue eyes of Elizaveta Pavolva Dubinina scanned her face. Squinted. Pinched Margarita's chin harder, pursed her lips. In her sixties, a born and bred bourgeoisie, surely the old bat could smell a fraud.

Roman hovered at his aunt's side. '*Tante bien-aimée*, Natasha Arkadyevna is not one of your thoroughbreds, you needn't inspect her like one.'

'Indeed, I can see she is not.' Elizaveta released Margarita's chin and folded her hands in front of her, look of scrutiny still firmly in place. 'So you're the Morozov cousin. Funny thing, that, as I thought I knew every branch of the Morozov line.'

Damn Roman! His dotty aunt was sharp as embroidery scissors. From hard experience Margarita knew that if one was to survive an interrogation, particularly if one were guilty, the best odds of success lay in silence. She fluttered her lids, folded her hands to mirror the old lady, and ducked her head, hoping to pass for shy or humble or some other

delicate attitude.

‘Distant cousin, *tante*, from Yaroslavl. She’s not often in Moscow,’ Roman assured her.

‘Ah, Yaroslavl!’ Teterevko cried, gripping his lapels again. ‘My grandfather hailed from Yaroslavl. A beautiful city, to which you are a credit Natasha Arkadyevna.’ Incredible what superficial fluff passed for conversation among the so-called educated class!

‘A city where two rivers meet,’ Roman murmured, and she turned to him, wishing to clap his mouth shut. Except he looked so genuine, so tender, and anyway what could she say in front of these people? She felt herself floundering.

Elizaveta’s chin lifted. ‘It is a shame you are so rarely in Moscow my dear,’ she said, ‘for I should have liked to have met you sooner.’ To Margarita’s surprise, Elizaveta linked their arms and gave her an indulgent pat. ‘Come sit beside me.’

She kept Margarita pinned under her relentless stare as the others settled into light conversation. Helena Teterevkova played an airy piano piece to a round of polite applause, and Nikitin enquired whether Margarita liked Chopin.

‘Oh...certainly,’ she said, having no idea what that meant.

‘Do you play?’ Elizaveta asked.

‘No, madam.’ Knowing that the more truths you told the fewer lies you’d need to remember, she added: ‘I prefer sewing.’

‘A fine hobby! Far more practical.’

Margarita only exhaled once dinner was announced. Roman escorted aunt Elizaveta, their heads together in smiling conspiracy. Between Tarasov’s tedious overtures to conversation, Margarita heard the old woman say: ‘It is a rare thing these days to find a woman who knows enough to hold her tongue. Just what you need. I approve.’

‘I assure you, there is nothing between myself and Natasha Arkadyevna. She’s

merely here to recuperate.’

‘No one goes north to recuperate,’ the old woman chuckled.

The second dining room was far larger, its décor grander. Tarasov said he was sorry there would be no dancing tonight. He recounted with delight the last dance Roman had hosted the previous new year, the long table tucked away to accommodate dancing, how the ladies’ fine dresses – ‘Not as fine as yours, of course, Natasha Arkadyevna!’ – had whispered in perfect compliment to the music. ‘Never have I enjoyed a party more! I do wish you had seen it.’

She’d been heavily pregnant with twenty-four-hour guards in her cell dreading the first labour pains in a swamp of terror and uncertainty – while Roman danced in the new year. What wicked lies Fedosia told! Living under a cloud, indeed. Margarita set her teeth until pain shot through her jaw.

Endless chatter about nothing – their parties, their friends, their work – bored her, left her susceptible to the effects of her sleepless night. Wielding a spoon in her gloved hand was awkward and the clock gave reluctant ticks as if it had better things to do.

‘It’s such a shame to see you in a little place like this, Roman,’ Elizaveta sighed as she sipped her soup.

‘Please, *tante*, don’t start this again.’

‘Start what? I only want your happiness, dear boy, and *Zolotoi Kholm* is so much nicer.’

He spoke with phenomenal patience; no doubt he’d said it a hundred times before. ‘I did not want *Zolotoi Kholm*.’

‘One of the others, then, you can have your pick. There’s room to breathe there, at least.’

‘And what would I have done with all that room?’ Above his smile his eyes were hard. ‘My needs are far better met here, besides which Viktor was the one marrying. It made sense that he and Galina Stepanovna should take it.’

‘Not necessarily. You wouldn’t have remained a bachelor forever. Would he, Natasha Arkadyevna?’

If only she could crawl under the table and evaporate to nothing. Between the old lady’s arch smirk and Roman’s scowl there was no right answer.

Elizaveta was not to be placated by silence this time. ‘All this immorality and dirt in the city. I’m certain you would much rather be in the country at this time of year, my dear.’

‘I’m certain I would not.’ Trapped in a mansion like some hothouse orchid watered by the blood of generations of peasants and servants. And they had the gall to call it Golden Hill! But Roman kned her under the table, and she remembered herself. ‘That is, I’m far happier here in Radara, Elizaveta Pavolva, as I know Roman Vladimiorvich is.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Helena, ‘I do find Radara ever so much more beautiful in winter than in summer.’

Galina nodded. ‘I often wish we could spend more time in Moscow, but dear Viktor’s work makes it quite difficult. However, we’re terribly lucky to have *Zolotoi Kholm*! Did you hear what happened to...’

The combined tact of the other ladies brought the subject back to genteel gossip. Margarita let their voices fade to murmurs, pushed her food around her plate, and wondered whether there was any way to excuse herself without upsetting some unspoken social propriety.

The boar tasted of the forest it had so lately inhabited. She rolled it around her mouth, comparing it to *tel’noye* in Zhorzhino, dill potatoes in flat 17, and weak broth in the Litovsky. Weighing the diversity of this table, groaning under game and wines and fishes long as her

arm, against the limited offerings on others. Noting how much was consumed. How much wasted.

As if her assessments were plain on her face, Nikitin turned to Roman and said: 'Have you heard they're bringing inspectors into that abattoir in the factory quarter?'

'Yes, one of the new initiatives along with improved drainage. Less offal in the Medelnyy will be a tremendous improvement.' Roman sipped his dark wine, admired it against the candlelight, and set it down. 'Long-overdue.'

'Absolutely right,' agreed Teterevko. 'Improved physical hygiene can only improve moral hygiene, as it were. Governor Suetsky is right to enact it.'

Margarita looked up from her plate. 'I thought Suetsky was foreign minister.'

'He tried,' said Roman, 'but failed. Lamsdorff got the job, so Suetsky has returned his attention to his first love: Radaran business.'

'Improving the lives of Russian workers,' amended Tarasov.

'Those poor people,' sighed Helena, 'I cannot imagine what their lives must be.' She shook her head sadly before shoving a forkful of lark sopped with truffle gravy into her mouth.

Elizaveta dabbed her lips with her napkin. 'Is there much point when they'll just take that good health to the taverns and cause disorder? It seems to me that's all they're good for these days. At least when they were serfs we looked after them.'

Margarita dropped her fork. 'What?'

'We set them free and they toddled off to the city with no conception of how to look after themselves. And look at the state of them now. It's hard to pity them when they've turned their backs on we who cared for them for centuries.'

'Please, *tante*,' laughed Viktor, 'enough about serfdom. You'll upset Roman.'

'It's true and you know it. They've brought their suffering on themselves. What the

poor need is not coddling but a firm hand.'

Margarita sat very still. If she moved, she would explode, and she mustn't. She mustn't.

'Now there I agree, Elizaveta Pavolva,' said Teterevko. 'I don't like Suetsky and never have, but at least he's trying to keep the students and radicals in line. That's where our workers go wrong, listening to these external influencers.'

Ice was cracking beneath her feet; any moment she would drown. *That mess with the students.* 'What happened with – ?'

'I passed a fellow just last week begging!' Teterevko continued. 'Right in the middle of the main thoroughfare. He looked perfectly fit to work, of course.'

'Wheeling money out of hard-working folks is easier than working yourself,' Nikitin said.

She clenched every muscle to keep from lunging across the table and choking Nikitin until he turned blue, her chest ached with the effort of keeping it in.

'I must say I pitied him – he was in a shocking state! I knew perfectly well he'd spend it on drink or some other wretched vice,' he said, admiring the ruby glint of candlelight on his wine, 'but I tossed him a few kopeks to move him along.'

'Oh yes.' Margarita was surprised to discover the sneering, scoffing voice was her own. 'Keep them away from your porcelain and marble!'

'Natasha Arkadyevna...' Roman warned.

'Will cleaning their water ease your conscience?'

'Natasha, that's enough!'

Only Terasov's twitching moustache signalled his indignation. 'Improved sanitation will better the everyday lives of the workers.'

'Fantastic,' she said, 'stop them dying quickly of cholera so they can continue dying

slowly of hunger and inadequate housing.'

'Those are not problems we can tackle,' said Nikitin.

Galina turned blazing eyes to Margarita. 'We cannot pity strikers and beggars.'

'By all means, criticise their behaviour. As if they had any choice! Never mind giving them money, meet their needs and see how quickly things change. Feed them all, I say.'

'Without need, Natasha Arkadyevna, they will not work,' said Viktor.

'Listen to yourself! You suggest keeping people in a state of constant desperation so you can sit back and reap the benefits. Feed them all, I say, and house them too! Your manors sit empty most of the year and your tables hold more food than you can eat, yet you begrudge scraps to the people most in need of them. You tweak problems but not the system that breeds them because that system favours you. Where money speaks, there the conscience is silent. Shame on you, all of you!'

'Natasha Arkadyevna.' Already betrayal was clear in his voice. Must she look at him, see it plain? 'You cannot fault people for incremental change. The fires of the world cannot all be doused at once.' His face was very still, almost as calm as his voice. He wasn't being conciliatory. He actually meant it.

She stood so abruptly her chair crashed to the floor. 'Then the world shall burn!'

The staccato clacks of her heels on the parquet floor were like gunshots, and once in the hallway she kicked them off. 'Roman Vladimirovich.' Elizaveta's voice, cold and unyielding as stone. 'I'm pleased to hear you are not courting Natasha Barinova. She's a hysteric at best, and not fit for you.'

Margarita made an obscene gesture. '*K chertu vsekh vas!*' she hissed.

Safely in her room she tore herself free of her doll's clothes, the diamonds in her hair and the gold at her neck, the gloves, the dress – the dress! She tugged and squeezed and shimmied but it was impossible with her trembling fingers. Curses trapped behind clenched

teeth, she dug her nails under the silk and yanked at seams until they split with satisfying little rips.

The door handle turned and Fedosia's worried face peeped through the gap. '*Barinya?*' Her jaw dropped. 'What are you about?'

'Get me out of this thing, I can't bear it!'

Fedosia tossed Margarita's discarded silk shoes onto the chair, nimble fingers unhooking loops and peeling off the yellow silk. Margarita's shaking worsened, pieces of her fell away. Too much inside her. She knelt on the bed and punched the pillows, over and over, buried her face in the tenderized fabric, screamed until her throat seared.

Her own tremulous breathing filled her head; she focused on it, on the emptiness, the stillness. Let them anchor her. This was all that had held her together in the Litovsky, the ringing silence after a scream. Darkness settled into her mind, allowed her scattered thoughts to coalesce. The edge of the bed sank with Fedosia's weight and her fingers burrowed into Margarita's hair, massaging her scalp.

'Oh, let me alone!' She sat up and smacked Fedosia's hands away. 'How can you stand it? That bunch of stuffed shirt hypocrites!' The maid looked scandalized and laughed as if she hoped it was a joke. 'Come, Fedosia, you must know none of them has any grasp of reality, not even – How do you stand it?'

Fedosia picked at her cracked nails, rubbing her chapped, red knuckles. 'Tis the way of things. And it's better than a shop, like my mother, or a factory like my sister.'

'It's a sin how few options a working woman has in this world.' The words appeared, silky smooth, of their own volition. 'Even here, where you think you're better off, you're taken for granted and told to be happy with your lot.'

'*B-barinya*, I'm not sure that's true... And if it is, I'd much rather a kind man like Master Kedrov took me for granted than some of the others.'

‘But Fedosia, you deserve more! A better wage, more consideration.’

‘More? When Mama worked in a restaurant men always pinched her or shouted at her. The shop she’s in now isn’t much better. The factory doesn’t pay my sister enough to feed her baby and the building is filthy...but look!’ She opened her arms. ‘Look where I am! In a safe, clean apartment with no one to pinch or shout at me, and my pay is decent. I know when to be grateful, *barinya*, and I am. Truly.’

‘You are a kind, sensible girl,’ she took Fedosia’s hand, ‘you recognize your advantageous position. But you are in limbo. While you enjoy comfort and safety, other women are forced to work in dangerous, unsanitary conditions. And while you labour here, fine ladies like Helena Teterevkova and Elizaveta Dubinina hardly consider you a person. It’s shameful!’

Fedsoia’s good-natured smile faded, her feathery brows inching closer and closer together. Yes, she began to grasp the point, the scale of the problem outside her own front door. It was hard to say just why Margarita was determined to convert this girl; some devilish impulse, an insurmountable habit, a tangential act of revenge. Smelling blood, she leaned in for the kill.

‘You are better off, Fedosia, but still treated as so much less than you’re worth! Where would *Barin* Kedrov be without you and Marfusha and the others? Hmm? Would he stitch his own clothes, cook his own dinners?’ Fedosia giggled, then slapped a hand over her mouth. ‘Precisely. He relies upon you for everything. And when you consider – ’

The door opened and framed Roman, huge and faceless, in the bright light of the hall, hands behind his back. ‘Leave us, Fedosia.’

‘Y-yes, sir, I’ll just get madame’s wrapper – ’

‘Now.’

She leapt up as if scalded and slipped out like a shadow. Margarita had one last look

at her crestfallen and tearful face, and almost smiled. A concrete example was always better than a theoretical one.

‘Do you mean to tell me what you’re about, propagandising my servants?’

Margarita pulled the fiery counterpane around her shoulders. ‘One of us has to.’

‘Oh, you’re in fine form this evening, aren’t you? Was dinner a mere rehearsal for recruiting the maid? What a spectacular act of self-sabotage that was! Might as well have handed copies of *Trezubets* around the table.’

‘It would certainly have saved me the energy.’

He rubbed his face, collapsing into one of the chairs by the fire with his hands over his eyes. ‘I don’t know anymore, Ritochka. I don’t know what to do.’

‘They were insufferable, Roman,’ she said, pulling her legs up under the blanket. ‘How could you stand it? They were hateful and callous, without even the decency to realise it.’

His words were muffled through his palms. ‘You seem to think I enjoy this.’ He dropped his hands and let them dangle, pathetic, between his knees. ‘I have a position to maintain as the liberal gentleman, and like it or not that is the company I must keep.’

‘If that is what passes for liberal, the country is doomed.’

‘Bah!’ He pushed himself up, hovered behind the chair, leaned over it. Fingers burrowed into the plush backing. ‘I managed to smooth things over, but they won’t look at you the same, nor will they forget I have sheltered you under my roof. You put everyone at tremendous risk tonight, Margarita. Not only yourself, but me, my servants, our comrades, even Savva. You might consider that next time your temper threatens to get the better of you.’

The click of the door sealed in the silence. She pressed her eyes against her knees until sinuous stars burst across her lids. Nothing made sense, herself least of all. Everything

was wrong, ruined. She'd woke here thinking she was free, but it was merely different, stone and bars upgraded to marble and mahogany serving the same purpose. She wanted to smash the house down, tear the street apart brick by brick, make rubble of it all, herself included.

Words had failed. They did nothing for *Trezubets*, for the movement, or for her. If she sat still any longer she'd burst out of her skin.

*

He seemed to be talking, but she didn't understand the words. Didn't even remember coming to this room. She stared up at him, uncomprehending, disinterested. 'Aren't you well today, my little bird?' he asked.

Half-forgotten lies swirled about her head. She must remember

Sokolov leaned in, and for all her exhaustion she still pointedly averted her eyes. 'You know what I think?' He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. 'I think you're nearly finished.'

Tears leaked from under her lashes. She felt it, too.

He summoned a couple of men to do his dirty work. This time might be the last.

There was something hard in the very bottom of her which jangled like a loose coin in a jar each time they struck her and she'd learned to love its clatter against her brittle edges. It fed her when there was nothing else to sustain her, neither food nor hope nor love.

Her lover, her baby, her dignity, her freedom.

They would pay. They had to. What kind of world would it be if they got away with it?

*

She jerked up. Had she slept? Or was it only the memory, close to the surface, flittering in and out of focus like living two lives at once?

But she was smiling. They *would* pay, and she'd use the only weapon she still believed in.

Margarita sprung from her bed to the writing desk. At the Castle she'd used shoelaces she'd frayed with her teeth like an animal, coated with spit and dirt to scribble on the grimy wall. Now in a leather chair with a fist full of pencils, warmed by the fire, she pulled a sheet of paper toward her.

Fingers clumsy, she held her breath and dragged the sharp graphite down the page.



It was completed in one night; the three days she spent locked away perfecting it was simple procrastination. Sooner or later, if it was to serve its purpose, she'd have to show him.

Margarita pressed her face into the gap of his study door.

'Ah.' Roman looked up from the desk and pushed his papers aside. His apprehension answered a twin feeling in her. 'The reclusive artist graces me with her presence.'

'Would you like to see what I've been working on?'

'Yes, yes, of course, yes.'

She despised that desperate enthusiasm, a tone reserved for invalids and children. This would fix it. Standing tall as she could in her plainest dress – being through with silk and organza – she presented the drawing from behind her back.

Margarita studied him as he studied it, and her face fell into grim lines matching his. He opened his mouth. Closed it. Cleared his throat. 'It's...incredible.' The same response he'd had to her description of tenement conditions, spoken with the same opprobrium.

'You hate it.'

'It's...brilliantly done.'

‘But you hate it.’

‘That is not what I said.’

‘But you do.’

He sighed. ‘Your execution – pardon the wording – is flawless. Only I wasn’t expecting such...gruesomeness.’

She peered over his shoulder to see it through his eyes. A gnarled tree trunk occupied the right edge. From its bough dangled a gendarme, a doctor, and a man in the gentry’s trimmings, all gleaming medals and epaulettes. Bodies blotchy and bloated, barely human. Scratched across the bottom: ‘Do Unto Others’. Someday she’d paint it in heavy, dark oils: black, plum, olive, royal blue, daubs of white, words in yellow.

Her social pyramid was a statement of fact; this was a statement of intent.

He didn’t understand.

Just like Varya said.

She snatched the picture back, rolled it up, and clasped it to her, a map only she could read. ‘I thought we could use it.’

‘What? In the pamphlet?’

‘Well I wouldn’t suggest another set of posters.’

Roman narrowed his eyes; she wasn’t meant to know what a dismal failure they’d been. He cleared his throat again, shuffled his papers, but the moment for ringing acceptance had passed. ‘Your art is excellent and has made valuable propaganda in the past. Unfortunately this...isn’t suitable.’

‘Indeed?’

‘You know it isn’t. We are informative. We demand action – within reason.’

Within limitations, he meant. ‘You call for reform, then.’

‘In this country, reform is revolutionary.’

‘What a noncommittal platitude. No doubt *that* will stir the masses.’ It was an excuse for cowardice, a pitiful one at that. A betrayal of the things he’d pledged himself to so fervently when they’d met. ‘I think you’re afraid.’

‘Is that so? Margarita, that?’ He pointed to the paper in her fist. ‘That is a declaration of war. Just because —’ He wiped his face. Sighed. Tried again. ‘You have suffered something terrible. You’re exhausted and hurt.’

‘That’s not —’

‘Your feelings are in your work, where they belong, but it’s inappropriate for our platform.’

‘Because it takes a position and doesn’t back away? Because it means something?’

‘And *Trezubets* doesn’t?’

‘No!’ It was so ridiculous she couldn’t help laughing. ‘It’s half-hearted to the point of having no position. Informative? Without action, education is useless. You leave the workers cursed with the knowledge of their plight but without the tools to change it.’

‘What shall I do instead? Encourage them to bomb factories? Hang their bosses from trees?’

Margarita flung her arms up. ‘Maybe! Anything is better than nothing.’

‘*Prekraty!* How can you say that?’

‘Because I care about this cause.’

‘I started *Trezubets*, don’t presume it means more to you than it does to me.’

‘If you give it up you’ll still have your old life. If I give it up, I have nothing, am nothing.’

He stood, reached for her. ‘That’s not true.’

‘No? I’m outside of everything that made my life worth living before.’

His hand dropped. ‘Is that how you feel?’

‘Yes,’ she snapped, infuriated by the baffled hurt tugging at the corners of his mouth. What was so hard to comprehend? ‘I thought...this would be my way back in.’

Roman shook his head. ‘It would give the impression we condoned vigilante justice, contradicting the whole *Trezubets* ethos. We call for change, not blood.’ He turned his back on her. She was dismissed. As she reached the door he called, ‘Perhaps we shouldn’t go to Switzerland after all. Until you’re feeling better.’

Responses crowded her lips: she was fine; she was well enough to fuck, apparently, but not to work; the trip had been his idea; she hadn’t cared to go; she never believed they would; this was punishment for rejecting him; he had disappointed her – again. The weight of grief was crushing.

‘No,’ she said at length, ‘perhaps not.’

*

Her cell door banged shut. She no longer flinched. Genuinely, in her darkest moments, she’d believed he would rescue her. He was a renowned *advokat* with a history of political cases. He knew her situation, knew her. She should have been freed long ago.

It was impossible to see out the window. Spring or summer? Early morning or twilight? Where was he, now? Working to free her? Did he worry for her? Assuming she crossed his mind at all.

He had forgotten.

So what?

Was she so dependent on him? If he cared for her, he’d have done something by now. At least visited, as Varya had. No contact all this time, no letters, not even a message delivered through a fellow prisoner. Why?

She laid on her cot, wrapping her arms around her stomach. *Empty*. She clenched her teeth until her jaw ached and concentrated on the hollow place, the way she existed around it, listened to it hum with loss and potential.

The emptiness was hers. It was all she had and the one thing they couldn't take away because they had given it to her.

*

She slammed the door of her room with a satisfying bang and resisted the urge to slam it again. Kicking a chair instead, she held her breath until the tears receded.

There was an impossible distance between what had been and what was. Even as she tried to follow the trajectory she knew it was untraceable. Fantasies of mutual work and shared goals were replaced by the reality of separate spheres, smiling through his patronizing affection and the indifference of his circle. He would reject her ideas but expect her service. Might as well have taken her mother's advice and –

Her mother. He'd not mentioned her in weeks. Another promise broken.

Maybe it was inevitable, she thought, crumpling onto the bed. Maybe she'd been a fool to think living with him would be different from any other man. When they'd been partners it felt certain. Now, he only saw her as a victim to be pitied. Well, she'd outgrown that role.

In fact – she sat up, watching the sun sink behind mansard roofs and skeletal trees – she had outgrown many things.

Once positive he'd gone to bed she slipped into the night in a restless haze. *Now, now*; her feet pounded the rhythm on the ice-glazed sidewalk. How had she stood inactivity so long? Words composed in comfy chairs, calls to action made safely off the streets... where had it gotten them? He'd made of her a talking parrot whose impressive recitation of socialist theory for his amusement inspired tender condescension, a mere pet to be tossed throwaway

praise with no basis in admiration or respect. Resentment brewed now as he struggled to alter her repertoire. *Later, later*, her mind sought to reason, hoping some justification lurked there; but her feet pulled her forward. *Now, now, NOW*.

At the mouth of alley, she stopped. The butcher's was two corners over, and the street had the quiet of an open wound before blood surfaced. The old picture flashed through her mind of the flat raided and press smashed, the devastation of everything she'd tried to build. With a shake of her head, she gathered herself to turn back –

Footsteps. Nearby, to the right. Cautious but still approaching though she had stopped. Gendarme? Okhrana? No, they were more covert, they moved with you, or tried to. A thief? If she was lucky.

Common sense said run, yet her fist clenched, heart raced... She turned, eager to take the first swing, and found herself face to face with Katya.

'Marusya!' She threw her arms around Margarita's neck with choking force. 'I can't believe it, I hardly recognized you!'

'Katya,' she whispered. Words, feelings, thoughts unfolded but all withered at Katya's un-gloved hand on her cheek.

'I can't believe it, you're free...you're alive! I didn't mean to startle you.'

'I don't frighten easily. They say prison is the best training, like it's –'

Katya waved her hands and looked over her shoulder. 'Marusya, keep walking.'

'Are you being trailed?'

'No more than usual.' She slipped into the alley. 'You can't stay in one place too long since the student demonstration.'

She was alert for the first time in weeks – months even, as if awoken by a bracing splash of water. Margarita took Katya by the elbow. 'What's happened?'

'When did you get out?'

‘Around Christmas. I’ve been underground.’

‘*Vot der’mo.*’ Deeper and deeper into the shadows so all that remained of Katya were the pinpricks of light in her eyes. ‘They staged a walkout in September and refused to go back til the girls were reinstated and the Jewish quota lifted. Went down the streets chanting, waving banners. Then the troops stormed in, and, well...’

‘What? Who called in the troops?’

Katya sighed. ‘Who do you think? Twenty dead in all.’

The air felt thin. ‘Were any of us – ?’

‘Several arrested.’

Possibilities darted through her mind too rapidly to analyse. ‘I assume you retaliated?’

‘*That* suggestion was rejected in no uncertain terms. I was told we don’t meet barbarism with barbarism. Haven’t been to a meeting since.’

That was just the sort of high-sounding rhetoric Roman was best at, bugle songs without a charge. Son of a bitch. How could he not tell her? Maybe he’d forgotten the youths dying in the street, too.

She shuffled, crossed her arms tighter, flexed her toes against the snow. Could she grapple with her conscience in an alley stinking of garbage and piss? A decision such as this surely required more dignity, more consideration.

Except that assumed the decision wasn’t already made. Weeks ago, frail and ill in bed; months ago in a squalid cell as her baby disappeared; years ago, watching a young man sway from a noose. The regime created their own enemies, and in that light it was hard to pity them.

Margarita found Katya’s eyes in the dark. ‘Is there somewhere we can talk?’

‘My flat. I was just headed there.’

When she emerged out the other side of the alley, arm in arm with Katya, her spine was straight and her stride sure.

Everything in Katya's apartment was made of wood. The walls, the floor, the furniture. No marble or velvet anywhere.

'I didn't think I'd see you again,' said Katya, moving books and papers off a chair. Her flat was small and cluttered, and Margarita had the impression she wasn't home much.

Taking a seat at the table, she said, 'That makes two of us. I wasn't sure I'd get out. Though I hear you were keen to rescue me.'

'My plan was too risky, they said. They were right, but I was desperate. We were finished without you. Groups don't last long without a leader, not even socialists.'

'I'm not in charge.'

Katya snorted over the samovar. 'Roman may have started it, but it's yours. Why do you think it started breaking up after you were arrested?'

So many details to process, new information to analyse, but before she could Katya set tea in front of her and wrapped thin arms around her neck, pressing their faces cheek to cheek. 'Was it awful? In there?'

It had been hard enough telling Varvara; the prospect of repeating it for Katya made her throat tighten so she might never force words out. Still, Stepan's prison stories had saved her; perhaps her story would help Katya someday.

Sharing it was exhausting, a physical as much as emotional task, though it was easier this time. Narrative now overlaid the chaos. Indignities could be detailed with indifference.

Except Kira. Her body rioted, fighting to keep the memory of her daughter in even as her voice barely wavered. Katya's eyes were red and teary. Margarita's were dry. *There,*

she thought, *I've conquered it. It can't hurt me now.* But her empty glass clanked too hard when she set it down.

'Can't you...can't you get her back?'

'No. And I don't want to.' Defiant, she met Katya's eyes and braced for another storm of criticism.

Katya squinted at the dregs in her glass. 'That's true,' she said. 'It's not safe for a baby. Besides, mother and revolutionary are full-time jobs. You'd have a hard time doing both.'

Such comprehension, even if not wholly correct, was a poultice on her wound, and she took Katya's hand. 'I shouldn't be surprised that you of all people understand.'

'Why?'

'Your dedication shamed me terrible. Whatever was asked of you, you did without complaint, and you refused to allow personal relationships to interfere with work.'

'I thought if I refused an assignment they'd throw me out. You never let them push you around. I looked up to you – I do, I mean.' Brazen, unflappable Katya actually blushed. 'And if you're referring to Sergei – if I loved him, it'd be different. It's not like you and Roman.'

'No...' Margarita slumped in her seat. 'I'm not his *tovarisch* now, I'm...something less. You know he tells me nothing about *Trezubets* meetings no matter how often I ask.'

'That's because there are no meetings. Or, not like there were.'

'You keep saying that, what does that mean Katya?'

'I'm not the only one who left. I told you, a group can't survive without a leader. Many of us didn't feel Roman's leadership was right for us after the massacre. Whatever *Trezubets* was when you left, it isn't that now.'

'Who's still involved?'

‘Don’t know for certain. Stepan’s still there. Evgenia. Grisha fled the country, that *moodak*.’

‘Yes, I heard.’

‘So Roman’s still producing pamphlets with a faction of the crew, though I don’t know how. Love of the cause, I guess.’

Margarita scoffed and shook her head. ‘He’s content to sit back and wait for change, he doesn’t realize he has to *make* it. Revolutions aren’t wished for, they’re created. I’m suffocating trying to make him see that.’

Katya nodded, sucked the residual honey from her spoon. ‘Pamphlets are alright for consciousness-raising but they don’t work on their own. That’s why I left. Circumstances had changed but we weren’t changing to meet them.’

The idea which had germinated in the alley bloomed so bright it left her momentarily speechless. Margarita leaned over, and as she studied Katya’s narrow, impish face she felt a swoop of sure success. ‘Well then...why don’t we do it ourselves?’



There had been a total of two happy days. The second was when Kira had come.

*

February was always grey. Brutal snow squalls covered the windows and darkened the room. The day dragged on, the temperature plummeted.

A guard was posted in her room day and night for over three weeks; now a doctor and a midwife joined them. She wasn’t brought to the infirmary. Due to weather, perhaps, or maybe they didn’t trust her near all those sharp implements. *Tatyana*...

Oblivious to the chill of the stone floor she crawled across sweating and howling, she wept into her arms and bit until she tasted blood and tore at her hair. Words filtered through a white buzz. Whatever breech meant she did not care, only wanted it finished. They pinned her down to stop her resisting the midwife's hands lodged inside her, twisting The Baby.

She gnawed her lips to pulp. If she called for Roman or Varya they'd wind up in here, too. Better she died than they.

'Fuck you, Mama.'

Doctor, guard, and midwife stared as if she were a mad thing, but *fuck them as well* she sneered into her elbow. Belly hanging between her knees, she gripped her hair by the roots and pressed her burning forehead to the floor.

Why hadn't her mother told her it was like this, even when she intended to sell her to the butcher? Peasant girls saw enough in the fields to make parallels with themselves, but animals seemed to cope far better. Ignorance magnified her fear and disgust thousandfold.

'*Poshel tuy*, Mama,' she said again.

They deemed her 'too narrow' and widened her accordingly. Couldn't or wouldn't dull the sting of the blade. She must have fainted. How else could she have withstood it?

The scalpel gave what nature had not, and finally, somehow, It was out.

Resurfacing. Gradually. Over her shallow breathing, a voice: 'A girl, Christ preserve us.' The midwife, doubling and tripling in Margarita's sweat-bleared vision, held something in tattered blanket.

'Give her to me,' she said, with surprising strength.

'One moment,' said the midwife, 'you must still –'

'Give her!'

Margarita lay on the floor sobbing and laughing simultaneously, her baby squealing like a piglet against her neck.

*

It lay on the table like a reproach.

‘A *gun*. Margarita are you mad?’ Roman reached for her with vindictive fingers, thought better of it, ran them instead through his hair. ‘*Ya ne veryu*, what were you thinking?’

‘That I’d sooner they arrest a corpse.’

‘So your intention is...what? To shoot your way out? And if you miss? They’d hang you – supposing you lived!’

There was no point explaining how little that mattered.

‘Where on earth did it come from?’

‘Friends,’ she said, crossing her arms.

Katya’s connection with the Workers’ Party of Political Liberation of Russia was a stroke of great fortune. No official body existed in Radara; soon after the massacre, the Party had been crippled by arrests, not only in Radara but St. Petersburg, Berdichev, and Minsk, leaving no members and precious few leaders at liberty. This made it easier for Katya to quickly secure a meeting with members from the capital.

‘Is this all?’ Margarita had asked when, to her horror, a man named Gershuni handed her pamphlets. ‘Katya said you wanted to do something.’

Gershuni came from a Jewish petty-bourgeois family, a fact his Cossack hat and rough greatcoat failed to hide. When he smiled, his round, clever face grew radiant, assuring her that once she read their manifesto she’d see they were action-minded. What they needed were members. Members who were unafraid.

Up to that point, Margarita had neither held a gun nor cared to, but the moment Katya put the Browning in her hand she knew this was what she'd been looking for. The power, the assurance, the potential. In its weight she felt everything that propaganda was not.

'I'll do it,' she'd said.

Roman wasn't meant to find it. He'd come in and laughed at the clothes piled on the chair and the bed. 'What's this, another sewing project?' Before she could stop him, he'd taken her cloak from the corner of the chair. Felt its disproportionate weight. Reached into the pocket.

Now it lay between them, a gulf made tangible, and she wondered what made her thinki she could escape without having this fight.

'You're meant to be underground. How could you be so stupid to expose yourself like that? Did you bring someone here?'

It was himself he was frightened for. 'No.'

'Varvara, wasn't it? Count on a *shlyukha* to resort to a gun.'

If the Browning had been in her hand, she'd have shot him. 'Don't call her that.'

'Why not? That's what she is.'

She shoved him with all her strength. 'She didn't give it to me, but she would have. She'd do anything for me. Who got me out of prison? That was Varvara, if you forgot.'

'I did try.'

'Like you tried to visit me? My mistake, that was Varya too.'

Animosity hung like smoke in the air, choking them. 'Margarita,' he said, half-shrugging, 'it wasn't –'

'I'm not interested in excuses. It wasn't only me you forgot. Twenty students shot in the street, our *tovarishchi* arrested, and you don't care about any of them!' A memory, edges almost erased by the intervening years... On her bed in flat 17 they'd watched students

stream by, he'd shaken his head, held her wrist. Impulsive action, he'd said it was, not political action.

But it's all political.

'You dismissed them three years ago like you dismiss them now.'

'Do you think I'm devoid of feeling? We who avoided arrest produced a special edition of *Trezubets* in their honour – ' Margarita rolled her eyes ' – but we were finalizing your escape from the Litovsky, so you'll forgive that my heart was in your cause instead of theirs.'

She stopped, shamed by the tremor in his voice. Swallowed the lump in her throat. He had been so dismissive, of the movement and of her, she never thought he'd turn from one to benefit the other. All the same... 'Those students deserve justice. Our comrades too.'

'Justice or revenge? What did I say terrorism was? Cowardice enacted by the inarticulate and you are not inarticulate.'

How he resembled Kira – wide-lipped, eyes metallic blue, hints of gold in fair hair. Assuming she was still alive, today was her first birthday. 'You can't understand.'

'I cannot believe you think this is what you want.'

'What else do I have? Revolutionaries can't have families, Roman.'

His face crumbled into the lines of a much older man. She heard her words as they must sound to him, and although the look in his eyes – Kira's eyes – pained her, she lacked the energy for either explanation or apology.

When he left the force of the front door ricocheted through the apartment. Margarita carried on packing with steady hands, methodical, stuffing her case with whatever fine clothes and useless trinkets she could fit. They'd fetch good money the Party could use for propaganda. And weapons.

Except the bracelet. It remained on the dresser under a note: *Fedosia – remember your worth.*

In the foyer she looked one final time on the high ceiling, the marble which threw up her distorted reflection. She hadn't imagined it ending that way. She hadn't imagined it ending at all. But it had. Sniffling, she wiped her nose and smiled.

The evening wind bit at her exposed skin, fluttering the hem of her skirt and the fringe of her scarf. Once the door closed behind her, she did not look back.

CHAPTER XII

May – July 1902

Bang! Bang!

Momentary adjustment. Inhale metallic smoke like the charcoal on her sketches, listen to Katya's shots to her right –

Bang bang bang!

– aim again. Steady eyes, steady grip.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Outside town cramped houses and factories gave way to woods and open fields. The Radaran branch of the newly formed Socialist Revolutionary Party, or *Essers*, had adopted an isolated patch as their all-purpose drilling grounds, practising hand-to-hand combat and arms training among the wildflowers. There were thirty-three members, originally of smaller groups like the Northern Union and the Party of People's Rights. No one had yet mentioned bombs, but Margarita suspected they'd have plenty of room here if it ever came to that.

'Excellent work!' called Sergei from the far end of the field where he struggled to keep Vlad in a headlock. 'You've gotten much better, *Zhar-ptitsa*.'

Firebird. The codename they'd chosen was a little ridiculous, but she couldn't help being bolstered by it, as attracted to the resurrection as she was to the flames. Smoke curled from the muzzle of her Browning. *Vozrodit'sya* – reborn – was exactly how she felt.

'How about you, *Chertyonok*?'

Katya's name, Imp, was less flattering albeit more fitting. She checked the chambers of her Bulldog. 'I could do better.' It was her only response to praise.

Margarita watched Sergei and Vlad tussle in the dirt and leaned over to Katya. 'Who do you think of when you're practising?'

‘Some Holy Brigade bastard. I imagine him setting fire to a synagogue or beating a rabbi, and –’ She pointed the gun at their makeshift target and pretended to fire. ‘And you?’

Sokolov’s cruel smile, the mole beside his right eye. ‘Suetsky,’ she lied.

‘Ah, the doomed man.’ Katya began dismantling the targets. ‘Are you nervous?’

Margarita looked over at Kolya cleaning his gun, face obscured by a wild beard and hair like an untrimmed hedge. ‘Too soon to tell.’

‘Ladies!’ Nikita shouted, waving them over. He was Gershuni’s representative of the Combat Organization down from the capital to inspect the Radaran branch, a tall, angular man of fair complexion and a feline face Margarita was keen to paint. ‘Time to switch.’

Margarita and Katya traded places with Vlad and Sergei. Usually Katya got the first strike in combat practice, utilising her small stature and speed, but impatience and poor planning put her at a disadvantage. Margarita could get the better of her in under two minutes.

Nikita wasn’t pleased with her performance, either. ‘Imp, pay attention. I could see what Firebird was planning three moves ago. Focus! Your life could depend on it.’

Katya set her mouth and pushed Margarita off with all her strength. She was getting better. Hopefully, better would be good enough.

‘What about you?’ Margarita asked Nikita, shaking mud off of her skirt and bending a sore knee. ‘You tested the others. When do we get to take you on?’

Wary as Katya looked, it was nothing compared to Nikita. ‘You’re both still new at this, I wouldn’t want...’

‘I’ve taken worse beatings,’ she said. ‘Besides, the police and Okhrana don’t hire women. There’s no reason I need to train to fight one.’

Nikita gave a watery smile. ‘Has anyone ever told you you’re too clever for your own good?’

‘No, never,’ she laughed. ‘Come on. I’m ready.’

They circled one another like wolves, sizing each other up, seeking vulnerabilities and formulating attacks. His face had transformed, aristocratic angles masked by deadly concentration. He charged. At the last second she swerved out of his trajectory, but only just; he grabbed her by the arm and pinned it behind her back, suspiciously gentle.

‘You’re going easy on me,’ she grunted. ‘Stop fucking around.’

Nikita wrenched her arm higher, toward her shoulder, and even though pain burned across her back she didn’t cry out. She elbowed him in the ribs with her free arm; he doubled over and she had him in a headlock.

Everyone – her comrades from the Radaran branch and the St. Petersburg members Nikita had brought – watched, silent.

Agile as a monkey, Margarita leapt on his back and tightened her grip around his neck, but she’d underestimated the power in his lean body. One hand on her hip and one around her braid, he pitched forward and flung her over his head. The impact of landing on her back knocked the wind out of her and before she’d recovered Nikita straddled her, pinning her arms at either side of her head.

Scattered applause rippled around the field. Digging her nails into his hands, she brought her knee up so swiftly that he flinched – but stopped before making contact. ‘There’s always the coward’s way out,’ she panted, nudging him.

Nikita’s fierce mask broke and she felt his laughter against her face, standing and extending a hand to her. ‘You’re creative, I’ll give you that. And I shall have a devilish bruise come morning,’ he said, rubbing his ribs. ‘But I could feel you panicking. You need to watch that, it won’t do you any favours. Adrenaline hinders more than helps. And do something about that hair, either crop it or style it differently. A plait is too easy for your opponent to manipulate.’

‘Thank you, comrade.’

‘*Babushka* will be pleased to know how well you did.’

‘W-will she?’

‘Gershuni’s told her all about you, she’s keen to hear your progress.’

Attractive as the *Esser* platform was, its boasting a woman co-founder was no small factor in Margarita’s decision. The political work of the legendary Ekaterina Breshkovskaya pre-dated even the ‘to the people’ movement of her mother’s generation – hence her alias. Rumour was she’d even given up her child to better serve the movement. Knowing *Babushka* was invested in her left a warm feeling of solidarity and a yearning to be worthy of the attention.

Nikita joined his comrades at the targets and Katya leapt in to brush dirt from Margarita’s backside and check her for marks. ‘*What were you thinking?*’ she hissed. ‘Jumping on his back like that, you’ll get yourself killed before anyone else.’

They ate supper around a fire sheltered by the treeline. Training often ended this way, portioning out hunks of bread and cheese, dividing the occasional sausage. Like Margarita, most of them were underground. Such stolen moments were their only taste of freedom, always shadowed by what lay ahead.

Kolya flumped beside Margarita and proffered a hunk of bread. ‘I’m sorry I haven’t any salt,’ he teased. She loved his adherence to old customs, despite the new world they were trying to build. In him, she saw a repository for nearly everything which deserved preservation. ‘That was an impressive display earlier.’

‘Thank you.’

‘I was worried about how you’d fare...in the aftermath. I’m not anymore.’

Katya grinned around a mouthful of cheese. ‘Aren’t you glad she’s on our side?’

‘I am. I’d certainly hate to face her.’

They ate in comfortable silence, and when they spoke it was of peasants-turned-proletariat and what the birth of the newest Romanov daughter might mean for the dynasty and their revolution. Primarily they listened to comrades spin yarns and crack jokes around the fire, exchanging the occasional bite of food or drinking from the communal jug.

Kolya licked the last of the grease from his dirty fingers before rising. ‘When will we next meet?’

‘Tomorrow? Before your shift?’

‘Excellent. At the usual place.’

With a smile he disappeared among the trees, taking the long way home. Son of a woodsman in his previous peasant life, before education at his master’s hand irretrievably elevated him, he’d once told Margarita that he never felt more at peace than amongst the trees.

Getting home proved its own challenge. Meal finished, departures from the woods were staggered and Margarita and Katya returned through the factory district, narrowly avoiding a policeman on duty, into the outskirts of the city.

Their downstairs neighbour was a light sleeper and friends with the *dvornik* who logged the comings and goings of the block’s residents. Next door, however, had no *dvornik*.

They crept to the top floor via the back stairs to *Loshad*’s rooms. Her name was no mystery; heavyset with unkempt, greasy hair and an oblong face, there was a strong equine air about her. ‘Hurry up,’ she whispered, ushering them through the main room. ‘How’d it go?’

‘Marusya picked a fight with Nikita and he flattened her!’

‘Don’t twist it, Katya. I asked to fight him, and I *did* win, I just chose not to take the final move.’

Katya rolled her eyes and went into the bedroom.

‘Were you productive here?’ Margarita asked *Loshad*.

‘The papers are collected and the money exchanged. Did you get the disguises sewn?’

‘Yes, I’ll pass them through and you can send them off.’

Katya stuck her head round the corner. ‘It’s open.’

Margarita reached the bedroom in time to see Katya slip out the window. The buildings were close enough that, when necessary, the bedroom windows acted as doors. She scrambled after, handing *Loshad* the costumes and wishing her a good night before closing the sash.

Changing in darkness to avoid lighting the lamps, Katya crawled into her bed and Margarita, wincing at the pain in her back, dropped onto her own. A far cry from the enormous feather bed and carved headboard at Roman’s, perhaps, but infinitely more appropriate. She didn’t need grandeur or even comfort. Functional was good enough.

Memory’s potency increased by night. Days were busy: planning, organizing, sewing, distributing, commanding, training. It was hard to find room for Roman amidst all that. But at night, listening to Katya shift under the sheets, memory opened like a pit. He’d squeezed with her into a smaller bed than this, whispered machinations in inky blackness. She missed him now they were apart. Or, rather, she missed the Roman she had fallen in love with. Wherever he was.

‘You’ll be up early then,’ Katya said.

‘Mm. It’s coming together, at last.’

‘With Kolya’s help.’

‘Yes. I don’t know if the man is a saint or a fool, but he’s a master of strategy. I couldn’t do this without him.’

Katya chuckled. ‘Well they say the best way to get over a boyfriend is —’

‘No, thank you,’ Margarita sniffed. ‘That’s the last thing I want.’

‘And probably not as satisfying as getting under Nikita this afternoon. Honestly, how you had the nerve...’

‘It’s not nerve, it’s necessity. We won’t be fighting women in the streets. It’ll be men, big ones, with sabres and truncheons and guns.’

After a long pause, Katya said: ‘I’m frightened, Marya.’

Margarita rolled over and held out her hand. It was all she could offer.

Soon the only sound was Katya’s faint, sleeping breaths. She hadn’t realized how *lonely* she’d been for so very long. Until the Castle, she rarely slept alone. Space was precious everywhere: in the *izba*, in school, at flat 17. Someone was always nearby, fidgeting or snoring or reading by candlelight. Prison was by no means quiet, but neither was it intimate. Even at Roman’s she’d been isolated in that big room by herself. It lacked the homey feel of The Warren.

