



JASPER KENT  
**THE LAST  
RITE**

Russia, 1917.

It was the greatest war  
the world had ever known.  
From it will rise the greatest monster  
mankind has ever faced . . .

From the bestselling author of *Twelve*

## ABOUT THE BOOK

***'Men will die tonight, whatever you tell us. Their throats will be ripped open and their bodies drained of blood. I may abstain, but I can't stop the others - not all of them. It will ease your conscience to know that those who died were our enemies . . .'***

**Russia, 1917.** Zmyeevich, king of all vampires, has been dead for twenty years.

Free of the evil that plagued his family, Tsar Nicholas II faces a new threat. War has brought Russia to her knees. The people are hungry for revolution.

Mihail Konstantinovich Danilov welcomes the prospect of change. Like his ancestors, he fought to save the Romanovs from Zmyeevich and his kind - fought and won - but he sees no future for Russia under a tyrannical tsar. He is not alone. His uncle, Dmitry Alekseevich, was born in a different era. He is a vampire, yet he still harbours one very human desire: that his country should be free.

But the curse that infects the blood of the Romanovs cannot be easily forgotten, and Mihail discovers that a terror once thought eradicated might soon rise again . . .

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# THE LAST RITE

Jasper Kent

*For P.K.*

## AUTHOR'S NOTES

### *Measurements*

Tsar Peter the Great based much of the Russian Imperial measurement system on the British system. Thus a *diuym* is exactly equal to an inch (the English word is used in the text) and a foot is both the same word and measurement in English and Russian. A *verst* is a unit of distance slightly greater than a kilometre.

### *Dates*

During the first part of the twentieth century, Russians based their dates on the old Julian Calendar, which in the 1910s was thirteen days behind the Gregorian Calendar used in Western Europe. In the text, dates of events in Russia are given in the Russian form and so, for example, the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II is placed on 2 March 1917, where Western history books have it on 15 March. On 14 February 1918 Russia adopted the Gregorian Calendar and so from then on all dates in Russia and the West were the same.

*With thanks to Mihai Adascalitei and Hildegard Wiesehofer respectively for advice on the Romanian and German languages.*

