Light at the end of the tunnel
by MaimuRose

Summary

The reds spare all of the Romanov children, but not out of the kindness of their hearts. Heartbroken over the loss of their parents, Olga, Tatiana, Maria, Anastasia and Alexei must try to find a way to survive in this cruel new world where no one seems to have their best interests at hand.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
The Ipatiev House.

Chapter Notes

In honor of the anniversary of the family’s death, I am reposting the first chapter. I was going to do it on July 17, the exact day they died, but I couldn’t wait anymore. This chapter is 99% the work of a great artist on DeviantArt: KeeganYoung, I just changed the ending and a few other things like the order in which some things happen, also adding a few others to fit my style and ideas, here is the link to his original story: https://www.deviantart.com/keeganyoung/art/Liubov-Sviataya-93101061

This story is the description of the real murders of the Romanovs from Anastasia’s perspective, it is really different in the end from this chapter for obvious reasons, and a lot more realistic. You should check it out and favorite/comment if you have an account there, he also has amazing art of the family, Anne Boleyn, as well as other original art. Check out the original fic, it is amazing and gut wrenching, and sadly, probably very similar to how the real Anastasia felt at the time. Like honestly, I can’t even begin to fathom how much thought went into every single detail, he literally did not forget anything: the smells, the sounds, the feelings and emotions, the clothes, the sight, the order of events, nothing. This author’s writing and characterization are just so perfect and on point I had to ask him to allow me to borrow it for this first chapter of my alternative universe fic, and to my great delight and surprise, he said yes.

This chapter is pretty much a fanfiction of that original short story, almost none of the writing, dialogue or the descriptions are mine, but then I pick up from where I change the ending for the purpose of this fic.

Anyways, thanks a lot to KeeganYoung.

Anastasia Nikolaevna Romanova.

I hear footsteps. Someone is coming. They glide across the dining room, around the large table, six-seven-eight steps, why do I bother counting? It is late. I am far too tired for this. There won’t be any other option but to answer when the owner of the footsteps knocks on our bedroom door. I let Tatiana do this, there is no way I am getting out of my cot. She is already thin as a stick, why waste my effort, I cannot imagine that walking to the door or any amount of exercise could help my appalling weight gain. Even mama had mentioned it. Thank you mama, I love you too. Who cares about my fat self now, I am tired; but the annoying and loud knock on the door is finally heard, and I can’t go on sleeping, so I open my eyes.

"Tatiana Nicholaevna? Could you inform the family we must get dressed? Commandant Yurovsky has told me we all must stay for an hour or two in the lower area of the house, they say it is for our own protection. It seems our Czech friends have finally come for us! I pray it is so! I'm sorry for this disruption your Imperial Highness".

The last three words are whispered, the Lord forbid those pigs hear our own loyal servants use our old titles! I can hardly be bothered to even care for that right now though. I am tired. Let me sleep for a thousand days and then a week! I know its Eugene Sergeievich, our doctor, I can see his glasses reflecting what little light is filtering through the painted windows. Trust the red pigs to
think we would try to escape by staring out the windows. We are clearly such devilishly crafty people. But now I do not care about the Bolsheviks and their silly imaginations, I need sleep. Why can I not have it?! The door closes after Tanya thanks Dr. Botkin. She has manners even at the devil's hour.

Tatiana strides over to papa and mama's room. Stride is a good word; she is like some gazelle. A deeply emaciated and skinny one. I can hear Tatiana say what Eugene Sergeievich has just told her.

"What? What?" Papa utters wearily. "Yes, my little one, let us get up then."

Tatiana comes back into our airy little room, and moves for the switch to the ormolu light fixture overhead. I have never hated her so viciously as now, is she even human? How can she accept this easily she won't be able to continue sleeping? It is too late though; the burning light hits my eyes as they adjust to the sting.

"Urrrgghhhhh! What fool dare invade my slumber?!" I mutter aloud to my sisters in the room. Tatiana gives me a frighteningly stern look and tells me to get up. I defy her.

Already Mashka and Olga are rising like phantoms from their cots near mine. I should like to think they have the same thought on their minds as me: What nonsense can this be?

They move to get up, but the lateness of the hour still casts its spell over them, and Maria falls back onto her pillow with an entertainingly loud plopping noise. I giggle like a rodent. Papa comes into the room and looks us over.

"My darlings, this could be serious, please, get up now and get your things ready," he says while staring at me with his sweet crinkled eyes. If papa wants it, then so do I.

I fight against gravity and all that other nonsense to get my bottom out of my blankets. The floor feels cool beneath my feet. Lovely. Olenka is already busy at the drawers getting out day clothes and undergarments, Tanya at her side. I sit at the edge of my bed staring at them. I look at Maria, still laying down, and smile at the stupid grin she has on her face, still lost between dream and reality. No doubt some mushy romantic fancy about that guard. He is gone, a pity, they told us he was sick. I am sure they would have set records with the scores of children they would have had. That is improper to even think, but again, I do not care. Right now, I focus on getting over to my stockings and chemise waiting in my drawers over by the Big Pair. I try to move my legs, but they do not feel like doing what I want. Blast them! I somehow make it over to my clothes and begin to change, fumbling with the hideously small buttons on my nightgown and wishing I could just do away with every stitch of clothing I own.

Olga and Tatiana finish with their stockings and set out for their dark skirts and white blouses set out on the chairs in front of their beds, casting looks of unknowing fear at each other. This makes me uncomfortable and for the first time I actually feel awake this morning. I look for the clock by the corner stove: 1:43 AM. I do not like being up so early, it is not quite right.

Mama comes through the door in her nightclothes, a look on her face that I have not seen in months. Hope.

"Girlies we shall be leaving this place, I know it, our friends have not forgotten us! Now you know what we must do, our medicines must be attended for. Olya, Tanya, come here so we can fix you up first," she says in a hushed tone of anticipation, her excitement is so endearing I come from behind her and give her a warm hug that makes her stumble.

"Hurry up dear and start by yourself", mama tells me, completely unamused by my antics.
Anna Demidova opens the door and peeks in; Mama calls her into the room to help with the preparations. Olga and Tatiana stand as still as the statues in the parks at Tsarskoe Selo while Mama and Aniuta conceal our jewels sewn in clothe under my sisters´ traveling wear. With the added bulk, my older sisters look half-normal, nothing like the gaunt skeletons they have come to be in the past year. I am still wondering why it is they grow thinner and thinner while I get fatter with each day when it is my turn.

"Nastenka, come here and we'll do you quickly, don't fidget child and it will go smoothly God grant it," Mama beckons in wearied tones.

"Careful you don't make her look like a Matrushka!" Olga says smugly, referring to the rounded wooden nesting dolls I used to have decorating my desk in our old rooms.

“At least I don´t look like a skeleton!” I tease back, but the truth is I would rather look like her. I hope she does not catch that.

Something clicks in Olga´s mind, and that same expression of uneasy fear is back on her face. I cannot help but loathe her entirely for just a moment, her fear makes me afraid.

Mama fashions me in the bodice rigged with diamonds and rubies, stitched behind the seams. I feel like one of those dashing blockade-runners from Alexei's books, smuggling goods across borders for the sake of my fellow patriots. The romance of it all is overwhelming. One look at Tatiana's sour face and my lovely thoughts die shockingly fast.

Maria doesn´t have any gilded armor, we started sewing the jewels into our clothes back in Tobolsk, while she was already on her way here with mama and papa. I envy her for not having to be bulky like myself, she used to be fatter than me, but has since lost all her baby weight in a way I wish I could. Still, the lack of exercise has made her start to regain some of that weight, but not even nearly as much as me, also with these jewels making me look like an elephant.

Mama goes back into her and papa's room. My little brother Alexei comes out for the first time, carried by papa. I have not seen him in actual clothes for months! He is in the green uniform he always wore in Tobolsk, which he had traded for a nightshirt and endless hours sitting in his bed ever since we had come to this dratted house. He looks like some shrunken creature from the witch's tale of Baba Yaga. The luster of his pale white skin and sunken eyes doesn't help to counteract the appearance much. I cannot help but stifle a giggle and in the process make a stupid grin. He notices.

"Shvibz, can I ask what gives you reason to laugh?" He commands in a tone of mock imperiousness.

"Why nothing at all your Imperi-aaal Highness," I remark with a foreign droll similar to that of Gilliard, out French tutor.

He smiles at this. An actual smile, well, his best attempt at one. It ends up looking pathetic and sad. My heart cries out for our poor Alyosha. Papa looks at me and I decide a continued production of my vocal talents is not exactly appropriate for this occasion.

Spotting Jimmy wagging his tail beneath my cot on his bed of rags, I scoop him up and shove my face into his ebony fur. I whisper into his ear in as many foreign accents as I please. At least he seems to appreciate my efforts. Mama comes back from her room dressed in the same dress I have seen her wearing for what seems an eternity. Her look of exhilaration has not left her, but the dark lines under her eyes gives away her fatigue, which reminds me why I am not in bed. Still something I am trying to understand.
Aniuta follows Mama, carrying the pillows that hold the pieces of jewelry too big to hide inside a button or corset. Mama hands Alexei his cap, with a fat red ruby secretly sewn under the top. He grins as he places it on his head. I could not help but feel repelled by the ghostliness of the expression.

Sitting on the bed and making Jimmy dance a lively waltz through the air, mama looks at me and tells me I will have to leave him.

"But Mama no! Please Mama! Not my little performer! I'll die without him. I just know it." I beg her with my most dramatic flair.

"Nastya, the little one will be fine in his bed while we wait downstairs, just think, Joy is outside, and he does very well on his own there." I pout at my mother, and she sighs.

“All right then, take him”, she concedes.

“Yay!” I celebrate as I stand up, spin Jimmy around, and kiss mama on the cheek.

“Hurry up”, she says. It seems Tatiana is also taking her dog Ortipo, but mama doesn´t try to forbid her from doing so or even questions her decision. Typical.

Botkin opens the door and asks if we are finally ready, mentioning that the Commandant is waiting for us. What a man this Commandant is! We had originally thought he was a doctor! But nothing could hide the fact that he is really a horrid man. That is a fact I have no doubt of. He is a cold and stern fellow that speaks to us with the courtesy of an awfully bad actor who is only good at memorizing lines.

Papa tells Botkin we have everything we need and the door closes. I give the clock one last glance, 2:06 AM. An un-Godly hour. We file out into the dining room around the table where the wretched man waits for us on the other side. He asks us to follow him and in single file, and we leave the first floor for whatever safety the lower level offers. Safety? I defy that! Who is really safe in times like these? With a civil war apparently going on.

We go through the rooms and pass the kitchen and onto the landing. I hug Jimmy in one arm and my pillow on the other as I walk down the stairs. Twenty-twenty one-twenty-two-twenty-three. I am counting again. Why do I care how many steps I go down? They still do not help my wretched curves. We make it out in a line. Papa with Alexei in his arms first, the metal brace on his misshapen leg making a clicking noise with each bounce of papa's step. Mama walks behind with my oldest sister Olga beside her, Tatiana next, Mashka walking along with me, our servants Botkin, Aniuta, Trupp and Kharitov forming the back of our grand procession.

As I step from the house into the dry dismal yard, I look at the sky and see only the moon, in its first quarter, as it reigns over me and our little party on its way to a place of greater safety. I stare at it, wondering what this half circle could know that I do not. It frightens me, and Maria sees it.

"Oh Anastasia, not afraid of the night are we?! Stop gawking or you'll stall everyone with your senseless star gazing!" She teases me in a scolding manner. Very out of character, I must say Mashka. I will get you back for that later, you cheek.

The silence that held such power over the summer night is ruined by the hideous clunking and roaring of an ugly lorry that sits in the courtyard. The front lights blind us, illuminating our shadows against the side of the pale wall, turning them into a mass of black movement making quick progress towards a door. We enter through it.
The corridor is unfamiliar and as we walk through endless doorways, I see horrid guards peeking from rooms and glaring at us, watching us, waiting for something. The heels of our shoes click on the wood floors. It reminds me of some strange waltz the band might have played on the Standart. Well if they had had enough imagination maybe. Again, I'm reminded of how tired I am. What dratted business this is. We walk straight from one side of the house to the other and at last make a turn through a pair of double doors into a lit cellar. We crowd in and I admire the lack of space and places to sit. Leave it to these pigs to find us suitable accommodations. Everyone stands awkwardly.

"What? No chairs? May we not sit?" Mama finally asks, her chronic pains don´t allow her to stand up for too long. Yurovsky looks at mama with a blank look, hardly surprising for a man with no soul. He asks someone to bring in a chair.

“Could you ask them to bring one for my son as well?” Papa asks, still holding Alexei in his arms, my brother is beginning to fall asleep on his shoulder.

They bring the chairs and set them in the middle of the small room, mama sits down with Alyosha seated by papa in the other. Olga, Tatiana, Maria, and I put some of our pillows and cushions behind them to add comfort.

“Wait here”, Yurovsky says. “We need to take a photograph to stop rumors going through the cities that you have been killed.” I thank our Lord silently that this is not true as he leaves.

I step back now and take better notice of the cellar. It has a curved ceiling which amuses me, and pale striped yellow wallpaper. Pretty if anyone asks my opinion. I turn around to see a locked door and frown; I do not know what is beyond it. That is the problem with closed doors. There is only one window and I notice guards outside it. They clearly must think windows are our favorite method of escape. Silly pigs.

The bare electric fixture overhead gives everything a harsh look and it is hurting my eyes. Why am I not in bed? The question still dances inside my head, I struggle to even stand, so I put Jimmy on the ground. I can pick out the engine from the yard making terribly loud noises. It is enough to wake the dead.

One-two-three-four. I am counting again, the seconds, or just counting to something. Thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two.

I am so bored. It has been half an hour already, I think, what are Yurovsky and his goons even doing? I yawn, I want to get back to bed too, at least my little brother and mama have chairs to sit on, the poor dears, they are in front of us with papa while I am behind with my three older sisters and our 4 remaining servants. My sister Tatiana, left of me, is carrying her dog Ortipo, while my dog Jimmy is now walking around the room, so cute. My brother’s dog Joy must be lurking outside the house somewhere, he always does that; how I envy that dog now, he has more freedom than us, and he can sleep if he wants to. Now that I think about it, I could try to sleep on the floor, but mama would scold me, and I would not have a heart to defy her like I freely defy Tanya. Tanya just stares at me with fake scorn and sometimes laughs when I do, mama becomes anxious; I can’t do that to her.

My eyes wander; from Botkin's furrowed brow to the still rigid look on Olenka's face. I have not seen her smile in a million years. I wish there was sun so I could see the sky through the window.

My mind wanders too, why is it that we are here? Are we going to be moved to a different location? If so, I wonder where.
It has been half an hour, but it feels like more, I want to either sleep or leave this house already! Wondering where we are going to be taken next is the only fun thing to do.

"I wonder if they are going to move us to a different city," my youngest sister Mashka breaks the silence, as if reading my thoughts.

"I don´t know dear," answers papa with a smile, turning around from the door to face us. "We may not be taken anywhere, there is fighting outside, and they may have brought us here just for our own protection."

"I miss Tobolsk," she tells our father. "I hope if they move us, it is to a similar place, or maybe Crimea to be with babushka, but I think it is unlikely."

"God willing, we may not stay here for long," mama says from her chair, also turning her head around as much as she can, she is stroking Alyosha’s hair with one hand. My brother is sitting in the chair beside mama’s, looking half asleep with his head turned upwards, poor baby. He managed to stand on one leg a few days ago, I really hope he gets better soon and is able to play outside at least for the miserable minutes the guards allow us, he has been sad these past few weeks, I can tell even if he tries not to show it.

"I also preferred Tobolsk," says Tanya, my second oldest sister.

"I don´t understand why they couldn´t just let us live there," I add. "I see no point in bringing us here, I am sure they saw we were happy there and did it just to annoy us."

I see Olga roll her eyes discreetly with the corner of my eye and my heart sinks, my oldest sister used to love my dumb comments and even play along with me, but these past few weeks she has not been the same, it is getting harder to lift the spirits of my family now that we have been imprisoned for almost 2 years.

"Remember it is all in God´s hands darling," mama says to me. "We may be getting rescued soon, I have faith that is the case."

It is startling when Yurovsky suddenly opens the doors and walks in with 5 other men crowding in behind him, the newcomers place themselves in front of us. Both mama and papa quickly turn back their attention to the door where they all came from.

They should not all be here. The room is far too small for us all! Do they think we will spread wings and fly off if they do not stand within reach to catch us? I am sure Tatiana is thinking the same from the look she is giving them. I should think she might like to slap these men. I am certainly for it right about now.

Yurovsky and his hoard do not leave but only stand there. I should like to know what he wants. One of the men is smiling, but his smile looks sinister, it wouldn´t have scared me if I wasn´t seeing so many men in front of us, they all have guns in their hands, it can´t be, can it? There has to be a trial at least! Is that not how things work? I start praying in my head to God for me to be wrong or at least give us strength if it really is what my panic filled mind tells me it is.

Yurovsky reaches into his pocket and takes out a folded piece of paper. This is so typical. My heart starts beating faster. He unfolds it with what seems like pleasure and reads out the contents:

"In view of the fact that your relatives in Europe continue their assault on Soviet Russia, the presidium of Ural Regional Soviet has sentenced you to be shot."

It can´t be, these are the kinds of things that happen to other people, historical characters, or people...
in the newspapers, but not us.

“In view of the fact that the Czechoslovaks are threatening the red capital of the Urals, Ekaterinburg”, the wretched man continues, “and in view of the fact that the crowned executioner might escape the people’s court; the presidium of the Regional Soviet, fulfilling the will of the revolution, has decreed that the former Tsar Nicholas Romanov, guilty of countless bloody crimes against the people, should be shot.”

"So, you are not taking us anywhere?” I hear our loyal friend, Dr. Botkin, say in a somewhat confrontational tone of voice.

The rest of us are silent. What is this? I do not understand him. No one does. Is only papa being shot? No, God! Please, no! Are we all?

Slowly, papa looks back at us with his eyes wide open and then turns to Yurovsky again.

"What? What?!" Papa asks, sounding completely perplexed, and once again he looks back and forward between his family and the man, fear showing in his eyes. "Read it again please.” Yurovsky complies, sounding impatient while reading the second time. I want him to be quiet. I want him to stop. How can this be happening, who would let this happen to us?!

“Oh, no!” Tatiana exclaims. Anna Demidova gasps, I think mama does as well. I hear worried murmurs from our two remaining male servants and Dr. Botkin. Papa positions himself in front of Alexei, pathetically extending his arm in front of my baby brother and everyone in the back of the room, as if that could protect us from bullets.

The pillow I have is like a weight pulling on me.

Papa begins to say a prayer to God, one I have heard so many times at church: "Forgive them father…” I see mama make the sign of the cross. Olga tries too. Forehead. Chest. Right. Left. “For they know not what…”

Almost at the same moment, it happens. The guns in their hands quiver. All of us lined up for a photograph that will never be taken. The moment passes. The explosion of the first bullet rips not only into papa but my world, that crumbles around me as a louder explosion of more gunshots at my beloved father. I scream out for him. No one hears me. No one cares now. I can’t even hear myself.

All the other women are screaming just as loudly as I am, me and my three sisters have come together to cling to each other, slowly sinking into the back of the room. I can see Alexei straightening up his head and becoming paralyzed, firmly holding the sides of his chair.

I am counting again. It isn’t three but four, five, six… I don’t know how many gunshots…so loud, they hurt my ears. All the men are aiming at papa and continue shooting his exploding chest over and over again. I can see papa reeling as blood flows from his back. I want to vomit. I want to scream. I want to cry out for the Saints to save us. But no one is coming, I know this. Suddenly a bullet hits papa in the head and it explodes, his blood is sent spraying across us behind him. My white blouse is covered with beads of red. Papa’s blood-soaked corpse finally collapses on the floor, his entire upper body is completely red, the floor has become a pool of crimson water.

The flashes of light and smoke from the guns have been too much. The need to throw up is greater. A man takes aim and mama’s head jerks violently as she tries to stand, then the side of her head explodes. Blood and red tissue spray from mama’s ear on to us crowded at the back. She all but falls on top of herself onto the floor. I stare at her; she is not moving. I cover my face with the
pillow and try to hide myself from the horror of my surroundings, but I cannot block it out. I pull it away from me and see the red that has been wiped from my face.

I cry, my sisters cry, all of us screaming for papa and mama. The screams are almost as loud as the gunshots. Tatiana is hysterically screaming for mama, this is too much too soon; how can our dear parents, who were talking to us so lovingly a few seconds before, be those two lifeless, unmoving and bloody things?

I scream and scream, hugging my sister Maria as tight as I can, trying to get away from those men who just killed our parents, trying to get away from the blood, away from the corpses, we sit close together in a corner.

The men then start shooting at us, are they killing us too? I am so scared, how much will it hurt? God please make it quick! The sound is so loud, the smoke is worse every second, it spoils the breathable air, filling my nostrils. The flashes are so bright. The shooting seems to go on forever, the screams seem to go on forever, my throat hurts now.

I see Botkin on the wooden floor, lying still save his hand groping the floor for what I can only think might be his glasses. Shots fire and Trupp falls hard, his face locked in outrageous pain as the blood flows from his legs. Another shot passes near his head, and he quickly lays down. Rapid fires hit Kharitonov, and I see him simply lay still on the ground; Botkin, near him, stops moving.

Death is everywhere. Death or blood? It has already begun seeping so fast through mama and papa's clothes. It spreads across the floorboards. It hangs in the air with my sisters' constant screams of confused horror. An explosion of dust falls from behind as a bullets rip into the walls. It falls on me and blocks out my view of the guards. It swirls and mixes with the smoke from their deadly weapons. A screen of grey and white settles between us and them. I want only to hide in it forever, escape the bullets flying across the room.

Mashka is sobbing and praying out loud by my side. I see Olga on the ground, she isn’t moving, is she dead? I wish I had managed to make her laugh one last time. Tatiana is sitting in the corner opposite from us, weeping and saying “God have mercy on us” repeatedly. Anna is also on the floor, covering herself with a pillow as if it were bulletproof.

Two of our male servants are injured, they are making pained sounds. Botkin is the only one who is dead for sure, his head has a hole and blood is coming out of it. I gasp, it suddenly hits me that they are dying because of their loyalty to us, and the horrid demons keep shooting at us; I am not scared to die if it is God’s will, mother and father used to tell us that whatever happens we have to accept it. I believe we will all meet again, but I fear the pain and watching my loved ones go through the same thing, I fear the process. I can’t bear the idea of my sisters’ or brother’s heads ending up like mama’s.

A sudden motion occurs beside me and Maria is over to the door at the back. She rattles the handle; I know it will not open for her. Desperate, she slams the palms of her hand again and again on the white wood. The fear is too much; she begins throwing herself at the immobile doors. She does not stop.

"Help! Help, please, somebody help us!" Mashka yells as her entire weight and force is used hitting those doors. Nothing comes of this. I stare at her in silent awe from my seat on the floor for only a few seconds before I stand up and go to help her, I have to step over Botkin’s body in order to do so, I start to feel sick as I begin to attempt to help my sister with the hopeless task, the fear doesn’t let me give up. Knowing the door can’t open just makes me hit it harder, I scream desperately, I want to get away, to escape their horrid need to kill us, anywhere but here.
Anna Demidova is behind her pillow beside us, and one of our murderers spots her beneath the blanket of smoke. He shoots. Her thigh explodes red, and she topples to the floor screaming like a wild animal. She lands in front of us. I scream so loudly for her. I curse them for what they are doing to us. Our Lord cannot let this truly be happening.

Bullets hit the wall by my head and I sit down quickly to meet Maria, who has given up trying to open the door and is now sitting on the floor praying, moving back and forward and crying. She looks at me with tears of despair and hatred.

"My God! My God! Nastya, what is happening?" My sister sobs in labored breaths. I cling to her on the floor and we hold each other, propped against the wall as the men shoot at us still.

After an eternity of shooting, is suddenly stops. Mashka and I hold our breath, grasping each other's arms tightly. The room is so filled with smoke that the armed men get out. I allow myself to breathe and pretend for an instant it is over.

I hear the sobs of my sisters, moans and troubled breaths, Masha is shaking beside me. I can barely breathe with all this smoke, it smells terribly and I have to take quick deep breaths to feel I have enough air.

My eyes travel to my sister Olga, laying on the ground, to Eugene and his head covered in deep crimson. I hear the moans of Trupp, Anna and Kharitonov. The tears flood my eyes as I hear and look around at my dying family and friends. The place has become so dark with all the smoke, but even through the darkness, I can still see my brother. I see the legs of Alexei's chair still sitting upright. I cannot believe he is still sitting. He is unmoving, paralyzed, with one hand covering his eyes and the other hand clutched tightly to the seat, his knuckles an incredible shade of pure white. He isn’t making a sound, how can he be so calm? I want to go see if he is injured but I am too scared to move, if I move even an inch those evil men will come back as soon as I do, I feel like they can detect all my movements.

Tatiana keeps sobbing and praying out loud, I notice Olga is straightening up and looking around at the horror of our surroundings. She wasn’t dead after all. Now the wait is almost as torturous as the shooting. I can only hear sobs and moans of pain for what seems like seven, six, eight minutes. Maria and I are still holding on to each other. Olga screams in panic once she recovers from having fainted, she clings to Tatiana.

The smoke in the room clears slightly, and the armed men enter again, some of them have bayonets instead of guns. Maria gasps and hides herself with my body, only her head leans out constantly to get a glimpse of what is going on. I start sobbing so hard I am having more trouble breathing than ever, I cover myself with one of the pillows we brought to the cellar, useless, just like trying to open the door, but I don’t care.

Feet move for my brother; I know what they want. I cry out his name, choking on the pronunciation of it. Maria shuts her eyes and howls in anguish at this. I recognize one of the men entering the room as the man with the creepy smile; to my great relief, they ignore Alexei, walking past him, but for how long? The man with the sinister smile does look back at Alexei as if he is not done yet, it makes me shiver with fear, anticipate the inevitable with dread.

My brother is still sitting on the chair in the same position, but I can now hear him sobbing. The men walk closer, making Maria stand up to attempt to open the door a second time, but it is useless, it is locked, and I already have a useless comfort in my pillow. I stay on the ground.

One of the men moves towards the valet, Trupp, who lays injured on the floor. Trupp tries to cover his face with his hand, he is shot in the neck. Tatiana, who is near, starts screaming again, hugging
Ortipo and trying to get away, Olga is clinging to her, her eyes wide open in shock.

The man with the creepy smile, who I recognize through the darkness only because of his teeth, goes over to our cook, Kharitonov, who pleads with him.

"Please", he says, with a lot of effort due to pain and trying to crawl away as far as possible from that monster. But that man cannot be reasoned with, he shoots the cook three times.

Maria starts hitting the backdoor with her palms desperately, it is pathetic. My heart hurts for mama, for papa, for our friends, poor Kharitonov who had taught us how to make bread just days before and is now dead.

The man then starts walking towards us, I hear Jimmy barking, he is still alive, he barks at the man with the smile, who notices and shoots him as well. I hate him. I cannot breathe. The acrid smell of the smoke burns my nostrils and the carnage burns its image into my eyes. I gasp for breath as the tears run down my bloodied face. Maria slowly falls back on the floor a second time, her tears leave tracks as they wash away the plaster and blood on her soft cheeks. We all lie crumpled: legs, arms, feet, chairs, pillows sprawled against the now red floor. The men inch closer from across the room, searching for us who live through the fog. I hate all of these men; I hate them so much. I wish I could take their stupid weapons and make them feel my pain. I want them to die and not us, it isn’t fair.

Olga and Tatiana, forgotten and unharmed against the wall near us, kneel and clutch their hands tightly. We scream out and moan through the growing silence. We call out for God and salvation. It does not come. My brother sobs louder than us, as a small child would. For seconds, his sobs are the only sound heard in the cellar.

Hearing us live, the man with the ugly smile begins shooting again at the back walls near Maria and I. Puffs of fresh dust and plaster fly out from the striped, yellow paper and reign down on our heads, he laughs at our screams. The sparks of guns light up through the smoke. We will not die. The guards sense this and begin to move closer. One of them slips in papa's blood and he hits the floor, his knees now drenched in the gore. He looks at his hands dripping with blood, and from where he sits, looks forward to see my eyes glaring at him. His light blue eyes convey shock and fear, for an instant even pity; his jaw drops. I feel as if our emotions might mirror each other. I hate him even more now that he understands our suffering and does nothing. I hope he regrets this for the rest of his life.

Suddenly I hear movements in the room, my eyes flutter. Aniuta is getting up by my feet, smothered in everyone else's blood. She is a hideous creature rising from a swamp of nasty gore. She frightens me horribly.

"Thank God! God has saved me!" She cries out loudly like a crazed gypsy reading a fortune. I can see the delirious look on her face as she stares at us all.

All the men in the room turn towards Anya and start bayoneting her, poor Anna tries so hard to fight back, but she is stabbed again and again. She tries to grab their weapons, but they only cut thick gashes into her soft hands. Revulsion fills me and I shut my eyes, but I can’t shut out the pathetic cries as they stab her with sharp metal, that turn into screams of pain; unbearable to listen to. Most of the men seem just as scared of her as she is of them.

Olga and Tatiana scream the whole time while watching the horrible scene unfolding before them, hugging each other with Ortipo in the middle. The whole thing lasts for a minute at least, and that evil man is smiling the entire time. I don’t want this, I don’t want to die like that, I don’t want my siblings to suffer that, oh please help us lord. My head throbs. I cannot take this anymore. The
uncertainty is unbearable, I would rather die quickly, why do I have to suffer?

Alexei is no longer sitting in the chair, he is now laying on the ground shaking and hugging mama and papa, or what is left of them, I notice he caresses mama’s blood soaked hair, like she did to him a few minutes before, as if she could still feel it; the fact that mama is gone hurts me harder than ever before, with memories passing through my mind of her taking care of me when I was sick with diphtheria, she can’t comfort me now for being terrified of being stabbed to death.

The guards continue their relentless assault on Anya, who is no longer moving.

I drift between reality and my imagination. What is the difference? What is happening in this room is like some horrible nightmare, one I want so terribly to wake up from. I see Tatiana sitting by the lake in Tsarskoe Selo. I look again and I see a woman screaming frantically, face and clothes soaked in blood. Other horrid things come to my mind. The Black sea at Livadia. Now she looks as if she has swam in blood, her eyes are wide open as she seems unable to understand what is happening around her, all she does is shake and cling to Tatiana. I scream and pant. I’m drowning. It is so hard to breath. I am sinking so far beneath the sunlit waves above.

"Stop that already, she is dead!" I hear one of the men say to the ones who keep stabbing Anna´s lifeless body. I recognize him as Yurovsky. "Go get the girls."

The men see Olya and Tanya crouching with their arm-covered heads. They have spotted their prize. Now they move in for the taking. I stare in silent horror, holding Maria while we both watch as our older sisters attempt to rise from the floor, the blood in their skirts making them weight more. Tatiana, sobbing and barely able to speak, tries to plead to them for mercy as she helps Olga up with one arm and carries Ortipo with the other.

I see the pigs´ evil leader move forward quickly. It happens in a second. He uses the butt of his rifle to hit Tanechka on the side of the head with just enough force that Tanya tumbles and her hold on both Olga and Ortipo loosens. She drops like an insect. My body is wrenched by spasms as I see it happen. I choke on my tears and my breath as one of the men carries Tanya’s limp body like a sack across the shoulder and takes her out of the room. What is this?

Olga stares forward, her eyes focused and aware of her surroundings for the first time in minutes, our parents’ blood painting her face and drenching her blouse in red. As she picks up Ortipo after Tatiana dropped him, the evil man with wild eyes viciously kicks her in the stomach and she falls back down, but she refuses to let go of our beloved sister’s dog.

"¡No, no, no, no, no, no, no!" Olga yells frantically as another one of the men grabs her by the arm, she starts screaming just as fearfully as when the men were shooting, her incessant struggle alarms me and devours my entire body with terror, she is becoming hysterical, are they going to torture us? Now for the first time the thought crosses my mind that death isn’t such a bad thing after all. Despite Olga’s struggle, she is taken out of the room like a sack, just like Tatiana, but kicking and screaming. She still somehow manages to keep her hold on Ortipo.

There is only one man left in the room, the one with the sinister look. He stumbles over to us and trips with the blood, dropping to his knees. He stares at us. We stare at him. In an instant he jumps and grabs Maria’s arm with his satanic hold, he points the bayonet he has used to stab Anna at her. Maria still refuses to submit to this man by letting him take her with him, she uses all of her body weight to free herself from his grasp, but the brute looses his patience and leans back to throw a punch at Maria’s nose, it starts bleeding.

Maria stumbles and puts her hands in her nose. I let go of my hold on her as soon as the man hits
her in the stomach with his knee, taking advantage of her weakness to put his arms around her waist. I do not want to be a part of this terrible scuffle. I slide away from it. I am ashamed of this, but I am unwilling to accept whatever they have planned for us. Neither is Maria as each pull is met with eerie resistance.

I run across the room, I will not let this evil man touch me, I defy this. My dark skirt is like a sponge and the blood it has drank squeezes out as I move, the material spread tight against my bent legs stretching, it is too uncomfortable to run, I feel good about myself for a second before the blood on the floor makes me slip and fall, I land on my hands, which hurts a lot.

Masha yells, cries, moves, and tries to kick the man, but she is soon being carried by the waist outside of the cellar as well. She howls, is she panicking? Is the force he is using to keep a grasp on her painful? All of this is too much, and I go back to the pillow. I defy this.

Now I am all alone. My hands still hurt from the fall. This is the moment I should be moving to escape but my legs don´t seem to obey me, it is too much fear, damn them!

Minutes have passed, but they seem hours, years, decades. I should stop trying to count things. No sounds except for the ones made by my crying brother, still clinging to the bodies of our parents. I start weeping too, now silently. I consider trying to comfort him, but there is really nothing that could comfort him right now. I consider saying goodbye to my parents just like he is doing, but I can´t.

I have seen dead bodies before in the lazaret, where I visited wounded soldiers with Maria, but this is different, if I see the bodies of my death parents then they will really be dead. I still want to reach for papa though, I want him to hold me in his arms, I want to look into those crinkled eyes. But I remember his body has been shredded with each bullet. Mama must not even have a face anymore. Do not think about it. The thought of what my parents´ faces would look like now makes me feel even more sick than before, I have to stand up to empty my stomach in a corner. I am too scared to look at those things or even touch them. I defy that. Those bodies cannot be my parents. Now I am standing, should I run for it now? The blood is everywhere; we are drenched in it. It makes my clothes stick uncomfortably to my skin; I would not be able to run too fast, and I would not abandon Alexei, he can´t run!

I am cold and hot at the same time. My throat throbs from so much screaming as I kneel again against the wooden floor. I can hear them in the distance calling for sheets. They want to move my parents and friends, but where? And what will happen to us now, after all that they have done to my parents?

Alexei makes a particularly pitiful sobbing sound, and then he starts calling for mama and papa. This is too much. I still wish I could be in bed, asleep. I can´t stay here though, what if they only plan to kill us in a more painful way? I stand up once again with my pillow and touch my brother´s back to catch his attention; he flinches.

“It is me”, I whisper. “They are gone! Let´s go!” But he does not move. I put my pillow under my shoulder and grab my brother by the back of his shirt, this time with both hands, pulling lightly at first, then with all my strength. A horribly loud shrieking sound pours from his throat as he clutches pathetically to our father´s coat; he won´t leave papa and mama.

Just in that moment, I hear footsteps and I freeze. My heart is now beating so hard I am sure the men will hear it. Part of me clung to the irrational hope that they had forgotten about me and my brother, and we would be able to escape the house and ask for help. I shake, I am so scared, whatever they are going to do with us… will it hurt? Will they kill us after? I no longer know what I want the answer to that question to be. And what will happen to our precious Alyosha? Are they
going to let him live? He is only 13! But I know that thought is ridiculous, these monsters have already murdered a couple in front of their children and stabbed a helpless woman to death, what could stop them from killing a child?

The owner of the footsteps arrives, it is neither Yurovsky nor the other evil guy, it is the man who pityfully looked at us in the eye before, with his own light blue ones. He is old and slender; his white hair is trimmed. His bony fingers cling around my arm so tightly I am sure it will bruise later; he picks me up.

"Please," I plead like Tanya did, "please tell me where you are taking us, what are you going to do? Are you going to spare us?" He ignores me and tries to grab me by the waist. I drop the pillow again; it can do nothing for me.

I start struggling, I am very angry now, he wants me to do as he says, takes part in the killing of my parents, and doesn’t even have the courtesy of talking to me and explaining what is happening. I start hitting and kicking him while he still tries to drag me out of the room and then upstairs. No. I defy this.

"I need help here!" He shouts incredibly loudly to the men upstairs while I keep hitting him to stop him from grabbing me.

Help does come. Two men, one of which is the man with the smile, enter the room. They look amused by what they see when they enter.

"You can´t overpower the short little fat one, comrade Vaganov?" Says the one with the smile, the other one laughs. "Grab her by one arm each of you."

I bite the man who is grabbing me in the hand so hard he lets go of me and I move for the door. The sinister man will not stop. Before any of the others can, he catches my hair with his fist. It hurts so badly! How dare he hold me like this? I hit his arms and try jerking my head from his hands, but it holds fast in his grip. The inevitable is coming. I have seen it happen to all my sisters. I refuse to give in.

“Grab her by one arm each of you!” He screams with a terrifying voice now; he is no longer amused. The two men do as they are told, there is nothing I can do now.

He stands in front of me and stares into my eyes, into my soul, and he slaps me across the face. He draws in closer, and uses that same terrifying voice to threaten me:

"If you don´t behave I am going to skin you alive in front of your pretty sisters upstairs. Are we clear?"

I start whimpering. I believe him. I saw the face of that man as he stabbed our maid, he was the only one of the men who looked like we was enjoying the whole situation, instead of looking distressed, I don’t doubt for a moment he is capable of doing what he threatened to do. One of the two men holding me still seems to find my crying funny, because he starts laughing as soon as the man makes the threat.

The cruel man slaps me again across the other cheek. My entire face stings.

"Are we clear?" He repeats.

I nod and my body goes limp.
I try to pretend I am not part of this world; nothing is happening, and no one is laughing at me. My parents aren’t death, this is not me. I defy this. I feel angry at myself for making these men laugh because of my crying, I feel embarrassed too, for looking so weak in front of them. I want them to be the ones crying after what they did to my parents, to our doctor, to our poor maid. But they did not do anything, nothing is happening, I defy this.

They take me upstairs; I can still hear Alexei back in the room crying.
Chapter Summary

This chapter was based on the real "Yurovsky note".

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yurovsky.

When I took my duty as commander, the question already stood about liquidating the Romanov family, since the Czechoslovaks and the Cossacks were closing in on the Urals, closer and closer to Ekaterinburg.

On 16 July, 1918, about 2 o´clock in the afternoon, comrade Filipp came to the house and presented me with the resolution from the Executive Committee to execute Nicholas. It was pointed out that the kitchen boy Sednev, playmate to the tsarevich, must be removed. He told me that during the night, a comrade will arrive and say the password “chimneysweep”, to him the corpses must be given, and he will get rid of them.

I called the boy Sednev and told him that his uncle wanted to see him, and therefore I was sending him away.

Restlessness began in the Romanov family. As always, Dr. Botkin immediately came to me and asked me to tell him where the boy was sent. I told him also what I had told the boy, but he was still somewhat concerned. Later, Tatiana came, saying that Alexei missed him, but I calmed her, saying that the boy went to see his uncle and would return soon.

Having called the inner guard who were chosen for the execution of Nicholas and his family, I assigned the roles and directed who will shoot whom. I provided them with “Nagan” system revolvers. When I allotted their roles, the Letts said that I spare them the responsibility of shooting the girls, because they would not be able to do that. I decided it would be for the best to completely free these comrades from the shooting as they are clearly not capable of performing their revolutionary duty at the most decisive moment.

Having completed all the appropriate assignments, we waited for the “chimneysweep”. However, hours passed, and the “chimneysweep” did not arrive. At 12 o´clock comrade Filipp came into the house again, he brought important news.

Orders had arrived, directly from Moscow, to spare the girls and the boy, for they were going to be taken to Perm, he gave me instructions and told me an extra truck was coming to take the children alive to the train station, the password the driver had to say was “chimney smoke”. Annoyed by these recent developments, I told him there was no time to make the necessary alterations to the plans already put in place for the execution of the entire family, there was also the concern that if we separated the children from the parents, panic would set amongst the prisoners, which may cause problems.
I also told him about the suspicions I had about the intentions of the people responsible for such sudden change of plans hours before the execution. Many, including myself, believed destroying the entire dynasty was a revolutionary and historical necessity I would proudly take part in, and we couldn’t give way to sentimentality when something much bigger was at stake. My first impression was that contra revolutionary infiltration was the sole cause of the entire affair. I was, however, not as well informed as comrade Filipp on matters of state, I had no evidence to support my suppositions regarding the people responsible for the decisión, or reason to doubt Filipp’s loyalty to the cause. After he explained to me in full detail the reasons for the decision Moscow had made I remained convinced that this postponement of the liquidation of the younger members of the family was a calculated measure that would benefit the revolution in the long run. I told comrade Filipp not to worry, the orders would be carried out.

I began adjusting the plans previously made. We would still have to kill the servants, I would eventually be asked to report back to Moscow to write the official account of the events. We couldn’t have any hostile witnesses talking about what had really taken place tonight. The Ural Soviet had ordered the confiscation of all the objects belonging to the family, even the tsarevich’s metal brace, and for a murder scene to be staged to discourage the arriving armies. For this purpose, I was going to tell the men in charge of the disposal of the bodies to burn all the family’s clothes in the woods once they arrived.

We wouldn’t allow the children to take any of their belongings with them. We would also have to ask the former grand duchesses and tsarevich to undress in order to confiscate all the jewels they had hidden somewhere in their clothes, something we had found out about shortly after their arrival from Tobolsk. One of our censors had noticed the uncommon way in which they used the word “medicines” in their letters; it seemed like a code word for something different. The small number of valuables we had managed to take from them previously had also made us consider the possibility they were hiding something. We would find out tonight if our suspicions were correct.

That left the issue of how to separate the parents and servants from the children. I didn’t think the prisoners would be able to overpower us or even cause serious trouble if they panicked, but the problems it may cause, and the amount of force we would need to use to subdue them, was unpredictable. I preferred to avoid the possibilities.

Managing to separate them peacefully was out of the question, I had recently witnessed what had happened when we removed the kitchen boy, how much worse would they react by being told they had to get in a truck without their parents?

I decided it was best for the execution to start as originally planned, only changing a few details. We would get them all in the room already selected for the process, and then I would ask the executioners to shoot directly at the hearts of the person assigned to each of them with order and accuracy, only this time none of them would be assigned to kill the children. In the unlikely event one of the children got hurt in the process, I would need the appropriate medical equipment to take care of the situation.

I met with the chosen executioners again and dismissed most of them, only 5 were necessary. I then spoke to two of the dismissed guards in private. One of them was ordered to get hold of four sets of clothes for women and one set for a boy of about 12 to 14 years of age, I gave him money in case he needed to purchase these garments and told him to use force if all the shops were already closed,
as they probably were at this hour. I told the other one to go to the nearest clinic or hospital and bring along bandages, sutures, alcohol or any other equipment necessary to treat gunshot wounds, I had been trained as a medic during the war, so I believed myself to be capable of taking care of any possible unwanted incidents. The two guards seemed confused by these orders and were about to start asking questions, so I told them to hurry and didn’t answer.

Back in the room where I was talking with the remaining executioners, I explained the new orders to them. Pavel Medvedev, Nikulin, Kudrin and Stephan Vaganov appeared to accept them without question, but one of the comrades, Peter Ermakov, seemed very disappointed.

"I am going to kill them anyway!" He said.
"Then I will be forced to write a report to the Ural Soviet explaining them about your unwillingness to follow orders," I answered. I admired his passion, but a true revolutionary would put aside personal desires for the good of the many.
"You are an undercover agent! You were sent to sabotage the people’s justice!" He shouted. I started to worry he may be drunk.
"Be careful comrade," I said calmly. I started considering the possibility of dismissing him as well.
"But why did they change their minds so suddenly?" Medvedev asked.

"Don’t get confused comrade, they will meet their ends," I explained. "They are simply more useful to us alive than dead at the moment. You must understand that even though we signed a peace treaty with Germany, because we were completely defeated militarily, we still are in a precarious situation and cannot afford to offend them in any way. Just two weeks ago, the German ambassador was shot dead. The execution of the former emperor and empress could be treated by Germany as an internal Russian affair, but it would be completely irrational to offend the Germans unnecessarily by killing the daughters, princesses of German blood, when just days before they had been asking about their wellbeing incessantly. It is feared they may use this as an excuse to further invade Russia. The imperialist war is almost over, and once the Germans are defeated by the Allies, we will have no reason left to keep the women alive."

"What about the heir?!" Yelled Ermakov. "We cannot allow him to live! He is the heir! That makes him an internal Russian affair!"
"I didn’t understand much, I don’t agree with this particular decision either, something about having a bargain chip with our many enemies in any possible future scenario, the position of the new government is very fragile at the moment. The decision makers in Moscow must have thought more about the possible advantages of keeping him alive than in the dangers," I explained. "At least that is what I have been told, we must not be capricious enough to claim understanding of comrade Lenin’s pragmatism. If this calms your fears, comrade Philipp tells me he won’t stay with his sisters for long, they are apparently planning to take him to Moscow. He will be kept away from counterrevolutionaries there, comrades, worst case scenario they will make him a pawn, and if the revolution succeeds and everything goes on as planned, they won’t find any use for him and will finish what we started here, of that I am sure. His fate is sealed."

"If their fates are sealed, we might as well kill him now and have our way with his sisters, that way they will really have a good use," Ermakov said, laughing at the end at his own joke, some of the other executioners also laughed.
"Stop that," I said, annoyed by his lack of discipline and the way he influenced the others to act the
same way. "I will not allow any harm to come to the girls. These are orders and if you are not willing to follow them you are free to leave like the Letts."

Ermakov was offended about being compared to the soft Letts, and didn’t say anything else.

Finally, at 1:30 a.m. the “chimneysweep” arrived, followed closely by the “chimney smoke”. I told them to wait outside.
I went to the lodgings and woke up Dr. Botkin, I told him that everyone had to dress quickly because there were disturbances in the city, and that I must transfer them to a safer place. Not wishing to hurry them, I gave them the opportunity to get dressed and went to see if the medical equipment or the clothes had arrived, but they had not.

At 2 o’clock, I transferred the guards to the lower premises and told them to place themselves in their arranged order. I led the family downstairs. Nicholas was carrying Alexei in his arms. The rest carried pillows in their hands or other items, two of them carried dogs.

We came down to the lower level to the room previously prepared. Alexandra Feodorovna asked for a chair, Nicholas asked for a chair for Alexei. I ordered the chairs to be brought. Alexandra and Alexei sat down.

I left them there and decided to wait for the guards bringing the medical supplies and clothes. Once they arrived, I took the clothes and the medical equipment upstairs, to the room that once belonged to the grand duchesses.

I returned to the room where the family was and brought the executioners with me. Nicholas stood with his back to me until I announced they were to be shot.
The execution was a disorderly affair, none of the guards followed my instructions. When I shot Nicholas, instead of shooting their respective targets, all of them followed suit and shot Nicholas as well, wanting to be the ones to claim they shot the former emperor. After Ermakov shot his target, Alexandra, the room became chaos with all the guards shooting without aiming. I was disappointed by this utter lack of discipline.

The firing went on for a very long time, and when I was finally able to stop it, the room was filled with smoke. Ermakov wanted to finish the injured with bayonets, so I allowed him and some of the men to go grab them.

After we entered again, I realized most of the servants were still alive, and one of the grand duchesses appeared to be dead or hurt. I told the guards to finish the remaining living servants, once they did, they had received instructions to take the children upstairs. The maid stood up and started shouting, and the men started bayoneting her in a disorderly manner, I had to inform them that the maid was already dead after a minute or so, this made me consider how much the Cheka needed professional executioners.

Finally, we started dragging the girls upstairs, none of them appeared to be hurt except for Maria, whose nose was bleeding, and Tatiana, who had been hit too hard on the side of the head by
Ermakov to subdue her, she woke up after a few minutes bleeding when she was already in the room and started screaming, until Olga, the one on the ground who had only fainted before, managed to calm her. I got to the room first to make sure the men behaved, because we were going to have to undress the girls in order to search for the jewels. The three girls were sobbing, absolutely hysterical, all of their white shirts were completely red, their skirts and faces covered in their parents’ and servants’ blood as well, but it didn’t belong to them. Everything seemed to have gone according to plan. The guards in the room were all behaving themselves, except for maybe Ermakov, who was taunting Maria.

"Did that hurt?" He said, making exaggerated gestures to catch her attention, when he wasn’t able to, he turned to the other sisters. "What is all your praying good for now? Do you want to go to the funeral? We are going to sprinkle your parents with acid instead of holy water!"

The girls were too upset by the recent events to be offended by Ermakov’s petty jokes. I wondered if they had even heard what he said.

I heard Vaganov downstairs asking for help, I guessed it was to be expected, he was in his late fifties and not in the best shape. Ermakov went with another man to see what it was all about.

"The little one needed a few slaps, that is all," said Ermakov when he returned, behind him, Anastasia was being dragged by the arms, she wasn’t putting any resistance. I told Ermakov to go get the boy so we could undress these girls quickly and be done with it, I knew he was the least likely not to overstep boundaries.

"I am going to need you to take off all of your clothes," I said in a serious tone, standing in front of them. "And by all I mean all, I need to be sure you are not hiding anything valuable in them. After you are done, you will dress with these new clothes we have brought, they are in the cot," I pointed to the cot I was referring to.

I don’t know what I was expecting to happen, but none of the girls made a move, they just looked at each other, terrified. The oldest one started crying harder, whimpering and cleaning her nose with her hands.

"We don’t have anything," Tatiana managed to say between troubled breaths. "I know about the medicines", I said, putting special emphasis on that last word, Tatiana seemed shocked and even hurt that I knew, she looked at her sisters and back at me repeatedly, and after a moment said: "Can we at least change our clothes in privacy? We will give you everything, we promise." "No, I can’t know for sure you won’t hide the jewels again in your new clothes unless we stay here. None of the men will harm you, I have forbidden it."

Nothing. No movements to do as I said, just more weeping.

"If you don’t do as I say, I will be forced to ask my men to do it by force", I said. "Maria doesn’t have any jewels, we sewed them when we were back at Tobolsk and she was here,
can’t you spare her the humiliation at least?” This time it was the oldest one, Olga, talking. “I have no reason to believe anything you say”, I responded. “But…” Tatiana tried to say. “Do it,” I said to my men, and I went downstairs to see why it was taking Ermakov so long to take an invalid boy upstairs. I heard the screams of the girls behind me.

When I got to the cellar, I found myself feeling angry at Ermakov for the first time, instead of simply annoyed. He was definitely drunk.

"Die, die, die already you little shit!” Ermakov yelled while trying to stab the boy on the ground in the stomach with his bayonet. The boy in turn whimpered and used his hands to drive the bayonet away from his body, I don’t know how he had managed to defend himself from a grown man for so long. The point of the bayonet was already red, showing he had managed to pierce his stomach at least slightly. "Comrade Ermakov! Enough!” I yelled, and he stopped his attack on the boy. "Go back upstairs immediately!”

He didn’t obey, instead, he walked around the room, groaned, and made angry sounds like a little spoiled bourgeois child. He then started bayoneteting the corpses of the former emperor and empress, in front of a very scared and horrified boy.

I went to the boy, carried him in my arms and took him upstairs, the boy was blubbering, tense, and avoided looking at my face. He moaned in pain when I picked him up. Back in the room, I saw that the grand duchesses had started undressing themselves in order to avoid being undressed by my men. Their heads were low, and they were silently weeping, Maria was the girl that had completely undressed the fastest and she was sitting in the corner of the room next to a cot crying, covering her breasts and genitals with her hands, and with her eyes shut close. I saw that some of the men had already found the jewels that were sewn in the shirts and corsets of three of the girls, and they were trying to separate the jewels from the fabric. Our suspicions were right.

When I entered with the boy the sisters looked worried, and even Maria raised her head to look at him. The oldest one looked as if she had seen a vision, she let out a huge breath she had been holding and seemed surprised and relieved we had also spared her brother. I went to the other room, that once belonged to the boy and his parents, and dropped him in the cot, I left him there and went to see if the guards were finished confiscating the jewels.

Once the 4 girls were completely naked, I asked the guards to make sure they hadn’t hidden anything. All the men except for Vaganov, who stood in a corner with a serious expression, started harassing the girls, asking them to turn around and uncover their breasts to see for sure we had had all the jewels, although it was clear they didn’t have anything left. Ermakov, who was back upstairs, did so gladly. In the other room, Alexei could be heard moaning in pain, which alarmed the girls, Anastasia even tried to leave the room to see what was going on, but I stopped her and told her to go back.

"Let me see," Ermakov said, groping the breasts of a very hysterical Maria, who let out a scream.
Medvedev and Nikulin followed suit and did the same with the other girls, groping them, laughing at them and making jokes. The shocked and terrified girls screamed as they had when we were shooting into the room downstairs and tried to crawl back into the room as far as they could.

Then I saw something that really infuriated me, one of the guards was taking some of the jewels and putting them in his pockets.

"Stop that!" I yelled, pointing my gun at him. "Anyone who steals any of the confiscated objects, will be shot. Give it back." I extended my hand, the thief complied quickly, clearly scared by the threat.

I ordered the guards, some of whom were now talking to the girls in a crude manner and trying to force them to dance, to stop goofing around and to start picking up the jewels and clothes collected and take them to my office. Once the men had left the room, I closed the door under lock and key to give the women some privacy to dress up with the new clothes, as they were covered in blood, I gave them a towel and told them to clean themselves as much as they could before doing it.

After I had washed my hands, I went to see if the boy’s condition was serious. I found him laid on the cot where I had left him, his face red from crying. I took his green shirt off, and he tried to struggle with me as I checked his wounds, he writhed the whole time I was treating him, but he was too weak to cause me any trouble.

He wailed very loudly both when I started to clean his wounds and when I started with the stitches, not only from the pain; I could see in his strained facial expressions and the way he tried to push me away that it was upsetting to him having the man who had killed his father treating him.

The sisters in the other room called out for him when they heard him scream.

The damage was superficial, the two wounds in his stomach very small and the internal organs intact, most of them were simple scratches; the wounds on his hands were actually worse than the ones on his stomach. Apparently, the boy had injured his hands trying to protect his chest and stomach from Ermakov’s bayonet.

The only strange thing was how long the bleeding went on for such small wounds. I had once asked Dr. Botkin what was the nature of the illness that made the boy a cripple, but he had told me he wasn’t comfortable answering as it was a private family affair. I now suspected it was some sort of blood disease.

I finished the stitches and bandaged each of his hands and then the torso. The boy was no longer screaming, only crying when I left him sitting in the cot. I took off his boots to make sure he wasn’t hiding anything before I left. Considering the girls had all their jewels in their shirts and corsets and I had already looked under his shirt, I assumed the boy probably didn’t have any, but we were going to take all of his clothes and cap anyway.

Back in the sisters’ room I found them all dressed up with the new corsets, white shirts and dark
gray skirts, very similar to their original clothes, but these skirts were darker and the garments cheaper. Only their original shoes they had kept, as the guard hadn´t considered buying them. They were all close together sitting in the ground crying silently, by order of birth. Olga reclined her head in Tatiana´s shoulder, Maria did the same from the opposite side, and Anastasia reclined her head in Maria´s shoulder.

I went to grab the boy´s new clothes, he would also keep his original boots.

I told the sisters they could now go see their brother. The girls hugged him one by one and kissed his cheeks, clearly glad to see him. I gave the clothes to Tatiana, who helped her brother change. Their new clothes were all simple and middle-class, but it wasn´t a huge change for any of the children, since they already dressed quite modestly.

Once they were all dressed and together, I escorted the children outside to the “chimney smoke” truck, Maria was carrying Alexei, now that Nicholas was gone. The truck were the bodies would be carried was just in front, but the guards hadn´t carried the bodies out just yet.

Still with tears in their eyes, they all got in the truck, that drove them away from the Ipatiev house. I never saw them again.

I went back inside to help with the disposal of the bodies, which would prove to be an even harder task. Some of the men tasked with it were even more immature and undisciplined than my own, they complained when we arrived with the bodies that we had not brought them any of the girls, and that the tsarina and the maid were not alive; my men had to help them with the burial.

After trying countless different methods, like disposing of the bodies on a pit or even attempting to burn them at some point, we ended up buying a different type of acid than the one we used at first, Stephan gave us the idea, he had some knowledge because his son was a chemist or had at least studied to become one. The bodies of the doctor, the servants, and the former emperor and empress were completely dissolved. We disposed of the resulting liquid in the woods.

Stephan Vaganov was found hanging from a tree near his house two days later, probably a suicide, I heard it was his chemist son who found his body while he was on leave from the front. It is a shame, because thanks to Stephan, no one will ever know what we did to them.

Chapter End Notes

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:
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- Constructive criticism
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- Comments in only one chapter.
- Comments in more than one chapter.

This author replies to comments, but if you don't want a reply, for whatever reason (for example, shyness), feel free to sign your comment with the Word "whisper" and I Will appreciate the comment just the same but not respond.
Maria.
No one talks on the way to the train station, no one talks when we get into the train. Or when it starts moving. The tears don’t stop flowing, I feel like the world has ended, that I am already dead. The present and the future don’t exist, they don’t worry me, they don’t matter. I am stuck in that house, in that cellar, in that moment, trying to remember it in a consistent order. Did it really happen? Was it just a dream? When my mind answers “yes, it happened”, my heart fills with anguish and I cry for my parents over and over, until it feels like a dream again, it is a never-ending cycle. Will I feel this way forever?

Alexei doesn’t stop clinging to me even after he has been sitting for quite some time, no longer needing me to carry him, we has suffered so much tonight that I don’t dare push him away, I let him wet my new shirt with tears. Tatiana comforts Anastasia and Olga, letting them sob into her shoulders while her own tears simply run through her neck, as always thinking of herself last. The side of her head already has a small yet ugly scab.

I know it has been hours since we left Ekaterinburg when the sun starts rising. We keep sobbing, sometimes we cry silently, sometimes we choke with sobs in a way that is probably heard all over the train. Half the time, Alexei´s face remains covered as he holds me as tightly as I do. "You are with us, you will be fine", I whisper in his ear more than one time.

About an hour after the sunlight has entered through the corners of the curtains, we are no longer crying. The first to stop crying is Olga, and that surprises me. Olga seems to be the one who suffered the most because of papa´s abdication and our following exile. She seemed anxious most of the time, even back in Tobolsk, maybe she always knew this would happen and had been preparing herself for some time. Anastasia stops after her, then Alexei, but he doesn´t stop holding me for a while after. His recent wounds are also making it painful for him so sit straight or move his hands, as he flinches wherever he tries to do any of those things, I see the way he tries to hide it by acting normal every time I catch him making a pained expression.

I am the last one to stop crying, right after Tatiana does. Still, everyone has the same serious and resigned expression. Our eyes are puffy and red.

Our cabin is small, but there is more than enough space for the 5 of us.

Just like many times before, the windows are covered by dark curtains we are not allowed to roll, and we are not allowed to leave the cabin without permission either. My sister Nastya is sitting opposite to me in the closest seat to the window with Olga and Tatiana, who is carrying Ortipo, sitting next to her. She breaks the rules several times, as she typically does, by moving the curtain slightly and having a small glimpse of the outside every now and then, but instead of telling me with excitement what she has seen as she usually did before, she remains silent and her sad, puffy and watery eyes don’t change or meet mine, unless it is to share a sad
smile that makes one or both of us inevitably start crying again for a few minutes or so.

The guards stationed outside don’t seem to care about enforcing the rules, they haven’t entered our cabin or bothered us the entire trip, which I am very thankful for after our experience. The only nuisance they claim they can’t avoid giving us is insisting on escorting us every time we have to go to the bathroom and waiting right outside the door, but we have grown used to that and their sometimes rude behavior. What we weren’t used to was being stripped of our dignity so outrageously like we had been tonight. Just the thought of how mama might have reacted if she had witnessed how her daughters and son were treated makes me burst into tears again, she loved us so much.

We didn’t even have time to grieve for our dead parents before we were forced to strip naked in front of those beasts, they said it was to find the jewels, but I know they did it for their own gratification.

I had never felt so ashamed and humiliated in my life, just the thought of those men knowing how we look like under our clothes makes me drown with shame. I know I should have put on more resistance, I should have refused to do it, but I was afraid they were going to beat me like that man I had heard being called Ermakov had done in the cellar. That man had also taunted us about our parents´ deaths with blasphemy seconds after it had happened.

I didn’t think anyone could feel more miserable than I did at that moment.

When they started touching us and talking to us like that, I expected the worst, I couldn’t believe how graphic their descriptions about what they were willing to do were getting, some of it included shooting us after they were done. I worried so much about Nastya, she was too young to be hearing such filth and being groped that way, I worried more about what they would do to her next than about the same thing possibly being done to me.

I feel so unclean now, I can’t get the feeling of those hands on me away from my head, away from my body, and the dry blood still stuck in my hair sure doesn’t help, it is like the events are stuck in my body itself, although I doubt a shower would completely make those feelings go away.

Still, I can’t help but be thankful to God that they only managed to touch our breasts. As revolting and violating as it felt, it could have been so much worse. I am sure it was God that had protected us from any further indignation, just like he had protected my sisters in the Rus, where they had told me they hadn’t been allowed to lock their doors at night, but fortunately had not been bothered.