Where was Varushka tonight? And why hadn’t she responded? Margarita had sent an errand boy, months ago, with a note explaining her failed relationship, sending her love, urging a reply. So far, nothing. It was best not to worry. Varya would come through, sooner or later. She always did.

Katya groaned in her sleep and rolled over. Margarita closed her eyes, smiling.

Night passed in foggy dreams, and she woke without feeling rested. Sun pierced the gaps between the chimneys, painting windows with lustrous gold sunrise and turning the buildings to paper cut-outs. She dressed so as not to disturb Katya, curled like a cat under her sheet, and left without eating.

The scents of wakening spring were subsumed by the stink of the wakening city. She dodged dripping laundry and the falling contents of chamber pots. Already factory chimneys

sent up dense plumes summoning glazed-eyed scarecrows who marched in jagged lines toward their day's work. Most wouldn't see daylight again until tomorrow morning.

Kolya waited at the park, sunlight sparking in his black hair, standing so near an almond bush she thought he was trying to hide in it. No fear of that. He was too large, like the bear of ancient *Rus*, to disappear among flowers. Noting a woman nearby, he made an extravagant show of kissing Margarita's hand and leading her to the street.

'How's your back?' he asked.

'It's hurt worse.' She lifted the hand he'd wrapped around hers, examining his fingers. 'No grease or powder. I'm impressed.'

Kolya smiled. 'I'm fastidious.'

They avoided the main roads, particularly Monument Square which Margarita flatly refused to cross. At the dilapidated cheese shop, they squeezed through a gap in the boarded-up door and headed for the basement. She lit the lamp she'd stowed and Kolya retrieved the maps and plans from deep in a shelf still emitting the odour of musty feet.

He spread the papers across the table. 'There are several options.'

'Which are?'

She meant what she said: she couldn't plan Suetsky's assassination without Kolya. It wasn't just his steadiness, his silence, and endless patience – traits Margarita herself lacked lately – but he worked in Suetsky's office. Though he had no contact with the man himself, he had access to forms and documents and invaluable information about Suetsky's movements and agenda. Kolya, recruited by Radaran *Essers* under her command, was a dream come true.

'He's travelling to St. Petersburg in two weeks to meet with the Tsar.'

'Too short notice, and would encroach on the *Essers* in the capital.'

'In July he'll be attending the performance of *La Bayadère* at Ozwiena Theatre.'

‘Perhaps... Would we kill him in the theatre? It’s been done before, effectively.’

‘Escape would be impossible. For *either* of us.’

She breathed in deeply, slowly. ‘I know the consequences and am prepared to accept them.’

‘What if we waited until he was outside?’

‘That could work. Although we’d have to be careful not to be spotted beforehand.’

‘Unless...’

‘What?’

‘A bomb.’

Margarita shook her head. ‘Absolutely not.’

‘It could guarantee we’d get our man.’

‘Either it could, or there’s a guarantee, it can’t be both.’

‘Alright – it’s more reliable than a gun, skilled as you are.’

His compliment pleased her, for she had practised hard in snow until the metal numbed her hands, and in rain which slicked her grip. ‘But we can’t risk civilian casualties. We want the people on *our* side. If we hurt them, even in the process of hurting their oppressors, we damage our relationship with the very people we’re fighting for, whose support we need. I won’t do it.’

He nodded. ‘It is a bit impersonal.’

‘Besides,’ she added, ‘we wanted to make a show of charging him. Publically. As a warning and an inspiration. If the bomb goes off at the wrong time, or if you’re in the wrong place...’

‘They’ll kill me anyway, assuming they take me alive. I’d rather go out on my own terms than theirs.’

They'd both known from the beginning that his role, vital as it was, was tantamount to suicide. Whether Margarita escaped the melee would be due as much to chance as her own cunning; Kolya's fate was sealed the moment he agreed.

Much as his placid acceptance chilled her, she respected it. Kolya did not flinch from his responsibilities or their ramifications. Kolya knew what needed to be done and was prepared to meet it with stoicism. She wished there were more people like him.

And yet you're willing to let him die?

She gave her head a little shake. 'No. No bombs. Not now, not for this. The Party will use what methods it sees fit, but I'm in charge of this branch. It's an unnecessary risk.'

'Alright. You might be able to stow away in a nearby building and shoot from there. Are you confident you could hit him?'

'Depends how far away I was...or how high...'

'There's time to practice between now and then.'

'Yes... Will we need disguises? To fit in with the theatregoers?'

He smiled, brushing his threadbare vest. 'Don't I look every bit the gentleman already?'

She laughed. 'Perhaps disguises are pointless. It's an attack by the people, for the people. Dressing as the gentry defeats the purpose.'

'Do you still have any of those fancy dresses you stole?'

'Most are sold, but I've kept a few for the odd job. And I didn't steal them, they were technically mine.'

Kolya raised his hands. 'Far be it from me to frown upon a little petty theft.'

Bells rang from steeples across the city to mark the hour which had nearly passed.

'We should go,' Kolya said. 'I'd like to stop somewhere before the office.'

This wasn't the first meeting which concluded with him visiting a pulpit. Margarita turned away to mask her contempt and helped clear evidence of their presence, trying to intuit what he saw in those rituals to draw him back again and again. If she didn't know him better, she'd worry he was an informant...

She doused the lamp and they clasped hands again, creeping up the dark stairs. Kolya checked the street and they emerged into the sunshine, trysting lovers snatching precious moments before the working day began. No one would suspect anything else.

'I don't understand this,' she said, eyeing the spires and domes of The Church of the Annunciation of the Most Holy Mother of God glittering above the rooftops. The golden Orthodox cross winked in the soft spring sun. It was nicknamed The Ship – due to the shape of the belfry, gallery, and domes – but had always reminded Margarita more of a gingerbread house with its intricate decorations of red, green, and white.

'You've made that very clear.'

He was not angry and she knew she could probe further. 'It doesn't make sense. Socialists are usually atheists.'

'All the ones you've met, you mean. Some are Jews, or Christians. Even our Muslim brothers in Dagestan suffer under the Tsar's yoke and join our ranks.'

'But the Tsar is just a mortal manifestation of God, and you agree worshipping *him* is ridiculous.'

'Yes, but you've hit on the key word: mortal. The Tsar, despite his mythology, is fallible, for he is a mortal man like us. Thus, when invested with godly authority, he mishandles and even abuses it.'

'Jesus was mortal.'

'He was also divine. Jesus was the greatest socialist of them all.'

She tried a different tack. ‘Doesn’t the Lord condemn murder? He made a whole commandment about it.’

‘Did not the Lord murder His own people to cleanse them of the impurity which had taken root among them?’

‘Then one or both of you is a hypocrite,’ she snapped. ‘You’re not meant to covet your neighbour’s goods, either, but your whole political philosophy hinges upon taking the goods of your wealthy neighbours.’

‘Those goods were stolen from the people, which we then distribute to the hungry, the poor, the sick, the prisoners, just as Jesus did.’

At the church steps Kolya cupped her face in his hands, eyes closed, and recited: ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’ He crossed her, and matched her scowl with a smile. ‘There’s more of the radical in Our Lord than the reactionary, and in Him I believe you’d find a kindred spirit.’

‘Amen,’ Margarita sneered, watching him disappear through the open doors.



Plan in place, there was much to be done. Scouting missions were the primary activity for everyone except safe house operators like *Loshad* who were too valuable to risk. Margarita, too, took her share of turns, until Vlad pointed out that the Central Committee didn’t want local leaders running dangerous missions. They couldn’t afford replacements.

Even so, there was plenty to occupy her. Katya loved *Do Unto Others* and suggested printing it in the *Esser* pamphlet, with some alterations: the doctor became a government

official, proclamations scattered at his feet, and the tree they dangled from was now the upheld arm of the Valorous Rider at Monument Square. This was her favourite touch.

One night while preparing stacks of them for distribution, there was a knock at the door. She froze. Katya was on a reconnaissance mission and wasn't due back for hours; anyway, she wouldn't have knocked or used the front door. No one was expected. The piles of illegal literature were a death sentence.

She gathered the bundles and stuffed as many as she could in the loose light fixture overhead, then rolled the rest into the hollowed chair legs. Another knock, more insistent, made her flinch. 'Coming!' she called, hoping her voice was steady. She lifted her robe from the hook in the bedroom and brushed the gun in the pocket, reassured by its heft, before approaching the door.

'Yes?' A boy. At least five years her junior.

'The weather is turning,' he replied, an agreed-upon code among their members, and handed over a letter bearing neither postage nor inscription. Margarita tucked it into the empty pocket of her robe. 'By the way,' he murmured, 'if you want someone to think you'd been sleeping, you should remove your boots. *Do svidaniya.*'

Margarita closed the door and stared dumbly at her feet, fighting back a wave of nausea imagining an array of faces at the door: Sokolov, Roman, Okhrana agents. She *had* to be better.

Resuming her seat, she took the missive from her pocket and opened it, hoping: Varya. The script was unfamiliar; she squashed a surge of disappointment.

*Dear Child! What work you have done cannot be repaid nor
its magnitude measured. The power of the word is often eclipsed by the
weight of an image, and I carry yours with me like a talisman. The*

golden rule moors us all and gives us strength. Your name has been wisely chosen: the fire will singe those whom it does not comfort. My most heartfelt love to you, Your Babushka.

The golden rule... Breshkovskaya had seen her work, even liked it! She closed her eyes and put her forehead to the page. Someday she would thank *Babushka* for her encouragement, her advocacy. In the meantime...

There were disguises to sew, one of the few joys unaltered by her sentence. Admittedly her range was limited compared to working at Glazkova's – factory and peasant garb, in plain colours, simple lines, and cheap fabrics, were entirely unlike the bourgeois costumes previously commissioned from her. However, a good disguise often meant the difference between freedom and arrest; she threw herself into every detail because lives depended on them.

There was intelligence to gather and adjustments to make. Each day comrades brought new kernels of information and her job was to decide how best to implement them. Shoe shop opened across the street from the theatre; upscale restaurant next door closed – possible vantage point? She practised with firearms obsessively; her aim was solid. *Essers* were employed in the theatre for better surveillance, all entrances and exits memorized; all alleyways, side streets, and main thoroughfares marked, observed, detailed.

Two weeks exactly until the day of the attack, Kolya sent a hastily scrawled note saying he would come to the safe house that night. *I must speak with you. It is urgent.*

Katya laughed, tossing the message into the fire. 'He'll be professing his love, no doubt.'

'Hush, Katya.'

She raised a hand to her forehead in a passable impression of a prima donna. ‘Oh Margushka, I must speak with you – alone, tonight – for my love is urgent and burns with the intensity –’

‘Enough.’ Margarita giggled, but her smile faded as she watched the paper curl, blacken, and disintegrate amidst the flames. ‘No...this is something else, something serious.’

‘Love isn’t serious?’

‘He’s too cautious, too sensible to take the risk for anything personal. The note was dangerous enough, but coming here... No, it’s about the plan, I’m certain of it.’

‘Pavel, Sergei and a few other theatre employees are coming, plus *Loshad* of course.’

‘Then we’ll have to speak in the kitchen or the bedroom.’

‘I’m sure that will suit him.’

Margarita slapped the table. ‘Stop it, Katya!’ She paced the compact length of the room, gnawing on her knuckle. ‘I haven’t time for such nonsense, I must think!’

All day she snapped at people and startled at the slightest sound. What could possibly warrant coming to the safe house straight from Suetsky’s office? *Was* he a spy? Or perhaps he was backing out. Impossible: the Central Committee would hunt him more viciously than the Okhrana. Maybe Suetsky had scented a whiff of rumour or paranoia. She checked the clock every five minutes, chewing the inside of her lips, waiting...waiting.

He arrived long after dark, and she was ready to shake the news out of him. There safe house was bursting at the seams, some of its visitors writing articles, *Loshad* frying potatoes amidst a heated debate with Vlad over the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and whether there might be war with Japan. No helping it: she brought him to the bedroom and closed the door.

‘Have we been found out?’ she asked even before the handle clicked. His smile infuriated her. ‘For God’s sake, Kolya, what is it?’

‘Relax, we’re in no danger. I have important news.’

Margarita collapsed on the bed and put her forehead to her knees. ‘All day I’ve been...’

‘I’m sorry. You know I couldn’t write any details.’

‘I know. So if it’s not an emergency, what is it?’

‘How would you feel about changing the plan?’

She jerked up so fast she went lightheaded. ‘Change it? But...’ Kolya sat beside her, face unreadable. ‘Why, has something happened? Do they suspect us? Suetsky, the Okhrana?’

‘No, no. Please stop worrying.’

‘But we’ve worked so hard, everything is in place.’

‘Do you know what happens in October?’

‘I can’t...’

‘It’s ten years since Suetsky became governor.’

‘Ten years...’

‘They’re planning a parade. He’ll ride through the city, through the square where he hanged an innocent man as an example. Easy pickings I should think.’

Margarita sat straighter, the picture in his mind now clear in hers. ‘It would certainly make our job easier. And the symbolism of it. Right there in the square...’ Roman’s face floated to the surface but faded just as quickly in the glow of poetic justice. ‘Yes. He’ll be most visible then, and we’ll have better cover.’

‘Hand me that pencil.’

He brought a sheet of paper from his jacket pocket which, unfolded, revealed a rough map of Radara; hunched over the bedside table, he set to tracing Suetsky’s intended route through the city.

The plot grew easily, organically, more so than the theatre idea ever had, and the longer they worked the more she wondered how she'd ever believed their original plan could succeed. Ideas and strategies flew between them so fast they practically talked over each other, but without contention, without struggle. They were of one mind.

The relief of synchronicity meant nothing. That creativity and ingenuity illuminating his hairy face would be blotted out by gendarme bullets one brisk October morning. He'd earned a reprieve, but was still condemned. Why was she letting this happen?

Kolya stood, refolded the paper, and replaced it in his inner pocket. 'I think you've made the right choice, Firebird. The parade will give us opportunity and cover we lacked before.'

Margarita rose too, as worried about Kolya's fate in the future as her own in the present. She looked up at him, nearly a full head and shoulders taller than her and twice as wide. 'Stay while I explain it to the others. I might need reinforcement.'

'You hardly need me for that.'

Any progress was enough for Margarita, who'd so long endured idleness; the same could not be said for many of her comrades.

'We can't wait anymore,' Katya said, face flushed and fists curled. 'He's a danger to us all as long as he's alive. Kolya, you said Suetsky's meeting with Pobedonostsev this week. Do you know what that man is?'

'A priest in statesman's clothing?' suggested Sergei.

'He's the worst anti-Semite of the lot. I wish Lagovski had succeeded last year when he had the chance. Now Suetsky's meeting with him, and he already despises us. Before you know it Radara will be like Moscow, all its Jews driven out and spread to the four corners of the earth.'

‘You’re getting ahead of yourself, Imp,’ said Pavel. ‘There are still Jews in Moscow, and just because the men are meeting doesn’t mean –’

‘My family was expelled, as were tens of thousands of others. You can tell me I’m getting ahead of myself when you’re next on the list.’

‘I’m a socialist same as you,’ said Pavel. ‘We run the same risks.’

‘Yes, and if you stopped being one the government would leave *you* in peace. My father and uncles and brothers all gave up their youth to the army thanks to Pobedonostsev’s laws, and their home to the whims of the Romanovs, not to mention their education. Suetsky has refused to lift the quota on Jewish students, if he meets with Pobedonostsev –’

Margarita, listening from her place at the table, reached up and took her wrist. ‘That’s enough, Katushka. We’ll kill him, but we can’t plow ahead without a solid plan. That’s how missions fail. Just look at Lagovski – six shots and not one of them hit. All our efforts will be for nothing if we rely on impulse.’

Katya pulled her wrist free, crossed her arms, and flung herself in her chair. ‘Don’t treat me like a baby, Marusya.’

‘Then don’t act like one.’ She rose. ‘That goes for all of you. We have a goal. We have a plan to achieve that goal, a much better one than before. If you aren’t prepared to do what is necessary to ensure it’s a success, including bear the waiting patiently, you’re free to join another branch and I’ll be happy to see the back of you. Is that understood?’

A sea of nodding faces answered, some glum, others determined. ‘How many of you have faced prison already?’ she asked. Several hands rose, including Kolya. ‘So you know the consequences. You know why we can’t fail. Those of you who have evaded capture...listen to their stories. If waiting is unbearable to you now, I assure you it’s far worse when you have no choice. You’re useless to me and this movement incarcerated. But if you are patient, if you trust me, then I can guarantee you action and purpose.’

No one objected or even moved, and she was acutely aware of everyone's eyes on her. She tried to look stony, to seem more convincing.

As she might have expected, Katya spoke first. 'I trust you, Firebird. But we're counting on you, too. So don't miss!'

CHAPTER XII*October 1902*

‘If this keeps on,’ Kolya said, wringing the water from his cap and shrugging out of his jacket, ‘we’ll have to think of another plan.’

‘No.’

‘Firebird, what choice have we? Look at it! Two days of rain, you can’t so much as see your hand in front of your nose. They’ll cancel, or at least postpone if it lasts through morning, and even if they didn’t you’d never get a clear shot.’

Sergei sighed. ‘We’ll have to make a contingency plan.’

‘Again?’ Katya crossed her arms. All their work, all their forbearance and struggle, to be thwarted again on the cusp of victory. Margarita felt she was hanging on by a frayed thread.

Kolya squatted beside the pernickety stove and lowered his voice so only she could hear. ‘I know. Believe me. But we want this job done right, for the sake of the movement and our party; ourselves, too. That means adaptability. Soldiering on when your body and your mind are too tired to go on. Your soul must never tire. Dig deep.’

Hands over her face, she listened to his murmured words and sought the resilience he believed was there. If she pushed on with this plan, even if the parade took place, she couldn’t guarantee she wouldn’t make a mistake. The gun might slip, or jam, or misfire, or she might miss, failing to kill Suetsky or – worse – killing someone else. She uncovered her face and pushed herself up despite her weak knees and aching back.

‘Yes.’ Her voice was miraculously clear. ‘A contingency plan. In case, and only in case, the parade is called off. What do we propose?’

Loshad looked nervous. ‘We should consult with the Central Committee,’ she said.

‘There isn’t time,’ Margarita said. ‘What do we propose?’

‘We could wait until the parade is rescheduled.’

‘It’s bound to be, that buffoon’s conceit knows no bounds.’

‘We could strike at his office?’

‘We do know someone...’

‘Guns or bombs?’

‘No bombs,’ Margarita interrupted.

‘But they’re faster.’

‘Easier.’

‘More expensive, though.’

‘But easier to hit your target. We don’t want to wind up like Kachura and miss.’

Each voice in the fray was another weight and the pressure on her head was unbearable. What was meant to be a confident command emerged a petulant shriek: ‘*Nyet bomb!*’

Everyone went quiet. *No*, she thought. This is how I lose them, by losing my head at the crucial moment. They’ll say this is why we shouldn’t put women in charge, they’re hysterical, are too emotional, too sensitive. I have to be better.

She addressed the concerned faces around the table. ‘Bombs are impossible. We can’t get them made in time, nor have we the funds or expertise. And the moral cost, the political cost, is too great. Are we so unimaginative that we can come up with nothing else?’

‘What about at his office? The way Vera Zasulich shot Trepov in the ‘70s?’

‘We’ve got Kolya in the perfect position.’

Margarita shook her head. ‘There’s bound to be more security...’ Her dissent went unheeded. On such short notice, there was no time to deliberate on a stronger plan.

In the clamour of her comrades hurraing and patting Kolya on the back she slipped to the window and glared at the clouds with hatred relentless as the rain. This was her chance...had been...was already gone before she'd taken a step. Roman's voice in her head, a distant memory from another hurdle: 'Are you looking for fame?'

She felt a hand on her elbow. 'Is this alright?' She wanted to rage, belittle him, tear him down, but he said: 'You're my leader. I won't take action unless you say.'

Margarita looked at the massive, calloused hand which dwarfed any gun it held. 'If you fire on him tomorrow in his office, will he die?'

'Yes.'

'Then...it doesn't matter which of us pulls the trigger, or where. So long as the outcome remains unchanged.'

Control was easy to marshal now. She gave the others their instructions and reminded them to stay vigilant. They wouldn't know until morning which plan to apply, so must prepare for both.

Soon only Margarita, Katya, *Loshad*, and Kolya were left in the house. Sitting through their evening meal, enjoying the occasional joke, she grew increasingly confident in the new plan and almost...almost relieved. She wouldn't shoot him after all. For years, explicitly and abstractly, she'd imagined killing Suetsky, but now it was so close... Perhaps it was best that it was no longer on her shoulders.

For dessert, Kolya produced a jar of blackberry jam which elicited cries of delight around the table. While *Loshad* hunted for something to serve with it, Margarita held the jar in disbelief. The rich colour, the faint outlines of seeds, the lumps of berry flesh.

He folded his hands beside hers. 'Not *vatrushki*, perhaps, but...whatever happens tomorrow, I thought this would be an appropriate marker for the occasion.'

Unbelievable. Months ago at a fireside supper following a hard day of training, she had recalled her primal craving for blackberries whilst in prison (omitting that pregnancy caused said craving rather than incarceration). How she'd thought of nothing but her mother's blackberry *vatrushki* and wept until she'd sunk her teeth into her arm to silence herself.

How could she let this man die? 'Th-thank you, Kolya.'

Plates and cutlery cleared away, conversation dried to nothing. Like some macabre twist on Christmas Eve, all were so preoccupied with thoughts of morning that the present was impossible to enjoy. *Loshad* washed the dishes; Katya put them away. Margarita showed Kolya to the door, struggling to dislodge a stubborn seed from the crown of a tooth.

'Well...until tomorrow,' he said. 'That is, if the weather breaks. I hope it does. I want it to be you.'

'Why?'

'It was your idea, your plan. You've put more of yourself into this endeavour than any of us, and I almost feel I'm taking it from you all because the weather is turning...' It was a rare indeed for him to talk so; his brow furrowed with the effort.

'Oh Kolya.' She took one of his hands between two of hers. 'So long as he dies tomorrow, I will be satisfied. Besides, we're comrades, aren't we? You doing it is the same as if I did, and vice versa. We're one in our mission.'

He nodded and looked down at his hand in hers. 'If I don't speak to you tomorrow, there's something must tell you.' She tensed, in no mood for declarations or confessions. 'Calling your masterpiece *Do Unto Others* completely misinterprets the tenet.'

At first she wasn't sure she'd heard correctly. 'In what way?'

'That proverb was never a declaration of war. It's instruction to show others the treatment you'd wish to receive, no matter their treatment of you in the past.'

‘Exactly. That’s how they treated me, so they should expect the same in return. They reaped what they sowed.’

‘Another Biblical proverb!’ He chuckled. ‘Are you positive you don’t want to convert?’

‘Certain, thank you.’

‘In that case, I – I want to you to know what an honour it’s been to work alongside you. I’ve learned a great deal from you, and I won’t forget it.’

He’d be dead, or worse, this time tomorrow. He’d remember nothing.

Her unwelcoming bed was cold and hard as sheet metal, but after an age of tossing and turning she dipped below the surface of sleep, near enough to touch consciousness.

She dreamt she overslept and missed the parade entirely, Kolya had failed to shoot, their plans were in ruins thanks to her, and lurched awake to find she’d hardly dozed more than half an hour. She rolled over, mystified how Katya could snore on so loudly when they were to kill a man tomorrow.

She stands in a throng of cheering weeping people and instead of faces sees only hands reaching for her. Someone loops a garland of flowers round her neck hailing her: geroi, hero! When she raises her hands to thank them they are black with blood. They give her a laurel and the blood covers her skirts weighs her down. The crowd showers her with kopeks and poems in her honour and there is blood on her face and though she tries to wipe it away it only thickens. She can taste it in her mouth like a dirty coin matting her hair and plugging her nose as they cheer her by name.

Margarita woke herself whimpering, running her hands along her body and surprised they came away dry. Shivering, she pulled her blanket over her nose, only to fall into the

same dream where each accolade brought fresh blood, though this time the sound of the crowd was more wrathful, mournful, not unlike the cries of solidarity in a prison riot...

She came to with a cry and this time did find her face wet, albeit with tears.

‘M’rusya...’ Katya rolled over, waved vaguely in Margarita’s direction. ‘Okay...?’

‘*Da*, Katya. Go back to sleep.’

She already had.

Giving up on sleep, she went to the living room and set a chair by the window, looking out at the back streets, at the rain which blurred streetlamps and dampened her hope.

One Christmas she and Varvara had gotten drunk and gone skating on the Medelny, screaming and squealing on wobbly legs until they’d been escorted off the ice and threatened with arrest for disorderly conduct. At nightfall, they returned to find the river empty and discovered they were equally poor skaters sober.

Varya had not yet responded to her letter. Why?

What time was it? Still dark, still raining. There were mere hours left, but too many, a lifetime of hours. She made tea but kept forgetting it, and found it all the more bitter when cold.

Prison might be easier the second time around. She’d know what to do, what was expected of her, how to withstand their tortures. And this time there would be no unpleasant surprises, no children borne or taken, nothing to weaken her body or her soul. Nothing they could hold over her. She’d be stronger this time. Perhaps...

Margarita brought her bare feet onto the chair and wrapped cold hands around her colder toes. Her mother would be horrified by all this. Because her mother, she saw now, was a woman of reform, favouring the small deeds fashionable among the youth at the end of the century. If she could tell her mother everything, perhaps she’d understand. Times had

changed. Margarita had changed. Maybe her mother had, too. She wondered if she'd ever get the chance to ask.

Mothers and daughters, missteps, lost chances. *Kira*. Nearly two. Walking, somewhere. Loved? Yes, always. A man like Suetsky, inveterate womanizer and opponent of women's enfranchisement, should never have power while her daughter lived. If her daughter lived...

She stood on the searing cold floor and stretched the ache from her back. Rifling through the kitchen drawer, she grabbed a knife in one hand and her long plait in the other. Nikita had used it to his advantage all those months ago. It would prove no man's advantage today.

She looked like a wild thing with her rough-edged locks grazing her shoulders, braid limp as a dead snake in her hand. It hadn't been this short since she was a girl, and never so scraggy. Her mother always said nice girls had long, tidy hair. Well, she wasn't a nice girl.

Knife returned and hair curling and crumbling in the flames, Margarita wrinkled her nose against the smell and resumed her seat by the window.

Would death hurt very much? Apparitions appeared in the corner, Petukhov and Tatyana mottled, engorged, soiled. She'd rather be shot. Quick and easy, painless if you were lucky. Did that mean it would be quick and easy and painless for Suetsky? That didn't matter, so long as he died. Though it mightn't be execution for her; it might be *katorga*, hard labour in Siberia, or prison again. For Kolya though... She dug the heels of her hands into her eyes until snow fell behind her lids, blotting out his gargantuan body hanging alongside the others, battered from police blows. Few deserved such barbarism; Kolya least of all.

Whatever happened to the butcher she'd been promised to? Had he been angry when she disappeared? Or had he simply taken some other child bride? How different would life have been as his wife? She'd be well-fed – she imagined herself corpulent and red-cheeked

– with probably half a dozen children to chase, plus a home to manage. She'd still be in Zhrozhino, or nearby. She'd still have her mother. Each day would blend into the one before and the ones that followed. Maybe she'd be happy. Likely not.

She lifted her head from the windowpane. The street lamps were out, the darkness total, but...she heard no rain. If they went ahead with their initial plan, would everyone remember their duties? If anyone got confused...

Her father had loved fairy tales and passed that love to her. One rainy autumn afternoon they'd sat peeling potatoes while her mother was at the school and he'd told her the tale of the firebird. How she could heal, how she could destroy. How she was never meant for captivity. How she brought colour and magic to the world with every part of her she left behind. Healing and destroying. Healing *by* destroying? Gentle, joking Papa, with his soft eyes and quick laughter, wouldn't want an assassin for a daughter. Kolya said in heaven souls had eternal life. If that were true she hoped her father forgave her.

It was hard to picture this flat this time tomorrow, *after*. Did Suetsky still sleep, or was he preparing for his parade, unaware of what awaited him? His smug, toad face, that horrible hair whose styling couldn't hide baldness. His shark's eyes disappearing into fat folds when he smirked. He never smiled, always smirked, like a naughty boy hiding a misdemeanour.

The street was grey and damp like a watercolour rendered with a dingy brush water. How long had it been light? Wind shivered through puddles and sent wet leaves scudding down the empty pavement. Radara was asleep.

Mostly.

Kolya would be eating breakfast. Or perhaps, like her, he had no appetite and waited by a window. Watching low clouds which, pendulous as they were, remained dry.

She would kill Suetsky, after all.

To her surprise, she felt nothing. No anxiety, no excitement, no fear. Her body was light and unreal, as if with the least movement she might simply float away. For the first time in weeks, her mind was still. No memories of the past or fantasies of the future. There was now, and now alone.

Bare feet shuffled across the wooden floor. Katya stood in the bedroom doorway, hair in chaos. 'It's not even five,' she mumbled, rubbing her eyes.

'I'm not tired.'

Katya turned to the window, blinked hard, and focused on Margarita with a sigh. 'I'll make you some breakfast.'

'No, thank you, I'm not —'

Katya swished past to the kitchen. 'Not today. You need food.'

They were quiet over their slices of black bread, which suited her. She didn't want to talk. There was nothing to say. Fragmented images without context seeped through her stupor, a face or a place or an object. But she couldn't hold them. The effort was too great.

She pushed her plate away.

'Finish it,' Katya said, bringing her own plate to the kitchen. 'And don't argue, you have to save your strength.'

She took another bite, let it turn to mush and forced herself not to swallow until its weight on her tongue made her gag. Katya brought tea. Margarita clutched the glass, hypnotized by the spirals of steam. To disappear into them, become one herself, untouchable and ever-changing.

Katya's case thudding onto the table wrenched Margarita back to the present. 'My alibi is in place. Everything incriminating has been moved to Vlad's, except these,' she said opening the case and tucking an assortment of papers under folded dresses. 'Is your disguise ready?'

Margarita retrieved it from the bedroom, one of the more attractive disguises she'd sewn. Dove grey, form-fitting, lacy, it made her look every bit the lady, and the accompanying hat and cloak would hide her face and figure...after. Katya put the garments in the suitcase with great care as if they were hemmed with explosives.

'Good. I'll meet you in the basement of the old cheese shop. Get there as soon as possible and change quickly, we should fare well. Do you know where you're going after?'

'Yes, it's my plan Katya!'

'Then focus!' She slammed the case shut and weighed it in her hands, pacing the living room at different speeds to test its burden. 'I suppose we out to get ready.'

A skirt whose hem was slightly frayed. A shirtwaist with many buttons, several loose, worn so smooth her thumb kept slipping through the holes. Her boots, worn and soft and practically silent. A kerchief, brown, tied over her hair and pulled around her face like the blinders on a horse. A coat which fell to her knees, Browning nestled in the pocket like a sleeping dragon; long shawl draped over her shoulders, bunched at her chest where she clenched it in hands which did not tremble. She looked at herself in the glass. Pale. Waxy. Eyes enormous and glazed red, resting on bags like bruises. Bones everywhere. Collar, cheeks, jaw. Missing teeth. She had never been less beautiful. Praise God. No one would look twice at her.

For a long time she and Katya stood by the door holding one another, the quiet interrupted only by the occasional snuffle. It felt like goodbye but...but of course they'd see each other in just a few hours. After. This was just the last moment of normalcy. Of before.

Down the stairs, past the miraculously empty stool of the beady-eyed *dvornik*, and into the street beginning to stir with spectators trekking to the parade route. Small children raced ahead, squeezing through gaps in adult legs. Men and women, singly, in pairs, in clusters, moved over the glistening pavement. Her heart thumped; there were fewer people

about than she'd anticipated. Suetsky was not popular, had never been, less so now than ever. Suppose no one came? It would be harder to hide in a sparse crowd.

Wind carried the smell of rain, freshening the stale breath of the city whose doors and windows remained shuttered like sleeping eyes. The Medelnyi flowed thin at some bends, wide at others, ribboned with half a dozen bridges. Restaurants, pubs, boutiques, shops arranged by class. Statues and parks and attractively fenced trees. Columned theatres and glittering churches, inviting gardens around the university clock tower. Mansions, tenements, and dignified houses. The most beautiful city in the world, more a part of her than Zhorzhino for it had adopted her without questions. At this moment she loved it more than ever.

If she died today, she hoped it was here.

A man leaned against the bakery wall holding half a loaf of bread, hat pulled so low only his clean-shaven jaw was visible. 'The weather is turning,' he said.

Could it be? 'That hat looks ridiculous,' she said. 'Like you're hiding something.'

'I am,' he smiled, ripping off a chunk of bread.

'Exactly. Take it off, or at least wear it properly.'

He nudged the brim up, and Margarita took a step back. Bare-faced and hair trimmed, Kolya was unrecognizable. But those eyes were unmistakable, black as jet and just as shiny. He handed her a piece of bread, golden crust cradling soft, white whorls inside.

'Please, no, I can't stomach –'

'Eat. You look terrible.'

She pursed her lips and snatched the fragrant bread, still warm. A decade ago she'd sat reading beside the brick stove while her mother churned out loaf after loaf for her peasant students. Margarita stuffed the whole chunk in her mouth, swallowing so fast the crispy edges scratched her throat. Her stomach bulged with unwanted food.

They approached the theatre, past Vlad skulking near a column. After Tomas Kachura failed to shoot Governor Obolensky in July, Margarita was determined not to repeat his mistakes: if she and Kolya failed, Vlad was to take the shot.

Was Katya already at the cheese shop, waiting among the cobwebs? She imagined her gagging on the smell and laughed so suddenly a passing couple turned to stare.

‘Are you quite well?’ Kolya asked.

‘Yes, yes, fine, yes.’

So many faces. The nearer they got the more there were. Strangers, unknown elements. Enemies or allies?

In the shadow of the newspaper building Kolya turned to her, blocking her view of the milling square. ‘Are you ready?’

‘It’s too late to turn back, if I’m not.’

‘It’s never too late. You’re in charge. If this is still what you want then, by all means, go on, but if you don’t feel up to it –’

That he spoke with kindness and concern was irrelevant. *Not up to it*. Did he think her a coward? Too weak, too feminine, to adhere to her ambitions? She met his eyes and set her jaw. ‘I do.’

‘Well then.’ He took her hands and stared down at her for a long time. Was Katya right? Part of her wanted to recoil, but if all went according to plan, hers would be the last friendly face he’d ever see. She dredged up a smile. It was the least she could do. ‘O Lord, You who steadied the hand of Peter as he began to sink on the stormy sea, if you are with me, no one is against me. Amen. Go with God into the light of justice, Firebird. And thank you.’

When he took his hands away a piece of her went with him. Madness, madness. Her most trusted and competent comrade and she was letting him walk to his death. At the corner

a beggar sat swaddled in ragged blankets. Kolya tipped a handful of coins into his cup and handed him the rest of the loaf before turning the corner and disappearing from view.

She wiped her eyes, mastered herself, and turned back. Her mark was two streets over.

Memorial Square swarmed as on the morning of Petukhov's hanging and the fire's aftermath, peopled with ghosts trapped by the horror of their deaths; any moment she expected someone to walk right through her. The gun thudded against her thigh with every step, and she pulled her shawl tighter.

The crowd was dozens deep on all sides and she slipped behind a gaggle of society ladies near the front, tightly corseted and topped with hats masquerading as greenhouses and aviaries.

'Suetsky was in business with my husband you know, he's a dear personal friend.'

'Really?'

'I'm terribly jealous!'

'He's such a head for business, it's made us a fortune. And with the Jews out of the market and the students under control, we're far safer. The rabble always comes for those better off than themselves, don't they?'

'Disgusting.'

'Good riddance.'

Margarita thrust her hand into her pocket. No. Don't waste ammo. *Focus.*

She scanned the crowd. Many more bourgeoisie spectators than not, although the working class were represented too, taking in the holiday atmosphere. A group of men and women, shabbily dressed as Margarita herself, passed behind, laughing and jostling each other.

'Wonder if he's as fat as they say?'

‘Or if his hair does looks fake!’

‘I reckon it’s all true. He’s as rotten outside as in. I hate the man.’

‘No one *likes* him, Sasha, but if you hate him that much why come to the parade?’

‘Because the only thing I hate more than Suetsky is working in that pit.’

The group roared with laughter and moved away in search of a better view while ladies in front of her tutted and tsked. ‘Lazy scum.’

‘There is the problem with Russia today!’

But Margarita smiled. The people were with her, with the *Essers*. And those who weren’t yet soon would be. Suetsky’s blood would seal it. And these women, who had never worked, never needed to: let them carry on their bitter whispers. Let them depend on and benefit from the labour of the same people whose poverty they chastised. Margarita fingered the ridges of her pistol. Their day was coming.

Over their shoulders and between their hats loomed the Valorous Rider, arm outstretched. And there, below its pointing finger, Kolya, clean face almost dapper under his hat. He looked like anyone. No one. Their eyes met and held briefly before he looked away.

Further across the square was the library, former home of *Trezubets*, and beside that the law offices. Was he here? She’d scrupulously avoided the square lest he spot her, wary of what he might do. Ignore her. Approach her. Try to talk her out of whatever he suspected she was up to. He was a variable she could not discount.

The band was the first indication that time was closing in, their brassy enthusiasm garish and grating. Their instruments shone in the weak sunlight, tune underscored by the steadily marching soldiers behind them whose bayonets, too, sparkled, and whose sabres clacked against their boots. A slick tide of nausea climbed up the back of her throat imagining herself stabbed with those bayonets, sliced with those sabres, shot, beaten with those guns.

But she couldn't turn back.

The soldiers performed manoeuvres to the delight of the crowd. She moved from foot to foot trying to revive her numb toes. If only they'd hurry! Funny that killing made soldiers into heroes but she'd be executed for doing the same.

To her left Suetsky's carriage approached. The edges of her vision went white, threatening to overtake her. She counted ten policemen in uniform; how many Okhrana agents in plain clothes? What if they were stopped? Well, then it was up to Vlad. And if not him... They shouldn't have been so confident! They should have had fourth and fifth backup plans.

The faces around her ran like wax masks, melting into teary eyes and gaping, cheering mouths. Suetsky was nearer now, the blunt lines of his face sharper, nestled in his carriage waving to the crowd, a wall of white noise with hands and banners and handkerchiefs aflutter.

She had met him here. While she'd bickered with a soldier on her way to work he'd watched her, smiling. Did he know right away what was in her soul, who she was? Or just think he knew? The next day he'd stood here beside her here, whispering doubts, the only sane man in the mob. Or so she'd thought. And there, at the plinth where Kolya stood waiting, she'd hit him with her bag and they'd first begun to know one another, or think they had. They'd walked together and that walk led here, one great circle back to the start. He'd fallen by the wayside, their paths diverged. Was he here? Would he stop her?

Her teeth chattered, covered by the clapping hooves of Suetsky's team whose eyes rolled at the enthusiastic crowd. Their fear hurt her because she shared it.

The corner of Suetsky's lips were buried in jowls, so gluttoned with pleasure his eyes were practically closed. He waved, she hated his manicured hands. The ladies in front of her openly wept and their tears excused hers.

She thumbed the screws in the grip and by the sight – *one, two three; one, two three*. How many times could she count them before the moment arrived? How many seconds were left? They limped along, stretching, bending, without ever passing.

There was still time. She could signal to Kolya, duck away – they could back out. Her stomach and bladder felt suddenly full and she wanted to void them both. But what would happen to them, their movement, to the people most likely to suffer at the dash of Suetsky's pen? Even these wealthy Orthodox women would suffer, in their way, whether they realised it or not. What would become of them all if this man carried on in his seat of power?

Margarita locked eyes with Kolya. He stood motionless, staring at her. *Fuck*, she thought. *It's a trap, he's one of...* Then he stepped through the cheering, whistling crowd into the path. The horses reared, and though the crowd was slow to react, Suetsky craned his neck to get a good look at the impediment to his one-man parade.

'This man,' Kolya shouted, pointing up at Suetsky, 'is a tyrant! He has defied God, abused his power and his countrymen. He wallows in your slavish adoration, for slaves are what he's made of you.'

'Out of my way, you bastard,' Suetsky snarled, opening the door and leaning out.

Gendarmes closed in, fighting through the bodies toward the commotion. Sensing them careening toward failure, she looked at Kolya, silently pleading with him to hurry. He seemed to understand and lifted his hand again.

'You stand accused by the Socialist Revolutionary Party for crimes against the Russian people, for the dissolution of the peace and prosperity of the city and its people.'

Suetsky climbed up to the driver's seat. 'How dare you? I'll have your head on my desk by dinnertime.'

Kolya reached to his pocket. All sound abruptly ceased, the fog which had plagued

her all morning dissipated. A trained dog, she saw the signal and attacked. As if orchestrated for her, the ladies and their oversized hats decamped mouthing screams of ‘Anarchist!’ Her way was clear, the eyes of everyone around her glued to the men facing off in the road.

Margarita drew her pistol from her pocket. Eyes wide. Breath even. Tired, heavy bones now avian hollow. Aim. That face, open mouth huge and black, face contorted with furious hatred, the hatred of a frightened, ignorant old man. Fire once, an explosion of sound and now she could hear everything, feel everyone duck so best to fire again, quickly, and perhaps again, but now everyone was jostling, trampling one another to escape and she was shunted aside, gun dropped, lost somewhere.

‘The Governor has been shot!’

‘Arrest that man!’

‘There’s another one!’

Beyond the screaming, panicking crowd Kolya was thrown to the ground screaming too, voice strident: ‘Long live the Proletariat! Long live the Socialist Rev –’

Bang!

Something between a howl and a scream came out of her, a sound she’d made only once before, but this grief was indistinguishable from the melee around her. People pushed and shoved, guiding her away, away, away from the square back through roads she’d wandered this morning. No sign of Vlad, although he should be – Her boots lost their purchase on the slick stones and she landed hard on her stomach into a stampede of feet, up again so fast she hardly noticed the pain, skirts held above her knees.

She disappeared behind the boarded door of the cheese shop, lurching down into blessed darkness.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Was this death? And where, where was...oh, yes. The code. ‘The weather – has turned.’

‘You were like an elephant pounding down those steps.’ Katya lit the lamp, her pointed face even sharper under the harsh light. She lifted it and backed away. ‘You look awful.’

Margarita doubled over and vomited across the damp earth floor.

‘*Nichevo sebe!*’ Katya took her arm and led her to the chair Kolya always used, removing Margarita’s shoes and kerchief, fanning her until her ragged hair blew about her face. ‘Rest a minute. If you go back out now with your face like that you’ll get picked up for sure.’

‘No time. Bag.’

Exasperated, Katya handed over the case she’d left with that morning, and Margarita used its contents to transform herself from factory hag into a smart young lady, doing her best to pin what remained of her locks into something like a fashionable do.

Katya cleared her throat. ‘Suetsky.’

‘I fired...twice? Three times? I’m – I’m not sure, it was all so fast.’

‘We’ll know soon. Kolya...?’

She pressed her lips together. It kept the tears in but kept words in, too. She turned away, ashamed of her weakness.

Katya sniffed as she scrubbed the gun residue from Margarita’s hand. ‘We carry on in his honour. If we had just five more like him, we’d have revolution tomorrow.’

‘Amen,’ Margarita said, wiping her nose.

Gloves covered her stained, calloused hands, a little paint to cover the fever driving her. The only thing which might give her away was her teeth. She’d need to watch that.

‘Well...you’ll pass, I suppose.’ Katya didn’t sound confident. ‘You know where to go?’

‘Stop asking!’

‘Alright, alright. Timing couldn’t be better. Pavel will collect me in forty-five minutes and I’ll be on my way to St. Petersburg. Let me help.’ Katya squatted and tied the laces of Margarita’s high boots. Her hands were steadier.

‘Tell them about Kolya,’ Margarita said. ‘What he did for us. He deserves to be remembered.’

‘He will be.’

‘Promise me.’

‘I promise I will tell them.’

They sat in silence as before any journey in the old tradition, each consumed by private thoughts, Margarita focused more on the journey to this moment than the journey from it.

At last they stood and Katya looked her over, adjusting Margarita’s hem and buttoning her jacket. ‘It’s impressive, I’ll say that. I don’t think anyone would recognize you even if they’d watched you pull the trigger. Here.’ She lowered the crêpe over Margarita’s hat and past her eyes. ‘*Enchanteur*,’ she laughed.

Time dripped steadily as blood from a wound. Any longer and their plan would be ruined. Yet she dawdled. Already this morning she’d lost one of her dearest comrades; now Katya was leaving indefinitely, due back when the dust had settled, be it next week or six months from now. She thought of Mikhail and Roman and Varvara and Kira and wondered whether anyone she loved would stay. The movement demanded supremacy over intimate relationships, and she accepted that. It would be worth the loneliness, someday, but was a high price to pay in the meantime.

Katya grazed each of her cheeks with a whisper of a kiss. ‘No need to return the gesture,’ she said. ‘You’ll smudge your war paint. I’ll see you up.’

‘No, no,’ Margarita said. ‘Don’t risk yourself before you have to. Look after yourself,

Katyushka. *Do svidaniya.*'

'*Do skorovo.*'

Up the stairs, like so many times before. Bones leaden again. She emerged a new woman, well-to-do and far above whatever radical nonsense had unleashed itself upon her quaint city.

The streets had emptied save for police who dashed about like disturbed ants. A cab rumbled past which she hailed with a handkerchief. 'Aleshin Lane,' she said, and the tremor in her voice caught the driver's attention.

'Were you caught up in that trouble, *barishnya*?'