# Selected Romanov and Danilov Family Tree

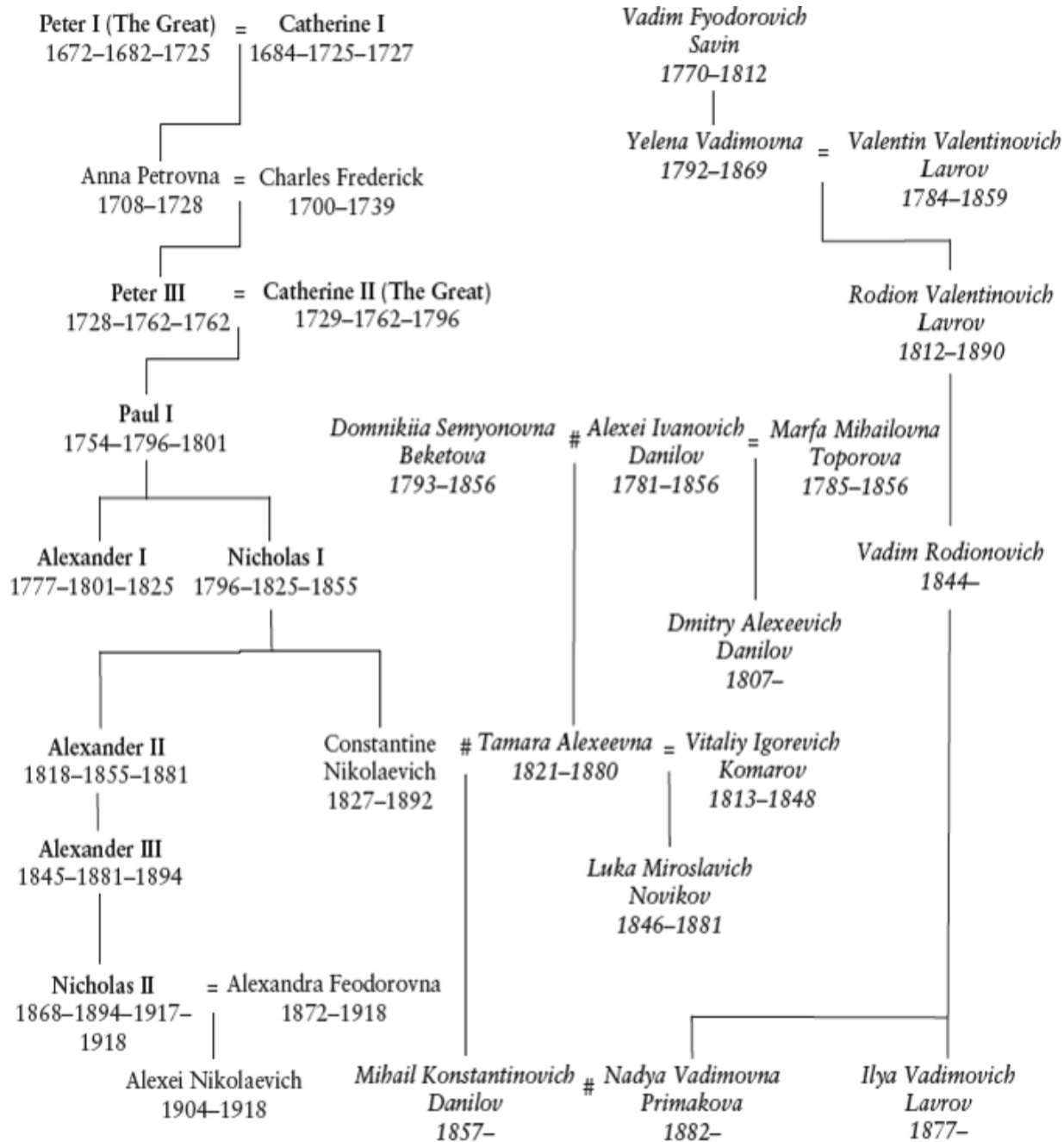
Reigning tsars and tsaritsas shown in **bold**.

Fictional characters shown in *italic*.

'#' indicates unmarried relationship.