Me and my sisters are also not injured like our poor Alyosha, it pains my soul to imagine how scared he must have felt down there alone in that cellar being attacked by that monster who had given me a nosebleed, and then having his wounds stitched by that murderer without any painkillers… every time those thoughts cross my mind I kiss his temple and hug him, he never wants to pull away, neither do I.

We have no idea about where they are taking us or for what purpose, which reminds me of the time I had accompanied my parents to Ekaterinburg without knowing exactly what was in store for
us. Now we know.

I will never travel with my parents again, never take a walk with papa again, or talk and joke with him and Nastya again, or do simple things like break the ice with him again. I can’t stand it, he was the kindest and gentlest of fathers. He is the only one that could comfort me right now with a hug and a few hopeful words, but he is gone, and how terrible how he went, my heart broke in half after the first bullet, so horrible. I start crying again and it is me now who hugs Alexei tighter for comfort.

And mama, my poor darling mama, how I will miss taking care of her, talking to her, being of use to her, even if having to do that secretly annoyed me when I was a little girl, those sorts of tasks always suited Tanya better. But now I wish I could spend every single day with her rather than not a single day more. She will never meet my future husband or see me get married or meet her grandchildren like I always imagined she would, at least not on this earth. I don’t even know if the bolcheviks will ever let us be free enough to get married. But whatever happens, the future seems grayer with papa and mama gone, the 7 of us were a team, it was always “we 7”. It no longer fills me with joy to think about my future children, and that always lifted my spirits even in my darkest days when we were separated for the first time. Now our separation is permanent.

Time passes, I stop crying once more, but I feel empty.

Even after we have all stopped crying no one says a word, maybe my siblings are afraid of saying the wrong thing, or trying and failing to console others, or they are, like me, so shoked and disillusioned by everything we have gone through that there are no words to clearly express how we feel.

The only time any of us breaks the silence is to ask permission to the guards to go to the bathroom, or in my brother’s case, to ask me to carry him there. After I carry him back the last time, I notice how tired he is, and I insist him to lay and rest his head on my lap. He falls asleep soon and I try to do the same, but a nightmare about tonight doesn’t allow me to rest. The guards keep shooting at us, I see mama and papa’s bodies, so horrible, I am filled with terror, they shoot me in my thigh, they shoot Olenka and Tatianushka in the head, they bayonet Nastya like they did to our maid, they shoot Alyosha in the ear…

I wake up to find all of my siblings sleeping except for Olga.

“Papa told me it was important to forgive everyone, and that it was what he had done,” she says in a low tone of voice, finally ending the silence. “It is easy to do when all you must forgive are disrespectful people, threats and taunts. It is harder to do when you have been seriously wronged.” I don’t know what to say, I know how important forgiveness is, but I loved papa so much that forgiving those who killed him feels like a betrayal, even if I know it is what he would have wanted.

“Before he died…” I say, reluctantly, “the last thing he did was ask God to forgive them, like Jesus did on the cross. But we don’t have to do it just yet, I don’t feel ready.”
Olga’s eyes fill with tears and she nods.

“It is just so hard,” she says, bursting back into tears. “I mean, I knew this could happen, mama knew too. Remember all those theology classes she gave us about suffering?”

“Yes,” I confirm.

“She said suffering prepared our souls for heaven,” Tatiana adds, waking up from her nap and smiling, really smiling, “and it took us closer to God. They are in heaven now my dears, there is no suffering there, I am sure they will watch over us, and intercede.”

“She did try to prepare us in case something happened,” Olga agrees, “but she never lost hope we could be rescued. I never lost hope either, I mean, I knew it was unlikely but deep down I always hoped I was wrong.”

“I think we should start praying for their souls, and for Jesus and the Virgin to give us a little bit of comfort,” Tatiana continues. “I know it is a little bit too soon for this to calm you, or even me, but we will see Papa and Mama again, whatever happens we will be together again, we have to live for them whatever time we have left.”

“Yes!” I exclaim while nodding, a little too loud, a small glimmer of peace fills my heart as I imagine heaven, but it isn’t strong enough to stop another sob from escaping my throat, and then more, louder ones. The idea of my parents being in heaven is a small comfort after what those beasts did to them, it would be a victory over the murderers. But not a big enough victory to make me feel calm, to fill the emptiness of my soul. Anastasia and Alexei are waken up by my noise, the latter yelps when straightening up.

“Are you all right?” Tanya asks him. “Does it hurt too much?”

“No, no”, he assures. “I am fine.”

“Let me make sure the stitches are in place…” Tatiana continues, leaving her seat. “We don’t know if that animal even knew how to stitch properly.”

“I am fine,” Alexei groans, but he lets Tatiana check the wounds in his hands and stomach, and then she puts the bandages back in place. I use this time to compose myself.

“It seems everything is fine, thank the Lord,” Tatiana says, crossing herself.

“It is such a shame you are hurt again after you were starting to get better,” my little sister, Anastasia, says sadly.
They both nod, but I can tell they are not in the mood, feeling too sad at the moment, I am also sad, but I know prayer will make it better. We all pray, for mama and papa to be with God in a better place, for Russia, for the war to end, for God to give us comfort and unity in these times, and for our safety and that of our relatives also under arrest. We pray for a long time. We also thank God for letting us live, we can’t only focus on the bad.

We all cry as we pray, sometimes we sob, but they are healing tears, I think.

"Remember", Olga tells us after breathing deeply twice to be able to speak, "whatever comes from God we have to accept it, we may not know the reason now, but, but he knows why he allows things to happen".

It is hard for her to accept, but she has such a strong faith. I see the little ones’ moods change a bit. They are not rambunctious like they used to be in happier times, but they seem calmer. In the end we all hug, and cry tears of relief instead of just anguish, and I kiss Tatiana more than the others this time, I am grateful for the way she pulled us out of the cycle, at least for now.

I feel like I can talk now, about other things, like the anguish will be there, but not every single second of the day.

“I love you all so much”, Olga says, tearfully, but smiling. “Mama would be proud of you, Tanya.” Of course, she would, she is acting like her nickname, The Governess, again, always guiding us, and now being a mother to us all after our terrible loss. I love them all so much as well.

“It is the morning already,” Anastasia says suddenly, peaking at the window.

“We were told not to look Nastya,” Tatiana reprimands her. “We don’t know what these men are capable of.”

“I wonder what time it is,” I say.

“I am hungry,” Alexei announces. I realize I am hungry too, it must be 9 a.m. at least.

“That is a good thing, you are only hungry when healthy, but am not too sure about asking the guards for food,” Olga says.

“I agree, we don’t know if they are the friendly type,” Tatiana adds. “But they must feed us sooner or later, otherwise why didn’t they kill us? If you want, I can ask them later, but I can’t promise you anything.”

“I think we should ask them for food over and over again just to annoy them,” Anastasia says, as if
to cheer everyone up, me and Alexei give her each a sad half smile.

“Not now Nastya,” Tanya scolds her. “First we need to get to know them better and see what we are dealing with”.

“I miss the nice guards in Tobolsk,” Alexei laments. “They were nice to papa and mama.”

When he says those last words, he starts trying to hold back tears, but he fails, my heart breaks for him.

“I know baby,” Tatiana says, moving forward to give his hand a squish, seeing him cry makes her eyes watery too. Most of the guards in Tobolsk were indeed very nice, they behaved in a gentlemanly manner towards us and some of them even played with papa and Alexei, they played cards with them, some also taught Alexei to use a bow and arrow.

“But some of the guards in Ekaterinburg were also nice, remember the one that gave Mashka a cake for her birthday?” Anastasia teases me, trying to cheer Alexei up.

We all smile at the memory pathetically.

“I don’t recall,” I say, wiping my tears and pretending to be offended, but I do recall, he brought us cake and we small talked.

“The cake was disgusting as well,” Olga says, raising and then lowering her eyebrows.

“Poor dear,” I say, remembering the guard that had brought it to me, his name was Ivan. “He probably didn’t have any good ingredients to make it, but it was a very nice gesture.”

“A nice gesture that got him arrested,” Olga comments.

“Wasn’t he taken away due to illness?” Tatiana asks.

“I honestly don’t know, but we didn’t see him after my birthday, I hope he is doing fine,” I say.

“But you think …” Alexei says, nervous about what he is going to ask, “he would have been capable of doing… that… if ordered to? Killing papa and mama, I mean, Yurovsky was also nice when he first arrived, he asked me about my health and stuff.”

“He also said there would be no more stealing of our valuables, and when he arrived the new guards he brought with him behaved better,” Olga adds, conceding that Alexei has a point.
The silence comes back again for a minute, I had never thought of that, would he?

“I don’t think so,” Anastasia reassures her brother, but I am not sure whether she really means it or is only trying to comfort him. “Most of the guards who took part in the shooting weren’t even allowed to talk to us, remember? Even papa tried to chat with them, and they usually shut all of us down. Yurovsky is different because he was the commander, so he had to talk to us, and all that worrying about your health was probably to make us put our guard down, don’t you think? Also, that nonsense about taking us to a safer place and then shoot at us instead, what is up with that?”

“Whatever way the new guards treat us we can’t afford to trust them so easily,” Olga says. “We must be careful.”

I agree with Olga, but I don’t know what is the use of being careful and not trusting them when we are at their mercy either way. All the trust in the guards I had left disappeared the moment they decided to kill our parents and friends, but that didn’t stop them from humiliating us and stealing all our jewels.

“Well I don’t care about the guards anymore,” Anastasia answers. “I only hope they let us go outside for longer than 5 minutes and they don’t paint the windows white and then threaten to shoot us when we try to open them for fresh air.”

“Ugh, yes!” Tatiana agrees. “Those windows were so bad for mama’s health, they only made her headaches worse.”

The mention of mama’s sad last days makes us all silent and gloomy again.

We stay silent for the rest of the ride.

All of us cry again at some point, but not at the same time. We stay silent and allow each other to do it, even though I would like to say something to console my siblings, the right words don’t reach my mind.

“Look! The train is stopping! We are in a station!” Anastasia exclaims after a while, taking a small glance through the curtains. Alexei tries to get a glimpse too.

“Don’t move the curtains!” One of the guards, who looks about the same age as Anastasia, orders yelling, entering the cabin. Anastasia and Alexei quickly go back to their positions.

“Comrade! Comrade!” Olga says before he leaves, using the word in a mocking tone. “Do you have anything to eat?”

I panic, I feel like she is being too daring, Tatiana seems to think the same way, her eyes open wide in fear. A horrifying image crosses through my mind of that guard suddenly pulling out his revolver and shooting my sister in the head.
“No,” he answers in a serious tone. “And you are not my comrade, citizen Romanova”.

“But we are starving!” Anastasia exaggerates, imitating Olga.

I stay still.

“You will be fed once you arrive to your assigned location,” he states.

“Please give us food!” Anastasia pleads loudly, almost yelling, putting a hand on her forehead. Alexei laughs when he sees her, me and Tatiana give them a nervous smile.

“Be quiet,” the guard says angrily and walks away. I breathe deeply. We all laugh, for a second all the hurt fades.

Suddenly a depressing thought occurs to me.

“We are going to die of boredom,” I announce.

“Why?” Asks Tatiana.

“We left all our things back in Ekateringburg: books, clothes, card games, everything!”

Anastasia sinks dramatically to the ground, pretending to faint, when she hears me say this. This is why I love her so much.

“You can now get out,” the young guard who had previously scolded us announces. “You have arrived at your destination, follow me.”

Anastasia straightens up quickly.

“Where are we?” Alyosha asks when I pick him up, something I will probably have to do more often now that papa is gone because I am the strongest of the sisters. The guard doesn’t answer the question, he takes us through door outside the train.

We all walk through the station with 5 guards walking around us, I manage to ask a passing woman what station we are in, but one of the guards covers my sight of her and tells us to walk faster before she can answer.

When we get out of the station, we are met by a horse led carriage, when we get on, I become worried the bumps in the carriage will become a problem for Alexei. There are soldiers, probably our new guards, riding other horses ahead of our carriage and behind it.
For an instant I become excited about our new location, which makes me feel guilty afterwards as I remember the moment our parents were shot. I am brought back to a depressing state. There is nothing to look forward to. My siblings must feel the same way, because they are all very quiet during the entire journey.

We travel through what looks to me too big to be a village, but I don’t know whether we are in a town or a city, the houses and the churches don’t look much different from the ones at Tobolsk. I wish they would let us go to church, but I know that is unlikely.

Finally, we stop in a house at the outskirts of the town or city, near the countryside. The house looks like a traditional peasant house, made of wood, but a lot bigger, as big as the Ipatiev house, it is painted blue with white decorations. All my siblings look at it with curiosity.

“It is beautiful”, I say, with child-like wonder.

“Papa would have loved it here,” I hear Olga say, in a very sad and dull voice. “He always loved Russian designs such as these.”

My interest in the house disappears. It will be such a trial to live anywhere without papa.

“Maybe he is watching from heaven,” Anastasia comments in a shaky voice, right before she starts to cry again. Poor thing, I really hope she is right.

“Well, we are here, what exactly are you waiting for?” One of the guards says in a condescending manner to us, but he gives his hand to Olga to help her get out of the carriage, and then does the same with all of us.

“Do you want me to carry him?” He says, referring to Alexei.

“No thanks,” I answer, suddenly feeling protective.

“Suit yourself,” he says, and he walks ahead of us.

The inside of the house is well furnished and looks cozy. An old man, slenderly built, with a white beard and blue eyes receives us in the living room and invites us to sit.

“Are these the Romanov citizens?” He asks one of the guards that accompanied us.

“Yes,” the guard, who is a blond, responds.
The old man turns back to us.

“I am going to call each of you by your names, if I am right you say yes, if I am wrong you correct me,” he says reading from a paper. “We are going to have to do this every day. Olga Nikolaevna Romanova?” He points at my oldest sister.

“Yes,” she confirms. He then does the same with me and my other siblings.

Poor Anastasia was still crying when it was her turn.

“Let me introduce myself,” he begins after he finishes calling us. “I am commander Pavel Antonovich, and I am going to oversee you during your stay here. We need to talk about the rules, first of all, your rooms and bathroom will be upstairs, and the rooms and bathroom of the guards including myself will be downstairs. You can move freely inside the house except to go inside the rooms or bathroom of the guards, are we clear?” We all nod, it seems little has changed.

“The guards are not allowed upstairs without my permission so they will not bother you except during rollcalls,” he continues. “I was informed you wouldn´t bring any possessions with you so I took the liberty of buying an extra set of clothes for each of you so you can have two and have something to wear when one set is dirty, but that is all.” I am impressed by his kindness and consideration, but don´t let myself get my hopes up.

“You are also allowed to go outside anytime you want, but you need to ask for permission and will be followed around by the guards, you can’t leave any further than the fence,” he proceeds. “If you need anything, my office is in the only room in the basement.” I can’t believe my ears.

“Are there no limits to the time outside?” Anastasia asks with her eyes wide open, smiling at Alexei and me as she wipes her tears.

“I am well aware these are more freedoms than you were allowed in your previous location, I had to argue a lot in order to get them so use them wisely and don’t make me regret them,” he says. “If any of you escape, all the consequences will fall on me, remember that and don’t get me in trouble”.

This man and his kindness reminds me a lot about commander Pankratov in Tobolsk, who had even asked us about whether we had books to read.

“We won´t cause you any trouble sir,” Tatiana says. “Are we allowed to send letters?”

“I am afraid not,” Pavel answers with an apologetic tone, I feel sad about this, I wanted so badly to get some news about Aunt Olga’s baby Tikhon. “You are not allowed to receive them either, I am afraid, no one is even supposed to know you are alive until negotiations for you release are finished.”
“What negotiations?” Olga asks.

“I am really not supposed to talk with you about this, children,” he says. It surprises me that he called us children, not that it bothers me, but only Alexei and arguably Anastasia would fit into that category; part of me is relieved that he considers us politically unimportant enough to compare us to children, those for me are good news. “Any more questions?”

“Where are we?” Anastasia blurts out before I can ask the same.

“You are in the city of Perm, about 291 kilometers from Ekaterinburg,” he says, standing up. “Now, I am guessing you must be very hungry. Would you prefer to have breakfast or a bath first?”

Chapter End Notes

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:
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This author replies to comments, but if you don’t want a reply, for whatever reason (for example, shyness), feel free to sign your comment with the Word "whisper" and I will appreciate the comment just the same but not respond.
Some of the events in this chapter are directly inspired by: “Romanovs A Crowned Family”. It is a very good movie, and one of the best portrayals of the real Romanovs. I haven’t found any real-life sources for some of the smaller events shown in the movie though, so I decided to use them here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alexei.
I don’t think Pavel is good. If he works here it is because the reds like him, which means he must be up to no good, he probably also thinks it was good papa died.

“It would be better to bathe first,” Tatiana answers. I don’t want to bathe first, I am hungry, but I keep quiet.

Masha carries me upstairs, she has carried me many times before, but now every time she does it reminds me of papa, and how he will never carry me again. My eyes get all watery, but I don’t want the sisters worried or sad again, so I hold back the tears.

“Masha help me bathe baby first,” Tanya says, and I remember mama won’t be here to help this time, or ever.

I flinch when Tanya cleans my wounds, and I remember mama will no longer be there to comfort me when I am in pain.

“Sorry, Sunbeam,” Tanya says, she is so much like mama.

My parents’ dry blood, that had been stuck on my face for hours, falls on the tub water, I can’t hold back the tears any longer.

Masha tries to comfort me, Tanya does too, they both look so anguished. Looking at me crying makes them cry too. I hate myself for making them sad again.

“They will always be in our hearts,” Masha tells me once I am covered in a towel while giving me paper to blow my nose. Tatiana brushes my hair with her fingers and kisses my temple. I love my sisters so much; they are so good and nice, and they never complain when they must take care of me. I wish I could do something as nice for them.
Once I am all dressed up, I can´t stop the urge to hug Masha once more and sob together again. She rocks me like a baby, even though I am almost as tall as Anastasia and will be 14 in less than a month.

I cry for my parents as she rocks me, I feel so sorry for them, papa sounded so worried about us when he asked what was happening, and mama looked so shocked, her dear beautiful face was then destroyed. I fear the hatred and indifference of those men, how we felt about anything they did to us didn´t matter to them; I had never experienced anything like that. I don´t like it when people are angry at us and there is no apology or favor I can give to appease them.

It pains me that they hated my father enough to kill him, I don´t understand how they could hate someone I loved so dearly. I don´t know all that was happening around the country when my father was Tsar, I don´t understand what crimes Yurovsky was referring to when he read that paper.

Maybe papa had indeed done something bad, but something I do know more than those men is that my parents never gave any order that could cause harm to anyone who didn´t commit something like murder, at least not on purpose. I know this because of the way they taught me to be.

Those men didn´t know my parents enough to execute them, my parents were murdered. Papa would say it was God´s will, but it is so hard to accept. I hope they are happy where they are now and God doesn´t allow them to see how miserable I am.

I stay in Masha´s arms for a while, I wish I could stay there forever, safe and loved. As my sister starts to pull apart I try to keep hugging her, I could be split apart from her forever at any second without warning.
"It is fine, baby, I am not going anywhere, I am just taking you to see the rooms", she tells me. Tanya kisses my temple before Maria leaves with me.

Masha carries me to see the rooms, Olenka and Nastya come along, leaving Tanya to take a bath. I hate what I see, the sisters will sleep in one room while I will be all alone in another one. Maria places me in one of the beds of the sisters´ room. Olga collapses on one bed face up, looking exhausted, Maria sits on the bed next to me, and Anastasia starts jumping on another.

Being alone didn´t bother me before, it even gave me pride to be the only brother and therefore have a different daily routine than my sisters, it made me feel special, it made the moments we spent together feel even more special; now I can´t stand the thought of being alone in one room when papa and mama won´t be there with me. Not even Nagorny will be with me. What if I have nightmares?

"Will I have to sleep alone?” I can´t help but complain. But I avoid telling them my fears of having nightmares.

“If you want, we can move my bed so I can sleep in your room,” Anastasia says, stopping her jumping, she probably saw my tear strained face, I nod and smile gratefully, wiping away my tears. I suddenly feel excited about having a sleepover with her, good memories of us two sleeping together near the Christmas tree during the holidays fill my mind and make me forget the sadness
for a while.

“I don’t know about that, darling,” Olga says. “First we need to see how heavy the beds are, and if they can go through the door”.

“We don’t have to worry about that, Masha is as strong as our late grandfather, she will carry the bed all by herself,” Anastasia teases. Masha smiles and throws a pillow at her.

Anastasia leaves the bed and goes to explore the rest of the room.

I don’t need to ask Maria to hold me again, she holds me in her arms while I lay my head on her shoulder and do the same. She talks with Shvibzik about whatever she finds in the room while she moves me to rock me again whenever she sees I am becoming upset. Listening to the little pair discuss things with relative normality and sometimes curiosity, as they have always done, instead of screaming in terror, is soothing.

After what feels like hours, Tatiana comes out of the bathroom all dressed up and with her hair wet. I wonder how the sisters will brush their hair, which has already reached their shoulders, we were not even allowed to bring our hairbrushes.

“Who is next?” She asks, and Maria leaves me alone in bed to stand up and take the bath.

“How are we going to brush our hair?” Olga asks Tatiana, who opens her eyes wide.

“I know how,” Anastasia says, going through an open drawer in a small cabinet in front of the beds. “There are all sorts of things here including hairbrushes, cigarettes, matches, hand fans and even card games, the owner of the house must have left it all here and the reds didn’t have time to take it out”.

“Can I try a cigarette?” I ask. Tatiana gives me a short but stern look. I am the only one of my siblings who doesn’t smoke yet, I have only put cigarettes on my mouth for fun, to imitate the undisciplined soldiers in Tsarskoye Selo after the revolution, papa and Maria thought that it was really funny. Nastya had also secretly allowed me to smoke a little bit of her cigarette when we were still at Tsarskoye Selo, I didn’t like it very much. Now I feel a bit curious again, but most of all, I also want to have something else in common with my sisters, who are all now grownups. It is not fair! They all started smoking around my age! But I understand why they wouldn’t want to give me a cigarette, how could they ever perceive me as a grownup when I don’t act like it? Still, I wouldn’t trade being coddled by my sisters for a thousand cigarettes.

"I will give you one in a year or at least a few months, baby", Tatiana concedes.

Maria comes back from the bathroom and Olga stands up to go next.

"Masha, it is good you are finally here", Nastya says, "we need to have a serious conversation. Don’t share any of these cigarettes with any of the guards Masha, I know you", my sister teases. "These are all for us". I let out a chuckle, Tatiana and Maria both smile.

I have my sisters. And we are one by one washing off papa and mama’s blood, they are in heaven
and are taking care of us, maybe that is why this house is such a better place than the Ipatiev house. I am good for now.

“Is there a Bible in there?” Olga inquires when she returns, her face no longer red.

Anastasia searches in all the drawers, making a mess out of them. “No”, she finally answers. “But look at this beautiful icon,” she shows us an icon of the Theotokos she found. It portrays the Virgin carrying baby Jesus, I am reminded of mama and how much she loved praying with us, we left all our icons behind in Ekaterinburg. Sadness takes over me again but I don’t feel the need to cry this time.

“I don’t know if we should use any of these objects without permission first, you know how insufferable they can become over the most harmless things,” Tatiana says. “You know what? I am going to go ask Mr. Antonovich,” she then turns towards the door. “I am also going to ask him if he will allow us to go to church or at least let a priest come to us like they did back in Ekaterinburg, does anyone have any other requests?”

“Ask him about the war,” Olga says, “Could he also provide us with a Bible and some newspapers?”
“Good ideas,” Tatiana answers, and she walks downstairs.
“Ask him to have the soldiers move one of the beds into Alyosha’s room!” Anastasia yells just before Tatiana is out of sight.
“But don’t play rough with him, Shvybzik!” Tatiana yells back.

We end up being allowed to use the objects because the owner of the house has passed away. “As long as you don’t use them as weapons,” Pavel had said. “I don’t have any Bibles but I will see if any of the soldiers have one they don’t use”. How silly, how could we use hairbrushes, fans or icons as weapons? He told us he would ask about letting us go to church or let a priest come, he also said he wasn’t allowed to give us newspapers, but that he would keep us informed on the war. I really hope our allies defeat the Germans, otherwise poor Russia will lose so much of its territory!

After we had all taken a bath, and the sisters brushed each other’s hair, and we all cried again, a lot. Maria cries she can’t get the instant papa died out of her head, Nastya says she is still scared. Tanya nods as she cries. Olga just cries. It is like the horror is lurking around the corner when it isn’t bothering us, but it is never gone. We finally have breakfast in the dining room, but it is so late already it isn’t even a breakfast. It is the dullest breakfast of all. No one talks, everyone is serious. Maria weeps silently. Anastasia has brought a fan from the room, she uses it to cool the soup, then she fidgets the food with her fork. Tatiana just shakes her head. I eat because I am hungry, but this is the worst food we have ever had. I know it is not the food that is different. From the table I see three soldiers going upstairs, Tanya tells me it is to move the bed, I feel a bit better.

Olga, who sits next to me, helps me eat, since I have trouble due to the wounds in my hands. Tatiana gives food under the table to Ortipo, and I remember my dog Joy didn’t come with us; I feel sad again, Jimmy was shot, I really hope the guards didn’t kill Joy.
Two of the guards watch us eat, as if we were going to escape while doing it. Like many times before, their eyes focus almost exclusively on my sisters. The guard who had helped us out of the carriage looks at my sister Maria almost exclusively. He had also offered to carry me but Mashka had refused, which I am grateful for, I don’t want to be carried by mean strangers ever again, after I get better I hope I will never have to be carried at all.

But the one who looks at all of them the most is a man with big and wide head and black hair and mustache, up and down, down up again, with a serious face and a frown. Pure contempt in his eyes. He doesn’t stop staring. I become worried, is he angry at them?

It is not fair! They haven’t done anything and he is already angry!

I think about my dog again.

“Do you think they will kill Joy?” I ask my sisters.
“Maybe someone found it and is taking care of him darling, don’t lose hope,” Maria says.
“If you want, we can pray about it later,” Tatiana adds.
“They killed all of our servants, who were people, they shot Jimmy,” Anastasia says, sounding annoyed I had asked for my dog, “and they didn’t shoot Ortipo because Tatiana and then Olga were holding him, why would they spare Joy?”

Her words hurt me, I lose all the hope I had left to see Joy again, I lower my head. Our Standart, our things, our baptism crosses, our parents and now our dogs, they take everything! It is not fair!

“Don’t be so cruel Nastya!” Olga scolds her.
“It is just the truth,” Anastasia defends herself. “I didn’t mean to be cruel!”

She starts crying and bangs her head on the table, I think I have made her upset, I worry she might have hurt herself. This time Tatiana does take action and tells her to finish eating, but she consoles her with a long hug first when she sees how distraught she is. Maria stands up to do the same.

This time it is I how cries after seeing my sister like that, Olga, next to me, notices, and holds my hand.

When we finish eating, the maid, who is a very old woman, starts to pick up our plates.

“Oh no, let us do that,” my sister Olga says, picking up her plate and mine, my other sisters follow suit picking each their own; I wish my knee had healed enough to do the same, I stay at the table, drinking water.

The maid seems surprised but grateful.

“How nice of you,” I hear her say from the kitchen, my sisters are helping her wash the dishes. “I didn’t know the grand duchesses were such humble and helpful girls”.

I beam with pride, I love it when other people are nice to my sisters and see how good they were.

“And what is your name?” Tatiana inquires.
“Galina” the maid answers, “Galina Lebedeva”.
“Do you have any children?” Mashka continues.
“I had a daughter, but she died giving birth to one of my four grandsons, two of whom died in the war,” Galina answers.
“I am so sorry to hear that,” this time it is Olga talking.
“One of my grandsons works here, his name is Oleg,” the old woman explains.
“Really?” Anastasia says.
“Yes!” Galina exclaims. “Oleg! Oleg!” She calls for her grandson. After a few seconds the guard who had helped us out of the carriage bolts through the dining room until he gets to the kitchen.

“What is it grandma?” He grunts. “You know I am at work; I can’t come any time you please”. It is funny that he said that, because he came really fast.

“Look, he is my grandson, he is 25 years old”, Galina raves to my sisters, ignoring her grandson’s tone of voice and pointing at Oleg with pride. “He is an engineer and worked for a few months in the trans-Siberian railway”. I catch Oleg rolling his eyes at his grandmother, how rude! “He was also granted a St. George cross, first class!” Galina says, putting special emphasis on the last two words. “He gave the medal to me, I have it at home, I can show it to you”.

“Those petty things are not important now,” Oleg says.

He probably means it is against the revolution to take pride in your achievements, how stupid. The Bolsheviks had forced papa and me to take off our epaulets, rank was apparently also against the revolution because everyone had to be the same; but papa always said that an army cannot function without rank and discipline, I think the Bolsheviks also know that, because a commander is always bossing the others around, and the commanders receive orders from other places; the new government doesn’t really believe what they claim to believe.

I am impressed by Oleg’s first class St. George cross, even if he thinks medals are petty, I hope he will tell us about how he got it, what regiment he was from and where he fought, I love listening to war stories. I received a St. George cross as well, but a fourth class, for visiting our poor wounded soldiers in a place that was located near the front, we could even hear the firing from there, it was quite scary, but it must be nothing compared to actually surviving a battle. I remember my father was there, he had helped me not to be scared. My eyes fill with tears.

“Look at those pretty girls Oleg, how nice they are, you should marry one of them instead of going with your friends to those places,” Galina nags. I suddenly forget I was sad, spit the water I have in my mouth and start laughing, I can hear Anastasia and Masha laughing too. They all must be blushing right now.

“They are called brothels grandma,” Oleg corrects her loudly, as if wanting everyone around to listen, I see Tatiana covering Nastya’s ears after crossing herself, “and the women there are just as nice, they were simply not as… lucky”. He stares at my sisters before saying that last word. Lucky? He doesn’t even know us! Does he know what he has been through?
Oleg gets out of the kitchen and then storms out of the house with an angry expression. The big pair comes back to sit with me. I am disappointed, Oleg seems like a mean guy who will not tell me war stories any time soon.

“Forgive him girls”, Galina says, walking out of the kitchen with the little pair. “He just hasn’t been the same ever since his brothers died…he is usually very nice…”. Olga and Tatiana smile at her.

“Don’t worry about it, darling,” Mashka replies. “We have dealt with way worse,” Anastasia says, trying to make Galina feel better, but the poor old woman doesn’t take that as a compliment and lowers her head in shame. “He must have been very brave to be granted that medal,” I tell her, to reassure her we don’t hate her grandson, “and a kind woman like you must have raised a very good man.”

Galina smiles at me.

“You are also very nice,” she says moving closer to me and patting me in the head. “Our brother has a golden heart,” Olga says smiling at me and then at Galina.

We talk a lot after that, mostly about what happened to us and our parents earlier, although the sisters omit what those ungentlemanly men forced them to do, something they talked about before breakfast. We cry again, but my sisters seem embarrassed about crying in front of a stranger just like they are embarrassed about earlier, so they hide their tears. I follow suit and hide my own as well. "What those men did is unforgivable!” Galina exclaims when my sisters are done talking. Galina even gives us her condolences for the death of our parents, the first person to do that, it makes me happy because it means Galina wasn’t glad about papa and mama´s deaths. I really like Galina.

The subject of conversation turns into something more cheerful after a while, which puts us in a better mood, and when I remember Galina’s short conversation with her grandson, I ask about the meaning of the word "brothel". I have heard soldiers talk about them, I know women live in them and kiss the soldiers. It is so funny.

“That is what I was wondering,” Anastasia adds in a cheeky tone. “You are both too young to know about those things,” Tanya replies quickly.

“Galina, we can also help you with the laundry,” Maria then says quickly.

While the sisters talk with Galina about house chores, I notice some of the guards are putting a white curtain up in the living room, with a chair in front of it. Commander Pavel enters the dining room and tells us they are going to take pictures of us.

This makes me sad, then angry, Yurovsky told us we were only going to get out pictures taken, and then he killed mama and papa, they were a bunch of liars, evil liars.

They take front and profile pictures of my sisters and me. A fat photographer and the angry guard with the black hair and big wide head are left in charge of us. Olga and Tatiana ask lots of questions about the purpose of the pictures, but none of them are answered. Once my two pictures
have been taken, I sit in the couch with my sisters.

When Anastasia’s turn comes in the chair she opens a hand fan she had brought downstairs from the room and puts it just below her face, making her mouth look like that of a fish just as the picture is taken. Me and my other sisters chuckle. Anastasia smiles and turns her eyes towards us, she is clearly proud of herself.

“I am going to have to take another one”, the photographer tells the guard, who looks angrily at us for laughing and then gives a death stare to Anastasia.

“You doll!” The guard barks at her. “I will put you in cold storage for this fun, stupid!”

Anastasia is no longer smiling; she looks at the guard as if she is about to cry, my other sisters look concerned. I hate to watch my sister being treated this way, how can he be so mean?

I know I can’t do much, but I can show her how much I love her and have her back.

I stand up, first only on my good leg and then I give two steps towards the angry guard. “Please don’t yell at my sister, sir,” I beg.


“Alyosha come back here,” Tanya says, concerned.

“Don’t yell at my sister,” I tell him with a firm tone of voice I had heard my father use when he spoke to his ministers. “Give her your apologies please”.

“Shut up child,” he says, walking closer to me, “and don’t poke your nose!”

He pushes me down when he yells the last sentence and I fall to the floor, landing on my left hand. The sisters all get up from their seats and start fussing over me.

“Alyosha!” Maria cries out.

“Alyosha! Did it hurt?” Anastasia yells.

“Did you hurt yourself?” Olga asks. They all start trying to check me up.

“No, not at all,” I say, blushing, secretly embarrassed by the situation, I straighten up and try to sound as calm and polite as possible. “Don’t worry, let me go”. Instead of letting me go, Masha and Tatiana help me get up. I choke back tears, suddenly self-conscious about my pathetic attempts at chivalry, I am just a cripple to that guard, even to my sisters.

I want to sink into the earth, or do something, it cannot end this way.

I limp towards the man again and the sisters follow behind, worried; it is a bit painful to stand straight with the stitches on my stomach, and to use the leg with the swollen knee is even more so. I am so scared of him, he even looks like Yurovsky, what is he does something? But my wounded pride doesn’t allow me to lay the situation to rest.

“Sir,” I begin again, not even knowing what I am going to say, what am I doing?

“What?” He yells, I don’t know the answer myself, but I have to think of something fast, so I say the first thing that comes to my mind.
“I challenge you to a duel,” I finally say, he doesn’t like jokes, that will annoy him at least. “You? Me?” He asks, completely bewildered. “I. You,” I respond with a straight face. “I will strangle you, little shit!” He growls while grabbing me from the collar of my shirt, effortlessly lifting me up and swinging me back and forward. Tatiana and Anastasia, who are still behind me, almost immediately start hitting the man in the head with the palms of their hands, Nastya uses the fan to hit him when that doesn’t work.

“Soldier Tabakov, attention!” Commander Pavel Antonovich says as he enters the living room from the door that leads to the basement. Tabakov immediately drops me. “To my office, immediately!” The soldier Tabakov obeys and walks away, not without cussing at us before. “Sorry,” Pavel says before closing the door once Tabakov has walked through it. Masha helps me sit back on the couch.

I look back to Anastasia, she has burst into tears and is now starting to run towards the stairs. “Girl!” The photographer yells to my sister, who turns around. “I still need to take your pictures”. Anastasia comes back, wipes her tears and lets the photographer take her pictures quickly.

“Are you all right Shvybzik?” Maria asks her after the photographer has left, she is truly concerned. Tanya and Olenka sit with her and start caressing her hair.

She nods but starts crying again, then her breathing becomes troubled.

I feel so sorry for her, was she really so scared? If I had stayed silent maybe Tabakov would have simply insulted her and then left her alone. Why does my very existence make everything worse all the time? I can’t do anything for anyone, all is done for me.

“I am sorry,” I apologize. “For what?” She asks, sobbing. “For causing trouble,” I mutter, ashamed of myself. “That was not your fault, it was that fool’s fault to get angry over nothing, the duel thing was funny, you know?” She tells me, smiling between tears, I am glad she thought I was funny. “I just miss papa and mama, that is all”. “We all do,” Maria says, tearing up. “These sorts of things wouldn’t happen when they were around, although they were prisoners, even the most hostile guards knew our parents would always do whatever it took to protect us,” Olga observes, with tears in her eyes herself. “Now we are all alone, orphans, with no one to care for us”. Listening to Olga talk like that alarms me, I thought the only bad part of it all was going to be living without our parents. Are the guards only going to become meaner?

“But they don’t want us dead, they didn’t kill us, they need us for a reason, right?” Masha points out. “Don’t worry darlings,” Tatiana says when she notices my pale face, Nastya and Masha also look scared. “Our relatives overseas will probably intercede to help us when they find out what they did to mama and papa”. “I just hope it is not our German relatives, and we are allowed to remain in Russia somehow,” Olga says; I hope that too.
"Pavel also scolded him; they are not allowed to hurt us," Anastasia adds.

None of the guards had ever harmed us before last night, they were all a bunch of liars pretending not to hate us, acting all normal and then shooting us without question when someone asked them to. I hate them, but then I remember papa wouldn’t have wanted me to hate them, so I try to ignore those feelings.

We weep silently again.

I notice Anastasia is scared even though she acts as if she isn’t, I know this because I am also scared. We don’t talk about the future anymore, just about what our daily routine should be, well, my sisters talk of that, I only listen.

Back upstairs, Olga, Maria and Tatiana are tidying up the cabinet in their room, while Nastya and I are in ours. Anastasia is exploring the things the owner of the house left in the cabinet of this room; I am sitting in one of the beds near the open window looking at the guards at the yard, while she shows me whenever she finds something interesting. Our tears have temporarily subsided.

“Look! A slingshot!” She exclaims, showing it to me. “Those idiots should really have searched the house better before letting us in, now we really have a weapon, muah, ha, ha!”

We both laugh.

“We should try to use it on Tabakov! He is patrolling in the yard just now, right?” Anastasia suggests. I open my eyes, horrified, he would kill us. Maybe she isn’t scared after all, I am the only one.

“But what if they do something to us?” I protest. Anastasia seems to think about it for a while. “You are right,” she says. “But it would have been so much fun, maybe someday we can use it on the sisters with something soft.”

“Yes! Like food!” I say. “But they will be so mad!” We laugh again.

“Can I tell you a secret?” Nastya says quietly. I nod. “But don’t tell anyone”. Anastasia then pulls out three diamonds from her shoes, one is almost as big as a palm, the other two are way smaller, my eyes open wide again.

“I thought they had stolen all of them!” I exclaim, a little too loud.

“Shh, shh!” She murmurs, putting a finger in her lips. “I put them all in my mouth while the murderous pigs were distracted saying nasty things to us and looking at our bosoms instead of our faces”.

“But how?” I ask, wondering what was so special about bosoms to make the soldiers forget about the jewels.

“I did it by separating some of the jewels from the clothes while we were undressing, we were wailing so loud they didn’t hear the fabric ripping, I put them in my mouth by pretending to cover my face only to cry; I put them in my shoes while we were traveling in the truck to the train station, it was so dark I could do it without anyone noticing," she explains. I feel so proud of her, she is so smart!

“But why didn’t you tell the sisters?” I ask.

“I am going to tell them; I was just waiting for the right moment to take them out when we were in
the mood for it and there were no guards watching, I am just telling you first.” I feel so much affection for my sister in that moment, it feels like an achievement, I never thought any of the sisters would tell me anything first, they usually talk the important stuff among themselves before I find out about anything, I am like their pet, a treasured pet, but still a pet.

“Wouldn’t it be fun to use one of the diamonds as a projectile for the slingshot?” I joke. “It would be a shame to waste a diamond on the slingshot” she says, putting the diamonds back inside her shoes and going to open the first drawer. “If we do it we should use one of these old empty lipstick tubes, they are as hard as rocks”.

“We should do it!” I yell, forgetting all my reservations. Anastasia smiles.

“We should! It will be fun! It is unlikely we will hit the target anyway!” She says, positioning the small tube on the back of the slingshot. She gets closer to the window and looks for Tabakov, I look down as well. Anastasia aims.

“Pow!” She jests, jumping a little after letting go of the projectile. We both look down. “It seems like I missed,” she states. “Sure you did. You got Tabakov on the forehead!” I exclaim, looking at the mean soldier holding his forehead in pain. “Let me shoot now!”

But Anastasia doesn’t give me the slingshot, she hides herself behind the curtain while looking down at the guard, she looks scared, I feel close to her. We are indeed similar, I hate it when people know I am weak. Now I must find a solution to this.

“Close the windows and the curtains,” I tell her, she does. “Sit here, lets pretend we were talking.” She sits down, I forget to tell her to get rid of the slingshot, she quickly notices her mistake and nervously puts it back on top of the cabinet.

We are pretending to talk about the weather when commander Antonovich, Tabakov and Tatiana enter the room, we get up. Tabakov has a wet piece of cloth tightly pressed against his head, there is blood pouring out of his wound, and he seems to be in pain. I suddenly feel guilty; if papa was here, he would have scolded me, I feel sad and guilty thinking about what papa would think. Tatiana looks worried about us being in trouble.

“Alexei Nicholaevich,” the commander begins, calmly, “soldier Tabakov asserts that there was a shot made from your window 3 minutes ago, who shot?” My sister and I look at each other, she looks terrified. “I did,” I say before she can answer, she had made the shot, but I had encouraged her to do it and put the idea back into her head, I was just thinking of having fun again, why am I like this? For the first time since we arrived, commander Antonovich looks angry. I get scared, now he will reveal how much he really hates us.

“Where is the weapon?” Antonovich asks. I limp closer to him in order to retrieve the slingshot in the cabinet. “Here it is,” I say as I give it to him. Antonovich smiles at me and then at Tabakov, who doesn’t
“Look Paul,” Antonovich says to Tabakov, still smiling, “it is just a children’s toy”. Antonovich turns back to me, “Alexei Nicholaevich, I have to confiscate this slingshot.”
“It is in your power,” I say. “Take it.”
“Soldier, please forgive me,” I say to Paul this time. “It is my fault, I am very sorry.” Paul Tabakov´s expression remains cold.

“I can ask my older sisters to wash the wound and put a bandage on it,” Anastasia adds.
“What else?” Paul replies angrily.
“Really, I can do it, I am sorry for what they did, they were just playing,” Tatiana says.
“Besides the wound is superficial, it is not that bad,” Anastasia says.
“What if you had hit my eye?!” Tabakov yells at her.
“Then it would be a bad one,” Anastasia admits.
“Thanks!” He hoots. “May I leave?” He asks the commander, who nods. Paul leaves the room.
“Ay, ay, ay, Alexei Nicholaevich”, Antonovich says while moving his head disapprovingly.

"My fault", I comment. "I am sorry".

Chapter End Notes

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:
- Short comments, including emojis.
- Long comments, with no limits.
- Questions
- Constructive criticism
- Reader-reader interaction
- Comments in only one chapter.
- Comments in more than one chapter.
This author replies to comments, but if you don't want a reply, for whatever reason (for example, shyness), feel free to sign your comment with the Word "whisper" and I will appreciate the comment just the same but not respond.
A walk in the garden.

Tatiana.

I thought we had had a collective foreboding during the last obednitza, Olga and I talked a lot about it on our last days at that dreadful house. She was as sure as I was.

It is customary to read “at rest with saints” at a certain point during obednitza. But for some reason instead of reading, the deacon sang this prayer, and the father went along. As soon as they started singing, all of us felt this sudden need to fall to our knees in prayer, Alexei of course, had stayed on his wheelchair. We all felt such spiritual comfort after, we had been imprisoned for so long that we felt the end was coming, and we felt as if we had attended our own funeral. As much as mama tried to give us hope for a rescue, she also kept talking to us about the Christian martyrs and Obadiah 1:4, "Though you soar aloft like the eagle, though your nest is set among the stars, from there I will bring you down, declares the LORD."

When papa was shot dead, I hoped the suffering would end for all of us, like me and Olga had a feeling it would. I can´t imagine a future without papa and mama; I always thought I would remain home to take care of my parents in their old age. I know we must accept God had other plans, but I am just heartbroken.

In the morning, while I took my bath, I tried to cry and scream as much as I needed to so I could be strong for my siblings after. The last thing they need now is to watch the person they look up to for support and guidance barely holding on herself. I ended up needing almost an hour to cry out and it still didn´t prevent me from crying again. I am not even sure that will prevent me from doing it again later. God help me, I am now the closest thing the little ones have to a mother, I need to be strong.

The memories don´t stop bothering me. Anna ´s screams while being stabbed, the stinging pain caused by a man pinching my nipple, my poor sisters screaming around me, also being molested. But what I have the most trouble with is the fact those men stole all the jewels my dear precious mama worked so hard to hide in order to provide for her children in exile.

I was almost unable to talk with Mr. Antonovich; his office at the basement was too similar to the place where our parents had been murdered so shockingly just hours before. When I first tried to climb down the stairs I had to immediately run back up, I had to wait for my tears to stop flowing and my nerves to calm before I finally picked up the courage to go back and talk to the commander.

After the incident with that unkind guard that insulted my sister and attacked my brother, we all cried again and decided to do so upstairs, with no guards around to bother us. Still in tears, Olga, Maria and I started to put our room in order while Anastasia and Alexei went to explore theirs. Keeping ourselves busy sure does help force our minds our of those horrible images.

While cleaning up what is going to be our room during God knows how much time, I ask Olga what she thinks the Bolsheviks´ intentions are with us, she doesn´t have an answer that isn´t pessimistic, and yet she seems alarmingly calm, like she doesn´t care anymore. I wish she felt something at least, even if it was absolute terror, like me, so I could have someone to share it with; I don´t want to scare the little pair, or Alexei.
“Only God knows what will happen to us, maybe we will stay here all our lives, who knows, I only care about staying together; we will see mama and papa again sooner or later, that is all that matters,” she says.

I decide not to press the subject forward, I don’t want our poor Maria to lose hope, her optimism really makes even the darkest moments brighter.

“We will get through this united and with more faith than ever, you will see, God will not abandon us,” Masha says while touching my shoulder and smiling at Olga, who returns a sad smile. I wish there was something I could do to give Olenka a little bit of Masha’s hope.

I hear footsteps of men climbing up the stairs, I don’t panic until I step outside the room and see that one of the men is Tabakov, the man who pushed down my brother, and he is heading straight to Anastasia and Alexei’s room with commander Antonovich; I immediately go to see what it is all about.

It would have been amusing if it wasn’t for our situation. My brother shot the man with a slingshot from the window, thank God the incident wasn’t taken seriously by Antonovich, who only took the slingshot away.

“I can’t believe you could be so careless,” I scold my two youngest siblings once the commander leaves the room. “Shvibzik, why didn’t you stop Alyosha from doing that?”

“He didn’t do it, I did!” Anastasia tells me, more to get credit for what she considers an amazing deed than to absolve her brother from all blame.

“Well, whoever did it, you can’t go around doing things that could get us into trouble, understand? And you Alexei, sit down, you knee isn’t healed yet and you recently got hurt” He groans, annoyed, but listens to me and sits back on the bed. Thank God his injuries weren’t serious, the dreadful man who patched him up is no doctor, as he claimed to be when we first met him, but he seems to have some experience either as a medic or orderly during the war.

The truth is I am impressed by Nastya’s good aim, and that rude and violent man doesn’t deserve any less, but we can’t afford to test the patience of our jailers, I wish my youngest siblings understood that.

I wonder though, how they can even act in such a childish way after what happened today, the only thing that makes sense to me is that their little minds are still in shock, in complete disbelief. What happened was so immensely awful and nightmarishly that it simply couldn’t have happened.

Galina serves us dinner while talking to us about the city, what a sweet old lady. Maria volunteers to feed Ortipo this time and Olga is once again helping Alyosha with the food.

“Poor Ortipo,” Masha says as she gives my little French bulldog a piece of food. “She doesn’t look healthy, she has been whining and barking a lot, and look at her ears all pinned back”.

“Poor thing,” Anastasia, sitting next to Maria, agrees while petting Ortipo.

“Maybe the sound of the gunshots made her anxious darlings, she will probably get better in a few days, don’t worry,” I say.

“So, you have all gone to England?” Galina asks us, taking a seat with us.

“Yes, in 1909,” I reply.

“How interesting! Did you hear that Oleg? You always wanted to visit England!”

Oleg, who is keeping watch over us with another guard, doesn’t say a word to her grandmother. What a rude man, how could a man raised by such a nice woman turn out to be like that? He is slightly taller than me, his grey eyes are small and almond shaped, his nose is straight and the little hair I see that isn’t covered by his fur hat is reddish brown.

“Yes, grandmother,” Oleg acknowledges her after almost a minute.
“I hope we are not exiled,” Olga says, “but if we are, I hope it is to England”.
“I am glad to hear you say that,” I tell her, surprised to see some optimism coming out of her mouth. “We should try to hope for the best”.
“But we can’t leave Russia, right? Papa said it was our duty to stay here in such difficult times!” Alexei protests.
“I know darling, but this is out of our hands, it is not unlikely we will be exiled; the king must be bargaining for our release right now,” I explain.
“I wonder why that idiot didn’t help us earlier,” Anastasia says, scowling. Maria and Alexei open their eyes wide.
“Nastya!” I exclaim. “He is papa’s cousin, he loved him a lot! The king probably didn’t realize the seriousness of our situation”.
“Whatever,” she replies, rolling her eyes and continuing to pet Ortipo.

After dinner, me and my sisters go outside with Galina for the first time. The sun is still up, and the grass looks very green, the fence is covered with roses. On the right, furthest away from the mansion, there is a huge tree with two swings attached to one of the branches.

“The place itself is beautiful”, Olga says to me.
“Tanechka! Can we go to the swing?” Alexei, who is being carried by Maria, says pointing at it.
“Baby you know very well you can’t, you will not be able to sit straight with the wounds in your stomach or even hold yourself with your hands,” I tell him, feeling sorry for having to do it. He pouts but seems to understand.
“When you get better, I will swing with you,” Masha tells him.
“But I will do it first,” Anastasia adds.
“Go swing now for me Nastya!” He tells her, and she runs towards the swing. We watch her swing resting on the grass. I let Ortipo run around for a while. I look at Olga to my left, she has silent tears in her eyes, but she is also smiling.
“What is it?” I ask her.
“Oh, you know what,” she answers, and then she rests her head on my shoulder.

About an hour later we help Galina with the laundry and hang our recently washed set of clothes to dry; Alexei is sitting in a chair nearby petting Ortipo. The little pair start hitting each other with some of the wet shirts, screaming like they did whenever they played hide and seek, me and Olga smile, I am glad they can still have fun.
Being outside with this good weather is helpful. Oleg approaches us with a Bible on his hand, did the commander ask him to give it to us? I start walking towards him to receive it, but he ignores me and gets closer to my younger sisters.

“Maria Nikolaevna?” He begins, almost shyly. My sister, whose hair is now slightly wet, turns around to face Oleg and stops hitting Anastasia.
“The commander told us you had asked for a Bible, I don’t use this one,” Oleg continues as he gives it to Maria, but before he can do it Anastasia takes it from his hand.
“Look Olga, here it is!” Nastya exclaims while running towards us. Oleg, however, stays with Maria and smiles at her.
“Thank you,” Masha says to him, smiling. “We left all our religious books and icons in Ekaterinburg, they didn’t give us time to pack anything, it will be a blessing to have it”.
“Well, I am glad I could help with anything,” he replies. “It is hard being without parents for the first time”.

What does he think he is doing?

Maria’s eyes fill with tears at the mention of our parents.
“I am so sorry, I didn´t mean to remind you or anything,” Oleg apologizes.
“No, don´t worry,” she says, wiping a tear from each eye. “So, do you want to get married?”
“What?” He says, taken by surprise, was he blushing?
“What I meant is, do you ever want to get married?” Maria says, laughing. “I wasn´t proposing”.
“Oh, yea, no that is not on my plans at the moment,” he replies, smiling.
“So, if you don´t mind me asking, where did you fight?” Masha inquires, continuing the conversation.

“Look at that,” Olga comments to me, “grumpy Oleg softened in the presence of our Masha”.
“Well, I don´t like it,” I whisper so that Galina can´t hear me. “He isn´t a very decent man. What are his intentions with her?”
“Nothing bad will happen Tanechka, let her be distracted, God knows we need it, we are watching her,” Olga answers.

We had finished hanging the clothes and Galina was now sitting with Anastasia on the grass near Alexei, talking. Galina is petting Ortipo while baby-talking to her. I hear Maria giggling, she and Oleg are walking towards us.

“I convinced Oleg to tell us about how he earned the medal,” Masha tells me and Tatiana. “Let´s go sit with the little ones”.
“Me and my sister will be glad to hear it, Oleg,” Olga says.
Olga, Maria and I sit on the grass near Galina and our two youngest siblings, while Oleg stands in front of us. Galina smiles when she sees us approaching.
“Oh, Oleg, you finally talked to the girls!” Galina gushes.
“Yes, Maria told me her brother would like to hear about my medal,” Oleg explains.
“Yes please!” Anastasia says while Alexei smiles.
“All right,” Oleg says without much enthusiasm. “I joined the army in late 1915, but I earned the cross fighting at Galicia, during the offensive of June 1916”.
“Oh, I remember that one!” Alexei says, exited. “Papa told us we took many prisoners!”

“Yes, we also had many loses,” Oleg adds solemnly, I feel a bit of pity for the man, sure he is rude, but papa would have probably respected him for fighting for our country. “Anyway, our battalion was given the task of attacking a weak point in the Austrian lines, we thought most of the Austrian trenches in that area had been destroyed due to previous artillery attacks, which we heard had worked very well during the offensive. When we approached, however, 100 meters or so from the enemy, we were met by a considerable amount of gunfire, two of my friends next to me dropped dead.”

I look at the faces of everyone around, they all have a serious expression now, even Anastasia and Alexei, which doesn´t surprise me, they have proven time and time again to be perfectly capable of maturity when it comes to serious matters.

“At fist I tried to keep walking and ignore the fire,” Oleg continues, looking down at his hands, “but it was proving to be impossible, more and more men were dying or being wounded around me, some were starting to shoot back, but we were at a disadvantage, because they had cover and we didn´t. Since there were only about 50 meters left between the enemy and me, and I would probably drop dead just like the others sooner or later, I decided to take my chances and run as fast as I could towards them, trying not to do it in a straight line. When I got to the enemy trench, I started shooting every Austrian I saw as fast as I could, I bayoneted them when I ran out of bullets, the rest of the men arrived seconds later, following me. I later discovered I had helped my battalion break through the Austrian lines, we got reinforcements later and kept advancing.”

We are silent for a while, Galina looks at her grandson with pride in her eyes.
“Awesome!” Alexei exclaims, he quickly realizes his over enthusiasm is a little bit out of place, “but I am sorry for your friends, sir”. Oleg gives my brother a quick smile, and then looks back at his hands.

“Did you ever get wounded?” Maria asks him. “I did get wounded during the war, just not in that battle; it was a bullet that grazed the side of my neck, fortunately, it didn’t touch any arteries,” he responds. “It sounds like a miracle” Olga says, “God probably protected you that day”. Oleg doesn’t respond to that.

My brother asks him lots of questions in relation to the equipment and strategies the soldiers used, what they did, where, in what positions, how, when, why; I can’t help but look at the little one with pride. Oleg answers all of his questions politely, which pleases my brother, who relates to our new acquaintance what he learned and experienced during the war while he stayed with our father at headquarters. “Well, I hope you enjoyed the story,” Oleg tells us after a while when it is starting to get darker. “I better go, I have been away from my post for too long”. He looks at Maria for a last time and then leaves.

We stay in the garden to watch the sunset, which makes us all sad again, Maria notes how we will never watch the sunset together as “we 7”, meaning ourselves and our parents.

Anastasia runs up the stairs for some cigarettes and matches, the four of us smoke on the grass with serious and melancholic expressions, we don’t talk.

The commander tells us he has arranged for a priest to come early in the morning for Obednya. This will give my siblings and I so much comfort after our recent trial! I thank him from the bottom of my heart and mean it.

Back inside, my 4 siblings and I pray in our room, everything we have gone through feels heavy on my soul. I ask God again to give me strength even through my sadness. We cry together once more, this time like we did on the train, finally having time to keep grieving after such a busy and stressful day. We even talk through our tears about our best memories of them.

“Remember when he buried me in the sand?” Alexei mentions, cleaning his nose with his arm, I give him a piece of paper I brought from the bathroom after we started crying. “Of course, I do! I think I took the picture. Taking walks will never be as fun anymore,” Maria adds, wiping her tears. “Or anything at all,” Olga says.

“I just hope that where they are, they are no longer in pain,” I say, remembering mama’s constant headaches and other ailments. “I have to tell you all something,” Anastasia suddenly whispers in a barely audible manner; Alexei grins. “What?” Maria whispers back. Anastasia pulls three diamonds out of her shoes, I can’t believe it! I start crying harder than before, this time not only from sadness. It is as if God had heard all the thoughts that bothered me, I then realize that is a stupid thought, of course God is listening, he never abandons us.


Nastya tells us what she did before Alexei can reply. She is such a quick-witted girl! I can’t believe she managed to even think during such terrible trial for her, let alone actually do it.

“Shvibzik, I officially concede you the title of the smartest in the family,” Olga declares in a serious tone, then, still with tears in our eyes and faces, we all start laughing.
Anastasia yawns; I look at her swollen eyes, she needs rest.

“I think you two should go to bed now,” I tell Anastasia and Alexei. They don’t protest. Masha carries Alexei, tucks him into bed, and makes the sign of the cross upon him. Then Olga, Masha and I say goodnight to them, I make the sign of the cross upon Anastasia.

“Don’t have to be responsible for everything, you know?” Nastya tells me before I leave.

“What?”

“We are all in this together. I can cheer everyone up as well, it is not only your responsibility to make sure we are coping, they were your parents too. I can help you with anything you need”.

I smile at her, feeling proud; my baby sister has become a sensitive young woman, and I was too busy to notice.

“I know,” I whisper to her. “I love you”. I kiss her forehead and go back to my room.

After Olga, Maria and I go to bed, we hear giggling and drawers being opened and closed in the room next door, Anastasia and Alexei have disobeyed to stay up and play for a while longer with whatever stuff they find in the cabinet. I am too tired to get up and scold them.

We haven’t fallen asleep yet, I can’t sleep without hearing screams of horror and pain, and I can hear Olenka and Masha moving in their beds, as if they couldn’t find the right position. It could be that they are not used to sleeping in beds. It could be the same thing that is happening to me.

"You can’t sleep?” I ask, none of the two in particular.

"No", Maria answers, I can tell she is crying. "I can’t".

"Me neither Masha", Olga says, she sounding calmer than Maria, but at the verge of tears as well. "I can’t stop thinking about them”.

"Those horrible images...” Maria sobs, "of their blood pouring out of their bodies, flying all over the cellar... other things coming out of them...it is stuck in my head”. Hearing my usually carefree sister sound so vulnerable makes me heart break, I hate hearing her like that, sounding as if she didn’t have an ounce of hope left. I am done being strong and let down my guard, the suffering of my sisters has reminded me of how truly brutal what just happened really was. I am crying now as well. The concept of execution is completely different from living it, witnessing it. No, I was not prepared, I didn’t have a genuine clue, or a forebonding. I wasn’t truly ready. How could this have happened? I can’t believe they were capable of doing that to my family, how could they leave us like this? I can’t believe they dared, I am in complete shock.

How do I help my sisters now? I should let them cry, mama said it is not good to force yourself not to cry, "never stop yourself from crying, unless you are in front of your enemies", she once said before she left with papa and Maria for Ekaterinburg. I still feel I should help my sisters, there has to be something I can do, they can’t lose hope.

"Masha, my dear, the terrible images will some day become distant memories", I tell my younger sister, "you will see, my love, but it is good to let it all out."

"Let’s pray, Maria dear", Olenka suggests. "This time, let’s pray to God for some comfort, he won’t let you down”. To do so we turn on the lights, we all get in a circle on Masha’s bed, surrounding her.

My little sister’s cheeks are bright red, as are her eyes. She tries to steady her breathing with each prayer. She nods as she recites, trying to absorb the words into her heart. That is it, darling. Olga seems just as upset as me, seeing Maria like that, she is especially fond of her.
The three of us lay in bed and cuddle with tear strained faces, Maria is in the middle. We are silent at first. Then we start speaking about what happened, something we had not really done before. I am the one who brings it up.

"I really thought they were going to kill us all", I start.

"Me too", Maria says with an empty expression.

"At first I accepted it, just like papa said we should", I continue, I feel as if talking about it will set the memories free and make them go away. "I had made my peace despite my initial reaction to the sentence, but when they started shooting… it was as if I had never thought about it, it was as if I had completely forgotten about the mere concept of heaven, all I wanted was for them to stop shooting, I..."

"I knew they wouldn´t kill us all", Olga says, surprising me. She notices my disbelief and explains herself. "I thought they would at first, just like you. Then, I don’t know how long after I woke up from having fainted, I noticed that the men didn’t seem to be aiming at us, just shooting at random, especially at the backwalls, that is when I realized, but I was still panicking, the bullets flying on top of me barely allowed me to think, I didn’t feel at all certain. The one horror I really took for granted is that they would kill Alyosha, I genuinely thought they were killing him, my mind couldn’t find any logical reason for them to spare him. I thought for a while he was already a corpse on that chair, he wasn’t moving...only when he sobbed did I realize he was still alive. But I still feared they had only spared the four of us for some evil reason, and that they would indeed kill Alyosha”. Olenka is crying again by the time she finishes talking. I take her head in my hands and kiss each of her cheeks.

"Thank God that was not the case, Olga, praise him", I say.