'Only just.'

'Did you see what happened?'

'No, I was too far away. But I – I heard the shots and ran with everyone else. Is there any word about...?'

'Aye, he's alive.'

She clutched the seat and forced the whiteness back from the edges of her vision. 'P-praise God,' she murmured, hoping she wouldn't be sick again.

He humphed softly. 'That remains to be seen. They're saying there was another shooter but no one's sure who or where they were. Though they got one fellow, the one who stopped the carriage. Right there in the street, didn't bother to even arrest him.'

'It's...barbaric...'

'You feeling well *barishnya*?'

'Yes, yes...please, can't you drive faster?'

She leaned against the padded seat and closed her eyes. If she could just last until she reached the house, everything would be fine. She must hold out until then.

He'd urged the horses or she'd fallen into a doze, but when they jerked to a halt she

nearly tumbled from her seat. The *izvoschik* helped her descend as if she were a proper lady, and she paid him enough to cement the impression.

Holding her hat against the damp wind, she turned to the cottage, two stories, slightly ramshackle but cosy for its size. A man hunched over a garden bed digging at some stubborn root turned at the approaching carriage wheels. ‘A fine time to garden now the weather has turned,’ Margarita said, feeling her pulse in her throat with every word.

‘My cheeky sister is home at last,’ he replied, brushing the dirt from his gloves. ‘What’s wrong dear heart? You look wretched.’

She burst into tears, felt the man clasp her in his arms. ‘I must – lay down,’ she panted, pushing him aside and stumbling up the porch, into the hall. But the cottage was unfamiliar, she didn’t know which door to take. Everything swayed, she felt herself sinking and, mercifully, was unconscious before she hit the floor.

The gauzy world looked much as it had when she’d woken at Roman’s, and the softness beneath her made her wonder if she’d wound up there again, a limbo she’d never escape.

She sat up and her head pitched and tossed like a ship. A gentle hand eased her back. ‘Ssshh. There now. Rest. Nip of rum?’

A woman plain and earthy as *khleb* sat on a chair beside her and pressed a warm, damp cloth to head. The man had given the code but the man wasn’t here and this woman might be anyone, a servant or an informant or someone else altogether.

‘Here.’ The woman produced a glass containing a splash of amber liquid. ‘Get this down. You’ll feel better.’

‘No.’

The woman smiled indulgently. ‘You’ve had a trying day, but I promise this will cure what ails you. Or at least make you think you’re cured.’

Margarita took in the rustic comforts of the large room, the worn, sagging sofa she occupied, the faded Georgian rugs, the crackling fire. She accepted the glass and drank with a straight arm, letting the sweet fire burned a trail to her stomach. She pushed herself upright.

‘Well done,’ the woman said. ‘Fedya’s just getting some tea ready.’

‘Where is Anton?’

The woman giggled. ‘That’s Fedya’s old code name, they change so often. I’m Lara, his wife. Your sister-in-law, for the time being. May I just say what an honour it is to meet you?’ Lara clasped Margarita’s hand. ‘When Nikita approached us about taking you in of course we never dreamed of saying no.’

Margarita snatched her hand away and shrank back into the sofa. ‘Please don’t, that’s – not necessary. Is there any news?’

‘Suetsky has been taken back to his mansion. No word yet whether he’s alive or dead.’

Kolya spread-eagled in the road, his blood streaming and pooling between the stones, Katya already en route to the capital, Vlad – where was he? – *Loshad* this minute dissolving what remained of the safe house, the bruises and aches she’d suffered, the training she’d grappled with: pointless if Suetsky lived.

Wretched as she felt, no tears came. And Lara, to her credit, did not disturb her gloomy thoughts. She might be dismissed from her position, or from the party altogether. And the counter-reaction to an attempted assassination would be merciless. Suetsky valued neither innocence nor justice; so long the price was paid, he would not care who suffered the consequences.

The door creaked open and Fedya appeared bearing a tray loaded with cups and tumblers and cakes. Lara rushed to assist him. They arranged everything on a nearby sideboard, tempting her with plates of treats and steaming glasses of tea. Her withered

stomach gurgled but she sipped her drink in an effort to be hospitable.

‘Any news?’ she asked Fedya.

‘Afraid I couldn’t have had any while I was making tea. Last I knew he was alive, but we must wait and see. Stranger things have happened.’

‘I’ve – let you all down.’

‘Nonsense!’ cried Fedya.

‘You took on Suetsky.’ Lara’s eyes shone, reverent. ‘Everyone despises him, but no one had the courage to do anything about it, save you. All Russia heard your shots today, a warning to tyrants and a signal to the people. You must never think you’ve disappointed anyone!’

Fedya patted her hand. ‘There, there, dearest. Please excuse my wife, she has a flair for the dramatic.’

His tenderness toward Lara prodded something sore and unhealed. What a pair of dupes.

An enormous orange cat leapt into her lap and nearly disturbed her tea before settling to groom paws which, she noticed, had thumbs. ‘This is Pushkin,’ said Lara, scratching behind its ear.

‘He likes pens,’ explained Fedya.

Margarita looked at their domestic tranquillity, their sizeable but sensible home with all its comforts, their deep bond, their beloved family pet, and absorbed contempt like a sponge. Another moment in their presence and she’d throttle them both.

‘I’m tired,’ she said, dropping the cat to the floor with a thud. ‘I must lay down.’

‘Of course!’ Lara leapt from her seat. ‘Follow me.’

At the top of the worn wooden stairs, to the right of the landing, Margarita was deposited in a room whose only real decorations were a rich coverlet and a copper ikon. It

seemed strange to see such religious devotion in supposedly dedicated terrorists. Kolya's merry eyes teased her memory, and slowly, awkwardly, crossed herself.

The bed was narrow and none too soft, but she fell asleep almost instantly and did not rise again until the following afternoon.

CHAPTER XIV

October 1902 – December 1902

It took Suetsky nearly three days to die. The bullet lodged in his abdomen did the most damage; Lara heard from someone at market who heard from an *izvoschik* who heard from a servant in Suetsky's employ that his blood turned poisonous and oozed out black and viscous.

Margarita didn't quite believe that.

Lara also heard, from the same source, that while witnesses corroborated the presence of a second shooter, a woman and probably a fellow *Esser*, there were no further leads to her identity. 'You've gotten away with it!'

Margarita didn't quite believe that, either.

State funerals were held. A few government officials adopted public mourning and called the *Essers* out as traitors and cowards. Most, however, did not respond. Suetsky was no more popular in government than out.

The public cracked jokes: 'A weight has been lifted from our city – a lot of weight.' 'The frog has croaked.' A song floated through the streets on the autumn mist:

*Princes lift curses with kisses
Essers lift them with bullets.
Now Suetsky's poor wife
Is free from her troll husband!*

People drank and celebrated, making the most of their opportunity to ridicule a man long loathed but much feared. Even other local revolutionary groups, opposed to terror generally, reached out in solidarity to the Radaran *Essers* for disposing of such an unsavoury character.

Among all of this merrymaking, Margarita was an unhappy figure. Visitors descended on the cottage on the pretence of party business with their true intentions poorly concealed. They cornered her at every available moment to congratulate her, admire her. To

get a good look at Suetsky's killer. They interrupted her meals, imposed on her solitude, plying her with adulation which made Lara look positively aloof. It was deeply unsettling. Socialists weren't meant to fall prey to hero-worship.

'The man was a glutton, he'd have died of a heart attack whether or not I'd intervened,' she said, closing her book and swallowing her irritation with the errand boy. He couldn't have been more than fifteen.

'But you *did* intervene. Firebird, saviour of the Russian people!'

'Pull yourself together.' She stood, too close, and hissed, 'He died of an infection.'

'From your bullet.' So gentle, so ardent, as if he wanted to convince her of her own power. 'He's dead because of you.'

'Yes...he's dead. Because of me.'

Often Suetsky's agonized gurgle obscured the sounds around her, or his fat body doubled over in agony from the corner of her eye, but Kolya was everywhere. Brushing her hair she saw his, splattered with blood and flecks of brain. His voice wafted from her books. Her nights were laced with childish dreams of resurrection. 'I am as my God,' he'd say, taking her hands and laughing at his blasphemy. Memory anchored her to bed.

Party work lost all appeal. They drafted, wrote, and re-wrote pamphlets and posters faster than they could be printed, smothering Margarita's action in a storm of propaganda. It reminded her of *Trezubets* in all the worst ways and brought out the worst of her temper.

'So how do *Essers* distinguish themselves from Social Democrats these days?' she sneered over a bowl of *shchi* one snowy evening. 'Never mind terrorism versus agitation or peasants versus workers, it boils down to who can publish the most unread pages in a single winter. History books will devote entire chapters to it! Long live the writer's revolution!'

‘We’ve had orders from Nikita and the rest of the Central Committee,’ Lara replied, stoic as ever in the face of Margarita’s bluster. ‘We are to lay low, propagandize, but no more actions until the backlash has died down.’

Fedya passed Margarita another sausage. ‘There have been many arrests, and reprisals. We must be patient, or we’ll be picked up, too. Once the danger has passed we’ll be right back on the front lines.’

They were right, which made her detest them that much more.

Lara and Fedya. Anyone else would have been better. They were constantly touching, giggling, sharing chores and trading ideas, operating almost on top of each other as if the least separation pained them. Margarita heard her mother’s voice in her head – ‘Don’t roll your eyes, miss, or they’ll stick like that!’ – whenever she felt herself ridiculing their turtledovey. Maybe she’d wanted such a union once, but thankfully had outgrown it. Sooner or later, their harmonious little love nest would crumble. She almost hoped she’d be there to see it.

Lara was particularly incomprehensible. Passionate but unfailingly gentle, all cow eyes and delicate hands, always busy with the chicken coop which was her pride or darning or jotting slogans. She was an *Esser*, a proponent of terrorism – Margarita recalled her delight after the assassination, how hungrily she’d asked for details in the following days – but she wouldn’t have been out of place in a bourgeois nursery or at a hospital bedside.

Worst of all, she wanted Margarita with her almost as often as she wanted Fedya. Whenever she turned, there was Lara. Hovering. Lara’s was the first face she saw each morning inviting her to breakfast, and the last she saw in the evening wishing her good rest. She sought Margarita’s input and advice on every quandary which crossed her mind.

‘Firebird, I’m sure the butcher on Razin Park Road is cheating me.’

‘He is. Everyone knows he’s a crook. You’ll be paying twice as much for a chop that’s mostly fat. Go to Dyuzhenkov’s at the station market. The prices are fairer, but don’t be afraid to haggle! We need to save wherever we can.’

And the following week Lara came home aglow, raining joints and chops wrapped in paper onto the kitchen counter. ‘I’ve never had such a bargain on the shopping before. I don’t know what we’d have done without you.’

‘Lost money hand over fist, I imagine.’

Rather than appear discouraged, Lara laughed.

No, Lara and Fedya were not her first choice companions. Out of necessity she would make the best of it for the time being, but swore to change her circumstances first chance she got.

When Sergei appeared with supplies for the safe house he distributed more than the usual forged papers, funds, and news. ‘Everyone’s reading it.’

Margarita took the booklet he offered her, printed on what looked like plain brown packing paper. *Chto Dyelat? What is to be Done?* By N. Lenin. ‘Not the most original title,’ she sniffed, flipping through the pages. ‘Chernyshevsky beat him to it forty years ago!’

‘I’m sure it’s deliberate,’ said Fedya. ‘Many of us joined after reading that novel.’

‘So?’ asked Lara, craning over Margarita’s shoulder. ‘Why’s everyone so excited?’

Sergei lit two cigarettes and handed one to Fedya. ‘He’s outlined the principles of the Social Democrats. Claims they require a party of professional revolutionaries leading the vanguard for the working class to steer them away from spontaneous action.’

‘Sounds like a load of trash, if you ask me.’

Lara took the booklet, opened it and scanned a page. ‘If you go into everything with your mind already made up, you’ll never learn anything.’

The point was sound, and Margarita resented it. ‘And if you give every patently bad idea the time of day, you’re liable to waste a lot of time.’

But the days had shortened, the weather worsened, and visitors to the cottage dropped to a mere handful; there was time to waste.

She had the impression, the further she read, that she was dealing with someone not unlike the teachers of her brief school days – savage, insecure men luring you into a mistake to prove their superiority. All that about ‘temporary alliances with unreliable people’... She felt it instinctively: Lenin was not to be trusted. He’d as soon welcome you into the fold as chew you up and spit you out.

His intelligence only obscured his message, the same criticism she’d made of *Trezubets* years before. She imagined Lenin cloistered in a smoky room with a dozen other intellectual so-called radicals debating and theorising and drafting long into the night; meanwhile, workers and peasants exhausted themselves in exchange for rags, hovels, and near starvation. Much good highbrow Social Democratic theory did any of *them*!

Quite a number of people with very little, and even a total lack of theoretical training joined the movement because of its practical significance and its practical successes.[...]Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement. This idea cannot be insisted upon too strongly at a time when the fashionable preaching of opportunism goes hand in hand with an infatuation for the narrowest forms of practical activity.

If she wanted that brand of nonsense, she’d have stayed with Roman. The two seemed cut from the same ideological cloth: words over deeds, the dismissal of spontaneous action as personal rather than political, and the obvious ignorance of the genuine conditions and needs of the working class they claimed to defend. She rolled her eyes and tossed the pamphlet to one side. If she never met another drawing-room revolutionary, it would be too soon.

The following evening Fedya sat absorbed in *What is to be Done?* With Lara on the floor against his legs, paper in her lap, tongue between her teeth, tapping her forehead with a pencil. Margarita buried herself in sewing, warming her toes at the hearth while Pushkin rubbed his face against her ankles.

‘Oh, I’m at a loss.’ Lara tossed the pencil to the floor where Pushkin pounced upon it. ‘There are only so many ways to announce the end of capitalism, I’m out of ideas.’

‘Read me what you have,’ Margarita said, without looking up.

Lara tilted her paper nearer the lamp and read through a sigh. ‘On the scales of history, money and power have outweighed all of humanity’s greatest attributes. We seek a new metric which redresses the indignities and injustices of the past. We...’ She looked up. ‘That’s it.’

It was unexpectedly decent, although she wouldn’t give Lara the credit. ‘How about: the bourgeoisie have kept their fingers on the scales too long; we must break the chains they’ve forged upon us before we can break the system they’ve created.’

‘Oh!’ Lara plucked the pencil back from the cat. ‘Such strong imagery. Thank you.’

Face bent stubbornly to her lap, Margarita murmured: ‘*Pozhalusta.*’

‘Firebird... You’re an artist...’

‘Mm?’

‘Would you draw something for my article? We all saw *Do Unto Others*, it was so visceral, wasn’t it Fedya?’

He looked up, said, ‘We kept our copy,’ then resumed his reading.

‘Would you mind? To strengthen the writing and attract more people.’

Reluctant respect peeked through layers of disdain. At last, she put her sewing down and met the wide brown eyes across from her. ‘Yes, Lara. I’d be happy to.’



Paper blanketed the kitchen table like fresh snow, some blank, others full of doodles or rough sketches. Even in their earliest stages, what she was creating had force. It had been a long time since she'd drawn this way, freely, letting the picture form of its own volition rather than labouring over and editing every line. Letting the image take control.

'Oh, hello there.' Lara paused in the doorway, wrapped in a worn robe. 'I wasn't expecting anyone else up so early.'

Margarita shrugged. 'Couldn't sleep. And I wanted to keep working on your sketches.'

'Ooh! May I see? Or would that disturb you? I know how finicky artists can be.'

She couldn't help smiling. 'It's alright. I need your feedback, as it's for your piece.'

'Don't worry about that, I trust your judgment.' She gathered the drafts, looking them over one by one. 'I love this one! So much power in the worker's swing.'

Margarita handed over another page. 'This one's better. I made the chains larger, you see, so the workers look like ants beside it.'

'Except this one with the hammer,' she said, tapping him. 'A great bear of a man. How wild he looks with all that hair. And such life in his eyes. He's fantastic.'

She snatched the paper back, suddenly possessive of the very much alive Kolya she'd tried to capture. 'Here,' she said, 'this one would be better. You talked more about scales than chains anyway.'

The second piece featured a gigantic finger tipping a pan heaped with kopeks, rubles, jewels, and pages of laws, disproportionately weighting the scale; the other pan contained vague outlines she had yet to fill in. 'Those will be symbols of socialism, when I settle on some.'

One corner of Lara's mouth drooped. 'It doesn't seem as...finished as the other.'

'Because it's not. When it is it'll be much more direct.'

'Well...let's wait and see. Whichever we don't use can always go in the next edition.'

She looked again at the paper. 'There's something almost Biblical in this, like the finger of God. Could it be more...mortal? I don't really know if I'm making sense, but...'

'Yes, I know just what you mean.' Margarita sketched haphazardly over the drawing. 'Embed it more firmly in the capitalist class, make it clearer.' She turned the page back to Lara.

'A ring! Splendid detail. Supposing it bore the Imperial eagle?'

'Or the cuff.' Beaming, she dashed out lines to represent the double-headed bird.

'What would you use to symbolize socialism? A crowd?'

'Mm,' Margarita frowned, 'we don't want association with mobs, especially so soon after an assassination. We need something benign.'

They pondered in silence for a time before Lara stood. 'I'll give it some thought while I tackle the washing. See what I can come up with.'

Margarita rose, too, and surprised herself by saying, 'I'll help you.'

'Thank you, Firebird, but you're working hard, I don't want to interrupt.'

'I could use a break.'

'Wonderful!' Lara squeaked. 'I'll wash and you can dry. Division of labour.'

Margarita smiled.

They chatted idly, Lara's hands submerged in suds, Margarita rubbing the wet plates until they squeaked and sparkled. 'How did you join the *Essers*?' she asked, putting a dish in the cupboard. 'I've been meaning to ask.'

'The usual way, I suppose.'

'I don't think there is a usual way, Lara.'

‘I wanted to attend university; this was back in ’98. My brother had gone to St. Petersburg to study, but our mother was – wasn’t well. I had to stay in Radara to help look after her.’ Lara’s face was hard as a nut, lips pursed and eyebrows knit. ‘Suetsky had set such a narrow quota on women in the local universities, there wasn’t a hope I’d be accepted. I tried, but...it wasn’t meant to be.’

‘It wasn’t predestined,’ Margarita said, angry despite herself. ‘You could have gone. Followed your brother to the capital. The quotas are looser there.’

For the first time, Lara’s voice was steely. ‘My mother needed me. What kind of daughter would I have been if I’d left her?’

What does that make me, exactly? ‘So what happened?’

‘My brother’s letters became more radical, and when he next came home he was practically a mobile propaganda library! Life was like a book I’d been trying to read in the dark, and suddenly there was light. Things were *clear*.’

Lara’s hands went still in the soapy water, face radiant. There were tears in her eyes. Margarita wanted to ridicule such sentimentality, but could not; she recalled that night in flat 17 grappling with the writing of Bebel and feeling sane for the first time. ‘How did you join us, rather than the SDs?’

‘By 1900 I’d accepted I was never going to university, but my sister still wanted to. She wanted to be a scientist.’

‘What had you wanted to do?’

‘Medicine. Not a doctor, mind you, I wanted to learn how different remedies reacted with the body. I wanted to...’ Her jaw worked to push out the words, but they were stuck fast. She scowled and tossed her head. ‘Well, it doesn’t matter.’

Margarita imagined her hunched over her mother’s sickbed, trying to analyse why the treatments failed, seething at the injustice of her forced helplessness.

‘Anyway, she was no more successful than I. I’d done a bit of reading, gotten in touch with a local cell, the Northern Union. They told me the students would be marching in town for the right to assemble on campus.’

‘I remember that!’

‘My sister’s friend Nadya was lucky enough to be enrolled, we marched with her. Then the police came. I tried to stop them but –’ Lara scrubbed the bowl a little too hard, her eyes far away and her voice husky. ‘It was terrible. When we visited her in hospital... They’d beaten her so badly we almost didn’t recognize her.’

‘I’m so sorry. How old was she?’

‘Hardly eighteen. That same night I joined the Union. And when we became *Essers*, I was glad. Propaganda serves an important function, but it plays by their rules, more or less, the bureaucrats and politicians. We need to strike outside the law. That’s the only way to get their attention.’ Lara handed over a pot which dripped suds on their feet. ‘What about you? How did you become an *Esser*?’

For Lara, the path was brief and crystallized in one moment. Margarita’s journey was diffuse, scenes flickering like a child’s flipbook – none of which she wanted to recount just now.

‘I joined a cell in ’98, did propaganda for a few years. I truly believed in it, and I fought hard to make it a success. Then I was imprisoned. That changed my priorities somewhat.’

Lara looked horrified. ‘I had no idea. For how long?’

‘Nearly two years.’

‘How dreadful.’

Margarita saw her eyes welling and, unable to bear sympathy with good grace, rushed on. ‘Yes, well, I left a different woman than I went in. I thought it ruined everything but...now, I don’t know.’

‘Was there a man?’ Lara asked, hesitant.

‘Not after that.’

‘Oh I’m so, so sorry.’

‘Don’t be. I’d outgrown him. This life fits me better.’ Suetsky’s corpulent form doubling over, groaning. Kolya’s head shot open in the street. ‘Much better,’ she said, more firmly.

Lara’s sniffing stirred Margarita’s old irritation. How typical of her to dwell on the most sentimental, trivial consequence of prison (Margarita’s genuine heartbreak and reticence notwithstanding). She wanted to move on without forever thumbing memories like old photographs. Let them fade. She’d create new ones, as long as she could forget the old.

‘Firebird, I was just thinking, that sketch of yours, with the scales. Why not a family to balance the other side?’

‘What makes you suggest that?’

‘A family is like a commune, working together, building something.’

It was accidental, but once she’d made a derisive snort she had to stand by it. ‘Only if a woman is very lucky. Most aren’t.’

‘I’m ever so lucky to have my Fedya. He’s my partner in everything, my comrade and my husband too.’

Was I ever so insipid? Margarita wondered, watching Lara pinken thinking of her own love affair. ‘How long have you been married?’

‘Two years. We met through the cell. He was so kind to me and so good to dear Mother, I never wanted to let him get away.’

‘Mm.’

‘We eloped really. It was so romantic...’

‘Hmm.’

‘We’re thinking of starting a family. Soon, I hope.’

Margarita misjudged the distance and knocked the glass against the shelf so it shattered with a pretty tinkle like a shop’s bell. Blood fell in slow, even drops between the shards.

‘Oh! Are you alright?’

‘Fine.’

‘Here, come wash it.’

‘I’m fine, hand me that towel.’ Lara tried to apply pressure, but Margarita tore the damp rag away. ‘Let me alone! I don’t need you.’ She pressed the towel to the cut, ignoring the tremor in her uninjured hand.

‘What happened?’

‘You want a baby?’

Lara blushed again, and Margarita sensed rather than heard sentiments of love, family, hope for the future. ‘I know how it must look but the *izba* is quite safe, we keep a low profile. And we’ll school it ourselves. Give it a proper revolutionary education. Make it a citizen not just of Russia but of the world.’

Margarita clenched at the towel as at a lifeline. ‘It’s idiotic and cruel, Lara. Condemning a child to this.’

‘Do you have children, Firebird?’

She gave Lara a long, measured look, weighing her worth. ‘No.’

‘Then it’s hardly your place to sit in judgment on my decision.’

What she wouldn't give to melt that frosty look off her face. It would be so easy. This stupid, selfish *suka* had no idea, had never considered the best interest of the child. Rage was tinged with no small measure of jealousy, and she wanted to grind Lara's happiness into dust.

No witty rejoinders came, nothing cutting enough to inflict the desired pain. Towel in hand she left the kitchen and mounted the stairs, heading for her room like a wounded animal to her den.

Halfway up, she stopped. Someone was knocking.

Lara appeared at the foot of the stairs, eyes red but dry, stepped up to peep through the window, and let out a gasp.

CHAPTER XV*December 1902 – May 1903*

Wet, icy wind sliced across the platforms and between the brightly coloured tiles of Radara station, leaving waiting travellers soaked and chilled. They shivered on intricately engraved benches or stood huddled under arches out from the keenest edges of the breeze, bundled in wool and furs, scarves and mittens, leaving only blinking, frozen lashes visible.

Margarita shifted from foot to foot. It had been eight years since she'd arrived at this station with tickets and false passports from Elena in her sweating hands. That girl, frightened of being caught with counterfeit documents, imagined the worst punishment as being sent back to her mother and an arranged marriage in their quiet backwater. Instead she'd found herself in flat 17, found...

Her breath caught. Among the crowd, as if summoned by memories, a hat wove between the passengers, feather rippling in the wind. How many times had she seen Varvara in such a hat? Of course it wasn't her, couldn't be in the middle of a workday, but she wanted so badly for it to be... If she called out...

Lara shuffled over, the toes of her boots already dark with slush, and set her case down. 'Tickets settled. Any sign of the train?'

'Not due for fifteen minutes yet. Try to relax.'

'Relax. Oh, Firebird, you are funny.'

'Then at least I'm good for something.' She turned away to keep from seeing the well-deserved resentment on Lara's face and pretended it was the wind which made her breathless.

'I won't forgive you,' Lara said. As if she sensed her gnawing conscience.

Margarita curled her frozen fingers tighter in her pockets. ‘Understandable. Though you could have refused.’

‘Oh, absolutely. So it would look as if I valued my personal relationships over my political work. I’d be discredited and in all likelihood expelled.’ Lara blew on her fingers. ‘I had no choice.’

‘I know it’s unfair, but the Committee makes the decisions and we must follow them.’

‘Except it wasn’t the Committee, was it?’ She felt Lara’s eyes searing her, heard the now-familiar undertone of hatred. ‘It was you.’

‘I’m not on the Committee, I don’t decide who goes where or does what.’

‘No, but they listen to you. They respect you, you’ve got clout. You put my name forward. So they picked me.’

‘I stand by my decision.’

‘I’d expect nothing less. But *why*? Why me?’

Margarita looked up and down the tracks. Where was this damn train? ‘You were there. You know why.’

*

Raw from Lara’s rough words and hand throbbing from the broken glass, Margarita had needed, with the yearning of an addict, to escape to her room and try to quieten thoughts of Kira. But Lara had welcomed their unexpected guests: Vlad, miraculously, and behind him –

‘Niki!’ Lara propelled herself forward and clasped him around the neck. ‘You hadn’t said you were coming.’

‘I can’t always send word ahead, you know that. And the heroine of Monument Square! My cup runneth over.’

Still frozen to the stairs, Margarita had eyes only for Vlad. 'Where the hell were you?'

He flushed and stared at his shoes. 'What're you talking about? We saw each other...'

'You know fine well what I'm talking about. You *should* have been waiting at the end of the road, since, if you recall, it was your job to alert our press if the plan succeeded. But you were nowhere to be found.' She descended the stairs and slapped. 'Don't you ever dare disobey an order again or I'll have Nikita transfer you to a different cell. Assuming there's an opening for a dead weight. You're lucky I don't suggest he have you shot!'

Lara pressed the back of her hand to her open mouth, but Nikita smiled. 'Vlad heard the shots and went straight to the press bunker, thereby following your orders. Most of them.'

'And you didn't think it prudent to wait until you saw me? Suppose it'd been their guns instead of mine. Suppose I'd been the one shot, and Suetsky without a scratch. You'd have looked a fool then.'

'That's true,' said Nikita. 'I admire your tenacity, but I've addressed the situation, Firebird. Unless you want me to transfer him?'

Margarita eyed Vlad's swarthy, cowed face where her handprint bloomed across his cheek. 'No,' she said. 'He's learned now.'

Sensing a lull in the drama, Lara linked her arm through Nikita's, beaming up at him. 'We're delighted to have you, Niki, but what brings you? I hope it's personal for once.'

'All business, *sestrichka*. In fact it concerns transfers, so perhaps we can cheer Firebird after all.'

Little sister? A dozen tiny pieces suddenly fitted into place. They moved into the living room, filling the chairs and sagging sofa, Margarita scanning the two faces for

similarities since she could find none in personality. Nikita, direct and stern, superior in the hierarchy; Lara, simpering, cloying, naive. How could they be siblings?

‘Word of our successes here in the north have travelled.’ Nikita counted them on his fingers. ‘Minister of Education Bogolepov last year, Minister of Interior Sipyagin in April, Governor Suetsky last month. Three assassinations in fewer than two years. We’ve proven ourselves effective, to say the least.’ Blood splattered Margarita’s vision. She blinked to clear it. ‘The Ufa branch wants bodies on the ground, literally and figuratively, but they need strategists. We’ve recruited from St. Petersburg. Radara is next.’

‘Kolya was our best strategist,’ said Margarita. ‘And he’s dead.’

‘A ruthless decision on your part, but one I trust you did not make lightly.’

She looked at her lap, the dark plum skirt, its softness under her clenched hands. Kolya’s cheer for the revolution filled her ears so at first she didn’t realize Nikita was speaking.

‘Firebird, are you listening?’

‘Yes, what?’

‘You’re leading this cell. You know who’d best suit the job. You threatened Vlad with transfer, though it doesn’t sound as if he’s fit for this specific mission.’

‘Who’s the target?’

‘I can’t divulge that, even if I did know. That’s Ufa’s concern.’

The first and most obvious solution was to go herself. She was sick of hiding, sick of sitting idle, sick of being haunted by Kolya’s ghost. But even as she imagined herself making the journey and starting over in Ufa, she knew it was impossible. This cell was hers, the result of her hard work. Leaving it in someone else’s hands was unthinkable. And she had no desire to leave Radara; what other city would compare?

Vlad was out of the question. Yes, she'd be glad to be rid of him, but he'd let her down once and once was enough; he would be no use as a strategist or an assassin.

Fedya seemed a decent fit. Well-read and steady enough not to lose his head over every inconvenience or change of plan. Invaluable traits in a revolutionary. And it would certainly teach Lara a thing or two about revolutionary sacrifice.

The women's eyes met.

'Lara should do it.'

Lara sat up straighter. 'But...I'd be no use in Ufa. I don't know the first thing about strategizing.'

'You'd be surprised how quickly you learn. And you're practical. Running a safe house requires as much long-term planning as any assassination, believe me.'

Nikita's eyebrows wrinkled. 'Your kind words are appreciated, but if anything Fedya may be a better fit.'

'No,' said Lara, reaching out to her brother, 'you mustn't send him.'

'Nor should you,' Margarita agreed. 'Dear Fedya spends all his time reading by the fire.'

'I'd think we'd want a steady theorist,' said Vlad. 'Someone in command of himself and the ideology.'

'She is no less intelligent than her husband,' said Margarita, 'but twice as active. Certainly he's steady, but perhaps we don't need steady as much as we need passionate and idealistic. Lara down to the ground. She is my recommendation. I have none better.'

'You enjoy sacrificing your best comrades, don't you?' Nikita's smile was a slap and she lowered her eyes, which suddenly burned.

Lara's fists were clenched and her lips white, still and bloodless as a marble statue. 'I don't suppose I have the right to refuse?'

‘Why would you?’ Margarita asked. Some perverse part of her thirsted to drive the point home. ‘Your duty is to the movement.’

But Lara very pointedly kept her eyes on her brother.

‘Refuse isn’t the word, Larushka,’ he answered. ‘No one has given an order. But Firebird believes your skills, in particular, would be a great asset. To the Ufa branch, the movement, to Russia. However, if you feel you can contribute more here – if *that’s* your concern – then you’re free to decline.’

Tension seeped from them, clogging the air like damp. ‘If I can’t refuse,’ Lara said at length, ‘may I at least speak to my husband?’

‘Of course.’

Vlad leaned forward. ‘I’m sure he’ll go with you. He’s devoted to you.’

‘Ufa isn’t looking for couples,’ said Nikita. He was glum but steadfast. ‘You could stay here until after Christmas, but...’

Lara stood in slow motion. ‘If you’ll excuse me.’ She nodded to Nikita, to Vlad, and left the room, taking all the warmth of the fire with her.

Vlad sighed. ‘She really can’t bring Fedya?’

‘She’s not going on honeymoon, she’ll have work to do.’ But Margarita felt much less confident now that the suggestion had been made.

‘Coldly put, but in essence correct,’ Nikita said, rising and making for the door.

‘I think you did it on purpose.’

‘I do tend to act with purpose, Vlad, unlike some people.’

‘I mean you wanted her gone. Not that I blame you. You’ve every reason to be insecure.’

‘Meaning?’

Nikita gestured for Vlad to follow him out. ‘Being an *Esser* means going where you’re needed, when you’re needed. Personal relationships must come second. In time she’ll understand.’

He bid farewell to Margarita, promising to return soon to finalize the plans. Vlad rubbed his cheek and cast a dirty look at her over his shoulder.

Yes, she thought, this will help Lara understand. And, she told herself, it was neither cruel nor petty. It was noble; she was saving Lara a good deal of pain. Prisons, lost children, passionate lovers turned to distant strangers. Lara could be spared that.

*

A blast of wind whipped across the platform, carrying Lara’s voice with it. ‘You said many kind things; I haven’t forgotten. But it’s why you said them, and what you didn’t say. I think you’re jealous.’

‘What?’ She pulled the scarf up higher over her mouth. ‘You have nothing I want.’

‘Vlad says –’

Margarita scoffed. ‘You’re going to listen to that incompetent worm?’

‘He says you’re jealous because I’m married and – pretty.’

‘Ha! Probably he’s just trying to get up your skirt.’

‘My God!’ Lara scanned the platform, wary of being overheard. ‘It’s not just him.’

‘Who else?’

She nudged a pile of slush with her toes. ‘A few people have suggested as much.’

Nikita, or Fedya no doubt. So they’d been slandering her behind her back, eh? They were intuitive enough to sense her dislike but ignorant enough to attribute it to pettiness and vanity. Margarita looked sideways at her. ‘Do you believe them?’

‘I don’t know.’ Lara’s voice was fraught. ‘You’ve never liked me, Firebird, and cannot understand why. I had nothing but love and admiration for you and you never

accepted it. It hurt, but I thought I understood. I know I can be – flighty, and you’re so...focused. But I never took it personally.’

If only this train would come! Some slippery serpent of shame wriggled from her gut up to her chest, constricting her heart and leaving her lightheaded. ‘It’s no more dangerous than what you’re doing here. Ufa isn’t a death sentence.’

‘Isn’t it? The way you looked at me in the kitchen...like you wanted to tear me to pieces. I’m not stupid. You wanted me to suffer and you got your wish.’

Barbs of truth lacerated her. Tears turned to ice halfway down her cheek. ‘It isn’t like that.’

‘You’re the only one who believes that, if you even do yourself.’

A cloud of smoke appeared on the horizon, occluding the sky as it approached. The other passengers crowded forward, bracing against the wind and damp, all these secure, simple lives. Lives she might like to have lived. She couldn’t undo the past any more than she could predict the future, a thought which brought her no comfort.

Lara lifted her case and moved into the open air, burrowing her face deeper into her scarf. Margarita followed at a distance overwhelmed by an inexplicable sense of loss. *Was* this a death sentence? She hadn’t meant –

A porter took Lara’s case, and the two women faced each other in the throng. She held out an un-gloved hand. ‘*Oodachi*. Good luck, Lara.’ What could she say? Something meaningful, supportive and free of spite. ‘You’ll do well.’

But Lara’s hands remained firmly in her pockets. ‘I know.’ She hitched up her skirt and climbed on board.

The train let out a shrill whistle and began to puff, casting up soot and sparks as it gathered speed. Margarita stood a long time on the platform, watching it grow smaller and

smaller, trailing streaks of grime across the sky. She couldn't catch her breath, but the wind had nothing to do with it. She was as glad to be rid of Lara as she was sorry to see her go.

Fedya and most of his things disappeared a few weeks later. She tried not to think of them together in Ufa, raising a baby, laughing at her. Instead she busied herself. Tended the cottage, ran errands, worked on pamphlets, headed meetings. But at night the creaking house sounded like the moans of the Litovsky. Dreams of her cell plagued her and February was fast approaching. She couldn't be alone then.

To the Committee, she pointed out that it was inefficient domestically and politically to leave her in the *izba* on her own. Surely Katya had finished her work in St. Petersburg by now...

*

Prison was built on discomfort but the worst, in the beginning, was the 'Judas' window. Any passing guard could open it any time and watch you. Sleeping, eating, shitting, it was all the same to them.

There was Sleepy with his drooping eyelids and Caterpillar who had brows thick as two fingers. She disliked them on principle. But she hated Mole. His hazel eyes were empty, like glass replicas, and his mole peeped from the wrinkles around his right eye whenever he smiled. He often did. As if he were happy to see her.

*

Curled on the sofa stroking Pushkin's soft fluff as he slept in her lap, Margarita watched the candle flicker and made a wish:

Happy birthday my little piglet.

Doubtful she resembled a piglet anymore, her newborn features filled out, but imagination failed her. What were children doing at two? Walking? Talking? Margarita didn't know, would never know. Thanks to Sokolov.

His face she could conjure with ease, as she so often did. It haunted her in dreams where she fired at him instead of Suetsky. She wished she'd killed him when she'd had the chance.

The coded knock ricocheted through the house, making her jump and sending Pushkin leaping from her lap.

Margarita kissed her cheeks three times. 'Welcome home, Katya!'

'I'd be just as happy not to see the capital again,' she said, dropping her bags on the floor and throwing herself onto the sofa.

'What were you doing? Nikita wouldn't tell me.'

'Well, it was top secret you know.' She blew on her proffered glass of tea and fanned her stiff fingers around it. 'I can't say much, but the Holy Brigade was involved.'

'Assassinations?' Margarita brushed orange fur from her skirt.

'No, no. Mostly gathering information on far-right groups. There's more than I realized. The Russian Assembly, the Holy Militia. The Holy Brigade is just the worst of a bad lot. They do like to use God as an excuse to hate, don't they? Anyhow, Suetsky embodied their beliefs. They championed his bid for Minister of Interior. With him dead, they're in chaos.'

'For now.'

'Yes, especially since they still have access to the Imperial court.' Katya took a long sip, nestled deeper into the cushions. 'What about you? Killed anyone since I've been away?'

Assuming Lara would survive... 'No. I'm on sabbatical.'

Katya laughed. ‘You’ve earned it. Listen, the Committee wants a write-up of my findings. Fancy lending a hand?’

Katya’s presence made all the difference. She brought laughter back, and productivity. She stood between Margarita and loneliness, and the dark thoughts which lived in that loneliness. Watching the snow pelt the windows the same way it had two years before, guilt weighing especially heavy, Margarita told her about Lara and Fedya, about the gossip. About the baby. And Katya listened without interruption before dismissing it all with a shrug.

‘So? You sent her away because you were jealous.’

‘What? No. She was the best one for the job.’

‘Sure you were. You lost your happy family with Roman and you’re angry – who wouldn’t be? – and you didn’t want her to have it so you banished her to some remote borderland.’

‘You’ve got it backwards.’

‘Doesn’t matter if the reason was wrong, you did the right thing. She was mad to consider it. Safe houses have been raided left and right since Suetsky died. And she wanted to bring a baby into that? Besides,’ she sighed, ‘a man can have a wife and children and still be a preeminent revolutionary. It’s not the same for us. I’d say you did her a favour.’

A memory stirred like a snake in long grass. ‘When I joined *Trezubets*, do you know what they asked me? If I was *encumbered*. They saw a family as a burden – for a woman. But I’d have done anything for Kira. I still would. An encumbered woman can be more useful than an unencumbered one.’

‘They want you free to take up dangerous work or disappear underground at a moment’s notice. Much easier for a father to abandon his offspring than for a mother to abandon hers.’

‘It isn’t.’

‘You know it’s true, that’s why you sent her to Ufa, to stop her doing anything to jeopardize her usefulness. You’re the same as those ridiculous, insulting men. Unless it really was plain jealousy.’

‘Fuck you,’ Margarita spat.

‘There’s the temper I remember,’ Katya laughed. ‘So you did something deceitful. So what? You gave Lara an incredible opportunity; the wrong motivation doesn’t change the result. And then her dearly beloved went anyway. In the end, she’ll probably wind up a lauded heroine with a doting husband and baby to boot. And you know what?’ Katya took Margarita’s hand, looked into her eyes. ‘That’s okay. Happiness is a rare commodity. Some of us wind up with more than others. We just have to move beyond it.’

‘I guess we must socialise happiness along with capital,’ Margarita said.

‘Haha! What a task we’ve set ourselves. Come on. Sleep will do you good.’

*

She was summoned when the thaw came, and glad to be reprieved from the incessant tap of melting icicles. Would they bring her to the room she’d been interrogated in months before when she’d arrived at the Litovsky? Probably there were dozens – a honeycomb whose interlocking chambers were devoted to questioning and breaking prisoners.

She stopped short. She’d not seen him since that day in the House of Detention. The day she lost Kira. A bomb went off in her scattering emotional shrapnel: fury, grief. The urge to hide. The urge to kill him.

‘Sit,’ said Sokolov.

When she didn’t move, her guard pushed her forward. ‘I’d rather stand,’ she said, arms straight and fists clenched. The guard reached for her wrists but Sokolov shook his head.

‘Never mind that, Popov. What can a woman do?’ He leaned back in his chair and looked her over. ‘Are you sure you shouldn’t rest? Your health, you know...’

Her jagged nails bit into her palms. *Breathe in. Breathe out. Say nothing. Show nothing.*

‘Suit yourself.’

Bending further over his desk, he organized his pens, papers, and files without looking at her. Without speaking. Toying with her. She would not rise to it. It would be her pleasure to outmanoeuvre him.

At last he tented his fingers under his chin, ‘Well, how’re you feeling?’

Poshel tuy, she thought.

‘I thought, now you’re back to normal –’ he gestured to her, and she wanted to cover her hollow, flaccid stomach. ‘Perhaps you’ll think more rationally. Be sensible.’

‘You mean you still can’t prove anything, so you want me to incriminate myself.’

‘On the contrary. The evidence against you is considerable. I’m working in your best interest.’

She straightened her spine, and though her head swirled with half-forgotten lies she kept her mouth closed.

He stared at the crusted milk stains which chaffed her and his look burned. ‘Don’t worry.’ The mole twitched when he smiled. ‘I’ll help you to see things clearly.’

*

Her eyes snapped open, and in the cold bed her sweat was like ice. It wasn’t the wind she heard wailing in the night, but an infant.



The dirt road from the *izba* toward town was little more than a mud track. The spring thaw was well underway, and it was better to be accosted by falling icicles and flower sellers than trapped inside listening to another round of debates on the *Esser* response to Kishinev.

Kishinev. Margarita hadn't even heard of it last week. But amidst the Easter celebrations a pogrom had erupted sparked by ancient fears of Jewish blood rites and fanned by the bigotry of backwoods priests. Katya read every paper through tears of rage and harangued anyone within earshot that the *Esser* party must respond to this callous attack.

'They killed over a hundred Jews, or so the paper says and they under-report those kinds of things. Women raped, babies slaughtered. And what did the police do, hmm? Nothing, as usual! They protect the seats of power, not the people. Will we sit here and say nothing?'

And the response, measured and sympathetic, was always the same. Kishinev was a tragedy, but the *Essers* were dedicated to freeing workers and peasants, including Jews, from all forms of oppression; the best response was to work for the revolution and not be distracted by side-issues. The argument circled back on itself after that.

Being outnumbered left Katya and Margarita impotent. Sergei had moved in and brought two comrades, Anatoly and Konstantin; when all was convivial there was no more inspiring, productive environment in which to plan and create. But when debates dissolved into disagreements and power struggles manifested in petty squabbles it was enough to make her wish she'd gone to Ufa, after all.

Tired and disheartened, Margarita took any opportunity to leave the cottage. She'd dropped off sketches with the printers and now carried finished copies of a new leaflet in her bag. Danger quickened her pace and sent a silvery thrill up her spine. Occasional stints

underground were necessary, but she missed being in the thick of it, outmanoeuvring police and the Okhrana at every step. Without activity, she would stifle.

Sunshine, the celestial pied piper, lured children into the streets. They scampered between legs and around carriages, shrieking with devilish glee as they tossed, rolled, and juggled onions with the dexterity of circus performers. A woman called three – three! – of them back to her, scrubbing dirt from their faces with her starched apron and pinching their cheeks. Any of these rascalion girls might be Kira, braids half-coiled and pinafores stained. Past the undertaker, she thought of Sokolov, imagined the blood pouring from him, a baptismal swell cleansing the bitter pain which riddled her like a sickness.

She skirted the old man selling *pirozhki* on the corner, past Nikiforov's – where she froze, to the annoyance of a passing clerk. That hat, with its miserable feather. That jacket.

Varya.

What was she doing in Nikiforov's?

The shop was as different from Glazkova's as possible whilst still being a tailor. Dark, richly panelled, it was more English than French and geared more for business than comfort. A middling establishment, hardly competition for Glazkova since it catered to a different clientele. Margarita dismissed an attendant and moved among racks and tables, watching Varvara's shabby feathered hat move along the aisles.

She stopped at a desk in the corner littered with familiar paraphernalia; loose threads, the scent of freshly pressed fabric, measuring tape worn smooth. Old friends hailing her from a great distance. *I remember you.* It was hard not to picture herself here, exercising all her old artistry and passion, creating –

'Look here, I've got the money so you've got to give me the coat.'

'I haven't got to do anything. Nikiforov's doesn't serve your sort, so clear out.'

Margarita peeked around a display rack; Varvara clutched one sleeve of a powder-blue coat, the clerk the other, growling and tugging like feral curs. The other customers made a hasty exit, and the clerk slammed his palm on the counter.

‘See that? You’ve driven away all our *decent* customers! Get out or I’ll fetch the police!’

Margarita stepped forward. ‘Pardon me, I’d like to purchase that coat myself, if you aren’t selling to this woman.’