Dates are *birth-[start of reign]-[end of reign]-death*



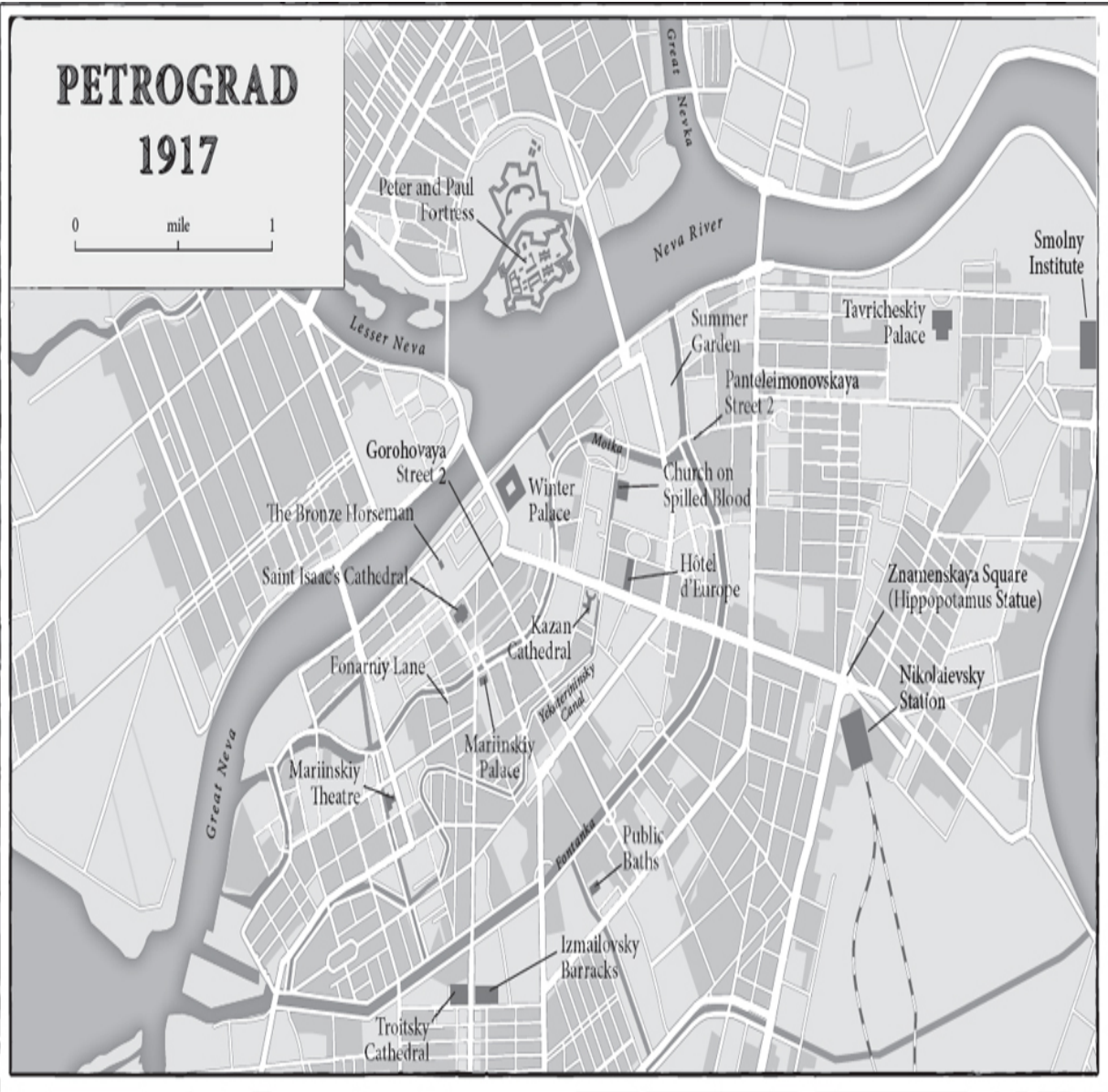


Cowards die many times before their deaths;  
The valiant never taste of death but once.  
Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,  
It seems to me most strange that men should fear,  
Seeing that death, a necessary end,  
Will come when it will come.

Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act II,  
scene ii

# PETROGRAD 1917

0 mile 1



## PROLOGUE

### *An Anatolian Folk Tale*

On the twenty-third day of the month of Nisan, in the eighteenth year of the principate of the Emperors Diocletian and Maximian, in the city of Nicomedia, the gift of martyrdom was bestowed upon the Tribune George - son of Gerontius - his head severed from his body for his refusal to renounce his faith. For this sacrifice he was acclaimed a saint. The anniversary of his death, 23 April, came to be celebrated as the feast day of Saint George. But it is not for his death that he is famed.

Long before, as the Roman Empire swept across the world, the Tribune George had slain the monster which was to make him renowned throughout history. By command of his emperor he had been dispatched to the province of Libya and one day, journeying with his slave Pasicrates, he found himself near the city which some call Lasia and others Silene, by which they may mean Cyrene. There George encountered a hermit, who told him of the city's curse.

'Close to this place,' the hermit said, 'lies a great lake, as wide as the Earth and as deep as the sea, beneath whose waters a monster makes its lair: a dragon who demands a tribute of the people. Every day they must offer up two sheep from their flocks upon which the beast may feed. They offer no resistance. They do as they are told, for they know that if they refuse the monster will drag itself from

the depths and descend upon the city, breathing destruction.

‘But it is not fire that the monster breathes as many such creatures do. It breathes poison – a noxious miasma far worse than flames, which may be extinguished. The dragon’s breath brings all who scent it to die in agonizing torment, such that no man who has witnessed it can describe.’