"I realized they weren’t killing any of us five when they walked past Alyosha", Masha says, she has also begun crying again. "I figured that if they spared him, there was no reason not to spare any of us four. When they were approaching him though, those were the scariest moments of my life, and after that, I am not absolutely clueless, I feared the same thing, but I also feared death, my mind jumped to a different conclusion each instant."

"I think what really woke me up was seeing that man hit you, Tanya", Olga tells me. "My mind was spinning trying to think of a way to save us from a fate worse than death."

"Let’s not talk about that", I interrupt her. "It is to horrible to contemplate, the important thing is that it didn’t happen, and that the five of us are alive and together”. I don’t want Maria’s head to be filled with worse things than she already experienced.

We lay together for some time and talk about small things to get our minds off what happened, how beautiful the garden is, how nice the weather, how much more polite these guards are in comparison. Sometimes we slip and talk about how much papa would have loved it. We get tired after sometime, and Olga and I go back to our beds.

I eventually do fall asleep. The terrible thoughts come back to my mind. It has been so hard, and this is only the first night.

Chapter End Notes
This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:
- Short comments, including emojis.
- Long comments, with no limits.
  Questions
  Constructive criticism
  Reader-reader interaction
  Comments in only one chapter.
  Comments in more than one chapter.
This author replies to comments, but if you don't want a reply, for whatever reason (for example, shyness), feel free to sign your comment with the Word "whisper" and I will appreciate the comment just the same but not respond.
Anastasia’s sleeping challenge.

Anastasia.

Me and my brother have played for hours. Checkers and colorito, which is the game Mashka and mama played all the time together. We have played new games I don’t know the name of. We even invented a new game with the cards. It has been good fun, the excitement of exploring new things is so distracting, even Alexei looks at ease, invested in his new surroundings like the artic explorer he is probably going to be when he is older, if the idiots ever let us get out that is. But of course, they can’t, because we are so cunning we would take over the world in little more than a week, so would all of our friends they have arrested, I understand their concern.

Alyosha is sitting on the floor, with both his legs straight, leaning against the bed. I have placed a pillow under his bad leg, and I am usually the one who moves his pieces so that he does not have to.

I win most of the time. Alexei beats almost everyone but me, he used to get angry at this, or every time he lost. Mashka and him would have the most hilarious fights about it, and papa would scold them anytime they fought. I die a little bit when I remember. A horrible image irrupts on my mind, who allowed that nonsense to be there? I shoo it away. Focus on the game.

We had a tiny argument recently, the first time he lost, although I am willing to admit I cheated that time, but it is not like Alyosha never cheats, it is payback of sorts, for cheating, and for the fuss he makes whenever he loses; he is so dramatic. Now Alexei is tired, so he does not care much about winners or losers. I don’t know what I am going to do when he gets too tired, I don’t want to go to bed but I can’t stay awake while bored. If I stop doing something, anything, it will all come back. I wanted to go to bed then, not now when my parents are dead, I do not want to wake up without them. I don’t care how tired I am, I don’t care my eyelids feel as they weight as much as me now. I defy it, why can I sleep now? Only when they are gone? I don’t want it like that.

We are playing the game with the cards we invented right now. And we have only spoken Tarabar, our secret, and also invented language, since we started playing. Tarabar is not really a language, it is just us putting established syllables before every real syllable of a word, something that makes every sentence exceedingly long, but one gets used to it. Alyosha grumbles something I don’t understand very well when he loses again.

“Can we go to bed now?” My brother asks, in Tarabar of course, as he yawns. I have seen his eyes wanting to close for minutes now.

“You really want to go to bed?” I ask. My brother nods as he rubs one of his eyes. “And loose the challenge you gave me?” I tease him, and he stops rubbing his eye when I do, then he frowns.

“I didn’t give you any challenge”, he protests.

“Well, I am making it a challenge now” I say. “The first to fall asleep is a red pig”. He looks at me as if saying: are you serious?

“Fine”, he agrees, and I observe the huge effort he uses to stay awake. “Can we play colorito again?” I nod, it is only fair. I know it is a bit cruel, what I am doing, he truly does need sleep, but maybe Alexei will find it fun, I love his daring side, so similar to mine, and I have not seen him cry ever since we started playing. Either way, I don’t want to wake up without papa saying good morning when passing through our room. I don’t miss them now, no, it has been way too little
time, I can hardly understand the fact that it has indeed occurred. I don’t want to go to bed because each morning I wake up I will miss them more, it will slowly become real. I fear the inevitable longing.

This is also the first time in years I am not sleeping with my sisters, I don’t like it; it feels wrong somehow, they are always there to gossip and joke around before I fall asleep. I wish Mashka was also here to tell her about the real reason I don’t want to sleep, she is the one who would understand the most, even though she would tease me before giving any advice. She must be asleep already, and I can’t bother Alexei with that. My little brother would not take me leaving him here nicely either, sometimes I forget he must be just as scared as I am after what happened, and it must be horrible to sleep alone in this strange house without papa and mama. Maybe we should put the five beds in one room instead, so we can all sleep together cozily, I bet Alyosha would love to hear all the nonsense the four of us usually talk about between laughter and giggles before we fall asleep, but I wonder if the beds would all fit. I wonder if we will even have the same kind of talks before sleeping from now on.

“Ha, ha, ha”, Alyosha brags exaggeratedly, I cross my arms, turn away, and make a haughty face to pretend to be offended by it. This time he has won. This is what good days are made of, but it would be so much better if our parents and friends were also here. It would have been so much fun to do this if papa and mama had been here to possibly catch us past our bedtime. I wonder in what room they would have slept, there are more than two in the house, probably with Alexei. My eyes almost flood with tears at the thought, I need to think of something else, of the days Alyosha and I played like this just months ago, but with the knowledge papa was near to join us at any time, papa was like a little boy when he played with us. I am about to cry now; I breathe in deeply to choke back the tears.


“When?!” Alexei asks with more indignation than a board game fraud allegation merits. He really didn’t, at least not this time, it is just fun to provoke him.

“Here, look”, I say as I use my index finger to point at the board game. “You moved a piece when you thought I wasn’t looking”.

“What? That isn’t true! Which one?” He asks, he is so tired he is falling for this silly old joke again. God, I love him. He leans to have a look.

“Here, closer”, I say. Alexei leans in even closer to the game, using one hand to support the weight of his torso, I use the opportunity to quickly raise the index finger I was pointing at the game upwards, hitting his nose in the process. When Alexei was a toddler, uncle Michael would do the same, but he would pretend to steal Alyosha’s nose instead. I was only 5 or 6, but I remembered and learned a similar trick. I wonder where uncle Misha is now.

“Aww, Nastya!” He whines as he straightens up and puts his hands on his nose, but I have done this before, I know how much force to use in order to make it harmless. His frown relaxes, and his expression turns into another one of those rare smiles, one that quickly fades like the others. I wonder if he will ever smile again while really wanting to smile, instead of smiling for the sake of any of us four, I wonder if I will ever make a joke again without having to hide the urge to cry like I am doing now.

We stay silent for a minute.

“I wonder whose house this was”, Alexei comments.
“Another engineer´s?” I venture. “The Ipatiev house belonged to one.”

“Maybe a geologist´s house”, Alyosha continues guessing, “or a rich peasant´s”.

“Maybe an architect´s house, it is very beautiful”, I say. “Which makes me wonder Alyosha, what do you want to be when you grow older now?” Alexei shrugs. It makes me sad.

“I will tell you if you tell me”, I encourage him.

“I already know yours; you want to be an actress!” He exclaims.

“I don´t know”, I say, “I have been thinking about other things, I could be a newspaper reporter and travel all around the world to get new stories, or a painter, I would just need to practice more, it would also be fun to work in the circus”. He laughs at this.

“Oh, sure, I can imagine you dancing with the elephants, no one would know which one is you!”

“Alyosha!” I exclaim, genuinely appalled by his insensitive comment, I feel a bit insecure about myself for an instant.

“What?” He asks, seemingly hurt that I did not laugh at his joke.

“That was rude!”

“But you always call yourself…”

“Only I, can call myself… that, you little brat”, I say, messing with his hair a bit more roughly than I usually do, and pretending to be more upset than I actually am. He notices.

“Alright then, maybe you can be a trapeze artist, but I am worried for the person that will have to catch you, and even more worried about you, I hope you will use a safety net”, I chuckle a bit at that. We stay silent for a minute; I am so tired I am running out of clever comebacks.

“I don´t know if I will actually live to be a grown up” Alexei finally says solemnly. “And I don´t know if I am good at anything… I wish I could be a soldier, but I can´t, at least not a proper one”. My heart breaks for him but I try not to let it show, I use a grin to hide how his words make me feel. His possible death at a young age has always been a known fact between my sisters and I, one none of us would ever dare admit out loud. A fact I defy, he will live as long as I have a say on it.

“Can you please hurry up then? Fall down the stairs headfirst this time or something?” I ask, wearing a cheeky smile. “Every time we think it is finally over you amaze the world by continuing to live, this oh-so-inevitable death of yours that has been announced for years never arrives, it is starting to become annoying. We were nice for mama’s sake, but my goodness! You are clearly overstaying”. Alyosha growls in a playful way and then grabs my short blond hair to pull it.

It is not the first time we roughhouse, I was always careful, of course, and we did it mostly when neither our parents nor the big pair were there to watch us, but his illness never stopped Alyosha from wrestling with the other boys, so I always thought it was only fair it wouldn’t stop him from wrestling me, and I may partially be another boy. I still panic when he pulls my hair, my eyes grow wide, I frown, I hide my lips. I stop moving.

I can only remember the man who groped my sisters pulling my hair in the cellar. I was the least affected among the four of us, not that they did not manage to touch me once or twice as well, but Tanechka would, whenever she could, place herself in front of me and Maria to protect us. She did this several times. My poor and devoted sweet, sweet sister, she did not deserve to go through that.
I hope she is able to forget about it. I have the sudden urge to hug her really tightly and tell her how much I love her. I will do so tomorrow, but I will make it look like a joke, of course, I can’t do serious sentimentality unless it is through letters.

Alyosha notices my fear and releases me. His smile disappears. I am angry about the way our fun has been spoiled. Stupid gross men. If I let the sinister man ruin this for me, he has won, so I grab Alyosha’s hands and guide them back to my hair, then I lightly grab him by the neck, or more accurately, I put my hands closely around his neck and grind my teeth to pretend I am angry. Alexei gets the message and playfully growls again.

We haven’t done this in months, maybe a year or so. Kolya, who is around my brother’s age, was the one who usually wrestled with Alyosha while we were imprisoned at Tobolsk, and Kolya was allowed to visit. Then he had the accident sledding down the stairs that got worse because of a cough, and he wasn’t able to play the same way with Leonid, our kitchen boy, so they mostly played with toy guns.

Alexei has been recently injured, and his knee isn’t well yet, it is still bent, so we don’t move too much. We just lean back and forward slightly while grabbing each other’s necks and hair, making angry sounds in a way that is so pathetic it is hilarious. He lets go of my hair and touches my face with the palm of his hand slowly, as if giving me a slap, while yelling: “Take this!” I take my hands to my cheek and act as if I am in pain, then I do the same to him with my fist, laying it gently on his face as I frown. “Pow!” I exclaim. He moves his head backwards dramatically as if he had indeed been punched.

And then we start laughing as we continue to play fight, God we laugh, I am crying inside, but I genuinely want to laugh, because my brother is laughing as well, and we are both enjoying this ridiculousness. It is a pathetic attempt at wrestling, but it is our pathetic attempt at wrestling.

We stop at some point, of course, even the nonsense we did can get tiring, but it will definitely not help with my weight.

“How silly!” Alexei exclaims, still laughing. “That was so stupid!”

“Well, that clearly wasn’t my fault”, I snap back to get back at him for calling me fat. “I bet wrestling with a porcelain base would have been more fun”. He just frowns, but he looks a bit hurt. A bit too much, I might feel slightly guilty for an instant, but that is how I get along with everyone.

We stay silent for a minute. I yawn, I am beginning to get really tired. But not everyday will be as this one, the heartache will get worse. I don’t want to wake up to another day.

Alexei continues to look around the room.

“There were probably children in here, because there are many board games, as well as the slingshot you found, and a woman also lived here, because there are lots of makeup, maybe it was the mother”, he says. “I think this was the mother’s room, because all of the makeup is here, and we found more hairbrushes here than in the other room. The board games and slingshot were here probably because the mother used to take them away whenever the children misbehaved. The cigarettes were in the other room, they may have belonged to the children once they grew older, maybe this woman was one of those who thought smoking was unladylike, and that is why she doesn’t smoke.”

“You are as good as Sherlock Holmes Alyosha, maybe you should be a detective when you grow up, they may even write a book about you. Now, thank me for figuring out your vocation”.

Another one of his sad smiles, a minute of silence, two minutes? Then his head lowers and his lip trembles, my eyes are already wet by the time he starts crying.
“I am also very sad, Nastya”, he explains. The tears roll down from my own eyes, but Alexei extends his arms and wipes the tears away from my face, I smile at him.

“It has been too horrible, right?” This time it is me talking, I take his hands to keep them on my cheeks.

“Like a horror story”, he weeps. “I hate what they did to them, I want mama back already”. More tears fall down my face after hearing this, there is nothing that he said that is different from what I feel. I extent my arms, and we hug and cry together. I am leaning against his bed; he is resting his head on my chest while I am resting my head on his.

"Do you think it hurt?” Alyosha asks after a while. "I wonder if all those bullets were painful, one after the other”.

"When they shot papa and mama?” I ask, and I feel him nod. "I don´t think so sunbeam, it was very quick, it may have looked horrible for us because we saw the result in their bodies, but they were dead very quickly, and corpses can´t feel anything".

"But what about mama and her headaches? Wouldn´t that bullet have hurt her a lot for at least a second?” I don´t really want to think about the answer.

"The important thing is that is has passed”, I say, and he nods again.

"They are not in pain now, it it over”, he says, more to himself than to me. "It has passed.”

“I am afraid to fall asleep”, I confess. “I don´t want this day to be over, the last day we saw them alive, tomorrow the days without them start”. He doesn´t say anything, but I think he might understand.

I realize light is coming from the other room, our sisters must be awake as well. I wonder if they can hear our sobs. I don´t want to worry them.

“But Nastya”, my brother says after a while in a worried tone, “you have to sleep eventually, staying awake forever is not good for your health”.

“For ours, silly…” I reply. “I know”.

“And the morning will come, even if you don´t sleep”, he tells me, “we just have to endure, with God´s help we can endure anything, the pain always passes”. I stroke his hair and smile between tears. I wish mama could stroke my hair now.

We keep sobbing. After a few minutes, I realize my sisters have turned off the lights once more. A shiver runs through my spine. I am scared once more. I have been scared since early in the morning, and no daring act can hide the fact. I was never scared. I was the most fearless out of the five. Once, while still at Ekaterinburg, Alexei had said that if they killed us, he hoped they wouldn´t torture us, I had said he was being dramatic and told him none of those things would ever happen, mama and papa had reassured him that they probably wouldn´t torture us. Now I finally understand how scared he was, because I am as well. And his fears were not unfounded, what they did to us in that cellar, and later in the rooms, was torture. This realization makes me upset. The tears won´t stop flowing anytime soon.

I confess this to Alexei, and that I am scared of having nightmares, I am scared the men in this house are not nice after all, that they will enter our rooms, I am scared I won´t be able to be myself around them without being punished or mistreated like we were this morning. I am scared I will be myself anyways, because I don´t know what else to be. I am scared I will not like being myself.
anymore, that the former me will disappear along with my parents, and I won’t know how to even exist anymore.

My brother tries to think of helpful things to say, he tries to sound wise, the poor dear, I should be the one comforting him. I never tell him any of my worries, that is what sisters are for.

“It doesn´t matter how you act, Nastya, or how much you change”, he says, “I will always love you. You are you, always, and I am also afraid”. He says the last words shyly.

“I am sorry about what I said about Joy”, I tell him when I remember what I said at the table. “I was just mad about how they killed our friends and parents, and how you were still thinking about your dog knowing that; but I am also sad about Jimmy, and a bit jealous your dog could still be alive. One would say I wouldn’t have time to think of him as well with our parents and friends gone, but I do think of him, and how he barked before they shot him. He probably thought he was defending us”.

“Yes”, my brother replies, "Jimmy was very brave, and so was Eugene, did you hear how he talked to Yurovsky right before he started shooting?” I chuckle.

"Yes", I say. "Dr. Botkin was having none of it at the end, he was being polite no more, ´so you are not taking us anywhere? You absolute beast?’” We laugh out loud. I have said the last sentence imitating our friend, also adding the words I think his tone was conveying.

“Are you also sorry about calling uncle George, the king of England, an idiot?” Alexei asks, I can’t see his face, but he sounds as if he is smiling between tears.

“No”, I state. “I am not sorry about that”. We both laugh again.

“If you do have nightmares, I will wake you up”, Alyosha says. And I kiss the top of his head.

“I will wake you up as well, but I won´t have any nightmares because I am not falling asleep, the challenge still stands, I will sleep tomorrow”.

My brother grunts, but he stays awake, not wanting to be the loser, and we keep snuggling like we usually did when we were little.

Our tears appear to stop flowing for now. We stay close for a while longer, but then I fall asleep with my head on the bed, only to quickly wake up again and find Alyosha almost snoring in my lap with his arms around me, his eyes closed, and mouth open. I realize, slightly frustrated, that I did not notice who fell asleep first. It is time I give up my stupid defiance and go back to bed. I wake up Alexei and we finally pull away from our embrace, I help him get back into his bed, trying to make sure he doesn’t accidentally hit himself anywhere. The room is a mess, but I don’t care, I won’t clean it up now, it will be fun to see Tatiana’s reaction in the morning…that is, if her mind is not too distracted to care.

I turn off the light and go to my bed, I realize I don’t want to clean up because I am exhausted, I will do it tomorrow. The diamonds in my feet hurt a little bit.

“Nastya!” My brother calls. Not now, let me sleep.

“What?!”

“If you ever become a newspaper reporter, can you take me with you on your trips?”

“Sure, I don’t see why not, but Alyosha, that thing about not being good at anything is nonsense,
you will find it, and you also love to be a host on cinemas, right? Maybe you could own your own cinema!”

“Yes!” He exclaims, his excitement is contagious, now I want to talk about this despite being exhausted. Perfect. “And your movies could be shown there as well!”

“Wait a second, wait a second, am I going to be an actress or a newspaper reporter?”

“You can be both!”

I hope my sisters talk like this again in bed someday, I hope the five beds indeed fit.

“Well this talk is exciting, but I am genuinely tired now,” I say. “Let’s sleep now.”

“Alright, Nastya, goodnight”.

“And Alyosha?”

“Yes?”

“Just so you know, the soldiers who stay behind the front lines to plan the attacks are just as important, papa was one, you can still be a soldier”.
July 18, 1918.

Tatiana.

“Mama! Papa!” Masha yells in her sleep, waking me up; I look over Olga’s bed, she is getting up as well. I open the curtains; the sun isn’t up yet.

“What is it?” I ask, getting closer to Masha’s bed. “Did you have a nightmare?” She struggles when I touch her forehead, it is full of sweat. Maria starts moving in the bed, covering her face with her forearms.

“It was just a dream,” Olga soothes while caressing Maria’s hair. “You are safe, it is all right darling, mama and papa are watching over us from heaven, you are good.” Maria stops struggling and seems to calm down. I remember our days working as nurses, they seem so far away now. Olga was better at comforting soldiers in pain than I was, even if I was better with the technical skills, keeping my stomach full and the actual nursing.

My poor sister finally opens her eyes, she is crying and struggling to breathe, but seems less scared than before.

“Are you all right?” I ask, she nods and closes her eyes for a second. “Do you want to talk about it?” Maria straightens up and sits on her bed.

“It was just… all that happened, on the basement,” Masha sobs, pausing often to take deep breaths, “but this time, they stabbed me, like Anna, with the bayonets, oh God, it all felt so real!”

Suddenly, I hear someone knocking the door, I accidentally let out a short shriek before I jump from the bed; I was reminded of yesterday, and the way we had been awaken at midnight. I breathe deeply and go to get the door.

I exhale; it is Anastasia, she seems nervous.

“What is wrong?” I ask.

“It is Alexei, he had a nightmare,” she answers.

“Can you help me by comforting him yourself? Maria also had a nightmare.”

“He doesn’t let me go near him, he asked specifically for you, he sounds very upset”.

“All right, can you go talk to Maria for me in the meantime?” I ask her, she nods and enters the room while I go to see what is wrong with Alexei.

He is sitting on the bed crying, I turn on the lights too see better, which startles him. The room is filled with card and board games he has played tonight with Anastasia.

“What is it sunbeam?” I tell him, getting closer to the bed. “Did you have a nightmare? You can tell me,” I encourage him, but he just keeps sobbing, I get closer, then I feel the smell, He lowers his head in shame when he realizes I noticed, he looks much younger than his age at that moment, poor thing, he must be so embarrassed; that nightmare must have scared him a lot. He had been 3 years old the last time he wet the bed.

He probably feared Anastasia would tease him.

“Don’t worry,” I say, as carefully as possible. “I am going to ask the commander to let me go for
your other clothes, they must be dry already. I will ask him if he has extra sheets, if he doesn’t, you can sleep on my bed. The important thing now is that you get a quick bath, and you can’t stay with those wet clothes”

“But where will you sleep?” He asks.

“With Olga, don’t worry about that.”

“But I don’t want you to wake the commander! What if he gets angry at you?” Poor darling, thinking about that.

“He won’t”, I say. “It is part of his job”.

Commander Antonovich is indeed a bit grumpy when I knock on his door and wake him up, but he doesn’t complain. The hardest part is having to tell him the reason I need my brother’s other set of clothes and the sheets; at first he thinks a counterrevolutionary group has come to take him and starts talking to me in an aggressive manner, but I manage to convince him that is not the case by telling him the truth.

“Please don’t mention this to my brother or any of the other guards, he will be mortified if he knows anyone else knows,” I implore to the commander.

“Don’t worry”, he tells me, "I will not mention this again. I remember the same thing happening to my daughter after my wife died in a trolley car accident, my daughter barely got out of there alive, she was 10. She was gravely injured as well, but fortunately she recovered; she is 23 now”.

“Thank you, commander, and sorry for your loss,” I say.

When I arrive upstairs with the clothes and the sheets, I see that the little pair has fallen asleep on Maria’s bed, cuddling each other, Olga is sleeping on hers.

I carry my brother to the bathroom; it is a lot harder for me to do that than it is for Masha. He is only slightly shorter than Anastasia, and I can’t carry her anymore.

He bathes all by himself, while I wash his dirty clothes on the sink.

"Does Anastasia know?” He asks shyly as I am putting his shirt over his head.

"No darling, she doesn’t suspect a thing", I reply, he sighs. "But you must know she would never tease you about something that is upsetting to you." He nods unsurely.

"She wouldn’t", I repeat. "But I still would never tell her, or anyone if you don’t want to". My sister has a heart of gold, her antics usually cheer everyone up, she doesn’t act like she does for the sole purpose of making people feel miserable.

“My left arm hurts,” he complains after I have helped him dress.

“Is that the arm you landed on when the brute pushed you?” I ask, he nods. “I am going to take you to Anastasia’s bed while I change the sheets, and then I am going to sit with you until your arm feels better, all right?”

He is crying the entire time I work.

“Pushing away the bayonet also hurt,” he says after I have finished with the sheets, he is still laying in Nastya’s bed .

“I know,” I sympathize. “That man, Ermakov, is a beast”. He slowly starts sobbing when I mention his name.

“Hey, it is alright,” I soothe, sitting in his bed and holding his hand. “Is that what your nightmare was about?” He nods, wiping his tears uselessly, they are quickly replaced.

“He… he, he yelled".
“He yelled at you while he tried to stab you?” I ask him. He shakes his head.
“Yelled, he had shot, Nagorny, while trying, to stab me”, he finishes amidst pauses to breathe, necessary because of the crying. I don’t know what to say, I don’t even know if I am surprised considering how they murdered our friends along our parents. My own tears start falling, how can they be so cruel to people whose only crime is loyalty? I realize all our friends still in custody are also in danger, maybe even our friends in the hospitals, our former servants, or friends we have gone to parties with, that visited us… I don’t know what constitutes a good enough reason to deserve death for these people.

“I am sorry, I don’t want to give you false hope, but it is possible he was only saying it to hurt you and brag”. I know that isn’t true, but I say it anyway.
“My fault,” He mutters.
“If I wasn’t, so sick, all the time, I wouldn’t need him, and they wouldn´t, have killed him,” he laments, pausing between breaths, he rubs his red eyes. He is breaking my heart with those words. “That is nonsense!” I exclaim, taking his hands away from his eyes. “Nagorny loved all of us, and he would have followed us even if you were a healthy boy who had outgrown him years before. The only people to blame are the ones that killed him. Do you understand? And even if he had died because of your illness, you must know darling that nobody blames you for that.” He nods, still looking unsure.
“What if they kill all of our friends?” He whimpers, his voice higher than before. “Like Mr. Gibbes and Mr. Gilliard”.
“We will pray for them”, I tell him, wiping away my tears and then his. “It is the only thing we can do at the moment”.

We end up praying until his sobbing is turned into simple silent tears, I have to reassure him that at least our foreign friends shouldn’t be in danger. When I am about to leave for the other bed, he tearfully asks me to stay, and I don’t have a heart to refuse him, even though this is unusual. I let him hug me as tight as he would his teddy bear when he was younger, and I stroke his hair until he falls asleep, he smiles sweetly with his eyes closed as I do it, it makes me smile as well.

"I got him, mama", I whisper. "I will take care of him".

When I wake up, I find Alexei still sleeping peacefully next to me, as if nothing had happened yesterday. He didn’t have any other nightmares, thank God. My arm just feels numb because Alyosha has rested his head on it. I have to move it around for a while, it is quite funny. The commander enters our rooms for roll calls and leaves soon after, just when he does, Anastasia enters the room and hugs me so tightly she might suffocate me.

"I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you!" She exclaims, kissing me on one cheek every two times she says ‘I love you’. I hug her back while frowning, then I smile, maybe my baby sister is running out of ideas on how to annoy me, poor thing.

"I love you too Nastenka”, I say, unsettled by this sudden display of affection, "but hurry up, we have to get ready". She doesn’t pull away, but she doesn’t say anything else as she keeps hugging me, I embrace her back, more genuinely this time, closing my eyes. My dear little one has suffered so much, and she needs her older sister, maybe she feels shy about saying it, so she is joking as always to get her point across. I tower over her, and despite being so skinny, I want to try this one more time. I lift her from the ground for just one second, during which she yells in surprise, before her shoes touch the floor again.

"I love you too", I repeat with a smile, she is still shaken up and laughing after I lifted her, then I kiss her temple and pull away. "The priest is coming soon, I am going to bathe first".
"And clean up the mess you left last night, Anastasia", I yell before I enter the bathroom.

Once more, I spend more time in the shower than I should. I curse myself for that, it is like once I start crying in the shower I can´t stop. I turn off the faucet before I stop crying. I have realized I will waste all the water in the world if I wait for my tears to stop flowing.

I find all of my siblings crying as well when I return from the bathroom, all except for Olga, who is consoling Shvibzik, sitting in one of the beds in our room. Shvibzik is sobbing louder now than she did any time yesterday, except immediately after that horrible nightmare took place. I look at my older sister´s eyes in silent gratitude.

Masha is sitting in the other bed, rocking Alexei just like she did yesterday. His sobs don´t sound as loud, as he is hiding his face in her chest. Maria sobs as well, kissing Alexei´s hair over and over again.

If our parents hadn´t been brutally murdered yesterday, I would have explained to both Maria and Alexei that he was getting too old for those things. I will never do it now. What my baby brother wants more than the throne of Russia he will never have. He will never see our gentle and loving mama ever again, or be held in the strong arms of our father. He can take as much time as he wants. Maria can as well.

I take Olga´s place and comfort my little sister while she goes to the bathroom. This time Anastasia doesn´t try do hide her love and need for her me with humor.

"I will be like your mother now, do you hear me?" I tell her, and she nods and hugs me tighter as she keeps sobbing, instead of teasing me about it like I know she usually would.

We all bathe and prepare ourselves early to be ready for Obednya, which we have downstairs. My siblings and I eagerly take part in the ritual, we need it so much. Galina also joins us. It is a very melancholic affair as a whole though, we are crying the entire time, during the sermon, as we pray for our parents. We weep discreetly, but we do. We almost try to apologize to the priest, who isn´t allowed to talk to us, with our eyes. I remember the last services we had with our parents once more. Olga and I look at each other once in a while, as if we can read each other thoughts. Maybe we do sometimes, it is af if we are saying: ´if only mama was here´, or ´it doesn´t feel as good without them´. It is still a joy to finally receive communion, it is the only thing that never truly changes. Union with Christ is always so. You can truly see Olga glowing after the service is over.

I feel miserable after the priest leaves, but my mind is at ease, at rest for now.

We break the fast and Masha talks with Oleg while we eat. They are talking about the games they played as children, and the usual differences in the things little boys and little girls play, Galina, Nastya, Alexei and even Olga join the conversation occasionally, it becomes quite interesting. I am glad Oleg isn´t talking to my sweetest sister about anything indecent.

It is really curious how for minutes we act as if nothing bad had recently happened, only to go back to the same pathetic state in minutes.

“When I was a little girl, I played with both girl toys and boy toys,” Nastya says.
“That is because you liked to play with Alyosha more than me,” Masha says, pouting at Anastasia and pretending to be upset.
“That is not true!” Anastasia protests. “I clearly remember I played with you most of the time!” Alyosha nods, agreeing with Anastasia.
“You remind me of me and my brothers when we were little,” Oleg adds, smiling at Maria. “We also had arguments as little children because of jealousy, but at the end of the day we all loved playing together”.

“Wait until I tell Ivan Skorokhodov”, Nastya whispers to my ear. “He will be very jealous.” I can’t help but laugh, my little Shvibzik says the funniest things.

I am so interested in the conversation that I barely notice commander Pavel Antonovich arguing with two men about them arriving too early, they go with him to his office at the end of the argument. Olga is the one who brings my attention to it.

“Commander Antonovich looks stressed about something”, Olenka tells me, sending chills down my spine. After a minute, Pavel Antonovich enters the living room followed by two strange men wearing black leather jackets and caps, they have serious expressions.

“Sorry for the interruption. These two young men come from the Cheka in Moscow. Olga Nicholaevna, Tatiana Nicholaevna, could you accompany us to my office please?” Pavel says with a low tone of voice, then he looks around us, as if considering something. “Maria Nicholaevna can come as well”. The three of us slowly get up and follow the men.

Once in his office, the men remain standing while we sit in front of Pavel´s desk, Pavel also sits. We all stay silence for a while; the tension is becoming unbearable.

“We have orders to take the former tsarevich to Moscow”, one of the Chekists finally states. The news take a few minutes to sink in, this can’t be happening, it is too much for two days, not again. My mind settles on this not being true, it can’t be. No one says a word. We stay in silence. The two newcomers smirk at us. Olga and Maria´s eyes become wet before mine, I don’t believe the news yet.

“But we can come with him, right?” I calmly venture, maybe we have just misunderstood what the man said.

“No”, the other Chekist states, “Moscow has different plans for the women”. It finally hits me. My eyes fill with tears.


“Our intentions are none of your concern,” the Chekist replies, Pavel looks sadly at us.

“You knew this!” Olga fumes at Pavel, tears are rolling down her cheeks, but her voice is not broken. She gets up the chair and points at the commander. “You knew since we arrived! That is why you complained about the time but didn’t look surprised to see them!” Antonovich commands her to sit down with a firm tone of voice I have never heard him use. She sits, but not without first giving him a look that, knowing Olga, only can be interpreted as pure sheer rage.

“This is too cruel! Ridiculous! My brother is sick!” Masha bawls, suddenly sounding like mama. “We don’t know any of you people! Don’t you have children? Have a heart!”

Quickly, I have to think of something to say, we can’t overpower them, we are completely defenceless, but I can reason with them. I must convince them somehow, there must be a solution to this.

“Please comrades,” I try to appeal to them with the words they use. “Let us keep our brother, we will not cause any trouble”.

“He is not a threat to you anymore,” Olga adds, looking at her feet to appear humble and trying to control her rage. “He is just a typical boy his age whose everyday concern is not getting bored, he is not interested in using his claim against you, I can assure you there is nothing he thinks about less.” I nod at the men, honestly supporting what my sister has just said, I hope they have taken her
argument seriously.

“If you let us live with him in exile, we promise we will never come back”, I say, weeping. I look at Olga, who never wanted to leave Russia, but due to the present circumstances, she doesn’t protest or even react to what I said.

“He is still young”, Olga continues arguing with a more desperate tone of voice. “We will touch the subject of our past only when necessary, we will find someone to teach him another trade, or send him to some foreign university, we will even try to make sure he marries a foreign commoner, by the time he turns 21, the very idea of interrupting his normal life to go back to Russia in order to use his claim will be preposterous to him, he will…”

“You must decide which one of you will tell the boy he is leaving”, Antonovich interrupts. There isn’t a solution, I know this now. They had forced papa and Alexei to remove their epaulets, they had split apart our family for no reason in Tobolsk, they had kept us in seclusion with the windows painted white at Ekaterinburg, they had stripped us of our clothes and jewels and there was nothing we could do about it. Now they are taking our baby brother too, and there is nothing we can do. I am tired of accepting everything so meekly like I am supposed to do, like papa told me I should; I am tired of being a prisoner, I am not strong enough.

“If none of you tell him, we will,” one of the new men says, and they start to walk towards the door, Masha gets out of her chair and moves in front of them.

“No! Please!” She begs, bawling her eyes out. I see she is about to beg on her knees, I will not allow that; I go to Maria and hold her up, I hug her, trying to comfort her.

“He is only a cripple!” I yell at the men, feeling disgusting after saying that word knowing mama hated it, the tears run down from my eyes faster. Masha looks at me, seemingly knowing what is causing my pain.

“Wait!” Maria yells; the men stop at the doorway. “I will tell him”. And she walks through the door sobbing.

Me and Olga can’t bear to listen to the conversation that will ensue between the little pair and Alexei. We sit on the corner of the office hugging and sniveling while Antonovich works on his papers and occasionally looks at us with pity, then he starts sending messages on the telegram.

I can’t block the reactions out, they still reach my ears even coming from upstairs in the living room, their cries of fear are worse than I expected.

I feel so ashamed, I have failed my poor mama, oh how she would suffer if she could see! Her baby boy! All alone! And for God knows what reason! I didn’t even have the courage to be the one to tell him.

Chapter End Notes

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:
- Short comments, including emojis.
- Long comments, with no limits.
  _Questions
  _ Constructive criticism
Reader-reader interaction
Comments in only one chapter.
Comments in more than one chapter.
This author replies to comments, but if you don't want a reply, for whatever reason (for example, shyness), feel free to sign your comment with the Word "whisper" and I will appreciate the comment just the same but not respond.
Olga’s choice.

Chapter Notes

The “chess” conversation is taken from “The Lost Crown”.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Olga.

I feel like the only purpose left for me in this life is to wait for the next one. After the initial shock caused my parent’s deaths and the humiliation that followed that night had passed, I amazed myself by how little I grieved except for certain moments of nostalgia. I just want to be with papa and mama again as soon as possible, even if I must bring my siblings along with me; those dark thoughts make me feel guilty. My siblings are still in this life because God willed it, so my obligation is to be with them and comfort them.

It may sound paradoxical to some people, but the only control left I have over my life is faith. Knowing everything is in God’s hands when we are suffering makes me unafraid. Knowing eternal life follows death makes me unafraid, both of my own death and that of the people I love. I have become unafraid quite recently though, my old happy and bubbly pre-revolution self wouldn’t be as fearless or comfortable with the idea of any of her beloved siblings dying so young, she was just as close to God as I am now, but she wasn’t close enough to death.

I am completely horrified at the prospect of Alexei being taken away. I don’t know what he is being taken for, I don’t know whether they will let him live or die, or what he will experience in captivity, or what vices he will be taught, or whether he will be allowed to receive letters, or if we will ever see him again. He is going to be alone around hostile strangers that either hate him or don’t care for him, and even if he execute him, he will die scared and alone with no one to comfort him and pray with him, and I don’t know exactly how they will execute him. Knowing it is all in God’s hands no longer comforts me, because I will not be there to see what exactly it is that God planned for him. Now I feel truly powerless.

Commander Pavel keeps writing things on the telegram, at some point he talks to someone on the telephone, but I am too caught up in my own misery to listen to what he is saying, the way he goes as far away from us as possible and whispers as if hoping we won’t hear what he is saying doesn’t help either.

My sister Tanechka, who has always known the right thing to say or do to make things better, can only weep with me now; I grieve for her, she always feels responsible for everything, I can’t imagine what she must be feeling right now. But worst of all I grieve for the little pair; my two younger sisters still had a glimmer of hope to stay together and move on as a family, Nastya’s wonder filled eyes when she showed us the diamonds she had saved almost made me feel hope too. Despite being perfectly capable of hearing their cries, I am selfishly glad I wasn’t there to see Masha destroy the last remaining piece of innocence in Nastya.

“Come sit,” Pavel Antonovich says from his place at the desk right after he finishes talking on the telephone. God help me, it is becoming increasingly hard for me to love our enemies, and I am not ashamed to admit I think it is entirely due to the increasing gravity of their actions and not because I am becoming more resentful. I stand up and help my devastated sister do the same. We sit on the
There is something I can do for you,” Pavel begins. “But I am afraid it is not much”.
“Will we be able to send letters?” My sister Tanya asks as soon as she hears Pavel say that, as if the pain had made her forget that letters were even a possibility. If we are allowed to send letters, I can at least imagine with relative accuracy my brother’s situation.
“I am afraid not,” Pavel says, the fear comes back again, and Tatiana whimpers. “But I could allow one of you to go with him”.
“I will go”, Tatiana quickly states, nodding.
“Wait Tatiana!” I exclaim, panicking at the thought of also losing my best friend to such uncertainty. “You have to think this through!”
“It is what mama would have wanted”, she says to me with a tiny voice. “I can’t abandon him, not when I have the chance not to”. She starts weeping in my shirt after barely being able to say those last words, I hold her.
“But Tanya, think about papa too, he wouldn’t have wanted for the family to be split again”.
“The family is already being split!” She weeps loudly. “If I go, you, Masha and Nastya will still have each other”, she pauses to take a deep breath. “He will have no one if I stay. The only thing I can do that doesn’t go against my conscience is making sure he doesn’t feel like we abandoned him”.
“But Tanya”, I say, as carefully as possible. “They are probably going to kill him.” Tatiana shakes her head.
“No”, she sobs.
“Yes”, I state, barely holding on myself. “I don’t know why they are postponing it for so long and I thank God they did so he could delight us with his golden heart for even a day more, but Tanya they are going to kill him…”. I pause to wipe my tears. “And they will kill you too if you go with him”. She wipes her tears as well and looks at the commander.
“Is that true?” She asks our jailer, not politely for the first time in our long imprisonment. “Are they killing my brother? Did you know all along? Was all the kindness you showed us simply part of the job?” And then I hear something I never thought would come out of Tatiana’s mouth. “How would you feel if it was your recently injured 10-year-old daughter being taken away from you for God knows what reason?”

Pavel looks at my sister with pity and sadness in his eyes and then lowers his head down. He seems to feel sorry for us, he seems to understand and sympathize with our situation, and yet he does nothing, it sickens me; I know he probably doesn’t have the power to do anything, but he has been given a position of power by the same group of people that killed my parents and now wants to take my brother away, which means that, at the very least, he implicitly accepts those wicked actions as long as they serve a more important purpose in his eyes.

“I don’t know with certainty whether they are going to kill him or not”, commander Pavel admits. “The only thing I knew for certain was that they were going to take him to Moscow the evening of the 18th of July, but they arrived earlier. Please believe me, I have nothing against any of you, at least not personally. I am just following orders. The only thing I know for sure is that negotiations are being made between various foreign powers and Moscow for the release of the 4 former grand duchesses in exchange for money, keeping the Germans at bay, diplomatic recognition, the release of prominent socialists imprisoned in those countries, you name it, but I haven’t been informed about any willingness to do the same with the former heir, so if any of you goes with him, it is at your own risk.”

It is just as I thought, I can’t allow any of my sisters to go with him, but I don’t understand.

“But why?” I ask, desperately, with tears still flowing. “Why did they spare him if they were not going to allow him to be released with us? Did they just spare him to make him suffer longer alone
in a cold cell with no family around? To beat him and leaving him to die slowly? Like Marie Antoinette’s son? Why? He doesn’t deserve this!”. Tatiana weeps hysterically when she hears me say that.

“No, none of that, of course not, we are not savages”, Pavel denies, moving his palms in front of him. I almost roll my eyes, but I want him to explain me, so I hold back.

“Then tell us anything you know, please”, I sob. “Because I simply do not understand, can you at least do that?”

“I can tell you what I suspect based on my conversations with fellow comrades from the party closer to Moscow than I”, Pavel says.

“Anything”, Tatiana cries.

“All right, as you know, we are at war at the moment. The Whites are made up of a great number of different political parties, some are even socialists, but a considerable amount of them are also loyal monarchists”, commander Pavel talks. “Do any of you play chess?” Me and Tatiana look at each other, wondering what this is about, then we nod at Pavel.

“Well, the quickest way to cripple your opponent’s offensive is capturing its queen, or at least forcing them to defend it”, Pavel continues.

“So, what you are saying is that my brother being kept in Moscow is like the queen in this situation?” I ask him.

“Precisely”, he says. “And many players will sacrifice any number of lesser pieces to spare their queen from harm. As long as the decisionmakers in Moscow have control over him, they have a certain amount of power over the monarchists in the White army, and they can use the possibility that your brother is still alive to set a trap for them, and all they need is evidence he is indeed alive for it to work properly, like daily pictures, or pieces of paper with his handwriting.”

“And they spared my brother and not my father because my father was hated even by some monarchists”, I assert, Tatiana looks at me with shock in her eyes, as if I had disrespected papa’s memory, but I was the one who had late night discussions with him about the problems in the country, so I know what I am talking about.

“Not really”, Pavel corrects me. “They chose your brother for this strategy because, as the heir, he represents the future. Because he is young and has never had power, he has never had the opportunity to make any mistakes that could make him unpopular to the masses, or is old enough to have his own opinions, at least not opinions that can’t be molded by selected tutors. He is, even for socialists or liberals in the white army who may be willing to give a constitutional monarchy a try, a perfect pawn; for the real absolute monarchists he is a perfect symbol, an innocent orphan child-tsar ready to continue his father’s legacy. He can also be used by us as a tool to cause fracture in the white army between those who want the monarchy back, and those who wouldn’t want it back in a million years, they are barely holding on to a single cause as it is, the only thing they have in common is their shared hatred for us Bolsheviks, but this could make our enemy’s cohesion problem even worse.”

The knowledge that these men at least have a plan for my brother that doesn’t include trying to violently re-educate him, like the French revolutionaries had tried to do with the dauphin, is strangely comforting in some way, but there is still one thing bothering me.

“And after the war? What will they do to him after you win the war? Or if you lose for that matter?” I ponder.

“If we lose, he will probably be released to the whites, maybe in exchange for the release of important prisoners of our own captured in battle”, he says, pausing before continuing. “If we win, I don’t know what they will decide to do with him, exiling him is out of the question at this moment for fear of even more foreign intervention, so is letting him live in Russia. But, remember that the cleverest player of all will sometimes sacrifice his own queen, tricking his opponent to win
the game, that is what the decisionmakers in Moscow can do to the whites when it comes to your brother. The question is, which kind of player is Lenin?"

So they are going to kill him, I don’t understand why this man can’t speak to us concretely without more chess metaphors, we have already watched our parents be murdered in front of us, we can take the truth, as harsh as it is.

“I will go with him”, Tatiana repeats after a while, nodding. “I will share whatever fate God has in store for him”. I don’t say anything yet, but I have already decided it is me who should go with my brother.
“Very well”, Pavel says, getting up from his chair. “You both better head out to say goodbye”.

Me and Tatiana walk out of Pavel’s office to find our three youngest siblings in the living room; the scene is just as I expected. The three of them are sitting on the couch sobbing, with Alexei sitting in the middle. Nastya seems to be taking it the hardest, she looks just as upset as earlier. Alexei rests his head on Masha’s shoulder and she holds his head with her hands, while Nastya hugs him from the other side. The two Chekists stand far from my siblings between the living room and the dinning room, they are talking to a very concerned Galina while Oleg listens to the conversation.

When Anastasia sees us approaching, she runs to me and hugs me.

“Please talk to the commander”, she sobs, I rub her back and try to keep my own crying in check.
“We already did, my precious Nastya, I am afraid it didn’t work”, I answer, and we keep hugging.
“Darlings”, Tatiana says, “I am going to go with Alexei”.
“What? You too?” Masha whines in a higher voice, then starts sobbing harder. “I am the only one who can carry him without trouble, and I already have experience being separated from the rest, let me be the one to go”.
“No Masha, I am better dealing with his illness”, Tatiana states.
“No!” Nastya exclaims, pulling away from me. “I will go”.
“Don’t be silly Nastya you are only 17”, Masha responds.
“And you are only 19!” Anastasia yells back.
"Anastasia, if there is any of us four who really shouldn’t go, that is you dear", I say. "You are far too young”, “I don’t want any of you to go with me!” Alexei sobes loudly “They want me dead, and I don’t want any of you to die with me”. He sinks his face back in Maria’s arms after he finishes that last sentence, Masha hugs him back, moved by his concern for us.

I always knew my brother was, to a certain degree, aware of his own political significance and the dangerous situation that significance placed him in. He knew the new regime saw him not as a boy, but as the heir to the Russian Throne and a symbol of the hated old regime. It is, however, heartbreaking for me to watch him voice those concerns out loud and behave in such a brave, grown-up way.

“Baby”, Tanya says keeling close to him. “You are crazy to think I would ever let you perish alone when it is within my power to go with you”.
“Forget about it Tanya”, I say with a firm voice. “I am the one who will go with him and I won’t accept any discussion about it from either you or Alyosha.” I notice she is about to protest so I grab her gently by the arm and guide her to a spot further away from the others.

“I can’t let you do this!” Tanya protests.
“No, I can’t let you do this”, I respond. “I can’t let you be the oldest one yet again, this time I most have that role”.
“You have never cared about me acting like the oldest, don’t pretend that is what you care about
“You are right. I never cared about that, in fact, it relieved me from the responsibility of being obedient and well behaved in order to set a good example for the little ones”. We both laugh at those many childhood memories through our tears.

“I am a better nurse”, she argues. “He is going to need me”.

“You have a life ahead of you, Tanya”, I answer, "beyond all this pain”. I look around to make a point. “Remember in Tobolsk, when you said you wanted to become a doctor now that you didn’t have to marry a prince?”

“I didn’t say that, that was just a stupid idea that crossed my mind while talking about the possibility of opening my own hospital.”

“Nonsense!” I exclaim, “I saw your eyes glowing when you talked about it, but even if you don’t become a doctor, you can still nurse, or open a hospital, and you are still young and beautiful, any man would be lucky to have you, unlike me, I am only 22 and already looking like an old spinster.”

“Don’t say that!” She yells, offended. “Have you actually looked at the mirror recently? Because you are wrong.”

“Do something for yourself for once Tanya”, I say, I hold both her hands and continue. “You have always lived for others like a true christian martyr, especially for mama, and I love and admire that about you, but this time I am asking you to do something for yourself, and if you can’t do it for yourself then do it for me, do it for the love and memories we have shared as sisters since you were born.”

“But Olga…”

“I can’t lose you Tanya, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I let you risk your life like that, the same way you wouldn’t forgive yourself if you left baby alone. Let me be the big sister for once, I am almost two years older than you, I know that sounds like nothing but it is one and a half years I have lived and you haven’t, let me give them to you.

“I will take care of baby and protect him with my life until it no longer depends on me, I will not let him die alone, I promise. You need to take care of the little pair, pray with them, comfort them, make sure they don’t lose their innocence and hope for a better life, a simpler life, but most of all make sure Shvibzik never stops being Shvibzik.” We laugh while crying again when I mention our baby sister´s nickname, then she looks at me as if she knew it would be for the last time.

“I am going to miss you so much”, she weeps, and we cry and hug each other tighter than we ever did before, we stay like that for a minute or so, until I break it off before I change my mind, the times we spent together since we were children run through my mind and I try to keep the memories for as long as possible. I wish I could go back in time and tell young Olga to enjoy her sails in the Standart with her family and stop worrying about whether Paul Voronov´s gaze will meet hers today.

Me and Tatiana come back to our youngest siblings, and I have to make Alexei see we can’t let him go alone. He wouldn’t have any say if he disagreed anyway, but I don’t want him to feel guilty. I say goodbye to the little pair, they hug me so tight I almost suffocate, but even that isn’t enough for the time we may be apart. Tatiana says goodbye to Alyosha by covering his forehead and cheeks with kisses. The two Chekist men watch the entire scene with signs of impatience, but they don’t bother us.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” Tatiana says as she starts running up the stairs while the little pair says goodbye to Alexei for a last time, Masha seems to remember something and goes to get it as well. When they return, Tanya brings Alexei´s second pair of clothes and gives it to me, seeing this, Galina approaches us.

“I will go get your washed clothes”, the old woman tells me with tears in her eyes herself, I become surprised by how little time it took for us to become fond of each other. I kiss both her cheeks when
she returns with the clothes.

Masha brings with her the Theotokos icon Nastya had found and gives it to me.

“To protect you on the road”, my baby sister says.

“No”, I say, returning it to her and looking at my three younger sisters. “Keep it, think of us whenever you pray with it, and don’t forget to pray a lot for our safety.”

After praying together one last time and saying the final farewells, I go to carry Alexei and am surprised by how heavy he is despite being so thin, it has been months since I last tried.

I see Anastasia with the corner of my eye walking towards the Checkists. Before I can figure out what her intentions are she has already kicked both of them on the shin. I hear them scream in pain and turn around, Anastasia is running back upstairs, and the two men are in too much pain to do anything except curse at my sister, calling her the most horrible and indecent names. Maria and Tatiana are in shock, Alexei smiles for a second before his face shows how miserable he is once again.

Good for my sister, I guess. And yet, I know she is in her bed sobbing, howling her pain away right now. I can hear her even from here.

“Do you want me to carry him?” Oleg asks, approaching us after he sees me struggle and stretching out his arms in invitation.

“Is that all right for you, sunbeam?” Tatiana asks him, Alyosha looks scared for a second but then nods. I let Oleg carry him and, blowing kisses at my sisters, we head out of the house.

A carriage is waiting for us where the two Chekists go to sit first. Oleg gets on first and sits Alexei on the back of the carriage; I trip when I try to step in after them, painfully hitting my shin on one of the stairs of the carriage, I cry out in pain, which in seconds makes me burst into sobs that have nothing to do with the pain. Oleg helps me get up and then get into the carriage by carrying me. He lifts me up with his strong arms by placing his hands under my shoulders.

“I am sorry about all of this”, he tells me when his eyes met mine, I think he really means it, his beautiful gray eyes fill with compassion as he looks between me and Alexei. After he gets out of the carriage he does something that makes me respect him more than any Saint George Cross Medal, he salutes my brother in a seemingly serious manner, Alyosha smiles at him in tears and salutes back, I smile at him too. None of the guards were supposed to salute either papa or Alexei after the revolution. Oleg has risked being scolded or even put in jail so he could acknowledge my brother’s time in the army, something he had learned more about when he and my siblings talked today during breakfast. My brother’s time as a soldier was just symbolic and consisted only on visiting the wounded and assisting parades, but Oleg had put that aside when he saw our suffering. I don’t know whether he meant it or did it only as a kind gesture, but he has brightened up our day.

One of the guards of the house, a blond, is apparently also coming with us to Moscow, he is sitting in front of us and I have heard him talk with the Moscow Chekists about it. To my great displeasure, Paul Tabakov is also coming.

Chapter End Notes

Just like the “chess” conversation was taken from the book “Lost crown”, so was the idea of Tatiana having the secret dream of becoming a doctor. I don’t believe there is
any evidence in her diaries, letters or memories from people who knew her that this was the case in real life but considering she was a very good nurse who complained about not being allowed in the most difficult surgeries and she actually knew at least one female doctor in her lifetime I don’t think it is impossible the real Tatiana at least once toyed with the idea, especially after the revolution.

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Vengeance.

Chapter Notes

Some of the events that happen in this chapter, as well as some more to come, are taken from the book “The Pillars of the Earth”. It is a very good book, one of the first long novels I ever read actually, it is about the building of a cathedral during the middle ages, I know the concept sounds odd but it has very interesting characters who move the story along, interesting historical facts, nice romances, and if you love historical fiction I truly recommend it.

Warning: Content may cause huge amounts of distress and/or trigger reactions, please read with caution, take care of yourselves. This is the darkest chapter yet and it is extremely dark, and I am not exaggerating, I don´t say these kinds of things lightly. This chapter was at times painful to write. There is nothing graphic, but if you can´t handle really dark material, wait for the next chapter, you will be able to connect dots.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Paul Igorovich Tabakov.

I was overjoyed to hear that annoying, cheeky prick who scarred my forehead was being taken away from his sisters. The sight of him and the youngest of his sisters whining was hilarious, if I still believed in God I would have thought this was a divine punishment for being a pair of smart-ass, privileged, immature, disrespectful, smug, and unruly children, simply unbearable stand. The Romanovs are not very likeable, but they don´t notice this because the world has revolved around them their entire lives.

I wasn´t exactly overjoyed to hear I was expected to escort the bratty child to Moscow though, but they needed someone from Perm to corroborate he had been safely delivered to his destination. Lucky for me, my comrade Roman Mitrofanovich Ustinov is coming too. He is a tall light blond with icy blue eyes, a little bit half-witted, but he is a loyal friend of mine from childhood and most importantly, he shares my sense of humor. I have nothing against the Cheka, I think they do an important job, but they take the joy out of the revolution with their firm rigidity, they make the yoke of the tsar seem light by comparison. What is the point of a revolution without vengeance? I can tell these two dull, stoic pricks will be hard to be around. They are probably sissy smug intellectuals from middle class families who have never done a hard day´s work in their lives; they are also young, late twenties or so, 8 years younger than me and they are supposed to give us orders, please!

The oldest sister, Olga, has come too. She really wants to die I suppose; I could tell since I saw her for the first time on the train station that she was already more over there than here. She is a weak pale sack of bones, with no servants or family coming along with her. She is beautiful, and she is alone. I am sure the Chekists won´t let us try shit with her though.

I am siting just in front of her in the carriage, and I become disappointed when I see that she and her brother have stopped crying. I start looking back and forward to her with a scowl on my face.

When I am not scowling at her, I turn over to Roman by my side and whisper a crude joke or two at his ear, not low enough for her not to hear. At first, she doesn´t notice, then she doesn´t think
much of it, until she finally starts getting offended, not only that, scared, something I can tell by the way her eyes grow big every time they meet mine and how she stops meeting my gaze again by keeping her head low. It is a small triumph at least. The little brother stares at us and then at her sister with a cocked head, evidently confused.

“I have heard them say they only have two sets of clothes and one pair of shoes each”, Roman tells me once we get bored of teasing her, although I know talking bad about her or her family will probably bother her just as much.

“I hope so”, I say back loud enough for everyone in the carriage to hear. “It is time for these parasites to know what scarceness means, when I was growing up we had, at one point, one pair of shoes for me and my two brothers, they are lucky they even get one each, don’t you agree comrade Ustinov?”

“What does scarceness mean?” He asks without a trace of irony; I roll my eyes at him.

“What I mean”, I explain with simpler words, “is that the Romanovs are all bloodsuckers.”

“Oh!” he exclaims. “Yes!” He starts laughing.

“I only wish their stuck-up bitch of a mother would have been here to wear only one set of clothes”, I say. “I heard from comrades that worked at Ekaterinburg that she liked to complain.” I turn over to watch their reactions about the way I talked about her mother. Olga is wiping a tear from her eye, and the boy is pouting at us with a frown on his face, I laugh out loud after showing Roman what I have achieved.

“Unlike Nicholas the bloody, that guy didn’t like to complain”, I continue. “I bet I could have entered his chambers to have a good time with his wife and he wouldn’t have complained, she already fucked Rasputin anyway.” I look back and can’t contain my joy when I find Olga covering her brother’s ears, disgust showing on her face.

“I wonder when they are going to follow their bloodsucking father and mother to the wall, they don’t deserve to breathe a day more after an entire life of luxury and banality sucked from the hard work of the people”, I say after a few minutes, and I look back to see their reactions; to my great disappointment, Olga is distracted looking at the port we are approaching and the boy is resting on her shoulder, looking at the sky like a retard. I grunt, I feel like I have liquid hatred running through my veins instead of blood.

Finally, we arrive on the port, where we will board our steamer, The Promise, and travel to Moscow through the Kama river first and then through the Oka.

Me, Roman, and the two Chekists get off the carriage while Olga struggles to pick up her brother, how could she not? She is so slim, which is a pretty sight but not much use for anything else; she is also carrying both hers and her brother’s clothes, which doesn’t help. Finally, one of the Chekists takes him away from her arms, the boy screams in surprise and then, almost instantly, starts sobbing. He stretches his arms towards Olga, keeps crying, makes a scene, and Olga stays near him, holding his hand while the Chekist carries him, but that doesn’t seem to shut him up, it is a shame that pretty girl’s only use will be to nurse that brat for what is left of her life. The Chekist doesn’t listen to his whims and keeps carrying him to our ship, he was a true professional, not a lackey to pampered children.

We were taught that spoiled baby was chosen by God himself to govern over us, please! He is 13 years old and still making such fuss about not getting his way. What does that pampered coddled brat know about anything of real life? What could he possibly know about ruling a country? When I was his age I worked fulltime on a factory, essentially raising my two younger brothers because my wicked mother didn’t give a damn about us, she most definitely wouldn’t have held my hand while my supervisor beat me when I did something wrong, let alone if he simply carried me. Olga is truly a pathetic little creature, following her pathetic weakling and annoying brother to a possible
death, why would she do that? He is going to die anyway whether they shoot him or not. She probably feels righteous and superior for making such a choice, that is the only explanation I can find. I really think that is the reason, she is a proudful woman who probably thinks little of anyone who isn’t her aristocratic family, I know that because of the haughty expression she uses with everyone. Seeing her work with the maid didn’t fool me, she probably thinks the maid should be grateful and her siblings even speak to her, she probably does it to feel righteous and superior too.

We board the steamer and accommodate our belongings in our cabins, each of us has one except for Olga and Alexei, who share one because we were only expecting him. The steamer sails at 9 a.m.

It surprises me to know the only people on board are us 4, the Romanovs, and the crew.

“Shouldn’t there be more security considering this is the former heir we are talking about?” I ask one of the Chekists once the 4 of us are in the common passenger quarters, sitting in the various furniture. Olga and Alexei are in their cabin.

“No at all”, he answers. “He can’t even walk, and his sister isn’t much trouble either, besides, all the members of the crew have also been ordered, under threat of ultimate penalty, to make sure none of them escape.” He is right, his importance doesn’t diminish the fact we don’t need that many armed men to prevent his escape.

“What is your name comrade?” The blue eyed Chekist who had carried the boy asks me.

“Paul”, I answer, “Paul Igorovich Tabakov, and this is comrade Roman Mitrofanovich Ustinov”. I signal to my friend.

“I am Volya Illarionovich Kapustin”, the blue-eyed man says, then he points at the other Chekist, the one who had explained to us the lack of armed men. “And this is Nosan Solomonovich Kacherovsky.”

“Do any of you want a cup of coffee?” Nosan asks, “I can have the crew bring it for you”.

The Chekists didn’t seem so bad or dull after all, while having a cup of coffee, they told us a lot of interesting stories about the Cheka back in Moscow, where we were heading. They told us about all the counterrevolutionaries they had caught and shot, and when Roman asked, they told him the leather jackets they were wearing were popular among the Chekists, but not part of any official uniform.

Apparently, liquor was implicitly sanctioned as long as it didn’t impair you from your duty, they were also fond of a white substance you were supposed to snort through your nose, they even gave us some of it to try and told us they had brought five bottles of vodka to drink slowly through the journey.

“Can you inform the Romanov citizens dinner is ready?” Volya asks me while preparing to eat in the small dining room.

“Sure!” I say, and I turn over to Roman, talking in a low voice. “Come with me, let’s hear what they talk about when no one is listening”.

“How can we hear if no one is listening?” He asks.

“I mean,” I explain, frustrated, “when they think no one is listening”.

“Oh!” He exclaims, “Yea!”

Roman and I position our ears outside the cabin to listen, I have to shut Roman up a bunch of times because he wouldn’t stop talking, making the listening next to impossible. Finally, I hear their voices, I recognize some of the prayers. I concentrate to make sure they are not saying anything else.
“They are praying”, Roman states the obvious, I sigh.

They are just praying indeed, pathetic, but of course they are, they are like coddled children still believing fairytales, and there is no place for those superstitions, or the people who believe them, in this new world; I recent their idiocy. I am also disappointed, I thought they would be saying or doing something more interesting, like maybe talking about how to escape. Scaring them by storming into the cabin in the middle of their plotting conversation would have been fun, but thinking it through, mocking their faith would also be fun.

“I want you to promise me something”, I hear the former heir say after they finish their prayers, maybe this will become interesting after all.

“What is it darling?” Olga says in an annoyingly corny voice.

“If they ever execute me and you make it out alive, you will tell the sisters I was brave”, Alexei says. “I want you to tell them I trusted God, and was excited to meet papa and mama again, and didn’t cry, tell them I even laughed, I don’t want them to be sad. Promise you will do it even if I do cry or feel scared.” I have to step away from the cabin door so they can’t hear me chuckling, Roman also laughs. That was so mawkishly sentimental and sugary I felt nauseous, it also made me regret the fact I will have to return to Perm after we leave them in Moscow, which means I will not be able to make sure he does cry during the entire process if he is indeed executed.