‘Get lost, *kooritsa*, it’s my coat and I’m —’ A spasm crossed Varya’s face, and Margarita couldn’t think why her first response should be fear.

Seizing his chance, the clerk wrenched the sleeve out of Varvara’s grip and bestowed his most ingratiating smile upon Margarita. ‘Certainly, miss.’

Outside, the women stood in silence jostled by passersby but in no hurry to move on. Questions bubbled up one after another, but she had the feeling she shouldn’t ask any of them. Only one thing mattered.

‘Varya – Varushka – didn’t you get my letter?’

‘What letter?’

‘To tell you I was leaving Roman, to keep in touch with you. I had it sent to the flat.’

‘Oh! I never received it.’

She would wring the neck of that little errand boy! She looked at Varvara’s face, so familiar, so like home, and reached for her. ‘I’ve missed you. Can we talk?’

‘Yes, of course, if you like.’

‘Should we go to the flat?’

‘We can’t,’ she said, looking over her shoulder.

Margarita frowned. ‘Because of that woman you live with? Does she still grieve you?’

‘Yes – yes, that’s why. Let’s just walk instead. It’s mild today.’

They linked arms and strolled back toward Zolotoye Solntse Park; Margarita thought they’d stop there, but Varya led her around and past it. The sleeve of her coat was thin and dingy. She looked tired, off-colour, and there was more grey in her cloud of brown hair than last time they’d met.

‘Are you well, Varushka?’

Varvara looked ahead, quiet at first. ‘How long has it been since I’ve seen you?’

‘Over a year!’

‘I thought so.’

‘I would have written again,’ Margarita said hastily, ‘but I couldn’t risk it. It would endanger the comrades I’m staying with. But I’ve thought of you every day. Sometimes I think about flat 17 and I’m so homesick I could cry.’

‘Me, too.’

Margarita frowned. ‘What?’

‘Just – everything is so different. Nothing is like it was.’

‘No. Why were you at Nikiforov’s?’

Varvara’s face clouded. ‘Why not?’

‘You make rather than buy. Usually with scraps from Glazkova’s. I’d have thought you’d be there now since it’s the middle of –’

‘My darling, I almost forgot to tell you! I saw Roman.’

Suspicion turned to a nervous curiosity. ‘You...you did? When? What did he say?’

‘Nothing. He didn’t see me. I was on the other side of Memorial Square and he was leaving the library.’

‘How did he look?’

‘Tall and well-dressed, like always. I told you, he was far away.’

They passed the general store and the cabinetmaker, and Margarita wondered about Roman, still buried in the library. Was any of the old set still with him? Did he miss her? And in what context?

Varvara's nose gurgled like a blocked drain. 'Suetsky's dead, you know. Not sure what reaches you underground.'

Thank goodness! She had no suspicion what Margarita had done. Although that made her behaviour that much stranger. 'Yes,' she said, so calm she even surprised herself. 'I heard.'

'I can't say I was sorry. For his son, maybe, and his wife.'

'But not his mistress.'

'Either of them.'

They laughed, quietly at first and then like schoolgirls, throats open and arms draped around each other's waists. It had been so long since she'd really laughed. No matter how much time would pass, she and Varvara could never grow apart. Margarita wanted to tell her everything, about Kolya and Vlad and Lara and Katya, whom she'd dubbed 'the little hellcat'.

She rested her head on Varvara's shoulder. 'Come back with me.'

'Oh,' Varvara said, wiping her eyes, 'I'm not cut out for that. Not clever enough.'

'Don't be silly. You're clever, and passionate which is more important.'

Varya shook her head. 'But what could I do?'

'Anything! You could run the safe house and make disguises until you'd done some reading. And you could stay with me in my room, just like the old days.'

'You know just what to say,' she sighed. For a moment Margarita thought she would agree, but when the church bells pealed the hour her waxy skin blanched further. 'I've got

to go,' she said. She took Margarita by the shoulders and kissed her three times. 'You look well, Margusha. Tell me you're alright. That you're happy.'

'I – yes, I'm... Are you?'

'I am now.'

Back in the *izba*, heated voices spilt from the dining room across the hall. She sighed. Still arguing over Kishinev as if the decision wasn't already made. Well, they were perfectly capable of bickering without her, and she wanted her bed.

'Firebird!' Konstantin cried. 'Come quickly! News from the south!'

Everyone huddled around the table buried under half-empty glasses of cold tea. 'Where have you been?' asked Sergei. 'You should have been home an hour ago, we thought you'd been arrested and we had to tell you –'

'First,' interrupted Anatoly, 'did you deliver the pictures?'

'Yes,' Margarita said, 'and here. I got proofs as well. We'll have to –'

'Never mind all that now!' Katya took the papers and tossed them over their heads like confetti. 'Bogdanovich is dead! The Ufa operation was a success!'

Margarita blinked as if such a place were new to her. Konstantin brandished a telegram which she took and read so quickly it didn't sink in at first.

Dear Babushka and family. Stop. Uncle F. A. has left his position. Stop. Send love to brother. Stop. Love, Mama and Papa.

CHAPTER XVI

June – November 1903

‘I want to kill Kolzak Sokolov.’

The assembled *Essers*’ faces were blank. Anatoly shook his head. ‘Sorry, who?’

‘A prison guard. At the Litovsky Castle in St. Petersburg.’

In the silence she sensed success slipping away. ‘He hasn’t exactly got name recognition, Firebird,’ said Matvey, a student who ran his safe house across town as if it, too, were a university.

Sergei nodded. ‘And he has no influence. If he were killed, it wouldn’t change any policy or benefit the people.’

She crossed her arms. ‘Tell that to the people he’s torturing.’

*

Not sound. A low hum without audible words. Spit sprayed onto the desk. His moustache frayed at the ends. *Maybe he’s tired.*

Without a clock or clear window she couldn’t guess the time. Must be very late. Or early. That was how they disoriented you, although Kira had already broken her internal clock.

A slap wrenched her back to reality. Her face ached around the pre-existing black eye.

‘Pay attention! You’ve wasted enough time, and we know everything now.’ He was a pendulum swinging across her vision and her eyelids felt so heavy... ‘We’ve caught your lover.’

Wide awake, she strained for a better look. Sokolov looked unbearably smug, and again that itch to obliterate him reared up and swallowed her.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ she stalled. *Is this why he hasn’t come?*
Her heartbeat warned her – *Don’t hope. Don’t hope. Don’t hope.*

‘It was inevitable,’ he said. ‘Normally, I admit, it happens sooner. Pyotr Ivanovich was a slippery snake, but I always get my way. You’d do well to remember that.’

Relief – Roman was safe, and since Pyotr was who they really wanted – ‘I guess that means you don’t need me anymore.’ *For shame!*

‘Ah,’ he smiled, bending over her chair. ‘Unfortunately your lover isn’t talking. Perhaps the state of you will change his tune.’ He pinched Margarita’s chin; she pulled away. ‘Or the happy news of his little bastard.’

She wanted to bite the nose off his face, taste his blood, suck it between her teeth. If Kira was leverage *for* them, then she could be leveraged *against* them. ‘Should I talk only because you want me to?’

‘View it as self-preservation, rather than self-interest. More motivating. More forgivable, too.’

She almost laughed. ‘Why should I, when there’s nothing to preserve?’

He lunged and grabbed her face so hard she felt his fingers through her skin. ‘Endless audacity you stupid *suka*.’ She tried to free herself but he squeezed and her cheeks burned where they stretched between her teeth. ‘I will make short work of you and love every second.’

Between puckered lips she enunciated very carefully: ‘I think you need me.’

When he let go two stinging spots remained inside her cheeks. ‘I could put you in a punishment cell you’ll never come out of, send you to Siberia, shoot you, hang you. Or you might wind up like that neighbour of yours... You’re expendable. Why do I need you?’

‘Pyotr Ivanovich hasn’t confessed, and you think I know something. So you have to make me talk. But I won’t – until it’s worth it.’

Disoriented, she realized she was on the floor, sideways, still bound to the chair so his kicks and blows were impossible to ward off. Closed her eyes as if it could protect her. The others never beat her like this. Their rage was impersonal, calculated. This was a man beyond control.

His voice filtered through darkness: ‘Bring her downstairs. If you forget to feed her, all the better. Leave her there.’

*

Konstantin cleared his throat. ‘Any other proposals?’

‘There’s always the tsar,’ said Sergei, to a collective rolling of eyes. Alexander II’s assassination hadn’t ushered in revolution in the ‘80s; targeting Nicholas would only result in greater repression as it had twenty years ago. Besides, the *Essers*’ success had, largely, come from aiming further down the chain of power.

‘In that case a prison guard –’

‘Is so far down the chain he’s off it,’ snapped Vlad. ‘Your heads are both in the wrong place. If you were starving one piece of *kulebyaka* won’t satisfy you, but one hundred would be too much. We must pace ourselves.’

This was her branch, it ought to be her decision, not Vlad’s. Varied targets were proposed: generals, factory owners, statesmen, lawyers. But none these men, for all their abuses of power, deserve death as much as Sokolov.

Loshad was nibbling a teacake and coated in so much sugar that she resembled one herself, yet her gravitas was enough to silence the room. ‘Alexander Mikhailovich Bezobrazov. He should be next.’

‘I’ve heard that name,’ said Katya.

‘He’s an industrialist,’ said *Loshad*. ‘Word is he’s close to the tsar, trying to influence policy in his favour.’

‘How so?’ asked Sergei.

Matvey brushed a dusting of sugar from his sleeve. ‘Timber enterprises in Manchuria. It’s nothing more than a thinly veiled invasion threatening to destabilize peace with Japan.’

‘Of course!’ Katya put a hand to her forehead. ‘That’s where I’ve heard of him. He’s a member of the Holy Militia.’

A great hubbub broke out, everyone chiming in, fighting to be heard. But Bezobrazov, with his capitalist clout and political connections and far-right extremism, was the clear choice.

Retreating through the dim, quiet kitchen, Margarita slipped out the back door to the yard where the chickens ambled, pecking at nothing. Aimless little birds with no purpose. She collapsed on the steps. Loss opened inside her, an endless void like the first time. She had been so close.

*

‘You’ll die.’

Thank God.

‘What do you want?’

She didn’t understand; the words were out of order, muffled.

He squatted in front of her chair. She wasn’t tied – she’d never undergone interrogation without being tied. No matter. Much as she wanted to, she lacked the strength to assault him.

‘What do I want...?’

‘You made it clear you won’t say what you know without incentive.’

Would he never stop badgering her? Even the crushing loneliness was better. ‘Ask Pyotr Ivanovich,’ she said, chin to chest. ‘I can’t...’

‘He’s dead,’ said Sokolov, as if the titbit bored him.

Poor Ptoyr. To die so I could break. Then again, he might still live. It might be a trap. Mustering all her strength, she tipped her head back. ‘My girl.’

‘What?’

‘I’ll tell you. If you tell me.’

He crossed his arms. Her eyes opened and she wondered if she’d slept, but he was still there, sizing her up or debating with himself. Or savouring his victory.

‘After all we’ve been through I’d hate to mislead you.’

‘Talk sense,’ she huffed.

With a lover’s intimacy he whispered against her cheek, ‘I might lie. You might confess every sin of your tortured little soul in exchange for whatever fiction I think up.’

Fine hairs peeked out of his mole. Errant crumbs in his thick blonde moustache and the smell of old eggs on his breath made her gag. But she moved her face closer. ‘I might lie, too.’

‘So we’re on equal terms. That’s what you socialists want, isn’t it?’

‘Does that count as a question?’

He chuckled and began to pace. Her head was too heavy to turn so she only glimpsed him when he crossed her field of vision.

‘I’ll go first,’ he said, ‘as you’ve kept me waiting so long. When did you first become the lover of Pyotr Ivanovich Klangin?’

The truth was easier than lying. ‘Three years ago.’ Had she known Roman that long?

‘When?’

‘No. Tell me.’

‘It’s not a question, merely a follow-up. Three years ago – when?’

‘Summer.’

‘And when did you join his group?’

‘No. My turn.’

He smiled, all oil and advantage. ‘You’re in no position to be so ruthless.’

‘We had a deal.’ She attempted to sneer, with no idea whether or not she managed.

‘Alright. Ask away.’

*

A gentle knock. ‘Marusya?’

She wiped her cheeks. ‘Have they decided?’

‘*Loshad* and Matvey will do it,’ Katya said, sitting beside her. ‘How are you?’

‘I’m alright – it was stupid.’

‘It wasn’t. Sokolov is a monster. You know it, I know it. They don’t. That’s all.’

Was it worthwhile to explain? Prising open the past, rooting around in it for words...when she wanted to forget. ‘It’s like losing her again. As if I’ve let her down.’

Hand in hand they sat in the sunset, listening to the flapping hens and Margarita’s shaky breathing. What now? What was the point? Some men deserved to live, and they died. Some men deserved to die and yet they lived, oblivious to the hurt they caused – or worse, proud of it. The tranquillity of the *izba* was an affront in a world like that. There could be no peace until such wrongs were righted.

She stood, newly resolved. ‘Thank you, Katyushka, for everything. I won’t forget it.’

‘Wait.’ Katya grabbed her ankle. ‘I know what you’re thinking.’ She gave Margarita a bracing smile. ‘And I can’t let you do it alone.’



Loose ends with the Slavophile mission meant a return to the capital. At least, so Katya claimed to the Central Committee; in truth, she sought accomplices. Her mental index of sympathetic comrades was impressive, likely extending into the criminal underworld. Upon meeting Afanasiy, whose smile opened on hinges probably oiled by his long hair, Margarita was certain of it. He had a tendency to twirl his moustache in the style of a theatre villain, and his every move was trailed by a sly ragamuffin named Rodya.

Who knew where Katya found them, one slick and well-dressed, the other barefoot and sly, but in exchange for hot food and the occasional kopek they trailed Sokolov and reported his movements.

That summer was hot and humid. They woke in puddles of sweat and cloying air saturated their bones. It was worse in the hen house, where the ammoniac stink of chicken shit was tangible, every little body a furnace in the small space. But it was the safest place to talk.

‘Afanas says next month.’

Margarita looked up, one warm egg still cupped in her palm. ‘So soon?’

‘He and little Rodya have the information they need.’

‘Rodya won’t be there, will he?’ Killing a man was one thing, but she didn’t want the child watching. Though Rodya was hardly what she would call sheltered. She wondered how many children had been in the square the day she shot Seutsky.

‘I don’t think so. Afanas doesn’t tend to bring the boy on business.’

‘Business...’ She balanced the basket on her hip, careful not to jostle its contents.

‘Whatever money he earns from his *business* I’m sure doesn’t come honestly.’

Katya snorted. ‘Unlike your capitalist boyfriend.’

Such acerbic defensiveness could only mean one thing. ‘How do you know your Afanas exactly?’

‘We met while I was in the capital.’ Katya bent down to lift a dozing hen from her nest. ‘He works in munitions.’

‘But not in a factory.’

‘No. A supplier.’

Margarita’s eyes widened. ‘Black market.’

‘Something like that. More...ideological. He supplies arms and munitions to groups like the Holy Brigade but –’ Katya had to shout over Margarita’s outcry – ‘most of it is faulty, or damaged. It undermines their operation and makes him a tidy profit.’

‘A profit nevertheless based on exploitation, apparently.’

‘Better exploiting Slavophiles than the workers and the poor. Besides, he’s not hurting *them*, just their operation. It’s tactical.’

‘Uh-huh.’ Margarita scratched a hen under the chin until its beady eyes blinked and closed. ‘And how tactical is it to sell defective ammunition? Won’t they catch on and stop buying from him? Then his profits dry up.’

‘Not all of it is defective, only enough to make difficulty for them. He cuts them good deals, is reliable and discreet. And he knows what he’s about. All things, incidentally, you quite liked about him a minute ago.’

Leaning against the nesting box she scraped manure off her shoe. ‘You’re sleeping with him.’

‘I was lonely in St. Petersburg,’ Katya said. ‘I didn’t know anyone and it’s so big and...’ She ran a finger over each egg in the basket, as if counting them.

‘Do you love him?’

‘Do I need to? He was good fun but it’s no love affair. I just knew I could call on him for a favour, as it’s right in his area of expertise.’

‘A hired killer as well, is he?’

‘No, that’s your job,’ snapped Katya. ‘But he’s not above tracking your mark or delivering him to you for slaughter. It doesn’t matter if you agree with him or like him – I don’t particularly like him myself. But we need him. If you want Sokolov dead, we need him.’

Margarita nodded. ‘Alright then. What’s his plan?’



*

Impossibly tiny nose, restless limbs, eyes the colour of stormy skies over the Neva.
Where are you my girl?

‘Why did you take her?’

‘It was neither safe nor sanitary to keep her here.’

‘According...to the doctor?’ If she could only get away from all these lights...

He wagged his finger. ‘Ah ah ah, those aren’t the rules!’

Margarita opened one bleary eye. ‘Merely a follow-up.’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘according to Doctor Pudovkin, the infant would perish if she stayed here. I, for one, was worried.’

‘Why...?’

‘You don’t have the best track record with cleanliness – do you?’ Hatred pumped in her throat. For three weeks at the start of her term she’d refused to wash; it ended with icy water in a metal tub and the laughter of men instead of the paper and pens she’d demanded.

‘Suppose you were equally negligent with your child. Pudovkin said you couldn’t nurse her. It was evident you were incapable of mothering her.’

She pressed trembling hands to her temple, trying to shut out the sound of her shame, to forget watching her daughter vomit rose-coloured sick. ‘No no nononononononono.’

‘You brought it on yourself, and if you loved that girl at all you’d be grateful. She’s better off.’

‘She was all I had...’

‘Not a question. My turn, yes?’ The strategizing chessman had returned, pacing again, smoothing down the ends of his moustache. How long could it go on? ‘How many of you were in this little group?’

‘I can’t remember.’

‘You’re perfectly welcome to forego an answer...but it will mean ceding one about your child. The decision is yours.’ Margarita cursed him with all the strength she could spare. ‘I know, I know, I’ve heard it all before. How many?’

She squinted around the room. ‘This many...’

‘What?’

‘They’re here...look!’ She pointed over his shoulder at the ring of hazy faces. ‘See? Josef. He’s here. And *Koshka*!’

It didn’t register, at first, what she’d done, but horror bloomed at his smile as he jotted down her slip. Code names might be just as valuable as real names. *Oh fuck*. Either he’d kill her, or her comrades would. If she wanted the last answer she must ask fast. ‘Is she alive?’

He put the pen down. ‘You’ve not answered my question, despite your valuable insights. How many?’

‘No...’

‘How many?’ and his scream made her cower, clutching the edges of her chair.

‘I don’t know I don’t know! I think... Let me think.’ *Me, Roman, Katya, Grisha, Mikhail, piece of shit Pyotr...* The rest didn’t come. ‘T-ten. There were ten.’

‘Just ten of you?’

‘That’s all I know.’

He laughed through his nose. ‘They don’t share much with underlings. And I don’t suppose you’ll offer me any more names, hmm? Alas, I hardly hoped. But it’s a good sign, isn’t it? Now, what was it you wanted to know? In all the excitement, I’ve forgotten.’

‘Is – my daughter – alive?’ she panted, blinking away red and black spots. She had to know...before she fainted she had to know.

He picked some grime from under his fingernails. ‘How would I know?’

Hot, prickly rage crawled over her skin and a scream brewed up from the pit of her thrashing her against her chair until the legs wobbled. ‘YOU HAVE TO TELL ME!’ Indifferent to the seat bruising her shoulder as she collapsed or the stone floor cutting her head, crying or some exhausted approximation. ‘You promised, you promised.’

He propped her up by the shoulders and she stared at him through her fingers. ‘Use your head. She might be alive, she might be dead. How would I know?’

Her fingers arched, turned outward, clawing at any part of his face she could reach, she was blind and he was screaming or she was screaming and swaying like dancers as she scratched like a feral cat and *she might be alive she might be dead she might be alive she might be dead shemightbealiveshemightbe*

Dead.

*

The women paused on the dark stairs. In the dining room, Konstantin and Anatoly discussed the negotiations with Japan, debating whether Russia would accept any terms.

They were too preoccupied with tensions mounting thousands of *versts* away to hear their comrades leave in the middle of the night.

Out the back door, past the coop and over the fence, into the woods. They'd said very little to one another that day, and now the nymphs buzzed too loudly for conversation. Occasionally they dabbed sweat with their sleeves or stopped to untangle their skirts from covert bushes. They edged the clearing where the Radaran branch had trained with *Essers* from St. Petersburg. When the plan to kill Suetsky was still in its infancy. When Kolya was alive.

Margarita thumbed the gun's grip, detached from the context of its presence in her pocket or her presence in the woods. There were only shadow trees, the mournful calls of night birds, August's overripe musk, Katya's boots crunching the forest floor. It was beautiful.

When they did stop after more than an hour it was at another clearing, much smaller than the first.

'Here?' asked Margarita.

'Yes,' said Katya.

And they waited.

Footsteps: two pairs. One sure but sporadic, the other haphazard, half-dragged. From between the trees Afanasiy materialised with a second figure, head covered by a sack, wrists roped in front of him. Her heart gave one almighty thump and then stilled.

'Got your package, *khoroшaya sestra*.' Afanasiy grinned, one gold tooth sparkling in the gloom. 'Fresh from the capital.'

'You brought him all this way in your cart?' asked Katya, eyeing him with admiration and a drop of scepticism.

He shrugged. 'Details, my dove. Now isn't the time.' He shoved the captive to his

knees, and the hood emitted a muffled whimper. Afanasiy smiled at Margarita. ‘He’s all yours.’

His pleasure in her task was unsettling. The way he licked his lips put her in mind of a dog awaiting a chop. Too late now. She stepped forward so her toes almost touched the bound man’s knees, reached for the sack, and pulled.

Stray marks still blemished his face from where she’d mauled him that day, highlighted by tracks from his tears. The mole looked the same as ever. Unbelievable. It was really him.

He blinked, looking over his shoulder at Afanasiy who grinned like a devil, at Katya, at Margarita. No flicker of recognition. Was she so changed? How had he seen her, then? When at last his eyes went wide it was not fear, as she’d hoped, but sheer disbelief.

‘You!’ he gasped around his gag.

She thumped him with the butt of her gun. The crack of metal on bone and his yelp as he fell sent a thrill through her. Yes. Shooting Suetsky from a distance was cool and practical, but this...this felt good.

Afanasiy laughed. ‘Time you were repaid by the people.’

Sokolov’s eyes darted around the clearing to Margarita – the overweening confidence and haughtiness she so vividly remembered altogether erased – and locked on to the pistol in her hand. She made an extra show of flexing her grip, and his face crumpled. ‘*Mat Boga, miloserdnaya Mat Boga.*’ He squeezed his eyes shut, rocking back and forth.

She pressed the barrel against his throat so he choked. ‘Shut up. You’re done talking.’

‘You can’t,’ he whimpered. ‘You can’t do this!’

‘Can’t we?’ snapped Afanasiy. ‘How many men have you tortured?’

‘How many women have you beaten?’ Katya sneered.

Margarita leaned in, teeth bared. ‘How many babies have you stolen?’

‘I didn’t –’

She dropped her gun, wrapped her hands around his neck, gripping harder the more he struggled under her. ‘I didn’t forget, Sokolov.’ His eyes huge, blood leaking from his nose.

‘What can a woman do, eh? Fight back! Fight me!’

Katya pulled her up under the arms, dragging her off Sokolov’s motionless body. ‘Firebird, this wasn’t part of it.’

‘Damn your plan,’ she panted.

‘It was your plan.’

‘Oh, shut up!’ She wiped her forehead, leaving a ghastly crimson smear behind, and looked down at Sokolov. How many times had she fantasized about this? Ever since those eyes, that mole, appeared at the Judas window, the swift end to her bathing strike, his hands on her. He’d held all the weapons then, all the power. Things were different now...but as her breathing resumed its normal measure rationality returned with it.

Katya’s voice, hesitant, echoed her thoughts: ‘What do we do now?’

Margarita scooped up the gun. ‘There’s no point shooting him now,’ she said, dropping onto a nearby log, eyes on Sokolov. She folded herself in half, stretching toward her toes and relishing the burn behind her knees. ‘We’ll have to wait until he wakes up.’

‘That might be hours!’ Afanasiy protested. ‘It makes no difference, just do it now.’

‘No!’ Margarita set her mouth firm. ‘I won’t do it like this.’

He reached for the gun. ‘Then I’ll do it.’

‘So help me God, Afanasiy Kirilovich.’ She rose to face him. ‘One step more and Sokolov won’t be the only one facing the barrel end of it tonight.’

‘Besides, we’ve not read him his formal accusation. He has to be awake.’

‘Katya’s right. He must understand the charges.’

Afanasiy’s brow furrowed as if trying to unravel their pretty trick. Finally, he put his

hands in his pockets and stepped back.

Margarita resumed her place on the log, devouring Sokolov with her eyes. It was really him, her nightmare made manifest. Under the blooming bruises and seeping blood, it was unequivocally him. Good. He needed to be identifiable.

*

When they knocked, she wasn't ready. Doctor Pudovkin was in the doorway and she thought *this is it – time to go*. But Sokolov was there, too, which was strange because he worked at the Litovsky and since transferring to the House of Detention she had assumed she would never see him again. Quite happily.

She was surprised when he came in her cell, alarmed when Pudovkin didn't follow; a twitch behind the ears, the compression of her lungs.

Sokolov reached out. 'Give her to me.'

She bared her teeth and pressed Kira's head to her so hard the baby began to cry. Cornered on the bed, there seemed no way past his body, his grasping hands.

'It's not a suitable environment for a baby,' he said.

'Then let me go.'

'You're still under suspicion.'

'You can't take her from me.' She flung herself off the bed under his arm, holding screaming Kira like a doll. 'She'll die without me!'

He reached out, grabbed Kira, pulled; Margarita dug her fingers into the infant's flesh and heaved with all her might. They would rip her in half! She kicked his shins, then a burst of red and black and she was on the floor, lips to the stone, babyless.

Up. Running, shrieking, arms outstretched to take Kira, to gouge Sokolov's eyes out. Kira bawling, round face turning red then purple, fists squeezed shut tight as her eyes.

She can't see me – won't ever again – 'Kira!'

She flung herself against the door, beat it, shouted over the scrape of the lock. Frantic, bounding from wall to wall, calling to whoever could hear: ‘My baby! They took my baby! Someone! Please!’ What could she do? *What could she do?* Clambering onto the desk, she tugged at the latch on the window and, when it wouldn’t budge, smashed the glass and pressed her face to the bars screaming into the courtyard: ‘They took my baby! Kira! Help me! Kira!’

It grew up around her like a storm, clangs, clatters, taps, bangs, shouts shaking the very walls. The House of Detention was in uproar. Men and women rioted with Kira’s name on their lips and Margarita knelt on her desk, lacerated hands grasping the bars and her throbbing head against the stone, calling and calling and calling until blood gurgled in her throat.

*

Kira would be two and a half now. A chilly dagger of jealousy gouged her: some other woman, no doubt, was called *mamochka*, plump little arms wrapped around her neck. For now. When the revolution came – and it would – she’d find her daughter. Liberate her. Give her a home. If Lara could do it, so could she. She would offer her lost daughter a brand new world to build as she liked, where men like this one had no place.

Sokolov stirred on his bed of leaves. She nudged his hip with her toe. When his eyes slid into focus he screamed and flipped over, scurrying away on his elbows and knees, pulling the gag from his mouth and shrieking with ferocity enough to stopper the heart.

Margarita threw herself onto him, dead leaves and pine needles tangling in her hair. He writhed under her and terror transmuted his words into howls and yips. The world had shifted into straight, clear lines, a rough sketch of reality, Sokolov one horizontal line among the vertical lines of the trees and her comrades.

Katya pinned Sokolov’s legs and Margarita grabbed his hair so Afanasiy could stuff

the rags back in his mouth. Loud as Sokolov screamed, she could scream louder. ‘You stand accused by the Socialist Revolutionary Party for crimes against the Russian people, for wielding your authority to inflict the greatest damage. You stand accused of abuse, of torture, kidnapping. And you have been found guilty.’ She looked at the gag in his mouth and the corner of her lip twitched. ‘Anything to say in your defence?’

His sobbing reverberated through her legs. He looked at her over his shoulder and his tears sparkled in the moonlight.

She put the gun to the back of his head, smiled, and pulled the trigger.

Click.

Impossible.

Clickclick.

In the reprieve Sokolov kicked out at Katya, who lost her grip; he bucked like a wild horse sending Margarita sideways. He would escape. After everything. ‘No no no no no.’ She grasped his shirt, heaved forward and lost her balance, sprawling across his chest. She hit him with the gun, then again. Again. Felt his skull cave like an egg and when the gun slipped from her slick hands she brought her fists together and hammered at what remained. His blood was on her hands and her blood was in his mouth and she didn’t know what she screamed anymore only she was terrified she’d never be free of this cell and if he got away she’d never see Kira again.

‘Firebird! *Iisus Khristos* stop, stop! Stop!’ Had they arrested Katya, too? How had she wound up here?

Afanasiy’s arms snaked around her waist and pulled her back. He shook her so her teeth clacked together. ‘He was supposed to be identifiable. You’ve ruined everything!’

But Margarita just blinked. Disturbing visions often appeared to her in the punishment cell, but they posed no threat.

Katya shoved him aside and knelt in front of her. Cupped her cheek. 'It's alright, *Zhar-Ptitsa*. We can fix it.'

'Fix it?' Afanasiy squealed.

'Yes, fix it.' Katya stood. 'Take the rope from his wrists and tie him to that tree.'

'How can I do that, *golyoobooshka*, he doesn't have a head –'

'Shut up and do it! Then go through his pockets. Take everything you find.'

'And do what?'

'What do I care? Burn it, throw it in the Neva or the Medelny, I don't care. Make it look like a robbery.'

'A robbery? Robberies don't usually end with faces caved in.'

'Well, this time it did.'

Afanasiy dragged Sokolov's body across the forest floor while Katya said soothing things, using her skirt to wipe Margarita's bloody hands.

Crunching sticks, shuffling leaves. Someone was coming. She...she was in the woods, and no one but Afnasiy and Katya were supposed to be with her. 'Wh-who's there?' she called. Katya slapped a hand over her mouth.

Rodya stumbled into view, doubled over and panting. 'I heard screaming, uncle.' Terror snuffed out love and concern and he screamed and screamed, eyes on the man without a face.

Katya turned. 'You brought the boy?'

'He was lookout, he wasn't mean to see anything.'

Margarita couldn't bear the child's shrieks, the poor thing needed comfort just like her Kira. She moved toward him, arms out, crooning, 'It's alright Rodya, it's alright.'

He fell over backwards and ran into the night crying '*Lesnaya Ved'ma!* Forest witch!'

She sank into the dirt, bereft.

‘Here.’ Afanasiy braced against the tree with one foot and gave the rope a final pull. ‘You sort his pockets. I must look after the boy.’

Katya was tugging her hand. ‘Marusya, you have to help me.’

They pilfered Sokolov’s pockets, neither looking at the pulpy mass on his neck yet unable to stop looking, and came away with a little money, his papers, and a locket. Margarita leaned against the tree, indifferent to the corpse beside her, and ran her thumbnail along the groove until the trinket sprang open.

On the left: a woman, young, pretty enough, aloof, hair upswept. On the right: two small children, the first about one year hold, clumsily holding an infant in swaddling clothes.

She vomited over the roots.

Katya grasped her arm, hair plastered to her sweaty face in spidery strands. ‘Come on.’

Dazed, Margarita followed with the locket tight in her fist.

On the bank of the Medelnyy, Katya shredded Sokolov’s papers and dropped them into the water which carried them downstream and swallowed them up. The money she shoved in her pocket. ‘Wash up. If you go back looking like that it’ll – what’s that? In your hand?’

Margarita opened her fist, revealing the faces with austere expressions and soft edges. Bile rose again. Calmly, Katya took the locket and snapped it in half, dropped the pieces to the ground. ‘They’re not our problem.’

Prying the photos free, Margarita ripped them up and tossed them into the river with the rest of Sokolov’s identity. She rolled up her sleeves and dipped her hands in the cool water, splashed her face and scrubbed her hands, rubbing hard at the red oval imprint of the locket in her palm. The sun rose, but that was not why the Medelnyy ran pink.



Leaves danced in a relentless wind. Clouds scuttled across the sky, flat as linens hanging low enough to touch. And the blue was so cold, she wanted to paint it. Just the sky. No houses, no rivers, no earth. No people. Only sky.

Matvey, Anatoly, Sergei, *Loshad*, Vlad, and Konstantin gathered round the dining room table. They laughed at the SDs whose internal disagreements had bisected the party: Lenin and his Bolsheviks, Plekhanov and his Mensheviks; one called for a party of professional revolutionaries, the other open to any soul looking to change Russia. Would these new parties be comrades with the *Essers*, or enemies? Would the Bolsheviks flounder with such limited members? How they laughed. But Margarita didn't care.

They speculated for the hundredth time what would happen now that Russia had issued its own demands to Japan. Would there be war? Would Japan capitulate? What would it all mean for the workers, the peasants? Margarita didn't care.

They bemoaned their failure to assassinate Bezobrazov, currently in Manchuria overseeing a merger between timber and mining which would increase his excessive wealth and court influence. They had failed and Margarita had succeeded. She didn't care.

She stood, and the room fell silent. 'Where you off to, *Myasnik*?' asked Sergei.

How they laughed.

Butcher. It hardly mattered now that that's how they saw her. The battered corpse with out-turned pockets had been discovered and identified by the wedding ring they'd foolishly left behind, unaware of the inscription it bore. She'd been appropriately censured by the Central Committee, but that, too, had passed over her head.

At least in the yard with the chickens, she could find peace. The cold didn't matter. She hardly felt it among the hens, soothed by their pecking and clucking and flapping.

‘*Lisitska*, stop pestering those chickens! Come here and help me and Elena Sergeyevna make pies.’

Her mother’s voice was so near she might have been just on the other side of the fence, hiding out of sight among the trees.

CHAPTER XVII

February – May 1904

Margarita had always been angry.

Men and women bustled past in shades of excitement and worry as they had for two days. A boy flew past waving newspapers like flags of surrender; she purchased one and stood against a corner to better survey her surroundings as she read. Headlines castigating the Japanese failure of diplomacy. She handed it to a passerby in a homespun kaftan. The paper, as an organ of the state, was unlikely to report truthfully.

Ah, there again. That anger.

It didn't matter that she was distracted. She could have found her way to flat 17 blindfolded.

First she had sought Varvara as a lost animal seeks shelter, the nearest thing she'd had to family these ten years. Then it became returning to the place she'd called home when the trajectory of her life had been simple, when she'd been happy, before the anger came and transformed her into someone new.

Except...that was wrong. Since waking in Roman's apartment she had assumed her anger newly hewn, formed and calcified at the Litovsky and House of Detention. But it had always been there. The difference lay in her ability to manage it. Maybe she'd lost her temper from time to time, said or done things she'd have been better advised against, but the anger didn't control her because it was *only* anger. Now it was rage.

She turned past the pungent jungle smells of the flower shop and nearly lost her footing on a patch of black ice. The flat was two streets away, beckoning her, her yearning for safety and understanding, for Varya, stronger than her fear of finding it changed. She pulled her scarf up over her mouth and trudged on.

So the anger existed even before *Trezubets* put it into words. Before Petukhov's hanging or the fire. Since she'd run away? Since the butcher – the word repulsed her more than ever – and the broken relationship with her mother?

No, it stretched back farther, one dropped stitch which destabilized the whole garment. The school, beatings disguised as education? It hadn't helped, but it was there before. The death of her father? Her memory didn't extend much further. Was that the wellspring?

Now her red mist had cleared; she had to come to grips with herself.

Somehow she'd expected it to have grown dilapidated, but it was the same. The cracked step. The spot under the windowsill where she'd stood with Roman, aching for a kiss receiving a pamphlet. Unchanged. As on the day she'd stepped into her cell, sorrow reverberated through her like a plucked string, knowing the world would carry on without her. She crossed the threshold. There were no doors to the past. You moved forward, never back.

The crone hacked into a handkerchief then dabbed her eyes with it. 'She ain't here.'

'When will she be back?' Margarita tried to see over the woman's shoulder. Just one glimpse of the room, that little dish-covered table, the screens, the cracked mirror.

She narrowed her eyes. 'Back? Back? Bitch won't come back.'

'What?'

'Not lived here almost two years, *doorachok*. Why don't you know that, huh? Clear off my doorstep, go on. Away with you.' She slammed the door.

Reeling, Margarita tumbled down the stairs to Fomichyova's flat and pounded until her hand went numb and the woman finally open up. 'Where is she?'

'Where's who? And who are yo –' She froze and crossed herself. 'God Almighty.'

'Where's Varvara Semyonovna?'

‘Her?’ Fomichyova spat over her left shoulder. ‘Gone. Long gone.’

‘Did that bat drive her out? So help me I’ll –’

‘Ha! Didn’t need to. Once I found out what she was I gave her the boot myself. Dragged her out. I run a respectable house, not a brothel.’

Icy fear dripped down her back. ‘She’s a seamstress.’

‘She’s a slut. And a slut what gets paid is a whore. I don’t do business with that sort.’

Margarita struck the door and Fomichyova leapt back. ‘You charged too much, you bloodsucker, and Glazkova paid a pittance. What choice did she have?’

‘There’s lots of jobs which don’t require a girl to open her legs. Why couldn’t she have gotten one of them? Couldn’t have, I guess. Them’s the rules.’ Before Margarita could ask what that meant, Fomichyova pushed the door over. ‘You want the whore? Go to Blagorodniy Lane, that’s where they swarm.’ She spat again and shut the door. Margarita heard the lock scrape.

Had it been her? She stepped onto the street to a blast of cold air. That day at the station with Lara, she thought she’d glimpsed...but she hadn’t believed it. But Blagorodniy Lane was so near the station – the whores preyed upon the travellers, or vice versa – it was possible... And that hat, that sad feather... *Nevosmozhnna!* Impossible! That unreceived letter, buying a gaudy jacket at Nikiforov’s in the middle of the afternoon when she should have been –

The otherworldly whistles of trains shivered on the wind, and Margarita looked down Blagorodniy Lane hoping to spot Varvara without having to breach her realm. She reminded herself that these were working women, just like those in the mills and boutiques, mansions and cafés, whom she’d met when handing out leaflets. These women were consequences of a capitalist society which regarded a woman’s body as an object of barter on par with a bowl

of soup or a suit, to be consumed, worn out, and discarded. These women were her sisters, for no woman on earth was so secure that she couldn't be reduced to this.

Nevertheless, she was afraid.

Their gaze met hers, identified that she was not a patron, and slid on as if she weren't there. Some had a haggard somnambulance, others alert with the energy of a lynx on the hunt. Dresses at least twice mended, stockings ill-darned, wet shoes. Didn't they freeze in this weather?

'*Zdravstvuite*, pretty girl.'

It was a stomach with a man attached, bald and bearded; she thought of a pirate gone to seed.

'I've not seen you before.'

'I'm not – '

'What's your price?'

'Nothing,' she blurted.

He roared with laughter which bounced up the walls, and she had to pinch herself because the stone and the cold and damp and laughter was exactly the same – 'Just at it cause you love cock, eh little duck?' He took her wrist and pressed it to an erection which felt remarkably like a sewing spindle.

She squeezed what she could get a grip on and he cried out, then went still, eyes huge, lip trembling. A hat with a sad, dirty feather hovered over his shoulder. *Nevosmozhnna!*

'Get out of here, Belomestnykh.' And it was her.

Belomestnykh's flabby face rippled with unshed tears; he opened his mouth but produced only a squeak and shuffled off. In his place was the point of a blade.

'You – you were going to stab him.'

'Margarita!' Varvara swayed on the spot. 'What –? You're not whoring?'

‘Me? No, but – are you?’

‘I always did.’

‘Yes, but... Can we go somewhere? Talk?’

‘I’m busy.’ Her words were rough, slurred. Was she drunk?

From her pocket Margarita took a small pouch and jingled its contents. ‘I’ll compensate for whatever you’d normally...earn.’

‘Mother of God, put that away. Idiot girl.’

Once, years before, Varvara had brought her to a room above a tavern, seedy but still cosy. The room she found herself in now was squalid and lacked all warmth. No sofa or carpet, not even an ikon. Just a bed, unmade, stained a palette of orange, beige, and yellow.

‘Be quick,’ Varvara said, looking out the window. ‘I don’t have a lot of time.’

Questions, suspicions, she didn’t know where to start. ‘I wanted to see you, Varushka. I’ve missed you. Everything’s been – wrong – for so long.’

‘And you thought I’d, what? Fix everything?’

‘Well – no, not like that.’ Every option felt perilous, riddled with traps. She must proceed with caution. ‘You’ve known me a long time, Varvara. Was I always like this?’

Varvara leaned against the bedframe which screeched like a locomotive and listed precariously. ‘Depends. What exactly is it you think you are?’

‘I don’t know – broken. I thought it started after the Litovsky, like a disease I caught with the scurvy but never got over. Or it’s been there since I was little, or before I was born, causing mischief, a devil in me feeding on my experiences, growing stronger and turning me into someone new, someone bad.’

‘Oh stop it! Just stop. Stop pretending you’re sorry.’

‘I – that wasn’t – wh –’

Chest heaving, clenched fists raised overhead, Varya looked half-insane. 'I'm sick and tired of listening to you lie to me, and the worst part is you don't even realize they're lies.'

'That's rich, coming from you. I went to flat 17, you haven't lived there for years!'

'If I lie it's for a reason. You're just deluded.'

'Deluded? All I wanted was to see you, to feel –'

'Lie! All you want is my absolution. You want me to forgive some great mystery in your tortured soul.' She spat. 'Except it's no mystery because I know exactly what you've done.'

Nevosmozhna.

'Poor Sokolov. Found in the forest with his his brains splattered up the trees.'

Margarita's stomach turned to water, she wanted to rest, just for a moment, even on that rancid mattress. 'That man –'

'I know all about what he did, so don't start. I knew you'd been wronged, knew you were angry, but *that...*' Varvara shook her head. 'I'd never have believed you capable. Monster.'

Such deadly softness was worse than screaming. A slap in the face would have been better. If Varvara had beaten her it would have been better. 'Please...'

'Is that what Sokolov said before you bashed his head open? And there's more, isn't there? You killed Suetsky, too.'

A steely voice cut through the fog: *If you admit it, she'll turn you in. You can't trust her.* But silence, she knew, could be damning as speech. This one had already gone on too long.

'I thought so. And you laughed about it, about his widow and his child, you laughed!'

'I laughed with you.'

‘Yes but I didn’t kill him!’ Varvara’s hands were in her hair and Margarita realised with plunging horror that she was weeping. ‘I believed in you and your utopia and I sacrificed myself for you.’

She took something from her coat pocket and tossed it at Margarita’s feet, a booklet with a photo attached. Across the top, in bold print: **Replacement Card**. She knelt, afraid to touch it. ‘Oh no, Varushka, no.’

‘W-what kind of utopia will you build on blood, hmm? How long can it last?’

‘You said – you said –’ She picked it up. ‘You told me you didn’t take it. You promised.’

‘I lied. To protect you. You also lied to protect you. What’s so special about you, I wonder.’

‘That doctor – he owed you a favour...’

‘I guess ensuring he didn’t become a grandfather before he became a father-in-law wasn’t enough. Said if I didn’t register he’d have me arrested. It was either that or leave you to die and I, an idiot, believed it was worth it.’ She threw her arms over her head and shouted ‘*Zheltobiletnitsa!*’ with merriment bordering hysteria. *Yellow ticket holder*.

Margarita pressed the papers over her face, whispered, ‘How could you?’

‘How could *I*?’ Varvara doubled over, shrieking with laughter and clutching the bedrail for support. ‘I should have known you’d have the gall to be betrayed. I loved you more than anything in this world, dearer than flesh and blood. The ticket and everything that goes with it, that was nothing because it meant you’d live. I lost my home, my job, the things I shared with you. But you were safe.’

So much had been risked on her behalf and she, in her conceit, had taken what she knew for granted and failed to consider the rest. Of everyone, Varvara least deserved the consequences of such a gamble. ‘Varushka, I’m so sorry, I don’t want –’

‘I don’t care what you want.’ She snatched the yellow ticket back. ‘If I’d known what you’d do with your freedom I’d have – I’d have left you rotting there! A murderer. My God.’

That terrorism was not quite the same as murder didn’t seem worth mentioning, and rang a little false besides. Margarita was embarrassed by her tears; she had no right to them, a sentiment Varya obviously shared.

‘Don’t you snivel at me, do you hear? Don’t you dare. Poor, poor Margusha! Feel guilty, do you? Sorry you killed those men, sorry you made a dupe of me, broke my heart? Add me to your list of casualties – killer. I can’t stand the sight of you, get out. Killer! Get out!’

She brandished the yellow ticket like a staff, banishing her, and Margarita fled through a fug of beer and vomit. She gulped like a land bound fish so frigid air seared her lungs, desperate for the safety of the *izba*, trying to outrun her guilt.

People ran down sidewalks and across roads in the centre of town, dodging speeding carriages and packed trams and she skidded to a halt, trying to navigate the crush. Some carried pictures of Tsar Nicholas, others sang, some brandished newspapers. A man in a lopsided hat and equally lopsided grin grabbed her shoulders and kissed her cheeks three times. ‘War, little sister, we’re at war!’

She blinked. ‘What?’

‘Those yellow devils have declared war! Ambushed Port Arthur in the dead of night. Scoundrels. But we’ll show them, eh little sister?’