‘Two sheep each day seems a meagre price,’ said George.

The old man shrugged. ‘Greater than our king is prepared to surrender. He paid the tribute for many years, but then famine came, and the flocks dwindled, and even two became more than the people could afford. And so now they offer up a human sacrifice, a subject of the king, which the beast is more than happy to accept. All are equal before the serpent. Lots are drawn. Any might become the chosen one – young or old, male or female. But today the duty has fallen upon the king’s daughter, the Princess Sabra. The king has tried to prevent it, but the people are adamant. They insist that the princess must obey the law which binds them all. And the princess herself is willing, knowing justice better than her father.’

The hermit looked up and pointed out across the plain towards the water. ‘Behold! There they go now, the princess and her entourage, down to where the serpent waits. It will not take long.’

But George felt only anger at the story; at the greed of the dragon, at the ingratitude of the people to their king, and at the disobedience of his daughter. The tribune mounted his horse and rode swiftly towards the lake. He passed Sabra and her attendants and shouted that they should stop; that he alone would face the creature. They did as he told them, some believing that he would do what he had said, others reasoning that this stranger would make an ample sacrifice, if only for today.

As the saint approached the shore he slowed his horse and surveyed the water, gazing into its still depths, searching for the monster. And then the waters became turbid and began to boil, even though the day was cool. The surface rose and separated and the monster was revealed, half serpent, half dragon. Its head towered above George, its body's length five times greater than the saint's height, with more still submerged and invisible beneath the waves. George looked up into its eyes and knew that this was no animal; no part, however vile, of God's creation. This was a manifestation of Satan himself that had somehow burst up through the Earth from the flames below. Perhaps the monster he faced truly was the Beast of Saint John's Revelation.

George turned his horse and galloped away from the water's edge, seeming afraid. But the act was not born of fear. Soon he turned and saw what he had hoped to see, that the creature had followed him out of its watery domain and into the realm of men. George levelled his lance, holding it out in front of him, pointing its iron tip at the leviathan's heart. Then he spurred his horse and began to charge. The monster reared its head, inhaling deeply before expelling a vast cloud of its noxious, death-delivering breath. But George was not deterred. As he rode forward he spoke loudly, without a break between words so that he would never have a chance to breathe in, reciting the Lord's Prayer. Thus even if some of the deadly vapour did infiltrate him the holy words would protect him from the venom.

And so George arrived beneath the creature's shadow unharmed, and his lance was true, and although it was shattered into a thousand pieces by the armour of the monster's scales, its iron-clad tip penetrated through them and into the dragon's heart, killing it and sending its soul back down to Hell. But even as the dragon perished, its head thrashed and its teeth fell upon the saint, and bit into

him, and drew his blood. It was the tiniest of wounds, and caused him little pain, and healed quickly. And yet he would always remember it, as would his children and their children too.

Afterwards George went into the city of Lasia and was honoured for what he had done. The king begged to know what reward he would accept, and in return George asked only that the people of Lasia should become Christians, a request to which the king happily agreed. That day twenty thousand were baptized, not counting the women and the children. The king had a church built in honour of Saint George and of the Virgin, and from its altar there still issues a natural spring whose waters cure all illnesses.

But this is not George's story. Neither is it the story of the monster he slew, nor of the princess he saved nor even of his slave Pasicrates, though it is through Pasicrates that we know all this to be true. This is the story of the lance that George used to slay the dragon, an artefact that would outlive all of them; that as yet did not even have a name.

As George was returning to Lasia to claim his laurels, it fell to Pasicrates to deal with the destruction he had wrought. Pasicrates surveyed the scene and felt proud of his master. The monster was dead. The lance was broken. But as Pasicrates looked he saw that the tip of the spear still protruded from the serpent's scales. He reached forward and grasped it, putting his foot on the creature's chest to brace himself. And after more than a little effort the shaft came free - like the sword Arthur pulled from the stone, although that story was yet to be written.