I press my ear against the cabinet door as soon as I can to hear how Olga reacts.

“…understand baby”, I catch her midsentence. “But the sisters deserve to know the truth and be there with you even if it is just in imagination, they will not judge you if you cry, papa also had a great faith in God, but he still felt anguish the few seconds before he was told he would be shot, I felt it in his voice, especially because the death sentence was really vague, making him think they were going to kill us too.”

“But if you tell them I cried you will make them sad”, he replies in a whiny voice. Is this kid really almost 14?

“We will feel sad if you die no matter how, baby, the same way you would feel if any of us died,” Olga says, why is she taking that kid seriously? Why is she so stupid and patient with his embarrassing requests? “Whether we died the bravest way imaginable or peeing our pants with fear”. Both siblings start laughing when Olga says that, and then the laughter continues. I decide to open the door, Olga is tickling Alexei under his arms, they are laughing even though they have tears in their eyes. When I enter the cabin, she stops the tickling, startled.

“That new fact about bloody Nicholas dying like whimp was interesting”, I say to her. “I wish I had been there to watch”.

“Watch? I wish I had pulled the trigger myself!” Roman adds.

“He shouldn’t have been shot though”, I continue. “He should have died in a more painful way, like burned alive.”

“Or skinned alive!” Roman exclaims. Me and Roman continue talking in front of them about the possible ways we could have gotten rid of the tyrant in excruciating detail, we even act out the possible scenarios.

We both roar with laughter, especially when we pay close attention to their faces. The boy has a dejected look, his lip starts trembling while we talk in a failed attempt not to burst into tears again. Olga looks at me with a very serious expression as she pulls her sobbing brother into her arms. Like that last time on the carriage, she doesn’t seem to have a strong reaction, but now I am at least sure she has heard everything I said. I am still annoyed though, that prideful and pampered woman deserves to suffer for her unearned and privileged existence, it frustrates me to no end that she is able to keep her composure, pride and dignity, she doesn’t have the right to keep them.
“Diner is ready, by the way”, I say. She doesn´t react.
“Roman, take the boy to the dining room, and you can starve if you want”, I say the last sentence
directly to her. The boy starts screaming and struggling when my friend goes to pick him, this time
his outburst is worse than it was when Volya carried him.

“I will be right here,” Olga says in the same corny tone of voice while getting up and following my
friend. “Calm down”.

Olga helps her brother eat so she takes a lot of time finishing her own food, how she didn´t thank
God and stay in Perm when the Chekists came for that baggage is beyond me. I didn´t insult them
while dining because I didn´t know how the Chekists would react. While Olga is still finishing her
food, one of the crew members comes into the dining room.

“I am sorry”, the sailor says. “But we are going to have to stop, we are having some technical
difficulties with the steam turbine”.

We go ashore in a small village kilometers away from Kambarka, the crew of The Promise stay on
the ship, one of the sailors tells us they may need the entire night to fix the steamer.

Volya and Nosan take all their vodka and cocaine with them and keep it in their bags. At first they
were so mad at the crew members for the technical difficulties they threatened to shoot them at
some point, which even I considered excessive. They finally saw the good side of it and decided to
use their stay in the village as an opportunity to relax.

Roman carries the boy again, this time he remains still, but he looks pale, and his eyes are open
wide. Olga takes his hand again as Roman walks with him.

Nosan tells Olga and Alexei that we are going to spend the night with a family of peasants and
warns them not to reveal to any of them their identity, otherwise he will be forced to shoot the
peasants. It is very fun to watch their appalled reactions. I don´t think they genuinely care about the
peasants; they have simply been told from birth they are part of their property, and they don´t want
anyone destroying their property.

Volya knocks on the door of one of the many wooden farmhouses and is greeted by a typical old
peasant woman wearing a handkerchief around her hair, her old husband is behind her, also
wearing the typical peasant clothes, boots and everything. They both look quite healthy and fat,
disgusting; they probably own more land than they need, and I can see from here they also own
many farm animals and even three horses, the revolution needs to arrive soon to this corner of
Siberia.

“Good afternoon”, Volya tells the old babushka. “Me and my comrade are from the All-Russian
Extraordinary Commission, and we are going to need temporary lodging for 6 people in your
house, just for one night.” The babushka´s eyes open wide.
“But we don´t have rooms for so many people!” She exclaims.
“Rooms will be shared”, Volya takes out his Nagant revolver and makes sure the woman sees it,
but he doesn´t point it at her. “Now if you will excuse us”. Volya slightly pushes the old woman
aside and we all enter the house. There is a young man without an arm, no older than 18, sitting in
the living room, probably their grandson who was injured during the war; he looks at us with
curiosity.

Roman lets the former heir sit on one of the wooden chairs and Olga sits near him, Olga and Alexei
seem content enough to be able to be around anyone other than their jailers, they immediately start
talking in a friendly manner with the veteran; truly pathetic, their bloody father and his bloody
imperialist war are the reason he doesn´t have an arm, they just like to pretend it isn´t. The former
soldier is an effeminate looking and sounding man, disgusting. Talking to that effeminate man makes the Romanovs look at ease, I am not happy about that.

There are two rooms in the house, me and the Chekists agree that the muzhiks should all sleep in one room, separated from us and the prisoners in the other one; we don’t know whether they have any monarchist sympathies, or if they will recognize Olga and Alexei from newspaper pictures, or even worse, let them escape.

It suddenly occurs to me that there is only one bed in the room, the Chekists say the muzhiks have enough blankets for all, but most of us will have to sleep on the floor. I didn’t mind sleeping on the floor, I became used to it since childhood, but the thought of Olga having to sleep on the floor warms me up.

The Romanovs and the muzhiks continue talking while Roman, Nosan, Volya and me begin drinking, playing cards and snorting cocaine, something I am beginning to like. I am pleasantly surprised to hear Nosan and Volya start talking about women, the ones they have fucked and the ones they want to, the alcohol has really loosened them up.

The old woman is becoming visibly upset about our drinking and the things we are talking about, I also look over to Olga to see if she is upset, I want her to be, but she is actively trying her best not to let any of our talks bother her, and she is unfortunately succeeding, she seems more worried about covering her brother’s ears when the subjects she deems inappropriate come. The most she does to show she is upset is cross herself a few times.

I don’t realize how much we have been drinking until I see we only have one and a half bottles left.

“I think you have had enough of that”, the woman says, approaching us. “There is a young lady here and that behavior isn’t appropriate”.

“You either shut up and prepare us something to eat or I will spread your brains all over that floor!” Volya yells, this time he does point his revolver at her, he is visibly drunk.

The woman immediately runs away from us to the kitchen, her husband follows her, concerned. Now Olga and her brother look scared and appalled again, good. I smirk and blink at Olga, but she is, as usual, avoiding meeting my gaze and doesn’t notice me doing that, I burn up with rage, how dare she? Does she even know it is not within her rights anymore to look down on us? The veteran also looks infuriated Volya threatened his mother or grandmother, but he doesn’t say anything.

The veteran uses his good arm to help Olga carry Alexei to one of the rooms upstairs when our talks about women are about to become explicit for the first time.

“Stuck up bitch!” Nosan screams at her loudly just before they are out of sight. “She needs someone to cheer her up and fix that wooden face!” The four of us cackle with laughter.

“That woman reminds me of the wife of an officer we arrested for hiding weapons”, Volya says. “We suspected he was going to use them to arm rogue groups opposed to us; anyway, the woman came to us begging for her husband’s release, she was one of those stuck up bourgeois women, the church type. I told her we would release her husband if she slept with all the members of our local Cheka, otherwise we would shoot him that same morning, you should have seen her face!”

“Well, did she?” Roman asks, excited.

“Of course, she did!” Nosan proclaims. “I was there! She didn’t stop crying and asking for forgiveness before, during and after, you should have seen it, hilarious!” That is what true, revolutionary vengeance really looks like; that, right there, is what the working class taking the power really is, not commander Antonovich’s stupid rules.

“How did the husband react?” I ask, interested.

“We really should have told him”, Nosan regrets. “We shot him the morning after it happened, we
kind of forgot about it.”

Nosan and Volya are even less serious than I originally imagined. I am no longer afraid of them.

“We should fix her wooden face”, I suggest. Just in that moment the married couple of muzhiks
enter the dining room with the food.

I can barely contain my excitement when I climb up the stairs. Roman and I were told to go first
because it had all been our idea, we stop before the door of the room where light is coming out of.
Youthful giggles can also be heard. I open the door; the laughter becomes a woman´s terrified
scream. Inside we find Olga, Alexei and the former soldier playing some sort of board game while
sitting on the floor in front of the bed, the light is coming out of a kerosene lamp on a table further
on the right from them. Olga is finally looking at me, her lips are parted by startlement. I enjoy in
her terror without saying a word. In a few seconds she recovers and stands up.

“What is it?” She asks politely but with firmness, her confidence would have angered me before,
but now I am soothed by the fact I have the upper hand.
“I decided this is going to be my room as well, what is it with you?” I reply. Olga looks at me and
then at the soldier, she is scared and confused.

I pull out my revolver and point it at the former soldier.

“I am hungry, go fetch me bread and meat”, I order him. He hesitates for an instant, fearing leaving
Olga and her brother alone, but fear wins at the end and he leaves. Olga walks towards him, as if to
follow him downstairs.
“Stay here”, I order before she steps outside, touching her shoulder with the revolver. Olga goes
back into the room with her eyes wide open and sits back on the floor with her brother, I sit next to
them and observe. They don’t look very similar unless they have the same haughty expression on
their faces; they also have the same gap in their front teeth, something I noticed when they were
laughing back in the cabin. I use my memory to see if they look like any of their siblings back in
Perm. I become annoyed it was her, and not one of her two middle sisters, who decided to come.

Tatiana and Maria are the most beautiful ones, especially Tatiana, who is just as haughty as Olga,
Tatiana had also been really condescending towards me when her bratty siblings hit my forehead, I
would have preferred her. Even Anastasia would have been preferable, she isn’t as pretty as Olga,
but she is the one I hate the most, the one who had made me look like a fool twice, Anastasia
would definitely have been my choice out of the four.

Olga is still beautiful though, she has a round face, up turned nose, high cheekbones, light blue
eyes, rosy cheeks, and dark blonde hair reaching her shoulders, almost light brown. Alexei is
nothing special, a tall and skinny teenager with dark auburn hair who has probably not even
reached puberty yet. I like the sensation of having him in my power, he will finally pay for taking
out his childish boredom on me, that injury had given me headaches last night.

“How old are you Alexei?” I ask him.
“Four…teen years old”, he says unsurely. Liar! His birthday is in two weeks at least, he is still 13,
but is so scared of me he is trying to make himself feel older; I chuckle, feeling proud of myself.
“Did you serve in the army?” I ask him.
“Yes”, he says shyly. “More less”.
“What rank?”
“Lance corporal”.
“Lance corporal!” I mock. “Lance corporal, just like me! How did you rise up to that rank? How
many Germans did you kill?”
He doesn’t answer, he just looks down at his hands, I grab his shirt lightly to get his attention. “I
killed one by bayoneting him through the skull, see?” I say, pointing at the still open forehead wound he inflicted on me yesterday. “He looked a lot like you, actually, but that makes sense since he had the same German blood you got from your whore mother. It was hard to do, getting the bayonet through the bone, but once I got to the brain it was way easier, do you want me to show you?” I touch his forehead harshly with my index finger while saying this, I am glad to see he is holding back tears.

“Stop bullying him! He is just a kid! What is wrong with you?” His sister angrily exclaims. She has dared to speak, and seems even more upset than the boy, probably because I dared to insult that German bitch. I don’t care anymore, she won’t be speaking much in a while, I don’t even acknowledge her existence.

“Have you ever even killed a man? Any man?” I ask the boy again. “No”, Alexei answers with a sudden rush of confidence, this time he looks straight into my eyes, his tears have been successfully held back. “Not yet”, the former heir adds with a slight attempt at bravado. He keeps looking straight into my eyes and gives me an intense hate filled glare, a glare that reminds me of his mother’s glare, the glare she used when photographed for official pictures back when she was still the empress, they even share the same haughty expression. You will suffer too somehow, I will make sure of that, you little pompous, stupid brat. You can’t even use a fork. “You are not a soldier”, I state, and then I spit at his face, he is startled and disgusted by the spit, but not incredibly upset, he cleans his face with his hands. “And you? How old are you?” I ask, turning towards Olga. At first it seems like she isn’t going to answer, but then she changes her mind. “Twenty-two”, she says.

“Gee, gee… The entire family knows how to count!” I say. “Are you a virgin Olga?” “Of course I am!” She replies, offended by the fact I dared to ask such question. Frigid little bitch, she thinks she is better than me because of that, I grow even more eager than before. I stretch my hand to grab one of her breasts and I squeeze it as hard as I can. Olga immediately stands up in a jump while screaming frantically. After seeing how upset his sister becomes, the little brother leans towards me and punches my stretched arm repeatedly with his fists and palms, throwing a hissy fit until I put my arm back. Nothing could have pleased me more.

I stand up, take the boy by the collar of his shirt with one hand and quickly throw one strong punch at each side of his face with the other before putting him back on the ground, his lower lip is broken and starts bleeding. As I had already imagined, Alexei is weak, he screams and immediately starts crying, covering his face with his hands.

“Leave him alone!” Olga yells, then she holds both her hands together in pleading. “Please leave us both alone!”

The soldier comes back, carrying on his one hand a plate full of meat and bread, he becomes pale when he sees Alexei covering his face with his hands and sobbing. He leaves the plate on the table where the lamp is and approaches Alexei, he gently takes the boy’s hands away from his face to take a look at him, one of his cheeks is starting to get swollen. The soldier seems relieved it isn’t worse. I feel disappointed, I was hoping the soldier would burst into a rage, what a killjoy. Olga also goes to comfort her brother and crosses herself when she sees his broken lip.

I take a piece of bread and start eating it. Roman, who has been standing at the doorway and chuckling occasionally at my comments, enters the room and starts eating with me. An idea comes to me; I purposely drop a piece of meat on the floor, about a meter away from me.

“Pick it up”, I say. The veteran gives me one angry look, but he sets out to do it. “Not you”, I tell him, and then I look at Olga. “Her”. Olga hesitates, I give her a death stare and she
nods. When Olga gets closer to the piece of meat and leans to pick it up I grab one of her ankles, right under her skirt, and very slowly creep my grasp up her leg, Olga stays still, paralyzed by fear. I notice the soldier walking out of the room.

When my hand reaches her knee, Olga tries to push me away, but I slap her with all my strength before she can. She places her hands on her cheek and starts screaming. I slap her just as hard again and she starts crying.

I see the boy move again; it is what I was waiting for. I push Olga aside, using more strength than needed, she falls to the floor. Alexei stands up like he had done in Perm, back when I insulted his sister for being an insufferable clown, he limps towards me pathetically as fast as his legs allow him to and then uselessly tries to hit me over and over again, like a deer attacking a hunter. I avoid most of his weak attacks and then punch him in the stomach, I throw him to the floor and he lands on both his hands, I kick one of his outer thighs, then one of his knees, which makes him scream loudly in pain. It is exciting, but not nearly as exciting as hitting her.

“Watch out!” Roman yells at me when I am about to kick the boy a third time, I turn around and see the veteran is about to throw himself at me, wielding a knife; this takes me by surprise, as I did not expect such display of bravery on that effeminate cripple. I won’t be able to take my revolver out on time, so I just raise my hands to protect myself. I think, horrified, about how he will kill me before my moment of triumph.

I hear a gunshot before the knife reaches my throat, the cripple has been shot from the back by Volya, the bullet has gone through the soldier’s back and landed on the wooden bed, dangerously close to Alexei, who starts screaming even more loudly. Olga also screams with her brother. The one-armed man collapses on the floor on his stomach, but he is still alive, I take the knife from his hand and turn him over in order to finish him off with it. The old peasants climb up the stairs after hearing the gunshot, the man looks horrified at the corpse while the woman starts screaming and crying.

“Misha!” She grieves while she bends over to touch his grandson’s body, the old man tries to attack Volya. Two more gunshots are heard after; Nosan has shot the old peasants too. The Romanovs keep screaming, the gunshots have scared both badly.

“Do you need help with anything?” Nosan asks.
“Let’s get the bodies outside the room”, I answer.

I grab Olga by the hair and try to undress her while my other three friends watch. When she starts fighting back, Volya and Nosan help me to keep her still by grabbing her by an arm each; I use the bloodied knife to tear off all her clothes while she struggles, cries and screams, unable to move, the hardest part is ripping off the corset. Volya and Nosan let her go once she is completely naked; she desperately tries to cover her nakedness with her hands, her vulnerability is exciting, her embarrassment is even more exciting.

I bring her closer towards me and touch the parts of the body she is trying to cover unsuccessfully. Her tears flow freely and constantly. Volya and Nosan jeer. She tries to push me away by slapping, hitting and kicking me. I grab her by the shoulders and shake her up with force to stop the resistance, but that only makes it worse.

“Please! Don’t do this! Mercy! Mercy!” She begs without stopping her struggle, I beam with joy at her lack of composure, pride and dignity. I have succeeded.

“Pray I don’t do it!” I bark at her mockingly in response to her pleas, then I bite her shoulder until I feel the taste of blood, she cries out in pain.

“The boy is standing up again”, Roman notices.
“Grab him”, I ask Roman, he grabs Alexei and immobilizes him in front of us.

I push Olga into the floor with the same force I used before, but this time she falls on her back, she is left without air and struggles to breathe. I pull my pants down and show myself to her, she looks truly horrified and crawls back away from me while screaming hysterically. My comrades’ jeers grow stronger than ever.

“Bring the boy here, closer”, I order Roman, “I want him to watch everything.” For some reason the idea of doing it in front of him appeals to me enormously. Roman also seems to love the idea, as I can tell by his smirk. Volya and Nosan also yell excitedly in support for the idea.

Roman brings Alexei closer and forces him to kneel down, the boy yelps in pain when his knees touch the floor. I show him what I had shown her sister previously, he opens his eyes wide in dismay, then he expresses disgust.

I kneel on the ground and start trying to separate her legs, she starts moving and struggling, and when she notices what I am trying to do, she closes her legs more tightly than ever. I let myself fall on her body, trying to submit her by force, but Olga keeps resisting and only grows more stubborn when I start punching her in the face, in the arms, touching the bite wound on her shoulder, I even pick her up at one point and give her a good beating all over her body with my fists and the handle of the revolver, the Chekists try to offer assistance but I rebuff them firmly, my pride is being wounded. When I push her back into the floor again she only keeps struggling and moving, always making sure to shut her legs with the little strength she has left. I threaten to shoot her more than once, but it doesn’t make a difference, she keeps struggling with the exact same intensity. Suddenly a fun idea occurs to me.

“Cut the lobule of the boy´s ear, Volya”, I say.

Olga stands still.

“No!” She wails with a very raspy voice after so much screaming. “Leave him alone! Don’t hurt him anymore!”

“Then open your fucking legs!” I yell.

Olga keeps staring at me with horror in her eyes, sickened by the disturbing choice she is being forced into. I am truly enjoying her suffering; this is even better than I imagined.

Volya approaches the boy, who is wailing in fear, with the knife on his hand. The boy tries to move but Roman keeps his head still. Volya quickly cuts the lobule of his left ear without much trouble before giving Olga much time to decide. He screams in pain, blood pours out of his small wound, the small piece of ear falls on Olgas chest.

“What can we cut next?” I say mockingly.

“Stop!” Olga cries. “I’ll do it!” She opens her legs and stays unmoving and tense, with her eyes closed shut. I look at her terror, enjoying it for a moment. I turn my head over to the others. Alexei watches the scene horrified and choking with sobs.

“Your turn will come comrades”, I say.

We took turns on her for about an hour. She chickened out the first time with me when it proved to be more painful than she originally imagined, as I could tell by the way she crawled back. She screamed for mercy when she wasn’t crying out in pain. When it was not my turn I made sure the boy didn’t look away or close his eyes by touching the wound on his ear if he did, which made him yelp with pain. It was fun at first to hear him scream blue murder at us or whimper when his sister
´s cries became particularly loud or one of us was too rough with her. I eventually became bored of his predictable reactions and focused solely on his sister, but once in a while I looked back at him out of curiosity, only to find him sobbing in the corner with his eyes closed shut, covering his own ears because there is no one available to do it for him.

Chapter End Notes

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:
- Short comments, including emojis.
- Long comments, with no limits.
  _ Questions
  _ Constructive criticism
  _ Reader-reader interaction
  _ Comments in only one chapter.
  _ Comments in more than one chapter.
This author replies to comments, but if you don't want a reply, for whatever reason (for example, shyness), feel free to sign your comment with the Word "whisper" and I will appreciate the comment just the same but not respond.
The siberian woods.

Olga.
The first thing I feel when I wake up is a hand, gently touching my face. My head hurts so bad. Wherever I am smells like vomit. All I can hear besides the ringing of my ears is loud snoring, and a voice, closer to me. It is also raining outside.

“Please be alive, please make her be alive, please God”, someone says, weeping, it is my brother.

Everything hurts, it was not a dream. I take a few seconds to accept that fact without dwelling too much on it and I open my eyes, my eye, one of my eyes is so swollen I can’t open it. But wait, where are they? Will they keep going? I jump and scream, sitting up and looking around; pain intensifies throughout my body when I do that, especially through my spine. My sight is blurry, I can’t see much, but I realize it is only us two in the room.

The light from the kerosene lamp is still there, but it is dimmer.

“Shh, shh”, my brother tries to quiet me, putting his index finger on his mouth. “You are going to wake them up”, I stop screaming. His right cheek is horribly swollen, his left earlobe is still bleeding, he uses one of his hands to press the wound tightly, his neck is filled with blood coming from it.

“Where are they?” I ask with whatever is left of my raspy voice.

“They all went downstairs to eat after they finished”, Alexei whispers with sadness; he wipes away his tears with his free hand now that he sees I am alive. “I think they are sleeping”. I look at myself, I am covered with the peasant clothes of a woman, but I don’t have them on properly. I use them like a blanket to cover myself up.

“I thought you might like to have something to put on once you woke up”, Alexei says shyly, I can tell from his voice he feels a bit ashamed about something, and then he points towards the door. “I took it from her body, outside, she is death”. Hearing him say that makes me emotional for the first time, he shouldn’t have to be taking clothes from the corpses of murdered old ladies in order to make sure his sister has something to wear after her rapists ripped all her clothes off. I remember we left out other set of clothes in the cabin of the steamer.

“Thank you”, I tell him. I am not sure I agree with what he did, but knowing my brother I can tell he has no malicious intent, then I become worried about something else.

“They didn’t stop or hurt you when you went outside to get the clothes?” I ask, worried.

“No, no”, he reassures me touching my good shoulder for comfort, which makes me flinch, he sees that and quickly pulls away his hand from me as fast as if he had been burnt on a stove. “They are all asleep, I think, besides, they are downstairs, and the body is right outside upstairs.”

I feel a ridiculous amount of nausea and have to crawl to the corner to empty my stomach, for the second time today.

“What happened to me?” I ask after I finish, referring to how I became unconscious, I am unfortunately aware of everything else.

“You didn’t react after one of them punched you too hard”, he says, slowly loosing composure through the sentence, his voice breaks after the last two words.
“They kept going for a while and then left you there”, he whispers, weeping. “I thought you were dead.” I start crying too, I can’t believe this actually happened to me. I turn away from Alexei to start putting on the old peasant’s clothes, he covers his eyes and turns the opposite way. Nudity wouldn’t have bothered him or me much before, me and my siblings weren’t that modest when it was only us or our parents around, but now I felt thankful for the privacy.

I slowly stand up in order to get dressed, my entire body hurts, but not as bad as it hurts sharply down there, blood is running down my thighs. I have to sit again for a while, standing up is painful, taking a step, no matter how small, is even more so. I try again and I feel like I lose balance, the room spins, and my head hurts almost as much as the parts that are bleeding. After a third try I manage so stand up and get dressed, the pain is there, but more manageable. I feel nauseous again for a minute, but I don’t throw up this time.

The red sarafan dress and the white linen shirt underneath are too big for me, and I have nothing to wear as clean undergarments, but they will be useful for now, I look for my shoes, they were fortunately not too badly damaged when they took them off, I can still wear them. I fear they will come back again, I couldn’t bear it one second more, the though makes me sob, that would destroy the small pieces of dignity I have managed to recover in these last 15 minutes or so.

After I am dressed, I sit down next to my brother and we stay crying without talking under the dimming light of the lamp, listening to the rain, the snores of the men downstairs and each other’s crying sounds. Alexei tries to hug me at one point, but I flinch at his touch and he pulls back, I feel bad about it, but I can’t help it.

I know it was extremely naïve and stupid on my part, but deep down I genuinely had the feeling me and my sisters were exempt from this; not from murder, but exempt from this. The possibility was always a serious concern on my mind though, especially the moment right after our parents died, and before that, when we were travelling on the Rus, forced to keep our cabin doors unlocked, but I felt it was impossible for it to actually happen. I couldn’t fathom the idea of men who were truly capable of doing it, as if they existed only on stories mothers use to scare young girls out of going out unescorted. Surely no one can be so evil in real life, surely not. I couldn’t help but remember the days when I was a little girl studying English history, I had told Miss Eagar that people were much better now than they used to be, and that I was glad I lived in an era when people were so kind, I would trade anything to go back to those times. Throughout the journey, when Tabakov kept staring at me like that, I kept repeating to myself that it just couldn’t happen, not to me.

I hate myself for thinking like this, but for the first time in my life I feel like God truly has abandoned me. At least when my parents were murdered God answered my prayers for our deaths not to be like our maid’s death, God answered my prayers for them to spare my brother as well, God answered my prayers for me and my sisters not to be defiled, God answered my prayers for us to be taken to a place where we were treated better and had more freedom to go outside, God even answered my prayers to bring my siblings some comfort over the loss. Tonight God hadn’t answered any of my prayers; God didn’t answer my prayers when I begged him to make my suspicions about Tabakov wrong, God didn’t answer my prayers for them to stop bullying us, God didn’t answer my prayers for them to spare me, God didn’t answer my prayers when I begged for them to stop.

I don’t even feel like praying to ask him for comfort, I feel like I am not even worthy of doing it anymore. The thought makes me start choking with sobs. I feel like I have done something wrong, like a deadly sin, even though the rational part of my mind knows it is a stupid thought.

I am glad it was me and not any of my younger sisters though, I am glad it wasn’t Tatiana.
Maybe God knew I that, maybe he had allowed me to drink from my own cup of poison to save my sisters and my brother, the same way Jesus had drunk his to save humanity. If going through it all again could protect any of my sisters from having to experience the same thing, or protect Alexei from further harm, I would.

Some part of my mind feels disgusted, I scold myself internally for daring to compare my defilement to Christ´ś ultimate sacrifice on the cross; another part of me defends the comparison fiercely. Tonight, I had suffered in a way I thought was impossible to suffer, more than I ever had in my life. Mother used to say that suffering brough us closer to God, I wish she was still here with me to comfort me and assure me that God accepts my kind of suffering. What would she say if she was here? Would she scold me for not taking even more precautions? For not leaving the room when I had the chance? Would she be proud of me for saving Alexei? Would she defend my comparison?

I miss her for the first time, she seems further away now than ever, I also miss my father´s kind smile and our interesting talks, but I am glad he isn´t here to blame himself for what had happened. I miss them for the first time because now I know we will be apart for a really long time. I won´t go with them any time soon, as much as I want to. I need to protect my brother, who is not only my brother, he is my godson, my spiritual child, I was there when he was baptized, he is my responsibility now.

I look over at Alexei. He keeps holding his ear, his left lobule is still bleeding and it probably won ´t stop any time soon, it must be due to his illness; he needs medical attention before he loses too much blood, but I don´t think any of the men will help us, and even if they do, I am terrified of waking them up.

They were so drunk they didn´t even care they had been ordered to take the heir safely to Moscow, they had murdered innocent people in cold blood right in front of us, they are absolutely unpredictable, they cannot be reasoned with. I go to the corner where all the ripped pieces of my clothes are, and I take one to use as a bandage. I suddenly consider I need something to disinfect his wound, but I am too scared to go down to see whether the men succeeded in drinking all the bottles.

I take a look at him again, his face is filled of pain and he is using his other hand to rub his already previously swollen knee, where he had also been kicked, he had limped with those legs to get clothes for me; it doesn´t matter if I am scared, I need something to disinfect the wound, I wipe my tears and stand up to grab the lamp.

“Where are you going?” My brother asks me.
“I am going to clean your wound with one of their bottles”, I answer, I see him open his eyes in fear. “They will not wake up I promise” I am not sure whether they will wake up or not, though.

I slowly limp out of the room and pass over the bodies of the poor muzhiks, I feel sick to my stomach and angered when I see the body of Misha, who had tried to save us, he truly didn´t deserve his fate, he had told us about how he had lost his arm stepping in front of a friend who had gotten close to a grenade, God bless his selfless soul. He had tried to help us without even knowing our real names.

Downstairs I find a scene I would have considered comical if I wasn´t so scared. One of the men had fallen down the stairs in his drunkenness, his head was bleeding badly, it was the blond one, I don´t know if he is dead or only has a mild concussion like I probably do as well; maybe God is still on our side after all. I think sadly about how my Shvibzik would have loved to see this.

All the other men are passed out or sleeping and snoring, one on the floor, another one on the table,
and one in a chair. I walk among them shaking, my heart beating fast. To my great distress, the one
on the table, the one that had cut my brother’s lobule, is holding the last bottle of vodka, it is less
than half full. I pray to God for the first time after the rape for him not to wake up while I take the
bottle away from his hands, he makes a huge snoring sound that startles me, but he doesn’t wake
up. I slowly climb up the stairs again, every step is painful. I start considering the possibility of
escaping right after I bandage Alexei’s ear; the men are fast asleep, and there are three horses we
can use outside, the odds are in our favor.

When I get to the room I see my brother rubbing his knee more desperately while silently crying
because of the pain; my heart aches, this had to happen just when his knee was getting better.
Alexei had always shown everyone a false image of bravado, he was the perfect example of what a
typical boy was: rowdy, active, romping, misbehaved. Since he was a little kid he played war with
his toy soldiers and jumped around pretending to be one himself, he played with toy guns with us
and his limited number of friends around his age, mostly the sons of one of his sailor nannies, he
sang war songs while holding riffsles. When he went with father to Stavka, the high command of the
armed forces, he liked to eat what soldiers ate, watch parades and stand in guard like a real soldier
would. Whenever his pains started he always tried to hide them at first. But he is literally scared of
everything; he has been coddled all his life because of his terrible illness by mama, and to a certain
extent papa as well, he has never been allowed to play tennis or even ride a proper two wheeled
bicycle, and although he has indeed been disciplined, it has always been in a way gentler way than
me or any of my sisters were disciplined. When me, Masha, Nastya and him played with our toy
guns he would be the first one to leave the game because he would get scared of the sound the toy
guns made, he is easily scared by people who yell at him, and recently, back in the cabin of the
ship, he had confessed to me that being carried by anyone but Maria terrified him because it
reminded him of the way he had been recently carried by our parents´ murderer, who had then
proceeded to stitch his wounds without any anesthetic, he feared anyone who carried him wanted
to hurt him. And yet, today he had done everything he could for me, he had fought bravely with his
weak body against a healthy grown up much like David had done with Goliath, but without
succeeding, and for that he had been hit mercilessly.

We can’t put our trust on these men not to hurt us again, even if they decide not to do it, I know
they will kill my brother and probably me as well sooner or later, when we are no longer of any use
to them. God has given us a clear sign he wants us to escape by making it plausible.

“You are going to need to bite something, you can’t make any sound”, I tell my brother. “Use this
pillow”. I take a pillow from the bed and give it to him for him to bite, then I start cleaning his
wound on his ear and his broken lip with a ripped piece of my clothes, he manages to avoid making
much noise very well, but I give him a stern look when he makes more noise than usual. Then I tie
up his ear as tight as I can while he keeps biting hard. I toy with the idea of also cauterizing his
wound with the lamp, but I wouldn’t have known how to do it properly or which parts to use. I also
clean the bite wound in my shoulder, many times, I use what is left of the bottle. I check his legs,
especially the leg he tells me Tabakov kicked to take a look at the damage. The swelling on the
knee is pretty bad, I don’t know how many weeks it will take for him to be able to straighten that
knee, a swelling on his outer thigh is also beginning to form, he is going to have trouble using that
leg to ride the horse, but these are extreme circumstances, as soon as we are able to I will make
sure he rests.

“Listen”, I say to him after I am done, “we are going to escape”. He shakes his head and opens his
eyes.
“They are going to wake up and beat us!” He exclaims in a whisper, trying not to make much
noise.
“Not if we do it quickly and don’t make a sound; now, I know it is painful to limp so I am going to
help you, but I am going to need us to go down the stairs and then outside, we are going to ride the
“But I don´t even know how to ride without someone guiding the horse in front of me! And look at my hands! I won´t be able to hold the reins, I am going to fall off the horse!” He shows me his injured and stitched hands, they are beginning to scar a little, but they do cause him trouble while holding a fork and knife.

“You can do it, I have seen you try to grab the fork, you are not completely incapable, it is manipulating it what troubles you”, I say, sounding more sure than I actually am, the truth is I am not sure he will be able to, but this is a life or death situation. “Besides, you will use your legs more than your hands.” The last part is true. He pouts and looks very scared; his fear could ruin everything.

“But I don´t have enough strength on my legs Olenka! It is going to hurt! Can we escape on foot?” He asks. Is he joking? He can´t walk and I am almost unable to do it.

“If we escape on foot they will use the horses to follow us when they wake up and catch us in no time, riding gives us the advantage over them, besides, walking will also hurt you, I know you are not supposed to ride, I wouldn´t be asking this of you if we were not in so much danger.” I say. He still looks unsure.

“I don´t want to escape; they will kill us!” He whines. “And where are we going to go anyway?”

We stay silent.

“Go without me, it is me they want to kill and you they want to hurt, they won´t chase you if you go alone”, he says solemnly after a few seconds. I don´t buy his act, he is terrified of being alone, he also knows I would never leave him alone on my own free will, he is just too scared to escape and wants to convince me to abandon the idea, knowing what to say in order for me to do so, smart boy, but a little bit manipulative.

“Come”, I say to him as I wipe his tears, more as an order I give with my authority as an older sister than as a suggestion. I put his right arm around my neck, I grab the lamp and I help him limp downstairs, making sure he uses his bad knee as little as possible. We walk down the stairs.

There is one last thing I must do; I sit my brother in one of the wooden chairs.

“What are you doing?” He whispers, terrified, I look at him and put my index finger on my lips. I get closer to the man on the floor, Tabakov, and take the knife he had used to rip my clothes, it was laying near him. Then I carefully pull the revolver out of his belt. My brother watches me in awe.

We walk slowly out of the house, to my great surprise the sun hasn´t completely set yet, the sky is yellow and orange, it has stopped raining, but the grass is wet, I leave the lamp right outside the house, it will only make riding harder.

We walk next to the house, where the horses are being kept in the stable. I tell Alexei to lean on the walls outside the stable while I look at the weapons I have stolen.

I had previously been given a pistol by my father, but I was forced to give it up before we sailed for Ekaterinburg, I regret that a lot now, but I also wonder if it would have been of any use in this situation anyway, the men were also armed, after all.

This revolver is different, bigger, but it can´t be much harder to use. I examine the gun to deduce its correct use and make sure there are bullets, then I look at the knife. I understand we may need these weapons to defend ourselves out there, but the thought of shooting, or worse, stabbing anyone, even a man as wicked as Tabakov, makes my stomach turn, I don´t think even papa ever killed someone with his own hands; I don´t think I would ever be able to use any of them, but they may be useful to scare potential attackers away.

“What are we waiting for?” Alexei says. I go to Alexei and explain him the proper use of the revolver. I don´t have any pockets in my dress to keep it, so I put it on one of the pockets of his
sweater, it barely fits, but the sweater has a button and the pocket is big enough, so it doesn’t fall. I will grab it if we are ever in any danger. My dress has a ribbon you are supposed to tie around your waist, so I put the knife under the ribbon and tie it tightly.

“Stay here, I am going to saddle the horses”, I say, pointing to the saddles hung inside the stables, I will only saddle two of the horses. Saddling the horses was the hardest part, I had never done it by myself before, I felt impatient to leave already, but the horses didn’t know me, so I forced myself to be kind and patient to them, petting them gently and sweet-talking to them. If the rapists woke up that would be the end of it, I didn’t have a plan, I prayed they wouldn’t. I take out the first horse, a brown one, the one I consider the meekest.

“Mount, this one seems nice, it was the easiest to saddle”, I tell Alexei. “Use your good leg first and then lift the other, I will keep the horse still”. It took lots of coercing to get him to do it, he was afraid and considered himself unable to do it despite my repeated reassurances and help offerings, I was growing increasingly desperate, looking back and forward to see if they were following us. He finally did as I said hesitantly when I helped by grabbing his arm while he stepped on the stirrup with his relatively good leg, then he lifted his other leg and mounted the horse. I had to help him with one arm while keeping the horse still with the other, at the end I was completely exhausted. I may scold him for this later when we are out of danger. After he is on the horse I help him with the reins, he relaxes a bit and manages to keep the horse still.

I go for my horse and remember there are three of them, the men will probably steal horses from other peasants to follow us, but if I let the third horse go it may buy us some time, they won’t have any horses ready right outside. I take the horse out and let him go, it doesn’t run, but takes no time for it to wander off. Then I get the idea of putting the third saddle a little bit away from the stables, I don’t know if it will help much, but it is something.

I go for my horse and mount it, when I do I feel a terrible pain under by belly, but it passes. I had not ridden astride since I was a very small girl on a donkey, I was used to ridding side saddle, but the peasants don’t have a side saddle, I will have to improvise, I pray it isn’t too hard. I squeeze the horse gently with my calves, and it moves forward. At first we both rode the mares slowly away from the cottage through the village and into the fields, I decided not to wander too far away from the river. My heart was racing, the hardest part was over, that is, until riding inevitably caused Alexei another attack, but I couldn’t think about that right now.

Alexei seemed nervous to be riding a horse alone for the first time, I reassured him by staying close to him at all times. Over time he gained more confidence, we started galloping far away from the village and into the woods, the fresh air and the excitement about doing something as fun, dangerous and previously forbidden for him as escaping a bunch of violent villains while horseback riding seemed to make him forget about the pain for a while, he probably felt like this was an adventure like in the Hollywood silent films he watched.

I was glad for my brother, but I also worried the confidence would get to his head and he would do something stupidly dangerous, like he had done sledding down the stairs on Tobolsk. I scolded him harshly whenever he started going too fast. We keep riding.

It starts hurting again, sharp pains make me feel like it is happening all over again, I force myself not to remember with each gallop, trying to think instead of happier times, my 16th birthday, dancing, my sisters, riding bicycles with the little pair inside the palace, aunt Olga’s parties, my crush Mitya, snowball fights, my friends back in Petrograd... I look behind us, I can no longer see any trace of the village from here and my environment has been transformed, all I can see are huge green pine trees. I feel like I am truly safe from harm for the first time in months; I thank God, maybe he decided to give us these trials for a reason. I use my right hand to cross myself quickly
before putting it back on the reins. All my troubles disappear for a minute, I have escaped. I feel a rush of excitement at the prospect of having to make my own decisions on what to do next for the first time in my life.

The sound of a wolf howling in the distance brings me back to reality; I look around and acknowledge the fact we are now in the middle of the Siberian woods with only the far away sound of the water from the river to guide us, the sun is almost set and I have no plans for what to do next, where are we even going to sleep or eat? What are we going to feed the horses? Is that wolf near? Are there others around? We are in no way safe. Freedom comes with a huge price; a responsibility I am not sure I will be able to bear.

At least it is not winter.

We need to find another village soon, but where? I don’t know these woods; We keep galloping, the horses will get tired eventually, they have already slowed down.

“Where are we going?” Alexei asks next to me.

“We need to find another village”, I tell him. “The easiest way to do it, I guess, will be getting closer to the Kama river, there must be more villages there.” I fortunately do remember what direction to head in order to get closer to the river, and we have not ridden away from it, just parallel to it.

“No, I mean after that”, he says.

“I don’t know, it is too early to be worrying about things like that, you need to recover before we even think about traveling any further, we need to find some loyal people willing to take care of us, maybe after that we can ask someone to help us sneak into the closest city occupied by the white army, they will help us find a place to stay there.”

Alexei becomes excited.

“Yes!” He yells with enthusiasm. “And when we tell them about everything the reds have done to us they’ll ki…”

“Shut up!” I yell in anger; tears come back to my eyes. “Don’t ever mention anything that happened today ever again! To anyone! We will never tell anyone what they did! Never! Never! Never!” I start crying again. He is shocked by my outburst and doesn’t press the matter further.

We head closer towards the river and slowly start too cool down the horses by letting them walk around and relax. I get off mine when it stops breathing fast and her skin is no longer hot and sweaty, then I help Alexei get off his and sit on the grass, leaning on a tree. The horses then start eating the grass, one wanders towards the river, I am worried they will go too far away, but I know they need to rest. The sun has completely set at this point and it is extremely dark, the only source of light we have is the reflection of the waxing gibbous moon on the water. I sit next to Alexei; I hear another wolf howling; I am beginning to grow scared. My whole body is sore from all the horse riding, I can tell that my brother feels even worse than me.

“What do we do now Olenka?” Alexei asks me.

“Wait, let me think”, I say. We could make a fire, Alexei learned how to do them at Stavka, more less, but where would we get the firewood? And even if we succeed, what if the men are already looking for us and see the smoke?

My horse, walking near me, snorts and holds her head high. I feel something move near us, and I hear someone stepping on the grass, it is none of the horses. I slowly stand up and take the revolver from the pocket of Alexei’s sweater, he looks at me with fear in his eyes. I walk towards the trees from where I hear the sound, my mare is near me; suddenly a short peasant in his late forties with a long black beard, black boots and a kosovorotka shirt appears, I give a short scream
and jump, I drop the revolver in fear, even the horse seems frightened by my scream, how will I ever protect my brother like this?

“Who are you, young lady?” The peasant asks me; I sigh, relieved and I pick up the gun. “You don’t have to be afraid, what happened to your face?”
“We don’t have money, we don’t have anything!” I exclaim.
“Calm down! I just went out for a walk. My village is right over there”, he says calmly and signals with his index finger the direction. I almost faint with relief and cross myself, my mother always said peasants were the real Russians, loyal to the Tsar, and not like the revolutionaries from the cities, I hope she is right and this man helps us.
“My God!” I exclaim bringing my hand to my chest. “Why didn’t you say that before? I thought you were a bandit or something.” He seems offended by my assumption.

I see my brother has limped towards me after hearing the commotion.

“Sit down! Rest those legs”, I tell him, pointing at him with my finger, and he sits back on the grass slowly.
“I am sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you”, I say to the stranger. “I am the Grand Duchess Olga Nicholaevna Romanova, we have escaped imprisonment and have gone through horrible things, we are so scared right now, please forgive us, we need help, somewhere to stay, just for one night if you want.” I confess my identity without thinking, trusting my mother blindly about her faith in the goodwill of the average peasant, I am too afraid of staying the night outside in the woods to be suspicious about anyone.
“And that boy must be the heir, I imagine”, he says, pointing at Alexei, who nervously follows the conversation.
“Yes”, I answer. “Will you help us?”
“Do you honestly want me to believe you have no money?” He asks, my heart sinks, I no longer know if we can trust this man if he only cares about money, and I already gave him our identities.
“I swear!” I exclaim. “The reds took all our money and jewels away!”
“All right”, he gently replies. “If you are alone and without money you can spend the night at my house, my wife will be pleased to give you something to eat, and you can sleep in the granary.”
“We would be very grateful”, I say. “We can’t give you anything, because as I have said, we have no money, but we could come back someday and repay you.”
“For me that is enough”, the man answers. “My name is Pyotr, by the way”.

I get back on my horse and the man helps Alexei get on his after I put the revolver back in my brother´s pocket.

“Give me the reins”, Pyotr says, and we both do, he guides our horses through the forest until we arrive at his village. I thank God when I see that it isn’t the same village we left.

Pyotr´s wife hears us coming and gets out of the wooden house.

“I found this young man and woman alone in the woods, give them something to eat”, Pyotr tells his wife, then he helps Alexei dismount.
“Go ahead into the house”, Pyotr tells me after I am dismounted as well. “I will take care of the horses.” I was wrong about this man; he is nice after all.

Me and the woman carry Alexei into the house, a traditional Izba, that is smaller than the one we left, warm and cozy. There is only one big room with a big stove, no chimney; opposite from the stove there are lots of icons, canddles and embroidered towels, the table is also there, and a little girl, about 12 years old, is sitting on one of the chairs, working on some kind of embroidery; the woman helps me sit Alexei on a chair, then we also sit. The woman looks at me in a strange way.
“What happened to your face?” She asks me.
“We have gone through a series of trials”, I answer, she will probably figure it out by herself. “The people who did this may be looking for us right now.” I add that hoping they will let us stay for more than one night while Alexei recovers, I have started to notice he shows signs of pain again, now that the excitement is over.

“I see”, the woman says, she is in her late thirties, slim, and has dark hair and blue eyes, she later tells us her name is Uliana. Uliana gave us fish soup after telling us to use the pit latrines on the back of the house outside and leaves if we needed to relieve ourselves, she also gave us water to wash our hands. I could tell Alexei was uncomfortable about our humble lodgings and picky about the food, but fortunately he didn’t say anything and was polite at all times as always. This is a truly primitive part of the country, but it is how many peasants still live, I had read a lot about it before with interest, it but never experienced it firsthand. Uliana also told us they slept on the floor or on benches, and the stove kept them warm, they didn’t have any pillows and sometimes they slept on top of the stove, which I found fascinating. Alexei was already talking to the brunette girl, asking her what they did for fun in the village, I smiled.

“Is there anything else you need?” Uliana asks me.
“Yes please, is there any dress you can give me? This one is too big for me”, I tell her.
“I will see what I have”, she says.

The clothes she gave me fitted me very well, since Uliana was slim like me. This sarafan was blue, which may seem immature, but considering the circumstances it was a color I preferred more than red, she also gave me a white linen garments to wear underneath and a white headscarf. I changed while the little girl showed Alexei all the things she had made and tied up my knife in the new dress. I gifted Ulina the clothes I had in return, although I felt guilty, because they really weren’t mine. I talked with Uliana for a while more about their lives in the village, while Alexei listened to us attentively. Apparently they had lost 4 children in infancy and the little girl, also named Galina, was their only surviving child. I felt terrible for them, but I had read that unsanitary conditions and overcrowding in the Izbas where the cause of such high mortality rates. I told her about our escape from the reds and our true identity, but I didn’t mention what had happened today.

“I am going to take you to the granary”, Pyotr says when he arrives at last. I feel a bit annoyed, but try to hide it, Alexei was already trying to sleep on the floor near the stove, but the soreness on his legs didn’t allow him to, and I was so tired I wanted to do the same thing, but we are guests here, so I ask Pyotr if he can carry my brother.

“He is going to take us to the granary”, I tell Alexei. “Is it okay if he carries you?” He nods. He doesn’t resist or look scared this time when Pyotr carries him, he had also been taught by mama that peasants were usually loyal, so he must feel safe, or maybe he is just tired. I carry the lamp to illuminate our way.

“Take a look”, Pyotr says opening the door once we arrive at the granary. I lean forward to take a look, he takes the opportunity to quickly grab my lamp and the knife from my waist and push me inside roughly, he puts Alexei down inside the granary a lot more gently after he takes away the revolver, but then he shuts the door quickly and leaves without saying a word; I start trying to open the door as soon as he goes, it can’t be opened from the inside.

“What is happening??” Alexei screams.

We are locked up, I panic. Will he turn us over?

“Don’t move, stay laying on the grain”, I tell Alexei. I start hitting the wooden walls, the door, I explore the entire granary, searching for a weak point, searching on the floor for a way out, there is
“Why did he do that Olenka?” Alexei asks.
“I don’t know”, I answer, completely exhausted. The fear goes away, I am too tired to even think about anything. I pray to God it is all just a misunderstanding.
“We can’t get out”, I state while sitting on the floor, that is covered with straw. “We will be here until he lets us out, try to rest.” I keep praying in a low voice, I don’t understand how God could let us get away only to lock us again.

Alexei starts moaning in pain, the hemorrhage on his leg must be worse now, I lay with him and hug him for the first time after the incident, I pray it passes quickly. I fall asleep from exhaustion despite the horror I have gone through today.

Chapter End Notes

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:
- Short comments, including emojis.
- Long comments, with no limits.
- Questions
- Constructive criticism
- Reader-reader interaction
- Comments in only one chapter.
- Comments in more than one chapter.
This author replies to comments, but if you don’t want a reply, for whatever reason (for example, shyness), feel free to sign your comment with the Word "whisper" and I Will appreciate the comment just the same but not respond.
The sound of the granary door opening wakes me up from the nightmare I was having. I jump in startlement and start remembering where I am, then fear comes back: what is Pyotr going to do with us?

Because it is still dark, it takes me a second to see it is not Pyotr who opened the door, but his wife, Uliana, who carries a lamp on one hand and our revolver and knife on the other. Her daughter Galina stands beside her, with a big piece of bread and two cups in her hands. Alexei, who hasn’t even slept because of the pain in his leg, sits up as fast as he can, with fear evident in his tired eyes.

The little girl gives each one of us a cup of milk and then parts the bread in half for each of us, me and my brother look at each other with confusion, but we start eating and drinking the milk, she then goes back to the house. Uliana simply gives me back my weapons without saying anything, I start tying the knife back in my waist after finishing the bread and milk, then I put the gun back in Alexei’s pocket.

“You both need to get out of here”, Uliana says. “My husband is planning to ransom you back to the reds.” It is something I had suspected, but it still hurts to know that man’s kindness was false.

“Why?” I ask with tears in my eyes.

“The revolution is everywhere in the country, girl, not just red guards are happy about it”, Uliana answers. “He firmly believes the death of our son is not only the Germans’ fault, but the tsar’s as well for sending him to fight in the first place, besides, we need the money, we are in a tough situation right now.”

“But that is silly”, Alexei answers between moans of pain. “We had to help our Slavic friends, and the soldiers bravely risk their lives for our motherland, and once we beat the Germans we will all have peace and it will be better for everyone.” The woman gives my brother a condescending look, and I can’t say I blame her; I can’t imagine losing a son to a war you consider pointless, but I am conflicted, because I know it is necessary to defeat the Germans, they started the war and my father also firmly believed in the allied cause. I don’t say anything, I have nothing to argue against a personal loss such as that one.

Uliana looks like she is about to argue with my brother, but she doesn’t.

“Well, whatever the cause of the war, you are just a boy and a young woman, I don’t want you back with those monsters”, Uliana finally says. “I will show you the road to another village, but you can’t stay there for too long, my husband will probably give information to whoever hears it that you were here, you need to keep moving.” My anxiety goes sky level, how is Alexei going to get better if we are on the run constantly?

“But I don’t want to ride again, my legs and belly hurt”, Alexei whines, tears appear on his eyes.

Uliana starts laughing the moment Alexei mentions riding.

“You are not going to leave riding”, she chuckles.

“Why not?” I ask.
“My husband already sold your horses to a neighbor”, Uliana answers. “The best I can do is give you my dead son´s crutches.” I can’t believe this, how can we be so unlucky? The woman leaves and then returns with the crutches, she gives them to me.

“Now hurry up”, she says. Alexei starts crying when I tell him we have to go on foot and give him the crutches, but he tries his best, the poor dear. This has been the worst week of my life.

“Just try not to use the leg that hurts”, I tell him.
“They both hurt!” He cries.
“Don’t use the one that hurts the most”, I correct, messing with his hair to reassure him everything is fine, but the truth is I am worried sick about him.
The woman shows us the trail we have to follow in order to get to the next village and gives me the lamp to guide us through the dark forest.

“It is only about three miles away”, she says, my heart almost stops, I don’t know what I was hoping for, if it was only me it wouldn’t be an unreasonable distance, but this is going to be hell for my brother.
“Won’t your husband become angry if you let us go?” I ask her.
“I am not scared of him”, Uliana states confidently.
“Thank you a lot for the dress”, I say, and then we start walking into the woods, after a while Alexei gets used to the pain, but it is still a huge trial for him, he sobs incessantly for the first half hour of walking, I try to go as slow as possible to give him time.

“Why are all these things happening to us, Olya?” Alexei asks in tears when we have lost sight of the village. The question makes me lose all the euphoria I had left about escaping.
Everyone is cruel to us now, anyone who wants to can beat us, rob us and do whatever they please with us, and what can we do about it? Complain to the local authorities? There is no one to protect us. We have been too trustworthy, just like my parents were too trusting in the inherent goodness of people, too trusting they wouldn’t hurt any of their children for their own real or perceived crimes. We should have all gotten out of Russia when it was at least not impossible, even if we were all sick with measles, even if we love Russia and were born and raised to serve it, even if it was our duty to stay.

We can’t do anything to help Russia when we can’t even protect ourselves. Not all the peasants are loyal or at least willing to help us out of kindness, we can’t take for granted anyone is. I decide we can’t trust anyone anymore. I will never let anyone take the reins of my horse, I will never let anyone take my gun away again, I will always keep my guard up when I meet a kind stranger and I will leave Russia if it becomes the only option to keep my brother safe. I pray to God the government that killed my parents doesn’t stay in power for too long, so we could stay in the country.

“God brings us suffering for a reason Alyosha”, I tell my brother. “Remember what mama used to tell us, if he allows these horrors to fall upon us it is because he thinks we are strong enough to bear them, he may have a plan for us, or he may be testing our faith.”
“I know, I know”, he says with a tired voice. “Papa was also born the day of St. Job the long suffering, he said that meant he was destined for great suffering in his life, maybe that also applied to all of us for being his children.” I give him a sad smile, it is typical of him to say such mature things once in a while between his childish short lines.
“Yes, maybe”, I concede. “And papa, like Job, never complained about his fate, he always trusted God in spite of all his suffering, and God rewarded their faith.” He doesn’t answer.
“Only he didn’t reward papa in this life”, he finishes for me.
“No, sadly not, but being rewarded in the next life is just as good.”
“Can you help me pray about it? I don’t want to complain, I know I must not”, he asks timidly
after a while. "I am doing it so often now..."
“We will pray once we are somewhere safe. Let us try to go a bit faster”, I tell him.

“Did the peasant babies die so God could test them too?” He asks in a small voice. I wish mama was here, she would have a good answer to that.
“They died because they were very sick, the peasants were very poor and the conditions they live in make it very easy for diseases to spread, but yes, God sends trials to all people, he works in mysterious ways, we cannot understand why he allows things to happen”, I answer.
“If only papa and mama knew how bad it really is around these places.”
“They knew darling, peasant villages have been like that for centuries and you know they were trying their best to fix it, doctors are always sent to attend villages, but wars usually complicate progress.”
“So that is why they hate us, right? Because of the war we could no longer help them as much, like mama did with all her charities, and their children that survived being babies also die fighting. Maybe they thought we didn’t care”
“Yes, that is probably a reason”, I say. “War causes a lot of personal hardship, so it is easier for them to forget about the reason why we are fighting, that is why victory is so important, so that once the allies win the war, Russia can get her land back and help these people. The Bolsheviks just gave a lot of our precious land away to the Germans to fix the problem, but that is treachery, and they are causing a lot more problems along the way.”
“And the Germans are to blame and not papa, right?” He asks.
“Of course,” I try to reassure him. “Papa didn’t want this war, it was forced upon him.” That statement seems to calm him down.
“It is very sad that all of Galina’s siblings died, and she is all alone, poor girl, she must feel lonely”, he says.

Out of nowhere, a man appears in front of the trail, both me and my brother give a short scream, he stumbles and almost drops his crutches.

“Keep walking”, I tell Alexei, but the man moves to block our way. I look behind, hoping to maybe take my brother and run, but another man is behind us in the trail.
“What do we have here?” The man in front of me says, he is a fat man with a dirty white beard, he carries an ax, by his face I can tell he is completely capable of committing violence, he has a type of expression I know too well by now, I become terrified.
“Leave us alone please”, I say to one of the men and then to the other. “We don’t have any money.”
“But you have other things”, says the man in front of me while walking towards Alexei. “Those boots could get us a few rubles.”
“They are mine!” Alexei exclaims, but his tone of voice is that of a scared child, he should have done what I taught him to and point the gun at the man to scare him away, but he was too scared to do it. It is useless, I am a woman and he is just a sick boy, and a couple of orphans no less, people can to with us whatever they please.

Suddenly, the fat man aims his ax at my brother’s head in a sloppy movement, but my brother dodges the blow and almost lands on the floor while doing it, he uses his crutches instead of his hands to avoid falling completely. I completely lose my patience; I had seen the murder of my parents, been unjustly treated, vilely abused, robbed, I am tired and barely able to control myself. My baby brother had been kicked and mutilated today and almost murdered two days ago, and in this moment, actually witnessing someone trying to kill him again, I lose my mind. Before the man even finishes swinging the ax, I pull out my knife with the hand I am not using to hold the lamp, and, without thinking it, stab the fat man in the belly while screaming at him.

I take him completely by surprise, his blue eyes open wide, he clearly didn’t expect me to be
armed. I feel horror and disgust about what I have just done, the physical sensation itself is
unbearable, but then I become scared he will survive and take revenge, so I stab him again with
force twice, then again thrice in another spot and again in two different spots; I bury the entire
knife in his flesh all times. The angry and violent man becomes a scared child in seconds, he
collapses with the knife still on one of the wounds and starts to cry out in pain. I know he won’t
survive what I have done to him, I feel nothing but pity for the man. I suddenly remember there is
another man behind me and I take the knife away from the flesh of the man in the ground, but
when I turn around with the blood soaked knife, I see the other man running away, the mere idea of
having scared someone away seems comical to me.

I stand in shock, witnessing with what I have just done, the man is still alive, screaming in pain,
and painting the road red, his intestines are showing, it is sad and disturbing. I never got used to the
wounds of the men while working as a nurse, or their cries of pain. I don’t know where the nearest
hospital is, I am in no position to carry him somewhere to get treated, and helping him will
probably only exacerbate his suffering without saving his life; and yet, I don’t consider myself
capable of finishing him off, would that be a sin? Or would that be considered justified due to
being in self-defense? But to finish him off wouldn’t be self-defense, it would be murder. Still,
even if it is murder, I don’t want him to suffer any longer. My catechism didn’t prepare me for this
situation. I am completely petrified; I don’t know what to do. I slowly start crying and having
trouble breathing, what is this? I am not asthmatic. I cross myself.

“You stabbed him Olenka!” Alexei exclaims after he stands up. “And the other ran away!
Awesome! You defeated them all! Hurrah! Hurrah!” He raises one of his hands in celebration.

I look at my brother with anger, I can’t not believe he is acting in such an immature manner in a
situation like this, but thinking about it better, he has been acting like this ever since I suggested
escaping to him. He needs to be taught a lesson.

“Finish him off”, I tell him with tears in my eyes between heavy breaths, I am still having trouble
breathing.

“What?” He asks in a small voice.

“Finish him off”, I repeat, pointing at the moaning man. “He is suffering, don’t you see? You need
to put him out of his misery”.

“But why do I have to do it?” He whines, looking at the man with pity for the first time.

“Because ever since I pretty much forced you to escape, you have been acting like an immature and
scared child that hasn’t even attempted to help me by doing the simplest of things, like cooperating
with the escape without complaining at every chance you get and not endangering yourself
unnecessarily by trying to ride the horse faster than you have to only to prove you could”, I scold
him with anger, almost yelling at him, with tears in my eyes. “Because I was praying the whole
time at the peasants´ house that you wouldn’t start complaining about the food or having to use
latrines, because the only times you have ever used a weapon it has been to play war, but you
couldn’t even get the revolver out of your pocket to scare the man away! Because there are people
out there trying to kill us or worse, keep torturing us! This is not a game, we didn’t escape because
I thought it would be a fun little adventure, this is not a vacation to the Crimea, but that seems to be
your idea! Don’t you understand that I am trying to save your life?! Do you think I would have
allowed you to ride a horse if that wasn’t the case?! I finish my scolding by screaming the last two
questions, freely crying now.

“I was never going to complain in the peasants´ house!” He protests, tears appear in his eyes as
well.

“You were about to at some point, I saw your face”, I say, trying to steady my breathing.
“I am sorry Olya, I am sorry”, he says, starting to cry. “Please, I don’t want to kill him.” He looks at the moaning man with compassion in his eyes again. I feel bad for him for a second, but then I remember the way he celebrated the bandit’s death at first.

“You are not getting out of this so easily”, I answer harshly. “You didn´t seem to have a problem with me stabbing him to defend you, but now you cry because there are consequences behind how great and awesome it was for me to do that; you need to learn the consequences, you need to learn it is not a fun thing; maybe that way you will stop acting like a child and finally see our dire situation for what it really is. You are going to do it.”

“But why?! Why don’t we take him to a hospital?” He sobs and tries to walk with the crutches towards me, then he tries to touch my dress in search for sympathy, but I walk away. “Please Olenka!”

“We are in the middle of the woods! Don’t you see that he is suffering?” I say, “What is your problem? What are you so afraid of? He is almost dead anyway, he can’t hurt you! Didn’t you push Ermakov’s bayonet away back in the Ipatiev house while he was trying to stab you? Didn’t you fight Tabakov? This is nothing compared to either of those things! Didn’t you always want to be a soldier? Well, this is what soldiers do. You have to start with something.”