A second staggered over. ‘Aye, we’ll show them! We only need two good Russians for every three Jap monkeys. The war’ll be over in a month. *God save our noble Tsar...*’

The song spread down the street leaving Margarita marooned amidst the enthusiasm, tensed as if trapped on a speeding train, destination unknown. So Nicholas’ imperialist goading had reaped its inevitable result. How many of these men would wind up buried at

the other end of the continent? And for what? Port control in the Far East? Conquering the ‘yellow devils’?

None of it mattered.

Everything was wrong, turned traitor. She wanted nothing more than to retreat to the cottage, close her door, and hide from the changing world.

So she did.



It was easy to cut herself off; the cottage was largely empty that winter. Several Radaran *Essers*, including Vlad, Sergei, and Anatoly, shipped out for Port Arthur. Even *Loshad* harboured a strange ambition to be a battlefield nurse.

‘Our dear boys need caring for,’ she said, as if it were the simplest thing in the world.

Vlad nodded. ‘They launched a sneak attack, torpedoed our ships in port and killed our men while they slept!’

‘Have you been eating propaganda posters, Vlad? You’re spewing it everywhere.’

‘Hold your tongue. I’m a proud Russian and she’s under threat. It’s my duty to go! Not that I’d expect you to understand, *Myasnik*.’

That the hands of nationalism and patriotism were usually intertwined – a sketch possibility which she immediately discarded – seemed irrelevant. Those who felt their duties as Russians outweighed their duties as revolutionaries were not in the majority, but their absence crippled the movement. She watched them go with sorrow. It mattered not whether they made it back from Port Arthur; they were dead to her already.

Those who remained fought bitterly against western Russia’s war fever, drafting scathing editorials about the war’s true nature. They condemned Minister of Interior von

Plehve's call for a 'short, victorious war' on the grounds that any imperialist conflict costing innocent Russian lives could never be victorious. They criticised cooperation between England and Japan, and Germany's support of Russia, calling it a global capitalist chess game. They denounced the hostilities as a means of distracting from and subduing public discontent.

Empty, unavailing words which washed over her and settled on her like sediment. Margarita wanted no part of them or anything else.

Life was a dark desert, adrift in blackness thick and viscous. Even were there light to see by, all would be barren. Wasteland, endless, capable of producing nothing, sustaining nothing. She was paralysed. Even if she could move there was no way out.

Ambitions for the future were dangerous; all those she'd nursed had turned to nothing, ruined her life and the lives around her – Roman, Varya, Kira, Lara. Feelings were abstract shapes, edges and angles discernible but not their depths, textures, and hues. She spent whole hours humming the worker's *Marseillaise* and stroking her stomach, trapped in a memory.

Once she'd fallen into the hole she was too tired to climb back out.

Emotions were unmanageable, so she didn't feel them. Food was not appealing, so she didn't eat. Bathing consisted of an overwhelming series of intricate steps, and so she didn't bathe. Socialising involved too many variables, so she avoided people. The tortures of the punishment cell became a refuge, self-imposed.

'Marusya?' Katya's voice was muffled by the door and her own hesitance. 'Please let me in.' Margarita braced herself, watching the shadows of Katya's feet under the door, willing them away. 'Marusya, I'm here if you want me.' The shadow-feet shuffled and disappeared. Margarita exhaled.

She didn't want Katya who stank of blood and forest dirt.

Margarita wanted her mother, her old mother, who had baked pies with her, brushed and braided her hair by the fireside after a bath and then unravelled it to run her fingers through the crimped locks. The mother who believed a hug had healing properties. The mother who cradled her in her lap and whispered, 'You can tell me anything'. Before her mother had begun keeping secrets herself; when she had preached the supremacy of honesty and Margarita had believed it.

She wanted Varvara, who had proven herself dearer than her own flesh and blood and who she'd disappointed, who didn't want her.

She wanted Kira, who had been entirely dependent on her. Whom she had been entirely dependent upon in return. The only soft, warm consolation in an existence otherwise hard and cold, the only parcel of affection in a place where all other interactions were inherent threats.

The knock which finally came was loud and insistent, more the warning of a gendarme than the enquiry of a friend, but then Katya had never been gentle.

'Margarita, open up this instant or I shall break it down.' She banged harder, shadow-feet planted wide, unmoving. Pounding, pounding. 'Open up, I mean it!'

Each waited for the other to concede, but both were too mulish to do so. Scratches and clicks at the door – Katya was picking the lock.

Pushkin's question mark tail and Katya's dour face, both attempting to navigate the squalid room. Clearing up required impossible cognition and energy. She pulled her blanket up to hide the stained, sour nightdress she had worn for weeks.

Katya put a plate of *blini* on the bedside table. 'Eat them. Every last one.'

'Please, Katya, I can't...' Her voice sounded high and alien. The heavy, sweet smell of buckwheat combined with the ripe, briny stench of herring was revolting.

'I am not afraid to force-feed you.'

‘I won’t burden you. Just go away.’

‘And let you wallow? Absolutely not.’ She climbed over Margarita’s legs and plopped in the far corner of the bed. ‘Eat, or talk, but I won’t leave til you’ve done one or the other.’

Margarita lay in sulky silence, but Katya kept her place even when the *blini* went cold. Knowing her, when night fell she’d curl up on the end of the bed like Pushkin and resume her vigil the next day. It wouldn’t end until her demands were met. It was easier to get it over with. ‘Everything has fallen apart.’

Katya nodded, waited, then – ‘And? Do you mean the party? We’re still operating, it’s simply scaled back. The campaign against Plehve is still on track –’

‘How many times now has it failed? Four? Five? Azef is incompetent.’

‘But they’ll try again, and we may not be directly involved but –’

‘I don’t want to be involved. In that or anything else.’

‘I’ve never heard you talk like that before.’

‘Because before I was simpleton enough to think there was a purpose. Everything we did, the assassinations, the propaganda, and look at the whole country waving flags and shedding tears of glory unto the autocracy. What was the good of any of it?’

Katya did her best to offer reassurance, speaking of temporary setbacks and history and the future, but none of that was the trouble. Margarita sat up, concentrating on the words drawn them from a dark place she was frightened to probe. ‘I wanted Sokolov dead. Badly enough to defy the Central Committee and murder him myself. In some childish way I thought...I thought she’d come back.’

‘What?’

‘I had the gun to his head and it was like she was there, just beyond the trees. But then he was dead and she was still gone, and...what was the point?’

The steady rhythm of Pushkin's purrs filled the space as Katya considered this. 'Almost like you could substitute his life for hers.'

'Yes, yes that's it!'

'I understand but Marusya, you...you never even asked him where she was. I kept expecting you to. You talked so much about it while we were planning, then each time you had a chance you – it was like you become someone else.'

'No.' Margarita rested her chin on her knees and looked out the window. The white buds on the trees had centres pink as mouse noses. 'It was always me.'



The insistent summer sun in part restored a sense of stability. Margarita was neither happy nor well, but was up and interacting with the *Essers* who came to share news, cross-reference, retrieve, and deliver. She fed Lara's chickens and tended the little garden where she'd first met Fedya. Katya was kind and patient as she knew how, confused by Margarita's long silences and general malaise but steadfast nevertheless, for which Margarita was grateful.

She followed the war's progress, reading papers when she could and piecing the rest together from her comrades. Port Arthur was under siege, and had been since April; the two armies had battled last month at Yalu River bordering China and Korea where Russia was roundly defeated. Just a few weeks ago the battle of Nanshan, despite heavy Japanese casualties, had resulted in another Russian defeat and the loss of a valuable port.

According to Matvey, incompetent military leadership and insufficient infrastructure would doom Russia's efforts. 'The Trans-Siberian only extends to Irkutsk! We can't get food and supplies to the soldiers fast enough.' This seemed the consensus in the street, too, where

fewer comments about ‘whipping the yellow devils’ could be heard, and no more predictions of a swift end to the war. Yet it carried on, the mad train gathering momentum.

She was too tired to puzzle over how to slow it down. She had run herself to ground and needed time to recover.

Basking in the gentle sun and warm breeze, Margarita sat in the backyard sketching the foraging hens and using a feed sack for a table, lost in the striations of a feather when Katya called to her. ‘There’s...someone to see you.’

‘Really? Who?’ Her heart gave a wild thump. Varvara, here to apologize – no, she’d done nothing wrong – here to forgive? Same old selfish Margarita.

‘An old friend. Are you busy?’

Her hands trembled around her sketchpad. ‘No, not at all.’ She would get on her knees and beg Varya’s forgiveness, kiss her skirts. Prostrate herself, renounce anything. Their friendship was too important –

The porch door opened. Disappointment and disbelief were one mixed feeling so potent she couldn’t move as he descended the steps and approached, his shining shoes incongruous among clawed chicken feet and scattered feed.

‘I’ll just go finish...’ Katya, failing to invent a chore, scurried back inside.

Tall. Well-fed. Finely dressed in a grey linen suit. Warm desire plunged from her throat to the core of her, illuminating her from inside. She wondered what she still found so alluring. Perhaps just the memory. ‘Hello,’ she said.

‘Hello.’

‘I’d offer you a chair, but –’ She gestured to an upturned crate beside her. ‘You don’t mind, do you?’ Lazy, almost insolent confidence in every movement. Gentle curls he’d tried to subdue. Scanning the cottage and the yard and the forest beyond with that incurable

curiosity. Maybe he was a little heavier, a little lighter at the temples, but still *him*. ‘I can’t believe I’m seeing you,’ she said.

‘It’s certainly – unexpected. I saw Katya in town and suspected she may have knowledge of your whereabouts.’ Roman rolled his thumbs over and over each other, stealing glances like a shy boy. ‘You’re looking well.’ He did not sound convincing.

‘Ha! As well as I feel, probably.’

‘Was terrorism not all you hoped?’ No malice, no sarcasm. He seemed tired, a touch sad, and she wondered what road he’d travelled over the years to meet her here.

Having asked an honest question, he deserved an answer in kind. ‘I believed it to be straightforward. Turns out it isn’t. And how do you fare?’

He fiddled with his watch chain and observed the milling chickens, obviously uncomfortable. ‘Similarly.’

When the gulf had opened between them she’d presumed it was organic and irreparable. In fact she’d set to it with pick and shovel, pushed him away as much as outgrown him. She was sick of fighting him. ‘I think we’ve reached a point where we can talk honestly.’

His face turned hard. ‘I’m pleased you’ve said that.’

...did he know? She squeezed the feedbag in her lap and readied herself.

‘Margarita, I’m so sorry. I mishandled many things, or failed to express them properly. I loved you so much, and when you were arrested I nearly lost my mind.’

‘Is that madness why you never came to see me?’ She tried not to sound bitter though it hurt even now. ‘I waited, hoped for months you’d visit or at least send word. And you didn’t. Do you have any idea what that did to me?’

‘My behaviour was unforgivable. You deserved better. You were right to accuse me of cowardice, for I dreaded your judgment. And more than that, I felt such compunction having involved you in the work, exposed you to that risk.’

‘Risks I took, willingly.’

‘Nevertheless, I despised myself. What man could hold up his head? You persisted in asking to attend meetings...’ He ran a hand through his hair leaving oiled strands askew. ‘I wanted to protect you.’

‘I didn’t need protecting, I needed work and I resented that you kept me from it.’

He looked so dejected she almost wished she hadn’t spoken. ‘I know. Nothing was as precious to me as your mind. Nothing brought greater pain than being locked out of it, feeling you slipping away. We seemed always at cross-purposes,’ he said, nudging a hen away with his foot.

‘Because you wouldn’t do anything. Your heart wasn’t in it.’

‘My heart was in what we’d built together. When the *Essers* turned your head –’

‘No! You always do this. Roman, it was *my* idea. You oppose me using violence but a man’s never beaten or tortured you, taken your –’ *Careful*. ‘Your fight is intangible, like thunder. We are lightning. Revolution needs both. What movement ever succeeded without violence?’

‘That doesn’t mean I am bound to condone it.’

‘But if I don’t believe in reforming a broken system – and I don’t – then I must break that system, which isn’t done with words. You show people their present, we show them their potential.’

Even as she said it, the words sounded hollow.

‘You’re still talking as if you were on a soap box,’ he said. ‘I don’t want oratory, not from you. First you snub it as a disappointment, now you pitch slogans. Which is it?’

‘Maybe both, or neither, I – I don’t know.’ Once, she’d shared her every thought with him, her mind darting between ideas faster than her tongue could express them. Now her head felt full of quicksand and broken glass. ‘Something more than beautiful words must be done. I still believe that. Violence is almost a habit; in prison it consumed me, and afterward anything less felt suffocating.’ She smiled. ‘You wanted only to give me a soft nest, and it horrified me.’

‘I had no idea.’

She shrugged. ‘How could you? I couldn’t explain it because I couldn’t face it, and I didn’t think you’d understand. But you see, I’d spent so long fantasising about hurting them I convinced myself it was right.’

‘That’s...natural. And did you? Hurt them?’

‘Yes,’ she said, her gaze deep in the woods looming beyond the fence. ‘But that’s why my conviction’s faded.’

‘Did you...Suetsky...?’

He couldn’t say it. How disappointing.

‘Were you there?’

‘Of course. He’d hardly passed when that man Sheremetyev stepped into the street.’

Nearly everything elicited tears these days but she refused to allow them now; it felt disrespectful to cry over one man in front of another. ‘I was not sorry to see Suetsky die, but it meant sacrificing Kolya. I can’t forgive myself for that.’

Roman looked at her with that same softness she remembered from nights in flat 17 and shivered as if at a phantom. ‘You take such pride in your decisions being your own,’ he said. ‘Don’t you suppose Sheremetyev made his own choice?’

She nodded. ‘I’ve thought a lot about that. He wanted to martyr himself, I think. That was his choice. But I could have stopped it, chosen someone less valuable. Expendable.’ She

held out her palms to him. ‘But is any life *expendable*? That’s when uncertainty crept in, I couldn’t let my rage go and it worsened...after I killed my prison guard.’

For the first time she could tell him about the Litovsky, not to shame or shock him, only to confide in him. If the words hurt him, it was their content and not her delivery. If he turned her in, she was prepared to accept the consequences. She told him the truth, all she saw and heard and bore. Except one. She still couldn’t bring herself to reveal that last piece.

He displayed none of the horror or disbelief she’d anticipated, which was a relief. Perhaps it would have been better to have done this years ago. Would he have been so understanding, or had he changed? ‘It was barbaric,’ he said. ‘But violence isn’t the only solution.’

‘Perhaps. I hope not. Because what I did was not a targeted political action or retribution on behalf of the people, though I tried to present it as such. It was for me.’

As a girl in Zhorzhino she’d been late home and taken a shortcut over a neighbour’s wall. She’d felt a sting in her hand as she’d vaulted the stones, but paid it no heed until later when her mother stopped mid-rebuke to pull up her palm, bloody and swollen. The pain Margarita had dismissed as a scrape from the wall was in fact a thorn from some vicious plant.

She felt the same bewildered surprise now as she had in her mother’s kitchen. ‘If I can so abuse what little power I had, it doesn’t leave me with much hope. But –’ she met his eyes; he must understand. ‘Your way is still not enough for me.’

Roman rubbed his jaw. ‘If it’s any consolation, your sentiments are widely shared. Since war broke out *Trezubets* has collapsed.’

‘Yes, we lost nearly half of our men and a few of the women, too.’

‘They’ve been leaving for years, but Port Arthur was the final straw. Stepan’s working with the railway and Mikhail is at a factory in the capital. So you see, they lost faith in propaganda just like you.’

‘Don’t say it like that. As if I betrayed you.’

‘You didn’t even say goodbye.’

‘I couldn’t,’ she croaked. ‘I was scared, too.’

Roman took her hands and pressed them; they were warm, and a comfortable silence descended over the yard. A dozen lost opportunities danced between them and she felt neither happy nor sad, just tired and a little wistful. A warbler chirped a pretty cipher overhead, and for the first time in a long time she felt something akin to peace.

‘You have changed, Margarita, but not for worse.’

She couldn’t help chuckling. ‘I think you’ve changed, too.’

‘We could go away,’ he murmured, running his thumbs along her knuckles. ‘Leave Russia, together.’

‘Leave? What are you talking about?’

‘The revolution is further away than ever. We won’t live to see it, if it happens at all. Why not go? The whole world is open to us. We could marry, start over – Geneva, or Paris or London. A place with room to breathe. Treat this as a failed experiment.’

This morning she couldn’t have imagined being proposed to, least of all that Roman would be asking. She wondered... It would give her an anchor, provide her life with some direction rather than aimlessly drifting as she was now. Security. Travel, all those exotic places. His voice conjured bright lights and glassy cobblestones, wild music, dancing until dawn, and when they were good together there was nothing quite like it – the way he kissed her, the weight of his body, his compatibility with every facet of her soul. They had changed, grown. They could rebuild, and it could be beautiful.

But you can't dance until dawn when there are dishes to be washed. A staid, respectable household, tedious dinners, isolation. She had been there before, wife in fact if not in title, and while she could argue that this time would be different she didn't imagine a piece of paper and pair of rings would much alter the dynamic. They had both changed, but not enough.

Besides, there was a strict order to these things. Inevitably children followed love and marriage. He would expect things she couldn't provide.

Failed experiment.

Marriage, for Roman, was a retreat from his own inadequacy. He wanted to take up a mantle of respectability, write off revolution as a boyish game he'd lost. She was disillusioned and uncertain about the future, but nevertheless sure there was one.

'Roman...I can't. There's still a lot of work to do, and I want to do it. More than I want to be anybody's wife.'

He opened his mouth and for a horrible second she thought he was going to argue. 'I expected as much.' He smiled like it hurt. 'I might even have been disappointed if you'd said yes.'

She gave a strained laugh and hung her head. She wanted him, or some version of him, but she wanted it to be easy, too, and it wasn't. 'What a shame. You've come all this way only to leave empty handed.'

His eyebrows furrowed and he pressed her hands tighter. 'There's something else.'

PART THREE

CHAPTER XVIII*July – August 1904*

‘Excuse me, please, how do I get to the Vyborgsky District?’

The porter shielded his eyes from the mid-day sun and studied her face. An agent? ‘*Konyechna!* Couldn’t be simpler.’ She thanked him for the directions and moved on.

Vitebsky Station was nothing like the station in Radara. Pristine white walls, vaulted, cathedral-esque ceilings, and myriad windows, a museum for light and air. The bronze decorations glowed with sunshine and, hypnotised, Margarita watched flecks of dust swirl in the wake of rushing passengers. The marble and bronze staircase recalled Roman’s opulent foyer, and it amused her to think that his home was nothing more than a grand terminal.

With a little sigh she imagined how it might have felt to be mistress of all that lavishness. She’d never wanted a life of luxury, but she had wanted him once. When he’d turned away that afternoon at the *izba*, full of courteous condolences and fond wishes, she’d pulled him back, held him close. Shut her eyes when his arms came up around her. They’re held each other a long time, an apology, a wordless goodbye. The punctuation mark on a long, winding sentence. She’d been scared to let go, but she had. She’d had to.

With the exception of her prison term (and, having been locked away, it hardly counted) Margarita had never been to St. Petersburg, and novelty fizzed through her. Everything was enormous: roads, churches, fine homes. Even the station, newly refurbished, gleamed with a lustre unlike anything in Radara. The street was filled with pedestrians – a kaleidoscope of races and languages and costumes represented so she hardly felt in Russia at all. Carriages, trams driven by horses and even steam!

A kiosk of postcards capped her good mood. Various unfamiliar bridges and palaces advertised the capital's beauty, and amongst these one very familiar landmark whose thick tower met its walls at wide angles: the *Litovsky Zamok*. She picked it up, disbelieving. Who would print a prison on a postcard; moreover, who would mail such a thing? She imagined writing to Roman or Varya: 'Wish you were here, kiss – Margusha.' She set the card back and hastened away, hunting for a tram across the river.

The salty, sour smell of overworked bodies packed tight thickened the air. Margarita clutched her suitcase to her chest and attempted to shrink into herself to avoid swaying shoulders, indifferent to talk of the latest Russian failures at Wafangou and Port Arthur. White fear tunnelled her vision when the tram trundled down a familiar intersection: The House of Preliminary Detention lurked just past that corner. Excusing herself, she shuffled to the other side of the narrow car and craned her neck around the forest of arms, watching the steely blue Neva pass below.

A silver-stubbled man with an eye patch smiled over the high collar of his greatcoat. 'First time in the capital *devishka*?'

'Yes,' she said. 'Just trying to get a glimpse of it. What's that spire there?'

'That's the Peter and Paul Cathedral.'

'Where the Fortress is?'

'*Da*.'

'Oh.'

'And you can see the *Kresty* just over the other side.'

'What is that?'

'Another prison.'

She dropped her eyes. *Litovsky Zamok*. House of Preliminary Detention. *Schlisselburg*. Peter and Paul Fortress. *Kresty*. St. Petersburg was a city of prisons. It was reckless to have returned.

‘Are you alright, miss?’ He reached out, clasped her shoulder.

Tension seized her blood. ‘Don’t touch me!’ she hissed, squeezing her case tighter as if it would protect her.

‘Hey.’ A man on a crutch jabbed a menacing finger at her. ‘Show some respect, girlie. This man fought a war for you.’

‘Not for me,’ she snapped.

The older man moved his hand from Margarita’s shoulder to his companion’s. ‘It’s alright, Aliyev.’

She nodded to the patch the older man wore. ‘Is that how...?’

‘They jumped us in our beds at Port Arthur. I never quite wiped the sleep out of this eye.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

When her stop came she disembarked so quickly she nearly tumbled headfirst into the street. Over her shoulder she watched Aliyev on his crutch glare at her through the window and vowed not to speak to another soul until she reached the flat. She glanced at the scrap of paper in her fist, and hurried on.

As with everything else, the barracks and tenements of St. Petersburg were far larger than those in Radara, the edifices grime-blackened and the windows opaque, phlegm yellow. Boys with heads shaved against lice and the sweltering heat raced past, old women hunched under sacks of washing lingered on doorsteps to gossip; further on women drove milk carts under lines of clothes strung like pennants between long poles. To compare this with the grandeur of the city proper was impossible, its palaces and apartments delicate as a pastry in

pastels and bronze with an innumerable army of clear, shining windows – no. She'd grown wary of the outrage which simmered in her, and it could not distract her now. Focus must remain on what lay ahead.

The basement was a cool reprieve from the relentless sun, but would be an icebox in winter. She checked the scrap of paper one last time and, positive she was in the right place, took a deep breath and knocked three times.

Footsteps shuffled behind the door which opened just enough to fit a woman's face. She was faintly lined like badly pressed linen and the hair peeping from under her headscarf had developed a steely glint, but the long, narrow nose and bright eyes were just as Margarita remembered.

'Yes?' She was polite but obviously suspicious of the stranger at her door.

Margarita's body seemed to have evaporated. No part of her existed except her queerly beating heart. 'Elena Sergeyevna...it's me...' she whispered.

Elena's face scrunched up as she looked her over, and then – her mouth fell into a long *o* and her eyebrows shot to her hairline. '*Da nu!*' she wheezed, opening the door and clasping the frame. 'It can't be – little Zinusha?'

Margarita sniffled like a child and Elena collapsed against her, somewhere between relief and a swoon.

*

'I can hardly bring myself to say it,' he said, eyes on his knees. 'I've let you down so many times already...'

His reticence weighed on her with the dread of an imminent axe blow and she touched her neck to ensure it was whole. 'Whatever it is, just tell me.'

'You asked me, years ago, to find your mother.'

And she knew, right then, what he'd come to say, felt it in her shoulders and the backs of her eyes. She listened, barely, to the epic tale of his efforts on her behalf, even travelling himself to Zhorzhino where Klavdya's neighbours told him everything. March, 1901. Influenza.

A breeze rustled the branches and cooled trails of tears she hadn't noticed and didn't trouble to wipe away. 'How long have you known?' she asked.

'A few weeks. I visited Zhorzhino at the end of May and been looking for you ever since. You might take some comfort in knowing you're well-hidden.'

She didn't. Superstition plied hot pincers to her. In February 1901, locked in a prison cell with a pack of guards and midwives, Margarita had screamed '*Pashel tuy, Mama*' through labour pains and she had meant it, hated her mother then more than ever, cursed her, and then her mother died and her daughter disappeared. Punishment for her disrespect.

All she had wanted was to unpick her knotted feelings, to unburden herself, apologise, understand. She wanted to be free. Grief would only add another impenetrable layer.

'Ritochka, I'm so sorry.'

'That's both of them. Mother and Papa. That's all the family I had, I...'

'Ah.' Roman reached into the inner pocket of his jacket. 'That isn't quite true.'

*

Elena Dyogtina shook her head over and over. 'Unbelievable. Unbelievable.' She ushered Margarita to the one nice chair which, despite its many patches, still leaked stuffing. She submitted to being fussed over, accepting tea and gingerbread, letting Elena remove her shoes and kiss her hands. 'I never thought I would see you again my Zinushka. But I always hoped. And look how you've grown! A woman now – too thin, though, much too thin. Let

me get you something. You'll stay here of course, there's plenty of room.' She paused, dropping Margarita's shoes by the door. 'Did you...go to Zhorzhino?'

Her mother's death felt tangible. 'No,' she said. 'A friend helped me – it's a long story. I wanted to come home...to what was left of it. There's so much chaos, Elena, so much uncertainty. I need peace.'

'We all want peace, only life conspires to keep it from us.'

'And how are you, Elena? Where is Boris Efimovich?'

Elena sighed. 'Off to the wars. Playing at being a young man.' Boris always had been less ardent in his ideals than Elena was in hers. Pragmatic was the word for him, although such flexibility was not in the nature of either of the women now thinking of him. 'Each day I read the papers and...the losses are so heavy in the East...'

'It will be over soon, this war,' said Margarita. 'It can't keep on like this, we've suffered too many losses. He'll be home before you know it.'

'I hope you're right. I volunteer a good deal with the Red Cross, knitting and stitching, which does me good. You might find it benefits you, too. It's as good a place as any to start looking for your peace. You always were a good seamstress.'

'I was, wasn't I? Perhaps that's my trouble, I've drifted too far from my roots.'

Elena settled on the arm of the chair, enfolding Margarita in loving arms. 'What's happened?'

It was difficult to answer, either honestly or concisely. 'I have come a long way, much further than the eighteen *versts* between here and Radara.'

'Mm, you always had a fiery temperament. You threw yourself into everything, spared yourself no emotion. Revolution doesn't suit half-hearted folks.'

Margarita bristled. 'How did you...?'

'How could I not?'

‘I’m an *Esser*, Elena.’

‘Yes, they’re popular with youths here, too. And we have Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, all sorts. You see the capital is rife with radicals.’

‘And which do you belong to?’

‘Oh, I’m happy to stay on the fringes of all that. I’m a teacher, and on Sundays I run classes for workers, wounded soldiers, and such.’

‘Propaganda?’

Elena shook her head. ‘Consciousness-raising. Party lines don’t interest me. More tea?’

Margarita closed her eyes and enjoyed the domestic racket from the kitchen. Truthfully Elena’s lodgings – Margarita’s lodgings, now – were nicer than expected. Furniture was sparse but sturdy, and obviously Elena didn’t let poverty stand in the way of cleanliness. Even a *krasniy ugol’* though the images, she could tell, were not saints or deities.

Checking Elena was still occupied, she moved closer to investigate. Photographs hung in place of ikons: Elena’s son Yuliy, dead in the famine of ’91 at age four; six men in uniforms complete with caps and swords, among whom she recognized Boris Efimovich, older and paunchier than the others but prouder too; and...herself – four years old, perhaps five – in her mother’s arms.

It was taken before her father died; even if Margarita’s age didn’t confirm it, her mother looked so happy, so bright. She couldn’t remember her mother smiling like that. And her hair, dark and bushy as her own, had never been so intricately pinned. Margarita found herself looking at a stranger, one she wanted to know.

One happy moment preserved in mockery of all those missed opportunities and all that bitterness.

Why didn't you – why didn't you – the opening salvo of a hundred demands. Was it her mother she was angry with, or herself?

A hand at her shoulder made her flinch. Elena stroked the photo, lip trembling. 'I suppose you know...'

Margarita nodded. 'Were you – with her?'

'I was.'

'Did she... It wasn't – painful or – or –'

'*Nyet, nyet*. She wasn't conscious.'

Somehow she was back in the chair, her mother's photo in her lap with the story trickling around her drop by drop. In the winter of 1896 her mother had been stricken with influenza. It had done something to her, changed her. Not just her body. Made her forgetful. Perpetually tired. Her personality seemed to change. 'A stranger in the house, on a hair trigger. The slightest thing might set her off and we lived on edge for she was terrible in a temper.'

'She was always like that.' Contrition was instant; how could she speak so about her mother, now? Yet...yet...death did not make it less true. And Margarita had adopted that temper, absorbed it, incorporated it into herself.

'Of course you saw it that way, but this was different.' Elena wiped her eyes. 'I can't explain it. She'd say or do terrible things and then – then when you confronted her later she'd have no recollection of it. *I could never do such a thing!* she'd say. Well, she recovered, mostly but she was never the same. Then in 1901 she fell ill again. She'd run herself down teaching with her fragile health.'

'And you didn't stop her? Did you even get a doctor, do *anything* for her?'

'What could we do? She insisted she didn't need doctors, and couldn't remember their instructions regardless. Besides, that old charlatan didn't know his ear from his elbow.'

She'd have fits, she'd – lose herself. Then the fever got worse.' She blew her nose on her apron.

Margarita pictured her mother possessed, a cursed fairy-tale character; fear left no room for sympathy with Elena, or even sorrow for herself.

'She was always tired, always sleeping, but she never got any better. She forgot...forgot where and when she was. Kept asking after you. Seemed to think you'd just come back from school and she was frantic with worry.'

'She was?'

'Of course!' As if it should have been obvious. 'After your father's death she only wanted a secure future for you, it was all she talked about. That's why she sent you to school, to give you some weapon against the world.'

'Oh, and I suppose that's why she tried to marry me off to the butcher, too?'

'Well...yes. It was madness, of course, but she'd tried everything else. Even offered to marry him instead, although he refused, the old lecher.'

Everything was sideways and backwards. If she was expected to feel forgiveness, she did not. Motives did not change actions. Yet why did she feel so buoyed up? Her mother had still tried to sell her off; why should knowing that she had tried to sell herself first, to spare Margarita, make any difference? But somewhere deep down, in the smallest of ways, it did. 'She never told me.'

'I think she always regretted that, particularly at the end.'

'Why the hell didn't you contact me?' Her fists clenched around the frame. 'I should have been with her.'

Elena's pitying look was layered with contempt. 'Would you have come, even if you'd known?'

A snap, deep in her chest, of whatever propped her up, because no, she wouldn't have come. Not even because she had been locked in the House of Detention over the weeks her mother suffered. No. She wouldn't have come even if she'd been free. She'd have been glad. Ashamed of her relief, but relieved all the same – just like she was now.

Elena pulled Margarita's head to her chest to muffle her crying, fighting to finish the story through tears of her own. 'Finally one day she fell asleep – lost consciousness. We stayed with her, always, she was my dearest friend and I c-couldn't leave her.' Margarita thought of Varvara and sobbed harder. 'When the doctor came I sat by her feet, I – g-grasped her ankle like I thought I could keep her... She held on so long...kept breathing even when we thought it was over. Stubborn as a mule, as always. Then...she stopped.'

Tears she couldn't justify fell much as she tried to hold them back, gulping them down, bailing herself out of the flood. Hypocrite, to mourn the person she'd spent most of her life rejecting. But animosity didn't mean her mother deserved so much unnecessary suffering. Unmitigated love and blistering hate lived together, not side by side or two halves of one whole, but as one thing, the way taffeta was teal in one light and violet in another.

'I was a terrible daughter.'

'Not terrible, my love. But submission was never in your nature, or hers. It was inevitable you'd clash.'

'I made it worse.'

'Neither of you helped each other. It can't be changed now.'

'But I could have been better.'

'Could have, but would you? Lamenting the past is a waste of time.'

Margarita sat up and rubbed her eyes with tight fists. 'I could have stayed with her, taken care of her. I couldn't have run away if it wasn't for you.'

‘Don’t you fault me for your feelings. I don’t regret what I did. If you had it all to do over again would you marry the butcher, stay in Zhorzino? She’d still have died.’

Countless times she’d pictured her mother pining at the kitchen table for the daughter she’d driven away, but this time it didn’t please her at all. ‘She must have hated me for leaving.’

‘Never. She carried a lot of guilt, too, although she was too proud to share her burden. But I know she missed you every day.’

‘I treated her dreadfully.’

‘Perhaps.’ Elena pulled her in again and rocked her. Back and forth. Back and forth. ‘Don’t dwell. It’s not as if a daughter never disagreed with her mother before you.’

Except those mothers and daughters could mend their schism, come to understand each other. Margarita was too late. ‘I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.’

‘For what?’

‘Killing her.’

‘Don’t be dramatic. There’s no sense tearing yourself up like this.’

‘Please forgive me.’

‘I’ve nothing to forgive. I’m an old hand at grief, Zinushka. You’ll always carry this hurt, and nothing I say can take it away. Some days it will chain you up, drag you down, crush you, but you’ll come through them. One day the weight will become so familiar you won’t even notice it. Come, lay down a while. There now.’



She spent a long night on the stoop, as she had often since arriving at Elena’s. Light never faded from St. Petersburg’s sky this time of year; evening became dawn became

morning. Cool winds blew off the Neva, wafting with it more pungent smells of humanity and industry.

Her head was full of her mother, all the time, even when she was thinking on something else. A feeling, more than a thought, a pressure around her like a cocoon. Shielding, suffocating. Separating her from everything around her.

Why couldn't she simply be sad? A simple, unadorned sickness of heart, generic and soon managed – not bitter and cheated and guilty. Everything had been so poisonous between them surely the loss shouldn't pain her. Except it did. It nagged at her, always, and that nagging infuriated and exasperated her. Which disappointed her, embarrassed her. Reminded her of her failure.

Now she missed her mother, whom she hadn't missed for ten years. Or...perhaps she had and hadn't realized. Regardless, it wasn't really her mother she missed but some idealized memory of her, no different to the tenderness she still felt for a Roman who had never existed. Everyone faded, love-bleached, their forms altered by the brightness of memory.

This was not her grief to feel. She had forfeited it long ago and had no right to claim it.

'I thought you might be out here.' Elena handed her a thick slice of bread and descended the steps. 'Come on then, if you're coming.'

Later, later, she would mourn. For now, there was work to be done.

No part of Elena's day was left unoccupied. When not taking in sewing or extra washing, she was knitting every conceivable garment to send East. 'With the state of the trains I'll be lucky if any of this arrives before winter.' She wrote letters to Boris and helped other, less literate women compose their own. Sunday afternoons she spent teaching.

Most days she visited the Assembly of Russian Factory and Mill Workers of St. Petersburg at the Vyborgsky Department down the street. Representatives from every revolutionary, working-class, and community group worked, learned, and debated together, a social organization rather than socialist. It was there they heard that Plehve, Minister of the Interior, had been assassinated.

The celebratory mood in the Assembly was a microcosm of the joy in the street. Plehve had been the most hated man in the Empire, especially among the workers' organisations. He'd supported them so long as their demands remained economic; the moment they turned political, he crushed them.

'Don't forget that he got us into this war,' said one young man, his flush of delight masked by a layer of muck.

'Or that he took away the peasant's governing bodies when he repressed the *zemstvo*. Is it any wonder they keep revolting? We ought to do the same,' added a surly young woman, picking her teeth with her nails.

'Nor that he supported the pogroms, and did nothing in response to the atrocity at Kishinev,' added a second man, older than the first.

Pinhas Rutenberg nodded his square head. Even when his eyes smiled behind his spectacles, his mouth drooped as though weighted by the gravity of his thoughts. An *Essex* of some renown, his position as workshop manager at the Putilov plant, St. Petersburg's heart of mechanical engineering, and his friendship with Father Gapon, founder of the Society, lent him an aura of celebrity. Rutenberg lifted his glass. 'A toast to Kishinev.'

The others followed suit, even Margarita, despite her reluctance to be counted among the celebrants over Plehve's coffin. Listening to his litany of sins against the poor, the progressives, and the Jews, it was hard to begrudge their relief at the expense of the Minister's life. Nevertheless, it sat ill with her all the same.

‘Did it need to be a death sentence?’ she asked Rutenberg, when the others had dispersed.

‘What other means have we? Russia is not like the Western powers with their democracies; now there’s a Romanov heir, we may never be. We haven’t so much as a free press. The Russian citizen has little recourse to his grievances besides bloodshed.’

‘I’m not sure that’s true,’ she said. ‘There *must* be other ways.’

‘I wouldn’t have expected such leniency from the architect of Suetsky’s assassination.’

‘Architect and executioner. So you see, I speak with some authority. There’s too much death in the world. I want to try a different track.’

Rutenberg clinked his glass against hers. ‘I respect your idealism, but I’m afraid it isn’t practical.’

Perhaps Rutenberg was right, perhaps the only efficient means of change in Russia was the bullet. But that didn’t mean others – slower, perhaps, and more difficult – were not viable.

The Assembly comprised half a dozen branches where thousands of members came together every evening to run libraries, tea rooms, co-operatives, and study circles for anything from math to gymnastics. And every Wednesday and Sunday lectures were followed by dances and socials.

In such an environment, the toil of building change from the very bottom didn’t feel impossible, only barely beyond their sights. Reach a little farther, you’d grasp it.

Once, Father Gapon himself appeared at the Vyborgsky branch. He spoke at length about the church’s role in workers’ efforts to better their lives and was met with resounding applause.

‘Is religion truly the answer, Father?’ Margarita asked, hardly troubling to introduce herself. ‘Take your brother in Christ, Father John. He tried to call upon the compassionate Christians of Kishinev to defend their Jewish brethren, then backed down and accused the Jews of instigating the massacre themselves!’

‘Zinushka!’ Elena turned to Gapon. ‘Father, I do apologise, the child has no manners.’

Gapon inclined his head to Margarita. ‘You are right, Father John did not make a respectable figure in that instance but we are not all, if you’ll pardon the expression, cut from the same cloth.’

Something in his tender spirituality reminded her of Kolya, made her want to give him the benefit of the doubt. ‘You, at least, have made a real difference for the working people of St. Petersburg.’

‘It has been a tremendous help to me,’ Elena said. ‘Being apart from my Boris pains me less when I know I’m needed here.’

Gapon tilted his head. ‘Where is he?’

‘East.’

‘Ah, this hateful war.’

‘But you’ve given us a respite. Dancing, tea parties, education.’

‘Though it seems a strange thing for a priest to run,’ Margarita added.

‘Ah,’ he smiled, ‘that is precisely what I should expect members of the church to do. You cannot deny that the life of our workmen is terrible: they have no joy, and therefore they take to drink. Let us give them some healthy amusement if we want to make them sober and moral. And we must also try to better their material conditions if we are to help them to a better life.’

‘The Church helps those who help themselves,’ said Elena.

Margarita looked across the full hall. ‘It seems to do more for them than guns and bombs.’

‘You refer to poor Plehve,’ said Gapon. ‘I am very much of two minds on that issue. On the one hand, he’d succeeded for twenty years in repressing every symptom of free life in the Russian people, and in punishing those who would have given our country liberty; yet I cannot help respecting his strong will and energy, and the intelligence with which he was endowed.’

‘Intelligent, perhaps, but his repressions only served to strengthen the revolutionary will which killed him in the end.’

‘Yes, though it does not appear likely to bring any change in government policy. We must wait and see.’

A woman appeared at his shoulder, petite and dark-haired with the serious, ethereal face of a choirboy. Margarita stood straighter, lifted her chin; eight years her senior, Vera Karelina was the greatest champion of workers, women workers especially, in all of St. Petersburg. She’d joined the earliest workers’ groups in 1890 and became a Social Democrat not long after. No Assembly member worked harder or was more ubiquitous – not even Gapon. ‘Father,’ she said, ‘they’re asking for you in the study circle.’

The moment he was out of earshot Elena exploded. ‘Zinaida, honestly. Differences of opinion are no excuse for rudeness.’

Vera chortled, folding her arms. ‘What’s this? Certainly Zina isn’t causing a disruption?’

‘I’m not! I only asked a question, and Father Georgy didn’t mind. I just need to determine if we can trust him.’

Elena slapped her forehead. ‘*Still* you dwell on this.’

From the moment Margarita discovered that Father Gapon worked as a chaplain in the Central Prison, her faith in him and his movement was shaken. Under no circumstances could prison employees be trusted. If a man worked hand in glove with tsarist prisons, what other institutions would he associate with?

Long fed up with these theories, Elena stomped off, hands in the air. 'It frustrates her hearing doubts cast over the man who's given her so much,' said Margarita. 'I understand. But how can she trust a man who works in the prisons? How can anyone?'

Vera's thoughtful face was very still. At last she folded her hands in front of her and, ever so calmly, asked: 'Were you detained, Zina?'

'Yes,' Margarita said. 'For almost two years.'

'I was as well. Briefly in Ukraine, and here in the House of Detention –'

'I was in the House of Detention!'

Vera clasped Margarita's shoulder, the corners of her lips lifting slightly. 'I talked a great deal to the chaplains at my prisons, Zina, not because I wanted spiritual consolation – though they offered it. I wanted company. Kindness. Sanity. Those things, as you know, are in short supply in a cell, and sometimes the darkest places draw those looking to bring light. I had my doubts too, at first. Whatever you might think of Gapon, or how he began the Assembly, don't forget to look at its impact on people like your Elena who have so little else.'

Margarita gave a quiet 'Humph,' thinking Vera preached nothing so novel as the notion of ends and means, and she was frankly sick of that doctrine.

Little could sway Vera when she got going, scepticism least of all. 'I understand your anger, Zinaida. I've felt it myself, and been ruled by it. But that is just so much self-indulgence. You must harness it. If rage burns inside you, let it nourish you instead of consume you. It's so often viewed as a destructive force, particularly for a woman, but that's

all wrong. It's creation! The first step to real change. You, girl, are a great engine, carrying this change into the future, but not if you combust in the process.'

She couldn't remember being speechless before, but then no one, not even Katya or Roman, had ever reached her core with such speed or precision. 'That's what I want,' she said, feeling the words wholly inadequate.

Vera went on smiling that placid, mystifying smile. 'There's work for you here.'

Like a wildfire fed by summer's heat, the Assembly spread through St. Petersburg with baffling speed and intensity. Word spread from worker to worker, across industries and districts, and in August Gapon organised a gathering at the Pavlov Hall – one of the most fashionable assembly rooms in the capital – for the workers, their wives, and their children. Thousands came. Breathless, Margarita held Elena's hand and watched them stream into the glittering space. Her experiences with community action had been surreptitious affairs, small groups in locked rooms talking in abstracts. This was incomparably better.

Speeches addressing the work of the Assembly to defend workers' rights and elevate them morally and spiritually were delivered to the packed hall. Afterward, they were invited to review the Assembly ledgers, an act of transparency Margarita particularly admired. She recognized the names of many prominent progressives, and a curious number of anonymous donations. Embarrassed conservatives? Nervous liberals? Who else would want their contribution unrecorded? Unless it was someone Gapon didn't want named...

Flautists and singers mounted the stage as twilight set in, and the evening ended with hours of dancing. Were there dead parents, lost children, estranged lovers? Was there war, poverty, starvation, and prison behind the gaily chirping woodwinds and shuffling, stomping feet? Gapon said it was the Church's duty to alleviate the workers' grinding misery. Evidently, he was a man of his word.

‘Zina! Zina!’ Vera waved to her through the crowd. ‘Oh Zina I’ve such wonderful news. Remember how reluctant the women were to have their men attending the Assembly since they’re needed at home?’

‘Yes, I remember Gapon was worried their anger would distract the men.’

If Vera picked up on her sneering tone, she didn’t show it. ‘Well he’s listened to their grievances and agreed to give the working women one day a week for meetings, just for them, devoted to their concerns.’

‘Oooh, one day! Given how little work they do, that seems *more* than fair.’

‘I knew you’d say that,’ Vera laughed. ‘That’s why I want you to help me run it.’

‘What, me? But —’ Vera was so principled, Margarita couldn’t disappoint her by confessing that she’d come to St. Petersburg seeking an escape from active work. ‘I don’t have experience with that sort of thing, besides watching Elena. I’d be no use to you, or to them.’

‘Do you know what these women need more than education? They need confidence. They need to know that they deserve to speak, and to be heard. They need to quash that voice inside them which fears ridicule and doubts their merits. They need to know that they have a place in this movement as much as their men. It’s not socialism without women. Do you agree?’

‘I – of course. That’s why I got involved in the beginning.’

‘Then you’re of perfectly good use to a great number of women. If just a fraction of your temperament rubs off on them, we’ll have made great strides.’

‘You know I’m an *Esser*, Vera Markovna,’ she said carefully. ‘If you’re starting a Bolshevik propaganda circle, I’m not the one you want.’

‘All the better! Cross-party cooperation is what we need. Help these women see the options open to them once they embrace their power. I don’t intend to convert anyone to

Bolshevism, as I'm not one myself. It's shameful how little the party concerns itself with the fate of working women, they've almost no interest in their liberation. The Assembly may not champion equal pay, or even let us on the governing board, but at least they let us participate! Now, any more excuses? Good. Meet me here tomorrow afternoon and we'll get started.'

The night passed in a haze, the pleasure of music and dancing unmatched by the buzz of her own hope. Maybe the simple truth was that she had strayed too far from her initial goals. Community, empowerment, those were the things which had first attracted her to socialism. The promise of a better world for all workers and particularly for women whose voices could finally be amplified. Her own voice, brash and brazen as it might be. If she returned to that goal, she thought, everything else must fall into place.

'Well I'm glad to hear it,' said Elena as they made their way home. 'It's about time you were doing something.'