Pasicrates looked at his prize. There was little of it left - less than the length of his forearm, and he was not long-limbed. The iron tip remained embedded in the monster's heart, but the wood he held was still sharpened to a point - still stained with the blood it had drawn. It would make a fine relic, better certainly than the other shattered fragments of the lance that lay strewn beside the lake.

Others might take them and sell them as sacred artefacts, but his was the shaft that had killed the beast. And he would not sell it. He would keep it for when the time came for him to write his story – which was to say the story of his master, the Tribune George.

Pasicrates travelled with his master until George's martyrdom in Nicomedia. But a slave cannot be held to account for his master's faith – and Pasicrates lived long enough to write an account of the life of Saint George. He left Nicomedia and travelled throughout Anatolia and into the Holy Land, settling finally in the town of Ashkelon on the Mediterranean coast, not far from Jerusalem. And there he died, bequeathing the lance and all his possessions to the Karaite elders of the city by way of thanks for the kindnesses they had shown him. For almost eight centuries the lance remained there.

And it was during that time the lance inevitably acquired its name – the name of the city in which it dwelt – 'Ashkelon', or 'Ascalon' as the Crusaders who captured both the city and the relic pronounced it.

It was in 1099 that Ashkelon fell to the Christian knights and that Ascalon was taken from it, along with the rest of their plunder. Many of the Crusaders had been looking for relics – for the Ark of the Covenant or for the Holy Grail – but none of them understood what they held in their hands. A few might have taken it for a fragment of the true cross, but there were plenty enough of those being sold in market places across Palestine – across the whole of Europe.

The Karaite elders of Ashkelon pleaded for the return of their treasures, and for the ransom of captives, offering money they had collected from every citizen. Whether they got all they wanted, no one knows, but it was not the Jews that the Crusaders regarded as their enemy, and so Ascalon was returned.

But the lance did not stay long in the city whose name it bore. The Karaites were a scattered community and they



shared their possessions across the world, knowing that anywhere would be safer than the turbulent Holy Land. Ascalon was sent north, across the Dark Sea to a citadel high in the mountains, known as Chufut Kalye. The Karaites who lived there claimed they had settled in the cave dwellings at the time of the Babylonian Exile, but few believed it. They lived there by the sufferance of the Crimean Khanate, but Ascalon could not be kept hidden from the ruling Tartars and soon it disappeared once again.

And it is here, just as we might expect mists of history to begin to reveal their secrets, that the story becomes its most vague. Ascalon was next seen in Buda, a city on the river Hister, also known as the Danube. It was 370 years since the Crusaders had taken it from Ashkelon, 200 since it had arrived in Chufut Kalye. How it reached Buda remains shrouded in confusion, but it cannot be mere chance that Constantinople had so recently fallen to the Muslim hordes, and it would have been no great journey for the lance to be carried from Chufut Kalye to the ancient capital of the Roman Empire. Who it was that brought it from there to Buda is untold, but it is claimed by some that the man who then took it from Buda to Visegrád was Fyodor Kuritsyn, emissary of the Grand Prince of Muscovy. Others deny that Kuritsyn could ever have been in Hungary at the time, but none doubt the identity of the solitary prisoner in the castle at Visegrád.

Prince Vlad, later known as Țepeș, once Voivode of Wallachia, had been betrayed by a man he thought his friend; it was neither the first nor the last time it would happen to him. He had come to Hungary seeking refuge and had instead been thrown into gaol, and left there friendless and alone. Is it any wonder that, when he was visited by the Russian Boyar and spoken to kindly by him, he began to place his trust in the man?

Kuritsyn - or whoever it may have been - showed Ascalon to the Wallachian prince, showed him the traces of the

dragon's blood that still tainted it, and told of the power that it possessed. The Muscovite ambassador had reasons of his own for what he disclosed, but that did not mean that the magic he spoke of was not real. He spent many long hours talking to Vlad, but in the end he left him alone, left him with Ascalon, and with the knowledge of what it could do for him, if only he would dare allow it.