Alexei takes the revolver out of his pocket, but he still seems unsure.

“What do I do?” He asks.

“Shoot him in the head or in the heart, I don’t know, but do it already”, I answer desperately, the man’s cries are becoming unbearable.

My brother points the gun at the man, weeping, but he still seems unsure.

“I don’t want to do it!” He screams while looking at me.

“If you don’t do it I will leave you!” I threaten with impatience, but without meaning it. “I will leave during the night one day and when you wake up I will be gone, traveling way faster without you, when the sisters are allowed to leave I will reunite with them somewhere, but you will find yourself completely alone!” My brother starts choking with sobs when he hears me say that. He points the gun at the man again, with his arms shaking, and aims at his head, but doesn’t fire, just keeps sobbing. I feel guilty, I should do this myself, I can teach him this lesson some other way... The bandit suddenly grabs my brother’s ankle and cries in pain, trying to get up; three bullets reach the man’s brain one after the other and my brother jumps and screams in fear before and while shooting him, dropping his crutches in the process. He screams again and turns away when he sees the man’s destroyed skull and brain.

Alexei drops the revolver in fear of what he has done, sobs inconsolably and crosses himself over and over again, but he doesn’t dare to look at me for comfort. He probably thinks I am still mad at him; I feel even more guilty than before, I am the one who approaches and hugs him, leaving the lamp on the ground to be able to do it properly.

“I am sorry”, I tell him. “It is over now, you won’t have to do that ever again, if something like that becomes necessary once more I will do it myself, just listen to me and be obedient from now on, all right? I would never leave you, that was just talk to make you do it.” I can feel him nod while sobbing, we sit on the ground to be able to cry off our pain. I sob too, for our parents, for our sisters back in Perm, remembering with horror what happened just hours ago and everything that has happened since.

I remember the words of my father: It is not evil that conquers evil, but love; how will I be able to
live by his words when I could only protect my brother by doing something evil? I wish my father was here, he would know what to do and I would know that whatever he decided would be the right thing to do.

After a while of crying and hugging, me and my brother get up to keep going forward, I put the gun in his pocket again.

“It is just to scare people away”, I tell him when I notice the scared look in his eyes. “Please try to point it the next time if something like this ever happens again”, I beg him.

This time my brother’s cries of pain combined with anguish become stronger while walking, I pray to God the village isn´t too far away.

Just like before, he slowly becomes used to it, his cries become moans. His face is full of tears, but he is no longer crying.

“We are stupid”, Alexei says between moans of pain when he is a little bit calmer.

“What?” I ask.

“That man… we left him there. We should have searched him to see if he had any money, or at least taken his boots”, I look at him horrified.

“There is nothing wrong about it, right?” He asks me, worried about my reaction. I don´t answer him.

We finally arrive at the village; it was very close to the place where we encountered the bandits; I cross myself in relief and thank God. All the relief disappears when we start searching for a place to stay, I have to leave Alexei sitting, leaning on a tree to ask cottage by cottage if they would let us stay for the night, making sure not to tell any of them about our true identity. I am reminded about how late it actually is by the angry reactions of the peasants when I wake them up, but finally a family accepts to take us in.

The family that accepts us has lots of very cute children, and we have to sleep with them near the stove.

The peasants´ many children suddenly remind me there is a possibility I may get pregnant, I open my eyes, panicking. What will our relatives think about me? What will grandma and my godmother Olga say? What will aunt Xenia say? Thinking about the gossip that could ensue among my own relatives makes me weep, if I don’t get pregnant I can at least keep my shame a secret, but it is all in God’s hands, not mine. How will my sisters feel if they hear gossip about their own sister? What will Tanya say? She has always been so self-conscious about appearances, she would never stop loving me no matter what, but the gossip will still hurt her deeply. What about Alexei? How will he feel if he hears lies or jokes being said about me when he painfully knows the truth in full detail? I mourn the loss of his innocence for the first time since what happened, I had not dared to think about the fact he had witnessed everything before, because the mere reminder filled me with anguish. I considered explaining to him the nature of what happened, because sadly he found out about the details of those matters in a terrible way.

Alexei knew little about the facts of life before, mostly through allusions in books, vague information in science classes, and a dismissive comment or two from mama and papa whenever he asked about such matters, something that rarely ever happened, his mind was always somewhere else. Whenever he did ask, he was told he would know much more when he was older, and that only married people are supposed to do certain things such as kissing. And of course, there was also the inappropriate vocabulary he inevitably acquired by interacting with so many soldiers. Even mama was appalled by it, but more so whenever Anastasia followed suit, she would tell our little sister that ladies aren’t supposed to talk like that. Alexei didn’t fully understand the implications of
half of what he said, and my sisters and I simply thought it was funny to hear him talk like that, pretending to be an adult.

Now it will never be funny again. I am too ashamed to do explain anything though, I prefer to pretend he saw nothing and wait for some other trustworthy relative to explain it to him when he is a bit older, maybe in a year or so.

I also find the idea of having Tabakov´s child disgusting, and I will never know if it is his child, or the child of one of the Chekists, or the child of his idiot blond friend. The thought fills me with dread, I will never be able to love that child, it would remind me every day of one of the worst days of my life. I decide that if I become pregnant I will have the child in secret and give him or her away to nuns or monks in a monastery, after I make that decision I feel a little bit better.

Our bad luck wasn´t done yet though, the mother of the children didn´t expect Alexei´s cries of pain to keep her entire family from sleeping, so she asked us, as kindly as she could, to sleep outside on the porch instead.

The night is cold despite being summer, it must have been the rain earlier. I pray with my brother for his pain to go away, for forgiveness for the bandit´s murder, for strength to accept God´s will.

“You don´t have to sleep outside”, my brother tells me, moaning in pain, after an hour of trying to sleep. “It is me who is making noise, go back inside, I will be fine here, I can´t sleep anyway, it wouldn´t matter if it wasn´t cold”. This time, unlike the time he asked me to escape without him, I believe he means what he says, but I am not going to leave him to cry out in pain alone anyway. Even if I went back inside, I am not sure I would be able to sleep.

I hug my brother and we cuddle each other for warmth. Finally, I allow myself to cry out of pure self-pity, I hate this, I hate what happened to me, I hate what is happening to us, I don’t want to be an orphan or have this huge responsibility, I don’t want to sleep outside on the floor, I am tired of everything.

I must have fallen asleep at some point way past midnight, because I wake up screaming because of another nightmare; my brother is beside me, still trying to sleep, still moaning due to the pain on his leg and with huge dark circles under his eyes, I worry when I see he didn´t notice my screaming, I touch his forehead to see if he has a fever, but I am relieved to see that isn´t the case. The sun is up, and the sky is very blue, although not for us. The owners of the house invite us back inside to have breakfast. My brother looks so exhausted that I gather all of my strength to carry him back inside, the woman´s husband helps me. I eat my food, and coerce my brother to do so as well.

“Remember what you promised me back in the woods”, I remind him everytime he stops eating. “Can you let him stay here for a few minutes?” I tell the woman after I am finished eating, she nods, my brother looks at me with fear in his tired eyes and shakes his head. “I will come back, I promise, I am just going to investigate how to leave this village”, I tell my brother, remembering what Uliana told us about her husband telling everyone about us.

“There is a man that arrives in the morning, he sells wool”, the woman says. “He is a very nice man and he can take you to Kambarka by cart for free, it is a small town not too far from here.” That would be fine, we would get further away from those men, and if the man sells wool that could help Alexei with the bumps in the road. I thank her and walk to the place in the village the woman told me the man would be.

We were not warned about how long the road to Kambarka would actually be, we leave the village before 8 in the morning, but don´t arrive at Kambarka until almost 7 in the evening. We stop in one village to eat at some point, my brother eats without coercing in spite of not being hungry, he really is trying his best after what I told him, the poor dear. I learn from experience and don’t tell the man
our real names.

Alexei laid in the wool the entire journey, he didn’t get up except when necessary the times the man stopped in villages to sell, I used the wool to lift his bad leg a little, maybe that would make him feel more comfortable. I tried to make sure the bumps in the road didn’t bother him too much by holding him, the wool really helped a lot, but it was impossible to completely avoid it. I held his hand tightly when the pain returned intensely at various intervals, but to my great joy he managed to get a few hours of sleep without any pain, I slept as well without nightmares, maybe it was the relief of getting away once again and seeing Alexei finally rest, like he needed to; Alexei is the one who wakes up in tears because of a nightmare at some point, he hugs me tightly and kisses my cheek as I comfort him, poor thing.

Despite that relief, I couldn’t help but grieve the fact we were moving further away from my beloved sisters, I miss talking to Tatiana, fooling around with the little pair, and Nastya’s pranks and jokes, despite how annoying they can be for me at times, when I am not in the mood, but now I miss her like crazy. If Tanya was here she would know how to comfort me and my brother better, Masha would keep our hopes up, Nastya would find it easier than me to make Alyosha forget about his pain by making him laugh. I am worried sick about them, when will I ever see them again? Are those horrible men going back to work in the blue house guarding my baby sisters? The thought destroys my peace, I pray they aren’t.

I also worry about our future destination, we can’t just wander around the country indefinitely, we need a plan, but I don’t even know where we are going to get our food next. By the time we get off the cart and thank the man, I am already hungry again. We both sit on the sidewalk. Kambarka is a small town, from what I have seen one of the occupations of the population is siderurgy, some of the houses have electricity.

“What do we do now, Olya?” Alexei asks me.
“We need somewhere to sleep, but I don’t want you to walk while I search for a place”, I answer. “I am so hungry though” I sigh.
“What if I ask people for money?” Alexei asks. “They will probably give me lots of it with these crutches.”
“Don’t even think about it”, I answer. I detest the idea of my baby brother having to beg for money.
“Come on.”
“No.”
“Please.”
“No!”
“Let me help you with something”. I end up losing the argument with my brother, I stand meters away from him while he begs to the people passing by, seeing him do that makes me emotional. Most people don’t give him anything or even look at him, but his youth, his crutches, his bandaged ear and his horribly swollen cheek give him an appearance that inspires enough pity on the people to buy us one meal for the both of us in a local cafeteria.

While sitting with my brother eating I start getting the feeling that the people are looking at me as if they knew I have been deflowered. I tell myself that is a stupid thought, I have stopped bleeding hours ago, and maybe they aren’t looking at me, just looking at everyone with curiosity. Maybe my swollen eye does give me away, but either way, the fact they keep looking at me annoys me anyway.
There are three men and a woman looking at me with special curiosity, one of the men specifically is analyzing me, what if he recognized me? I don’t think so, I am pretty sure my face is unrecognizable for now, but they could have recognized Alexei, his cheek is deformed, and his lip is swollen too, but his face is not drastically changed. Even if they didn’t recognize me, that is how everything started, by a man looking at me, and I won’t have any of it. I wake up from my seat and go to him.

“Stop looking at me! I am sick of it!” I yell at the man.
“Why did you do that, Olya?” Alexei asks me when I return to our table.
“Finish your food quickly”, I tell him. “Those people over there may have recognized us”.

Chapter End Notes

Was Olga too harsh with Alexei by making him kill the bandit? Or did she have a good point and a good lesson to give?
This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:
- Short comments, including emojis.
- Long comments, with no limits.
_ Questions
_ Constructive criticism
_ Reader-reader interaction
_ Comments in only one chapter.
_ Comments in more than one chapter.
This author replies to comments, but if you don’t want a reply, for whatever reason (for example, shyness), feel free to sign your comment with the Word "whisper" and I Will appreciate the comment just the same but not respond.
July 19th, 1918.

Perm.

Maria.

Everything is slipping out of my hands; it is like all the light that remained inside us left when Olga and Alexei did. My sisters are heartbroken, and I am the glue tirelessly and uselessly trying to get the pieces of their hearts back together. It could not be any other way, we called my brother ray of sunshine for a reason, whenever he was sick our home became a dark and gloomy place to be, and whenever he recovered it filled with sunshine, his personality could be best described as “happy”, always wanting to make everyone who was sad happy, he was like the crowning jewel of our family, and now he only has Olga to take care of him, he is so fragile, my baby brother, how many times have I wished I could have a son like him? I wish I could be with him at all times to protect him.

My oldest sister’s absence also left a deep hole in my heart, must people who knew us superficially would have thought that we were divided into the big pair and the little pair, but that was never strictly true; especially as we grew older, the four of us became close to each other regardless of age, we were like four pieces in a puzzle, a four leaf clover is what mama used to call us, but one that sadly didn’t give my parents any luck. I miss Olga more than I can describe, my big protective older sister; she can be as fun to be around as Nastya, a pure and loyal soul, I think, she has always loved stronger and harder than any of us, with passion. Of course she was going to go instead of Tatiana, Olga is completely devoted to her, and all of us.

Immediately after they left, the three of us stayed sitting silently together, with silent tears in our eyes, just like when our parents died, a day ago. Anastasia barely talks or smiles anymore, I hate seeing her like that, that is not her. Nastya spent all the evening after Alexei left in the swing, not swinging, just crying. Poor dear, we all loved our brother dearly, but she is the one who treated him more like a partner in crime than just the baby of the family. She must be sad because she wanted to swing with him once he recovered. Anastasia couldn’t bear to return to the room she would share with our brother, so she is sleeping with us from now on; not seeing Olga in our shared room also bothers her, they both shared a sense of humor, especially in happier times. Nastya couldn’t sleep last night, so I didn’t either, I just laid with her to try to comfort her.

“You will smile and laugh again, you will see”, I told Anastasia in bed next to her. Hearing my words of comfort only made her even more emotional. She started sobbing.

“I am just so bored”, she cried.

“What do you mean?” I asked her, caressing her hair, thinking that maybe that statement was just a weak attempt at joking to cheer me up.

“My family is my greatest source of joy and amusement”, she said, choking with sobs, “my family is being destroyed piece by piece.” I started crying too.

“I am still here”, I told her.
“I want everything to be over”, I hugged her tightly when she said that, I could not bear to see her like that, she had always been so sure of herself and even controlling, but now she was truly my baby sister, who needed protection from those awful feelings.

But I think Tatiana has taken it the hardest, although she is so strong she has managed to appear stoic in front of us, but I heard her crying in the shower from outside the bathroom today in the morning, she spent two hours in there, and didn´t get out when she finished her shower. She barely talks when it is not time to pray. Tatiana was like a second mother to Alexei, mama always trusted her with him the most, she knew more about being a mother than me, even though I yearn to have children the most among my sisters, and what can I say about losing Olga? It must feel like half of her has been ripped away, out of the 5 of us, Olga and Tatiana are the closest in age. I have some idea about how she must be feeling, since I was also separated from my dear Shvibzik, but at least we had been promised we would meet again, so even apart from her and missing her like crazy, I was filled with hope.

We prayed last night and in the morning today for their safety, with the icon, just like Olga asked us to, and now I am doing it again silently. Please God, keep them safe, let them have a peaceful journey, and don´t let anything they may suffer tarnish their souls.

Galina has been so sweet, sneaking pastries for us, which isn´t something we eat anymore with our soldier rations, it is one of those few moments when Nastya smiles, I can´t help but do it as well, I love sweet stuff. “I am also praying for your sweet brother and your kind sister”, Galina tells me on the evening when me and my sisters are knitting, with material the commander provided us; at first Tatiana didn´t want to accept it, she felt it was a cruel joke on the commander´s part, to give us something to do in exchange for having taken our brother away, but I told the commander to give it to me. In the evening we are all sad, heartbroken and in serious need for something to occupy our minds with, so the three of us all end up knitting clothes to use when winter comes, even though it is months away.

“Thank you darling”, I answer Galina sadly, “I am sure they would be very grateful.” She also sat to knit with us when she finished her work.

Oleg no longer talks to me, he just looks at all of us with pity whenever we pass him by; I don´t know why, it was fun to talk to him, in happier times I might have even been swooning over him and telling mama all about how much it pains me to be far away from him, he is so handsome. That thought made me sad, Olga was just as boy crazy as me before the revolution, we used to talk about our crushes all the time. Maybe he thinks I wouldn’t want to talk to him after what just happened, but that is not true, any distraction would make me feel better, maybe it is because I hadn’t really tried to start any conversations, I was too sad.

Finally, I stand up, leave what I am knitting, and approach him, he is guarding the front door.

“Hi”, I tell him, raising my hand. He gives me a nod with his head and smiles slightly. We stand like that awkwardly for a few seconds, then my face becomes ugly and I start crying. He looks at me, concerned.

“I am sorry”, I tell him, weeping. “I just needed some distraction, I don´t know what else to do, my sisters are destroyed.”

“There, there”, he says awkwardly, patting my back.

“My brother…”

“I understand”, he says. “It must be hard, I also lost two brothers.” I already knew that, Galina had
told us, but it was nice to hear him tell me something about himself.

“How do you get through it?” I ask him, and I realize, embarrassed, that I have a runny nose, I try to clean myself with my sweater.

“I don’t”, he says. “I am barely holding on myself, at least you have God to comfort you.” I feel sad and disappointed to hear him say that, it means he does not believe in God, but I try not to judge.

“God can also comfort you”, I tell him. “God loves all his children.”

“Believe me I have tried, and then I gave the Bible to you when I gave up, I figured out you would have a better use for it”, I look at him with pity, I can’t even imagine what it would be like to lose Olga and Alexei while also thinking I am never going to see them again.

“Did you know this was my father’s house?” Oleg suddenly comments. That actually surprises and interests me.

“Really?”

“Really”, he repeats. “That is why there were no bibles in the drawers, I had it. That slingshot, the one your brother used, I used to play with that slingshot with my brother Anton all the time, we used to drive my grandmother insane.”

“I assume she wanted to work here when the reds took the house, didn’t she?” I say.

“Yes, she and my father became very close when my mother died, she didn’t want to leave my father’s house when he also did.”

“I am sorry about your father”, I lament, he probably only has his grandmother and other brother left.

“It was a long time ago, before the war even. He just became very sick”, Oleg says.

“When did you lose your faith Oleg?” I ask him. He smiles at me, as if he feels sorry for me and doesn’t take me seriously. It doesn’t make me angry, I feel sorry for him as well, we don’t take each other’s beliefs seriously.

“It wasn’t one moment, it was a process. First comes the questions, then comes the experiences that pile up the questions, sometimes it is not even your own experiences, just seeing the way things are in the world that make you question; things pile up slowly, and before you know it, one day you are praying and realize you don’t believe it is going to help anymore.” We stay silent for a while, I really don’t want to keep talking about this, it would only make me feel worse than I already do. Our faith is Christ the only thing we have left, and the horrible way things are in the world and now in our lives don’t change anything, we can’t claim to understand God’s plan or the reason he allows things to happen. His will must be done, that is what papa used to say, he never complained to God about our situation. Christ also suffered for us is something mama said, so we should too.

“What are your brothers’ names?” I say, trying to change the subject.

“Well, first comes Andrei, he is the one who is still alive, but we don’t get along too well.” I smile when I hear him say that in an apologetic tone. “He is already married and has two children, my nephews”, he continues.
“Oh!” I beam, “How old are they? Do you have any pictures?”

“Yes, sure”, he says, and he shows me the pictures of a three year old baby girl and a 6 year old little boy, then he shows me the wedding picture of his brother and his bride, she is really beautiful. “But these are old, especially the baby girl must be a lot bigger right now, her name is Irina.”

“Oh, my cousin Irina also has a baby girl named Irina!” I exclaim, and we both laugh.

“I guess your cousin Irina isn’t very creative with names”, he says.

“No, I guess not”, I respond, smiling.

“My next brother is Yuri, he died in the war, less than a year ago”, he continues, and my expression becomes serious. “Then there was Anton and me, but Anton was killed as well.” That could only mean one thing, her mother had died giving birth to either him or his brother, but I still didn’t feel confident enough to ask him about it.

“Where any of your other brothers married?” I ask.

“Yuri had a fiancée, I think he really loved her, because he didn’t want to settle down before”, he says, that is really sad to think about. “When Yuri died, she joined a convent.”

Moscow.

Lenin stayed silent after hearing the news. He had barely even reacted, but Yákov Sverdlov, the only man sitting with him at his office, could tell the escape of the former heir bothered him, even if just slightly, but he looked more disappointed than angry or scared. Sverdlov deeply regretted giving Lenin the last-minute idea of keeping the boy alive as a pawn until the end of the war, but at the time of the decision he would never have imagined something like this could happen. He had been one of the brains behind the execution of the former emperor and many of his relatives, including his brother, the former grand duke Michael, and the former grand duchess Elizabeth, sister of the former empress. He had even worked tirelessly when the provisional government was still in power for the family not to be allowed to go into exile, he knew from the very beginning they all would end up dead, it was a historical necessity. That is why keeping the Romanov children alive for a few more months for pragmatic reasons, especially the daughters, didn’t seem like such a bad idea two days ago. He had worked hard to sign a treaty with Germany, and even if the chances of Germany continuing its invasion of Russia were slim, he wasn’t going to risk the stability the Brest- Litovsk treaty had achieved for anything, not even for Revolutionary justice, not when they had all the time in the world to make sure that it was accomplished.

“Was this some kind of plot?” Lenin finally asked after minutes of silence.

“No, at least there is no evidence for that yet, but I will make sure there is an investigation”, Sverdlov said. “Apparently, the guards got angry because the steamer they were traveling in malfunctioned, so they became excessively drunk during their stay on a village and fell asleep. One of the Chekists died from alcohol poisoning, a red guard from Perm fell down the stairs and hit his head hard enough to kill him. The morning after, the former heir, as well as one of his sisters, was gone.”

“Buffoons! What a disgrace!” Lenin exclaimed. “The other two left should be shot!”

“No, comrade Lenin, we should not get ahead of ourselves”, Sverdlov cautioned. “They were honest enough to make sure the news reached us by sending a telegram to the commander of the
guards of what was supposed to be the heir’s new prison for what remained of his life, and they are the only ones that know what happened to them and the location where they disappeared, we need them to search for the missing Romanovs.”

“Do you think it is risky to let the boy live?” Lenin asked. “What do you think we should do? It is unlikely he and his sister will survive alone in Siberia anyway… but thinking it through, if our enemies come across the true story of the former heir’s unlikely escape, they may try to spark a revival of monarchist fervor in the white army, or worse, among the peasants; although we could easily subdue the latter by force, of course.”

“It is not about how risky it is, although there is a possibility it may be”, Sverdlov said. “It is about what should be done, and that boy shouldn’t live, he represents the old regime, and it is our revolutionary duty to make sure he is annihilated. We should send a special unit of about 300 to 500 red guards to look for him and his sister, the unit should be under the supervision of selected investigators that will answer only to us two. Its existence, along with its real mission, should be kept secret from as many people as possible, even from people close to us, that is my recommendation. We should tell the people who were aware of the survival of the former heir that he has been executed due to a change of plans. Soon the Czechoslovak legion will take Ekaterinburg and inquiries will begin about the fate of the Romanovs, we have already started several campaigns of disinformation, we just need to plant as much evidence for the demise of the entire family as possible, make sure we execute any untrustworthy people that come to learn or suspect the truth and we may be able to keep our search relatively secret, or at least secret enough that anything that comes to light about it appears to be just another rumor.”

“One of those people close to us who shouldn’t know about this is definitely Trotsky, I suppose”, Lenin chuckled after saying his name.

“That poor man probably doesn’t even know yet that the former Tsar is dead”, Sverdlov said, chuckling as well. “He is still dreaming about having his show trial and being the center of attention, what a narcissist.”

“What about our other plans?” Lenin inquired. “I actually considered your idea about using the boy as a pawn to be useful; will they shoot him on sight if they apprehend him or should we continue with the previously designed protocols just as planned?”

“The situation has changed, his escape has proven that sparing his life, even for the purposes we had, was a dangerous decision, that was my mistake, for which I humbly apologize”, Sverdlov explained. “I believe he should be shot on sight”.

“I agree, the possible benefits weren’t worth the risk after all”, Lenin conceded. “What about the woman?”

“She should be returned to her sisters in Perm, we will still need the women for a few months, but she should also be shot if she puts any resistance. As far as I know, the decision to allow her to accompany her brother was not approved by Moscow, just the Ural Soviet.”

“I didn’t sanction that decision at all, they clearly took liberties, I will deal with that matter later”, Lenin said. “We need the four of them to fool the Germans, although, if you allow me to be frank comrade Sverdlov, some of the asylum offers from foreign countries are tempting, we could even use their exile as a propaganda tool to show the world our generosity.”

“None of that!” Sverdlov exclaimed before Lenin had even finished talking, a little louder than he
“Calm down, comrade Sverdlov”, Lenin said. “The negotiations are just beginning, we should hear what they have to offer before we throw away a useful opportunity, we have to consider all the options. As for the subject of the special unit looking for the former heir and his sister, can you find the right person to make the necessary arrangements? I am far too busy to worry about some rogue children playing hide and seek. Make sure he is someone known for his discretion and loyalty to the revolutionary cause, and that he has experience in investigative work.”

“Don’t worry, I know the right person, his name is Igor Pyotrovich Turov, but please comrade Lenin, don’t be seduced by those foreigners when it comes to the former grand duchesses.”

“Good. Well, enough of the Romanov subject for today, I haven’t made up my mind yet”, Lenin said. “Let’s get on to the important stuff. Refresh my memory, what were we talking about before the news arrived?”

Chapter End Notes

I decided not to use any POVs of historical characters other than OTMAA’s, it just feels too weird because I don’t know their personalities too well, not that I know for real exactly how OTMAA were, but at least I have read a lot of their letters, diaries and descriptions from people who knew them, so I have a mental idea. Yurovsky was an exception because of necessity to explain what was going on, it was also easier because of the very real Yurovsky note, that was useful to set the tone of his POV. That is why the scene in Moscow with real historical figures is in third person, I hope that doesn’t confuse or bother anyone, lol. I may do a few more scenes like that occasionally just so we know more less what the hell is going on with OTMAA’s situation whenever necessary.

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:
- Short comments, including emojis.
- Long comments, with no limits.
  _Questions
  _Constructive criticism
  _Reader-reader interaction
  _Comments in only one chapter.
  _Comments in more than one chapter.
This author replies to comments, but if you don’t want a reply, for whatever reason (for example, shyness), feel free to sign your comment with the Word "whisper" and I Will appreciate the comment just the same but not respond.
Olga.

Even though my brother´s leg still hurts, I can´t bear the idea of leaving him alone sitting for only one second, what if those people take him while I am away? I ask him to come with me to look for a place, he leans on a wall while I knock the doors on each street, searching for a place to stay the night, but the people here don´t know us, and they understandably don´t want two strangers to stay the night with their families, even if one of them is a cripple, I still don´t want to reveal our identities though, I am not going to make the same mistake again. We come across small groups of red guards, but they don´t seem to notice anything different about us, I thank God and try to walk the other way whenever I encounter them.

I sit on the ground again with my brother, even if the town is big enough for me to keep searching for a place to stay, I am completely exhausted. I cry out of fear and anxiety, there are dozens of other homeless people around us, some are falling asleep in the same sidewalk we are in; I am not prepared to be homeless and live out of the pity people have for my sick brother, who is again rubbing his bad leg.

I weep out of frustration.

“I don´t like it when you cry Olenka”, my brother says to me, wiping one of my tears, but seeing him trying to console me while he is also in pain only makes me sadder, I continue weeping. The sun has set completely, but at least there are streetlamps, so we are not completely in the dark, something I am grateful for.

“Why don´t we ask for more money to pay for an inn?” He asks. I wipe my tears; I need to be of use well.

“I don´t want you to keep begging”, I tell him, knowing too well that I may have to allow him to do it again later, I may even have to swallow my pride and start doing it as well. “And I don´t think we could collect enough money begging to pay for a room.”

“Well, how else can we get money?” He asks me, “Do you think it would be a good idea to sell my boots? The bandit said we could get money with them.”

“Not at all, you need them”, I say. “I really don´t know how else to get money, maybe I could get a job and ask for a place to stay for both of us to our employer, I saw lots of small factories when we arrived here.”

“We can work.”

“I will do the work; you have to rest. Let us go before all the places close”, we both stand up and walk, he uses his crutches.

“But when I get better I can work, right?” He says.

“Sure, you will” I say. I am not so sure about the idea, how are we going to get a job so soon and at this hour? But I can´t give up, I do not want us to sleep on a porch again, at least I have to try before we run out of options.

I ask in every shop I find if they have jobs available, but they have none; I even ask them at some point to allow us to sleep there in exchange for free labor, they tell me there are places we can go to for that kind of arrangement but that they are not one of them.
We come across an ironworks building and see the men working with the iron rolling mill, but I also see at least one woman, I tell Alexei to wait outside. One of the men approaches me when he sees me enter the building, I panic and step back, I don’t like seeing that man walking so fast towards me.

“What is it?” He asks me in a rough manner, as if I am not supposed to be there.
“Can I talk to the supervisor?” I ask.
“I am the supervisor”, he answers, as if it gives him the most pleasure in the world to say that. “I would like to work here for a few days”, I answer, keeping my head down, trying to appear meek. “I don’t need any money, just a place to stay for me and my sick brother.”
“What in God’s name would you be useful for?”
“I can do any manual labor, just tell me what”, I say.
“Show me your hands”, he says, I do so. “You won’t be useful”, the man says condescendingly. “I am sorry.”
“Why not?” I ask, losing my patience.
“All right, I will show you”, the man says while grabbing my arm, I almost faint from the fright, but he only takes me to where the woman is working. “Show her your hands”, he says, this time to the woman.
“Touch them”, he says, referring to the woman’s hands; I do, they are rough and filled with burn scars. “She has worked here since she was 15, she is used to it; you wouldn’t last here for a week.” I agree he has a point, but that does not mean I can’t get used to it as well.

“How do you know? You haven’t even let me try yet”, I protest. All the workers who were hearing the conversation start laughing. I walk away, I burst into tears without even fully knowing why, for a moment looking for a job was not the real reason they were laughing at me, but it was something far more sinister. I was completely helpless again.

“Thank you for your kindness”, I try to say with sarcasm, looking back at the man, but it comes out rather pathetic.

Alexei looks at me with concern.

“They didn’t give you the job?” He asks.
“No”, I say. “Let’s go”.

“There are other jobs”, I say after a while after I wipe away my tears, smiling at my worried brother. “Maybe I can work as a servant”. From now on I go from door to door in the biggest houses to see if anyone would take me, but I have no luck.

We continue exploring the town and find a place filled with Jews, many of them have bright red hair, like the rest of the people here.

“Are we going to work for the Jews?” Alexei asks with a mix of both fear and curiosity, we have been taught that Jews are not trustworthy people and that they are more likely to be revolutionaries, if any of them recognizes us we might be in trouble.

“Why not?” I say. “We are in no position to be picky right now”. Alexei raises and then lowers his shoulders. I do feel some apprehension, but we have already walked through most parts of the town.

We arrive at a jewelry store, the Jewish man, also a red head with a big red beard, is about to close, he looks about 50 years old.

“Good night”, he tells us when he sees me and my brother approaching. “Do you want to buy or
sell anything?”
“No, no”, I answer. “We don’t have anything to sell or want to buy anything.”
“How can I help you then?” He asks, observing us carefully, he is probably wondering what happened to my face, but is too polite to ask.
“Would you accept me as a servant?” I blurt out.
“A Christian? Of course not!” He says, startled, as if the idea itself was bizarre.
“Why not?” I say, discouraged.
“I don’t think it would work out, my family and friends would object”, he explains. I feel a bit offended; I don’t like how he rejected me on the basis of my faith as if it was something undesirable, but then again, maybe that is the way Jews felt when they were rejected from universities because of quotas, or were not allowed to live in certain regions of the country, I had never really questioned or considered that before.
“Well, I guess I better find a Christian to take me as a servant, but thanks anyway”, I reply with my head down, not knowing what else to say.
“It is worth a try”, he says, then he looks at Alexei and back at me, up and down, with a serious expression. “Although, if you allow me to be frank, I don’t think anyone in their right mind would employ you as a servant, it is easy for someone who has been hiring people for years to see that you are used to give orders, and it would be very hard for you to have to receive them, especially someone who has been groomed from childhood to either marry a head of state, or become one.” My Good eye grows big and I become paralyzed by fear, I look at my brother, he has the same expression. I open my mouth to beg him not to turn us over, but the man raises his hand and continues talking before I am able to.
“Yes, I know you are both humble, have a good attitude, don’t think yourselves superior to those who serve and are willing to work just like anyone else to make a living”, the man starts talking, his voice is soft and friendly. “But you have been served your entire lives and told there was a special and untouchable place for you in the world. That way of thinking you have learned doesn’t disappear only because a revolution succeeds, or because you go through hardships; even now, talking to me, from the bottom of your hearts, you are convinced that things should fix themselves and the ways of the world should change on their own in order to give you satisfaction, instead of improving yourselves and acting to accomplish whatever it is that you seek. People from high class are bad at serving. They are disobedient, resentful, irreflective, ambitious, entitled and susceptible, they miss the comforts they think they rightfully deserve and are supposed to get back someday for the way they were born and raised, they believe they are working hard when at times there is nothing further from the truth, and they create difficulties with the other people in service with their unacknowledged obsession with being the best at what they do.” The man raises and lowers his shoulders.
“But that is just my experience hiring those kinds of people”, he adds. I almost forgot I was afraid of him, he had simply lectured us as if we were his children, and in a kind way also, maybe even kinder than any of the people we had encountered ever since we arrived at Kambarka. I look at my brother, he looks fascinated by everything the man has just said, no trace of fear is left in his eyes. I feel like a little girl during the Russo-Japanese war again, around the time Alexei was born. I had told my nanny I hoped all the Japanese people were slayed by our soldiers, since they had drowned our sailors. Mrs. Eagar had kindly explained to me that there were a lot of innocent women and children in Japan that didn’t know how to fight, and after learning that they even had an emperor like my father, I understood they were people just like us.

I do not think this man is going to turn us over, even if he is a Jew, and did recognize us; but still, as interesting, and probably true as most of what he said was, none of it is helpful.
“But what do you recommend us to do?” I ask. “If you don’t mind advising us.”
“I can only tell you what I would do in your situation”, he says. “Look for something to sell. When I got to this city I started buying the jewels from people who needed money, then I started selling them at a slightly higher prize and hiring craftsmen to work repairing the jewelry people brought to fix for a good price, when I started making more money I hired people to make the jewelry.”
“But where did you get the money to buy the jewelry?” Alexei asks.
“I asked my uncle for a loan; the interests weren’t high since we were family”, the man answers.
“But we don’t know anyone who would give us a loan”, I protest. He puts his index finger on his chin and starts thinking.
“Mm…let’s see, what would I have done if I didn’t have an uncle? Well, I think I would have gone to the forest and searched for edible berries, then I would have sold them to people passing by or street vendors who have no time to search for berries”, the man answers.
“But that takes a lot of time and it is getting late”, I answer.
“You young people are always so impatient”, he answers in a scolding tone. “Wait a while”.
“All right”, I say, smiling, but a little bit disappointed. “Thank you for the advice”.
“And what if there are no berries in the woods?” Alexei asks.
“Well there is always something you can find”, the man starts. “There are rabbits…”
“Let’s go Alyosha”, I tell my brother, shaking my head and chuckling, it is getting late, but my brother stays to listen to the man for a while.
“Good luck”, the red-haired man says with a smile after he finishes talking. I raise my had to say goodbye and we walk out of there.

“Are we going to the forest for berries?” Alexei asks, looking exited for the prospect despite the discomfort on his legs.
“No”, I answer, laughing and smiling at him. “I don’t know, maybe in the future.”

I feel hopeless again, I may have to start looking for a good-looking porch to sleep in and keep thinking about what to do in the morning. We wander through the city aimlessly for about half an hour, we could see less and less people around as time passed.

While sitting on a sidewalk to rest I see a young girl, about the same age as Alexei, maybe a bit older, smiling at us, I walk towards her, she looks friendly.

“Hi”, I say shyly, “me and my brother are new in town, do you know what the fastest way to make money is around here?”
“You need money?” The girl asks.
“Yes”, I reply. “I am willing to work really hard.”
“I know someone who can help you!” She says.
“Really? Where?” I say, relieved by this.
“Follow me!” The young girl says, and we follow her.

To my great dismay, when we arrive at the place the girl was referring to, I find lots of different women with indecent items of clothing talking with men outside, some entered the building with the men, and some left with them. Now I understand the girl wasn’t smiling at me, but at Alexei. It was too good to be true.

“I bet this is a brothel”, Alyosha says. I open my good eye and look at him, shocked.
“You don’t even know what a brothel is”, I tell him, trying not to sound excessively worried.
“Yes, I do”, he insists, seemingly proud of himself for knowing. “It is like a house, where women who don’t have any money go live and work together, and men go visit them with their friends to look for someone to marry, they also kiss.” I sigh with relief.
“Yes, you are right”, I lie.
“Let’s go in then”, he says.
“No darling, I can’t work there”, I tell him, and then I approach the girl that was in front of us guiding us and touch her shoulder.

“I am sorry dear, but I can’t work here”, I tell her, she looks disappointed.
“It is alright”, the girl says. “Good luck.” She walks into the building, I feel sorry for her, she is younger than my 17-year-old baby sister, but there is sadly nothing I can do for her at the moment, if I was still a Grand Duchess I might have asked my mother to find her work as a servant somewhere or patronize her education in a girls’ school, I realize that I mourn the loss of my title for the first time since the revolution, it at least allowed me to do something, however small, when I saw injustice in the world. I hope at least none of her clients are as bad as Tabakov.

“Why can’t you work there?” Alexei asks me. “Oleg said something about women being nice there; he said they were just unlucky; they can probably help us, is it because you don’t want to kiss anyone?”

“Because the women that live there do bad things, I am not working there”, I say firmly and without any more details. He looks pensive for a second.

“Maybe you could tell the girls you don’t want to be kissed”, he suggests.

“Let’s go find a place to sleep, a porch or something”, I change the subject. He pouts when he realizes we are sleeping outside again, but doesn’t complain and follows me.

Once we walk several streets away from the brothel, we encounter the three men I had seen before looking at us, this time the woman wasn’t with them.

“It is the people from the cafeteria!” My brother exclaims.
“Let us go the other way”, I tell Alyosha, and we walk the opposite side where we came from through an empty street, but I know it is useless, my brother is using crutches, and they appear to have been following us, they are going to catch us sooner or later.

“Do you want me to point the gun at them?” My brother asks with a panic filled voice.

Me or Alexei could point the revolver at them, but the idea scares me, what if they are armed as well and only use it as an excuse to shoot us? They are dressed as civilians, but they could very well have something hidden. I shake my head at my brother, and we keep walking, he seems relieved.

“Wait girl!” One of the men yells from behind. “We are not going to hurt you! We are friends! We will help you!” Right, if I wanted to kill someone that is exactly what I would say. We keep walking.
“Wait girl!” One of the men yells from behind. “We are not going to hurt you! We are friends! We will help you!” Right, if I wanted to kill someone that is exactly what I would say. We keep walking.
“We will help you! We have morphine!” A different voice yells, my brother turns his head around and slows down slightly.
“What are you doing? Keep walking!” I scold him. I know he must be in a lot of pain to consider accepting the men’s help after one of them offered morphine, but we have no reason to trust them.
“We were sent to look for you!” One of the men says in English, and I finally stop walking, making my brother stop with me.

“We come all the way from Ekaterinburg,” the man continues talking with a British accent after he gets closer to us. “There were thousands of different rumors about your present whereabouts, which is why there are dozens of groups like us looking for you.” I finally turn around; my brother does the same when he sees me doing it. The man who is talking is in his thirties, has green eyes and light brown hair, and he has a mustache similar to the one papa had, but no beard. Behind him
where the other two men, I recognize one of them as the man who was analyzing me the most at the cafeteria.

“We are not going to hurt you”, he continues whispering in English once he gets close enough. “My name is Charles Lamb, I am one of the British intelligence officers tasked with looking for the Imperial Family after they went missing from Ekaterinburg two days ago.” I am so scared, what if he is not on our side anyways? What if we can’t trust him? My eyes fill with tears out of pure sheer terror caused by uncertainty. If I trust him he could betray us like the muzhik did, if I do not trust him we may end up homeless for months. What decision can get us into more trouble?

“We have heard reports the tsar is dead”, he continues in a soft tone of voice, as if trying not to scare us. “Is that true?” I start crying while nodding.

“It has been horrible!” I finally sob. My brother, seeing me cry, starts crying too. The Englishman tries to grab my shoulders in a sloppy attempt to comfort me, but I step back.

“Where are the other Grand Duchesses?” One of the other men, the one who observed me the most, asks me in Russian. He is in his fifties and has light brown hair and blue eyes, this one does have a beard, with several white hairs.

“They stayed in Perm”, I answer between sobs. “They wanted to take my brother alone to Moscow, but I came with him.”

“We escaped because they started mistreating us”, Alexei continues, I worry about what he might tell the men, but he only shows them his bandaged ear, that is now covered in red spots. “They cut me, look, and they beat my sister really bad, and they also killed papa and mama, and our doctor and servants.” I am relieved by his discretion.

“The reds did this to you?” The bearded man asks, me and my brother nod.

“They killed papa right in front of us”, Alexei says, his voice breaks.

“Animals!” The man exclaims, expressing his anger with his hands and arms, which startles me.

“Scum of the earth!” I give two steps back and cling to my brother.

“Forgive me your Imperial Highnesses”, the man says when he sees how frightened I am, I am surprised to hear him use our titles, but he might be doing it to make us keep our guards down.

“Where are my manners? I am Sergei Volyaovich Volkov, your most humble servant, I worked for years in the Okhrana after fighting in the Russo-Japanese war, now I work for Charles and I assure your highnesses that he has your best interests at heart”, he proceeds to bow.

“And I am Valeriy Stefanovich Kirilov”, the third man says politely, but he doesn’t bow. He is the youngest of the three, and has brown hair and eyes. “I am a doctor myself, and I would like to treat your wounds. My wife is a nurse, she can also help.”

“You must have both gone through countless horrors”, Charles says again, this time in a heavily accented Russian. “Please, accompany us to the inn we are staying in, so in the morning we can come up with a solution to your present situation.”

“Oh, thank God!” I sob, finally allowing myself to feel calm for a moment, even if I don’t completely trust these men yet. “You have no idea of how much we have prayed for help! Thank you gentlemen! Thank you!” What are the chances they would actually find us? This is God taking care of us.

They seem so sweet, Sergei offered to carry Alexei, who was apprehensive once again after the incident with the man who betrayed us, but the way the Sergei called him by his title seemed to calm my exhausted brother, who accepted while I carried his crutches and held his hand.

At first Sergei didn’t recognize me, he said that he had only recognized my brother, which is why
he had stared at me with so much attention at the cafeteria, he guessed I was one of the four Grand Duchesses, but he didn’t know which one because of my swollen face. I finally revealed I was Olga, which was a huge relief for him to know.

The three of them asked us all about our journey, and I told them as much as I could, leaving out some of the most shameful parts out.

“It is amazing you managed to get to Kambarka!” Sergei exclaims. “It is very far away from Perm!”

They had two rooms at the inn, one in which Sergei and Charles stayed and another one where Valeriy and his wife did, but Charles booked another room with two beds for me and my brother. When our room was ready, Valeriy’s wife, Anastasia Kirilova, helped Valeriy give my brother’s ear wound a few stitches, they also cleaned it up, and bandaged it again when they were done. My brother behaved well and did not complain at all, although he tried not to cry during the whole process, he almost succeeded as well, poor thing. Anastasia gave me some ice to put on my swollen eye while they stitched my brother, she also gave me some of her clothes to borrow, a nightgown to sleep today and normal clothes to wear tomorrow; I thanked her gratefully. After Valeriy left, Anastasia wanted to check if I had any other injuries in my body as well, but I didn’t let her.

After I had helped Alexei get a bath, I was finally able to take the long shower I did not realize I needed until my entire body was wet and covered in soap. Now I could finally get the feeling of those hands out of my body, now I would be able to erase all the traces of that day. But the more time I spent in the shower the more I came to realize it would not work. I scrubbed my skin raw, so hard that it became pink and painful to the touch, by the time I realized I was hurting myself the harm had already been done; especially painful was scrubbing the bruises those men had left on my arms, legs, torso, everywhere they had touched with a lustful need to possess and hurt my body, to hurt me.

I came out of the shower feeling more worthless and spoiled than ever. For the first time since the incident I had been given time and space to genuinely think about what happened to me without rush or fear of death. Now I had seen the bruises that proved it, and I had felt the pain they caused me when I touched them again. It happened. I stay inside the bathroom for a few minutes to cry because of the pain this realization causes me.

“Would you allow me to give your brother a morphine injection?” Anastasia asks me when I step out of the bathroom, she is examining Alexei’s leg. “A very small dose of course, he was just telling me this leg, especially the knee, is causing him a lot of pain.”

“Are you all right Olenka?” My brother asks me when he sees my red eyes, I nod at him, smiling.

“Yes Anastasia, thank you”, I tell the nurse. “But a very small dose to help him sleep tonight, I don’t want him to grow too dependent.”

“You know”, Kirilova whispers to me while giving my brother the injection, “you are not the first woman I have met with your… situation, if you get into more trouble as a result, I can help you.”

“What… what do you mean?” I ask, feeling exposed, I know it is not hard for any adult to deduce the full extent of what happened to me, but I don’t like it when they say it out loud.

“You know…” she repeats, “get rid of it.” I open my eye in realization, no, I couldn’t do that.

“No, no, thank you”, I answer her. “It is too early to tell anyway.”

“That is all right”, she says. “But if you change your mind early enough, I can help you.” I nod, but I would never change my mind.
“Get rid of what?” Alexei asks from his bed after Kirilova has finished his injection.

“Nothing, darling”, I tell him, he seems angry about not being told the truth and looks at me with a frown, but doesn’t say anything.

“I am going to tell the men to come back to discuss where to go tomorrow”, Anastasia says, and she leaves the room.

“What do you think sunbeam?” I ask my brother. “Where do you think we should go now?”

“To the Crimea!” He gushes, and I smile at him. I knew he would say that. We hadn’t been there since the war started, it was the place our family used to travel to for our leisure time and there was no place in the world I loved most. The clear blue skies, the beach. We had a palace there, Livadia. “In St. Petersburg we work, but at Livadia, we live” is something I used to say. Our close relatives are also there, our grandmother the Dowager Empress, our aunts, and cousins, but there is only one problem: it is controlled by the Germans.

“The Germans have it at the moment”, I remind my brother. “Remember what mama said once, after all the Germans have done she preferred to die in Russia rather than be saved by the Germans.”

“Oh, right”, he remembers, and lowers his head. We are both too proud to be protected by the enemy.

“The other option is England, I suppose”, I tell him, he has a thoughtful expression. “I think these men are planning to take us east, to Vladivostok.”

“Didn’t papa also say that it was our duty to stay in Russia if we could?” He asks.

“Yes darling, but you have already seen how hard it is to find people to trust, most people aren’t loyal anymore, they have their own ideas about who should rule Russia and some are willing to kill us over it.”

“Yes, I know!” He exclaims, sounding annoyed I was explaining to him something he probably considered obvious after everything we had gone through. “What I mean is, why go to England when we have somewhere safe to be with our family in Russia? I know the Germans have the Crimea, but refusing to go there because the Germans have it is like conceding it is theirs now forever, and we can’t lose hope, right? Our allies will win the war for us and we will get Crimea back.”

“Alyosha”, I try to explain again, trying not to sound condescending, “if we go to the Crimea we will be protected by Russia’s enemies, it is not the honorable thing to do, you know that better than anyone, and Charles is a British intelligence officer, taking us there would put him in danger.”

“We don’t need him to take us all the way”, he answers, “only close enough, didn’t we travel to this town all on our own? We can do it. We don’t need protection from the Russian people by the Germans Olya, only some of them have been bad to us, we can hide who we are for precaution, but the Russian people are good. Sergei and Valeriy are helping us, the man who took us to Kambarka was also really nice, and the guy with the red beard as well.” He is good at arguing, I give him that, when an idea gets into his head it is hard to dissuade him, papa was the only one that could convince him to do something without any trouble.

“It is not about whether we need their protection Alyosha”, I tell him, “they think we do, and they are going to give it to us, you know papa wouldn’t have liked us to receive help from the enemy.”

“What about Olga and Xenia?” He asks. “What about grandma? What about the locals in the Crimea?”

“What about them?”

“They are also living under the protection of the Germans.”

“But they didn’t choose that, Alyosha, the Germans simply arrived.”

“Well, I don’t choose them either”, he says. “I don’t want them in the Crimea, but that is where
they are right now, and that is not going to stop me from joining our family in a place that is part of our homeland. I don’t choose the Germans either Olya, I choose Crimea. Besides, we always get help from the enemy, if you think about it, when our soldiers take an enemy machine gun we use it, that doesn’t mean we side with the enemy.” I remain silent and consider everything he said, I also consider what other options these men might have for us. I do miss my relatives in Crimea, especially aunt Olga, it is the only place we can go where we will truly feel safe and home, at least as much as we can if Tatiana, Maria and Anastasia won’t be there with us for a while.

“You know what?” I say after a minute. “You may be right, but we need to ask Charles and the others”.

I never would have thought the discussion would turn into an ugly and scary argument, especially for me. I tried to sound assertive, and forget about how humiliated the ironworkers had made me feel earlier.

“Me and my brother want to go to the Crimea”, I repeat for the third time to Charles and Sergei, who are both standing in front of my brother’s bed, where I am sitting. Valeriy and his wife have already gone back to their room, which makes this all the more frightening for me.

“Your Imperial Highness”, Sergei says, as politely as possible, “Charles has orders to take you to Vladivostok, to the British consulate, to take you from there to a safer place.”

“We want to be with our relatives, not stay in the hands of strangers for weeks”, I state, “we have been apart from our family members for far too long, and if we can’t be with our sisters, we want to meet with our grandmother, aunts and cousins at least. Have a heart and understand our situation!”

“I was ordered to make a report on the Imperial Family’s whereabouts Sergei, and I already have a good enough source of information in order to complete my mission”, Charles says to his employee, and then he turns towards us. “Sergei, Valeriy and Anastasia will take you to the Crimea, Sergei will protect both of you with his life, he is well armed, and I can already see you are as well.” Charles looks at the revolver and the knife on the table next to one of our beds. I had removed the revolver from Alexei’s pocket when he took a bath and done the same with my knife when I showered. I had completely forgotten about it; I curse my own carelessness. The men had not taken advantage of our weakness to steal any of our weapons though, which at least means they are trustworthy. I thank God.

“Thank you so much!” I exclaim. Sergei tries to protest, but Charles speaks before he is able to.

“I am doing this as a personal favor to you because I didn’t receive any specific orders about what to do if I actually found any of you free from captivity, which was completely unexpected. I also understand you have suffered enormously and don’t want to be around strangers any longer, but if I had received orders preparing me for this situation I am afraid I would have had to follow said orders”, Charles continues. I feel suspicious about Sergei, why did he claim Charles had orders he didn’t in fact have?

“I understand”, I say, “and we are incredibly grateful still.”

“You will have to tell me in full detail everything and anything you remember about the location of your other three sisters though”, Charles continues, “right now I only know in what city they are in.”

“Sure”, I say, “I remember a lot about our trip from the house to the port where we took the steamer, I also remember the way from the train station.”

“I am not joking, your sisters’ lives could depend on it”, Charles says in a serious tone.

“What?!” My brother exclaims.
“What do you mean?” I ask, incredibly worried.

“You are already aware the Bolsheviks are no strangers to executing people without trial, if something like this were about to occur to your sisters, knowing their location to keep track of their situation would help us prevent a tragedy”, Charles says.

“But, but why did they spare us if they were going to kill us later anyway?” I ask, holding back tears now. I already suspected it was only temporary, I had even made my peace with it, but now that I have a good chance at surviving the idea of my sisters being murdered becomes again unbearable to contemplate, as if hope for your own life is also a curse, making the possible loss of your loved ones much more painful.

“Basing my deduction on the current situation in your country, on what you have told us about the sloppy way they decided to execute your father right in front of you and on reports we have gathered about the execution practices of the Bolsheviks, I suspect they spared you and your sisters on a whim, mainly to appease the Germans until the end of the war”, Charles says in a low tone of voice.

“But you are going to help them, right?” My brother asks, his lip is trembling, his eyes are wet and his voice breaks saying the last word.

“I will do my best to convince my fellow English intelligence officers stationed in Perm to launch a rescue attempt, that is why I am departing this town early in the morning and leaving you with my employees”, Charles says.

“But for the attempt to succeed we are going to need accurate information”, Sergei continues, he has apparently accepted his orders. For a moment I wish I could return to Perm to tell them exactly where my sisters are, and to beg the English officers to help them as soon as possible. But I can’t do that now, I need to at least make sure my brother is in a safe place, I need to trust Charles.

“I will tell you everything”, I say, wiping my tears. I pray to God my memory doesn’t fail me, and that Tabakov’s insults didn’t distract me enough to forget important things.

Charles pulls a huge piece of paper from his suitcase, as well as many colored pencils. Me and Charles sit on two chairs, one at each side of a small table in the room, and he starts mapping my sisters’ location based on the descriptions I give him. Alexei also helps once in a while by telling us several details from the bed, where he is already starting to fall asleep. Charles succeeds at making a very specific sketch of the blue house, the garden, its parts, and how to get there using both the port and the train station as references.

Both Sergei and Charles then ask us for information about our daily routine in the house. I explain to them I know very little, since I only stayed for a full day there, but I tell them everything I remember.

“This is going to be very useful”, Charles says after he finishes and starts putting everything back in his suitcase.

“Well, I guess we part in the morning, I will wake you up”, Sergei says after. “Have a very good night, your Imperial Highnesses”.

They leave me and my brother alone, I put on my nightgown and then tuck Alyosha into bed. We pray together, thanking God for this huge help, also begging him to keep our sisters safe.

“Are you sad because of those men that hurt you?” He asks me, my eyes fill with tears and I shake my head to reassure my brother. “Don’t be, they hate you but I love you, the sisters love you and lots of people do because you are very kind and smart, they are just bad. God will punish them and those who killed papa and mama.”

“I know baby”, I answer smiling, and I kiss his hand.
“I love you”, he says again, and I kiss his forehead before going to my bed. This time my brother, not being in pain, falls asleep rather quickly, and after worrying for a few hours about the fate of my sisters, I eventually fall asleep as well.

Chapter End Notes

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:
- Short comments, including emojis.
- Long comments, with no limits.
_ Questions
_ Constructive criticism
_ Reader-reader interaction
_ Comments in only one chapter.
_ Comments in more than one chapter.
This author replies to comments, but if you don't want a reply, for whatever reason (for example, shyness), feel free to sign your comment with the Word "whisper" and I will appreciate the comment just the same but not respond.
The child Tsar.

Chapter Notes

Some of the events that occur in this chapter, as well as some more to come, were inspired by the book “The Romanov Files 1918-1953”

See the end of the chapter for more notes

July 20th, 1918.

Alexei.

I miss my father. I was dreaming papa and I were in a boat, in the Dnieper river, where we used to go sometimes in our spare time during the war. My mother and sisters were there too at times, like when they visited us, and then they disappeared; dreams are weird like that. Maria and Anastasia were playing “I spy”, giggling when one of them said something funny that was clearly not the correct answer, I laughed with them. Olga and Tatiana were just enjoying the view, often smiling at their younger sisters´ silliness. Olga was happy, I felt so happy.

Papa was using his characteristic soft voice to tell me about the parade we would assist next to encourage our brave troops, and the hospitals we would visit, to comfort our wounded. Mama was asking me about the things I had done while she and the sisters were back home working at the hospitals, Tatiana asked too sometimes. It was so beautiful, the blue skies, the sun, the river… then I found out I was dreaming.

I do not like it when that happens, you are having a nice dream and then suddenly you realize it is just a dream. At least that means I can control the dream, it won’t become a nightmare. So, I keep dreaming, this time I choose what I dream.

I am now playing with papa a game in the fountain, where we both end up soaked with water, I remember that game, it was so fun.

I am playing in the snow with my 4 sisters when the dream becomes a nightmare again, not because of anything that happens in the dream, but because of the things I feel. I become aware of how distant those memories are, they are impossible to repeat, they are gone forever. Papa and Mama are dead, and Tatiana, Maria and Anastasia are far away from here, I am desperate to see them again and play with Anastasia; now, not in a few weeks, not when I die. I remember the night they died; my mind is filled with those horrible images again, when life left their bodies I felt like all the light in the world had disappeared, taken somewhere else. Poor papa, so kind, so worried about us. Poor mama, always in pain, always caring more about other people’s pain, especially mine.

I cry in my sleep, well, I am no longer sleeping. I am crying while lying awake with my eyes closed. I want my parents back most of all, I miss them, I want to be held and hugged by papa, and to have my hair ruffled and kissed by mama. I felt so safe when they were around, even when I was in pain, or worried about something. I want them to comfort us and tell us everything is going to be fine, that it is all God’s will so everything that happens is necessary.

It is harder to be reassured by God’s will without my parents speaking to us about it, but it was so comforting to hear about before, my parents were wise and knew what they were talking about, I knew whatever they said was the truth. I was safe. Please God, make me feel comforted by the
knowledge it is all in your hands again, and take care of my parents, make them happy and not worried about anything where they are...

My sister really is crying in her sleep.

“Mercy!” She cries, “Mercy!” I want to wake her up from the nightmare, but I don’t want to get out of bed, she has told me I need to stay in bed to get better. My leg hasn’t hurt all night, but it must be the morphine, it will pass.

“Olenka!” I call her from my bed to wake her up. “It is just a dream, Olenka!” I sit up and turn on the lamp in the small table between the beds.

“Olya!” I scream, louder this time, and she wakes up and looks around the room.

“Oh, I am sorry sunbeam, did I wake you up?” Olga says when she looks at me, sounding worried; why is she worried about me?

“No, it is fine” I say. “I was already awake.”

“Does your leg hurt again?”

“No, no.”

“You had a nightmare?”

“No, I am fine.”

“Why are you crying?”

“It is nothing.”

“It is all right if you had a nightmare.”

“No, you had a nightmare!” I reply, in a harsher tone than intended, she seems hurt after I say that.

“Why are you talking to me like that Alyosha?” My sister asks, not sounding angry, just sad.

“I am sorry!” I sob, I don’t want to make her feel worse. She seems confused, how could she not be? I was so rude; I do not know what is happening.

“I could sleep in your bed if you had a nightmare”.

“I didn’t have a nightmare!” I yell angrily again, and in that moment, I hear a knock on the door and give a short scream, Olga does too.

“It is me, Sergei, I am sorry for scaring you, your Imperial Highnesses”, the voice from the other side of the door says. “Get ready, I will wait right here outside to take your Imperial Highnesses to the cafeteria for breakfast, we leave in an hour”.

Me an Olga laugh about how silly we were. We are being so stupid nowadays, getting scared over anything.

“I am sorry Olya”, I tell her. “I didn’t have a nightmare, I just miss our parents”. She stands up, sits on my bed and gives me a hug, I hug her back tightly, as if the strength I used to hug her could make all her pain disappear.

Olga dresses quickly, putting on the clothes Anastasia gave her and hiding her knife there, she also keeps the peasant headscarf and puts the revolver back in my pocket; I hate that stupid thing.

Sergei carries me downstairs, to where Valeriy and Anastasia are waiting for us, already drinking coffee. Anastasia has brown hair and eyes; her eyelashes are long and pretty. I am glad I did not cry this time when Sergei carried me, or needed Olga to hold my hand in front of our new friends.

Being carried still feels empty whenever it is someone new doing it though, I wish I could turn my
head and see papa’s familiar face again, or Mashka, and give them a hug they would return with affection. I never noticed how much I enjoyed my loved ones to carrying me until now.

“Oh, this is delicious!” Olga exclaims once she gets a cup of coffee herself. “How I have missed coffee! In captivity it is a rare occurrence”. My sister looks so relaxed; it makes me smile.

Valeriy, Anastasia and Sergei tell us lots of interesting things about their travels though Siberia searching for information about us while we eat our breakfast.

“Thank you all for this food, it is the best we have had in months”, I say, and they all smile.

“You are very welcome your Imperial Highness”, Sergei says, referring to me, then he turns to my sister. “Your Imperial Highness, if you allow me to…”

“Oh, not again Sergei! You and Charles argued about this all night long, he was probably relieved when he left earlier today”, Anastasia yells. “They have suffered enough; they want to reunite with their family!”

“No, it is all right”, Olga says. “What were you going to say? Oh, and Sergei, you can call us by our first names and patronymic, there is no need for so much formality, you have saved us from a terrible situation.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dare your Imperial Highnesses!” Sergei says.

“No, seriously, most of our servants called us by our names, papa didn’t want us to be spoiled in any way”, my sister replies.

“All right,” Sergei says smiling, “I am not sure about addressing… you in such familiar terms, but if your Imperial Highnesses… I mean, if… you have no problem with it, I will try. I was about to advise you to reconsider your next locati…”

“Sergei!” Valeriy exclaims, sounding annoyed.

“The heir’s escape is a true miracle!” Sergei yells looking at Valeriy. Valeriy and Anastasia both look scared for a minute and put their index fingers in their mouths to shut Sergei up, they also give him a deadly stare. My sister also looks scared, my own heart almost stops, I look around the cafeteria, some of the people are looking at us.

“I am sorry”, Sergei whispers, realizing his mistake.

“The heir’s escape is a true miracle”, Sergei repeats, murmuring this time. “An amazing story, like the story of tsarevich Dmitri surviving, which was sadly untrue and paved the way for the false claimants during the time of troubles. This time it is real, we have the real tsarevich, and a real story. We need to use this opportunity to present him to the people still loyal to the Romanovs in the White army!”