'What do you mean? I'm like a whirling dervish following you around!'

'Something to occupy your thoughts, not just fill the time. It'll do you good, take your mind off things. And you know what?' She looped Margarita's arm with hers, patting her hand and turning her face to the star-speckled sky. 'Your mother would be so proud.'

'She would?'

'Oh, yes! Education was terribly important to her. Hence why she became a teacher, and sent you to school.'

'I wouldn't describe it as a model of learning, although it was good practice for prison.'

'She thought she was giving you an advantage. I'd say she did, but as with any advantage there was a cost.'

Because she knew the answer, knew about their money troubles and her mother's struggle to keep them afloat, she didn't voice the thought which plagued her: *why didn't she want me?* Instead, she asked: 'Was Mother a socialist?'

Elena slowly turned the key, thinking. 'Perhaps not in the precise, defined way you lot are today. But our ideals were very much in sympathy. That's why I say she'd be proud. You're so like her at her best, you know, that when I'm with you I find I miss her that much less.'

Margarita bowed her head and, having no adequate response, didn't offer one. Such touching sentiments failed to consider how like her mother she was at her worst. Bad, good. One must outweigh the other, innately or by choice. Whichever she was –

Elena grabbed her arm. 'Do you hear that?' They stopped outside the flat with heads tilted toward the door, toward the sounds of shuffling, thumps, and clatters.

Margarita pointed to the slash of light beneath the door and they looked at one another in the dim hallway, momentarily paralysed. For the first time since leaving Radara, she wished she had her Browning. Moving in front of Elena, she turned the handle. Nudged the door open.

Lamps lit; remnants of food on the table. Otherwise, just as they'd left it. An unusual robbery, if that's what it was.

Noise from the bedroom.

She gestured to Elena and mouthed, 'Stay here,' tiptoeing to the sideboard and picking up the badly tarnished candlestick, flexing her fingers to stabilise her grip. With her free hand she reached for the bedroom door, took a deep breath, and pushed it open slowly, slowly, slowly.

At first, in his billowing blouse and high, soft leather boots, she mistook the man on the bed for a peasant. But the putrid shade of khaki, the peaked cap (not to mention the rifle) marked him as a soldier. His left sleeve, empty below the elbow, was pinned to his shoulder.

He turned and they both shouted – Margarita in recognition, he in alarm. ‘Who the hell are you? Oh, don’t tell me: another of my wife’s strays. Well clear out, some other kind-hearted soul will have to shelter you. Go on, out!’

Elena rushed in wielding a heavy pot overhead, war cry on her lips. She stopped. The pot hit the floor with a clang and she collapsed, wrapping her arms around her husband’s legs. ‘Boris, Boris!’ she sobbed, over and over, rapid prayers of thanks and protection blurred into a soothing hum. He slipped to the floor beside her, sniffing into her headscarf, and Margarita wordlessly backed out of the room.

‘*Spasiba*, Zinaida,’ said Boris, taking a glass of tea and smiling up at her through a scraggly greying beard. ‘What a miracle you’ve found us again.’

‘And a miracle you’ve come home, uncle! We hear of so many terrible losses in Manchuria...yet, here you are.’

He gestured to his empty sleeve. ‘Most of me, at least.’ Elena rested her head on his shoulder. Clutched his amputated arm as if she’d never let it go.

Margarita joined them at the table. ‘Is it as bad as they say?’

‘Worse,’ he replied. ‘If it were only a matter of being whipped by the *Japushki*, we’d be embarrassed enough. But we’re sabotaged by our own side.’

‘Sabotaged?’ cried Elena.

‘From the top down, by incompetence. Our officers gamble and drink like fishes. I heard they were carousing at a ball while our men were ambushed at Port Arthur!’ Margarita

recalled the grizzled man with the eye patch and shuddered. 'How can the men take orders from such scoundrels?'

Elena spat over her shoulder. '*Otvartitel'nii*. Submitting to their basest impulses while men like you give their bodies to the cause!'

Boris raised her hand, kissed her palm. Patted it. 'Hush now, mother.'

Margarita averted her eyes from their tender display and waited a decent interval before speaking again. 'What happened to your boots, uncle?' Slumped by the stove, worn thin in the toes and mostly split at the soles, they were caked inside and out with mud.

Boris looked at his filthy feet soaking in Elena's washtub, wiggling his toes so they squeaked against the metal. 'Listen child, it isn't only our officers who are incompetent, it's our entire command structure. Or, lack of one. We don't get the provisions we need. Look at the state of my uniform.'

'Uniform!' Elena tutted, brushing and tugging at his tunic. 'Hardly the word for it.'

'We march all day in boots poor to begin with. You might as well go barefoot.'

Elena blinked back tears. 'Before bed you must let me wrap them with burdock.'

'Nonsense,' he said. 'They need to breathe.' He leaned back and closed his eyes. 'The quiet in this city is marvellous. Nothing has ever sounded so beautiful.'

Margarita and Elena looked at one another. Centre of the industrial boom and hub of war production, the capital was anything but quiet even on such a summer night.

'It was never like this fighting the Turks or the Chinese,' he said, eyes still closed and voice heavy. 'We dig trenches until our arms are numb to defend positions we abandon within a few days. Everything is reinforced with barbed wire. We're more like prisoners than soldiers. Machine guns don't need cranking anymore, and by God their racket never stops. I hear it still.'

Boris extracted a cigarette from his pocket which Elena lit for him. His lips trembled around it. 'We were slaughtered at Wafangou. Thousands of men piled like fortifying logs, and for what? We didn't relieve Port Arthur. Hell, we couldn't even operate our guns!

'Reinforcements only arrived once we'd begun falling back, by then the Japs had nearly caught us. The rain was blinding,' he sobbed, 'I tried to help this lad, just a boy, he looked like our Yuliy. He'd been shot, I only wanted to help. I called for a medic, waved my arm and –'

Boris struggled to resume his dropped narrative. Neither woman dared move lest it disturb him. 'I laid there a lifetime, I couldn't hear but I felt myself screaming and screaming, mud in my eyes and my mouth, mud and blood, the boy's or mine I didn't know.' He took several deep, gurgling breaths, as if he still drowned. 'Finally someone took me away over their shoulders and the battlefield scrolled by, upside down, all those dead men, clowns grinning up at me with their red painted faces. What for, Elena? What for?'

'Enough, enough.' Elena draped his arm around her neck and lifted him. She was dry-eyed but so pale she must surely crumble under her husband's weight. Somehow she lugged him to the bedroom, re-emerging for a moment to retrieve a bottle of cheap vodka and Boris' untouched tea.

Margarita doubled over in her chair and screwed her eyes closed tightly as she could. How much pain could one nation bear before it broke?

CHAPTER XIX

August 1904 – January 1905

‘Well, yes, I do want to express myself.’ She must have been mid-forties, leather-skinned and square-jawed. ‘But then I think so many people will be watching me, and what if someone laughs at me? I grow cold with terror at the thought. And so you sit in silence while your heart is seething.’

Until that moment, Margarita still doubted Vera’s venture, or more accurately her own role in it. Until that moment, she hadn’t entirely understood. Now she looked at the cluster of women in braids and headscarves eyeing one another askance, calloused hands folded or buried under threadbare aprons, and knew. Her role was here.

Vera’s placid voice filled the room, arms wide to embrace it. ‘The majority of workers hold the view that politics isn’t a woman’s business. Her business in the factory is at the machine; at home, the children, nappies, the pots and pans. When I first joined the Assembly, there wasn’t a single mention of the woman worker, as if she was non-existent, like some sort of appendage, despite the fact that the workers in several factories are exclusively women.

‘But I see you. I see you toil over the textiles donned across the Empire. I see you working as seamstresses, waitresses, midwives, you the workforce they dare call “unskilled”. I see your labours of love for your families, resumed at the end of every gruelling shift. I see you raising the next generation, in and of itself the noblest undertaking. I see you. Now the Assembly sees you. Soon all of Russia will see you, the great, silent builders of our country, silent no longer.’

Applause crackled like lightning through the room, some women wiping their eyes with apron corners, whispering and murmuring with the first evidence of enthusiasm they'd shown all evening. Vera turned to Margarita, who had no desire to follow a speech such as that.

She'd do it for Varya.

'I didn't need to see you; I was you. I worked as a seamstress for six years, eking out what little I could serving women who didn't so much as look at me. Like I was nothing. Before socialism, that's how I thought it would always be. You work tirelessly, every day, from the moment you open your eyes in the morning till you close them again at night. Your toil at home is constant, no breaks and no quitting time, and it is entirely discounted. Like it's nothing.

'But you, women of St. Petersburg, are *everything*. The lowest rung on the ladder is the position of greatest power; without you, the Empire has nothing to rest upon. What influence you have, without even realising! Ladies! Seize hold of your power. They may laugh and ask "What can a woman do?" – because they know what a woman can do, and they fear it. We needn't be afraid. We have only to work together.'

The applause was more reserved this time, but the murmurs louder.

After that the women were more comfortable expressing their anxieties, their anger over the war, their fear for their men in the East and at home. 'If the husband is arrested, not only he but the whole family will perish!' one woman in a yellow kerchief shouted.

'And is that right?' Margarita answered. 'My uncle has given an arm for his country, yet his factory refuses to take him back or give us any assistance. Is that justice?'

Membership bloomed thereafter thanks to Vera's tireless recruitment, although it soon drew ire from loftier quarters. 'Bourgeois feminists,' hissed Vera. Their tailored dresses

and high-piled hats against pristine, scrubbed skin highlighted the sorry state of the working women. 'If they're upset, we must be doing something right.'

One lady wrung her parasol as if it were Vera's neck. 'Can't you see your emphasis on economics detracts from the true cause of women's suffrage?'

'Socialism isn't about enfranchising fifty-percent of the population,' said Margarita, 'but emancipating ninety-nine.'

At home, Elena was busier than ever. The focus of her life had shifted to supporting veterans: teaching their classes and organizing soup kitchens, bringing Boris with her everywhere in the hopes of rousing him to something of his old self.

Margarita offered to find her own lodgings now Boris was home, but both Dyogtins refused. 'We've no children of our own, anymore,' said Boris, 'and you've no parents. Well – that is to say...' He cleared his throat and looked at his shoes; Margarita flung her arms around his neck, overwhelmed with gratitude.

So she stayed, and each day they gathered around and read the paper, watched the tide of war turn in favor of Japan, and discussed the future. Would there be a constitution? Perhaps the *zemstvo* would return? In October, Russian ships under Rozhestvensky mistook British fishing boats for Japanese torpedo ships. Boris banged his fist on the kitchen table, his tremors worse than ever. 'Incompetence! Why would the Japanese be in the North Sea, eh? Blasted incompetence!' War with Britain felt imminent; the runaway train had lost its conductor and ploughed inexorably, blindly forward in a cloud of dread and uncertainty.

Every minute not in factories and barracks or haranguing in lecture halls with Vera was spent shadowing Elena her from classrooms to tea rooms. Elena's revolution was gentler, more intimate, and more impactful for the chaos around it. Gapon's sessions grew radicalised despite the absence of hardline SDs and *Essers*. Many discussions now revolved around different forms of government.

Now there are a dozen Assembly branches with over 8,000 members. Of those in the capital, 1,000 are women Vera has recruited single-handedly.

I'd have taken an altogether different view of propaganda if I had known it could be like this. Nothing aloof or theoretical here! In the thick of it, practicing what I preach, I've accomplished more than I ever did with Trezubets, perhaps even more than by the barrel of a gun. Terror has its place (the public's responses to Plehve and Suetsky were proof of that), but it isn't my role to enact it.

This is not written to entice a reply, or your forgiveness. I deserve neither. It's just that I love you, dear one, and always shall, and am forever grateful for all the ways large and small that you made my life better. I cannot repay them. If I accomplish anything here, it is for and because of you.

*Ever yours,
Margusha*

The letter left in the pocket of an Esser to avoid the censor.

Her messenger was no sooner out the door than three people tumbled in. 'There you are!' Vera carried an assortment of books, leaflets, and fruits. She nodded toward a stern, pretty woman whose dark hair was heaped atop her head; Margarita was struck by her austere dress, accented only by a long chain. 'Alexandra Mikhailovna is collecting for the students arrested at the march yesterday, literature and food and the like. We need another pair of arms.'

Margarita leapt from her seat and rifled through the chest for drafts and discarded sketches. Boris, sitting patiently while Elena stitched his left sleeve, looked up with a frown. 'What march was this?'

'Against the war, sir,' said a young man in a dingy uniform. He hovered in the doorway carrying rolled up blankets. Margarita was positive she knew him from somewhere. 'Against the abuses and mismanagement in the military, and the government prolonging this war despite heavy losses and the will of the people.'

'Please, no war talk,' groaned Elena, 'you'll set him off.'

'Hush, mother. You say they arrested these students?'

‘Yes,’ nodded Alexandra. ‘I was there, hundreds were hauled off.’

Boris puffed out his cheeks. ‘Leave it, Elena. I’m off to help the young people.’

‘How, exactly?’

‘I’ve one good arm, I intend to use it! Zinaida, hand me that shawl, and those books.’

The man gave a cheer. ‘*Brava!*’

Margarita’s squinted at him. ‘I know you, don’t I?’ she asked, piling a blanket into Boris’ arm. ‘From the tram.’ She hadn’t recognized him without his crutch.

‘Ah,’ he said, ‘so that’s where I’ve seen you.’

‘That’s Aliyev,’ said Vera.

Alexandra ushered them out. ‘Socialise later, we’re wasting time.’



It was the firing of four workers from the Putilov plant. That’s what did it. That’s what turned the Assembly into a political rather than a social body. It greased the tracks and ensured that the few people trying to pull the brakes on the speeding train found no traction whatsoever.

The foreman Tetiavkin was especially hostile to the Assembly; men had previously reported receiving unjust cruelty upon discovering their membership. That was the link between the men dismissed that December. Subbotin even reported him sneering, ‘No doubt your society will keep you’ before sacking him.

What angered the members, and Gapon, most? That four of their own were dismissed without cause or recourse? Or that the Assembly was now under threat?

Within days Gapon summoned delegates from every district to draft a five-point manifesto, in the main a tame piece of writing which hardly asked for anything radical:

Tetiavkin's dismissal, the reinstatement of those fired, and reassurance that such an injustice would not be repeated. Yes, all very well. Until the final point, which Margarita read, then re-read, and re-read a third time because surely she'd misunderstood it.

5. That if these, the lawful requests of the men, be not satisfied, the society cannot be held responsible for any breach of the peace in the capital.

Gapon was threatening revolution.

'If we decide to stand by our comrades,' he said, 'we must do so at any cost, and must be ready to bear all the sacrifices such a step might entail.'

Hysterical devotion swept the Assembly not unlike the patriotism in the aftermath of the attack on Port Arthur. Men and women pledged themselves body and soul to restoring the honour of the Assembly, and Margarita wondered why, among this crowd of galvanised workers, she felt no joy or excitement. Only dread.

Many were already in a querulous mood. Under the benign influence of Mirsky, Plehve's liberal replacement, or maybe in the paternal glow of having at last produced an heir, the tsar had eased censorship and even given the *zemstvos* greater authority...yet still refused to grant the primary demand for a parliament.

'We want our voices heard.'

'He offers small concessions to keep us docile!'

'Our Little Father simply doesn't know.'

'If he knew, he would certainly help.'

Such ridiculous bickering drove her mad. Margarita left the meeting and headed home to finish her illustration in support of the dismissed workers. She'd not been at it more than an hour when there was a knock at the door.

Vera Karelina stood on the threshold beside a man with a cheerful expression visible between a bushy beard and badly receding hairline. He held a small girl in his arms half-

hidden behind a curtain of hair. When Margarita smiled at her, she buried her face in his shoulder. ‘Zina! Are the Dyogtins home?’

‘No, they’re at the meeting. I couldn’t bear it, they keep going on about —’

‘May we come in?’ Vera was already halfway inside. ‘This my husband, Aleksey Yegorovich.’

‘Good evening, *tovarisch*,’ he smiled through his beard, skirting around her.

‘Oh! I didn’t realise —’

Aleksey hitched the child further up on his hip. ‘And this little bug is our Oksana. I’m afraid she’s a bit timid around new people.’

Her throat strained as if she might be sick. ‘Vera, you...have a daughter?’

‘I’m sorry to have brought her, we rushed over the moment we heard the news.’

Margarita sank into the armchair, transfixed by dark-haired Oksana wriggling in her father’s lap.

‘Fullon, the city governor, is doing his best to meet our demands, or so he says,’ Aleksey said, lifting his daughter over his shoulder and rubbing her back.

Vera leaned forward. ‘But we can’t guarantee his support or his success. So it’s been decided that, if necessary, we’ll declare a strike.’ For the first time, Margarita’s eyes left the girl. ‘It’ll begin with Putilov. If, after two days, our demands aren’t granted it will spread across St. Petersburg from factory to factory, workshop to workshop.’

‘The workers support this?’

‘It was their idea!’ Vera chirped, her normally serious face radiant.

Aleksey moved Oksana to his other shoulder. ‘The men need to save what they can during the coming holiday to tide them over, in case it comes to this. Will you tell the Dyogtins?’

‘I – I will, but Elena Sergeyevna and I bring in hardly anything from laundry and needlework, and Boris Efimovich’s wages at the distillery are much lower because of his arm. If we lose that income, I don’t see how we’ll survive.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Aleksey. ‘The Assembly will support you.’

Oksana whined into her father’s neck. ‘Hungry, *Papochka*.’

‘Yes, yes, come along.’ He stood, bouncing her gently in his arms. ‘We’ll stop in one of the canteens on the way, find you something.’

‘Wait.’ Margarita went to the kitchen and spread a gingerbread slice with an extra thick layer of Elena’s preserves. ‘There you are, little bug.’

Oksana’s tiny hands clasped the offering, eyes wide and brown like Vera’s locked on hers. ‘*Spas’ba*.’

Margarita’s heart clenched until it must be squeezed dry of every last drop of blood. Father and daughter left, but Margarita tugged at Vera’s sleeve. ‘You never told me you had a daughter.’

‘You seem surprised.’

‘It’s just... I didn’t think you’d have time to...’

‘I grew up in an orphanage, Zina, then worked in a cotton mill, and all that time I wanted two things: to change the lot of the Russian worker, and have a family of my own. Should I have only chosen one dream?’ She waved over her shoulder. ‘Remember to tell the Dyogtins!’

Flat empty, drawings forgotten, Margarita retreated to the chair and curled up small as she could. So it was possible. The ideal pieces came together, a patchwork of hypotheticals: if she’d told Roman, if they’d found Kira, if they’d stayed together, balancing pamphlets with action, this sort of action.

But she had been afraid. She'd realized it that day in the kitchen coming up against Lara's fearlessness. That's why Lara had to go: her presence in the *izba*, building a family and running a safe house, would have underscored Margarita's weakness, her failure of will and imagination.

Newfound bravery was moot: it was too late. While there had been a kernel of truth to it over the years – even had she told Roman that first day, the odds were long – now it was certain. Three years missing and Sokolov dead, Kira was irretrievable and no others would follow.

The Dyogtins returned late from their veteran's meeting. 'Are you alright, Zinushka?' Elena asked, taking her chin and turning her face to the light. 'Have you been crying?'

'Vera's been,' Margarita said, ignoring the question. 'We must prepare.'

She thought enthusiasm for the strike would fade, but then came the news: Port Arthur had surrendered to the Japanese after nearly five months under siege. After thousands had died maintaining the stronghold. Anger was on par with sorrow...until word got around that Stoessel had surrendered without consulting senior officers, despite a vast stockpile of ammunition and food. The soldiers at Port Arthur might have held out for months, might have won, yet Stoessel had capitulated. The capital watched his court-martial, and that of Foch and Smirnov, with malicious glee. Strike preparations were fed by wrath.

The war was irretrievably lost and cheer was in short supply that Christmas although the Assembly, in the form of Gapon and Vera, did everything in their power to brighten the mood. Every branch was decked out with *yolki* and the doors opened to the city's children; not only those of members but the many left orphaned by war and poverty. They milled

about with the awkward mistrust of street curs, half-frozen and three-quarters starved, shovelling food into their dirty mouths with abandon.

‘Look at them,’ Margarita whispered, watching them line up to receive a parcel of clothing from Gapon, little faces illuminated by this small kindness. ‘We ought to bring one home.’

Elena goggled. ‘Bite your tongue, miss, before it carries you off. Just where would it sleep, exactly? We don’t know how we’ll feed ourselves with this strike coming.’

Margarita watched the children wriggle into their new garments and chase each other around the hall, stuffing their pockets with food. Discussion of strike etiquette proceeded around her – ‘No red flags, no revolutionary slogans or imagery. We are a peaceful demonstration, we must give them no reason to attack!’ – but she was distracted. These children looked for shelter, food, and love, and were left wanting. *Chto delat?* What is to be done?



Two of the dismissed workers had been restored. Two more remained. Gapon arranged to meet Smirnov, director of the Putilov plant, in a last ditch effort to re-instate them and avoid the strike. ‘In the meantime,’ he said, ‘a labour petition to the tsar must be drafted. Just in case.’

Unsurprisingly, Smirnov refused to entertain Gapon or the demands of his Assembly. The runaway train reached a slope, and Margarita knew there was no stopping it now. All that remained was to brace for impact.

Thirteen thousand men downed tools. Margarita and Vera watched them, a solemn but proud procession filing from the factory floor into the snow. They accepted biscuits from

the women and milled about the courtyard until Smirnov appeared shouting: 'You had better stop this game!' He frothed like a man possessed, but the men were unmovable.

'We demand you fire Tetiavkin and re-instate the dismissed workers Sergunin and Subbotin!' said a man down the front.

Smirnov shook his head. 'I've found no fault with Tetiavkin's conduct, and I'm certainly not going to fire him just because your Assembly demands it! However, I understand you're upset, so if you like I'll conduct a new investigation in the dismissal dispute...so long as you return to work.'

Only a fool could think it would be so easy.

Soon there came the whisper of runners on snow followed by excited shouts of 'Father George has come!' 'Gapon, he's here!' 'At last, Father Georgy!'

Everyone rushed to see him rise in his sledge, arms skyward, open mouth and swarthy features, dark robes and tall *kalimavkion* inky shadows against the snow. Voice comforting as eiderdown, likening them to an old oak shedding the gloom and frost of winter. 'Your demands are no more than justice,' he said. 'Have we, or have we not, the right to defend our members?' She would immortalize this moment later, and try to capture something of its promise.

He read the updated strike demands, still reformative rather than revolutionary; there were no calls for an end to capitalism or autocracy, anyway. They asked for the firing of Tetiavkin and the reinstatement of Sergunin and Subbotin, a permanent committee of workers to defend their rights, and amnesty and back pay for strikers. These were printed and circulated to every industrial enterprise in the city. Margarita, running through the slush to distribute them with numb fingers, had each point memorized by day's end.

Two days later, Witte, former Minister of Finance, arranged for Subbotin to be reinstalled; surely, with only one man left unemployed, the strike would halt. But it was too

late for half-measures. The deputation met with Smirnov one last time with demands now including an eight-hour day, no forced overtime, a wage increase for the men, and even a separate demand for women's wages – albeit for considerably less.

Of course, Smirnov refused; of course, the delegates refused to back down.

The Assembly was now open to all workers, paying members or not, buzzing with a hive's industry from morning til night. The newly-assembled Strike Committee organized and distributed donations of tea, sugar, bread, and potatoes to the striking workers and their families.

'Was that your doing?' Margarita, up to her elbows in potatoes, asked Vera. 'The women's pay increase?'

Vera continued dividing loaves, smiled her sphinx smile, and said, 'If this is the only thing I accomplish in my life, it will be more than enough.'

'Pity the men's raises will be twice as much.'

'Yes,' she sighed, 'but we've known from the beginning that the Assembly doesn't champion equal pay. This is victory enough for now. We shall keep working, you, me, all of us, and in a hundred years it will be incredible to think women ever earned less than men!'

The faith-based metaphors of Gapon were rousing in their way, but the unbridled conviction and tenacity of Vera Karelina would be what pulled them through. Margarita only wished she were half as optimistic.

The Semianikoff Works and the Franco-Russian shipbuilding yards, both crucial to the war effort, joined the strike; thereafter, industries fell like dominoes. On her feet from dawn until well into the night, Margarita ran meetings, served food, recruited. She no sooner lay down at night than rose again to do it all over, going wherever she was needed across the city.

She spent the night facilitating a discussion at the Vyborg Branch, dreaming of her cot less than a block away while Gapon's voice reverberated in the reverential silence. 'The employers will not heed us; the officials ignore us. We must go over their heads! The tsar does not know of our needs, and we will tell him. If he loves his people, he will grant them their humble supplications.' Signatures poured in; the petition had yet to be written, only the original strike demands were available as a template, but eager workers left their marks all the same.

'Your Gapon is charismatic, I'll give him that.'

Margarita turned, sure it could not be who she thought – but there was Nikita, lean and handsome as ever. Settled in a quiet corner, they embraced and exchanged pleasantries. 'What brings you here?' she asked. 'We've not established connection with any political parties.'

'It's true, I typically don't go in for police-socialism, but the momentum of this action has transformed the city. I wanted to witness it while there was still time. And, I was told this was where I might find you. So, have you given up the *Esser* platform? Calling for concessions instead of revolution?'

'Quite the contrary,' she retorted, stung. 'I've never hidden my affiliation.'

'Yet I'm sure you haven't trumpeted your, erm, accomplishments within that affiliation.'

'Well, no. But there's a good deal more support for the *Essers* than you might think, especially after Plehve – congratulations, by the way. Most of these workers are peasant stock. If they could go back to the land, if they had land to go back to, they wouldn't hesitate. I don't mean to be flippant, but there's fertile ground here for us, when the time is right.'

'It's certainly close. But it's run by a madman. Is your Gapon serious about this petition to the tsar?'

‘Stop calling him “my Gapon”.’

‘Does he have any idea what he’s getting himself, all of you, into? Feeding them that benevolent father tripe, it’s dangerous.’

‘I don’t like it, either. But that’s how they see the tsar, an all-loving instrument of God.’

‘When the instrument is turned against them, they’ll sing a different tune.’

‘What a grim mood you’re in, Niki.’ She tried to laugh off her anxiety. ‘Tell me, how’s Lara? Is she still in Ufa?’

‘No, no,’ he said, ‘her services were needed elsewhere. I see little of her, but I know she’s well. She and Fedya had a baby last Christmas. I’ll tell her you asked after her.’

‘No – that’s alright, don’t trouble yourself.’

She remembered their telegram after the assassination of Bogdanovich in Ufa. Signed ‘Mama and Papa’. So Lara had had her baby after all. Well, good. It eased some of her guilt on that score.

‘Incidentally,’ Nikita said, ‘I have something for you.’

He reached into his pocket and produced a folded scrap of paper. She couldn’t think what it might be. Then – ‘Oh, thank you Niki! Thank you!’ She jumped up and kissed his cheeks, excusing herself.

Bundled against the bitter wind off the Neva, Margarita ran home quick as she could, snow squeaking under her boots. Once inside, she bothered to remove neither scarf nor shoes or even light the stove, simply collapsed beside the nearest lamp and began to read.

I don't know how to begin this letter. Our last meeting has been much on my heart, and I didn't think we would ever speak again. For a time that was what I wanted, but it hasn't made me happy like I thought. Are you surprised? Don't be. You and I are not the same people we were then, nor is the world the same place.

Where to begin. I work in Maison de Beauté – why is swathing something in a French veneer the only way to give it a fine gloss? Even the old procuress is called

Madame. Ha! But she's getting on, and I'm thinking, well, who better to take over than me? A man might want an inexperienced wife, but he can't say the same of his whore. Imagine me running a brothel! Soon you may not have to.

You chose a rocky path and then wondered why your feet pained you. Now it sounds as if you're doing the work you were meant for my love, and I am delighted for you, but one word of warning: be wary of that Gapon. There are rumours he's in the pocket of the police and that's how he funds his Assembly, and why he's never raided. It may not be true, and I don't know what it means if it is, but tread lightly.

Write me soon, dear one. And stay safe.

Tsiluyoo,
Your Varushka

Margarita kissed the letter and rolled it carefully before using it to light the stove. Would it be so surprising if the prison priest colluded with police? Yet he'd shown them the ledgers. Those anonymous donations...

So she was surprised when he announced to the Narva branch: 'Therefore, it is time that the workmen, whose life is so hard, should state their needs also to the Emperor. Let us all go with our wives and our children to the Winter Palace on Sunday at 2pm. Let us go quietly and peacefully, and we will be heard.'

A great cheer washed over the room. People wept and embraced. 'To the Tsar!' 'Our *batiyushka* will help us!' 'When we tell our Little Father how we're being fleeced and beaten, he'll never let it stand!'

Gapon beamed at them, but he no longer looked benign and paternal. Turning her back on the stage, Margarita squeezed through the mass of sheepskin coats and *valenki*, scanning the happy faces for one in particular.

'Karelin!' she cried, spying Aleksey by the far door. She had hoped to find Vera, but there wasn't time to waste. 'Karelin, is Gapon working for the police?'

'Why, yes,' he said, calmly as if she'd asked whether the sky was blue.

'*Vsemogushchiy Bog!*'

‘Verushka and I were hesitant at first, but Gapon is an honest man. Besides, their funding means the Assembly is legal; what better place to promote socialism?’

‘What’s all this?’ asked Vera, appearing beside her husband with Oksana in her arms.

‘Gapon’s a police agent.’

‘He’s hardly that,’ Vera replied, unruffled as ever.

Karelin nodded. ‘He takes their money, quite against his better instincts, but uses it to benefit the very people it’s meant to control. They wanted to keep the workers obedient, you understand, away from revolutionary influence.’

‘But look around,’ Vera smiled. ‘The entirety of St. Petersburg has shut down! No trams, no papers, not one window lit in any factory across the city. And now, the petition. If the police were *really* in charge, it could never have gotten this far.’

‘How many of these people will wind up in Siberia, or worse, if you’re wrong?’

Vera’s face went stiff. ‘Do you think I would risk the safety of my comrades by exposing them to arrest? Or my family? If you’re having second thoughts about the march on Sunday, or the movement —’

‘I have no doubts about the movement,’ she said. ‘I have doubts about Gapon.’

‘At this point,’ Vera shrugged, ‘it amounts to the same. We’re meeting here tomorrow. If you change your mind, come find me. If not...I’ll understand.’

Four days had passed since the strike was declared, and the demands of the Assembly, both economic and political, now accommodated the entire working class of St. Petersburg, drafted and signed by themselves. Gapon was their figurehead, but they were in charge. Nothing like this had ever happened before in the history of Russia.

Would she turn her back on it, then, because she didn’t trust Gapon?

He claimed he’d be satisfied if the government agreed to convene an assembly with legislative powers and implemented an eight-hour day allowing the people to participate in

political life. Ludicrous – Nicholas would never allow such concessions to his power! Gapon seemed to know how impossibly high he'd set the bar, and how very much was at stake. He'd begun to ask: 'What if the tsar refuses to hear us out?'

'Then he is no tsar to us!' they replied. 'Away with the tsar if he will not listen!'

Yet they wept and cheered at the prospect of Nicholas finally hearing their pleas. They swore again and again that they were willing to die in the square for their petition, would turn their backs on the Emperor they worshipped should he refuse to hear their appeal, whilst believing down to their cores that such a scenario could never play out. They loved the tsar. The tsar loved them. On Sunday they would beseech him and he would oblige.

Would she turn her back on these people?

This movement was hers, too. She had worked for it, sacrificed for it, killed for it. Now was not the time to abandon it. She would stand by it, by the people, in solidarity. It was the lover she cherished. It was the child she nurtured. Despite everything, even her doubts, she would pay whatever price necessary.



The next evening Margarita arrived at the Narva branch in time to see people streaming into the dark, frozen courtyard. 'What's happened?' she asked a passing worker.

'Not enough room in the hall for everyone,' he said. 'People were fainting, wasn't even air enough to keep the lamps lit.'

'Not enough room? That hall holds 700 people!'

The courtyard filled with spectators crowding the barrels and pallets Gapon cobbled together as an impromptu platform using lanterns like stage lights. Petition in hand, he read

each point aloud; those they felt most attached to elicited a sea of hands raised to the starry sky making signs of the cross. Their demands were sacred to them. Tears prickled her eyes.

‘He’s been reading it all day, all over town. Heard it three times, myself.’ Her companion crossed himself, cap in hand. ‘Thousands of us have left our marks upon it. Have you?’

Gapon’s once luxurious voice was now a hoarse croak. ‘You must come with us,’ he cried in conclusion. ‘You must bring your wives, your children. And if the Emperor will not come and we are met with bullets, if innocent blood be shed, then there will be no tsar for us any longer!’

Their bloodthirsty cheers were laced with cries of ‘God save the Tsar!’ ‘He will listen!’

An old woman who hardly reached Margarita’s shoulder cried, ‘And what if our Little Father, the tsar, will not come out to us for a long time? I was told he is not in St. Petersburg.’

Gapon opened his palms to her. ‘No, but he is not far away, only half an hour’s journey. We must wait at the palace, if necessary, till late at night, so you had better take some food with you. But remember: no weapons! We must show them we are a peaceful demonstration!’

‘Tomorrow, comrades, is our day of Resurrection, a day of awakening and a dawn of new life for Russian workers. Tomorrow will be our Calvary and salvation; tomorrow we will rise from the dead. Tomorrow we will walk with the Lord.’

‘For justice!’ the crowd cried, rushing to sign the petition. ‘For the workers!’

Margarita shivered, and remembered why she’d come.

Vera was near the front in a throng three-deep answering questions and giving instructions. When she saw Margarita her face broke into a wide, soft smile and she reached out over their heads. ‘So you’ve decided?’

‘I’m marching tomorrow, Vera Markovna. No matter what happens.’

‘I knew you would.’ Claspng Margarita’s hand, she said, ‘I have business to finish here, but I’ll come by later. I must speak with you. Aliyev will bring you home. Aliyev! Aliyev!’

‘No,’ said Margarita, ‘I’d rather walk.’

‘But the trams are on strike,’ Vera said, ‘it will take hours. You’ll freeze.’

Aliyev slouched up, hands in pockets, hat pulled low. ‘I don’t mind, Zinaida Maximovna.’ His voice was kind, but his face looked even flintier than the day he’d glared at her from the tram window.

Feeling herself cornered – and it was freezing – she followed Aliyev from the courtyard to a rickety wagon hitched to an equally rickety horse. ‘Is this yours?’ she asked, eyeing the beast askance.

He clambered aboard. ‘Accusing me of stealing?’

She stroked the horse’s long, velvety nose. ‘I’m just not certain I trust this contraption to get me home in one piece.’

‘Agafia is the most dependable creature on God’s earth,’ he said, patting her haunches. ‘Delivered speakers all over the city today and she’s not once lost steam. My mother delivers milk, I’ve just borrowed her kit. Well?’ He picked up the reins. ‘You coming up, or not?’

Night settled still and dreamlike around them, tranquil as an undisturbed snow globe. No trams, no industry, no sounds bar Agafia’s occasional nicker and clopping hooves. Such

silence in St. Petersburg was unprecedented. Margarita sought patterns in the stars and smiled into the wind. Against the velvety blue darkness, the snow glowed like phosphorous.

Margarita looked sideways at Aliyev as they approached the Fontanka River. 'I was in prison, you know. Litovsky.' She couldn't say what possessed her, some strange vulnerability, feeling small and unremarkable around so much stoic beauty.

'So, what are you?' He turned to her, scratching his stubble. 'A revolutionary?'

Her laugh ricocheted down the empty street. 'Yes, I suppose I am. Does that upset you?'

'Why would it?'

'As a soldier, I imagine you value order, hierarchy, authority.'

'You don't imagine very well. I wasn't a soldier by choice.' He slapped the reins on Agafia's back. 'I want a quiet, peaceful life like everyone else, but I won't obey mad orders or fight for theoreticals.'

'Isn't the work of the Assembly theoretical? Justice, freedom?'

Aliyev turned onto the Embankment. Moonlight crackled down the frozen Fontanka, lighting the vaporous breaths of Agafia and her passengers. 'Sure, that's part of it. But if we succeed we'll see real changes to our lives: shorter hours, better pay, security against unjust dismissal. This isn't capturing some chunk of dirt thousands of *versts* away because a general told you to. This march will benefit Russia more than any war she's ever fought.'

His earnest vision touched her. Political machinations weren't his concern; likely he wasn't even aware of them. All he wanted, all any of them wanted, was to lighten the load, make life less gruelling. Hardly a revolution by her measure, but perhaps the definition was relative.

Agafia's hooves echoed around in the empty street, and Margarita had the eerie impression of hundreds of invisible eyes sequestered in shadows. 'Are you afraid?' she asked.

'About tomorrow?' He shook his head. 'I've been shot before.'

'You think they'll fire on us?'

'No. That's why I'm not scared, because even if they did, it's nothing I haven't already survived.' He urged Agafia on faster as they neared the Liteiny Bridge. 'At least this time I'm not trapped in a trench, forgotten by God and my own officers.'

He pulled to a stop in front of her building. 'Come in,' she said. 'You risked a good deal to drive me here, the least I can do is offer you tea. And Elena makes the loveliest *pirozhki*.'

No sooner had they walked in than Elena flung herself into her arms. 'I was so worried!'

'Why? I told you I'd be late.'

'Yes, but that was before the posters!' she wailed.

Margarita looked to Boris for enlightenment. 'They went up this afternoon,' he said, 'an order forbidding street demonstrations.'

Aliyev joined Boris at the table. 'You mean they've forbidden the march?'

'No, no, I'm sure it means anything disorderly, and we aren't disorderly.' Margarita and Aliyev exchanged doubtful glances. 'It was poorly printed and without a signature, no doubt pranksters or some scoundrel factory boss trying to keep us away. Well we won't stay away! And when the tsar hears our petition he'll make them pay.'

Elena righted herself, dabbing her eyes. '*Prostituye*,' she said, 'I couldn't stand to think...' She patted Margarita's cheek with a rough hand before turning to her guest.

Vera arrived an hour later. ‘I can’t stay,’ she insisted, ‘I’ve only come to relay some information. Procession routes are up to your branch leaders, but we’ll converge at the Winter Palace for two. The branches will be open all night making placards and banners, so come whenever you’re ready. Bring food. No weapons. Zina, may I speak with you privately?’

Taken aback by the abrupt shift, Margarita led her to the bedroom and closed the door. ‘What is it? Has something happened?’

‘Goodness you’re jittery. Nothing has happened. But in case it does...Zina, will you look after Oksana for me if Aleksey and I die tomorrow?’

‘I – will I – what? My God, Vera, what sort of question is that?’

‘A very serious one. We don’t know what tomorrow will bring. Gapon is almost certain we shall face opposition, and you and I both know the risks. We’ve been on the receiving end of tsarist soldiers before.’

‘Suppose all three of us die?’ Frenzied laughter percolated in her chest. ‘What then?’

‘I’ve other irons in the fire. You’re just first in line.’

‘Vera, I’m – honoured, truly. Oksana is wonderful, and I’d love her with...with my whole heart and soul. But there must be people you know better or are closer to.’

‘There are a good many people I’ve known longer. I’ve chosen you. You’ll ensure she grows up strong, passionate and opinionated and n-not afraid of being those things.’ Vera swiped at her eyes and Margarita had to look away to keep herself together. ‘Will you promise?’

It was evident you were incapable of mothering her. You brought it on yourself, and if you loved that girl at all you’d be grateful. She’s better off.

Sokolov’s words had no place here. ‘Yes, Verushka. Of course.’

Vera put her arms around her. ‘Thank you,’ she whispered. ‘Before I go, I have something for you.’

From her bag she took a square of paper, folded many times. Margarita saw the words: *Russia is too vast, her wants too manifold, to admit of bureaucrats alone governing her. It is absolutely necessary that the people should assist, because only they know their own hardships.* ‘Why are you giving me the petition?’

‘You’re questioning all my decisions tonight, aren’t you? It’s not the original, Gapon will carry that. But copies are to be left with trustworthy comrades. Just in case.’

‘And what am I meant to do? Hand it to Nicholas once everyone else is dead?’

Vera patted her arm, smiling again. ‘Always so dramatic. Well, until tomorrow. *Ni pukha, ni pera!*’

‘*K chyortoo!*’

Then, she was gone.

Aliyev spent so long absorbed in his conversation with Boris that, when he stood and made to leave, Elena shrieked as if scalded. ‘You can’t! It’s much too late now, there will be soldiers everywhere. You’ll have to stay here.’

‘I can’t impose, Elena Sergeyevna. Besides, there’s no room for me.’

‘Of course there is, Zinushka can sleep in the good chair and you can take the cot.’ She looked at her uneven stitches and crumpled the shirt in her shaking hands. ‘Perhaps we should all...get some rest.’

Kisses and kind words were exchanged and Elena produced a spare blanket. Without the Dyogtins the room felt suddenly cold, cryptlike, and the silence played on Margarita’s nerves.

‘I’m perfectly happy with the chair,’ Aliyev said, perching on the cushion like an oversized bird of prey, the blanket wrapped around his shoulders and his cap bunched up for a pillow. ‘I won’t kick you out of your own bed.’

He wouldn’t accept her hospitable protests, and in the end she doused the lamps and nestled into bed. Weariness permeated her bones, yet sleep eluded her. Just like the night before shooting Suetsky, her head was too filled with thoughts of morning, playing through scenarios, wondering where she would be this time tomorrow.

‘Can’t sleep?’ Aliyev murmured.

‘I’m sorry, am I disturbing you?’

‘No. I don’t think anyone’s sleeping tonight. I keep thinking about that decree. I’m not sure Boris Efimovich is right...’

‘He isn’t.’

After a long pause, he said: ‘We could not go?’

‘If they’ve ordered in troops and outlawed demonstrations, we all probably face arrest either way. I’d rather they shot me.’

‘They won’t shoot us,’ he insisted again. ‘They might order us to disperse, but Gapon and the tsar, they won’t let anything bad happen.’

Apparently Gapon was all-powerful and Nicholas endlessly merciful. Well, that was his prerogative. She pulled the blanket up over her shoulder and closed her eyes.

‘I believe tomorrow can only come to good,’ he continued. ‘I believe in the Russian worker.’

‘Good, because we are our only hope, Aliyev. No one else will make us free.’

Giving up on any possibility of sleep, they talked. It might be their last night alive or at liberty, and why spend it with a stranger? He talked of his time in the army, of death and disease and danger, and when he sniffed she reached for his hand. Neither let go. He shared

his unexpected discovery of the Assembly, and above all his conviction that tomorrow was the first day of a new Russia, one where her citizens were treated as such.

And because he asked, she told him her story. Maybe she wanted to enter the square with a clean conscience, or maybe she was finally ready; whatever the reason, she shared even what she'd kept back from everyone else – including herself. He never flinched or let go of her hand, never questioned or criticized. He simply listened, hand around hers. He took her at face value.

Dawn had hardly broken when the bedroom door opened and Elena and Boris emerged.

‘Did we wake you?’ Margarita dropped Aliyev’s hand and pushed herself up.

Boris shook his head. ‘No, child. We thought we might go to the church. Just in case...’

‘I can drive us,’ said Aliyev.

He shrugged off his blanket and sprang into action, miraculously refreshed, packing leftover *pirozhki* and gingerbread into a sack. Boris sat at the table staring into the smoke of his cigarette. Elena knelt before the *krasniy ugol* and prayed to her dead loved ones.

Margarita buttoned her coat and tucked the petition in her pocket. Wrapped her scarf over her head and around her throat. Looked around the room. A great deal had changed since Roman dropped whispers of doubt into her ear at Petukhov’s hanging. That woman didn’t exist anymore, and Margarita didn’t mourn her. The Russia which spawned her was being rejected, improved upon, this very morning.

Under her fear, excitement stirred.

‘Zinaida,’ Elena called, pulling her best shawl around her shoulders. ‘Are you ready?’

Margarita nodded. ‘I’m ready.’

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In the early hours of Sunday, January 9, 1905 (Old Style), the Assembly members left their positions across St. Petersburg to converge upon the Winter Palace. They intended to present a peaceful petition to Tsar Nicholas II requesting improved conditions for workers and minor political reform, convinced their “little father” would help them.

The Vyborg branch, of which I made Margarita a member, was to convene with the procession from the Petersburg branch at Toritskaya Square across the Neva. Those present before eleven were warned by branch chairman Varnashev that troops had blocked the Troitsky Bridge; he advised them to make their way to the palace on their own to avoid confrontation. The several hundred workers who arrived after eleven, having gone to church beforehand or simply ran late, received no such warning.

At the Troitsky Bridge, the mounted Uhlans gave no warning before charging the Vyborg branch members, who were slashed with sabres and trampled under hooves. Three times the soldiers rode backward and forward through the crowd, leaving dead and wounded in their wake, approximately twenty altogether. Those brave and well enough to carry on climbed over the embankment and crossed the frozen Neva on foot.

Such clashes were repeated across the city that morning. Those from the Vyborg and Petersburg branches who reached Troitskaya Square were met bullets from the Pavlovsky Guard, and approximately forty wound up killed, with many more wounded. Stirred by the encouragement of Vera Karelina and her husband Alexei, the Basil Island and Gavan branches were prevented from crossing the bridges by a Cossack cavalry with whips and sabres, despite marchers waving white handkerchiefs of peace.

The Narva branch led by Father Gapon met with infantrymen at the Narva Arch and faced a hail of gunfire. Gapon's bodyguards were killed, and in the chaos Pinhaus Rutenberg

convinced the priest to make his escape and go into hiding, trimming his beard and hair to disguise him.