And so in the depth of his despair, after twelve years in gaol, with no hope of release - with no hope at all - Țepeș took Ascalon, cradling it in his hand. And with only a moment's hesitation he performed with it the rite that Kuritsyn had described. And just as the Boyar had explained, Vlad entered immortality. And at the same moment, just as Kuritsyn had known he would, but had never told, Vlad descended into Hell.

**FEBRUARY**

# CHAPTER I

'HIPPOPOTAMUS!'

The shout was accompanied by a sniggering laugh that didn't sit well with the sombre mood of the people in the square, but amply reflected their anxiety.

I turned and looked. Bodies were pressed tight around me. It hadn't been like that when we arrived, but two or three dozen police mounted on horseback had been slowly advancing, corralling the crowd of several hundred together. To one side waited a group of Cossacks, also mounted. If the police weren't strong enough to deal with us, they wouldn't have far to look for support.

At first I couldn't see who had spoken, but my eye caught that of a young factory worker who saw that I had heard his shout. I gave a brief smile of acknowledgement and hoped it would be enough not to appear rude. Much as I wanted to express my solidarity with these people - why else had I come here? - I was incapable of feeling at ease with them. Even in this era of modernity - in 1917 - we were separated by every fissure that existed in Russian society: by age, by wealth, by class. We were from two different nations. The joke about the hippopotamus had been amusing enough when I'd first heard it, but it soon wore thin - for me at any rate; not, it appeared, for everyone.

The man read me perfectly, and revealed that I had misread him.

'No,' he said, not shouting any more, but raising his voice above the murmur of the frightened crowd. 'I mean, it's written down.'

He pointed, indicating somewhere towards the base of the statue. I pushed my way through and stood beside him. He grinned victoriously and nodded downwards. As soon as I saw it I knew that the tide had turned - victory was inevitable.

Гиппопотам  
Gippopotam

It was scratched on to the plinth with heavy, deliberate strokes. I looked up at the statue. The epithet was entirely appropriate. It was supposed to be a monument to Tsar Aleksandr III, reflecting the power of his autocracy, but it simply looked like a small, stout nonentity astride a massive, exhausted horse, its head bowed and despondent. The idea that it was the Russian people who were represented by the horse was not hard to grasp, though it was the term 'hippopotamus' that had caught on to describe the squat, pathetic animal. When it was first erected a rhyme had done the rounds, describing the statue - plinth, horse and tsar:

*Here stands a chest of drawers,  
On the chest a hippopotamus,  
And on the hippopotamus sits an idiot.*

The absurdity was obvious to anyone who looked at it, and yet Nikolai, Aleksandr's son, had been happy to have it put on display a decade and a half after his father's death. The idea of the statue was to remind the Russian people that the tsar was immovable, that the tsar's power was unchanging. But the people didn't need reminding of that. They knew it. They experienced it every day of their lives. Even those of us whose existence was tolerable knew that nothing would change. With each new tsar we hoped, but it always came to nothing. No one would ever have portrayed

Tsar Nikolai II as having the brutish strength of his father. If Aleksandr believed himself immovable he might have been right. Nikolai most certainly believed it, and was quite mistaken.

I let out a brief snort. The factory worker, still close to me, would have taken it for a response to the graffito, but it wasn't that. I was laughing at myself and the fact that in my own mind I referred to them as Tsar Aleksandr and Tsar Nikolai. Was I trying to hide, even from myself, the simple fact that I was one of the family – that Aleksandr III was my cousin?

'This is your final warning. Hand it over.'

It was the sound of the police captain's voice. The 'it' in question was a red flag being held up in the crowd. Earlier it had been right at the front, but as the gendarmes had tried to get hold of it, it had made its way to the centre of our group. I couldn't see whether the people carrying it had moved or whether it had just been passed along from hand to hand, but now it was defended on all sides by a shield of human bodies. I doubted they would protect it for long against bullets and sabres. It wasn't even as if there was anything written on the banner, but the colour alone was enough. It went back to 1848, the Year of Revolutions, and perhaps longer. Both sides understood what it meant. Russia hadn't had a revolution in 1848, and now we were making up for lost time.