“For the love of God, Sergei”, Valeriy says, “you want to take a sick boy and his battered sister even further away from their closest free relatives, and for what? Some move in the hopes of making monarchism relevant again? To make a child an Emperor and give him responsibilities he is not well equipped for? What an irresponsible thing to do! You would be putting him in danger again! What he needs is a family to ensure he is loved and well cared for.” My knee starts hurting again as soon as Valeriy says that, as if my leg had heard Valeriy reminding everyone that I am sick. I know it is stupid, the effects of the morphine may have simply worn off, but that is what it feels happened.

Valeriy is right, I don’t want to become Tsar, this is all over for good. A Tsar is supposed to protect his people, and I couldn’t even protect my own sister, I was the reason she was hurt in the first place. Even papa knew I was too sick for it, that is why he abdicated for me as well as himself when they stopped his train and made him give up the throne during the riots in Petrograd. Papa
also abdicated for me because he feared they would separate me from him if I became Tsar, my chest tightens and my eyes fill with tears when I think about that, my father really loved me. Papa may be gone, but I know he would have wanted me to be with my grandmother. I manage to hold the tears back.

“Papa abdicated for me”, I say, trying to keep my composure. “I can’t be the Tsar anyway, I am too sick to do my duty properly, I want to go home with my grandmother”.

“Forgive me your Imperial Highness, but that wasn’t legal according to the Fundamental Laws of the Russian Empire”, Sergei replies, looking at me and sounding sure about what he is going to say. “The instrument of abdication was never officially published by the Imperial Senate. You are the legitimate successor, and the Fundamental Laws make no provision allowing the Emperor or a parent to strip a dynast of his succession rights. Instead, the affected dynast, yourself, would have to abdicate his own rights, and I beg his Imperial Highness to forgive me, but I find it difficult to see how his Imperial Highness could do so before attaining his majority. According to the fundamental laws, you are already the Emperor, and will be so until the day you die, unless you abdicate after you turn 16.”

I stay silent for a while, looking at Sergei shyly. I understand everything he said, although it was a bit too much information to process so fast; at first I felt annoyed he would claim my father did something illegal, I wanted to defend his memory, I really hope Sergei didn’t notice my frown. Then I realized he was just stating facts about the law. Maybe my father had indeed broken the law, but just because he loved me so much, the thought makes me emotional again, I miss my father.

I feel trapped. Papa has always told me power is a duty, not a privilege; he said power was like a cross to him, a terrible responsibility for the welfare of the entire country and its people that God had entrusted to him, which is why he didn’t want to give the people a say over what happened in the government, if they made the wrong choice about something it would also be his responsibility.

If abdicating the throne for me was illegal, and now Papa is dead, that means it is my duty now to take that same cross, but I don’t want it. I know it is selfish, if you want to follow Jesus you need to pick up your own cross and follow him, that is what they say in church, but I don’t want any more trouble. The country has a lot of problems, which is why the revolution happened, like the peasant children dying young. I don’t know how to fix them.

I don’t even know for sure what the root of all the problems is, or if there is more than one root, I would have to learn more about what is happening all around, and I have never been so good at geography, or math, or history… or any class; I suddenly remember how far behind I am with my lessons, what a bore! I would not have time to play anymore if I became Tsar, and I can’t even begin to imagine how boring the lessons about how to rule a country would eventually become.

Even if I were good at schoolwork I don’t think I would have all the correct answers, the tutors may even lie to me for their own purposes, papa said people sometimes lied to the Tsar for their own selfish reasons. If I do something wrong people will get hurt, and they will blame me and hate me even more than they already do, like it happened to papa. I don’t want people to get hurt, and I do not want them to hate me.

But if the new people in power do something wrong and people still get hurt, then whatever happens will also be my fault for not doing my duty, even if they don’t hate me. Oh, I don’t want this! I truly am a prisoner again. The pain in my leg continues.

“I am not bothered about the idea of my brother becoming emperor”, Olga says before I can come
up with a good answer. “But because of the present situation in the country there is no way that can be achieved without compromising Alexei’s safety and putting even more Russian lives at risk. As his sister, I cannot allow that, he is also a minor after all, which means he should be with his relatives until he is old enough to decide what to do with his claim, I don’t want him to become a puppet for some strangers with their own agendas.” I feel relieved she is standing up for me, I nod at my sister and then at Sergei. If Olga thinks it is fine for me to be relieved of my duty, then I no longer feel guilty about wanting the same thing, Olga has always wanted the best for Russia, and she knew papa very well; I trust her.

“I completely understand your reservations”, Sergei tells my sister. “But this is a critical time in the history of Russia, there is a civil war going on and whoever wins will pick the destiny of Russia for the next hundred years, I can assure your Imperial Highness that I wouldn’t let any harm come to the Emperor, they will have to walk over my dead body”, Sergei then turns to me. “You can’t be guided by personal desires in a time such as this, as the Tsar you belong to Russia, not to yourself. Just imagine your Imperial Highness, how extreme the Bolsheviks’ methods must be for socialists and monarchists to band together against them. Are you going to let them get away with the murder of your father? With the murder of your people?” I hate this, now I feel more guilty about it than ever, the right thing to do is accept, I think. The pain in my leg increases, but I won’t show I am in pain, not yet… if only I wasn’t so weak.

“I am sorry sir, I am just scared, but you may be right”, I tell Sergei.

“This is why I am not a monarchist”, Valeriy mutters to his wife, who nods in agreement.

“Stop trying to bully my brother into agreeing with your badly thought out plan! It is me who will decide whether he goes or not, what part of him being a minor do you not understand?” My sister responds, in a firmer and slightly harsher tone this time. “Whatever happens to Russia is God’s will, if God wills for my brother to become Emperor, it will happen. We don’t have enough supporters to back up his claim now.” Hearing my sister say that comforts me again, she is smart, so there must be some truth about Sergei’s plan not being well thought out. As long as she defends me I will be all right.

My sister has finished talking, but when she sees that Sergei is going to argue back she keeps going.

“And I don’t trust the Czech legion!” My sister says before Sergei can speak. “They are republicans, and the only reason they fought on the side of our allies was to get their independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, now they must be fighting the reds because they want to return home to keep fighting for their own homeland. It would not be honorable for my brother to use a foreign army to support his claim. Also, the white army can still rally behind him while he is safe in exile”. I sigh with relief; I love my sister, and she loves me back as well, too much to agree with Sergei’s plan. Part of me is worried I am only taking her side to evade what I really think I must do.

“It would not be only the Czech legion helping you…” Sergei continues, but he is stopped by Valeriy, and then the two of them start discussing what they are going to do if they indeed take me east to the whites, as well as how much money they have and would need for each potential route. I see Olga roll her eyes, which makes me smile for a second, but then I realize they are indeed taking us east.

Both my arms and my legs hurt now; my arms are sore from using the crutches, my legs from riding and walking, my cheek and lip hurt like they are in flames, and the leg where that stupid evil man kicked me hurts the most; I hate him as much as I hate Yurovsky and Ermakov, but I think what he told me while the others were torturing my sister is true, I am weak and stupid.
I don’t think I will ever be good enough for this, I am in pain so often, my family has already been separated twice because of my illness. Back when we were imprisoned in Tobolsk, they wanted to take my father away, apparently to Moscow for his trial or to sign the Brest-Litovsk treaty, although there was a change of plans and we all ended up in Ekaterinburg. If it wasn’t for my illness, we may all have gone to Ekaterinburg together, but a simple cough and a bump sledding down the stairs for fun had rendered me too ill to travel. Papa and Mama had to leave without us, Maria left with them to help take care of mama, and the big pair and Anastasia stayed to take care of me until I was healthy enough to join them. I caused my family so much suffering by separating them and making them to worry; I missed papa, mama and Mashka so much during that trip, and my sisters did too.

Sometimes I think I was born to cause problems; how could I have been born to fix them as well?

“What are we going to do with the tickets we paid to get to Kazan?” Valeriy asks.

“Nothing, we have not changed our minds, we are still going to the Crimea”, Olga responds. Sergei looks sad and disappointed, I cannot bear to look at him so I lower my gaze, I feel sad for him, his loyalty moves me, I wish I were brave enough to be who he wants me to be, I wish I wasn’t so sure I would ruin everything. I wonder what papa would have wanted me to do if he was alive, I fear he wouldn’t have liked my cowardice and how much I want to evade my responsibility, although maybe he would have been glad I am making the safest choice, he always wanted me to be happy. I prefer to think it would be the latter, my uncle Misha didn’t want the throne either when papa abdicated for me, so it can’t be a completely unforgivable choice to refuse it as well, and my refusal may even be only temporary.

“I am sorry sir”, I tell Sergei after I gather up the courage to look at him again. “I didn’t mean to disappoint you, I just want to go home”. His face completely changes.

“Oh no, your Imperial Highness!” Sergei exclaims. “My apologies, I didn’t mean to pester you, I just really want what is best for Russia, and what is best for Russia is having its legitimate, God-chosen ruler back.” I rub my leg to try to make it hurt less, but stop when I notice Olga is looking at me.

“Maybe someday, Sergei, if God wills it”, Olga says, with a softer tone this time, Sergei gives her a sad smile, but he seems to have accepted our refusal. I relax, even the pain in my leg diminishes slightly somehow.

“Well, let us go then, the ship sails at 8:00 a.m.”, Anastasia says.

“My brother’s leg is hurting again”, Olga announces, she noticed. “Can you carry him?”

Sergei carries me to the front door of the inn, and then Valeriy and Sergei carry me on a stretcher all the way to the port while the women walk, it is a bit embarrassing and annoying since I can’t see where we are going while laying like that, but it is also a relief not to use those crutches, they caused me a lot of pain.

Valeriy stops on a local shop, leaving Anastasia to carry his side of the stretcher, and buys some newspapers and a book for us.

There are some red guards in the port, my heart stops, Olga gets closer to me.

“Don’t panic your Imperial Highnesses, I don’t think they have received orders to look for you yet, it is too soon”, Sergei says when he notices my pale face, talking to me and my sister while carrying his side of the stretcher. “If they ask we will just tell them the heir is a young red guard injured while fighting bravely in battle against the foreign counterrevolutionaries, the Grand Duchess was attacked by one of them and is now joining the red army like any man would. We are on our way to Moscow to get volunteers with our story.” Even though I am petrified, the idea of
acting like a red guard is amusing, I look at Olga, she seems less convinced, but nods.

I lay on the stretcher and think about a face a red guard would make; it would be a serious and angry face most of the time, one that shows you hate everyone. I look at the other passengers about to board with disdain.

We pass the red guards and board the ship without them giving us a second glance, the excitement almost makes me forget the pain, we really fooled them all. I giggle, and Olga shakes her head when she notices me.

This ship is bigger than the one we used to leave Perm, and there are a lot more passengers; I hate thinking about that other steamer though, it scares me. Me and Olenka get a cabin once again, while Valeriy and Anastasia get theirs. Sergei gets his own cabin right next to ours.

“What do you think about our saviors, Alyosha?” Olga asks me once we have sailed, I am resting on the bed, my legs and arms hurt a lot now. Olenka is sitting on my bed, about to read one of the newspapers out loud.

“They all seem fine, they are helping us”, I answer, raising and lowering my shoulders. “They have been good to us.” Olenka seems unconvinced.

“I think I trust Sergei”, Olga says, which surprises me considering what he was trying to do, Olga seems to notice my startlement. “Yes, he wanted to do something terrible in my opinion, but I think he has good intentions, he is a loyal Russian, one of the few left.”

“What about Valeriy and Anastasia? They are nice as well, Valeriy bought us a book”, I say. “Anastasia is also pretty”. I add shyly, I hope Olga will not tease me about it, I would not have told this to Nastya.

“Yes, darling she is pretty, and she and her husband are kind”, Olga says smiling at me, then she looks as if she is thinking about something, “but they are also liberals.”

“But they don’t hate us”, I argue, even though father has told me liberals did cause him the most trouble.

“You might be right, they are the good kind, at least for now it seems so. Mama considered Kerensky a gentleman, even though he is a socialist”, Olga says, smiling, and then she ruffles my hair. I feel sorry looking at her dear face like that, she is so good and selfless. I feel a rush of affection for my sister, so I sit up and give her a sudden hug, which makes her tense for a second before she hugs me back.

“Sorry”, I say to her.

“What for?” She asks, caressing my hair while still hugging me.

“For scaring you”, I say, she kisses my forehead and keeps hugging me in response. I don’t want to tell her what I am really apologizing for, she would just tell me it wasn’t my fault like Tatiana did and feel sorry for me. She does not need that right now; I was already inconsiderate and misbehaved with her yesterday and the day before. I kiss her cheek and then we pull apart.

“Do you think things would have been better for Russia and for us if the provisional government stayed in power?” I ask. “Papa always prayed so much it would be so, before… you know, the other revolution happened in October”.

“Maybe Alyosha, I like to imagine it often too”, Olga says. “But the if doesn’t exist, it wasn’t God’s will for that to happen, he had other plans.”

Olenka starts reading to me out loud from the newspapers, I lay back in bed to rest, the pain in my body is distracting, but manageable. The war is still going on, now the Americans are fighting in many battles as well, I think victory will come soon, the Germans can’t fight against almost the
entire world forever, they will eventually run out of manpower. A second battle has taken place in Marne, it seems our allies are holding on just fine, and they are launching a successful counterattack. It is a relief, Olga seems calm.

“I don’t think Crimea will be under the control of the Germans for much longer”, Olga says, and keeps reading. “Oh, look sunbeam, this article will interest you, it is about a relatively new English ace, his name is David Percival Williams.” Olenka shows me the picture of the ace near his plane, it catches my attention.

“Oh, that sounds interesting, remember how much papa loved planes?” I say, feeling nostalgic. My sister nods, smiling when she remembers papa, and starts reading.

“He has 39 air victories! He was outnumbered in most of his battles!” I exclaim during the middle of the article, impressed. “And they are all confirmed! That is awesome!” My sister continues reading, the article is remarkably interesting and exciting, it goes into full detail about the dogfights in which the pilot obtained his victories.

“He was knighted after he was injured early in July landing behind enemy lines to save a friend whose plane had crashed, and if he achieves 5 more victories when he returns to action, he will have as many as Albert Ball!” My sister says excited.

“Is Albert Ball the best ace?” I ask, “I want to see his picture as well.” I wish I could be as brave as them, as brave as Oleg, and all our wounded friends.

“He wasn’t darling, that would be Edward Mannock, with 73 victories”, Olga replies. “Albert Ball was sadly killed in 1917 and received the Victoria Cross posthumously, he had 44. But Edward Mannock was only the best ace in England, the best ace in the war has been a German pilot, but I think he was also killed recently, I am not sure. Their pictures do not appear here.”

“Ugh, I hope this new guy beats the German guy”, I say. “Well, I hope not”, Olenka says, which surprises me, she has never held her tongue when it comes to talking bad about the Germans, once again she notices my confused face.

“I don’t want the war to go on long enough for this new pilot to have time to return to combat and also achieve that many victories”, Olga says; I realize my error.

“You are right”, I admit. “I hope he doesn’t even have time to return to battle, I hope this war ends soon and he stays home with his mother.” Sometimes those amazing stories make me forget about how terrible war really is, even though I have seen our poor wounded soldiers moaning in pain in our hospitals and have held their hands to comfort them. Papa has also tried to make me see how many men have actually died in the war, so that I realize the cost of it. Once, during a parade, he asked all the men who had been there since the beginning of the war to raise their hands, only a small handful did, which meant all the others that were there from the beginning had been killed. I will never forget that day. I might not be brave, or a real soldier, or will ever be because of my illness, but if I am ever Tsar I hope I can stop wars from happening. Me and Olga start praying for the war to end, and then we pray to see our sisters again soon.

After praying for a while, Olga suggests we start reading the novel.

“Ugh, it is a girl book” I say, disappointed, Olga hasn’t even finished reading the title.

“Little Women, it is an old American novel”, Olga says. “Are you seriously going to complain about that?”

“I am sorry”, I say, chuckling, “who cares, continue, let us see what it is about.” My sister shakes
her head in disapproval while smiling at me, and then starts reading.

The book was not bad after all, it actually reminded me of my sisters because there were four of them in the book and they all loved each other, it made me really happy and nostalgic at the same time, I just wish they had a little brother as well, so I could fit in. They were also a family that was wealthy and now was poor, like us in a way. They did the best with what they had and enjoyed their time together, they even made plays, like our family did during captivity. Olga laughed and said Meg reminded her of Tatiana, because they both missed being able to dress up as elegantly as they wanted, although Meg complained more about it and Tanya always tries to hide it and not make a fuss about it, I told Olga Jo’s temper reminded me of her, but she denied being similar to Jo and even became slightly annoyed by the comparison, which I think proved my point. She said Jo was more similar to Anastasia because of her tomboyish nature, and Beth was a combination of Tatiana and Maria because of her hard work and gentleness.

We both laughed at our attempts at comparing the March sisters to our own. It distracted me from the pain once in a while, I think I will be fine in a few days.

We had to stop reading the book because dinner was served, this time I managed to grab the fork and knife, since the wounds in my hands were already healing, I felt silly about how happy it made me, especially when I saw how pleased Olga was when she saw me. The food was just as good as the breakfast, we all sat on a round table.

Sergei did not mention our previous arguments this time, he talked about his time working in the Okhrana, how he went undercover in many revolutionary organizations and knows how to imitate their kind. He also told us about his wife and children, he had two daughters who were in Omsk at the moment, one was pregnant, and two sons who had been taken as prisoners by the Germans.

“I am sorry to hear that”, Olga said. “I hope they are being treated fairly.”

We also discussed how the war was going. Valeriy was really fun, he offered me and my sister cigarettes, and this time Olga did let me try one, but warned it would only be one. It was better than the last time I had a cigarette, especially after I got used to it, but they all laughed when I coughed at first, it was really funny, Anastasia Kirilova told me she had done the same the first time.

After we finished eating we went back to the cabin and Olga kept reading out loud, but I start becoming distracted by the pain, it is back in my legs and arms, I can barely move one of my arms.

We go to bed early, because Sergei tells us we will arrive at Kazan tomorrow at 6:30 a.m. I can’t sleep, however, because the pain on my legs is getting more intense than even when we slept on the porch, as if it had been waiting for tonight to finally sink in, but I try to hide it at first, I don’t want my sister waking up. Finally, I start making noises, first it is just moaning, then I yell with my mouth closed, the sound comes from my throat. I can’t help it, the pain it is too intense. I am glad to see my sister comes to comfort me, even though I am ashamed of disrupting her sleep, it is this and not the pain itself what makes me start crying.

“Oh, God”, I groan, it has become unbearable. “Have mercy”.

“It will pass”, Olenka tells me while holding my hand in a soft tone of voice, I squeeze it tightly when the pain reaches higher levels than usual. “It always does”. I know this, no matter how bad it gets it always goes away eventually, it is all right, I am used to it, it will pass. She gently checks my leg without letting go of my hand.

“It is the knee”, she says, but it is not only the knee. “This is just as bad as Spala.” I think the pain this time is worse than in Spala, because now it is not only on one leg, but I can’t know for sure, it was so long ago.
I had almost died in our hunting lodge at Spala when I was 8 years old, and I hadn’t even been kicked in the leg, I had simply hit myself on the leg playing the way many boys do every day without almost dying. My leg had been swollen like it is now and the only thing I did in the worst moments was ask God for mercy like I am doing now and wish for death, they had even given me the last rituals, they had printed the official announcements of my death. I had asked mama for reassurance it would not hurt any longer once I was dead, the thought seemed comforting, it is even more now that mama is in heaven.

But I had survived, mama said it was Rasputin who had saved me from afar by praying, like he also had done later during the war, when I got a nosebleed and had to return home from Stavka. He was no longer around though, but I no longer think he was the reason I survived, he had already dead when I had my attack in Tobolsk, and I was getting better before papa and mama were murdered. I don’t want to die now though, I already have experience with these attacks and know they won’t last forever, God is testing me, these are my trials and my cross, I just need to be patient. I want to see my other sisters again in this life.

Another wave of pain rushes over me, please God, make it pass. The world goes dark and all I can feel is the pain. At least in Spala I had mama, who rarely left my side, held my hand and kissed my forehead and cheeks all the time to make the pain go away. I miss her, but I think she is here now, doing the same thing. I wonder if she is an angel that came to comfort me, or take me away to heaven, to be with my mother and father in the arms of Christ.

“God have mercy on me”, I say. It doesn’t pass, I don’t know how long it has been.

Now my sister is being tortured again, but I can’t move to help her, I see men with sinister smiles. The one with the bayonet.

Now what I am seeing doesn’t make sense, it is not Olga, but Anastasia, Maria… mama.

“Mama!” I scream, many, many times.

I feel a hand on my forehead, I hear prayers. It is alright, God is with me, he is just testing me, Christ also suffered.

Then it gets cold, so cold, I have never been this cold. Wherever I am it is not comfortable, I am floating in water. I am being bathed, I don’t want a bath right now, I am too cold, I try to say so.

“You can’t be guided by personal desires in a time such as this”, Sergei says, “as the Tsar you belong to Russia, not to yourself.”

I hear the screams of the peasant woman for her grandson again. Misha was a saint, I am sorry, they had no right to do that. God had different plans.

“Imagine how extreme their methods must be”, Sergei keeps going. The gunshots are so loud, they are making a horrifying sound. Anna is screaming, poor Anna! Monsters!

No Sergei! Please! I want to go home to my mother!

“You are not going to heaven with your mother”, the bandit with the dirty beard says, his brains are coming out of his head. “You are going to hell for what you did, and so is your sister.” That is not true, that is not true, we asked for forgiveness, Christ forgives all sins, right?

My sister is screaming in pain again, maybe we are in hell already.

“Mercy! Mercy!” She is desperate; I am desperate.
I am so sorry, I want to save you, I move, but I can´t move, I cannot do anything for you. I am sorry. I wish papa were here right now, papa could have saved you, I am sure.

Someone is carrying me; I do not know who it is. I am scared, I do not like that; I have no control over anything, who are you? Why are you carrying me? I do not know you! You are a monster and you killed my mother!

“Let me go!” I scream. “Let me go!”

I do not want you around!

I am carried anyway; I have no control, I cannot do anything for myself. I am being held in the arms of a monster and I will fall if he stops holding me with those same hands he just used to do unspeakable things, but I still want his hands off me. Mama would not have allowed them to carry me, she would not have allowed him to stitch me. She would have saved me.

Now I am back on a stretcher, first I only see the sky above me, the waxing gibbous moon, then there are red guards around me, I scream, they are going to kill us!

“A 13-year-old boy and a woman, she was beaten in the face recently”, one of them says.

Now they are arguing with their loud voices.

“Help!” I yell, “Help! They are going to kill us! They are going to kill us! They are going to cut me!”

The pain doesn´t stop, it keeps going. They are singing revolutionary songs to me; they are mocking me. I feel a pinch on my arm. They are going to cut me now, I keep asking for help, I need to get away, but everything disappears into darkness before I can.

My mother is with me again, she is holding my hand and kissing my forehead to ease the pain, but I know I am not dead, because I am in pain. Mama promised once I was dead it would not hurt anymore. But then again, maybe I am in hell.

Chapter End Notes

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:
- Short comments, including emojis.
- Long comments, with no limits.
- Questions
- Constructive criticism
- Reader-reader interaction
- Comments in only one chapter.
- Comments in more than one chapter.
This author replies to comments, but if you dont want a reply, for whatever reason (for example, shyness), feel free to sign your comment with the Word "whisper" and I Will appreciate the comment just the same but not respond.
July 21st, 1918.

Alexei.

I wake up on a moving train, I know it is sunny already, because the curtains are open, when did we go ashore? I am in a cabin, laying on two of the seats, I have a blanket over me. My forehead is sticky with dried sweat, my cheeks are marked with dry tears, the pain in my legs and arms is a lot milder, but it still there, my head hurts. My bad knee is raised with pillows. My sister is sleeping on the other two seats, she looks really tired, sleeping with her mouth wide open; I think she was the one holding my hand and kissing my face. I do not know what happened, but I am sure I ruined her night. I do not want her to wake up, I try to sleep again.

The next time I wake up Olenka is caressing my forehead, I feel exhausted, not as if I had just been sleeping.

“What happened?” I ask, my voice is raspy.

“Your knee is the most swollen it has ever been since you accidentally bumped it on the bed back in Ekaterinburg, it caused you a lot of pain tonight, you were also delirious with fever even the morning after”, she answers, holding the my hand, then she kisses it two times and puts it on the side of her face while looking at me with affection, I want to kiss her dear face as well, but I am too weak. She seems sad but composed, she has experience with my illness. “Me and Valeriy had to give you a cold bath, we already went ashore at Kazan and left, right now we are heading towards Moscow, but it seems you were too ill to notice, you passed out several times, like when you had the nosebleed, remember? I suffered so much tonight seeing you like that, we had to give you another morphine injection, this time I allowed Anastasia to give you a bigger dose.” I am so grateful for her, she is like a saint, like mama, I really want to hug her; but then a terrible thought crosses my mind, where those red guards real?

“Are we arrested again?!” I ask, trying to sit up.

“Sh, shh, no, talk less loudly”, my sister tries to calm me and lay me down again, caressing my forehead with the hand she is not using to press my hand on the side of her face. “After we get to Moscow we are heading south, we are staying there for a day to rest, that was always part of the plan.

“Sergei passed himself as a member of the Cheka to get us good cabins.” She chuckles.

“Where the red guards real? I heard them asking for us!” I say.

“You are not wrong. A few red guards stopped the train in one station looking for a 13 year old boy and a woman with a battered face; when they inevitably suspected us, Sergei gave a great speech where he presented you as the brave red guard injured in battle just like he told us he would yesterday morning. I wish you had been well enough to see it; it was a very well-acted spectacle. You were yelling the entire time that they were going to kill you, poor dear, but they believed you were referring to the Czech. Some of the red guards even started singing the Marseillaise to you, it was incredibly fun to play along and join them, Valeriy and Anastasia did as well, it was very amusing despite the horrible circumstances, you looked so scared, poor thing; but you are right sunbeam, the three of them are very nice, you have no idea how much they have helped me take care of you.” Olga smiles as she tells the story. I am glad to hear most of what I saw and heard last
night were just nightmares.

I chuckle a bit, but I am quite disappointed, that would have been fun to see while knowing what was happening.

“Did you act as the woman attacked by the foreign counterrevolutionaries that was going to join the red army?” I ask. Olga chuckles.

“I was too afraid to say anything until we all started singing, I thought it was the end at first, but yes, Sergei told them my made up story and I didn’t contradict him, I looked at the red guards as if they were stupid buffoons and had made a huge mistake crossing me, a soldier. I don’t know whether that can be called acting, I am sure Nastya would have done it better.” We both laugh, Olga imitated the face she had made in front of the red guards, it was very funny. I raise my arm and open and close my hand to communicate I want to hug her, she understands and takes me into her arms, it feels so nice I want to cry from relief. I feel almost as safe as when it was papa holding me, Olya has the same warmness papa had.

“I did have many nightmares this time”, I tell her, weeping, she hugs me tighter in response.

“I know darling,” she says after a minute with a sad voice, “we heard you screaming”.

“Thank you”, I tell her after a few minutes, I am no longer weeping, but my cheeks are still filled with tears. “Thank you for taking care of me, you are a jewel, I love you.”

“I love you too sunbeam; I hope the worst is over now”, she tells me, and after she kisses my cheek, we pull away and I lay back down. “Are you hungry Alexei? It is already time for dinner, we can eat in the cabin if you are too tired.” I am not hungry, and she probably notices that, but I will eat anyway, I want to get better, so I nod.

We eat in the cabin, I sit up to do it, which makes the room spin around, it is torture to eat, I do not feel like throwing up or anything, it just tastes bland. The food does help me after a while though, I feel much stronger, but my leg still hurts so much I want to keep crying at times.

My sister keeps reading “Little Women” to me while I lay to recover my strength.

“What is the point of anything she just dies in the end?” I complain when Olenka finishes the book, one of the sisters dies. “She should have healed; Jo was taking care of her”. I realize, embarrassed, that I have the urge to cry again, for both Beth and the pain I feel in my leg, but I manage to control myself.

“I am sorry Alyosha”, my sister says, “these things happen all the time.”

“But I don’t get why the author would write that when she can decide what it is that happens, all those things Beth did for the poor German family and how her sister Jo took care of her tirelessly when she was ill for nothing, she just dies in the end when she was the nicest one”. My voice breaks in the last sentence, I start crying. I know I must be sounding so stupid right now, upset over a book, but it is not fair, why did it need to have a sick character that dies in the end? This is not the right time.

Olga puts one index finger on her chin and starts thinking, she always tries to give a good answer to everything, at least it is something she tries to hide.

“This part of the story is not necessarily about Beth Alyosha”, my sister says in a serious tone, “even though she was at the center of it. Beth inspired her sisters to appreciate what they had, something they didn’t do when she was healthy, and she moved other people with her kindness, even if she died in the end, her story matters, it is important because of everything it taught her sisters about love and devotion, she still lives in them every time they think of Beth and are
inspired by her strength. Think about Jo, if she were real, mama would say that her soul is growing
by having such devotion for her sister, it is never, ever, for nothing, God knows why he does
things.

“It made me sad as well, especially because of how much I miss our sisters, Beth reminds me of
Masha especially, although Beth is shyer. I find it very moving to see you react this way, especially
because you didn’t want to read the book at first, remember?” She smiles while saying that. I must
have still looked upset, because my sister gave me a forehead kiss, wiped my tears and then
pinched my good cheek to cheer me up. I burst into sobs and hug Olenka, what she said did remind
me of my other sisters, Masha especially gave the best hugs, she hugged as tight as a bear, and she
does remind me of Beth; I miss her, and I miss her hugs. But most of all I am still upset about the
book, why did she have to die? It is just a story, I know, but death is real, it has taken so many
people I care about already, it can also take me at any moment, which will leave my sisters
heartbroken, and I do not like it.

“Don’t worry Alyosha, you are not Beth, I promise”, Olga says when she sees I am still crying, and
casses my hair, that statement only makes me more emotional, it is as if she could read my mind.
It takes me a while to regain composure.

“And Laurie should have married Jo, if I was Laurie I would have married her, she is more fun to
be around”, I say while still hugging Olga, wiping my tears and trying to think of something else to
talk about, that part of the book also annoyed me, so I choose that topic. Olga laughs, and then we
pull apart. I slowly go back to normal, I stay sitting up to talk, while Olga kneels in front of my
seat.

“Amy and Laurie had more things in common, they complemented each other”, Olya says. “I
actually liked that they end up together, I think they would have a successful marriage if they were
real, and besides, you don’t always get to marry the person you love, other circumstances also
come into play. The other person may not love you back in that way, or they may find themselves
in love with someone else, they may be from different social classes…”

“Like you and Pavel Voronv!” I exclaim, Olga blushes and I can see her smile at the memories, I
like making her smile, I stop feeling sad. Paul Voronov was an officer in the Standart, one of our
yachts before the war and the revolution. My sisters have told me she liked him a lot.

“Yes…” Olga admits. “But he married someone else, just like Laurie, sometimes people are not
meant for each other. It is God´s will.”

“And Tanya and Malama! And Masha and Kolya!” I continue, I laugh after I finish. Dmitri was a
soldier Tatiana had helped nurse back to health, he had given her Ortipo, her bulldog. The first one
had died but Malama had given her a second one because he loved her so much. Kolya was also an
officer, he was very fat, so we called him fatso, but he was kind and tender like our dear Masha, so
she, of course, loved him. I had once defended Kolya in front of his boss in the Standard, I liked
Kolya, and I hate when people are treated unfairly.

It is amusing to know all of my sisters´ crushes, I think it is funny they would have to kiss them if
they ever got married, but not like those men had kissed Olga when she looked dead, they would
both want to put their mouths close at the same time, which looks very weird, and must feel kind of
icky; but it would be fun to go to a wedding where one of my sisters gets married and kisses her
husband in the end, they would probably be so happy, although I would miss them, I would no
longer be the only man in their lives; I hope none of them gets married too soon after I see them
again.

“Exactly, both of them were nice men, they would have made excellent husbands for both of them
in different circumstances”, Olga says, chuckling.
“Did you ever kiss him?” I ask.

“Alyosha!” Olga exclaims, raising her eyebrows, but then she relaxes and starts explaining to me. “No, darling, never, or ever did the sisters kiss any of their sweethearts. It is not appropriate to kiss anyone who isn’t your spouse yet on the mouth, but me and Voronov talked a lot and I felt deliriously happy every time I saw him or was near him, I missed him tremendously whenever he was gone, and he was one of the main reasons I loved the sea, I became a bit obsessed, and he was only the first one I loved as intensely, there was also my Mitya, who I haven’t seen in so long, I hope he is alright... You will understand someday when you are older.” Olga is smiling and blushing the entire time she talks about the feelings she had for Voronov and Mitya. What she said first makes me feel outraged on her behalf though, I need to tell her, but I fear she will be embarrassed, I am not sure about it.

“The bad men kissed you when you were not awake”, I decide to say, lowering my head, Olga nods sadly and then slowly starts crying, she becomes more upset than I thought she would. I wish I hadn’t told her, but I think she has the right to know. I feel more horrible than ever about not having protected her.

“I wish they had at the very least not done that”, my sister says with tears in her eyes, but then she wipes them away and gives me a sad smile. “I am sorry,” I say. “Don’t worry, let us not think or ever talk about that ever again, all right?” I nod, if that makes her feel better then so be it, I will never tell anyone.

I can’t help but feel sad and confused that Olga seems to be ashamed of what happened, I feel terrified whenever I think about what they did to me, but not embarrassed. Maybe it is because what they did to her is particularly gross, but that just proves those men are incredibly evil and filled with hate, and that there is something wrong with their heads, otherwise I can’t see how they could come up with something like that to torture someone, they were obviously crazy. If she told everyone what they did to her, anyone would see how evil and crazy many of the reds are and realize it is dangerous to put them in charge of a country. They made my sister suffer so much; I hold back tears.

“I am sorry”, I repeat again. “For what?” She asks worried. “Nothing”, I say, smiling, I need to change the subject, so I do not start crying. “I don’t care what you say, Laurie should have married Jo.” Olga rolls her eyes and smiles, shakes her head, and then she proceeds to explain to me why I am wrong, as if this was a math question with an unquestionably correct answer, I don’t back down so easily, I may have brought up the subject to distract us, but I really do believe they should have ended up together.

“I can’t believe how much you care about this Alyosha, you are just as romantic as me and the sisters!”, Olga says after we have been discussing the topic for almost half an hour, bewildered. “I remember when you were little you told our cousin Elizabeth that you loved her”. I remember Elizabeth and her sister Olga, we used to play together before the revolution, I like them a lot, but I don’t love Elizabeth.

“I don’t remember that happening”, I say. “And I am not as romantic as the sisters. I am not romantic at all; I am a boy.” “You and Elizabeth were both three years old, so of course you don’t remember”, Olga responds, grinning. “But you must remember your friend Irina Tolstaya, you wanted to marry her, do you recall? And you even worried Mr. Gilliard would marry her. That was not too long ago, like three or four years at most have passed.”
“I do remember Irina, she is very pretty and kind,” I admit, “but she is an adult, and must have seen me only as a little brother.” I smile while saying that. Still, she was a good friend to all of us, Tatiana always told me in her letters whenever she saw her.

“Of course, you were too young to actually give it much thought or worry about it enough to make you lose sleep”, Olga comments, “but once you grow older it will begin to matter more. You need to remember the woman´s opinion matters too; Jo didn’t want to marry Laurie.”

“I know, I know”, I say. “I just wish she did though, they would have been good together, they had a lot of fun…”

“But she didn’t, and when you get older you need to respect the woman’s opinion on that matter, on any matter that concerns her”, my sister leans forward and says the next words in a profoundly serious tone. “Promise me you will always respect women, like mama and papa taught you to”. I nod, keeping my eyes wide open. I do not understand why that matters much, you can’t get married if you don’t want to anyway, the woman would only have to say she doesn’t come freely during the declaration of intent after the procession and the priest will not continue marrying them.

“I promise”, I say, then I remember that time before the war when my family visited Rumania, they wanted Olga to marry the crown prince of Rumania, Carol, but my sister did not like him. “It is like with Carol, right? You didn’t like him, and papa respected that.”

“Exactly,” my sister says, then she laughs. “I remember the sisters and I stayed in the sun for hours so that we could get tanned and Carol wouldn’t like any of us, but later Carol asked papa for Mashka’s hand, and she was only 16! Papa rightfully told Carol that Maria was only a schoolgirl.” I laugh.

“It would have been weird for Masha to marry so young, especially Carol”, I say, chuckling. But I start thinking, if Olga had married Carol, those horrible things would not have happened to her. “Do you regret not marrying Carol?”

“That is funny, me and Tatiana talked about this months ago. Even now, after everything that has happened, I do not regret refusing to marry Carol, I wanted to remain in Russia, and I can’t even begin to imagine how worried I would have been for all of you since February of last year if I had been in Rumania during the revolution. The uncertainty would have been even more unbearable.”

I do not remember much about Carol, the thing I remember the most about that trip was playing with his siblings, prince Nicholas and princess Ileana of Rumania. While eating grapes during a tea party I had spit the pips into the lemonade bowl with a really good aim, and I had taught Nicholas how to do the same. I thought princess Ileana was very pretty, she had brown hair and beautiful light eyes, and I promised her I would come back and marry her when we were older. That was obviously unlikely, I was just 9 and she was even younger, but maybe not impossible, my father said he knew he wanted to marry my mother when he was 16 and she was just 12.

“I liked Ileana a lot”, I tell Olga, and she smiles at me. “Olya, do you think that if she likes me back I will still be able to marry her even if I don’t become the Tsar when I am older?” I ask her. Olga gives me a sad look.

“I don’t think so Alyosha, unless her family recognizes your claim in exile, but I think they would prefer to make an alliance with a house that is still in power.” I lower my head, that makes me sad, but she is probably right, I hadn’t thought about Ileana in a long time anyway.

“But don’t worry darling”, Olga keeps going when she sees my sad expression, “there are lots of other girls out there who are free to marry whoever they want, and you are too young to worry about that.” That reminds me there is something good about all of this.

“Olya!” I exclam, “now that you are no longer a Grand Duchess you can marry whoever you want
when we get to the Crimea! Even an officer like Voronov! Or a soldier like Mitya! But of course, we have to wait for the sisters fir…”

“I am not going to get married Alyosha”, Olga says with a sad smile and a melancholy filled tone of voice before I even finish talking. I do not understand, maybe she is too sad to get married now, but she can marry in a few years.

“Why not?” I ask. “You have always wanted to get married”.
“I have changed my mind, I think I am going to join a convent once I am sure all of you are safe”, she responds.

“But why did you change your mind?” I ask. My sister looks as if she doesn’t know what to say, she looks around the cabin and bites her lip, searching for a good answer to give me; I am sure she will tell me a lie, I can see it in her face, it annoys me.

“The trials God has sent me have put things into perspective, the things I once considered desirable don’t feel so important anymore. I think I will feel more at peace in a convent.”
That makes a bit of sense, convents are peaceful places full of prayer, they are an incredibly good choice to forget about what happened. Olga has always been the most religious out of my sisters, so if any of them was destined to join a convent it would be her. But still, Olenka looked so happy when I mentioned the man she used to love, and the way she reacted to our talks about marriages proves the idea of marriage is still dear to her heart. Maybe she does want to join a convent, but I know that is not what would make her deliriously happy, like she said Voronov made her feel; she even sounded sad when she said she wasn’t going to get married, as if she had been cursed with being unable to do it, and it wasn’t a decision she freely made.

“I don’t think that is what would make you happy Olenka”, I tell her, she is about to argue back but I continue talking before she is able to. “You can of course do whatever you want, I understand what you told me. Maybe joining a convent will solve all the problems troubling your soul, because you will stop wishing for anything and live only to serve Christ, who will take all your troubles away.”

“That is why…” Olga starts to say, but I interrupt her once again.

“But it is not what would make you the happiest. Christ will always be with you and comfort you after every trial you face, whether you join a convent or not. You are not joining a convent out of vocation, or because God gave you a sign, you are joining because you think you are no longer able to get married, which is not a good reason; even if you did remain a spinster, that doesn’t mean you have to join a convent, you wouldn’t be able to dance as often, and you always loved to dance, you wouldn’t be able to spend as much time with us either, me and the sisters would miss you. I don’t understand the reason you can’t get married anyway.”

Olga has tears in her eyes, but she wipes them away before they fall.

“Baby, I will try to explain you”, she breathes deeply and, after pondering for a while what she is going to say, continues. “No decent man would consider me a good choice for marriage anymore, not after… I…”
“Not after those men did all those distasteful things to me, it is… considered bad luck, yes, their families might not like the idea either, and I can’t change that.”
“But why? What does that have to do with anything? That sounds like silly superstition”, I say.
“You are good, sweet, kind, smart, brave, you are good at singing and playing piano as well… and… sorry, at the moment you are not very pretty, but once your face heals you will look good again, everyone always says that you sisters are pretty.”
“Oh, darling!” Olga exclaims, smiling.
Olenka then laughs and messes with my hair as if what I just said was a joke, or something endearing that should not be taken seriously, it makes me angry, because I really meant it, I frown.

I hate that Olga might genuinely accept this injustice when she is so good to everyone, when she was recently so good to me, her heart is filled with devotion and selflessness, and she has acted like a martyr ever since the Chekists came for me, she has acted like mama.

Now I understand why Olga acts so ashamed and does not want me to tell anyone, she fears people will act like she brings bad luck or will not like her because of what happened, those people would be stupid, it could have also happened to any of them if they met men as crazy as the ones we met; there is nothing wrong with my sister.

An idea crosses through my mind, maybe what they did to her is what only husbands and wives are supposed to do to make babies, maybe that is why what they did to her was so awful, maybe that is why she doesn´t want to get married. But that idea is stupid, it looked way too painful, and if that is what makes babies then papa had to do it to mama, so that can´t be it. Maybe it is something similar though; gross. I am glad I am only 13.

Those decent men are worthless either way if they reject my sister for that reason. I do not like them; I almost hate them; I prefer to be indecent if that is what a decent man is.

It is not fair that my sister might have to deal with rudeness or meanness now. My sight gets blurry when I imagine people bullying my sister, or mocking her just like those evil men had done, if it ever happens it will be because of me. I might cry again, but I do not want to do it in front of Olga at the moment, I am mad at her for not taking my compliments seriously; I am also kind of ashamed of being such a cry baby today.

“Don’t be angry Alexei!” She exclaims when she notices my frown, seemingly amused by my anger; her amusement just makes me angrier. “That is just the way things are most of the time, but thank you for everything you said, it was very sweet”. I pout, there is the word, sweet, she is not taking me seriously again, I wipe my tears before they fall, I do not want her to comfort me now, I am really mad at her.

“I will tell you something Alexei”, she says, “if I ever find a decent man who is willing to marry me, and I want to do it as well, I will marry him just to take that ugly frown off your face”. I try to stop myself from smiling but I fail, I wipe what was left of my tears, then I chuckle, I do not want to be angry at her anymore, even though I know she only said that to make me happy. Olga notices I am in a better mood now and tickles me, we burst into laughter as we try to tickle each other. I never succeed at doing it, but she does.

“Stop, stop, stop!” I laugh. “I am tired of laughing.” I really am exhausted, and the pain is starting to increase again.

“Do we pray and then go to sleep?” Olya asks.

“Mmm, I am really tired Olenka, and it really hurts, everything is starting to hurt again, I really want to sleep, can we do it tomorrow morning?”

“All right”, she says, with an understanding look, “tomorrow, but Sergei is going to wake us up in the middle of the night, be prepared, we are near the Kazansky railway station”. I nod.

“I am going to ask Anastasia to give you another small dose”, Olga comments, I bet she noticed my discomfort. I open my eyes.

“But that is bad for me, isn’t it?” I say.

“It really is darling, in excess”, Olga responds, “but I can see you are still in pain and I think it is cruel to deny you a small dose. Once this attack passes we are done giving you morphine, I promise, I hope this is the last one you need.” Anastasia does end up giving me another shot, it is embarrassing to see her again knowing she saw how I acted while having nightmares, I try to avoid
looking into her eyes; me and Olya thank her.

After the nurse leaves, Olga kisses my forehead.

“Can you sing to me?” I tell her before she goes back to her side of the cabin. Olga smiles, kneels near me again, and caresses my hair while singing a lullaby; she has a very pretty voice, sweet like that of an angel, and she really enjoys singing, it sounds even better when she plays the piano, and when the four sisters are singing. I quickly fall asleep. Those decent men are stupid.

Chapter End Notes

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:
- Short comments, including emojis.
- Long comments, with no limits.
- Questions
- Constructive criticism
- Reader-reader interaction
- Comments in only one chapter.
- Comments in more than one chapter.

This author replies to comments, but if you don't want a reply, for whatever reason (for example, shyness), feel free to sign your comment with the Word "whisper" and I will appreciate the comment just the same but not respond.
The worst thing that could possibly happen.

Chapter Notes

So, in chapter 13 I made a horrible mistake about the english ace with the most victories, I just realized it now while researching about wwi planes and changed it. I am no historian, so please, if you see any historical errors that are not done on purpose for the sake of artistic license (like OTMAA surviving for example, or the fictional ace in the newspaper), please tell me, I would be very grateful, I may not be able to fix everything if the errors aren't like, small details, but it would be helpful. If you know about this time period ideas would also be appreciated.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

July 21st , 1918.
Olga.

Sergei wakes us up in the middle of the night just like he told us he would.

“I am sorry to wake you up, your Imperial Highnesses, it is time to get off, we will stay in the hotel a couple of blocks away from here for the night, there you can continue sleeping”, Sergei says, and then he talks to my brother specifically. “I hope you are feeling much better your Imperial Highness”.

“Yes, thank you Sergei”, he answers while sitting up, and I really hope he means it, my precious golden hearted baby brother. I had hoped some miracle would have exempted him from another hemophilia attack, but how could that have been possible with the way that man had kicked him? I go over to him and kiss his cheeks over and over again until he becomes annoyed at me. I really thought for a moment I was losing him yesterday, I think this has been his worst attack ever, but of course, as always, God did not allow him to die. I am so grateful for your mercy God. Seeing myself through his innocent eyes renewed my love for life for a moment, but the poor dear thinks I have not pondered about all the compliments he gave me, I have, I just feel wary about taking them seriously, he loves me too much and knows little about life, that can cloud his judgement.

Poor Sergei, as he leaves I remember the kind and fatherly way he reacted to my brother´s illness. Few people outside our family circle actually know the nature of his disease, yesterday Sergei became one of those few. Alexei looks scared of him for some reason though.

“He looked very distressed to see you like that last night”, I whisper to my brother, referring to Sergei. “He told me he now understands more than ever that you are still only a child who needs protection, and apologized to me for pressuring you yesterday.” He nods and looks calmer.

I wished so much yesterday for Tatiana to have been here to comfort me as if she were my older sister, I had never dealt with any of my brother’s attacks on my own, we would have handled it better together. Thinking of Tanya makes me miss her so much, but I pray we will soon be together again in the Crimea.
We get out of the train; Valeriy and Sergei carry my brother as always on a stretcher. There are several soldiers walking through the station, which frightens me.

“Don’t worry, they are regular soldiers coming from the front, they are not looking for us”, Valeriy explains to me. We manage to get out of the train station with no problem, it is a beautiful white building, like Livadia. I daydream about seeing my godmother again, Olga must be so worried after so much time without news from us, I also wonder about my grandmother’s health, I hope she is alright.

Some red guards start walking parallel to us in the street, I find their lack of consistent uniforms amusing; the only thing they have in common are the similar rifles and bayonets in their arms, some of them also have red arm brassards. What has Russia come to? I feel relatively confident until one red guard in a group of three men points straight towards my brother. He looks young, about the same age as me.

“Stop”, the red guard who pointed his finger at us says as he blocks our way, he raises his arm towards us and shows us the palm of his hand, his hair is brown, and his eyes are green. “We are going to need you to come with us”. Now I am genuinely scared, two other red guards approach us.

“Wait!” Sergei yells, giving Anastasia his side of the stretcher to carry. “What is this about? We have done nothing wrong”.

“I am just following orders, come with us please”, the red guard replies.

“We are loyal comrades on a quest to stir up the spirits of the proletariat against their oppressors, do you see this young red guard? He was wounded in battle fighting against the counterrevolutionaries and he is little more than a child, and yet here you are, old enough to be at the front but bothering good working-class people without even explaining why.” Sergei speaks with a melodramatic tone of voice so ridiculous it would make me laugh in other circumstances, as if giving a speech, but it was good enough to fool the red guards last time. He points at my brother, and then back at the man as he talks.

I remember I am supposed to be acting, so I look at the group of red guards up and down with a frown. Valeriy, Anastasia, and my brother remain calm.

Another guard, this one an ugly old fat one with dark hair and beard, whispers something in the ear of the guy next to him, a redhead. They are both looking at me and my brother with interest, I feel the urge to cross myself, but that would give us away.

“You have nothing to fear if you have nothing to hide, I admire this young man if you are really speaking the truth, it will only be a few minutes”, the brown-haired guard says, he looks at my brother and then at me. My heart starts beating really fast, I try to keep my act, but it is becoming impossible, what if Sergei, Valeriy or Anastasia have letters that compromise them? What if they recognize my brother? It is not that hard; our pictures have always circulated abundantly throughout the empire. Sergei’s act worked very well last time, but those red guards appeared to be from lower ranks, this man seems much more confident in his authority.

Maybe Alexei has grown tall enough for them to overlook him, none of his official pictures show how tall he is now, although he definitely hasn’t grown tall enough to be confused for anything other than a child, which is what they are looking for. I start having trouble breathing again, like when I stabbed the bandit, I hate it when this happens.

I want to make sure my brother is fine, I stand closer to him and grab his hand, he smiles at me and squeezes mine while I try to steady my breathing, I regret doing it though, there is no way they are
going to believe I am trying to join the red army now. My brother becomes a bit alarmed as well when he notices my anxiety, I ended up making things worse.

“I have nothing to hide”, Sergei replies. “I was a political prisoner in Siberia when you were still in diapers, what have you done for the revolution?”

“Nothing as great”, the young guard answers in an annoyed tone. “But the way you brag about it makes me doubt your intentions, a true revolutionary is humble”.

“I am from the All Russian Extraordinary Commission comrade”, Sergei says in a firm and serious tone, showing the man the same badge he had shown the previous red guards, it must definitely be a fake one, or one he acquired while working tor the British Intelligence. “If there is anyone whose intentions must be questioned, that is you, I wasn’t aware getting off a train was a good reason to arrest someone, I have never considered it so.”

The green-eyed man looks scared of Sergei after he mentions being part of the Cheka. I relax and start thinking of a way to help Sergei by playing my part. I am a young woman in my twenties, I already passionately believed in the cause of the revolution before the foreign counterrevolutionaries attacked me, which only strengthened my stance. I am going to become a soldier to take revenge, something rare for a woman, which means I think little of men who do not fight when it is them who should be crowding the trains for the front. How would I react to this situation?

“I am sorry”, the brown-haired man answers with restrain, but he still observes us with suspicion. “But I have been ordered to investigate every young lad I see with a woman… with a face like that, my apologies, but I can’t really see why she would be traveling in this state, and the combination is indeed a huge coincidence.” The man moves his hand towards my brother and then me, but his eyes remain on Sergei.

“Not everyone has been lucky enough to experience a pain free life, comrade,” I snap at the guard with a serious stare. “Perhaps the relative ease of your comfortable job has made you forget what the revolution really is, it is paid in blood, not in hours”. I thought about Felix Yusupov, one of Rasputin´s murderers and my cousin Irina’s husband, while saying that. He belonged to the richest family in the nation, they were even richer than my father the emperor, but he never fought and sat idle during most of the war.

“I will just search you quickly…” he starts to say as he approaches us.

“We insist we have nothing to hide, comrade!”, Sergei exclaims. “We are going to be late for our meeting, and this young woman over here was attacked by counterrevolutionaries and foreign invaders, the people you should be searching for. She is now joining the red army, and if I may say so, she will be fighting in the front, not doing menial tasks. She is not the woman you are looking for, and neither is this brave lad, but I wish you luck finding them.” I look at the guard with pride in my eyes and my brother does the same.

“Ugh, I can’t wait to get out of here”, I say after a few seconds, when I see he has no plans for backing down.

“I know it is probably not you”, the man continues, “but I really need to consider all the possibilities”.

“We have already explained to you who we are and why we are here, and have shown you proof we are not the people you are looking for. If you continue bothering us and wasting our time, I will be forced to open an investigation regarding your real motives”, Sergei says with a deadly stare.
“You are completely mistaken!” The red guard exclaims, but he sounds more fearful than offended. “I am indeed doing my job! I have orders!”

“Really?!” Sergei answers in an accusatory tone, he raises his eyebrows in disbelief. “Oh, I am sorry then, you must obviously be telling the truth, you are definitely not a saboteur, you just curiously use the same tactics I have seen them use before”.

“I am not!” The man yells defensively.

“I am going to need evidence for that”, Sergei says with a harsh expression, he then takes out a notebook and a pencil from his suitcase and opens the notebook as if to write something. “Who do you receive orders from?” I cannot believe my ears; Sergei is now the one questioning the red guard; I look over to Alexei, he is trying not to smile, I give him a stern look.

“Comrade Igor Pyotrovich Turov”, the red guard answers with a nervous tone of voice, he leans over to see what Sergei is writing, and when he sees that Sergei is still looking at him with suspicion he continues talking. “And he received orders to take charge of the entire investigation straight from Sverdlov, who acted with the permission of Lenin”. Sergei writes everything down.

“Have you ever met Sverdlov in person?” Sergei asks him.

“No, no, but I am sure of it.”

“How can you be sure of it if you have never seen him? This does not add up, Sverdlov is too busy to order such an investigation, do you even have their signatures? What is the investigation even about? Answer!” Sergei manages to scare him with the way he barks the questions and orders.

“I am not supposed to reveal this information to anyone! Not even the Cheka! Please come with us! It is an order!” The red guard exclaims, with panic in his voice and sweat running down his forehead.

Sergei continues arguing with the man confidently, he responds that they have the same authority so he can’t order him to do anything. I lay down my guard just as the redhead and the ugly man are moving closer to me, observing my face, I pretend that offends me and turn my head around. I start praying they did not recognize me.

“I am not sure about her, but I am sure it is him”, I hear the black-haired man whisper to the red hair. My heart starts beating fast, I pray these other two men do not manage to convince the young one that we are indeed the ones they are searching for.

I see the black-haired man move out of the corner of my eye, he suddenly grabs my brother by the arms and removes him from the stretcher so fast that it takes a minute for Anastasia and Valeriy to react, fear rushes throughout my entire body a little too late, it is too sudden for me to grasp what is happening with clarity. My baby brother starts screaming almost immediately. Anastasia tries to grab him back, but the man holds my brother with one arm and uses the other hand to hit her twice with his rifle in her shoulder and outer thigh so hard it makes her collapse.

I keep holding my brother´s hand tightly, but almost at the same time he is removed from the stretcher I feel the red hair grab me by the waist, he drags me the opposite way, I realize he is trying to force me to let go, so I grab my brother´s hand even tighter, with all my strength, with all my soul, while yelling for help and trying to use my other arm to hit the man with my elbow. The man´s strength becomes too much and with one great pull I am forced to let go of Alyosha´s hand. I start screaming in terror. This can’t be happening, I blink repeatedly to see if I can wake up, but it isn’t a dream.

The man carrying my brother is still grabbing him by the torso with one arm and uses his other hand to hold his rifle, leaving my brother´s arms free for him to struggle fiercely but uselessly; the man starts running away, taking my brother away from me. My mind fills with anguish, I start
screaming for my him and he does for me as well, we extend each other´s arms pathetically.

I see Valeriy on the ground, holding his nose, the redhead must have punched him there when he also tried to help me, he stands up and approaches Anastasia to see if she is alright.

I am filled with rage, I move and struggle against the man grabbing me frantically, I hit him over and over again, and he reacts by dropping me on the ground and kicking me in the stomach more than one time, leaving me without air, which fills me with terrifying memories, hearing my brother scream in fear for me makes it all the more similar. I become a sobbing mess.

“No! Leave her!” I hear Alyosha sob as the man picks me up again and grabs his revolver from his hip. I want to yell at my brother to use his own revolver, but I genuinely can´t even speak, I barely have enough air to sob.

I remember knife under my shirt, and try to grab it, but the sound of a gunshot stops me. The horrible sound startles me, I hate it, I don’t want to hear it ever again; I can hear my brother screaming hysterically for me even louder but I cannot see him any longer, he must think I was the one shot, but it was the redhaired man grabbing me who was shot in the stomach. The shooter was Sergei, who then moves to chase after the other man who has already taken my brother considerably far, I am filled with hope for a second.

The brown-haired guy pulls out his revolver as soon as he composes himself after the shock and shoots Sergei before he can even take one step towards the man who took my brother, I see blood pouring out of his chest, but I refuse to believe it, not him God, why? I scream even louder. Why is this happening?

As soon as Sergei´s body collapses, Anastasia grabs me tightly by the arm and drags me away, far enough to be safe from the shooting. Valeriy stays still, paralyzed, watching the entire scene unfold. The brown-haired guard goes over to check on the redhaired man who was just shot in the stomach and Valeriy uses the opportunity to grab Sergei´s gun and run in the direction of the man who took my brother. I move to go with him but Kirilova´s tight grasp stops me. I hate Anastasia Kirilova in this moment so much that it scares me.

“We meet in the hotel my love!” Valeriy yells to his wife before running even faster, fearing the brown-haired man would go after him. The latter does realize Valeriy is gone when he hears him yell, and raises his head.

“Come on! My husband will save him!” Anastasia says as she drags me back to the train station.

“No!” I scream back, struggling against her; my baby brother is being taken and this woman does not seem to care. I see the young guard turn his attention towards us and I finally listen to Anastasia.

We run inside the train station for minutes until we are sure the man is not following us and then hide among the crowd once we slow down; this didn’t happen, this didn’t just happen, a lump forms in my throat, and the entire world goes black before I hit the ground.

I find myself surrounded by people when I wake up laying on the floor, Anastasia is right next to me supporting my head with her hand.

“Breathe in, breathe out”, Kirilova tells me while helping me stand up again, I can hardly breathe. I do not need her comfort, I am annoyed by it, I need my brother back, I refuse to accept this just happened, it is too horrible to describe, I can´t protect him now, anything bad could happen to him. “She is alright”, Anastasia tells the people that were around, and most of them walk away, then she
helps me stand up.

Everything I have suffered for this not to happen was for nothing, they may kill him anyway. I scream loudly with tears rolling down my cheeks when my mind finally accepts that my brother has been taken and now I have to start thinking of how to get him back instead of daydreaming about how great it will be when the 5 of us are finally together in Crimea again. I scream again bending over my stomach.

“Shh! Shh!” Anastasia exclaims while putting her index finger on her lips and keeping her hand on my back, she wants me to be quiet. I realize I am still screaming, and now I am angry at her. I stop screaming, but I hit her with my palms two times in the shoulders, which I immediately regret when I see her rubbing them, I had hit her hard enough to hurt her. I stand still when I realize what I have done, then turn around and put my hand on my forehead to continue crying.

“I am just as shocked as you are, I can´t believe this just happened”, she says.

“No, you are not!” I yell back, turning back around to face her and pointing at her with my index finger. “I doubt you are even capable of feeling compassion for any children at all”. She seems hurt by my statement, but I do not care.

“You are being unfair, your pain is blinding you; don´t forget my husband is also in danger”, she reminds me.

“That wouldn’t be the case if you hadn´t let that man take him!” I cry.

I am still angry at her, I am angry at her husband, at Sergei and myself for not doing enough to protect him, I am even angry at my brother for not using his revolver yet again, stupid boy. God is the only one that escapes my rage because I know I am not supposed be mad at him, which just makes me even angrier at everything and anything, at things that have nothing to do with what just happened; the people passing by, the trains, the clock hanging over us…

All the people in the station that are walking or standing nearby are observing us, curious about all my screaming and subsequent argument with Anastasia. I feel ashamed of my outburst, ashamed of my rage, of talking nonsense, ashamed of being angry at Sergei especially, when he died to save me.

God please forgive me, help me be better, I cross myself. Mama always cautioned me against my outbursts of anger, she used to say it was unladylike. I thought I had left most of my bad temper behind during my teenage years, when I stopped answering back to my mother with a bad attitude. I cross myself again.

I let out a loud sob, and Kirilova hugs me; I hug her back, but the hug doesn´t help, my anger is just transformed into anxiety.

“I am sorry”, I apologize. “I didn’t mean any of that”.

“It is alright”, she answers, but I can tell she felt insulted at the very least, and is restraining herself from protesting about what I said. I completely understand why. I may not like what she does, but what I said has no basis on truth, I had witnessed the way she had helped me take care of Alexei tirelessly, I had seen her hold his hand as dutifully as any Sister of Mercy would whenever I was too tired to stay awake.

“What are we going to do now?” I ask her in a small raspy voice, wiping my tears.

“I think we lost the guard who stopped us, if he even followed us at all. We need to see if we can
grab Sergei´s suitcase before any other red guards in the station take it, there is important information in there. If it makes you feel better we can look for your brother and my husband right after instead of waiting for them in the hotel.”

“How?” I ask.

“I remember the direction the man took, maybe my husband succeeded in stopping him, don’t lose hope”, I nod. I choose to refuse to acknowledge there is even a possibility Valeriy might fail to save my brother, my eyes dry. I choose to have hope and start praying for Valeriy to succeed and for God to forgive me for my shameful recent behavior.

We go back to Sergei´s body, that many curious people are surrounding, and take his suitcase. I can hardly believe no one has stolen it yet.