Despite the military regiments, petitioners filled the square of the palace where the imperial standard flew, indicating the Tsar's presence inside. Disquiet set in as survivors of the attacks at the outskirts trickled in, bloodied and battered, darkening the mood as the appointed hour approached with no sign of Gapon or the Narva branch.

As two o'clock struck, the soldiers wasted no time in dispersing the crowd. They fixed their bayonets, scattering those on the path by the garden and sending children up the trees. But the people would not disperse, insisting they were peaceful petitioners and nothing more. The cavalry made the next attempt with whips and sabres, but the crowd only grew larger and Prince Vasilchikov, the commander of the Guard, gave orders to fire if necessary.

As the bugles sounded and the soldiers took their positions, rifles lowered to the crowd, those petitioners in front began to kneel, remove their caps, cross themselves in an effort to reinforce their peaceful intent. On the third peal of bugles the soldiers fired. Approximately thirty people lay dead, including several children in the trees of the park, and more were killed in the riots which followed.

Bloody Sunday, as it came to be called, marked the start of the 1905 revolution, which lasted for two years. Strikes, clashes between left-wing agitators and far-right organisations such as the Black Hundreds, nationalist demonstrations of independence, and assassinations plagued the empire, fuelled by the eventual defeat in the war with Japan in September 1905.

Tsar Nicholas II's nominal reforms placated the nation's outrage without addressing its fundamental causes, leaving the nation vulnerable to further uprisings. Within ten years war and revolution would ravage Russia again, obliterating the monarchy and turning society upside down.

‘Much passive resistance, little understanding, and even less interest’: Misrepresentations of Russian revolutionary women’s anger in *To Kill a Tsar and Sashenka*

Introduction

“...when women do explode with rage, even if the effect is to catalyze a social movement, their anger will never be...understood as nation-reshaping.”
~ Rebecca Traister¹

Women’s anger started the Russian Revolution.

From its inception in the 1860s, women were active in the radical underground and individually were some of its greatest heroes. As a demographic, however, their revolutionary potential was neglected. Considered ‘bread and butter’ problems, women’s issues weren’t recognized by male leadership ‘as political [but as] material concerns, which could only draw women to the class struggle temporarily...’² Women accounted for nearly half the labour force by 1917 while still fully responsible for domestic duties.³ The year before they had struck for improved working conditions, pay, and management; now, mounting war casualties, rising prices, and scarce goods drove them ‘to dissolve the already tenuous division between ‘economic’ and ‘political’ demands.’⁴

Within the movement, women’s issues were deemed a distraction from the focus of socialism. Bolsheviks Maria Vydrina and Anastasia Deviatkina wanted to organize an International Working Women’s Day demonstration; their male comrades insisted they wait until May Day. Undeterred, they organized a women’s march at the Field of Mars drill ground.

¹ Rebecca Traister, *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Anger* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), p. 88.

² Anna Hillyar and Jane McDermid, *Revolutionary Women In Russia, 1870-1917: A Study in Collective Biography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 149-150.

³ What Alexandra Kollontai referred to as “the dual burden of hired labour and maternity”. (Alexandra Kollontai, “The Labour of Women in the Evolution of the Economy”, *Alexandra Kollontai: Selected Writings*, trans. by Alix Holt (London: Allison and Busby, 1977), pp. 142-149, p. 145).

⁴ Jane McDermid and Anna Hillyar, *Midwives of the Revolution: Female Bolsheviks and Women Workers in 1917* (London: UCL Press, 1999), p. 146.

On March 8, 1917, two things happened simultaneously: a large crowd gathered at the Field of Mars, and in the Vyborg district – long a socialist hotbed – women textile workers downed tools and took to the streets. The demonstrators called for ‘traditional suffrage...[an end] to the food crisis...or...openly revolutionary calls for an end to the war – and the monarchy.’⁵ The Vyborg workers made similar demands: ‘Down with the war! Down with high prices! Down with hunger! Bread for the workers!’⁶ Women built barricades from tramcars, convinced soldiers not to fire on protestors, and persuaded nearly all Vyborg workers to strike. Within a week, the walkout became general, the army mutinied, and Tsar Nicholas II abdicated.

Social anger, which Michael P. Jaycox defined as a ‘judgment that systemic injustice is stymieing the basic human flourishing of a vulnerable social group’, was a key part of women’s revolutionary arsenal.⁷ Yet it is absent from modern female-led fiction of the Russian Revolution whose protagonists are generally wealthy women, often from England or the USA depending upon the author’s background. These are novels of pretty dresses and pretty romances wherein the (exclusively Bolshevik) revolutions of 1917 are either barely-sketched backdrops or larger-than-life antagonists for women threatened rather than liberated by radical change; rarely do they engage in political struggle.⁸

My novel, *Do Unto Others*, widens this narrative. First and foremost, my protagonist is a native-Russian woman and working-class. This puts her in touch with the practical realities of socialist thought and the element of class creates a new kind of character-driven conflict, particularly between her and her lover. The romance subplot which superficially satisfies the

⁵ Helen Rappaport, *Caught in the Revolution: Petrograd 1917* (London: Hutchinson, 2016), p. 49.

⁶ Ibid. One woman was arrested after shouting at police: “You don’t have long to enjoy yourselves – you’ll soon be hanging by your necks!” (*Revolutionary Women*, p. 152).

⁷ Michael P. Jaycox, ‘The Civic Virtues of Social Anger: A Critically Reconstructed Normative Ethic for Public Life’, *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 36 (2016), 123-143
[≤https://www.jstor.org/stable/44504812>](https://www.jstor.org/stable/44504812) [accessed: 01 April 2019] (p. 129).

⁸ “All too often the words ‘worker’ or ‘revolutionary’ are used in the sense of male worker and male revolutionary.” (Sheila Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance, and Revolution: A History of Women and Revolution in the Modern World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 111.) The protagonist of *The Revolution of Marina M.* by Janet Fitch dabbles haphazardly in revolutionary work, but in no way is it central to the character or the plot. Jim Pinnells’ *Saturn’s Daughters: The Birth of Terrorism* does feature a terrorist woman of *Narodnaya Volya* as its protagonist, however the novel is too deeply sexist and too poorly researched to merit academic analysis.

conventions of the historical novel becomes a red herring, a misdirect in what is really a love story between woman and movement rather than woman and man. Within this movement, the protagonist joins the Socialist Revolutionary party; this is more in keeping with her views, and better reflects the party's popularity in the early twentieth century. Finally, setting the story in the years leading up to the 1905 revolution shifts the focus away from 1917 whilst also exploring its foundations.

Historical fiction personalises the political, allowing us, in the words of György Lukács to 're-individualise the general' by making 'every historical force...adequately and obviously embodied in concrete human beings.'⁹ Focusing on political subjects, such revolutionaries and terrorists, means contextualizing their divisive actions to keep readers' empathy, as I discovered whilst writing my novel *Do Unto Others*.

My protagonist, Margarita Kasyanova, is driven by anger from the novel's outset and her political and personal trajectory are determined by her temperament. Her turn to terrorism needed to be a logical result both of her personality and her experiences, one the reader would understand in the context of what had come before and make them want to follow her story through to its conclusion even if they disagree with her decisions.

To this end, Margarita needed to be well-rounded and engaging, and I felt the best approach was to invent as little as possible. She is a composite figure of numerous revolutionary women I researched, from her backstory to her philosophy to her personal life. My intention was to be as faithful as possible to these women, to represent them in light of their general absence from historical fiction as well as nonfiction. As such, it felt impossible to ignore the pivotal role played by anger in sparking and maintaining their revolutionary careers.

Though both *To Kill a Tsar* by Andrew Williams and *Sashenka* by Simon Montefiore feature revolutionary female protagonists, neither novel adequately explores their fundamental social anger, falling victim to gendered tropes rather than highlighting lived experiences and

⁹ György Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), p. 92, 109.

predominantly told through the prism of their relationships to men. Williams and Montefiore treat anger as a personal, depoliticized emotion, thus depreciating its impact. This essay analyses their representations of revolutionary women's anger alongside historical women's own words, as well as feminist theories around women's anger as forces for social change. It explores not only the stereotypes around women's anger within the books, but also the notable gaps where anger *should* be present.

There are three key areas to consider when exploring women's social anger: gendered anger, political anger, and how class operates within them. All three were interconnected in women's lives and philosophies, each informing the other two to create a coherent worldview. These protagonists lack cohesion; their points of view are superficial because there is no interconnectedness. This is most evident in their representations of gendered anger.

Gendered Anger

It would have been far easier, of course, had I been a boy: then I could have done almost anything... And then, the distant specter of revolution appeared, making me equal to a boy...
~ Vera Zasulich¹⁰

Gender was among the first inequity a revolutionary woman navigated. Olga Liubatovich, member of *Narodnaya Volya* (People's Will), recalled praying 'to God for hours on end that He might make me over into a boy' rather than bear 'the heavy burden of a human being, and the burden of a woman, as well...' ¹¹ This sense of injustice then led to political anger, the correlation between gender and class influencing revolutionary activity. This is not the case for either Anna or Sashenka, whose gender never informs their political work, and whose anger is treated as desirable (she's beautiful when she's angry) and ridiculous by the men around them.

Anna is a revolutionary of serf origin, unlike so many women of *Narodnaya Volya*, the terrorist organization planning the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. Her early life is lifted from

¹⁰ *Five Sisters: Women Against the Tsar; the memoirs of five young anarchist women of the 1870s*, ed. by Barbara Alpern and Clifford N. Rosenthal (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987), p. 69.

¹¹ *Five Sisters*, p. 193.

the memoirs of Elizaveta Kovalskaia, illegitimate daughter of a landowner and one of his serfs. ‘I think I was barely six,’ Kovalskaia wrote, ‘when I became aware that there were landowners and...serfs in the world...that my father could separate my mother and me by selling her to one...landowner and me to another – but my mother could not sell my father.’¹² For Kovalskaia, struggles of gender and class are intrinsically linked. She began her career by running schools and socialist study circles for women.

For Anna, although the ‘thought that her mother was no more than a chattel who could be sold to another member of the gentry was intolerable’¹³, women’s struggles are absent from her political work. She neither mentions nor considers them again. In fact, she actively retreats from them as her relationship with Hadfield progresses and particularly after she becomes pregnant. A lover and a child spell ‘the death of [her] revolutionary ideals’.¹⁴ Nor is there any mention of women’s authority or equality with men or their efforts to achieve it, whether in Russia, within the socialist movement, or within *Narodnaya Volya* specifically.¹⁵

¹² *Five Sisters* p. 207.

¹³ Andrew Williams, *To Kill a Tsar* (London: John Murray, 2011) p. 96.

¹⁴ Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaya, *The Little Grandmother of the Russian Revolution: Reminiscences and Letters of Catherine Breshkovsky*, ed. by Alice Stone Blackwell (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1919), p. 39. For Breshkovskaya “The conflict between my love for the child and my love for the revolution...robbed me of many night’s sleep. I knew that I could not be a mother and still be a revolutionist. Those were not two tasks to which it was possible to give a divided attention.” Much as it pained her, she left her son in the care of her sister-in-law, writing later: “I was not the only one called upon to make such a sacrifice. Among the women in the struggle for Russian freedom there were many who chose to be fighters for justice rather than mothers of the victims of tyranny” (Breshkovskaya, *Reminiscences*, p. 40). Later generations of women would face these same struggles: Olga Liubatovich wrote poignantly of her own brief time as a mother in the 1870s, and shared the story of her friend Gesia Gelfman, whose child was born in prison and taken from her, resulting in the death of both mother and child; Alexandra Kollontai, Soviet Russia’s first female cabinet minister, and founder of the *Zhenotdel*, or women’s department, had made women’s issues including childrearing the foundation of her socialist philosophy – not least because of her own decision to leave husband and son behind, as Breshkovskaya did thirty years before, to dedicate herself to the socialist cause. For more information, see Angelina Lesniewski, ‘It Is a Sin to Start a Family: Motherhood and Radicalism in Revolutionary Russia’, *Litterae Mentis*, 4 (2017), 68-88.

¹⁵ Of all the revolutionary groups active in Russia until the February Revolution, *Narodnaya Volya* had among the highest female membership, with its women taking on equal responsibilities throughout the hierarchy, from courier to Central Committee member, and there’s no indication that the romantic relationships formed within the movement distracted them from underground work. This was the generation of women whom Vera Zasulich, whose shots at Governor Trepov were the opening salvos of the terrorist age, said had attained “the historically rare happiness of acting not as the wives or mothers or inspirers of men, but in the capacity of fully independent, equal social activists.” (Quoted in Ana Siljak, *Angel of Vengeance: The Girl Who Shot the Governor of St. Petersburg and Sparked the Age of Assassination* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2008), p. 75).

Montefiore's Sashenka comes closest to sharing Zasulich's dreams of revolution making her "equal to a boy". Her Bolshevik uncle 'treated Sashenka as an adult; more than a woman, as an adult *man*, a co-conspirator in the worthiest, most exclusive secret movement in the world'.¹⁶ Her identification of the gendered imbalances of Imperial Russia and her place within it leaves her political philosophy unaltered. This is surprising, given Sashenka's rigorous studying of socialist material, including *What is to be Done?*, Chernyshevsky's protofeminist novel. Like many male revolutionaries, she's attracted to the austere minor character Rakhmetov, obfuscating the novel's theme of women's liberation and ignoring the work done by her own party.

Since 1905, Alexandra Kollontai had fought to incorporate women's issues into the Social Democrat party program.

...my Marxist outlook pointed out...with an illuminating clarity that women's liberation could take place only as a result of the victory of a new social order and a different economic system. [...] It was very difficult to win my fellow members over to this idea. [...] [They] accused me and those women-comrades who shared my views of being "feminists" and of placing too much emphasis on matters of concern to women only. [...] Much passive resistance, little understanding, and even less interest for this aim, over and over again, lay as an obstacle in the path.¹⁷

By 1914, the Bolsheviks were the only revolutionary group with anything resembling a platform for working women – because of women like Kollontai.¹⁸ Sashenka, however, seems to have no knowledge of or interest in this aspect of the party she's desperate to join, nor has the necessity occurred to her despite her shame and occasional anger at being regarded as a sex object.¹⁹

¹⁶ Simon Montefiore, *Sashenka* (London: Bantam Press, 2008), p. 51.

¹⁷ Alexandra Kollontai, *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), p. 13-19. Kollontai et. al. regarded "feminism" as a bourgeois position; instead, it was an integral part of their socialist worldview; one was not achievable without the other, thus they could not be distinguished between.

¹⁸ This was in large part thanks to women like Nadezhda Krupskaya, Inessa Armand, Konkordia Samoilova, and Klavdia Nikolaeva. Despite this, the Socialist Revolutionary Party (ideological descendants of *Narodnaya Volya*) boasted more women among its base and within its leadership; Ekaterina Breshkovskaya was a founding member.

¹⁹ Included in her list, among other things, is Kollontai's novel *Love of Worker Bees*, a novella with a deeply feminist message about the dangers of valuing romantic love at the expense of work. This seems to have made little impression on Sashenka's perspective as a female Bolshevik. Incidentally, while *Sashenka*'s opening section is set during 1916, *Love of Worker Bees* was not published until 1923. For more information, see Angelina Lesniewski, 'A Personal Revolution: Women in the Fiction of Alexandra Kollontai', *The Gradpost* (Autumn 2016), p. 6).

Sashenka's beauty is a source of shame for her; her greatest fear is resembling in any way the dissolute, wanton mother she despises. Knowing herself to be attractive, she constantly self-objectifies and self-surveils because, as Soraya Chemaly explains, 'the internalization of objectification [has become] second nature.'²⁰ She's responding to a real threat. At her first meeting with Captain Sagan, he notices her 'most abundant bosom' and her allure is so strong that Sagan, who, at nearly forty, has built a career on seducing and turning female revolutionaries into spies, finds he's the one in thrall.²¹

And nothing was so adorable as the way she suppressed her humour and joie de vivre, knitting her brows to play the dour revolutionary. He laughed at the tricks of the Almighty, for, however matronly she wanted to be, God had given her features...that undermined her wishes at every turn and made her even more delicious.²²

Sagan considers Sashenka, at just sixteen, too sexy to be a radical. His lust renders her political position and the apparent anger of her 'knitted brows' irrelevant.²³

Every man is enticed by Anna's beauty, but Hadfield is fascinated at their first meeting by the 'intense frown that never left [her brow] for long.'²⁴ Beautiful as anger makes her, it lowers his esteem for her. During one of their many separations, he broods over her volatility.

There was a darkness in her, fragility, confusion, a stubbornness beyond reason. [...] She was capable of slipping from submissiveness to defiance and intemperate anger in little more than the blink of an eye. And yet there was a femininity and subtle intelligence there, too, that was deeply attractive.²⁵

²⁰ "The form that objectification takes...is irrelevant. What matters is its multifaceted impact, the most consequential of which is the elimination of voice in a situation where the right to a voice is essential. Because girls are primed by the expectation that we put others first, it often becomes second nature to make other people's perspectives and the demands that come with them, our own. [...] ...self-objectification reduces both awareness of anger and the ability to respond with anger." (Soraya Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2018), p. 34-6).

²¹ Montefiore, *Sashenka* p. 68.

²² Montefiore, *Sashenka* p. 153.

²³ Falls into the "she's beautiful when she's angry" trope; revolutionary women were often idealized for their youth and beauty – the terrorists in particular, as will be discussed – although without the prurient rumination of these novels.

²⁴ Williams, *Tsar*, p. 90. Hadfield is also prone to pondering her "unconventional" beauty, although from the description there's nothing particularly unconventional about it with the exception of her constant frowning. This particular detail becomes fetishized: Hadfield dwells on it when they're apart, and it's among the first things he notices each time they reunite. Hadfield is chronically attracted to revolutionary women; his last relationship was with radical Lydia Figner, and he frequently references the beauty and severity of her sister Vera, leader of *Narodnaya Volya* after the Tsar's assassination.

²⁵ Williams, *Tsar*, p. 231.

Anna's feminine charm is alluring both because of and despite her unpredictable anger. In Hadfield's eyes, Anna's anger is a shortcoming, reinforcing that 'anger signifies strength in the strong, weakness in the weak.'²⁶ Sara Ahmed expands upon the consequences of this dichotomy for women, wherein 'the already pathological "emotionality" of femininity' reinforces '[a] hierarchy between thought/emotion...thought and reason are identified with the masculine [and] emotions...with femininity...'²⁷ Modifying Anna's intelligence as 'subtle' evidences this emotion/reason dichotomy and clues us in that 'femininity' and 'intelligence' are somehow incompatible with anger.

When women's anger surpasses beauty, it becomes laughable and petty, if not insane. Both novels reinforce that 'women [are] more likely to expect that their partner would deny responsibility and mock them'.²⁸ Anna and Sashenka are regularly ridiculed by men as a result of their anger, even when their anger is justified. 'This persistent denial of subjectivity, knowledge, and reasonable concerns – commonly known as gaslighting – is deeply harmful and often abusive,'²⁹ particularly in Anna's case, as it's nearly always from her romantic partner.

From their first meeting Hadfield, liberal by the standards of 1870s Russia, and Anna are politically at odds. Throughout their relationship he makes one blunder after another, many of which risk endangering Anna, her comrades, and their movement. At one such moment, rather than recognize the authority of her experience, Hadfield condescends: 'But why didn't you say so? Why throw a tantrum?' She taunts, 'Wasn't it ladylike?' with 'something close to a sneer'. So far, so good. But when he replies, 'It was ill-mannered' she literally deflates. 'Her shoulders seemed to drop a little, and she closed her eyes, the anger and tension draining from her. "Yes,

²⁶ Jane Marcus, 'Art and Anger', *Feminist Studies*, 4 (Feb., 1978), 68-98
<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3177626>> [accessed: 01 April 2019] (p. 70).

²⁷ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 170.

²⁸ Beverly Fehr et. al. 'Anger in Close Relationships: An Interpersonal Script Analysis', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25 (March 1999), 299-312 ([p. 307](#)); see also *Gender and Emotion: Social Psychological Perspectives*, ed. by Agneta Fischer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

²⁹ Chemaly, *Rage*, p. xviii.

perhaps.”³⁰ When Anna eventually attempts to sever their relationship, citing the movement’s primacy in her life, he is contemptuous. ‘He could see she was lost in an angry mist and quite beyond reason. [...] It was comical, and he fought a mad urge to laugh.’³¹ Hadfield’s patronising is a troubling act of testimonial injustice.

According to Miranda Fricker, the interplay of identity power (a man listening to a woman) and approaching his assessment with negative stereotypes (that she is irrational and emotional) puts the woman in credibility deficit. ‘[T]here is an epistemic dysfunction in the exchange—the hearer makes an unduly deflated judgement of the speaker’s credibility, perhaps missing out on knowledge as a result...the speaker is wrongfully undermined in her capacity as a knower.’³² Fiery Anna’s reaction to the belittling or outright denial of her feelings is to defer, self-surveil, and be silenced even when she is in the right. Her justifiable anger is treated as ridiculous, childish, and boorish by Hadfield and by herself.

It’s worth bearing in mind that ‘women tend to be angered by the negative actions of men [whereas] men tend to be angered by women’s negative emotional reactions...’³³ Again and again Hadfield puts Anna’s life’s work at risk and faces backlash from her, only to be astonished by it. Even when he threatens to expose the party’s base of operations, her rightful anger is disregarded as her being ‘so quick to take offence’ and ‘ready to attack at the first opportunity.’³⁴ At no point does Hadfield recognize his contribution to her temper. This constant gaslighting leaves her doubting her capacity rather than doubting Hadfield.

³⁰ Williams, *Tsar*, p. 93. She is embarrassed after this exchange, and Hadfield decides not to soothe her, “enjoying her discomfort” (Williams, p. 94).

³¹ Williams, *Tsar*, p. 288.

³² Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* [online], Oxford Scholarship Online, uploaded September 2007, [cited April 12, 2019]. Available from: <<https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198237907.001.0001/acprof-9780198237907-chapter-2>>

³³ Fischer, *Gender and Emotion*, p. 214.

³⁴ Williams, *Tsar*, p. 331. When Alexandra Kollontai returned, horrified, from a visit to the Krengholm factory in Narva and tried to explain her horror to her husband and his fellow factory inspectors, her husband responded with patronizing amusement by urging them to hurry to the theatre, asking “Why don’t you make us one of your speeches in the restaurant afterwards?” brushing off her outrage and treating her increasing turn to revolutionary activity as a whim or a hobby. (Quoted in Cathy Porter, *Kollontai: A Biography* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), p. 53.) She separated from him soon after, noting he “felt that my inclinations constituted an act of personal defiance directed against him” (Kollontai, *Autobiography*, p. 11).

Sashenka is similarly maligned, in less detail. As we have seen, her displays of anger, intrinsically linked to shame, are alluring to Captain Sagan. Yet he, like Hadfield, also considers them ridiculous, ‘...the way she knitted her eyebrows to assume a military briskness made him want to laugh.’³⁵ Sagan’s refusal to take her feelings seriously – to laugh at them – is indicative of the broader perception of women’s anger as performative. Even her Bolshevik comrades dismiss her as inferior, whether due to her age or gender is unclear, yet the perpetual dismissal of her questions, actions, and requests doesn’t upset her. As will be discussed, Sashenka’s character is let down by superficial narration which rarely delves into her emotional or psychological heart.

This dual perception of women’s anger as alluring and ridiculous is embodied in Maria Spiridonova, one of the most accomplished revolutionaries of her day. In 1906, at age twenty-two she assassinated a provincial government councilor; within two days, a local conservative newspaper called her ‘some kind of insane, unscrupulous female revolutionary.’³⁶ As Nadezda Petrusenko points out, this is an effort to deny Spiridonova’s violence as an act of political agency, and instead as a symptom of mental illness, i.e. a deviation from femininity over which she had no control.³⁷ Spiridonova’s public perception on the right became a weapon for the left after the Bolshevik revolution. With the exception of Kollontai, she the most powerful woman

³⁵ Montefiore, *Sashenka*, p. 137.

³⁶ Quoted in Nadezda Petrusenko, ‘A Female Agent of Political Violence in Pre-Revolutionary Russia: Gendered Representations of Maria Spiridonova’, *Kaleidoscope Journal of History of Culture, Science and Medicine*, 5 (2014), 232-249 (p. 238). See also Sally A. Boniece, ‘The “Shesterka” of 1905-06: Terrorist Heroines of Revolutionary Russia’, *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 58 (2010), 172-191 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41052426>> [accessed: 27 February 2016] (p. 140-141) and Leonid Praisman, ‘Terroristy i revoliutsionery, ohranniki i provokatory’, *ROSSPEN*, Moscow, 2001, accessible at <<http://socialist.memo.ru/books/lit/priceman/index.htm>> for further contemporary quotes referring to Spiridonova as “sick”. There was, of course, similar myth-making on the left, particularly from the SR press in making Spiridonova out to be a virginal martyr for the cause. For more on this see Nadezda Petrusenko, ‘Women in the World of Gender Stereotypes: The Case of the Russian Female Terrorists at the Beginning of the 20th Century’, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 1 (2011), p. 136.

³⁷ And she was not the only one. Socialist Revolutionary Fruma Frumkina recalled that “for a terrorist there is no greater humiliation than a declaration that all his activities were the product of a mental disorder, a creation of his sick imagination.” Indeed, she rejected an insanity plea because she refused to deny her own agency even at the risk of execution. She was hanged July, 1907. See Nadezda Petrusenko, *Creating the Revolutionary Heroines: The Case of Female Terrorists of the PSR*, Stockholm University, Department of History (PhD Thesis, 2018); “The unequal relationship between men and women meant that men could ‘brand’ women with ‘mental incapacity’ and call it nature” (Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History* (London: Pluto Press, 1989), p. 41).

in revolutionary Russia. As leader of an opposition party, Spiridonova embodied a threat to Bolshevik power.³⁸ She had to be eliminated, but was too high-profile to be killed. The solution was simple: scorn Maria Spiridonova as ‘a madwoman gripped by ecstasy.’³⁹ Officially deemed ‘sick and hysterical’, the assignation stuck.⁴⁰ As Rebecca Traister asserts, ‘Whether angry women are driven crazy, or whether their anger is confused for mental illness, the claim about them in a society that treats mental illness as a delegitimizing aberration became the same...’⁴¹

Like Spiridonova, in *To Kill a Tsar* and *Sashenka*, fervor in the female revolutionary is regarded as simultaneously attractive and disturbing, worthy of derision. By ignoring the gendered experiences of their female characters (and thus of real women) as well as the anger sparked by these experiences, and then devaluing displays of anger as either alluring or laughable, Williams and Montefiore set their protagonists up to fail as political figures.

³⁸ ‘All day long, in and out of convention, the peasants came flocking to see her, and would talk to no one else.’ (Bessie Beatty, *The Red Heart of Russia* (New York: Century, 1919), p. 376); As the Bolsheviks took to requisitioning grain and forcing harsh reprisals on peasants unwilling or unable to comply, they sent letters to Spiridonova for help and guidance, saying “If you also forsake us, *matushka*, we have no one to turn to.” (Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia* (New York: Dover Publications, 2003), p. 93).

³⁹ *Rech'*, no. 221, 20 September 1917. German journalist Alfons Paquet described her as “a tireless hysteric...the caricature of Athena, who, while speaking, always seemed to be reaching out for an invisible harp, and who, when the hall would burst into applause and rage, would impatiently stamp her feet, lifting the fallen shoulder straps of her dress.” (Quoted in Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution 1899-1919* (London: Collins Harvill, 1990), p. 637.) Here we see, though Paquet glosses over it, the oratory power of Spiridonova coupled with her legend, and her popularity with the people. Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams, journalist and member of the conservative Kadet party, remarked that “all her speeches and actions showed an unbalanced and hysterical nature.” (Quoted in Sally A. Boniece, ‘Heroines and Hysterics: Mariia Spiridonova and Her Female Revolutionary Cohort in 1917-1918’, *Revolutionary Russia*, 30 (2017), 78-101 (p.88); Emma Goldman “had been told by Zorin and Jack Reed that Spiridonova had suffered a breakdown, and was kept in a sanatorium. Her malady, they said, was acute neurasthenia and hysteria. When I came face to face with Maria, I immediately realized that both men had deceived me. [...] If Spiridonova had really suffered a breakdown, as I had been assured, and was hysterical and mentally unbalanced, she must have had extraordinary control of herself. She was calm, self-contained, and clear on every point. She had the fullest command of her material and information” (Goldman, *Disillusionment*, p. 91-92).

⁴⁰ Historian Oliver Radkey claimed that even in the height of revolutionary activity in 1917, as Spiridonova ascended her power, she “had preserved a mental attitude of a high-school level” (*The Agrarian Foes of Bolshevism: Promise and Default of the Russian Socialist Revolutionaries, February to October 1917* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 472); Orlando Figes describes a speech by Spiridonova as “long and characteristically hysterical” (*A People's Tragedy* (London: Pimlico, 1996), p. 634). Anna Geifman also lends some credence to this in her book on the terrorist movement; this is no surprise, given that the majority of the women discussed within the book fall under a brief section headed “Psychologically Unbalanced” (*Revolutionary Terrorism in Russia, 1894-1917* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 167-172).

⁴¹ Traister, p. 54.

Political anger

First idealism, then pained outrage – that is the entire psychology of the classical, or ‘heroic’ period of our revolutionary history.

~ Olga Liubatovich⁴²

From expressions and explorations of gendered anger, many women’s rage turned political. Unfortunately, the only women given real-time political anger within these novels are the fictionalized *Narodnaya Volya* women who appear briefly in Williams’ text. Though Anna and Sashenka are presented as dedicated revolutionaries, their anger is not politicized; instead it’s personalized, prompted by offense or humiliation, making the women appear vain and moody and neglecting their political power.

Anna Kovalenko is introduced through political anger: she meets Frederick Hadfield at a political debate and chides him for his lack of revolutionary commitment. She speaks with ‘scorn’, her eyes flash ‘angrily’.⁴³ While her anger never ebbs, it’s thereafter depoliticized; her constant frustration with Hadfield’s lack of commitment end with her reneging on her outrage. She has one moment of political gumption, ‘boiling inside’ because he doesn’t recognize her the sincerity of her pledge to revolution and refuses to pledge himself. She is finally able to say: ‘our struggle means more to me than you do.’ Then she immediately backtracks. ‘She knew she was being unreasonable and she was sorry, but her feelings frightened her.’⁴⁴ She considers her angry feelings irrational including prioritizing revolution over Hadfield; fear of womanly emotion drives her, rather than clear-sighted commitment to a cause.⁴⁵

⁴² *Five Sisters*, p. 151.

⁴³ Williams, *Tsar*, p. 37.

⁴⁴ Williams, *Tsar*, p. 253-254.

⁴⁵ Throughout the history of the revolutionary underground, women from across parties found themselves leaving husbands and lovers whose outlooks did not align with theirs, including Breshkovskaya and Figner. Their differences did not even need to fall along left and right; Kollontai’s husband was a liberal factory inspector, but she found his insistence on small-scale reform infuriating. “[A]s great as was my love for my husband, immediately it transgressed a certain limit in relation to my feminine proneness to make sacrifices, rebellion flared in me anew. I had to go away, I had to break with the man of my choice, otherwise...I would have exposed myself to the danger of losing my selfhood” (Kollontai, *Autobiography*, p. 13).

Otherwise, Anna's anger is fueled by irritation or embarrassment. Hadfield notes 'a certain insecurity in her, quick to anger and take offence, but purpose and energy too...'⁴⁶ Hadfield doesn't see anger as the catalyst of her energy, spurring her to action. Unfortunately the way Anna is written, with many of her political decisions happening off-page, means we are in the same position: watching her anger splutter and fizzle over small indignities rather than smoulder over injustices.

There is so little anger in Sashenka – indeed, so little anything – that she comes across as vapid even when she's meant to feel sincere. As Soraya Chemaly notes, 'It is a symptom of a larger problem of sexism that one of the only acceptable and predictably talked-about forms of anger in women is a girl's anger toward her mother...particularly...in adolescence.'⁴⁷ An amalgamation of teen girl stereotypes, Sashenka's anger is mainly sparked, as we have seen, by: a mother she despises and fears becoming; her own appearance; and how these things reflect upon and shame her.

When Sagan mentions Rasputin, Sashenka's 'fury' turns inward. 'She wanted to shout out that she was ashamed that a creature like Rasputin was ruling Russia, ashamed that her own mother, whose love affairs with cardsharps and fads with charlatans had long embarrassed her, was now consorting with the Mad Monk. But instead, she could not stop herself answering like the petulant schoolgirl she still was.'⁴⁸ It's difficult to gauge what are Sashenka's impressions of herself and what are Montefiore's assessments; but she never matures beyond this petulance during her revolutionary career.

Shopping for a dress with her mother and governess 'began to rile her. She hated the way she looked in every dress and found herself becoming angry and upset. "I'm so ugly...in this. I refuse to wear it! I'd burn it!" Her mother...was a gorgeous swan while Sashenka felt lumpier

⁴⁶ Williams, *Tsar*, p.193.

⁴⁷ "It's no mistake that the time when we come to a growing awareness of our inequalities, we are supposed to focus our anger on another woman" Chemaly, *Rage*, p.281.

⁴⁸ Montefiore, *Sashenka*, p. 82. We hear echoes here of Spiridonova as the eternal high-school girl, although Sashenka is, in fact, still enrolled at the Smolny.

and fatter than a warthog’.⁴⁹ For all that her mother’s lasciviousness shames and humiliates Sashenka, she nevertheless envies her poise and beauty – strange considering her efforts to *try* and look lumpy to hide her body which, elsewhere, is so un-warthogish.

Sashenka has no opportunity to revel in political anger. Revolutionary statements are made flatly, without markers. When she confronts her father with her Bolshevism, after over a year of illicit activity, she tilts on the brink of anger without crossing over. ‘Her face was firm, *almost* aggressive. [...] She was *almost* shouting at him...flushed with defiance...’⁵⁰ Even in the thick of revolution, she isn’t really angry. Her anger is explicitly expressed only when Sagan attempts to rape her, but her ‘corrosive shame and...savage fury’, firmly stated, aren’t developed. She imagines going back and shooting him...and instead, watches a mob beat him to death.⁵¹ Not for the first time, an opportunity for Sashenka to exert any agency whatsoever is missed.

Sashenka’s agency and motivation are never fully established. Her uncle, Mendel, ‘exposed Sashenka to the grotesque injustice of capitalist society, to the oppression of workers and peasants, and showed her how...her own father – was an exploiter of the working man.’⁵² Mendel gave a more detailed explanation, perhaps, but Sashenka already seemed to know these things in a superficial way. She recalls that:

Since childhood, she had been shocked by the injustices she had seen at [her father’s] vast estates... The luxury and debauchery of her parents’ wretched marriage seemed to her the epitome of the rottenness of Russia and the capitalist world. Mendel had rescued her from all this wickedness, and had changed her life.⁵³

At last, there’s context: Sashenka had seen “injustices”, though what, and by/to whom we’re left guessing, particularly since this engendered “shock” but no anger. Again, despite her recognition of these wrongs, the credit goes to Mendel.

⁴⁹ Montefiore, *Sashenka*, p. 99.

⁵⁰ Montefiore, *Sashenka*, p. 174. Emphasis is mine.

⁵¹ Montefiore, *Sashenka*, p. 178-79.

⁵² Montefiore, *Sashenka*, p. 51. As Sheila Rowbotham points out: “Women have come to revolutionary consciousness by means of ideas, actions and organizations which have been made predominantly by men” (Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance, and Revolution*, p. 11).

⁵³ Montefiore, *Sashenka*, p. 94.

Childhood exposure to the gentry's cruelty was recalled in explicit terms by those who witnessed it.⁵⁴ Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaya devotes nearly twenty-five pages of her memoir to outlining the suffering of the serfs on her father's estate and its effect on her. 'How many times, stupefied and shocked, I have been the witness of such humiliating, degrading, excruciating things! [...] [They] tormented my childish mind...unable to sleep for thinking of all the horrors about me.'⁵⁵ She observed how many were carried into the schoolroom 'crippled by the knout. Sobbing wives told of husbands killed before their eyes' and that she '...felt that tremendous economic and political changes must be made' as a result.⁵⁶ Sashenka isn't afforded this depth and her sincerity suffers, especially since the focus of her anger is still her parents. Worse, it's difficult to discern how much of her comprehension and conviction is organic and how much is Mendel pulling her strings. Exploring her emotional reactions in narration could have alleviated this, and more accurately represented female revolutionaries' responses to social injustice. This becomes especially problematic when we consider the matter of class.

⁵⁴ Vera Zasulich took the assassination of General Trepov onto her shoulders because of society's silence in the face of his flogging a political prisoner. "There was nothing to stop Trepov, or someone just as powerful as he, from repeating the same violence over and over. I resolved at that point, even if it cost my life, to prove that no one who abused a human being that way could be sure of getting away with it. [...] It's terrible to have to lift a hand against another person, but I felt that it had to be done" (*Five Sisters*, p. 78). *Narodnaya Volya* member Praskovia Ivanovskaya wrote that, when revolutionaries looked at "the injustice all around us, at the downtrodden, benumbed masses [o]ur souls pined for truth and justice" (*Five Sisters* p. 101). Maria Spiridonova, at her trial in 1906, recalled the effect Luzhenovsky's cruelty toward the peasants had on her: "I undertook to carry out the death sentence...for it would have broken my heart, it would have been a shame to go on living and hear of the terror and demoralization which reigned in the souls of the peasants after Luzhenovsky's maltreatment. [...] [T]here was no power in hell, no prospect of the most terrible torture that could move me from my resolution" (Quoted in Issac Steinberg, *Spiridonova: Revolutionary Terrorist* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1935), p. 38-39). There is certainly a propagandistic strain in this speech, since revolutionaries often saw the stand as their best opportunity to state their beliefs, their rationale, and their party platform. Nevertheless, it becomes difficult to doubt her sincerity in light of her life-long consistency.

⁵⁵ Breshkovskaya, *Reminiscences*, p. 6-8.

⁵⁶ Breshkovskaya, *Reminiscences*, p. 18-19.

Role of characters' class

Already as a small child I criticized the injustice of adults and I experienced as a blatant contradiction the fact that everything was offered to me, while so much was denied to other children.

~ Alexandra Kollontai⁵⁷

Anna and Sashenka come from different backgrounds: though both have wealthy fathers, Anna is an illegitimate serf while Sashenka is the spoiled only child. Their class plays no role in their thoughts or choices, disconnecting them from the socialist ideas they espouse.

Anna's experience is lifted from the girlhood of Elizaveta Kovalskaia who, plagued by nightmares of being sold, at age seven convinced her nobleman father to retroactively register her serf mother (and by extension herself) as a free citizen.⁵⁸ Williams sands down the spikey edges; Anna lived with 'an old babushka' and her benevolent father, rather than being confronted, 'used his influence to register Anna as a member of...the lower middle class...and sent her to the local gymnasium' *after* the emancipation of the serfs (thus risking and losing nothing). The mother is never mentioned again.⁵⁹

As a result of this tempering, Anna's class never drives her the way it did revolutionaries with similar backgrounds. We learn from Vera Figner's character that Anna has 'organized workers into a union' in Kharkov⁶⁰, but we don't see this work being done, and none of her present activity or even her thoughts reflect the difference of background between Anna and noble women like Figner.⁶¹ Anna never discusses what *Narodnaya Volya* could do for the peasants – a perspective only she has. Framing her personal anger, like when Hadfield's use of

⁵⁷ Kollontai, *Autobiography*, p. 9.

⁵⁸ *Five Sisters* p. 207.

⁵⁹ Williams, *Tsar*, p. 96.

⁶⁰ Williams, *Tsar*, p. 38.

⁶¹ Vera Zasulich, whose assassination attempt on General Trepov predated the assassination of the Tsar by several years, was born to a noble family but fobbed off as a poor relation at age three after her father's death. "I always considered myself one of the poor," she said, "at first against my will, with a feeling of deep resentment, and then, later, almost with pride" (Quoted in Siljak, *Angel*, p. 21). Figner and Liubatovich left memoirs; Perovskaya was hanged in 1881 for her role in the assassination of Tsar Alexander II.

French highlights her lack of education, in a wider, politicized context could give her depth and shed light on ways peasant and working-class women navigated genteel revolutionary circles.⁶²

Sashenka's position as the daughter of an industrialist is more complex. Revolutionaries were commonly from the intelligentsia and nobility, guilty that their rights were denied others. Breshkovskaya noticed it as a child, inviting peasant children into her home to share the comfort and shelter she enjoyed; Kollontai recalled she 'did not know the meaning of privation. Yet I saw how [peasant] children were forced to give up things...' ⁶³ As an adult, she realized she 'could not lead a happy, peaceful life when the working population was so terribly enslaved. I simply had to join this movement.'⁶⁴

Considering Sashenka's privilege, it is strange that Marxism is readily accepted without any examination or discomfort around her own class. When her uncle first asks her views Sashenka recites a brief litany of Imperial Russia's sins: 'It's all wrong. It's so unjust. The workers are like slaves. We're losing the war. Everything's rotten.'⁶⁵ As she sits in prison, she misses her governess, her school matron, and her pony, even as she observes the filth and suffering of the prisoners.⁶⁶ Her focus is not the movement, nor the people she's meant to be working for; once free, thanks to her father, she's grateful for the wealthy life she claims to be rejecting, and never again thinks of the prisoners she's left behind.⁶⁷ She reveals herself early as disinterested in "the people" except as a symbol.

⁶² Williams, *Tsar*, p. 98-99.

⁶³ Breshkovskaya, *Reminiscences*, p. 4-5. Kollontai, *Autobiography*, p. 9.

⁶⁴ Kollontai, *Autobiography*, p. 11. After seeing the brutal conditions at the Krengholm factory, she told her husband, "We can't go on living like this, while other people live like animals!" (Quoted in Porter, *Kollontai*, p. 53).

⁶⁵ Montefiore, *Sashenka*, p. 50.

⁶⁶ Montefiore, *Sashenka*, p. 47

⁶⁷ Sashenka's convictions do occasionally shift and slip, particularly under pressure. When during their first interview Captain Sagan questions her father's loyalty, as a Jewish man, she replies hotly: "'My father's a Russian patriot! The Tsar gave him a medal! [...] The King of Saxony made him a baron.' Whatever Sashenka's views on her father's class and the capitalist war, she was still his daughter. 'He works hard for his country.'" This despite multiple avowals of disgust at the wonton luxury of her parents' lives and her father's role in the war, revealing Sashenka's superficial attachment to Bolshevism as a political position, rather than a social one (Montefiore, *Sashenka*, p. 64).

The class systems is something she observes, without recognizing her participation in it, or that her wealth comes at others' expense. '[T]he...Yusupov Palace...more than any other building represented the iniquitous wealth of the few. [...] Like...Mendel, she lived for the Revolution. Whenever she looked...she saw only those who would benefit from the beautiful march of the dialectic.'⁶⁸ For her the 'iniquitous few' are comprised of others – especially her parents – even as she reaps the benefits of her privileged position, making it difficult to believe her conviction is sincere.⁶⁹

Reconciling socialist convictions with class was difficult and painful for women of the upper classes. Vera Figner wrote at length about her struggle to square the two.

Thus...stood, on the one hand, millions of human beings condemned to endless labor, to poverty...while on the other there was a small handful...enjoying all the good things of life because others were laboring for them. [...] And I, Vera Figner, was one of those people on top; like them, I was responsible for all the misery of the vast majority.⁷⁰

Even having identified and accepted her complicity, she was reluctant to give up privileges like her inheritance and her degree.⁷¹ In the end she realized she 'would have to renounce my position, for it would be unthinkable to recognize that you were the cause of others' suffering and still retain your privileges and enjoy your advantages'.⁷² Figner considered the movement paramount, and couldn't condone her actions contradicting her words. Sashenka not similarly conflicted; there's no indication it even occurs to her. For unexplained reasons, she continues by

⁶⁸ Montefiore, *Sashenka*, p. 93.

⁶⁹ Working-class women exhibit the only overt anger, wrestling and beating each other for food, smashing shop windows and looting bread as the revolution approaches. Sashenka observes this "the anger of the streets" coolly (Montefiore, *Sashenka*, p. 139-142). Female anger doesn't live in Sashenka; it is an othered emotion, a lower-class affliction.

⁷⁰ *Five Sisters*, p. 14.

⁷¹ "All these things I had to shatter with my own hands, when the goal was already before my eyes. When I had analysed both this side of the question, and the other, on which were ranged my friends who had given themselves unreservedly, with all their souls, to the cause; people who had disregarded these same feelings, these same blessings, who had not yielded to the egotism of their relatives, or to their personal ambitions; when I remembered that these people were suffering in prison, and had already experienced that hard and grievous lot for which we had all been mentally preparing ourselves; when I realised that I already possessed the knowledge necessary for a physician...I decided to go, in order that my deeds might not disprove my words. My decision was deliberate and firm, with the result that later I did not look back with regret even once" (Vera Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (New York: International Publishers Co., 1927), p. 45-46).