'Come and take it!' rang a shout from somewhere in the crowd. The captain hesitated. There was no doubt that that was precisely what he had been planning to do, but now it would seem as if he was taking his orders from the mob. The dilemma didn't trouble him for long. He turned his horse and trotted away from us, back towards his men who stood in mounted ranks in front of the railway terminus. I didn't hear him issue any instructions, or even make a gesture, but a moment later he turned again and as one they charged forwards, their right arms extended and their

sabres horizontal. It would have better suited the battlefields of the Crimea than a square in Petersburg. But this wasn't Saint Petersburg. This was Petrograd and had been for the last three years. And Petrograd was turning out to be a very different place.

I was close to the back of the crowd and therefore safe for the time being. None of us around the statue moved. Some at the front - maybe half of them - tried to turn and run, but the ranks of protestors behind them remained still and there was nowhere for them to go. A few tried to escape by going forwards, slipping between the charging horses. I saw at least one - a woman - trampled. Perhaps others made it through.

Now the horses were among us. As the front line of protestors finally gave way, a wave of motion - like the blast running through an explosive - raced through the crowd and almost seemed to hit me. I stepped back from it, bumping into those behind me and perpetuating the wave through the mass of bodies. I could hear screams from the front and saw the police sabres rise and fall. I could not make out where the blows landed, but each time the blades were lifted high to strike again there was more blood on them. I'd heard that this was how the police were dealing with protests, but I'd not seen it for myself; not truly believed it. If I had done I doubted I would have come here. The same was true for most of those around me; we'd been brave enough to face the police if all they did was stand and watch, but now it was time to flee.

I turned and ran, but those around me were faster. An elbow barged me to the left. I turned, instinctively wanting to apologize, but I'd been pushed into someone else's path - a sailor, head and shoulders taller than me. He didn't even notice that he'd knocked me to the ground. I tried to get up, but a knee hit me in the back of my head, and then I felt a foot between my shoulder blades. I tried to crawl towards the statue, hoping it would give me some kind of

shelter. I kept low, like I'd been taught in the army, as though to avoid enemy fire, trying to use my forearms to gain some purchase on the paving slabs.

It seemed an eternity, but it can only have been a matter of seconds before a pair of hands gripped me and lifted me up, leaning me against the plinth on which the hippopotamus stood. I was protected from the stampeding crowd, forced to pass it on one side or the other. I never saw who had saved me, and they didn't stay to receive my thanks.

I clutched at the leg of the bronze horse, desperate to stay on my feet. It was pointless for me to run. I could feel the air rasping in my chest as I breathed. My arms were weak. When the charging gendarmes got to me I'd no reason to suppose they'd see me any differently from how the crowd running past did, how I saw myself: a weak, pathetic old man, clinging to a statue because his own legs weren't strong enough to hold him up. They wouldn't regard me as a threat.

I looked back towards the railway terminus to take in the slaughter. I knew the sight would not sicken me as perhaps it should - I'd seen worse in battle. I didn't relish it either, but someone had to bear witness to it, to report it. The more brutally they treated us, the sooner it would end - as long as people heard what was happening.

But I didn't see what I'd expected. The mounted gendarmes were not amongst the crowd, hacking away at them. Most of the people in the square had managed to get away and some had even stopped and turned to look, like me, at what was happening. There was still a battle taking place, but it was not between police and protestors.

The Cossack troop which had been stationed to one side of the square, as if in reserve, had entered the fray. But they had not gone to the support of the police. Instead they had moved to protect the crowd. They outnumbered the gendarmes, and knew better how to use a sabre from the



back of a horse, though some of them were more practical than that. I heard pistols firing. The police thought too late to use their own guns – a sword is a fine weapon for scattering a group of protestors, but it's not so much use against a Cossack.