“Shouldn’t we take his body to his family?” I ask Anastasia, my mind is filled with anguish for this poor man, I hate seeing his body, it just makes it all the more real.

“We can’t Olga, I am sorry”, she answers in a murmur. “How would we be able to travel with it? We do not even have enough money for the casket, or to pay someone to embalm him, not when we have to travel and pay for hotels. We have his pictures and letters here, that is what we can give to his family.”

“But what is going to happen to his body then?”

“I am afraid he will end up in a common grave.”

Kirilova carries the suitcase while I follow her, whenever I am not thinking of my brother I can’t stop thinking about Sergei. He deserved better than this, a proper burial. I remember my parents, they didn’t have a proper burial either, that man who taunted Maria talked about how they would throw acid at their bodies; I am disgusted, and a sudden rush of grief for my parents goes through me at the thought of not having at least been able to say goodbye to their bodies, I had been taken out of the murder room without being able to do so.

We walk and walk in the direction the man with my brother went and Valeriy apparently followed, but we find nothing, so we ask the people passing by.

“Yes, I did see a man carrying a boy, he was walking backwards”, one man testifies after we have asked dozens of people. “I saw him from the balcony of my house, he shot a woman passing by”. I am shocked by those news, that brute, I hope my brother is alright.

“Do you have any idea where they went?” Anastasia asks.

“They went straight two blocks and then they turned left”, the man answers.

“Thank you”, Anastasia says.

We do not find either Alexei or the man when we arrive where the man told us to go, but we find Alexei’s empty revolver on the way, my mind imagines the worst.

“Valeriy!” Anastasia suddenly shrieks whilst running when she sees her husband laying on the floor moaning, she locates the source of the wound and applies pressure with her hands. When I go to help her and see a body laying near Valeriy, it belongs to the young green-eyed guard who stopped us at the train station, I suspect Valeriy killed the young guard when he was followed by him, but didn’t succeed in killing the man who took Alexei. My heart starts beating really fast and my anxiety increases, I think I may be having a stroke, is it possible?
I restrain myself from asking Valeriy what happened and where in God’s name is my brother. Poor Valeriy can’t even talk right now, this situation is too terrible to bear, this clearly proves he did not succeed but I refuse to believe that.

I breathe deeply several times and focus instead on helping Anastasia put pressure on the wound while she takes out bandages from her bag. I keep my mind only on my job, trying to get over my inherent dislike of blood, trying not to think of my parents’ blood staining our clothes that night, trying not to die of worry.

The wound is on the lower side of his torso, he may live.

“I am here”, Anastasia whispers to her husband, putting her hand on his cheek. “I am here.” She is already crying.

A man and a woman arrive on the scene, the man has a white beard and brings a suitcase with him, the woman looks about 30 and brings a stretcher.

“There he is”, says the woman to the man in a worried tone of voice, “I told you”. The woman lived nearby and had heard the shooting, then she had called a local doctor.

Me, Anastasia, and the new doctor stop the bleeding with the help of our bandages and the ones he brought and decide to take Valeriy to the local infirmary where the man works.

The nurses of the infirmary do not allow Anastasia to help with the surgery, one of them said she would be too anxious to be of any use, since it is her husband. Me and Kirilova wait outside the operating room sitting in a small living room next to the patient beds.

Many of the patients are wounded soldiers, but there are also patients quarantined due to illness in different rooms.

The doctor and the nurses fight to save Valeriy’s life while Anastasia sobs, rubbing her arms and staining her nurse uniform with blood, she had already taken her veil off for comfort. The sight of the blood is more unbearable now than when I worked as a nurse.

I feel guilty and ungrateful about how little I care about the fact Valeriy’s life is in danger; I am just worried sick about my brother. I do not tell this to Anastasia though, it would be insensitive, she is already absolutely anxious, and there is nothing she can do for my brother now. The only thing I can do is pray. I pray for both Valeriy and Alexei.

I wonder what will happen to my brother now, will they execute him immediately for escaping? Will he stay a prisoner for years under solitary confinement like Ivan VI until he loses his mind?

My mind diverts to Ivan VI, he was just a baby when he was made emperor, empress Elizabeth later took the throne and he was separated from his family and imprisoned for what was left of his life. My ancestress Catherine the Great had then ordered him to be murdered if anyone ever attempted to release him. He was killed when he was 23.

I then think about an even earlier tragic figure, Tsarevich Ivan Dmitriyevich, the son of one of the false Dimitris during the times of trouble. He had been hanged when he was 3 years old like a thief for no crime other than being related to an impostor when the first Romanov Tsar, Michael, was sovereign. The Romanov dynasty had started with the murder of an innocent child, I can’t bear to think what that means for my brother. Legend even says the mother of this child had cursed the dynasty before dying.

Maybe this is just divine retribution on my family for the way our ancestors treated those innocent
boys, Tatiana would say it is indeed the product of a curse if I ever shared these thoughts with her, she has always been very superstitious. Or maybe God has sent me all these trials to acknowledge things about my family I did not consider before, other than maybe thinking naively that people are much better now than they were in past centuries. I used to admire Catherine the Great, and the fate of Ivan VI was just some tragic afterthought for me; he was not my brother. Now my family is the afterthought for the new regime, we are just a means to an end, a potential threat to their power just like those children were.

I still can’t accept this though, my brother does not deserve this, my siblings do not deserve this, or my parents, we are not our ancestors. Maybe I am biased for being his sister, but never have I met a more conscientious child than my brother, never have I encountered a child so concerned about other people’s troubles. I remember with nostalgia the time before the revolution when he defended a cook who was refused a position, he argued with our parents about it all day long until the cook was indeed taken back; papa told me all about it later with a grin on his face, clearly proud of his son’s early signs of a strong will, my brother stood up for all of his own. I am filled with grief when I think of my father and how much I miss our talks.

God, I am going to miss them both so much!

Anastasia’s tears eventually move me, even though since I met her our relationship has been awkward and formal despite how much she has helped me, like that of a nurse and a onetime patient. I have never seen her so fragile; she must love Valeriy like mama loved papa. After the shock has passed the fact Valeriy tried to save my brother sinks in, what a good man, I truly hope he survives.

The worst part is that all of this could all have been avoided. I am so anxious and disillusioned I might burst. I do not follow the same advice I gave Alyosha, I simply can’t stop thinking about what ifs.

“My stupid brother didn’t do the simplest thing again!” I suddenly grumble.

“What?” Anastasia asks wiping her tears, clearly startled by the way I referred to my brother.

“I am so sorry about all of this; it was my fault”, I lament. “If my brother had used the revolver in order to scare the guy, your husband would not have been shot. I was the one who put the gun in Alexei’s pocket again just because that is where I was used to put it, I already had pockets in this sweater that you borrowed me, I should have kept the gun.”

“No, no, don’t say that”, Kirilova replies. “They took us completely by surprise, the last time our act worked so we were not prepared for it not to, those other two guards just went ahead and grabbed you and your brother, they didn’t listen to anything we had to say. I doubt a gun would have helped much; they were also armed.”

“This was indeed all my fault for being careless”, I insist. “I really thought the worst part was over and I lowered my guard, I had my head in the clouds and did not even think or consider anything and now Sergei is dead and both my brother and your husband could die at any minute, this is all my fault.” I am crying again when I finish talking, I put my elbow on the arm of the sofa and rest my head on the palm of my hand, covering my face.

“If it was anyone’s fault it is everyone’s fault, we should all have been more careful”, Kirilova replies. We stay in an awkward silence for a while, I keep crying for my brother, Anastasia cries for her husband. I can’t stop moving my legs and biting my nails, I weep silently when I am not choking with sobs, and I have trouble breathing when I am not doing either, Anastasia notices and breathes deeply in order to be able to talk.
“I understand how horrible the uncertainty is”, Kirilova tells me with tears in her eyes. “I would be lying if I told you we have a plan for this, we don’t; but we have Sergei’s notebook where he wrote about the man searching for your brother, and the British intelligence must have connections with in Moscow as well, I promise we won’t stop searching for him.”

“Yes please! You can’t give up on him!” I sob, and even though I know it is unlikely they will find him, my mind is comforted by the fact that something will be done, this is not the end, I haven’t abandoned him, I haven’t let Tatiana down. Anastasia assures me that they won’t give up. I breathe better from now on, but I still can’t stop moving my legs.

“Your husband was very brave to follow that man”, I note after a few minutes in gratitude, hoping to cheer Kirilova up. “I am sorry I didn’t say this before, but I am very grateful for everything you two have done, and Sergei as well. I have prayed a lot for your husband to get better”. Anastasia turns to me and gives me a tearful smile.

“I appreciate that, I hope God listens”, she says, “and believe me, I am just as surprised about what he did as you are, if you knew him you would see why, he once told me he had decided to study medicine so if a war ever broke out he wouldn’t have to fight”, Anastasia makes a short chuckling sound, then she cleans her face with a handkerchief. “He never served in the front as a medic either, he and I worked at a military hospital far away from all the fighting, that is where we met.”

“Really? Did you work together?” I ask, putting my hand under my chin and looking at her with interest, hoping she will continue the story. Anastasia smiles and nods.

“At first the only thing he did was boss me around more than necessary, he asked me to help him with surgeries more than the other nurses”, she begins, “so I started answering ´no´ to everything he asked me to do because he was starting to drive me crazy. I always ended up doing it anyway of course, sometimes I did it while saying ´no´, it later became an inside joke for us, and it just… started to grow from there”. She smiles, looking at her hands while telling the story, and I can’t help but think about how ridiculous it is that we are talking about this considering how sick with worry I am, my legs don’t stop moving and my head is starting to hurt as well. I am still glad to hear about it though.

That is how I would have met my husband if I were a normal girl and not a Grand Duchess, while working as a nurse in a hospital, I feel a twinge of jealousy. None of those horrible things would have happened to me if I were a commoner either, my brother and sisters would be safe in my arms, my parents as well. Those thoughts make me sad, just more what ifs. I hope God helps me accept his will.

“It is strange he ended up working for the British intelligence in these times then”, I joke, wiping my tears.

“I suggested it”, Anastasia reveals with a smile, she looks as if she is recalling good memories. “I have always been way more adventurous, although he is the one who was the most bothered by the events of October of last year, he hopes our allies will do something to help us once the great war is over, that is what made him accept”.

“I really hope the allies do help our motherland”, I say, and I feel more confident to talk to her after all she has revealed about herself. “You have no idea of how lucky you are”. Anastasia cocks her head in confusion. “I don’t mean now, forgive me”, I chuckle, and she nods in understanding. “I mean you are lucky nothing could stop you from marrying him, he is a good man”.

“Talking from experience?” She asks, and I nod.
“It was a soldier I nursed… Mitya”. My darling Mitya, is how I call him to myself. I last saw him about two years ago, before the revolution, and I have not gotten news from him in months.

“You were in love with him?” Anastasia asks with a spark in her eyes.

“I think so”, I say shyly, it just occurs to me how little I actually know about love compared to women like Anastasia, or my own cousin Irina, and they are both just slightly older than me. It feels strange to know the things they do. “I can’t know for sure if my girlish crush on him could be considered love, but we loved talking, especially on the balcony while I knitted, I was always so glad to see him, the hours felt like seconds, and when he was away I sent him letters. One time, when I received a letter from him, I threw all of my things and jumped around, I asked a friend if it was possible to have a stroke at 20, I genuinely thought I was having one”. Just like I felt an hour ago, but for an extremely painful reason.

“That sounds like love indeed, did he ever tell you he felt the same way?”

“Not really, but he showed it in other ways, especially by the way he looked at me”, I blush, I can’t believe I am talking about this. “I don’t think I am supposed to tell you this, not even my mother knew, she would have stopped liking him as much if she did. Once, Mitya offered to kill Rasputin for me if he ever offended me, I learned this from a friend, Vera, who is also a sister of mercy”.

“Definitely nothing like my Lylalya then”, Anastasia chuckles.

“No, I don’t think so”, I say while I smile. “He was wounded more than once during the war, we once said when he left that he would return either with a St. George cross or in a stretcher, he returned with both eventually, more seriously wounded. But he was delightfully nice and cheerful most of the time like your Valeriy. He also got along with my family, he was often invited to the Alexander palace for tea, I remember he gave Masha a birthday card once, and talked with my brother on the telephone, he liked to hear Mitya’s war stories.” As I remember my brother, my voice breaks and the tears come back to my eyes when I mention him, Anastasia notices and gives me a sad smile.

“Poor thing”, she sympathizes, “I don’t have any younger siblings, but I understand it must be painful, he was such a sweetheart.” I don’t like the way he refers to him in past tense. Suddenly one of the nurses exits the room where she was operating Valeriy.

“He will recover”, she announces to both of us, Anastasia cries from relief, thank you God, please do not forsake my brother now. “He is resting now”, she then turns towards Anastasia. “You can see him, but try not to disturb him.”

We decide to spend the rest of the night on the infirmary, Valeriy rests on one of the many beds while I let Anastasia sleep on the sofa. The woman who found Valeriy offered us her house to sleep in, but Anastasia did not want to be too far from Valeriy, and I would not be able to sleep anyway. I stay up the rest of the night praying in silence for Alexei with tears in my eyes, please God be with him.

The next morning after having breakfast in the infirmary’s cafeteria, Anastasia sits on Valeriy’s bed while I sit on a chair the opposite side. One of the nurses brings him breakfast when he wakes up, but Kirilova is the one who helps him eat.

I feel like I am interrupting an intimate moment watching them, they stop once in a while to say things in each other’s ears and even kiss once, I turn my head around in that moment.

My own emotions surprise me, I still want that. I wish I could experience what they have but without everything it entails. I told my brother no one would want to marry me, but the truth is I
know there are some good men willing to overlook what happened to me, my uncle Michael married a twice divorced woman after all, much to papa’s displeasure. The full reason I probably won’t marry is not something I wanted to share with my brother. The thought of doing what wives are supposed to do makes me sick now, I have trouble believing many women subject themselves to that on their own free will, I have trouble believing mama obviously did at least five times.

“I am so sorry Olga”, Valeriy tells me as soon as he has finished eating, with his gaze lowered as if he is afraid of talking to me. “I tried, but I should have tried harder”.

“Don’t say that”, I tell him. “You did everything you could, I am grateful.” He gives me a sad smile.

“You should be proud of your brother, he fought like a wolf”, Valeriy comments, looking at me now.

“I can imagine”, I tell him, and tears go back to my eyes. “Pity he forgot to use the revolver though, that would have made the difference, but I guess he was too scared to think straight, we all were”.

“Oh, but he tried”, Valeriy says, and I look at him with my eyes opened widely. “He did pull out the revolver from his pocket, but the man realized this quickly and took it from him.” This revelation makes me emotional; I start weeping. I am not angry anymore; I am just completely heartbroken. “He also bit the man in the arm, he saved my life”, Valeriy adds with a smile, and I make a weird sound, half sob, half chuckle.

“I don’t want, to go, to the Crimea, anymore”, I cry between troubled breaths, Valeriy looks worried. “I want to stay, here, and look for him, and if I don’t find him, I would rather go, back to Perm, to help the British, with the rescue, of my sisters, I can’t lose them as well.” I am hyperventilating by the time I finish talking.

“Darling, that is not necessary”, Anastasia objects. “Once we are sure you are with your relatives we will go back to Perm to meet Charles and give him all the information we have on where we lost your brother, he can use his contacts to find him and rescue him.” That sounds so stupid and complicated, Moscow is one of the biggest cities in the country and they could be keeping him anywhere, it will probably take weeks, my brother may be death by the time they find him, or mistreated. Anastasia knows they won’t rescue him, she even referred to him in past tense, she just does not want to admit this to me directly. I do not say anything though.

I think I have accepted his death; I have accepted that my agonizing suffering was for nothing, accepted I have failed to protect him, accepted God’s will. All I can do is pray for God to comfort him on whatever path he has planned for him and not give up on him by running away to the Crimea. All I can do is pray for God to comfort me, for I do not think I will ever recover from this, at least that is what it feels like, I am still a sobbing mess.

“We should try to do that, but I don’t think it will work”, Valeriy foretells with a low tone of voice, as if reading my thoughts. “I don’t think it is the Bolsheviks who have Alexei, which makes it extremely unlikely he will be found”.

“What do you mean? The men who took him were red guards, and you killed one of them, right?” Anastasia asks.

“I didn’t”, he reveals. “The dead man you found did shoot me, but he was murdered by the man who grabbed Alexei, who then drove away on a truck with him.” I almost faint, I do not know what this means for my brother.
“So, what did that guy want? Why did he do that?” I ask.

“I am not sure”, Valeriy answers. “He probably belongs to a different group, un loyal to the new government, I am sorry I can´t tell you more, I don´t know who they are.”

“But couldn´t they be monarchists?” I ask with a small glimmer of hope. Valeriy sighs, as if not wanting to destroy what was left of my hope.

“The man who took your brother tried to shoot me”, he explains, “and I doubt he thought he was saving him from me, Alexei made it clear that he considered me a friend, why wouldn´t he negotiate with us if he was indeed a monarchist?” I nod, that makes sense, but it makes my uncertainty even worse.

“I stand by what I said earlier, I want to stay and look for my brother”, I say while wiping my tears. The Kirilovs give me a sad look, then Valeriy looks at Anastasia and back at me.

“It will be hard to do without help”, Valeriy admits. “And we are not involved enough with the higher ranks of the British intelligence to find help here, our only contact was Charles.”

“Can´t we send a telegram to their headquarters in Perm? Or a letter?” I ask.

“With all the information about the location where we lost him, and the name of the man tasked with finding Alexei? I fear it could be intercepted, we would be in serious trouble”, Valeriy answers. “I am afraid you two will have to go back to Perm to contact Charles and explain the situation, that way he will get help from other agents here in Moscow, he has more knowledge about secret codes and experience with searches like this”, he explains, and then he notices his wife is shaking her head, so he talks directly to her. “Don´t worry about me, you can give Charles the address of the hotel I am staying at, and we will continue communicating through letters, there is nothing suspicious about a married couple writing to each other.” He smiles at her after saying those words, and tries to hold his wife´s hand.

“I can´t leave you here alone!” Anastasia exclaims angrily while standing up and raising her hands, refusing to accept Valeriy´s touch. “You just got shot! And we can still find some information on our own, I was thinking about asking the woman who found you to help me ask all her neighbors about where the truck went, you already know what direction it took initially, we can investigate from there”.

“That is a good idea my love, but there is no guarantee you will find enough witnesses to tell you the direction the truck went, let alone where it went from there, and what are we going to do if we find him? Look what happened to me. We need experts, we are a doctor and a nurse, we weren´t trained for these kinds of investigati…”, Valeriy asserts.

“I won´t leave you here!” Anastasia cries. “Are you crazy? What if the Bolsheviks investigate and blame you for the murder of one of theirs?” I feel pity for both of them, and it hits me how helpless we are in this situation, I have looked up to them for protection all these days, but there is literally nothing they can do for my brother without help.

“Dear, if we want to have even an insignificant chance of saving that boy, we are going to need help from speciali…”

“You should do it, you should both stay here and investigate”, I argue, and then look at Valeriy. “I really don’t want to separate you from your wife in this state.

“You are going to need each other to get all the information possible”, I continue after a short pause, now looking at both of them. “Once I get in touch with Charles, we will find a way to transfer all the information you might be able to gather without raising eyebrows, I will ask them how, and we will be in touch through letters to the hotel, we can think of a temporary code right here, me and my sisters have already used one to refer to the jewels we sewed under our clothes so
that the reds didn’t steal them in case of exile. I admit it was not a remarkably successful code, the guards in Ekaterinburg somehow figured it out, but I learned from the experience, we can make this one harder”. I finish talking really quickly, I was afraid they would make me change my mind before I could finish, and we would stay stuck here without a plausible plan.

“Olga, it is really dangerous to go alone”, Anastasia objects. “You would be carrying with you Sergei’s suitcase, that contains all sorts of damning information, they could execute you, even if you are not recognized as a Grand Duchess.”

“It would be dangerous even if we went together”, I digress. “I just need the address and some money; I will be alright”.

Chapter End Notes

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:
- Short comments, including emojis.
- Long comments, with no limits.
- Questions
- Constructive criticism
- Reader-reader interaction
- Comments in only one chapter.
- Comments in more one chapter.

This author replies to comments, but if you don’t want a reply, for whatever reason (for example, shyness), feel free to sign your comment with the Word "whisper" and I Will appreciate the comment just the same but not respond.
Shvibzik.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tatiana.

I watch Maria brush her hair while I lay on the bed and pet Ortipo. My little dog still looks incredibly nervous and barks for no apparent reason at least once a day, I hug her with concern whenever I see her that way, she has not followed orders she easily understood before either, like sitting or giving her paw. Ortipo has been such a source of comfort, I already loved her before, but I took her for granted, it is such a miracle that she survived the Ipatiev house. She reminds me of my dear Malama, who gave it to me. I wonder how he is doing now; I hope he is safe. Russia is out of the war, but maybe he joined the white army, I cannot help but hope he did not, but that is exactly what he most likely did.

Maria seems very content this morning, relatively speaking, because today is Oleg’s 26th birthday and she has planned to prepare him a cake along with Galina, something commander Antonovich allowed because he probably thinks we will forget he allowed our brother and sister to be taken away. Me and Anastasia are supposed to help Maria and Galina. I won’t argue with that, being grumpy will not make my siblings return. Anastasia is in the bathroom.

I am already up and dressed in my black long skirt, white shirt, and dark brown sweater, but I do not have the energy to brush my hair. I woke up in an especially melancholic mood and even cried as soon as I opened my eyes to another day. I miss Olenka and our ray of sunshine so much, and the thought of a full new day without talking to my older sister about our happier days or hearing Alexei play with Anastasia in the room next door hit me hard. Maria, on the other hand, looks as perfect as ever, and had energy left to console me earlier by listening to my laments, trying to give me hope, and reminding me of God after all of it failed.

When Nastya woke up and saw me crying she helped Masha, and after I was feeling a bit better, Anastasia tried to make me laugh by imagining and telling me about the most ridiculous scenarios, she walked around the room while talking in order to have space to make hand gestures.

“Wouldn’t it be funny if Olenka and Alyosha were actually rescued in the middle of their trip? They could be in Crimea right now swimming and making fun of us for staying here for all we know, while we are suffering like fools, completely oblivious”, Nastya said.

“Shvibzik!” Mashka exclaimed. “I can’t believe you right now!”

“No, you are right, that is not it”, Anastasia continued, and then she opened her eyes wide and pointed her index finger upwards whilst moving it as if she just had a huge realization. “They had this whole thing planned from the beginning! Antonovich is just a secret agent, they took Olga and Alexei away in order to prank us, and they are both in on it…” Still in tears, I finally chuckled.
Anastasia moved on to act out the scenario.

“Imagine their faces when they find out we tricked them!” Nastya gushed with excitement, playing Alexei by bending her legs slightly to appear shorter and talking in a higher tone, imitating the sweet sound his voice used to make whenever he became excited about something; then she made a ridiculous appalled face in order to act as if she were Alexei making a bad attempt at imitating me.

Anastasia then straightened her legs and turned around to talk in the opposite direction, to imitate Olga. “That must be exactly Tatya’s face right now! I wish we were there to see!” She exclaimed, talking to the spot where Alexei was supposed to be. “They are probably worried sick and have no clue, did you see Nastya’s face when we left? We are better that her at acting now! They didn’t suspect a thing!” Anastasia then, still in character, laughed exaggeratedly.

“No, wait! They did not take them away!” Anastasia exclaimed after she had finished impersonating Olga. “They are living right next door and laugh every day at the things Antonovich tells them about us. They know how rude you were to him yesterday Tanya, can you imagine that?” Masha laughed; I rolled my eyes and smiled without teeth, that humor was too dark for me, the lengths Shvibzik is willing to go. Yesterday after dinner I ignored Pavel when he tried to ask me if we needed anything, Mashka was left with the bothersome task of listening to his hypocrisy.

“Maybe they are ready to reveal they have been here all along and we are all leaving together anytime soon”, Nastya continued, and she got closer to my bed, where I was laying. “How about that?” For a moment I let myself imagine it was true, I could almost experience the laughter that would ensue, I even imagined the exact words I would use to scold Olga for scaring me like that. I imagined the two of us laughing at the memory every chance we got in the future.

“Come here, you idiot”, I said as I sat up to hug my youngest sister; I started crying again, but in a way that relieved and prepared me to face the day. “You are starting to lose your charm”. Maria joined the hug, and I used the time we spent in each other’s arms to thank God I still had my two youngest sisters.

“How did you even come up with that, Nastya?” Mashka asked.

The little pair has taken care of me like we have switched places, especially Maria.

Yesterday Maria was the one who made the beds, the one who cleaned the room, brushed my hair, the one who comforted Anastasia when she had a nightmare, I was too terrified after my own. It is like I can no longer take care of anything like I used to without Alexei around, he was always there, reminding me of how vulnerable he was and how much he needed me, and so was Olga, with her melancholy. Mama as well, the poor dear was always ill, I miss her so much. I had to take care of them, I was the strong one. I still have the incessant urge to help, to be of use, but my sisters are just as strong as me or even more so, and suddenly I do not know what to do with myself anymore.

Mashka has finished brushing her hair when I hear a knock on the door, and for the first time in
days I do not jump at the sound. I leave Ortipo on the bed and go to open it. It is Denis, the guard who always roll calls whenever Antonovich is not available. He is a small young man around Anastasia’s age, a little bit shorter than me and skinny as a stick. He has brown hair and eyes, wears round glasses, and these past two days Nastya has made it her life’s work to make his life impossible.

“Roll calls”, the young man says, and he puts a small notebook in front of his face. “You know how it is”. I nod and let him enter the room, he does not even look inside, his nose is stuck on the notebook and he grabs a pencil from the pocket in his chest in order to mark. “Tatiana Nikolaevna Romanova?”

“That would be me”, I answer in a low tone of voice, the man marks my name in the notebook with a tick.

“Maria Nikolaevna Romanova?” He continues.

“Right here”, my sister says.

“Anastasia Nikolaevna Romanova?” Denis finally asks for my youngest sister, but he receives no answer, he lowers the notebook. “Anastasia Nikolaevna Romanova?! Anastasia?!” He yells, looking around the room with a nervous tone of voice; it is ridiculous that he thinks any of us escaping is even a possibility, and even more so individually, as if we would abandon each other. It is still funny to see.

Anastasia comes running from the bathroom with her hands soaked wet, she surprises Denis by shaking her hands at him and sprinkling his back with drops of water. He immediately turns around, and a few drops fall on his glasses, clouding his sight, I can tell because he turns his body back towards the room and squints his eyes, I feel a bit sorry for him.

“Oops”, Anastasia says, feigning innocence. Denis takes off his glasses to clean them with his shirt.

“It is not funny”, he says with annoyance.

“I don’t care if you don’t think it is funny, being locked up is not funny for us”, Anastasia answers coldly, giving Denis a deadly stare. The young guard just moves to walk out of the room, bumping into Anastasia, who is in the entry, in the process. Anastasia trips Denis before he walks out in response, but he manages to avoid falling by giving two huge steps ahead. He looks back at Anastasia with a frown before leaving.

“It is not funny”, Anastasia imitates Denis with a face while pretending to clean her imaginary glasses with her sweater.
I retrieve my unfinished work from the shelf, sit on my bed, pat Ortipo’s head one more time, and continue knitting what I started yesterday. I am making a sweater for Masha, it will probably be ready way before Christmas, I will also have finished the one for Anastasia by then. I am ashamed to admit I hope the commander will give us wool of a color other than light blue in order to make the flowers stand out, Masha will have to ask him for that to happen.

Maria looks at Anastasia with her eyes wide open, she seems unsure as to whether this behavior is just Shvibzik’s usual display of mischief, or whether there is more to it. I think it is a combination of both, my little sister was always ready for some amusement; teaching the dogs how to do tricks, mimicking people, and quite literally sitting on me, naturally, some of this amusement included practical jokes. She is probably trying to retain some sense of normalcy in this situation, and maybe because she is failing to feel the same way she used to, she also has to result to insults.

“That was unnecessary Shvibzik”, Maria tells her younger sister while picking up Ortipo from my bed to pet her, then she sits on her bed. “He hasn’t done anything to us”. Anastasia doesn’t answer, but Maria’s reaction puts her in a bad mood, she sits next to her and crosses her arms, then her eyes fill with tears she holds back. This is a common occurrence now.

“It was just a prank”, Nastya assures Masha after a minute of silence in a dull tone of voice that does not match what she is saying. “He probably also thinks it was funny, but doesn’t want to admit it”.

Maria turns towards Anastasia and hugs her, which just makes Anastasia unable to hold back from crying.

“Ugh, look what you did Mashka!” Shvibzik exclaims, pointing at her own tears before wiping them. “I hadn’t cried since the day before yesterday.” Maria just gives her a sad smile and continues to hug her and stoke her hair.

“Denis is nice enough”, I comment, ignoring my sister’s tears and continuing my knitting. I know Nastya is suffering like all of us, but treating her sadness as something normal and not fussing over it is what I have seen makes her feel better. “At least he doesn’t make a huge fuss out of Nastya messing with him like that villain Tabakov.”

“We cannot bully the poor guy just because he doesn’t seem to react, that is just a good reason not to”, Maria complains, still hugging Nastya and talking to both her and me, then she talks only to our little sister. “Today will be fun, you will see darling”. Maria kisses Anastasia on the cheek after she finishes talking, my youngest sister smiles and gives Maria a quick hug that is even tighter than before, then she talks to me.

“He is too serious to stand”, Anastasia says, referring to Denis.

“He seems friendly”, Maria objects. Her kindness and openness are endearing, but she is so naïve. I worry her feelings might get hurt, like that time in Ekaterinburg when one of her so-called new friends stopped talking to her when they forbade the guards from speaking to us.
“If he were friendly he would talk to us Masha”, I disagree. “For him we are just a job, he rollcalls and then leaves, he never asks about how we feel, he never even says ‘good morning’, even when you say it to him first. Don’t worry, if I see that Nastya´s antics bother him too much I will put a stop to it”.

“If I let you put a stop to it”, Anastasia challenges me, and I have to stop myself from smiling, I shake my head at her.

Maria brushes my hair before we go down for breakfast. I already want the priest to visit us once more, even if the same one that came the morning they took Alyosha away was here yesterday. Communion is the only thing that makes me feel at peace, like nothing bad has happened, but not even a day after it is over the feeling disappears.

After breakfast, the three of us spend time in the kitchen with Galina. We are now preparing some kind of cake, I do not know how the flavor will turn out with so little sugar, but it is fun to make. I am mixing the flour and the eggs with a wooden spoon right now. Anastasia and Maria are buttering the pan. Most of the ingredients Galina bought with her own pay.

“Are you sure Oleg knows nothing?” Maria asks Galina.

“Well, I don’t know, I haven’t told him, but maybe one of his friends or the commander accidentally did”, Galina responds. Oleg is patrolling outside the house right now; I do not think he knows.

I think we are doing this more for Galina, we talk to her every day and she makes us feel like we are normal people and not prisoners. Oleg does not talk most of the time, at least not as much as he used to, unless Maria talks to him first. At least Oleg is never rude or ignores Maria, he has even introduced me and my sisters to some of the other guards. I chuckle, Masha can’t stay one day without talking to them and Oleg or she will die, she is way too interested in people. I also like talking to them even if I get too shy sometimes, but I would enjoy it way more if they were not our jailers.

Sometimes I wonder why it is that Oleg is never the recipient of Nastya´s pranks, one would think he is a safe choice since he is on friendly terms with all of us. Maybe his serious expression and imposing appearance scare Shvibzik away, his apparent strength is like Tabakov’s, but that is where the similarities end. Poor little Denis is not like that at all.

Anastasia stops what she is doing and takes away my spoon, then she moves to walk out of the kitchen, but I stop her by grabbing her sweater.

“What are you doing Nastya?” I ask her.

“Denis is guarding the front door, I just want to sprinkle some of this mix into his head”, Anastasia
extolls.

“No”, I state. “That is enough Shvibzik, water was fine, but this will make his head all sticky and waste the mix, we don’t get these ingredients every day; calm down, stay here.”

Anastasia rolls her eyes and makes a frustrated sound with her throat, keeping her mouth closed, but I think she knows that I am right, especially about the food, it is irresponsible to waste it when there are so many people who need it right now. My poor baby sister, my heart breaks for her. She should be free in the outside world studying to become an actress or something, not stuck here with nothing to do but miss our loved ones. The little pair and Alexei are so young, they would be the ones to adapt the easiest to being commoners. These people have no other reason but mean spiritedness for keeping us here.

We have played all sorts of games and songs to distract ourselves, and we pray, I do not think we have ever prayed more hours a day than we do now. Every day is just a quest in search for normalcy. It is just like when papa, mama and Maria left without us: the longing, the worry, the false rumors, the uncertainty…

This time is so much worse, we have not been promised we will meet again. Sometimes I fantasize Olga and Alexei will come running through the front door any day now, explaining it was all a misunderstanding and they only needed baby in Moscow for a week or so.

Maria has not talked to Oleg the entire day; she plans for this to be a surprise.

“How are we going to surprise Oleg, Masha?” Anastasia asks our sister once we have put the mixture into the oven.

“I have it all planed”, Maria answers. “Since he is going to guard us at the dinner table today after his break, I was thinking of offering him to sit with us and then bringing him the cake”.

“Sounds neat”, Anastasia comments.

“I can play the piano if you want to”, I add, and Maria’s eyes light up.

“That would be great!” She exclaims, her enthusiasm makes me glow, I am glad I can be of help.

“First Ivan Skorokodov gives you a cake on your birthday and now you are returning the favor to someone else, how rude”, Nastya teases, Masha just smiles.

The three of us and Galina walk outside in the garden for a long time, and later Oleg guards us along with another man during dinner, Anastasia smiles like an idiot the whole time. I feed Ortipo under the table.
“Oh, I can’t take this anymore!” Anastasia suddenly exclaims while standing up when she finishes. “Happy birthday Oleg!” She turns towards him and hives him a funny courtesy.

“Thank you”, he says with a smile after raising his eyebrows in surprise. “Did my grandmother tell you? If she did then that is weird, she hasn’t congratulated me”.

“That makes me worry for her health”, the guard next to Oleg jokes, they must be friends.

“She is in good health”, Oleg tells him, his smile disappears for a second. Galina leaves the kitchen and enters the dining room with the cake, she must have heard Anastasia.

“The girls helped me do it, Olegushka”, Galina beams, I chuckle when I hear the diminutive form of his name, and Oleg gives his grandmother a rare genuine smile.

“Thank you”, he says while nodding once, referring to all of us. When her grandmother puts the cake on the table he moves to kiss her on both cheeks.

“Don’t you want to sit?” I ask him and his friend.

“All right”, Oleg concedes, “but only for a while”. Oleg, the other guard, the little pair, and Galina sit and get a piece of cake each, according to Nastya this cake tastes a bit better that the one from Mashka’s birthday. I get a piece too, but go to play the piano instead, I’ll eat it later. I decide to play cheerful pieces; I choose something by Mozart to start. My sister Maria picks up Ortipo.

Some of the guards stationed near the door or right outside hear the music and enter the house to listen and watch as I play the piano. I look back at them and smile, but my smile disappears when I see commander Pavel among them leaning against a wall, he is watching as well. I have prayed for God to give me strength to forgive our captors, to be meek like him, but I just can’t forgive Pavel.

Denis is looking at my piece of cake with longing. It would have been nice to share it with the other guards in the house, but we did not have enough ingredients, and there is like 15 of them. I stand up once I finish one of the pieces and offer Denis my cake.

“Here”, I say.

His eyes open wide and he points towards the cake I am holding with his index finger, then he points that same finger towards himself, as if wondering if I am really offering it to him; poor thing, he is just a boy with no manners like most of our guards have been.

I nod at him.
“Thank you!” He says, and he accepts the cake, but before he can even get a taste, Nastya comes from behind once again and grabs the cake from his hand to smash it on his face. It is almost painful to watch, what a waste, he looked like he really wanted to try it; what follows is Denis finally snapping at Anastasia by chasing her around the living room and then outside the house in order to throw what is left of the cake at her.

I shake my head as I watch, Nastya is lucky she has someone to torment without any serious consequences. I sit on the piano and start playing Trepak by Tchaikovsky, the first thing that occurred to me once I saw Denis run out of the house to chase my sister.

Meanwhile, Masha chats with Oleg and Galina at the dinner table, until Oleg stands up, intending to leave, probably because of a shift or something.

“You can stay here Oleg”, Pavel tells him. “Enjoy your day”. Nice gesture, I guess. Oleg nods and sits again; he and his friends keep talking to Masha and Galina.

I am about to finish playing Trepak when Denis comes running into the house again, followed by my sister, who is now chasing him, her hair is filled with cake and I am definitely not going to help her wash it off after what she did. Nastya wrestles with Denis when she catches him. I stand up, this does worry me, not because I think Denis is even physically capable of hurting Nastya, but because the commander might not be happy with the situation.

“All right Nastya, stop that”, I say, and I turn to Antonovich to see if he is angry, but he has not even realized what is happening. Mashka leaves Ortipo on the floor and approaches me when she hears.

Denis and Anastasia are now wrestling and hitting each other like my sisters and brother used to do with our French tutor Gilliard sometimes, but this is not a family friend, this is a guard.

“Denis please leave her, she was just bored”, I repeat again. None of them listen. Denis is overpowering Nastya now, she is laughing.

“Stop, stop, all right, you win”, she says, sounding both amused and annoyed at the same time, Denis has both her arms pressed to the floor. Antonovich has finally realized what is happening and comes to see if there is a problem.

“Stop hassling me!” He yells at her, and then he lets her go and stands up.


“No, no”, Anastasia assures him before I could speak, she stands up. “We were just playing.” Pavel’s expression becomes cold.
“I would prefer for you to avoid these sorts of games”, he tells Anastasia. “Members of the local Cheka are visiting the house tomorrow in the morning and I can’t have the prisoners roughhousing like toddlers with the guards, otherwise I will be forced to impose restrictions on the amount of interaction you can have with them, are we clear?” Anastasia nods, looking scared by the possibility of having even less people to talk to.

Pavel turns towards Denis.

“To my office”, the commander tells the young guard, who looks even more scared than Anastasia, he lowers his head and walks with Pavel. I am horrified by the prospect that the boy may get into trouble, but if I speak for him, my sister is the one in trouble.

“No!” Anastasia yells, and she runs to place herself in front of them. “I was the one teasing him the entire day, he just snapped when I threw the cake at him, I am so sorry, it was just a game, I didn’t mean anything by it and I won’t do it again, just please don’t scold him”. She finishes by making a sad face. Pavel looks at Anastasia and then at Denis.

“This is a job, not a school”, Pavel tells the young man. “Your behavior today was completely childish and unacceptable even if she started, you could have accidentally hurt her, what would I tell my superiors then? If anything like this ever happens again I will be forced to send you away”. Pavel goes back to talk to the guards he was speaking to before this happened. I sigh with relief.

“Oh, Shvibzik”, Mashka says while shaking her head.

“Thank you”, Denis tells Nastya. I go back to the piano and think of something to play, I am going to scold my sister after our party is over. I hear Anastasia apologizing behind me and I change my mind, she clearly knows what she did.

“Either way Pavel is right, I should not have reacted that way, you are a girl”, Denis answers, and I hear Nastya complain about her being a girl not being important. In the meantime, Maria has gone back to chatting, and Denis seems to have found something to talk about with my youngest sister.

I play the piano for a while longer, Maria dances with Oleg, but then some of the less shy men ask her to dance as well, I can’t help but feel protective of her, so I look over to make sure she is fine every two minutes. Anastasia dances with Denis, and I can see the way she steps on his feet on purpose, she never learns. Denis seems less uptight now though, he plays along with her and steps on her feet as well, in a few minutes they are no longer dancing, only holding each other by the arms and trying to keep stepping on each other’s feet while laughing. I feel happy for her. My dog is running around the living room with her tongue out.

I feel the presence of God and have a spiritual moment. I thank the Lord for today, he has comforted us and made us forget about the pain for a while, he has also given us this beautiful moment of forgiveness.
After a minute, God helps me come to the realization that this is not actually a true case of forgiveness, just a moment of two enemies becoming friends, or people loving their neighbors. My little sisters are trying to love their enemies, because that is what they are by being our jailers, they are not our enemies because they have wronged us, the circumstances have made them our enemies the same way that being born in Germany made the German soldiers our enemies. Loving our enemies is our Christian duty, but it is not what forgiveness is. I can’t forgive the guards that have behaved properly when there is nothing to forgive.

To forgive someone that person needs to have actually wronged you, which means forgiveness is meant to be hard, not like it is for my sister to become friends with Denis, a boy the same age as her that could have been her classmate if they were normal youngsters going to college. Forgiveness is not my siblings and I, especially Mashka, becoming friends with the guards in every place we have been detained.

Forgiveness was Christ, in agony after being tortured for hours, asking his father to forgive the ones who brutalized him. Forgiveness is meant to be painful, a never-ending trial and struggle against passions that does not end when you decide to forgive for the first time, that is why the ones who genuinely forgive are considered pious.

I remember my father, my eyes fill with tears, he told Olga he had forgiven everyone.

I want God to help me be more like him, to forgive the ones who have truly hurt me, and for forgiveness to be genuine, you can’t forget what it is you are forgiving.

I think of my parents, of papa’s kindness and sense of humor, of mama’s devotion and affection for each and all of her children, of how I sat with her every day, of how much I loved when she stroked my hair. I think of Olga, of how tired she felt while nursing, of how much the job didn’t suit her, but how she didn’t let that ever show in front of the soldiers, how she was kindness itself to them, how she told me about her faith was the only thing that gave her strength to continue her duty, I think of the care she showed while changing each bandage, of how much she wanted to make sure none of her patients were ever in pain.

I think of Alexei, of his mischievousness that sometimes rivaled Nastya´s, of the excitement he showed in the letters he wrote to me when he was away with papa near the front, I think of how he found joy in the simplest of things, like molding bullets from tin, or how he joyfully returned all of the affection my sisters and I gave him.

I still long for all of them, but I attempt to do so while letting go of the feelings of hatred and resentment I have for the ones who took them away. I try to trust God with all of my righteous anger, for he is the one who will judge the people that split our family eventually, not me.

I think of Christ to remind myself this kind of forgiveness is even a possibility.

The tears roll down from my eyes, and I forgive my parents’ executioners, I forgive commander Antonovich as well. I wipe my face with one hand, no wanting my sisters’ day to be ruined by
seeing me cry again.
If I want a different color of wool for the flowers, I will have to ask for it myself.

Chapter End Notes

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:
- Short comments, including only putting an emoji.
- Long comments, with no limits.
  _ Questions
  _ Constructive criticism
  _ Reader-reader interaction
  _ <3s as extra kudos
  _ Comments in only one chapter.
  _ Comments in more one chapter.
This author replies to comments, but if you don’t want a reply, for whatever reason (for example, shyness), feel free to sign your comment with the Word “whisper” and I will appreciate the comment just the same but not than respond.
A fourth voice missing.

Chapter Notes

Hello, as you may or may have not noticed, I have changed the order of certain chapters and in consequence some of the contents of those chapters. Do not worry, the only change is the day of the year the chapters from the POV of Doroteya are supposed to take place. The reason I did this was because I realized way too late that those chapters fit a lot better in the beginning of the story.

I am sorry if anyone becomes confused or annoyed by this, I am a total mess, you can blame me for not writing this fic first and then posting it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Perm. July 24th, 1918.
Maria.

Commander Pavel was taken this morning, I am alarmed, but Tatiana is even more so. I do not know what to think of it.

Today after we woke up, Denis came to knock the door just like yesterday, he looked nervous and agitated. He roll called as always, but instead of leaving, he asked us to walk down the stairs.

“But why? We haven’t even bathed yet!” Nastya protested.

“The new commander wants to see you”, Denis responded, lowering his head. Tatiana looked as if she were going to faint.

The new commander presented himself as Ignat Iliaovich. He is slightly younger than Pavel, a cleanshaven brunette. He seems colder and meaner, but he did not do much to support that initial impression. What he has shown me with his behavior, is that he is just as indifferent as Pavel, but Ilianovich does not pretend to have sympathy for us by showering us with kindness like Antonovich or Pankratov did.

When Tatiana asked what had happened to Pavel, Ignat replied that it was not a cause for our concern. After that, he allowed us to go back to our rooms as if nothing happened.

“None of our concern! None of our concern! How could it not be of our concern?!?” Tatiana exclaims, referring to what the man said minutes ago, she is in tears. We are sitting on the floor indian style facing one another, Anastasia is taking a bath, me and Tatiana already did. “This is the exact same thing that happened weeks before they killed our parents! They change the guards!” She truly fears the worst. I get closer to Tatiana and hug her.

Denis is on the doorway, and has been talking to us ever since he took us downstairs to meet the new commander. If it were not for Denis we would not have learned Antonovich was actually arrested, although Oleg or one of his friends would have probably told us later.

“Don’t worry, I don’t think that is the reason”, he says. “They only arrested Pavel”. Tatiana told me about offering Denis cake yesterday, that, and the way he joked around with Nastya may be why he seems more polite and considerate now. Tatiana is too upset to appreciate that now,
though, which is understandable.

“He is right Tatya”, I tell my sister while I stroke her hair, her tears do not stop flowing. “I think you are blowing this out of proportion, just because a change in the guards led to something awful before doesn’t mean it will lead to something awful now.” She sighs deeply and lays down, resting her head on my lap. The truth is I do not know what will happen.

Anastasia comes out of the bathroom with her hair wet, I worry about the way she limps and flinches a bit when she steps on one leg, maybe she hurt herself yesterday running around.

“What happened to you on that leg Shvibzik?” I ask my sister while pointing at the leg.

“Nothing, nothing”, she brushes it off shaking her hand. “I think I fell yesterday”.

Anastasia did not take Pavel´s arrest very seriously, she is now joking with Denis about how the poor man looked like Santa.

“It is a shame we won’t have him for Christmas!” Anastasia exclaims. “If he gave us all that wool for no reason at all, imagine on Christmas!” I smile, Tanya also does give her a tearful smile.

“He did keep candy in his office”, Denis replies chuckling. Tatiana´s mood lightens up.

“I am not sure you should get any presents this Christmas Nastya”, Tatiana teases our sister while wiping her tears.

Oleg is not with us when we have breakfast, but later I find him while walking in the garden with my sisters. Tatiana and Anastasia are walking fast, they are trying to get Ortipo to follow them. I remember sadly how much papa loved to walk, he never got tired, I wish he were here with us.

Oleg is near the fence when I approach him, as always dressed in his long coat and his fur hat, he welcomes me as always by raising his eyebrows and smiling.

“I hope you don’t mind”, I speak to him, “but I would like to know the reason Antonovich was arrested, Tatiana is really worried”. His face immediately changes.

“I have no idea”, Oleg says, “they must probably suspect him of doing something”. That is slightly reassuring, maybe it has nothing to do with us.

“What do you think it is?” I ask. He looks to one side and then the other to see if there is anyone listening.

“I don’t know”, he answers, “but yesterday, my grandmother complained about a bunch of men wanting to get her to spy for them, maybe the commander was involved with those men.”

“Spy what?”

“What do you think? You, this house.” He spreads his arms and moves his head around.

“Really?!” I ask, almost jumping with excitement; I cannot believe this, are there people out there wanting to rescue us? Oh, I dare not hope! Something does not add up, however.

“Why would they need Galina if the commander was in fact one of them?” I ask Oleg, he raises and lowers his shoulders.

“I don’t know”, he says, “maybe because she leaves and returns to the house more often than the commander, those men approached her in the market, maybe they didn’t want Pavel to be suspected, like he probably was.” I raise and lower my shoulders like he did a few seconds ago.
“What do you think is going to happen to him?” I ask Oleg. I did not have any good feelings left for Pavel after he oversaw my brother and sister being taken away from us, but I do not want anything bad to happen to him. Oleg makes a weird expression, he raises his eyebrows and his gaze goes somewhere else, as if he does not want to tell me the truth. “We can only hope they don’t have evidence for any wrongdoing, and they let him go”, he replies once he looks back at me.


“And you made me aware of it”, he jokes with a smile. “Thank you very much”.

“You are welcome”, I reply with a courtesy. Then he becomes sad for some reason. I should not have brought up yesterday.

I feel guilty about it, but I am disappointed about how little excitement Oleg showed yesterday on his birthday party, he only danced with me for a few minutes and then sat back down with his friend. He was polite, sure, there is nothing I can reprove, he thanked me and my sisters at the end of the day, but his spirits were low. Nastya had a better time at Oleg’s party than Oleg.

Maybe he is just shy like my mother was, and that is why he does not like parties. Or maybe I have overestimated how close we are, me and my sisters have only small talked a few minutes a day with him, mostly about his time in the army and our time visiting soldiers in the lazaret, or treating them in the case of Tatiana. Maybe despite his friendliness he still sees me only as a prisoner, who he talks to out of kindness.

“Oleg, did the party yesterday make you feel embarrassed?” I ask him, lowering my head.

“What? No! What makes you think that?”, he answers in a concerned tone, but I can tell he is only saying it to make me feel better, I can recognize pity by now, most friendly guards have felt it for us one way or another. I keep my head down, I must have sounded so needy, this whole situation is really embarrassing.

“I know maybe it was too much, and if that is the case I apologize, I may have done it for selfish reasons, I am just so miserable all the time and pretending everything is normal gets me through the day”. Before Galina even told me about Oleg’s birthday coming up, I had a dream me and my sisters were in the Standart, our Yacht, before the war. I was 15 again, and we were wearing white dresses embroidered with lace and big flower hats, dancing with some of our many officers, I woke up with unbearable feelings of nostalgia.

“Don’t feel bad love, I will tell you what happened”, he says, and I raise my head to look at him. “It has nothing to do with what you did, you are a very generous and considerate girl, this is just the first birthday I have celebrated without my brother; I was hoping for the day to pass unnoticed to be honest, I didn’t want to have anything to do with it, I would actually put most of the blame on my grandmother, she knew and let you be a part of this”.

“I am sorry Oleg,” I say. “Was he Yuri or...?”

“Anton”, he finishes for me as he closes his eyes for a second and nods. “It was Anton, don’t worry about it, there was no way you could know”.

“I bet he must have spoiled you every year for you to miss him that much”, I say.

“Not really”, he replies with a smile. “We shared the same birthday”.
“You are a twin?” I ask, feeling a bit excited. I used to pretend I was a mother of twins when I played with my sisters as a child, the only thing better than one baby is two babies. It must be dangerous though, Oleg’s mother died giving birth to him or his brother, now I am afraid of it.

“Was a twin”, Oleg corrects me with a very melancholic tone.

“Well of course birthdays must be painful!” I exclaim. “I hope you are able to celebrate it again one day though.”

“I hope so too” is his answer.

I remember baby’s birthday is less than a month from now, I will miss him so much during that day as well, I hope Olga finds something fun to do with him, but still, the poor thing will also be missing us, I might miss him forever. If I do not see Alexei again the memory of him will haunt me my entire life, I will remember him every time I look at my children. Now I want to cry. I wonder what they are doing right now, I hope there are some friendly guards they can talk to in Moscow, but even if there are, I will never know about it... I am crying now.

“I am so sorry for your brother and sister as well”, Oleg says, and he gives me another one of his awkward pats on the shoulder.

After dinner, we sing religious hymns, we used to do that a lot in Ekaterinburg, but things have not been the same ever since, now I think we should have done so while Olga was still with us, she had the best singing voice.

“I forgave him yesterday, you know?” Tatiana tells us when we are in our room playing checkers, because it is a game for two, the winner is going to play with Nastya after. We could be playing something more fun, but Anastasia has this weird obsession with not going back to the room she and baby used to share, most games are there.

“Who?” Anastasia asks.

“Pavel”, she replies.

“You are a saint Tanya”, Anastasia says, and as she walks through the room I see her flinch again.

“That was very nice of you Tanya, mama would be proud”, I add, I don’t know if I have forgiven, maybe trying not to think about the way we have been hurt and not being angry at anyone is my way of forgiving. “Nastya, seriously, what is wrong with your leg?” Tatiana looks at our sister as well.

“That leg has been bothering her all day”, I tell Tatiana, and she looks at her and then at me shaking her head like mama used to do.

“Come here Shvibzik”, Tatiana says as she extends her arm towards Anastasia, Nastya complies and gets closer. “What happened to your leg?”

“Nothing happened to my leg”, she answers, then she takes her shoes off and temporarily hides her diamonds in the pockets of her sweater. “More like my feet, but this one is worse”. She raises her right leg and shows me the sole of her foot, she has two disgusting and painful looking blisters.

“Ewww, Shvibzik, what happened?”

“It turns out having two diamonds in your shoes can be painful”, she answers, and then sits on the bed in front of me and Tatiana. “Especially when you are running or having your feet stepped on.”
“Why did you let it get so bad?” Tanya asks with concern as she checks both of Nastya’s feet, no wound scares her. Anastasia raises and lowers her shoulders.

“I don’t have anywhere else to put the diamonds”, my little sister replies. She is fearless when it comes to pain, when she was a little girl she used to climb up tables and jump from them, our nanny would give her light slaps on the hand to stop her from doing something so dangerous, but she kept doing it, her exact words were: “it is not nice to get a slap, but it is better to climb on the table and get a slap than not to climb on the table”.

“What about your pockets?” I tell her. “You just put them there.”

“I don’t feel they are safe in my pockets when there are guards around, none our sweaters have buttons in the pockets either”, she answers. “What if I jump and they fall?”

“That doesn’t matter now darling”, Tatiana says. “You shouldn’t put them in your shoes anymore”.

“All right”, Anastasia seems to comply, “I will put them in my undergarments then”.

“I am serious Anastasia”, Tatiana says.

“And so am I”, Anastasia declares. I shake my head and smile.

“They will fall just as easily dear”, I say, “what if we keep them here in our room? They haven’t searched it or even entered it much ever since we arrived, they think we brought no belongings other than the clothes we were wearing, which were not even ours, they don’t suspect a thing.”

“Mmm…” Anastasia seems scared and unconvinced.

“I understand you are scared, it was hard for you to smuggle them”, I soothe her.

“What if you put them inside your pillow?” Tatiana suggests as she sits next to her. “Really darling, they have no clue”.

“All right”, Anastasia agrees. “Inside the pillow.”

“I am going to ask Antonovich…” Tatiana realizes her mistake. “I am going to ask the new commander for alcohol and bandages for your feet.”

We keep playing checkers after hiding the diamonds and I lose. Anastasia plays two rounds, first with Tatiana and then with me.

We sing hymns again after praying for Olga and Alexei’s safety with the icon we found, just like Olga told us to do, I feel closer to her. Now I understand what my sisters felt when I went to Ekaterinburg alone with my parents, the hymns do not sound as good, we need a fourth voice.

Chapter End Notes

I am so sorry this chapter is so short, I was planning to have way more important things happening but I haven’t finished writing them and I needed to update to inform you that I won’t be able to write as often as I used to because I am having online classes and homework almost daily since last week. I will update eventually, do not worry. If I have a lot of homework it will wait until July, when I will have a week off.
This really pains me, but it is what it is, I need to take my time to write in a relatively decent manner and so that the scenes turn out the way I imagine them. Thank you for your understanding.
Bitter thoughts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Moscow. July 24th, 1918.
Igor Pyotrovich Turov.

It has been days since my investigation started and I have nothing to calm Sverdlov’s fears. The missing former Grand Duchess and the former heir might have already been smuggled out of the country for all I know. To my great relief, neither Lenin nor Sverdlov seem worried about me taking my time, they know they can always send assassins if the missing Romanovs are spotted years later in a foreign nation.

I am the one who is the most worried about finding the woman and her brother, I want to make a good impression on these important members of the party, and that is not going to happen if the Romanovs escape the country. If only I had supported the October revolution in time, but I was too busy looking at the risks to become a significant player. Now my destiny is probably going to be buried on the footnotes of history books, if I even make it there, all of this despite all of the support and loyalty I have given to the cause, despite having known for years we were on the right side of history.

I look at my papers and study the leads once more, the last clear one we had was a witness from Kambarka; this witness claimed he had heard a man yelling out loud in a cafeteria that the Tsesarevich had survived, he later described the people who were travelling with him.

Paul and Volya, the two guards responsible for letting the Romanov citizens escape, as well as the crew of the steamer they were travelling in, were summoned to come to Moscow and help me with the search as soon as I was tasked with the investigation. They were the ones who explained to me exactly where they lost the woman and the boy, so I sent my first search parties to the location and instructed them to question as many witnesses as possible, using official pictures for reference. None of that worked, the peasants all wanted something in return, and they would have said anything to avoid being tortured. All I managed to do was create rumors that might one day harm our cause.

We received the clue from Kambarka indirectly, from a local Cheka that had arrested the witness for “spreading false rumors”. I never suspected Kambarka, I thought the settlement was too far from where the Romanovs had been lost and never did the idea occur to me, if it wasn’t for a patrol that wandered too far away we would have never found anything.

The lead from Kambarka was later corroborated when I ordered patrols of red guards to be posted on every train station located on several possible routes I suspected the Romanovs might have taken. They couldn’t ask for Grand Duchess Olga and Grand Duke Alexei, of course, so I ordered them to look for a boy on a stretcher and a woman with a swollen face.

I received a report that people that fit this exact description had been found, but the suspects were unfortunately allowed to proceed with their journey because the guards who stopped them weren’t mine. Since I don’t have enough guards at my disposal, I have been allowed a certain degree of authority to give orders to red army units not directly under my command, this with a seal of approval from Lenin. Unfortunately, unlike my men, those other guards didn’t really have a clue of what they were actually looking for and how fundamental its finding was for the future of our nation; they were also foolish and gullible enough to believe anything they were told by the other people the Romanovs have been spotted travelling with.
I was so worried after knowing I had dismissed Kambarka as a possible location that I might have
gone too far this time, I even made sure there were people looking for the Romanovs in the stations
of Leningrad. I just hope that rumors do not spread among the people that the woman and the child
on the stretcher those red guards were frantically searching for were actually a missing Grand
Duchess and the heir.

The thousands of pretenders already appearing throughout the nation, probably looking for
attention, do nothing to help me with my quest either. I have had about ten different reports of
these sorts of lunatics in just two days.

The only lead I have now is the death of one of my men, Davydov, and one of the men under his
command, they patrolled here in Moscow. Davydov was a nice fellow, loyal man; it is truly a
shame. He was probably murdered by another one of his men, for I never saw that fat and ugly
man again. I don’t have evidence this is connected in any way to the missing heir and Grand
Duchess though, it could have been a petty robbery for all I know, the mysterious man seemed
more like a common criminal, not a true revolutionary. I have already asked for my men to look for
witnesses though.

Recently I received a telegram that said the Cheka headquarters in Perm had evidence for some
sort of conspiracy which involves the higher ranks of the British intelligence. It might seem selfish,
but I just hope they fail more disastrously than I probably will, that way I may not gain any fame or
praise for being assigned this almost impossible job, but I won’t look like a complete idiot either. I
curse myself for my self-centeredness, it is one of the things I hate the most about myself.

I am about to read the autopsy reports detailing once again how Davydov died, when I hear a
knock on the door of my office.

“Come in”, I say, and my secretary, Dina, does. “What is it woman?” I say without pride in my
tone, I become really moody whenever I think I am failing at something. I used to be the best in my
field. This has been the hardest search in my career.

“A letter from the Cheka”, she says.

“Another pretender?” I ask, the Cheka has been informed by the higher ranks that my office is
actually in charge of dealing with pretenders from all over the country in order to decide whether
they are insane or worthy of execution. This way our search remains as discrete as possible, and the
average Chekist can continue doing their job safely in the knowledge that the imperial family is no
longer a cause for their concern.

The secrecy, however, is exactly the reason why this search is causing me so much trouble, I have
been instructed not to name any of the two people I am looking for, at least not in urban areas
where rumors can spread like wildfire, this wouldn’t be a problem if we weren’t also discouraged
from using photos as references to question witnesses. I also need more men and staff, but that
would only make our secret search too big to hide, and I am too proud to ask Sverdlov for more
help. The young man practically idolizes me, he is aware of my long history of success as a private
investigator, and thinks it is only a logical conclusion that looking for these people is also an easy
task for me.

“This one is different”, my secretary replies, referring to the pretender. I doubt it is different, it is
not that hard to pretend to be somebody else, people would be surprised by how convincing some
pretenders can be. Most pretenders are easy to spot by their looks though, or by the way they act,
as if they wanted to be spotted, so I have other staff who sort them out, Dina among them, I only
check or meet the most similar ones, physically speaking.
“How so?”

“They don’t have the motives of a usual pretender”, Dina responds, looking at the contents of the letter with unusual interest.

“They?”

“The members of certain local Chekas around Moscow have been receiving pictures of a boy, they are slipped under the doors of the buildings”, Dina hands me the opened envelope. “The Cheka has been trying to handle this issue on their own for about two days, but they are beginning to grow worried”.

I empty the contents of the envelope on the desk and my mouth opens when I look at the pictures. The child looks older than in his official pictures, as evidenced by his long face, but he can’t be older than 14. His eyes are sunken, probably by lack of sleep, and his strained expression denotes absolute fear. In two of the pictures he looks as if he were about to cry, making his features hard to recognize at times… but it is him, no one who has spent days studying his face and years seeing it on postcards could miss that. Alexei Nicholaevich is holding a newspaper with his hands, showing it to the camera, on big letters it says clear as day: July 21st, 1918.

“Our government is being blackmailed”, Dina states before I am able to ask her who or why took and left these pictures inside those Cheka buildings. “The people who kidnapped him want the release of a number of prisoners, they have threatened to turn him over to our enemies if their demands aren’t met, the Cheka left you a copy of the threatening letters, they have also requested for you to be given more resources for your investigation. A General, General Gorlinsky, has been assigned to help you. You may be promoted as well.”