⁷² *Five Sisters*, p. 151.

day to live in her parents' fine home, shop for gowns with her mother, and live the life of a noble daughter whilst attending her Bolshevik duties at night.⁷³

From her first exposure to Marxism, Sashenka proves her radicalism is an exercise in personal fulfilment. After airing her views to her uncle, she immediately asks: 'Am I a revolutionary? A Bolshevik?'⁷⁴ She is so excited by the prestige of Bolshevism that she adopts it without learning its or any other party's platform. As we have seen, Sashenka's portrayal as a stereotypical teenage girl makes her adoration for the revolution feel vacuous. As she sits in prison she calms herself by remembering 'she had been put on earth to live this adventure: it was her vocation'.⁷⁵ The word 'vocation' is an odd choice. Women turned to revolutionary activity with wholehearted dedication, and often paid high prices: prison (for more than the one night Sashenka faces), exile, and death.⁷⁶

Sashenka fails to outgrow this melodramatic sense of self-importance. 'She revelled in the delicious, almost amorous feeling of being part of a secret, a giant conspiracy. There was something seductive about sacrificing the old morality of the middle classes for the new morality of the Revolution. ...the very unromance of it was what made it so romantic.'⁷⁷ She treats 'revolutionary' as a role to be swept up in, viewing herself as romantic heroine. A thrill is always running up her spine or her heart skipping a beat as she moons over her own glamour.⁷⁸

Yet the greatest draw for Sashenka is the distance revolutionary work puts between her and her parents. Her father is indulgent, when present, and her mother is an opium addicted nymphomaniac; Sashenka is determined to prove herself different. When she returns from jail

⁷³ "What does our rage at injustice mean if it can be silenced, erased by individual material comfort?" bell hooks, *Killing Rage* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1995), p. 19.

⁷⁴ Montefiore, *Sashenka*, p. 50.

⁷⁵ Montefiore, *Sashenka*, p. 27.

⁷⁶ "Women, it must be confessed, are much more richly endowed with this divine flame than men. This is why the almost religious fervour of the Russian Revolutionary movement must in great part be attributed to them; and while they take part in it, it will be invincible." (Stepniak [Sergei Kravchinsky], *Underground Russia: Revolutionary Profiles and Sketches from Life* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1883), p. 127). "None of the women of our circle would have given way before the certainty of death on the scaffold. Each would have looked death straight in the face." (Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (London: The Cresset Library, 1988), p. 212).

⁷⁷ Montefiore, *Sashenka*, p. 94.

⁷⁸ Montefiore, *Sashenka*, p. 103.

she ‘revel[s] in the shock of her father and the servants. “Yes!” she proclaimed, “I’ve been to prison, I’ve seen the tombs that are the Tsar’s jails. I’m no longer the Smolny girl you thought I was!”’⁷⁹ Sashenka’s one night among the general population of prisoners has elevated her, in her mind, into a hardened agent of revolution, enough so that she can risk the safety of her operation by announcing her involvement despite the Bolsheviks’ emphasis on discretion.

The pleasure she takes in shocking ‘respectable’ people and feeling grownup is her core motivation. She harks back again and again to her fear of remaining a coddled rich girl: when Rasputin is killed and her mother collapses, Sashenka reminds herself ‘she was a Marxist and a Bolshevik, and she had nothing to do with her parents anymore’ even as she carries her mother home; when a piece of information gleaned from Sagan proves useful she smugly asserts that ‘She really was an asset to the Party, not the spoilt child of the degenerate classes.’⁸⁰ This constant repetition feels forced, as if the reader needs reminding as much as Sashenka herself. Her desire to join the movement is a personal, superficial revolution rather than anything political or institutional. If we accept that ‘...anger at injustice...is not selfish. ...when someone is angry at injustice, they’re not just concerned with themselves but also other people...’ then we cannot accept that Sashenka is motivated by social injustice.⁸¹

Conclusion

Williams’ and Montefiore’s portrayals of female revolutionaries in the Russian underground set them apart in a genre whose heroines are so often merely impacted by the Revolution rather than participants in it. Unfortunately, without examining gendered and political anger or taking class into account, they fail to present an accurate, well-rounded impression of the women as they really were. Angry women were fundamental to the movement

⁷⁹ Montefiore, *Sashenka*, p. 76.

⁸⁰ Montefiore, *Sashenka*, p. 120. Ibid, p. 140.

⁸¹ Myisha Cherry, quoted in Traister, *Good and Mad*, p. xxiii.

from its inception, and when the workers rose up in 1917 it was outraged women who took the first steps.

Being ‘angry’ is not in and of itself revolutionary: it’s what is *done* with that anger, how it’s channeled and makes itself heard, which is truly radical. Denying a characters’ anger or treating it as a stereotype cuts off a fundamental part of her identity and puts her agency into question. Making a female revolutionary protagonist ‘angry’ is not the same as making her well-rounded, realistic, or complex. How that anger is treated, by the author, the heroine, and her fellow characters, does that.

With that in mind, I was careful to show the multifaceted nature of women’s anger, the different ways in which it both motivates and debilitates, vitalises and drains, creates and destroys. I also wanted to explore the enormous variety of situations in which it can manifest and the equally numerous ways it can be received. Above all I wanted to make clear that their feelings, however messy or intense, were legitimate, and that a woman’s anger does not inherently preclude her from rational or meaningful decision-making, not least in a political sphere. It is my sincere hope that my novel, *Do Unto Others*, goes some way toward addressing this gap.

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Appendix A

Russian revolutionary women appearing in *Do Unto Others*

Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaya

Born January 13, 1844, Breshkovskaya was raised in pious noble household. Her sympathy with the plight of the serfs on her father's estate led her to become a teacher at a village school. She married in 1868 and gave birth to a son, but her husband was not sympathetic to her liberal views, so she left her family to join the anarchist movement.

She traveled as a revolutionary missionary during the *narodnik* (to the people) movement in the early 1870s and was arrested. After a four-year term in prison she appeared as a defendant at the Trial of the 193 in 1877 and was sentenced to five years *katorga* (hard labour) in Siberia and prison.



When she was released in 1896, she turned from propaganda to terror, forming the Socialist Revolutionary Party in 1901 with Grigory Gershuni. After his arrest, she escaped to Switzerland and US, where renowned anarchist Emma Goldman arranged a speaking tour for her. She raised thousands of dollars to be sent back to Russia for the SR cause.

Breshkovskaya returned to Russia in early 1905 as the revolution erupted and managed to remain in hiding for three years until she was arrested and exiled in 1908. After the 1917 an amnesty was declared for political prisoners across the empire, and Breshkovskaya, now 73, became a celebrate figure in the Provisional Government.

She was an ardent opponent of the Bolshevik revolution, seeking support from the US government to crush their uprising. She left Russia for Czechoslovakia where she died on September 12, 1934.

Sofia Perovskaya

Born September 13, 1853 to a noble family, Sophia yearned for an education but faced resistance from her father, military governor of St. Petersburg. She left home at 16 and joined the Tchaikovsky Circle. Arrested in January 1874, she was tried at Trial of the 193 and acquitted on January 23, 1878.

Perovskaya joined Land and Liberty but the party split in 1879 into Black Repartition, who preferred propaganda, and *Narodnaya*

Volya (The People's Will) who favoured terrorism. Sophia participated in the attack on Tsar Alexander II's train. On the night of November 19 the terrorists misjudged and blew up the wrong train. Sophia joined *Narodnaya Volya*, becoming the first woman on the Administrative Committee and Executive Committee, and next joined the mission to blow up the street the tsar often passed through en-route to Crimea, but the tsar went by sooner than anticipated.

Around this time she met Andrei Zhelyabov, fellow terrorist, with whom she was to collaborate on the assassination of Tsar Alexander II and whom she married. They plotted to throw a bomb at the tsar's carriage on March 1, 1881. Zhelyabov was arrested on the night of February 27, but Sophia refused to abandon their mission and stepped as primary organizer.

Spent a restless night in Vera Figner's flat on February 28 and awoke at 7am to station her accomplices along the Griboyedov canal before she crossed to the opposite side, to give the signal. This time, their aim was true.

Sophia was arrested on March 10. At trial, she admitted to her role in the Moscow train bombing and the assassination in the capital. Sophia was sentenced to death and executed on April 3, 1881 along with four of her accomplices, including Zhelyabov. She was the first woman hanged in Russia for a political crime.



Vera Figner

Figner was born July 7, 1852 into a noble Jewish family. In 1872 she went to Zurich with her sister Lydia to study medicine; whilst there she joined the *Fritsche* group, an association of a dozen other female radicals.

When she returned to Russia she got her license as a paramedic and was invited to join Land and Liberty. When the group split, Figner joined *Narodnaya Volya*, becoming member of the Executive Committee and participating in both unsuccessful attempts on the tsar's life. The night on February 28, 1881 she helped prepare the bombs which would kill Tsar Alexander II.

Determined to capitalise on the Party's success, Figner refused to flee abroad and instead attempted to rebuild *Narodnaya Volya*. She was denounced by a traitor and arrested on February 10, 1883, then tried in Trial of the 14 in September, 1884. Facing a death sentence, Figner refused to plead for clemency. Her sentence was commuted to imprisonment in the Schlüsselburg Fortress, where she remained in solitary confinement for 20 years.

In 1904 she was moved to internal exile, and two years later, amidst the chaos of the first Russian revolution, allowed to travel abroad. She organized funds and support for Russian political prisoners, and after 1917 joined the Society of Former Political Prisoners and Exiles, working for their paper *Katorga i ssylka* (Hard Labour and Exile).

As with so many *narodniks*, her pleasure in the revolutionary events of 1917 were diminished by the nature of Bolshevik rule and the betrayal of socialist/anarchist ideals. Amidst the turbulence, only her legend protected her from the fate which befell so many opponents of Bolshevism. She died June 15, 1942.



Vera Zasulich

Vera Zasulich was born July 27 1851, and when her father died she was sent, at age 3, to live with cousins.

In the autumn of 1868 she fell in with the circle of students associated with Sergei Nechaev. Tenuous as their link was (she had let him use her address for foreign correspondence), she was nevertheless implicated in the trial of his followers and arrested.



Released in 1873, Zasulich joined the Kievan Insurgents, a militant Bakuninist (anarchist) group. It was while working as a typesetter in an underground press in St. Petersburg three years later that she heard about the Trepov incident.

Fyodor Trepov, governor of St. Petersburg, had ordered a political prisoner flogged for failing to remove his cap. Zasulich felt the injustice keenly. On January 24, 1878, she shot and wounded him. She was tried March 31, and, miraculously, was acquitted; her selfless reason coupled with the general hatred of Trepov, exacerbated by her excellent lawyer, made her a popular heroine.

Zasulich was smuggled to Switzerland where she converted to Marxism, becoming a founder of the first Russian Marxist group and translating his works into Russian. Zasulich joined the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party and served on the editorial board of Lenin's *Iskra*. When the party split in 1903 she joined the Mensheviks and, upon returning to Russia after 1905, joined Plekhanov's independent radical party.

War was declared in 1914, and Zasulich supported the war effort. She was too ill to participate in the 1917 revolution, and was deeply troubled by the Bolshevik seizure of power in October, for she knew Lenin and his cohorts better than most. She died of pneumonia on May 8, 1919.

Alexandra Kollontai

Born on March 31, 1872 to a noble family. A member of the Russian Democratic Labour Party since 1899, she witnessed the Bloody Sunday massacre which sparked the 1905 Revolution after which she joined the Mensheviks.

Kollontai went into exile for nearly a decade, travelling across Europe promoting socialism and women's rights. She was disappointed in the Menshevik's support of the war, turning her allegiance to the anti-war Bolsheviks, and returned to Russia following Tsar Nicholas II's abdication in 1917.



She joined the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet and worked on the women's paper *Rabotnitsa*. After the Bolshevik coup in October she was elected People's Commissar for Social Welfare and founded the *Zhenotdel* (Women's Department).

Soon Kollontai was bitterly disappointed with the running of the Party. She joined the Workers' Opposition Party, but the Bolsheviks had by now cracked down on all opposition, internal or external, and Kollontai and her fellow Workers' Opposition comrades were largely discredited.

She was sent to administrative exile as the foreign attaché to Norway – the third female diplomat – followed by Mexico, Norway again, and finally ambassador of Sweden, as well as Soviet ambassador to the League of Nations before retiring in 1945. She died of a heart attack on March 9, 1952.

Vera Karelina

Born in 1870, Vera grew up in St. Petersburg Foundling Hospital where she was taught technical work, being briefly adopted by a family in Yamburg. She became a weaver in cotton mill at age 20 where she organized the first social-democratic women workers circle. Arrested in 1892 for attending an illegal political meeting, she spent six months at the House of Preliminary Detention. Upon release, Karelina moved to Ukraine but was arrested and imprisoned again on the same charges until her release in 1894.



Two years later Karelina returned to the capital to form strikes and workers' circles, and joined Lenin's League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class.

Initially she considered Grigory Gapon's Assembly of Russian Factory Workers of St. Petersburg to be 'police socialism' (as it was funded by a police administrator), but soon saw it as a legal means of disseminating socialist propaganda. She was selected as chairwoman for the women's section, leading classes and educational activities for women workers. Karelina was largely responsible for the Assembly's shift towards a more political tone.

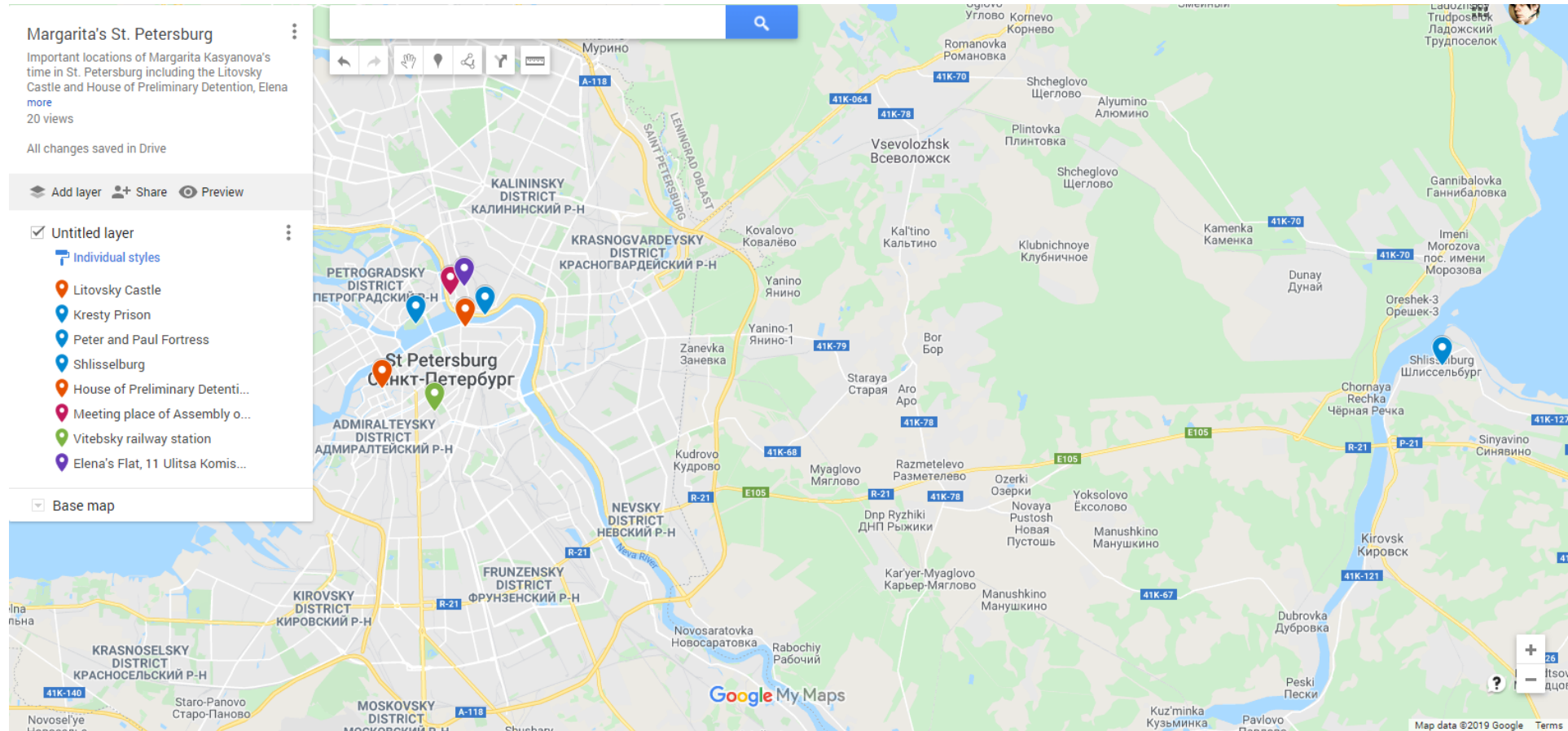
Karelina helped plan the procession on January 9, 1905. She and her husband led a march from Vasilyevsky Island to the Winter Palace, where it was fired upon by the Imperial Guard, resulting in hundreds of casualties and many more injured.

After the Assembly collapsed, Karelina was elected to the St. Petersburg Soviet in 1905 and started "Labour Union" in 1907, although it was quickly broken up by police. She returned to Yamburg and set up rural cooperatives. She died in Leningrad in 1931.

Appendix B

Personalized Google map of *Do Unto Others* locations, St. Petersburg, Russia

(Available from: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=1CbaXfeYwMGuYWy3mv_oZIBcseQT_F1sr&usp=sharing>)



Margarita's St. Petersburg
Important locations of Margarita Kasyanova's time in St. Petersburg including the Litovsky Castle and House of Preliminary Detention, Elena's more
20 views
All changes saved in Drive

Add layer Share Preview

☒ Untitled layer

Individual styles

- ☒ Litovsky Castle
- ☐ Kresty Prison
- ☐ Peter and Paul Fortress
- ☐ Shlisselburg
- ☐ House of Preliminary Detenti...
- ☐ Meeting place of Assembly o...
- ☐ Vitebsky railway station
- ☐ Elena's Flat, 11 Ulitsa Komis...

Base map

Litovsky Castle

С.Петербург - Ст.Петербург, № 16.
Исторический музей - Литовский замок

Where Margarita spends the majority of her prison stay.

59.92753, 30.29311

Google My Maps

Map data ©2019 Google Terms

Margarita's St. Petersburg

Important locations of Margarita Kasyanova's time in St. Petersburg including the Litovskiy Castle and House of Preliminary Detention, Elena more

20 views

All changes saved in Drive

Add layer Share Preview

☒ **Untitled layer**

Individual styles

- Litovskiy Castle
- Kresty Prison
- Peter and Paul Fortress
- Shlisselburg
- House of Preliminary Detention**
- Meeting place of Assembly o...
- Vitebsky railway station
- Elena's Flat, 11 Ulitsa Komis...

☐ Base map

House of Preliminary Detention

Where Margarita spent the end of her pregnancy, birth, and first few months of Kira's life before she was taken.

Details from Google Maps Remove

Shpalernaya Ulitsa, 25, Sankt-Peterburg, Russia,

59.94881, 30.35116

Google My Maps

Map data ©2019 Google Terms

Margarita's St. Petersburg
 Important locations of Margarita Kasyanova's time in St. Petersburg including the Litovsky Castle and House of Preliminary Detention, Elena more
 20 views
 All changes saved in Drive

☒ **Untitled layer**

- ☐ Individual styles
- ☒ Litovsky Castle
- ☐ Kresty Prison
- ☐ Peter and Paul Fortress
- ☐ Shlisselburg
- ☐ House of Preliminary Detenti...
- ☐ Meeting place of Assembly o...
- ☒ **Vitebsky railway station**
- ☐ Elena's Flat, 11 Ulitsa Komis...

☐ Base map

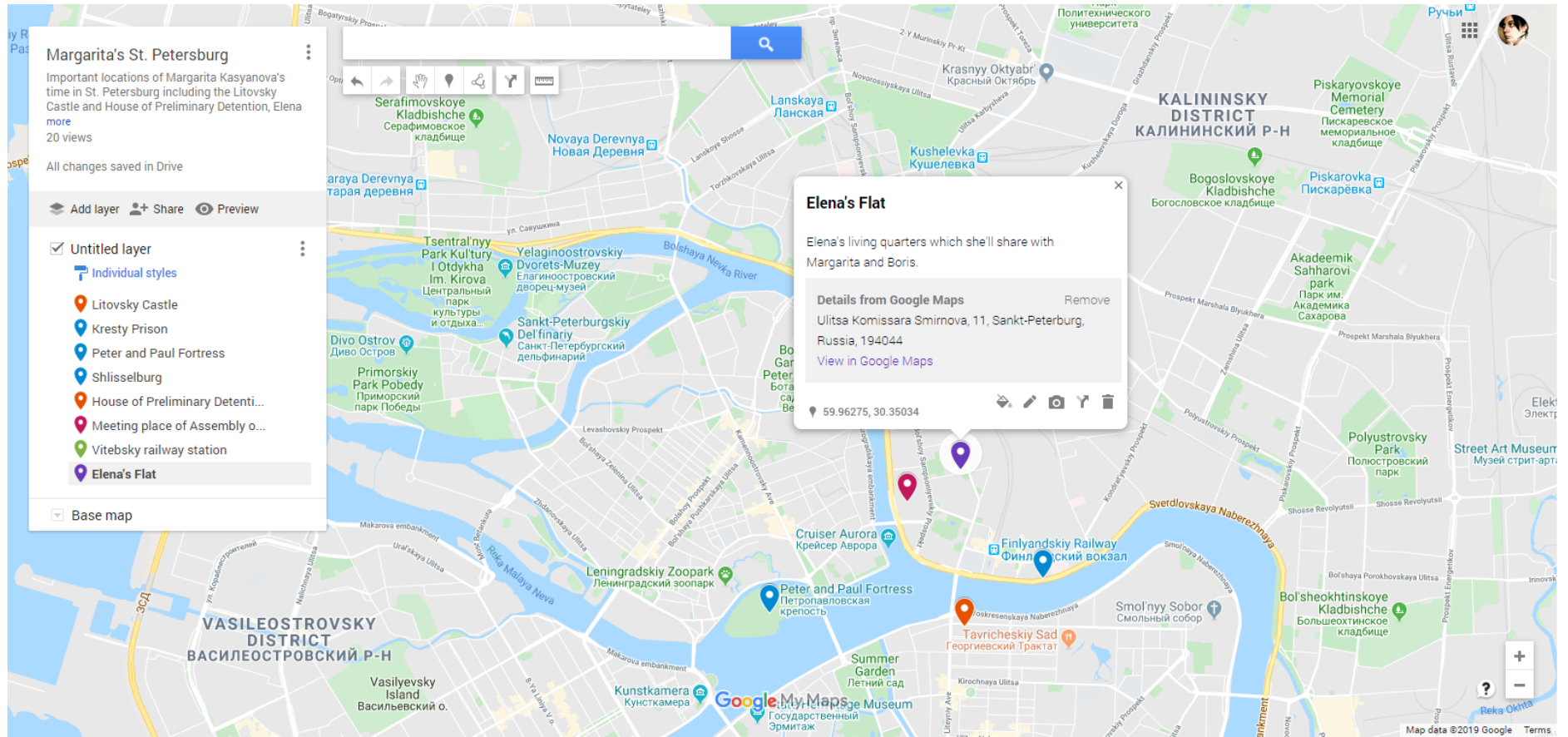
Vitebsky railway station

Where Margarita arrives in the capital.

Details from Google Maps
 Zagorodnyy Prospekt, 52, Sankt-Peterburg, Russia, 198013

59.91967, 30.32949

Map data ©2019 Google Terms



Margarita's St. Petersburg

Important locations of Margarita Kasyanova's time in St. Petersburg including the Litovsky Castle and House of Preliminary Detention, Elena more
20 views

All changes saved in Drive

Add layer + Share Preview

☒ **Untitled layer**

Individual styles

- Litovsky Castle
- Kresty Prison
- Peter and Paul Fortress
- Shlisselburg
- House of Preliminary Detention
- Meeting place of Assembly of Russian Factory and Plant Workers of St. Petersburg
- Vitebsky railway station
- Elena's Flat

☒ Base map

Meeting place of Assembly of Russian Factory and Plant Workers of St. Petersburg

Meeting place for Father Gapon's organization which Margarita attends with Elena.

59.95989, 30.34104

1 of 1

Map data ©2019 Google Terms

Appendix C

The Prisons of St. Petersburg

(Available from: <<http://www.ensspb.ru/object/2855697693?lc=en>>)

**Active prisons**

1. Pre-trial Detention House
- *12. Central solitary confinement prison “Kresty”
13. Women’s prison
14. Military prison
15. Prison hospital

Non-Existent Prisons

6. Trubetskoy Bastion of the Peter and Paul Fortress
7. Military correctional prison
8. City transitional prison
9. Governor’s directorate

Non-Existent Prisons (Building Not Preserved)

11. Penal prison (1706)
12. Secret House of Aleekseevsky ravelin, Peter and Paul Fortress
13. Lithuanian Castle (Litovsky Zamok)
14. Prison Third Section SEIBK (His Imperial Majesty’s Own Chancellery)
15. Transit prison
16. Prison under the remit of the St. Petersburg City Administration

*Map is mis-numbered, and I have reflected this in the translation.

Appendix D

My Excel spreadsheet of Russian Revolutionary women

	A	B	C	D
1	Full Name	Alias	Birth-Death	Political Affiliation
2	Maria Alexandrovna Spiridonova	Marusya; Onufrieva	Oct 16, 1884-Sept 11, 1941	Socialist Revolutionary/Left SR
3	Fanny Kaplan	Dora, Feiga Khaimovna Roytblat-Kaplan/Roytman/Reutemann	Feb 10, 1890-Sept 3, 1918	Anarchist/Socialist Revolutionary (Right SR?)
4	Olga Davidovna Kameneva		1883-Sept 11, 1941	Bolshevik
5	Lydia Konopleva			
6	Vera Nikolayevna Figner	Likhareva/Ivanitskaya/Kokhanovskaya	Jun 25, 1852-Jun 15, 1942	Frich/Narodnik/All-Russian Socialist Revolutionary Organization (Moscow Organization)/Narodnaya Volya/Socialist Revolutionary Party
7	Lydia Nikolayevna Figner			Frich/Narodnik/All-Russian Socialist Revolutionary Organization (Moscow Organization)/Narodnaya Volya/Socialist Revolutionary Party
8	Evgenia Nikolayevna Figner			Narodnik/Narodnaya Volya
9	Vera Ivanovna Zasulich	Elizabeth Belinskaya	Jul 27, 1849-May 8, 1919	Nechaev/Narodnik/Emancipation of Labor (first group of Marxists; co-founder)/Russian Social Democratic Labor Party/Menshevik
10	Alexandra Mikhailovna Kollontai	Davydova	Mar 31, 1872 - Mar 9, 1952	Menshevik/Bolshevik/Workers' Opposition
11	Sophia Lvovna Perovskaya		Sept 13, 1853-Apr 15, 1881	Chaikovsky/Narodnik/Land and Liberty/Narodnaya Volya
12	Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaya	Babushka / Little grandmother of the Revolution	Jan 13, 1844-Sept 12, 1934	Bakuninist/Narodnik/Socialist Revolutionary
13	Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya	Sablina, Lenin, NK, Artamonov, Onegin, Fish (Ryba), Lamprey, Rybkin, Charcot, Katya, Frey, Gallei	Feb 26, 1869-Feb 27, 1939	Bolshevik
14	Praskovia Ivanovskaia			Narodnaya Volya
15	Olga Spiridonovna Liubatovich	Shark		All-Russian Socialist Revolutionary Organization (Moscow Organization)/Land and Liberty/Narodnaya Volya
16	Elizaveta Kovalskaia			
17	Dr. Maria Ivanova Pakrovskaja			Menshevik
18	Inessa Fyodorovna Armand	Frantsiska Kazimirovna Yankevich/Blonina/Comrade Petrova		Bolshevik
19	Eva L'vovna Broido		Nov 7, 1876-Sept 14, 1941	Menshevik
20	Elizaveta Fen			
21	Rosalia Samoilovna Zemlyachka		Mar 20, 1876-Jan 21, 1947	Bolshevik
22	Vera Markovna Karelina		1870-1931	RSDRP (more independent; did not rely on party instructions); Gapon Society/Assembly of Russian Factory and Mill Workers of St. Petersburg
23	Anna Boldyreva			Bolshevik
24	Nagovitsyna-Ikrianistova			
25	S. Klitchoglu			
26	Dora Itkind			
27	Maria Itkind			
28	Anna Budnitskaia			
29	Glafira Okulova-Teodorovich			
30	Didrikil sisters			
31	Praskovia Kuliabko			
32	Varvara Ivanovna Aleksandrova			
33	Haiia Abramovna Abramova	Klavdiia Dubrovskaya		
34	Elizaveta Berzin			
35	Nina Agadzhanova			
36	A. Smelova			

	A	B	C	D
1	Full Name	Alias	Birth-Death	Political Affiliation
37	E. Balashova			
38	M. Golubeva			
39	Daria Ivanova			
40	M. Lebedeva			
41	Ludmilla P. Shelgunova			
42	A. Dement'eva			
43	Beta Kaminskaya	"Masha Krasnova" - in factory	??-1877	Narodnik/All-Russian Socialist Revolutionary Organization (Moscow Organization)
44	Aleksandra Khorzhevskaya		??-1886	Frich/Narodnik/All-Russian Socialist Revolutionary Organization (Moscow Organization)
45	Medvedeva			
46	Anna Toporkova			Narodnik
47	Gesia Mironovna Gelfman		1852(approx)-1881	Narodnik/All-Russian Socialist Revolutionary Organization (Moscow Organization)/Narodnaya Volya
48	Evgenia Tumanova			
49	Praskovia Georgievskaya			
50	Nadezhda Georgievskaya			
51	E. Vvedenskaya			RSDRP and Bolshevik
52	Golovina Iurgenson			
53	Zinaida Nevzorova	Pastry		Bolshevik
54	Praskovia Kudellii			
55	Sofia Muralova			
56	Elizaveta Elagina			
57	Mariia Boie			
58	Nevzorova			
59	Iakubova			
60	Radchenko			
61	Olga Varentsova			
62	Elizaveta Volodina			
63	Evdokiia Sysoeva-Levina			
64	Sofia Pomeranets-Perazich			
65	Raisa Strazh			
66	Ekaterina Groman			
67	F. Rudakova			
68	Evgeniia Bosh			
69	Anna Vinokurova			
70	Olga Brichkina			
71	Mariia Alekseevna Chekhova			

	A	B	C	D
1	Full Name	Alias	Birth-Death	Political Affiliation
72	Anna Miliukova			
73	Ekaterina Zimina			
74	Anna Khriashcheva			
75	Mariia Evdokimova			
76	Masha Kapatsinskaia			
77	Anna G. Smirnova			
78	D. Morozova			
79	M. Odintsova			
80	A. Poletaeva			
81	A. Kisliakova			
82	Ryzhova			
83	M. N. Lebedeva-Razumova			
84	A. I. Smelova			
85	Klavdiia Kiriakina			
86	Elena Razorenova			
87	Elizaveta Sergeevna Balashova			
88	Daria Chernikova			
89	A. Krupitchikpova			RSDRP [1903]
90	Lepilov sisters			
91	M. Nagovitsyna			
92	M. Sarmentova			
93	D. Sergeicheva			
94	E. Saltykova			
95	Iraida Karaseva			
96	Praskovia Dimitrieva			
97	E. Nagurskaia			
98	Mariia Pokrovskaia			
99	V. Ianchevskaia			
100	Vera Ananeva			
101	Nina Babakshvili			
102	Ekaterina Babakina			
103	Maria Zvonareva			
104	Valentina Bagrova			
105	Aleksandra Artiukina			
106	Tatiana Liudvinskaia			

	A	B	C	D
1	Full Name	Alias	Birth-Death	Political Affiliation
107	Rozalia Zemliachka			
108	Sofia Nevzorova			
109	Lydia Kostenina			
110	Lia Shumiatskaia			
111	M. Shustova			
112	M. Novikova			
113	A. Melekhina			
114	A. Gladysheva			
115	N. Zhokhova			
116	E. Sharova			
117	E. Zakatova			
118	L. D'iakova			
119	O. Krutova			
120	T. Zhitkova			
121	Dusia Alekseeva			
122	Maria Vydrina			
123	Sofia Goncharskaya			
124	Dubrovskaya			
125	A. Itkind			
126	B. Ratner	Evgeniia Egorova		
127	Marta-Ella Lepin			
128	Maria Kostelovskaia			
129	Anna Shabanova			
130	Fruma Frumkina			
131	Irina Kokhovskaia	Ira		Left Socialist Revolutionary
132	Klavdiia Nikolaeva			
133	Larissa Reisner		May 1, 1895-Feb 9, 1926	Bolshevik
134	Vera Rudolfovna Menzhinskaia			
135	Liudmila Stal			
136	Vera Slutskaia	"Our Iron Vera"		
137	E. N. Adamovich			
138	Elena Giliarova			
139	Elza Grundman			
140	Patronelia Zinchenko			
141	E. Alekseeva			

	A	B	C	D
1	Full Name	Alias	Birth-Death	Political Affiliation
142	Anastasia Deviatkina			
143	Arishina Kruglova		??-1937	
144	Zhenia Egorova			
145	Liza Pylaeva			
146	Rachel Kovnator			
147	Alexandra Singer			
148	Maria Kotikova			
149	Serafima Zaitseva			
150	Galina Flakserman			
151	Ekaterina Dmitriyevna Kuskova			
152	Elena Rozmirovich			Russian Social-Democratic Worker's Party; Constitutional Democratic Party
153	Poikhsena Shishkina-Yavien			
154	E. D. Kuskova			
155	A. E. Rodionova			
156	Sakharova			
157	P. G. Glizer			
158	Maria Nikiforova			
159	Sofia Bazulenkov			
160	Yadviga			
161	Olga Chernysheva			
162	Nina Gerd			
163	Anna Loginova			
164	E. Tarasova			
165	Nina Bogoslovskaya			
166	Lisa Koksharova			
167	E. K. Rimanenko			
168	E. N. Bogdonova			
169	E. R. Peterson			
170	Varvara Iakovleva			
171	Sofia Smidovich		Mar 8, 1872 - Nov 26, 1934	Social Democratic Labour Party/Bolshevik
172	P. G. Zamogilnaia			
173	Anna Litvelko			
174	Natasha Bogacheva			
175	Nikiforova			
176	Pankina			

	A	B	C	D
1	Full Name	Alias	Birth-Death	Political Affiliation
177	Chernysheva			
178	Anna Itkina			
179	Ariadna Vladimirovna Tyrkova	Ariadna Borman		Kadets
180	Apollinaria Takhtarev			
181	M. F. Vetrova			
182	Anna Elizerova			
183	Maria Ulyanova			
184	Vera Dridzo			
185	A. D. Tsuriupa			
186	Lydia Knipovich			
187	Inna Smidovich-Leman			
188	Dimochka			
189	Elena Gorbunova			
190	Elena D. Stasova	Comrade Absolute		Bolshevik
191	Slovatinskaya			
192	Pavlova			
193	Itkina			
194	Elizaveta Drabkina		Dec 3, 1901-Feb 7, 1974	
195	Antonina Struve			
196	Fofanova			
197	Kalmykova			
198	Sofia Kovalevskaia			
199	Nathalie Armfeld			Chaikovsky/Narodnik/Land and Liberty
200	Madame Olga [Novikoff?]			
201	Varvara Batiushkova		-1892	Chaikovsky/Narodnik
202	Lyubov Kornilova			Chaikovsky/Narodnik
203	Sophia Mikhailovna Ginsberg			Narodnaya Volya
204	Angela Karpouzi			
205	Anna Pavlovna Korba			Narodnaya Volya
206	Elizabeth Kovalsky			Narodnik
207	Maria Kovalsky			
208	Maria Ignatievna Kutitonskaya		Feb 23, 1856-May 4, 1887	Narodnik/Narodnaya Volya
209	Malatesta			
210	Stenka Razin (?)			
211	Madame Vishnyevska			

	A	B	C	D
1	Full Name	Alias	Birth-Death	Political Affiliation
212	Alexandra Kornilova			Chaikovsky/Narodnik
213	Angelica Balabanoff		1878-1965	
214	Anna Mikhailovna Epstein		1846-	Chaikovsky
215	Rosalie Christoforovna Idelson	Epstein??	1848-	Lavrovist
216	Varvara Ivanovna Aleksandrova			Narodnik
217	Anna Yakimova	Kobozeva		Narodnaya Volya
218	Tatiana Lebedeva		??-1887	Narodnaya Volya
219	Konkordia Somoilova			
220	Klavdia Nikolaeva	Comrade Natasha		
221	Vera Mairova			
222	Klavdia Volnaya			
223	Nyusha Maxima			
224	Konkordia Ivanovna Martov			Menshevik
225	Maria Aleksandrovna Ananyina			Menshevik
226	M. P. Pototskaia			
227	Anna D. Kurshinskaia-Charushina			
228	Bareisho Ivanova			
229	Tsvetkova			
230	A. Mamaeva			
231	A. Venediktova		??-1906	
232	Lidila Sture		??-1906	
233	Anna Shuliatikova		??-1908	
234	Henrietta Dobruskina		??-1908	
235	Nadezhda Andreyevna Terent'eva			People's Will (joined 1882); PSR
236	Tsetsiliia Bobrovskaia			
237	Anna Stepanova		1887-	Union for the Liberation of Labor
238	Pelageia Adamova			
239	Narodovolka Trubnikova			
240	Liubov Krivobokova			
241	Olga Dilevskaia			SD
242	Aleksandra Nikolaevna Nogina			Bolshevik [1903]
243	Mariia Iovleva			
244	Ekaterina Iovleva			
245	Olga Trubnikova			
246	Mariia Trubnikova			

	A	B	C	D
1	Full Name	Alias	Birth-Death	Political Affiliation
247	Akselrod sisters			
248	Alexandra Adolfovna Izmailovich	Sanya	1879-	Socialist Revolutionary
249	Ekaterina Adolfovna Izmailovich	Katya		Socialist Revolutionary
250	Mariia Adamova			
251	Anna Lepilova			
252	Natal'ia Grigor'eva			PSR
253	Vera Spiridonovna Liubatovich	Wolffie		Narodnik/All-Russian Socialist Revolutionary Organization (Moscow Organization)
254	Nadezhda Suslova	Volchënok		
255	Mariia Obrucheva	Bokov	1843-1918	Land and Liberty
256	Madame Marie Strakhova			
257	Sofia Alexandrovna Leshern		1840 (or 42)-1898	Land and Liberty
258	Sofia I. Bardina	Auntie	1853-1883	Narodnik/All-Russian Socialist Revolutionary Organization (Moscow Organization)
259	Maria Alexandrovna Kolenkina		1850-1926	Land and Liberty
260	Alexandra Malinovskaia			Land and Liberty
261	Fanny Lichkus			Land and Liberty
262	Kovalik			
263	Maria Oshanina			Narodnaya Volya
264	Sofia A. Ivanova			Narodnaya Volya
265	Maria Giaznova			Narodnaya Volya
266	Anastasiya Alekseyevna Bitsenko		1875-1938	Social Revolutionary (PSR)/ SR Combat Organization (terror)/Left SR/Bolshevik
267	Maria Markovna Shkolnik	Manya/Mania		Social Revolutionary Combat Organization
268	Zinaida Konopliannikova		??-August 29, 1906	Socialist Revolutionary
269	Rebecca Moiseevna Fialka		1887-	Social Revolutionary
270	Lydia Pavovna Ezerskaya		1866-	Social Revolutionary
271	Anna Solomakhina			
272	Maria Prokofieva			
273	Nadezhda Konstantinovna Sigida	nee Malaxiano		Narodnik
274	Schukina			Social Revolutionary
275	Tolya Ragosinikova			
276	Sarra Danzig			
277	Lydia Golovina		1901-	Left Socialist Revolutionary
278	Andreyeva			Bolshevik
279	Surkova			
280	Maria Benevskaya			Socialist Revolutionary
281	Dora Brilliant			Socialist Revolutionary

	A	B	C	D
1	Full Name	Alias	Birth-Death	Political Affiliation
282	Tatyana Leont'eva			Socialist Revolutionary
283	Sofia Subotina			Narodnik
284	Maria Kalyenkina	"Little Masha"		Bakunist
285	Feodoseeva Il'ichna Drabkina	Natasha/Marianna	Jan 5, 1883-Jan 10, 1957	Bolshevik
286	Vera Pavlovna			Bakunist
287	Vera Kornilova			Chaikovsky/Narodnik
288	Olga Shleysner		??-1878	Chaikovsky/Narodnik/Land and Liberty
289	Alexandra Obodovskaya			Chaikovsky/Narodnik
290	Anna Kuvshinskaya			Chaikovsky/Narodnik
291	Larissa Chemodanova			Chaikovsky/Narodnik
292	Olympiada Alexeeva			Chaikovsky/Narodnik
293	Nadezhda Yurgenson			Narodnik
294	Evgenia Dmitrievna Subotina		1853-1930	Friche/Narodnik
295	Maria Dmitrievna Subotina		1854-1878	Friche/Narodnik
296	Nadezhda Dmitrievna Subotina		1855-1930	Friche/Narodnik
297	Dora Aptekman	Hussar		Friche/Narodnik
298	Lydia Osipovna Dan			Menshevik
299	Felicia Sheftel			Land and Liberty
300	Vera Rogachova		??-1882	Narodnik
301	Fanni Abramovna Moreinis-Muratova			
302	Genrieta Nikolaevna Dubroskina			
303	Nadezhda Aleksandrovna Golovina		1855-(1943)	Narodnik
304	Sofia Boreisho			
305	Alexandra Ivanovna			
306	Ekaterina Zasulich			
307	Varvara Shatilova			Narodnik/All-Russian Socialist Revolutionary Organization (Moscow Organization)
308	Evgenia Florianovna Zavadskaya			Frich/Narodnik
309	Grebnitskaia			Frich/Narodnik
310	Anna Tomilova			Nechaev
311	Anna Nechaeva			Nechaev
312	Anna Rozenstein	Kuliscioff [meaning: unskilled worker]	1854(??)-	Narodnik
313	Maria Pavlovna Vorontsof - Kavalefskaya			
314	Natalya Sergeevna Klimova			Social Revolutionary
315	Varvara Nikolayevna Yakovleva		1884-Sept 11, 1941 OR Dec 21, 1944	Bolshevik
316	Yevgenia Bosch		1879-1925	Bolshevik

	A	B	C	D
1	Full Name	Alias	Birth-Death	Political Affiliation
282	Tatyana Leont'eva			Socialist Revolutionary
283	Sofia Subotina			Narodnik
284	Maria Kalyenkina	"Little Masha"		Bakuninist
285	Feodosieva Il'ichna Drabkina	Natasha/Marianna	Jan 5, 1883-Jan 10, 1957	Bolshevik
286	Vera Pavlovna			Bakuninist
287	Vera Kornilova			Chaikovsky/Narodnik
288	Olga Shleysner		??-1878	Chaikovsky/Narodnik/Land and Liberty
289	Alexandra Obodovskaya			Chaikovsky/Narodnik
290	Anna Kuvshinskaya			Chaikovsky/Narodnik
291	Larissa Chemodanova			Chaikovsky/Narodnik
292	Olympiada Alexeeva			Chaikovsky/Narodnik
293	Nadezhda Yurgenson			Narodnik
294	Evgenia Dmitrievna Subotina		1853-1930	Friche/Narodnik
295	Maria Dmitrievna Subotina		1854-1878	Friche/Narodnik
296	Nadezhda Dmitrievna Subotina		1855-1930	Friche/Narodnik
297	Dora Aptekman	Hussar		Friche/Narodnik
298	Lydia Osipovna Dan			Menshevik
299	Felicia Sheftel			Land and Liberty
300	Vera Rogachova		??-1882	Narodnik
301	Fanni Abramovna Moreinis-Muratova			
302	Genrieta Nikolaevna Dubroskina			
303	Nadezhda Aleksandrovna Golovina		1855-(1943)	Narodnik
304	Sofia Boreisho			
305	Alexandra Ivanovna			
306	Ekaterina Zasulich			
307	Varvara Shatilova			Narodnik/All-Russian Socialist Revolutionary Organization (Moscow Organization)
308	Evgenia Florianovna Zavadskaya			Frich/Narodnik
309	Grebnitskaia			Frich/Narodnik
310	Anna Tomilova			Nechaev
311	Anna Nechaeva			Nechaev
312	Anna Rozenstein	Kuliscioff [meaning: unskilled worker]	1854(??)-	Narodnik
313	Maria Pavlovna Vorontsov - Kavalefskaya			
314	Natalya Sergeevna Klimova			Social Revolutionary
315	Varvara Nikolayevna Yakovleva		1884-Sept 11, 1941 OR Dec 21, 1944	Bolshevik
316	Yevgenia Bosch		1879-1925	Bolshevik

	A	B	C	D
1	Full Name	Alias	Birth-Death	Political Affiliation
317	Anna Nikolayevna Bychkova		1886-1971	Bolshevik
318	Apollinariya Alexandrovna Yakubov	Kubochka, Lirochka	??- 1913 OR 1917	Bolshevik
319	Olimpiada Evgrafovna Kutuzova			
320	Klavdia Timofeevna Novgorodtseva			
321	Valentina D. Velichkina	Manyá		
322	Vera Mikhailovna Velichkina	Bonch-Bruyevich/Bonch-Bruyevitch	1868-1918	Tolstoyan, RSDRP (1903)
323	Anastasia Sergeevna Panina			
324	Sofia Vladimirovna Panina (Countess)		1871-1956	
325	Marusya Burko			
326	Samsolova			
327	Maria Antonova			
328	Anna Semyonova			
329	Solovyova			
330	Tkachev sisters			
331	Vera Moirova			Bolshevik
332	Lyudmilla Menzhinskaya			Bolshevik
333	Alexandra Artyukhina			Bolshevik
334	Vera Golubeva			Bolshevik
335	Sofia Armand			Social Democrat
336	Varvara Armand			Social Democrat
337	Maria Armand			Socialist Revolutionary
338	Iurkovskaia			Socialist Revolutionary
339	Evstiliia Rogozinnikova			Socialist Revolutionary
340	Maria Seliuk			
341	Anna Rasputina			Socialist Revolutionary