This couldn’t have been easier for me. People who act like they have already won always make at least one mistake, and one mistake is all I need. The fact that all of the former heir’s pictures have him showing a newspaper from three days ago already shows a lack of discipline and care on the part of the blackmailers. Now the only challenge left is the sister, they would have also taken a picture of the woman if they had her as well, of that I am sure… or maybe they did take her, but they were, yet again, too incompetent to use her as well, where could she be if not with her brother?

Olga.

I am lost, and not only metaphorically, I can’t find the address written in Sergei’s notebook. I arrived at Perm in the morning, two hours ago, and I have been wandering ever since. I do not have any money to take a carriage or a motorcar, so I have to walk and ask people on the streets for directions, among them, hundreds of soldiers are walking with the locals, probably retreating from Ekaterinburg, or getting prepared to stop the Czech legion’s advance.

All the people seem confused as to why I am dressed as a man. Since there is no longer any need to pretend that I am one, I have stopped forcing my voice to sound deeper, and have taken off my cap to reveal my growing golden hair, making my gender obvious.

I am too tired to keep walking, so I sit on the sidewalk to rest for a while and watch the people pass by. I miss having Alyosha by my side, he would probably have been so excited about what I did these past few days. I find the way I am missing him right now funny, as if he is only on the front with papa and not in terrible danger. Sometimes the truth is so horrible you can no longer process it.

Some passerby had stolen all of Sergei’s money from his suitcase while it was laying next to his
body, as well as most of his clothes. Me and Anastasia were running inside the station to escape the red guard when it happened. Nothing else was stolen, the thief or thieves had not seen the value of his writings, letters, or pictures; they just wanted the money, and most of the clothes, thank God for that, I can still make sure all of his important belongings end up with his family. Our night had been so full of other worries that Valeriy, Anastasia and I did not realize the money was missing until we started planning my trip back to Perm. For a moment we put everything on hold; Valeriy only had a few rubles in his pocket, not enough for a meal, let alone staying on a hotel for weeks and buying train tickets. We continued to discuss what to do in the house that belongs to the woman who had found Valeriy, Natalia, whose offer of hospitality was still open. We carried Valeriy to the house on a stretcher.

We came up with a solution eventually, Sergei had several uniforms in his suitcase in case a disguise was ever needed, most had been stolen, but not all. Valeriy suggested I travelled back to Siberia with the soldiers leaving for the front. He said if I dressed properly, carried the suitcase inside the coat and kept my head low while mixing with the men no one would notice me. The mere idea made me shiver.

I refused at first, what if they all knew each other and saw that I was out of place? What if I looked suspicious? What if they called someone to interrogate me? Valeriy told me it was unlikely the average soldier, especially conscripted ones, were focused on that, and that I just needed to look out for political commissars, but even those would not be looking for a Grand Duchess among his soldiers. I was not convinced, the idea of being among red soldiers unprotected made me start crying with fear, even if they didn’t suspect me of anything, they could find out I was a woman. I now know what men are truly capable of. And what would mama say? Being dressed like that is hardly decent.

“All you have to do is mix right in the middle and act normal”, Anastasia encouraged me.

“But what if they ask who I am”, I sobbed. That is no longer what I was worried about, but I didn’t want to shame myself by telling them the real reason.

“You say you are a new conscript”, Valeriy said from his bed in a calm voice. “I know you can do it; I saw the way you talked to the guard, just get in character, I think you are less likely to be discovered this way than how we originally planned, actually.”

“But my voice…” I protested.

“If you can’t fake a male voice just go with Sergei´s story, you are a female soldier”, Anastasia said. “You are not a bad actress, you know?”

Then another thought occurred to me.

“What am I going to eat?” I asked, I would never ask food from the men. Both Valeriy and Anastasia stayed silent for a while.

“I am not sure if they feed the soldiers on the way or if they are supposed to buy food with their salary”, Valeriy admitted. I know they were fed on the front and in the medical trains, but some also brought their money in case they got hungry. I am not sure how it is now though.

“We can ask Natalia to lend you some money”, Anastasia said. “We will repay her.”

I became a sobbing mess.

“Alright alright,” Valeriy said while laying on the sofa where he would sleep, he was moved by
my tears. “We will think of something else”, he looked at his wife with concern.
I did not want to do it, but I did not have a better idea, and in that moment I am ashamed to say the
dark part of my soul suddenly found comfort in the idea of the soldiers recognizing and killing me,
knowing too well many of them would be proud to brag about having raped the former Tsar’s
daughter before anything else. I didn’t care anymore as long as I died right after, that way I would
not have to live another day without knowing where Alexei is, or whether my sisters would be safe.
Life was, and still is, becoming too hard, how much more can I handle?

I looked at myself in the mirror, dressed in a simple soldier´s uniform that men in the infantry used
to wear: khaki pants, a long shirt the same color, but without any epaulettes, black boots, and a
long coat. We had a cap as well, the one most Russian soldiers used, it was also khaki, but the part
used to protect the sight from the sun was black. The cap had a metal oval in the front, right in the
middle, on top of the Khaki part; that metal oval had a black circle surrounded by a golden one.
Red soldiers did not use this cap anymore, so Anastasia and I removed the metal oval.

I used the cap all the time to cover my hair and avoid having to cut it.

I hate wearing men´s clothing, I feel so unlike myself, without a skirt and a corset I feel almost
naked, it made me feel even more vulnerable and exposed at first. I can’t wait to take this of, I hope
I am offered some proper clothes when I arrive.

Hours before I left, Anastasia got a job in a hospital not too far away from Natalia´s house, and she
gave me the address of both the woman and the hospital.
It is said God never gives you more than you can handle, I know that now to be true, but in that
moment I just hoped it was.

I travelled in crowded car, loaded with common soldiers who, most of the time, left me alone, but
that was no comfort to me. I grew up surrounded by officers and sailors, all of them nice, all of
them there to protect us, I never had any reason to think badly of any man, I didn’t even suspect
harmless vices, not until proven otherwise, I was too innocent.
I wonder if that same innocence is the reason mama never believed any of the rumors about
Rasputin, how could she? What did mama really know about evil men until very recently?

Now it is all the other way around for me, I can´t think good of any man. I will never be able to
believe with full certainty that a man has a good heart unless I see he has been given an excellent
opportunity to harming me without repercussions, and still refuses to do so. All men seem like
potential monsters now, all of them, until proven otherwise.

I am almost falling asleep on the pavement, I wasn’t able to sleep much on the trains, any
movement or sound, any soldier sleeping, siting or even standing slightly closer to me than usual
could make me panic, and my heart would beat so fast I feared several times I was truly dying, I
was indeed going to have an attack, I even confessed to God all of my sins for a last time whenever
that happened, sometimes I had the sensation I was going crazy, and as a consequence I wouldn’t
be able to reach Perm. It was similar to the night I spent on the Rus, where I would wake up every
five minutes to make sure nobody entered our cabin, but this time it was much worse, I didn’t
genuinely fear for my life on the Rus.

I cried myself to sleep every night that I managed to sleep. It is still too painful to think I won’t be
there to comfort Alexei if he is indeed executed, or that he might be alone for the rest of his life if
he isn’t, just what the poor darling feared, please God comfort him. I am trying to remember all the
times we have spent together, now that they are still fresh, in the future I might forget them.

Before we left Tsarskoye Selo and were moved to Tobolsk, maybe that same day or the day before,
Alexei pushed me into the lake with my clothes on; the memory makes me so nostalgic, I was
there, floating in the water and completely bewildered. I looked up and my brother was still barefoot on the plank, laughing. Whenever he acted like his typical self I didn’t worry about the future, because I knew that he was smart enough to have an idea of the danger, but he was just too young and childlike to care, and if he could still act like a child knowing our circumstances, so could I. In Tobolsk my sisters and I took turns to pull his sledge during winter, the poor dear enjoyed that simple amusement so much. He was almost as depressed as me when our parents left; later in Ekaterinburg he missed being able to walk, and I spent enough time with him to know there was something else saddening him, maybe the same thing that saddened him when our parents and Maria left. He looked so stressed whenever Tatiana, misguided albeit with good intentions, told him to get better so we could meet papa and mama again, he confessed his feelings of guilt to me. After that, I explained the situation to Tatiana and she stopped her innocent pestering of our brother. The day before they took him, he kept apologizing for something, I suspected what it was about…no, I knew what it was about… and I still didn’t calm his fears, I did not tell him that it wasn’t his fault.

If my baby brother dies, my uncle Michael is next in line, but I do not know where he is or if he is safe, as far as I know he has also been arrested, I need to pray for him also.
If something happens to my uncle, Grand Duke Cyril, the son of my great uncle Vladimir, is next in line. At this point though, I would rather have Russia be a republic than have Cyril on the throne. He betrayed my family. During the troubles in St. Petersburg, when the mob was looting and burning the village of Tsarskoe Selo, Cyril had command of the guards outside the Alexander Palace. As long as the guards stood there, the mob stayed away. But Grand Duke Cyril abandoned my family, with me and my siblings except for Maria sick in bed with measles and my father away at the front. My poor mama and Maria were left to face the frightening situation alone, with only a few Cossacks there to protect us. Maria spent herself so much that she almost died once she fell ill as well. The very sailors who had served us abroad the Standard in our beautiful summer cruises deserted us along with our treacherous cousin.

Cyril ordered the guards under his command to abandon his four invalid cousins in the middle of the night while they slept in order to support the provisional government. I genuinely believe he is an opportunist, and he just wanted the throne for himself; I have heard the rumors of several plots hatched by Cyril’s mother, Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna. His branch of the family has acted like a bunch of vultures for a long time, but I suspect their treacherous plotting behavior only increased when my brother almost died at Spala, and my uncle Michael married a commoner around the same time.

If Cyril had stayed on his post, maybe all of my family would have been safe right now; my sisters wouldn’t be at risk, my brother wouldn’t be probably dead right now, and I wouldn’t be completely heartbroken. If anything were to happen to Alexei, Cyril would probably claim his right to the throne from his comfortable exile as soon as he heard the convenient news. Cyril is safe with his family in Finland while we are here, grieving our parents in grave danger, he had already abandoned his motherland like he abandoned us while those men were ripping me apart and mutilating my brother. Cyril must be eager for any news confirming the deaths of my father and brother; reprehensible and despicable traitor. I could almost cry from rage, but I have cried so much on my journey I don’t think I have any tears left.

After minutes of bitter thoughts, I stand up and start looking for the address again, it is not a hotel but a house, must be rented. Fishing street 023, it says, near the river. I have already walked near the port, but maybe I have only focused on places near, maybe it is far from there, just close to the river.

As I walk I come across a kiosk selling newspapers, I can’t help but be curious to see if I have missed anything important. My mind fills with sadness as I grab one and remember the way I read
the newspapers to Alyosha.

“Can I?” I ask the woman selling the newspapers, referring to whether I could take a small peak without buying one. She looks at me with pity, probably because of my face, maybe because of the way that I am dressed. This happened to me several times on my journey, some soldiers were exceedingly courteous and even gave me food whenever they deduced I was a woman, I felt a bit safer around those types, they gave me hope in the inherent kindness of people.

“Only for a minute”, the woman responds.

I read the headline: Ekaterinburg in the hands of foreign invaders. The Czech legion, those are the foreign invaders, I do not trust them, but they have no quarrel with us. They were so close, so, so close… one week and they could have saved my father, my mother… I touch with longing the golden bracelet me and each of my sisters got from our mother.

My bracelet is the only thing I have left from either of my parents, the reds took all the rest, and they only allowed us to keep the bracelets because they could not be removed; they even took our crosses, the ones they gave each of us after we were baptized, we never took them off, not even when we bathed, not until they were stolen. I suddenly realize the guard who stopped us in Moscow could have recognized me because of my bracelet, he probably hoped to ask me to show him my wrist before Sergei convinced him otherwise. I haven’t worried about the bracelet during my entire journey, but maybe that was a good thing, if I had been touching my wrist I would have looked more suspicious.

I kiss my bracelet as I remember my mother, and how she called me her big Olga, my poor affectionate mama. I read in the first paragraph of the paper. It confirms to the world that my father is dead, and I start crying as if I did not know that already, reading it on a newspaper that sees his murder as an act of justice makes it all the more horrible, his death is just becoming more painful with every passing day. The newspapers say that we have been taken to a safer place, but they include my mother in this, and my brother, who they never intended to spare, or maybe even us… they are liars. They do not even mention Dr. Botkin, or Trupp, or Kharitonov, or Anna Demidova. I can’t imagine how their families must be feeling without knowing where they are. Tatiana and Gleb Botkin also lost their father, but they may still think he is alive. The reds must feel truly ashamed of what they have done or intend to do in order to lie like this.

The article mentions a soldier who stayed in the city, defending it with his men at least 5 hours after it had already been taken. He barely escaped capture afterwards. The author praises his name, and calls for other comrades to follow Gleb Vaganov’s example. There was a time I would have admired his courage and passion, maybe I just hate the cause he is passionate about. These past days have made me feel discouraged, while I traveled with the soldiers I heard them talk, most of them didn’t talk about politics at all, but some of the ones who did said positive things about the new government, the government that killed my father, the same government this one Gleb Vaganov was so desperate to defend. Knowing so many of my countrymen freely support the reds is so conflicting, it is hard to reconcile with the things my mother used to tell us about real Russians, so loyal to the Tsar… it is hard to reconcile with my love for Russia itself.

I can’t help but feel angry at those soldiers, sometimes hatred even for the man in the newspaper, even though years of studying French history and even reading novels from the perspective of revolutionaries has allowed me to concede that these hatred so many of the people have for us didn’t come from nothing, it came from years of serious problems not being heard. But rationally acknowledging something is one thing, feeling it in your heart, is another.

God would not want my heart to be filled with anger, for either my countrymen or even the people
from our own family that have betrayed us, us humans are so weak. How many times will I have to ask God to forgive me for my thoughts? He wants my heart to be filled with love, my mother used to say. I need to keep my mind off our enemies, and focus only on the meekness of our Lord.

I remember the prayer I wrote in my diary back when I was imprisoned with my family, back when I thought we were going through the worst. Now I need this prayer now more than I did back when I wrote it down, so I murmur it after leaving the newspaper back in its place: Send us, Lord, the patience, in this year of stormy, gloom-filled days, to suffer popular oppression, and the tortures of our hangmen. Give us strength, oh Lord of justice, Our neighbor’s evil to forgive, And the Cross so heavy and bloody, with Your humility to meet, In days when enemies rob us, To bear the shame and humiliation, Christ our Savior, help us. Ruler of the world, God of the universe, Bless us with prayer and give our humble soul rest in this unbearable, dreadful hour. At the threshold of the grave, breathe into the lips of Your salves inhuman strength, to pray meekly for our enemies.

I repeat the prayer again while walking, and my mind rests enough to think and keep searching. I realize now that maybe all of the doubt and resentment I was carrying with me is what didn’t allow me to find the address, “seek and you will find” says the Bible, but I wasn’t seeking anything before, I was too busy thinking about how pointless it all was.

I knock on the door of the small yellow and white mansion, located near similar ones. There are even shops around, and poor people begging in the streets, not what I imagine when I think of a place filled with spies. I wish I had a coin to give an old and wrinkled babushka. I am distracted when the door is opened, and an unknown skinny black-haired man with blue eyes dressed in simple civilian clothes opens the door, he is surprised when he sees my strange aspect. I stay paralyzed for a few seconds, I had not rehearsed this part, but am able to think quickly.

“I am here to meet an officer”, I say in English with a bit of nervousness, “Charles Lamb”.

“Who asks for him?” The man questions me in perfect English as well.

“Please let me see him”, I beg pathetically, my voice breaks. “He will know who I am, I really need his help, something terrible has happened”.

The man leaves the door open and invites me to enter, but before I can reach the living room, he has started touching me, first my shoulders, I paralyze, then my arms, this can’t be happening again, my stomach, when he feels my knife, which I have kept in the pocket of my shirt close to my chest these days, I push him away and scream frantically.

“What is happening here?” I hear a woman say in Russian, she comes from the living room.

“I was making sure she didn’t have any weapons”, the man answers in a perfect Russian as well, then he turns back to me, but I can’t dare to look at him, I stay still. “I am sorry miss, we do this with everyone that enters, and you are dressed as a soldier.” My breath slowly steadies, but I don’t answer him. “Could you please give me your knife? I am sure that I what you have hidden, and what do you have in that suitcase?”

I don’t want to do that, I don’t know this man.

“I will not give you anything until I see Charles Lamb”, I say.

“Please sit”, the robust woman tells me as she invites me to come into the living room, I do so as she turns back to the new man. “It is just a knife Randall, lets wait until the officers arrive”. She is right, keeping the knife is just me trying to feel as if I am in total control of the situation. My life, and my sisters’ lives, now depend on these men, extraordinarily little on me. I sit on one of the
furniture in the living room.

I am surprised by how relaxed sitting on a proper sofa makes me feel, the trains I travelled on had hard seats. I almost fall asleep in the soft cushion. The interior of the house is nicely decorated, as if they were using someone’s house. The man who opened the door comes back to me.

“Have my suspicions on who you are”, he tells me. “But I will wait for Charles to arrive.” He looks at me up and down with a frown. “That uniform looks dirty; would you like to change your clothes?” I put my guard down, for now, he does not seem like a monster.

“I honestly only want to sleep right now”, I tell him, and my eyelids close before I am able to even lay properly on the sofa.

I am awaken by the alarming sound of several men talking in the dining room next to the sofa where I was sleeping, I relax when I see Charles is one of them and I sit up, only to find someone had covered me with a blanket while I slept.

“We must waste no time then”, one of them says in a way that displays authority.

“No”, I hear Charles answer, “let her sleep”.

“I am awake!” I announce as I walk uninvited into the dinning room where several men dressed as civilians are having a conversation. The men are talking over a huge city map, they study a red spot carefully, is it the house where my sisters are still being kept? Oh God, please let it be! Let them be rescued! Are they even safe? The men’s eyes all turn on me, and I quickly take off my coat to reveal the suitcase I have carried with me this entire time.

“I am sorry for interrupting, but I need your help”, I say, and Charles, who is already standing up, approaches me. Seeing him again this close makes me emotional, when I saw him for the last time I was with my brother, I was filled with hope for him and my sisters.

“What happened to Sergei, Olga? Where is your brother? And what in God’s name are you doing here?” His concerned tone is enough to make me burst into tears, I did have some left after all.

“They took him!” I sob as I give him my suitcase. “They took him and Sergei is dead!”

Charles hugs me as I keep crying those words over and over again, I accept his comfort without fear for some reason, maybe because he reminds me of a time I still felt the horrors I had gone through would pay off in the end, and maybe because he seems like a good man, or I just want to believe he is. I know too well bad men do not have a particular look.

“Igor Pyotrотович Turov? Who is that?” Says the same man I am guessing is the leader, he has gray hair and an equally gray mustache, but he still looks strong; Charles must have given him my suitcase and he is now searching through the contents. “We have no reports of anyone named like him”.

“He is, the man, looking, for us”, I say between pauses, still in Charles’s arms. “Can you, make sure, those letters and, pictures, get to Sergei’s family?”

The gray-haired man takes his eyes off Sergei’s notebook and looks at me with sadness and pity. “Of course,” he answers as he nods. “They will also receive a modest sum of money”.

"My sisters?!" I cry.

"We have found their location, your help made it easy", Charles responds.
“Can you also help me find my brother?”

Chapter End Notes

I will update again in July.
Visions of the future.

Chapter Notes

These days I have been kind of rewriting this whole story to cover up the fact that I started it on a whim, don’t worry, I made very few changes. The main ones were in chapters 1 and 2, especially chapter 1 thanks to another author, I never liked how chapter 1 turned out until now. I also added a chapter from Anastasia’s pov between the first and second chapters from Tatiana’s pov. I had not written anything from Anastasia’s pov since chapter 1 because she is going to get so many povs in future chapters that she is kinda going to overshadow her sisters, and I wanted to make up for that by giving her sisters a chance to shine before that, but now I realize that is kind of silly, it is not a competition, which is why I added that chapter. Nothing important happens, so you do not have to read it, but since Alexei is missing I thought it would be a nice addition to have a last glimpse of his bond with Anastasia.

So, for any newcomers who weren’t here when I posted a chapter on Romanov history that I later moved to the prequel fic, it would be better for you to read at least half of the first chapter of “Home, Love, Family” in order for you to understand some of the things that occur or are thought here. Don’t worry, this is not publicity for my other fic, lol, it is literally only the first chapter, or at least half of it, that you need in order to understand.

I know, I am a mess, but this is my mess.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Moscow. July 25, 1918.

Doroteya Filippovna Lavrova.

“Beautiful! Beautiful!” My old patient calls for me, he just had an appendectomy.

“What is it Pavel?” I answer, trying to denote as much patience as possible. Before my recent vision of the future I would have been more kind. But now, everyday is a struggle in order not to cry.

“You know I can’t, dear, I have other patients”, I reply. He has asked me this just when I finished doing it less than half an hour ago.

“Or maybe she doesn’t want to”, Anastasia says as she appears behind me.

“It is really not that, excuse me”, I say apologetically to my patient. I take Anastasia to the corridors outside the patients´ beds. “Well, that was a bit rude”, I tell my new friend.

“I never let my patients treat me as anything more than a nurse”, she says. “Why do you?”

“They just feel lonely Anastasia, this man´s daughters haven’t come to visit him in a long time, his two sons died in the war and his wife is mad at him, even though he tells me she died years ago”.

“How do you know she is alive and mad at him?” Anastasia asks. I forgot I haven’t told Anastasia or her husband anything about my visions, the visions that I involuntarily have since I was a child and can barely control. I never tell anyone outside my family circle.

“Another relative of his told me”, I lie. I have only known Anastasia Kiriova and her husband Valeriy Kirilov for three days, but I already feel like they have been part of the family for years, which is why I sometimes forget I should not share my strange ability with them, two complete strangers.

Anastasia started working as a nurse three days ago in the same hospital I do, where my husband Andrei also works as a surgeon. She had also asked for a place to stay for herself and her injured husband. I let them stay with me, my husband, and my five-year-old daughter Katya on a whim, without even asking Andrei. Luckily for me, he never stays angry for too long, and Valeriy and him have become good pals.

Valeriy and Anastasia stay on the room for visitors, one me and my maid Sonia had to clean up before they could use it. Valeriy was shot by a robber who took all of their money while he and Anastasia were staying in Moscow temporarily on their way to visit a friend. At least that is what they have told me, and I give them the benefit of the doubt even though I could easily figure out whether what they are saying is true. It is rude to spy on people you know personally. The story is convincing enough, ever since the revolution, the streets haven’t been safe, it has become chaos out there. Just last week Andrei was robbed and assaulted, luckily he didn’t have much money with him, and they just gave him a black eye that is almost healed.

Valeriy stays all day in bed, and Anastasia takes care of him devotedly. Sometimes we take him out to the garden of our house on a wheelchair. My daughter is very funny with him.

Me and Anastasia continue giving meals, changing bandages, and assisting in surgeries.

We have a special place in the left wing for people infected with contagious diseases such as typhus, only certain doctors and nurses can enter, but there are too few of us for so many sick. We receive soldiers coming from both the south and eastern fronts, thankfully not too many. Most arrive in terrible conditions, and have barely been treated in the trains; the whole country is running short of medical supplies.

If it wasn’t for Dr. Markov, the founder and, at least for now, owner of the hospital, we might have been as lost and short of basic needs as most hospitals nowadays ever since the war. He works tirelessly along with the rest of the doctors in the hospital to make this place a true sanctuary, a place people who are in pain or weak can heal with peace and tranquility. He is working especially hard now that the funds are running low.

We obtain most things from the black market, and my sisters have friends in my village who sell us fresh food cheaper.

Dr. Markov is an extremely strict man, so strict sometimes Andrei resents it and tells me the funniest stuff about him with a very convincing stern voice that perfectly imitates him, my Andrei has always been jealous of him, he is so passionate about what he does that he becomes frustrated whenever he knows someone has more experience, as much as he also admires Dr. Markov, he is also very competitive. I find the way Andrei tries to hide it endearing, I always pretend I don’t notice that the new subjects he studies with especial enthusiasm generally become important to him only when Dr. Markov mentions them. I have been thinking about every single thing I love about Andrei recently. It is what I think about most of the day.

Dr. Markov is strict with shifts, with anti-epidemic measures, baths and laundries for the patients.
He doesn´t like it when we try new methods without his consent, and he insists we are especially careful when it comes to taking care of the fragile technological equipment, such as the x rays, and the handling of the donated blood and its subsequent classification for the purpose of transfusions. Dr. Markov is really up to date with all the new advancements, and even then he becomes annoyed when he isn´t able to modernize the hospital as fast as he would like.

Despite him trying to stay in good graces with the new government for the sake of everyone working here, as well as his patients, something tells me his time in charge is coming to an end; maybe this year, maybe the next one. I don´t know how to feel about it, he is a great man, and I don´t like the new establishment, but the healthcare in this country is already terrible, like 1 doctor for 6000 villagers in some places levels of terrible, and not all workers can afford hospitalization. The war, and now this civil war, has only made it worse. My friend Dafna, who works in this hospital and is more liberal than either Andrei or me, says that socialist healthcare will benefit the nation as a whole. I don´t want to be naïve, but I really hope at least the healthcare system does improve after the war is over. Whether it is socialism that will make that happen or not is something I will have to find out. I can barely have visions about the future of an individual, let alone about the future of a nation.

My shift has finished now, as is Anastasia´s, but I am not sure about my husband, it depends on whether there were complications on his last surgery or not.

“Help me find my husband before you leave, Anastasia”, I tell my friend, “if he is still in surgery you can leave first”. Anastasia nods.

Our house is a few streets away from here, we usually walk home unless it is too dark already. The surgery does take longer than usual, so Anastasia goes ahead while I wait outside the room. I immediately run towards him for an embrace once he is outside, this never gets old.

“What was it this time?” I ask my husband as we walk home.

“8-year-old boy broke his tibia, you know, fell while playing football. He wasn´t in my schedule today, he arrived recently.”

“Oh, poor thing”, I say.

“I knew you would say that Doroteya, but children are stupid”, my husband answers, as always.

“Come on, darling”, I say, “you wouldn't have such interest in pediatrics if you didn’t love children.” He is always so fun with his patients, especially with children.

“Oh, no, with one it is enough, Katya is the only child I like”, Andrei says. “And I am glad it is a girl, and a girly girl, I couldn’t deal with either a boy or a tomboy jumping around, climbing trees and trying to make me die of a heart attack at 28!” I roll my eyes, but then laugh.

“Well, you might not like this then, but I saw a boy in a vision”. Andrei stops on his tracks and looks at me with awe.

“You are pregnant?”

“Well be pregnant”, I reply. And he laughs loudly and carries me off my feet, he believes me. He knows everything about me. We cover each other's faces and lips with kisses. He keeps kissing my nose for a while, this would have annoyed me before, not now.

“Wait a second”, Andrei says when he stops kissing me, then he points his index finger at me. “Is that the reason you have been so especially affectionate so recently? Because you wanted to have
another baby?” He shrugs. “I mean, I am not complaining but… sometimes I need to sleep, Doroteya.”

“No Andrei”, I say as I roll my eyes. “I saw the baby, so even at our normal rate we would still have it”.

“Shame it is a boy”, he says.

“Oh, don't be dramatic”, I respond, and then he takes my hand and looks at me.

“I am happy”, he says, and he kisses the side of my head, then we keep on walking.

“Ugh, I want to get home already”, I say. “I am hungry”.

“Not even pregnant yet and already with cravings”, Andrei teases me.

We enter our apartment and find Anastasia in the dining room writing a letter on the table under the light. She becomes a bit startled when we arrive and quickly folds her letter to put it away, but smiles at us to appear natural. It is a bit suspicious.

“Good evening, I am not much of a cook”, she greets us, “but I helped Sonia prepare us something to eat.”

“Thank you, Anastasia, that is nice of you”, my husband says. I am still stuck looking for any other weird signs, but I hide it with a smile.

Me, Andrei, Anastasia and our daughter eat together. Valeriy had already eaten in his room, and Sonia prefers to eat alone.

I am fighting my urge to see what that letter is about and I fail miserably. Only portions of it appear on by mind. I understand very little of her handwriting, but it is there.

Dear C.L.: We are safe, it says, is Ms. R there yet? What Ms. R? This is our new address, we are living with a really decent couple, dear Ms. R will understand that we found many boring places around the city, but one of the theaters has fairly interesting plays we haven't seen yet, we are planning to do so tomorrow after work. And most damning of all: We can't tell you anything yet until dear Ms. R arrives, scared of talking nonsense.

What theater? They didn't tell us anything about going to the theater tomorrow. I worry I might have brought something dangerous to my house, I worry this might all turn out to be my fault. I know my daughter will be safe, but what about my husband?

I go back to reality, or to the present, and hope it wasn't too obvious I wasn't paying attention to the conversation between Anastasia and Andrei about new advancements on ways to treat abdominal wounds. Even my daughter seems more interested than me, which isn't normal. It occurs to me she might want to be a nurse like me when she grows older and my mood completely changes for the better.

After dinner, Katya goes to her room to play, and Andrei takes this opportunity to spend time with our daughter. Anastasia helps me wash the dishes, and then she excuses herself to go to her and Valeriy's room once she is finished.

When I get to my daughter's room I find her wearing a stethoscope and playing with Andrei, who is clearly the patient in this situation.
“I am going to give you some aspirin”, Katya says in a serious voice. She is really disappointed to know it is time to go to bed, and even more so when her dad supports my decision by saying goodnight to her with a kiss on the cheek and going back to our room.

I calm my very upset daughter, help her put on her nightgown and tuck her into bed. As always, she asks me for a story.

I tell my daughter the story of Ivan and the Chesnut Horse, which is an immensely popular tale. I wonder why I had not told her about it before. Maybe I had just forgotten, I talk to her about the Romanovs so often…

“I love how at the end Ivan gets to marry the princess, he deserves it because he is so good, I was surprised, but I like it!” Katya exclaims.

“I am glad you liked it my darling, now it is time to go to bed”, I tell my daughter.

“Tell me more about the Grand Duchesses! Where are they now? In Ekaterinburg? Are they still there? What are they doing now?” She talks and asks the questions with excitement.

They are some of the many people I see on my visions, something that used to happen very often because I willed my mind to do so. I used to tell my daughter real stories about the Grand Duchesses that I learned about thanks to this strange gift from God. Little Anastasia’s pranks, Maria’s kindness, Olga’s intelligence, and of course, I tried to make Katya behave sometimes by telling her that Grand Duchess Tatiana Nikolaevna, the most beautiful of all, always obeyed her parents. What can I say? What little girl does not like to hear about princesses? And how could I not use my ability, that is a curse most of the time, for something that genuinely makes her happy? I regret it now, however, these are real girls, real women, real life. Bad things happen, what do I tell her now? That their parents were murdered in front of them?

“They are still together in Ekaterinburg, dying of boredom”, I lie with a smile, my daughter laughs out loud as if my joke were actually funny. There is nothing new about them her innocent five-year-old ears should hear. Could I tell her that two men came for the little brother and I got so upset that I completely stopped having visions of the Romanovs? That when I do have visions I try to block them out of my mind and then forget about them immediately? That I don't know where any of them are now because their story might not have a happy ending and I am not prepared to see it?

“Can you tell me their futures then? And will I be able to marry the tsarevich and become the tsarina?” She asks the two questions in a quick succession.

“Remember I can't see the future darling”, I answer, endeared by my daughter’s interest.

“Now, it is late, time to go to bed”. My daughter pouts.

“Can't you tell me another story? She asks with a sparkle in her eyes, I almost give in. “It can be about anything!”

“No, it is late, I promise I will tell you lots of things tomorrow, I have many interesting stories for you”, I answer truthfully, and she seems comforted by this, there are really thousands of stories to tell. This time, I will make sure they are all fictional. I kiss her forehead and caress her dark blond hair while I tuck her into bed. We say our prayers together before I sing to help her sleep, then I turn off the lights and leave to join my husband in bed.

I have seen the future, maybe better than most people with my abilities are able to, but I do not
want to tell my daughter any of my possibly inaccurate predictions. My poor child, I should definitely not have filled her little head with this almost fairytale like story that might still end in tragedy.

I had visions about the futures of Olga, Tatiana, Maria, Anastasia and Alexei weeks ago, back when they were still in the Ipatiev house in Ekaterinburg and I thought I had made an obvious mistake, because Marina’s prophecy was, apparently, turning out to be true, and I was no match for a woman who saw 300 years into the future.

Marina's prophecy was not fulfilled, at least not entirely. Seeing the future is hard, and just like in any other vision, you cannot understand what is happening if you only see the middle. Marina did not see the beginning nor the end. Tsesarvich Alexei didn't die in the Ipatiev house, so the dynasty did not end there, like Marina proclaimed it would.

Something dreadful did happen at that house. Those boring moments in the cellar were the last this loving family would ever spend together. Maybe the dynasty did not end, but the Romanov family was ripped apart. Five innocent children were forced to watch the murder of their parents. Then they were split, maybe forever. That was Marina’s vengeance.

But maybe Marina's words simply have not come to pass yet, and just like the Ipatiev monastery was only the beginning for Tsar Michael I, the Ipatiev house might have been just the beginning of the end for Tsesarevich Alexei.

I don’t know if any of the visions I had back then and kept to myself will ever come to pass, except maybe, for the one I had about Alexei.

Predicting the future is harder indeed, few seers are able to do it, let alone do it properly, most who see the future only get nonsensical visions that need to be interpreted in order to make sense. Sometimes I am completely wrong. Sometimes I have a good vision, that tells me everything I need to know, but I am unable to interpret it properly until the events in question come to pass. Sometimes my visions are correct, but I am still wrong. That is why I stopped telling people their futures for rubles in my village, I experienced many embarrassing moments, some called me a charlatan and never forgot the offence, even now when I visit my family in the village I fear encountering those people. I lost my best and only childhood friend because of one of my predictions. I predicted she would marry the man she loved. My vision, in which I saw her kissing him, only predicted the man would seduce her without marrying her, he left the village the morning after. It was partly my fault he was able to do that, my friend really thought he would keep his word and marry her soon after. Some people started ostracizing her, and Anna never talked to me again. Anna left the village to travel the country and never came back, I really miss her.

My first vision of the Romanovs` future was that of two shining stars, the brightest I had ever seen, I knew those two stars were the big pair, because I saw their faces in the light. Then I saw three stars, or four stars. The third star, in the middle of the sisters, shone the brightest, because it was made up of two stars, one in front of the other. Now that I have gathered up the courage to focus on their futures again, I see the same thing. I do not know what this means, but it might be a good sign.

I have also seen Maria’s future, which is a worrying sight; there is also a star, but it barely shines, for instants it isn’t there, it is so small and insignificant I worry I might have imagined it out of fear for the girl’s future. The star appears and disappears.

Whenever I have visions about the two youngest children my heart sinks, they are the most unsettling of them all. When I think of Alexei’s future I only see darkness; black, unadulterated, pure darkness. I only have visions like that when the person has died, and I have always been
Death is the only thing I can predict accurately when it just happened or is about to. I told many of my acquaintances about their sons’ deaths in battle way before they received any news from the front, I received the knowledge from those visions. Sometimes they did not believe me, but I was never mistaken; many thanked me once they received the news for preparing them for the terrible blow, others blamed me for their deaths, saying I was a witch who murdered their sons. I do not blame them; their grief must be unbearable.

My husband became angry whenever I told the parents I had predicted their sons’ death, saying it was best not to say anything until they received the messages themselves, but I disagreed, I thought they deserved to know as soon as anyone close to them knew. Now I understand my husband's point of view.

I already mourn the poor heir, such a good boy, such compassion for someone so young. In the words of his own late mother, perfect son in law he would have been. I know I must tell my daughter sooner or later, maybe I will tell her tomorrow.

The visions I have about Anastasia’s future, or lack thereof, are the strangest I have ever had. I do not see anything. Not even darkness. If I do perceive something, it is another girl. Every time I focus on someone's future I see something from their past or present whenever I fail, anything; never does my mind go blank like this, never am I presented someone else. Anastasia’s name does give me a bit of hope for her though, the meaning of her name is like hope itself, and their names are what they are for a reason.

I see my own children’s future a lot more easily. I know both my darling baby girl and my not yet conceived baby boy will survive childhood and grow up to have children of their own. I see so much happiness in their futures, but I also see suffering. A war, even greater than the ones taking place right now, is coming. It brings an evil enemy, cruel and vicious as the most radical revolutionaries of today's youth, but way more ambitious and destructive. Maybe this enemy is just a different group of reds, I have seen their flags, they are red, but they have a symbol in the middle, I think I have seen it before, but it is not the hammer and the sickle.

My son will bleed and suffer for the motherland so terribly that it might haunt him for the rest of his days. Another thing that bothers me is that I can't see my daughter’s husband in the visions that take place after that terrible war, and curiously, one of my worst nightmares about that war includes a giant mushroom. My visions of the future are nonsense more often than not.

Some nights I cry myself to sleep thinking about my visions, it has become a daily occurrence. I am doing it right now while hugging my husband, who is already asleep, I want to wake him up, to conceive our child right now, or tomorrow, this entire week, just like we have tried this entire past week. I want to kiss him, become one with him and stay that way for hours. I want to enjoy every last second I get. I am crying as I wake him up right now, I am going to tell him I am crying because of the tsesarevich, that I need him to console me. But the main reason that I am crying is because two days ago, I started to see darkness in Andrei’s future as well, darkness that is always accompanied by a child’s voice, the child is asking a question over and over again: “Where are you taking me?”
So, what do her visions mean? For real though, I do not know, whoever can make up an end for the Romanov children that makes that vision understandable gets to make up the ending.
I am joking, but I am legit curious of what you guys think it means. I will cling to the hope you will tell me in the comments, it would be interesting to know. For real though, I am craving feedback, (the two kind souls that comment most of the chapters are making my days already, but I would like to know from other readers as well if they are even still out there, lol).
The informants.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Cheka headquarters, Perm. July 26, 1918.

A white bearded man is being interrogated in a small room; he sits on a chair in front of an empty desk while a younger man walks behind him from one side of the room to the other.

“Who gave you the idea to let the woman accompany the boy?” The young interrogator asks the older man.

“No… no one, I thought it would make his departure faster, and a bit easier for the prisoners”, the scared middle-aged man responds, “but I asked for permission to the Ural Soviet, if there is anyone you should blame from any complications resulting from my suggestion, it is them”.

The interrogator does not say anything else; he looks pensive, and he knows his suspicions are a stretch, but, how else could the recent events be explained? The prisoner breathes deeply, he thinks he is safe for now.

“Have you ever been in contact with any foreign intelligence?” The interrogator asks after a few minutes of silence. The eyes of Pavel Antonovich widen.

“Absolutely not!” Pavel exclaims, his forehead furrows. “How did you get such an idea?”

The interrogator places himself in front of Antonovich with his back to the desk, leaning on it.

“Let’s review the situation, shall we?” The interrogator says, sounding a bit calmer, but his eyes remain cold and fixed on the former commander. “You made a petition to allow one of the sisters to travel with the boy. Now, this wouldn’t have been a problem if your superiors had refused, I am willing to admit that, but the fact is that you, and only you, took the initiative.” Antonovich tries to protest, but the interrogator continues talking over him even louder. “Not even a full day has passed and the heir, who is a cripple, escapes, something he would not have managed to do without help from his sister.”

“I had nothing to do with the relocation”, Pavel protests, but the other man does not acknowledge what he said and continues talking before Pavel even finishes his sentence.

“Less than a week later we receive reliable evidence that a band of underground anarchists have kidnapped the boy and are now threatening to turn him over either foreigners or counterrevolutionaries operating under the shadows if we don’t release all of their family members and fellow anarchists, the ones that were arrested after the revolts in July. Do you see where I am going here? Don’t you think it is an amazing coincidence?”

“That’s all you have?” Antonovich asks. “If anything this proves the ineptitude of the people who planned the transfer of the tsarevich, something that, again, I had little to do with.”

“And yesterday, in the middle of the night, we captured an informer who was trying to obtain information concerning who has authority over the mansion where the three remaining Grand Duchesses are being detained. I don’t think it is cynical to suggest someone is trying to work against the best interests of our government behind the scenes, and we have good reasons to suspect you didn’t have the purest of intentions the moment you suggested to allow citizen
Romanova to accompany her brother.”

“All I wanted was for the removal of the boy from the house to go smoothly!” Pavel yells. “That is all! I have no clue of any conspiracy, and if you allow me to be sincere, comrade Anisimov, I think it is quite a stretch to think of any foreign intelligence working side by side with bloody anarchists! You are young, you’re wrong, you are inexperienced with these matters, you are not as smart as you think you are, and you are lazy!”

Alexander Borisovich Anisimov’s first meets Pavel’s cheek for the first time. Antonovich takes his hands to his face, but recovers quickly. Alexander’s eyes widen profusely, he has never used violence before. He considers that maybe the old man is right, although he did wound his pride. He has no evidence connecting the boy’s kidnaping to the people trying to rescue the former grand duchesses, as he suspected was happening.

He has to keep searching, maybe interrogate that man they arrested recently again. The young man claims he doesn't know who he works for, who instructed him to get a job at the headquarters and walk into the offices in search for anything concerning the mysterious prisoners of the blue mansion, as the neighbors call it. He claims he is only doing it for money.

Alexander does admit it may be so, he knows the basics about how intelligence work operates, they pay informers who know little about who they are working for, that way the people behind the investigation can stay hidden. That way their entire plan won't crumble if they catch a single person working for them. But Alexander also knows there are British spies living in the city, German spies as well, he suspects the British because the Germans already think Moscow will eventually set the four women free for something in exchange.

It wouldn't make sense now for the Germans to risk the negotiations. And the Cheka has intercepted a telegram, they indeed have, and there is no doubt it comes from the English. They want to communicate with their extended network of spies, to inform the world that three daughters of the tsar, at least, are still alive. Alexander won’t let that happen, the best way to botch this plot of theirs is to stop their communication, he will find them somehow, and cut their cables.

The young Chekist will at least interrogate the informer again, maybe he remembers something about the person who recruited him, then they can arrest the people that look like that person until they find the individual and ask him about who he works for, then find that person and then the next one, until they get to the bottom of it.

Maybe this time, Alexander will be more willing to use force. There is always a first time, he thinks, as to Pavel Antonovich… well, he is a member of the party, so that gives him the benefit of the doubt. But the former commander will stay in prison until the entire Romanov affair is sorted out.

Olga.

I had a nightmare recently, probably had more throughout the night, but I don't remember them.

I am awake now with my eyes closed, longing for my sisters and anxious about my missing brother, but relieved about my present circumstances nonetheless.

It felt so good to finally take a bath and get to wear normal clothes yesterday. I hadn't done either of those things in days. I open my eyes in a comfortable bed, dressed in a comfortable nightgown, with a small glimmer of hope.

To my great delight and surprise, my still swollen eye can at least open up a bit now, I need to
make sure I can still see with it. Yes. It was uncomfortable at first, but I can see with it just as clear as I can with the other. It must have been the ice in a piece of cloth that Dunia, the maid, gave me yesterday after taking a bath. Thank you God.

I stay in bed for a few minutes, enjoying the little positive sides of my desperate situation before I enter into a panic again once the subject of my brother and sisters comes up.

Yesterday, after I had explained to the agents my brother's situation, they had claimed it would be next to impossible to find him in a city as big as Moscow, especially if he hadn't been taken by the Bolsheviks. The superior officer James Wilson didn't even have the courtesy to say it would be next to impossible, he used the word “impossible”, without adding anything to soften the blow. I appreciated that old tactless man way more than the others, at least he was honest. I had still begged them to try with pathetic sobbing pleas.

If I lose all hope my brother is will be found, I can at least focus my mind on grieving and accepting God's will. It would be better for me to accept it, it would be painful, but oh! So much easier! Way easier, and not as painful as having unfulfilled hopes for the rest of my life.

But this is not only about me, it is not fair for my brother that I stop looking for him, not when, no matter how impossible it is for us to meet again, it would still be even more impossible if I didn't try.

I asked them to tell the king about it, he would make them do something to find his nephew, I know he would. He may have not allowed us to come to England when our situation wasn't desperate, but it is different now. Papa was still his cousin, uncle George can't be completely heartless, he just can't. James Wilson's expression had changed, becoming cold.

Some of the others had said that the agents in Moscow would probably be too busy with other missions; political or military espionage, the more “important” things. They didn't use that word, but I know what they meant.

Charles had interrupted them, saying they could at least ask the higher ranks to contact their people in Moscow to make sure an attempt was made to look for Alexei. Then, probably thinking I was becoming hysterical, he had told me not to worry about either my sisters or brother, that they would find a solution, and had asked Dunia to take me upstairs so I could take a bath, eat in my room, make myself feel comfortable, and rest.

As the other agents seemed to respect Charles's opinion, I let myself put the search of my brother in their hands.

Now, laying in bed and having had more time to consider this entire situation, I think the agents are not taking, at least my brother's situation, seriously enough. It is like the world stopped caring about him the moment papa abdicated, if he was still the tsaresvich and had been kidnapped everyone would be looking for him. They would have found him the morning after, maybe the same night he was taken.

Now my brother means nothing to them, cousin Cyril could take his place for all the English care, they just want to win the war and keep Russia as an ally after that happens. My parents idolized the English, my father was appalled when he saw how easily the British press turned against him when he abdicated. I understand now that Great Britain looks out for its own interests mainly, every nation does. There is no real brotherhood in alliances.

Alexei means the world to our family, every loved one means the world to their families, and that never helps any common man. We are like that poor young girl I saw in Kambarka, no one cares
about her fate, not enough. Our only hope is that the king cares. I wished we lived in a world where everyone mattered enough.

I get out of bed and dress up with new clothes, normal clothes. The long skirt is light gray, unlike the dark one I left with. I find the new corset and shirt pretty, with its round collarbone and short sleeves. They gifted me a lovely pink sweater. Tatiana would love it, I wish she was here to I could gush about it with her, she always loved clothes, however simple. I am reminded of how much I miss her, I just want to talk to her now. They even gave me new boots. I can't complain about a lack of kindness.

I go down the stairs, where I find Charles and another agent having breakfast, Dunia asks me if I want to eat as well, I nod and thank her for her kindness.

“Good morning”, Charles says when I sit, and he folds the newspaper he was reading in order to start eating.

“Good morning, did the others have breakfast already?”

“Only me and Erik live here”, Charles explains, “the others live in different hotels and houses, just so we don’t draw too much attention.”

“We received a letter earlier this morning”, the other agent, probably Erik, states, he is a light blond.

“It is from Anastasia and Valeriy in Moscow”, Charles elaborates.

“Are they doing all right?” I ask.

“They are fine, living with a couple that works in the hospital where Anastasia is nursing now”, Charles assures. “The letter is from the 23rd of July, and it is numbered as the second, I am guessing the first one didn't arrive, they did well in sending several just in case.”

Many letters we sent to our parents in Ekaterinburg while we were in Tobolsk also went missing. With the way things are in the country I am surprised any letters still reach their destination. But what if someone reads the missing letter and finds it suspicious?

“Does it contain any damning information?” I inquire.

“It just says that Charles should wait for a certain ‘Ms. R.’” Erik responds. That is a code name Anastasia, Valeriy and me had chosen, they meant myself. “Is that you?” I nod.

“The letter also said that they haven't found any good places to see, which is suspicious considering we are in the middle of a war, not the best time to go on a pleasure trip”, Charles continues. I almost cry. The arrival of the food stops me.

“It is in code”, I explain before I start eating the eggs. Charles nods.

“That is not the only choice of phrasing that seemed strange, it is pretty obvious this letter is in code”, Charles tells me. “They haven't found any good places, what does that mean?”

“It means they haven't found any clues for the whereabouts of my brother” I lament. Then I explain to them the code Anastasia, Valeriy and I had agreed upon. They would communicate they had found witnesses or leads by writing they had found “interesting plays to see in a theater”.

“The letter is from three days ago”, Charles says. “It would be faster to communicate through
telegrams”, then he put his hand on his chin. “Anastasia and Valeriy are not trained to communicate in code through telegrams, I fear for their safety if anyone were to figure out the meaning of those letters somehow”. He turns towards Erik. “We have to make sure the people that search for Alexei in Moscow also get in contact with them, they were there when it happened and must have much more information”. Erik nods, and we all continue eating.

I explain to Charles the secret code Valeriy, Anastasia and I agreed upon while we drink coffee, and Charles writes it down. As I drink the coffee I think of my sisters, and how much they would enjoy it.

“I was reprimanded today”, Charles informs me. This is distressing to hear, he is the person I trust the most among these men. “Was it because you asked Sergei to take us to the Crimea?” I ask, he nods.

“Despite explaining to Wilson that I had received no orders to do the contrary and informing him about what had taken place”, he complains to me.

“Did you tell him you didn’t expect to find us walking free?”

“I did, it is the argument I used the most”, he says. “But now I think I made a terrible mistake”. I lower my gaze. “Maybe if I had been there…”

“You had no way of knowing”, I interrupt. I have been through this, it does no good to think about what would have happened.

“Today we are revisiting the issue of your sisters when the agents return”, Charles changes the subject. “You can stay to listen if you want to, and then we can decide where you want to go next.”

“I don't want to go anywhere until I know for sure my sisters are safe. Is there anyway I can help?” I ask. He smiles at me.

“We will see.”

I want to see my sisters as soon as possible, but I do not know if that will be possible, I want to do whatever will be best for their escape.

The men I saw yesterday do not talk about anything other than the red army's retreat and what they know about their forces when they arrive. This lasts for hours. I am stuck in a chair watching them not plan out the rescue of my sisters, it is incredibly distressing. We eat before they are even mentioned, but the men continue talking about the red army's retreat. They eventually bring up the subject after Charles communicates with Wilson in a series of stares and eyebrow raises, it takes a long time for him to get the message.

“Yes, Miss, don’t believe for one second we have forgotten”, Wilson says. “We are simply having trouble planning where to hide you if the rescue operation is indeed successful, and then we have to make plans for your next location.” I nod, but it sounds awful, it sounds as if they really have forgotten. I imagine me and my sisters ending up hiding somewhere inside a house in Perm, without hope of leaving anytime soon, not being able to go outside because there are people looking for us. At the mercy of a group of agents that may or may not abandon us if things get too hard.

“Well, not only that”, Erik interrupts. “We are also having difficulties planning the rescue itself, we need someone inside the house to provide us with information on the routines of the guards.”

“When they are changed, where they sleep, if any sleep there, who feeds them”, another man adds.
“Or depending on the method we use for the rescue, we would have to warn the Grand Duchesses about the shooting.” Those words make me freeze.

“Wha-at, what do you imply?” I ask.

“Well, if it comes down to it, that is, if we suspect your sisters are in danger, and we don't have enough information to come up with a better, more subtle plan...” Erik responds, “we are going to have to use force to rescue the Grand Duchesses”. That means people would die. I cross myself.

I have not considered the issue of the guards in a long time, part of me wants not to care, to let them face the consequences of keeping us locked up, but that is not what papa would have wanted. *It is not evil that conquers evil.*

More importantly, Galina’s grandson is there, she doesn't deserve that. Oleg probably doesn’t deserve it either, he was kind the last time I saw him, who knows... and I don't know enough about the other guards, but we have had no quarrel with them, at least not yet. One of those four demons was a guard who acted no different from the others.

The possibility of any of them dying doesn't make me sentimental or scared anymore, like it would when my family was imprisoned, but together and unharmed. This feelings don't make me feel good about myself, they make me feel tainted, less closer to God. Disgusted with myself.

“How can we avoid a bloodbath?” I question the men.

“We are still gathering information about the people who have authority over that house”, Charles explains. “With luck, we may be able to falsify a telegram ordering your sisters’ transfer, we just need to recruit some locals that are willing to perform the dangerous task of disguising themselves to escort your sisters out. No one would be harmed if everything goes according to plan, but we still need time.” I really hope they manage to do that.

“It is just proving hard”, Erik says. “Yesterday, one of our informers was arrested, and a few days before, commander Pavel was, which makes us suspect that they are already aware of some sort of conspiracy to liberate your sisters.” My spirits either rise or fall everytime a new agent speaks.

“But worry not, they have no clue of our location or anything like that, and in case the safe idea doesn't work,” Wilson explains. “We are going to need someone inside who can also come and go as she or he pleases, we need to communicate with the prisoners so that they are able to follow instructions in case the worst case scenario occurs.”

“Well, we have already found her”, Erik explains to me, “we are just having trouble getting our informants to convince her to talk to us”.

“She appears to be scared of us”, another agent confirms as he nods. We stay silent for a while.

I curse myself for how slowly my mind is working. There is only one woman living in the house, and she goes out all the time.

“You mean Galina?” I offer.

“If you refer to the old lady that works in the blue house and goes to the nearby market every Friday, then yes, that is who we are talking about”, the same guard corroborates.

“I can convince her to help us!” I immediately offer. They accept. They usually wouldn’t let the informants know who they work for, but this is a special case.
They gave me a headscarf to cover my swollen eye, which could give me away if they ever suspected I was here. I cover the other side of my face as well as I can too, but the headscarf won’t help much anytime I see someone face to face.

Erik walks with me and leads me to the open marketplace, where I should find Galina in about half an hour. At 3 o’clock in the afternoon. She always comes on fridays.

Erik wishes me good luck and leaves to watch out for me from afar. He tells me he is originally from Denmark, or at least his mother is. An aesthetically pleasing man. I can’t call any new man I meet handsome anymore, not even in my mind, without feeling repulsion.

I start exploring the place. I really don't know what I am going to say to Galina, part of me is ashamed of doing this, trying to convince an eighty year-old woman to do something so risky for the sake of four girls she has only known for a week. It is not fair for her. I have little time to think of the moral implications when I spot the old lady looking at the meat.

She has a big basket on her shoulder full with supplies for the kitchen. Poor dear, that must weight a lot. I approach her slowly.

“Good morning”, I say to her while I cover my swollen eye. She almost drops the basket when she jumps.

“Olga! What are you doing here?” She exclaims loudly.

“Shh, shh”, I try to calm her as I extend my arms. She frowns and opens her mouth, then she uses her free hand to cover her distressed expression.

“What happened to you?” She asks. I shake my head many times, maybe too fast, as my eyes fill with tears.

“Nothing”, I respond as they roll down my face. I keep crying at the realization that this woman has seen my sisters everyday I have been away. “It is too long of a story to tell”.

Galina tries to touch the side of my face with her hand to display compassion, but I flinch away. The the pity manifested in her gray eyes makes me burst into sobs.

She seems understanding and does not press the matter further. I try to breathe again.

“How are, my sisters?” I immediately ask between pauses to breathe when I have composed myself, at least enough to talk.

“They are in good health”, she responds with a kind smile. “No one has harmed them child, do not worry.” I nod, again, many times, way too fast.

“Morally? I mean, how are they feeling?” I continue my inquiry. Galina’s smile disappears.

“Missing their sister and brother, missing their parents. They cry everyday. Probably more than I see them cry, since they don’t like to appear too distraught in front of me, or anyone other than themselves. They always wipe their tears when they see me.”

“Please tell me everything you know”, I say, pressing her to continue. I miss them so much.

“They scream in the middle of the night, everynight at least one of them does, for their parents mostly, sometimes they just scream the word ‘no’ over and over again, sometimes they just scream. They wake the few guards who remain in the lower rooms to sleep, some of them become angry
and yell back to shut them up, but there is nothing they can do about it.

“They are also trying to put on a smile during the days, sometimes they succeed, especially Maria. She is such a sweet girl your sister, did you know she and I prepared an improvised birthday party for Oleg?” I chuckle in tears at, it sounds like something Maria would do. It is like getting a small piece of her.

“Tatiana is good at playing piano,” Galina continues. “She does it almost daily nowadays, when she is crying it helps her relax, they also sing religious hymns after praying some days.”

“Oh! Did they joke about missing a fourth voice and sounding terrible without it?” I ask.

“Well, yes!” Galina responds. “It is amazing how well you girls know each other, they make lots of witty comments about it”. I smile, remembering the times in Tobolsk we were making those funny comments about Maria’s missing voice.

“And Anastasia…” Galina begins to say.

“How is she?” I ask, I am extremely worried about her.

“It seems she has found a friend”, Galina says. “She plays a lot of games with one of the youngest guards whenever she is in the mood, they mostly run around the corridors and up and down the stairs, yelling and chasing each other, that is, when the new commander isn't there.” I really hope it never comes down to the agents entering the house by force then.

“Galina…” I start to say, hesitantly, with a low voice. “I hate to ask you this, and I completely understand if you refuse, it is extremely dangerous, but I am now living with a group of British intelligence agents, and they need someone from the house to pass them information.”

“Oh! So that it what it was!” She crosses herself, looking quite alarmed. “Oleg told me not to do it, he says it would be dangerous if I get caught”. For a second I feel an irrational hatred for Oleg, then I urge myself to relax when I remember this is the woman who raised him. Of course he told her that. I am starting to feel like a monster, but I want my sisters to live, so I press on.

“It could save my sisters’ lives Galina”, I tell her the truth, feeling guilty about doing it knowing she will probably accept now. “We don't trust the government to keep them alive for more than a few more months, at least that is what they say, they have evidence the Bolsheviks have already executed numerous people without trial.” She puts her hands in her mouth, then she crosses herself again.

“That is horrifying!” She exclaims. “You poor girls, I have no other choice but to accept, are you sure I would be of use?”

This bothers me too much. I don't know whether the information she provides will be that useful, we have two plans already, and one of them doesn’t require that much information on the house itself, only on the people who have the authority to order my sisters’ transfer. But regardless of what plan the English decide to go for, what Galina is offering to do will put her at risk.

While we were in Ekaterinburg, we received letters from some allegedly loyal people who wanted to rescue us, they asked us about the interiors of the Ipatiev house, of its security. We answered back, I wrote the letter myself. Papa and mama were so anxious, they didn't want anyone to get hurt, but they had hope. T
actually use a rope or stairs to go down, I repeat, an actual high window! And for all of us to do all of that without any of the guards noticing; preposterous.

We decided to answer that we couldn’t be rescued unless it was against our will, without our cooperation.

Those “loyal people” never came.

I have wondered if the Bolsheviks got hold of the letters and that was the reason they killed my parents. Other times, I have wondered if there were loyal people out there at all, if those letters weren't forged by our jailers in order to have an excuse to murder my parents.

Either way, I completely understand, even now, why we didn't accept their offer, it was too risky, a bit ridiculous in fact, and we were not aware of the danger we were in. We even wrote back that our guards were taking good care of us. We genuinely cared about the safety of the men guarding us, especially my almost saintly father. How naive we were! But I know that it is right to care, no matter how I truly feel about it. It is what papa considered right. It is the Christian thing to do, or think, I don't know.

Now that I have seen firsthand what we really needed to be rescued from, I don't think the offer from those “loyal people” was ridiculous at all. Risky? Very. Likely to fail? More than to succeed. Likely to get some people hurt? Yes, it could have. But if I could go back in time I might have written to beg them to think of another way to rescue us, to keep trying, I may have written we would cooperate in some other way. I might have even convinced mama to agree with the plan to drug Alexei, with the plan to get out through the window. Mama might have gotten hurt, but she might still be alive. My poor mama… I get the urge to cry thinking about her.

I won't make the same mistake we did when we turned down that rescue offer, as flimsy as it was. Now that I know there are real people seemingly willing to help us, I am going to play a part in my sisters’ rescue, as small and insignificant as it might be.

I curiously remember the words the Jewish man in Kambarka said to my brother and I. At the time I considered them interesting, but a bit condescending. Now I think there was some truth to what he said.

Maybe we have been told there was a special and untouchable place for us in the world, mama certainly made us believe that sometimes. We felt that things would fix themselves, and that the ways of the world would change to give us satisfaction, even if we knew that was not the case. In the constrained circumstances we found ourselves in, there was not much we could do other than pray and hope, so I don't think a more pessimistic attitude would have helped, it would have actually made things worse; but it is not that way anymore, at least not for me.

I have to act. Things won’t fix themselves. The ways things are in the world right now won’t either, now for our sake.

I still believe God has a plan, but God works through us.

Maybe I am becoming a monster. Some of the guards might get hurt, and I am putting Galina at risk. But Galina is willing to do this, and my sisters are in danger, so not doing anything would be equally monstrous.

I won’t let fear ruin the only chance we might have.

“Any information you may give will be extremely helpful”, I answer. Please forgive me Lord.
English is not my first language, so making British characters sound British is a bit hard for me. I don't know which phrases or vocabulary to use. If you know more about this and recognize any type of expression in my writing coming from a British person that is more American than British, or even too modern for the setting, please let me know and give me the “correct” words a British person from that era would use, or at least a British person would use (I know there are different British accents depending on the region, so just tell me if I am using an expression that is American and give me an alternative as well, please). 

For OTMAA or the Russian characters is different, I honestly don't care about it because they are supposed to be talking Russian most of the time anyway, and it is only written in English because I don’t know Russian, so I can take the liberty of not thinking much about how American or even modern their expressions sound, at the end of the day those are not the words or phrases they are “really” using, only the “translation” so to speak, of what they are saying or thinking. 

For these British characters though, there is no logical explanation as to why they would be using American expressions, because they ARE supposed to be speaking in English, just as I have written it, so it would be better to make them use English or other British expressions or manner of speech, something I am a bit ignorant about. Any help with that would be greatly appreciated.

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:
- Short comments, including emojis.
- Long comments, with no limits.
- Questions
- Constructive criticism
- Reader-reader interaction
- Comments in only one chapter.
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This author replies to comments, but if you don't want a reply, for whatever reason (for example, shyness), feel free to sign your comment with the Word "whisper" and I Will appreciate the comment just the same but not respond.

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