Shouts and cheers began to rise up from the crowd, which was now reassembling. They were fickle, but in times like these it was madness to be anything else. A few minutes before they had been jeering at those same Cossacks they now hailed as their saviours. And why not? We were no longer in a world of certainties, of officer and *ryadovoy*, of noble and peasant. What mattered now was not what you were, but which side you were on. The Cossacks – this troop of them – had chosen. It was a choice I'd made only months before.

The battle was quickly over. The police weren't prepared for any kind of resistance. There were no orders given, but they soon disengaged – those that could. They headed north at the gallop, up Ligovskaya Street. The crowd had once more become emboldened, and a hail of stones and other projectiles followed the retreat, though to little effect. The damage had already been done. I could see four gendarmes lying there in the middle of Znamenskaya Square, alongside the bodies of those they'd cut down. Two riderless horses stood close, calmly awaiting some form of instruction. The others must have followed the herd. One of the gendarmes managed to get to his feet. He eyed the Cossacks fearfully, but they'd now lost interest, or been gripped by the realization of what they'd done. The policeman roused one of his comrades, then another. I heard one of them shout 'Sir!' and shake the fourth prone body and it was then I realized it was their commanding officer, and that he was dead. The Cossacks were experienced enough in battle to know that the best strategy was decapitation – take out the opposing leader and those

who remained would be powerless. The other gendarmes were lucky that the operation had been so clinical.

I turned and walked away. The crowd was thinning now and I had my breath back. Suddenly I didn't feel quite so old - quite so self-pitying. I'd be sixty in a few months. That wasn't so ancient. There were plenty of officers still active at the Front who were older than me. And I'd managed to achieve a riper age than that police captain, or those he'd killed in the crowd. There'd been a time, years before, when I'd thought the whole purpose of my existence on Earth had been fulfilled. And so it had been, with the death of a single man - a single vampire. Since then I'd found new reasons to live.

'Mihail!'

I turned at the shout of my name, but there were still crowds around, and I couldn't make out who had uttered it.

'Mihail Konstantinovich!'

Someone was walking towards me. It took me a moment to recognize her: Yelena Dmitrievna Stasova. I wouldn't have called her a friend, but our paths had crossed more than once. She was an extremist - a Bolshevik who'd only recently returned from exile in Siberia - but now wasn't the time to worry about our petty differences. For the moment we were all on the same side.

We shook hands. 'Were you in that?' she asked, jerking her head towards Znamenskaya Square.

I nodded and we began walking side by side up Nevsky Prospekt.

'I thought it was going to be like '05 all over again,' she said.

I shuddered at the thought. 'Bloody Sunday' they'd called it, though you only had to say 'The Ninth of January' and people knew what you meant. I'd been seven thousand versts away, fighting the Japanese, but the news had still reached us. The official figure was around a hundred dead, shot and trampled, but I'd heard as many as four thousand.

All they'd wanted to do was deliver a petition to the tsar asking for decent working conditions. Nikolai hadn't even been in the city, but the Imperial Guard had fired on them anyway. Half of the crowd had been singing 'God Save the Tsar'. They didn't want to get rid of him, they just wanted him to rule for his people. Times had changed.

'Back then it was the army against the people,' I said. 'It wasn't even a contest.'

'And now?'

'You saw whose side the Cossacks were on.'

'One platoon? What difference is that going to make?'

I smiled to myself. 'You weren't expecting it to be Cossacks, were you?'

'Their loyalty's to themselves,' she explained, 'but they're human - some of them.'

'Is that why you've never bothered putting your *agents provocateurs* in amongst them?'

'I don't know what you mean, *tovarishch*.'

I didn't press the point, and the Bolsheviks weren't the only ones trying to infiltrate the army. It wasn't that the men needed pushing into revolution - three years of war had done enough of that - but we all knew that the real battle would be for what came after the revolution, about who took the reins of power. It would be in that struggle that troops - certainly those stationed in Petrograd - could be decisive. The navy was completely infiltrated, but wasn't such a presence in the city, not with the waterways frozen all the way out to the Baltic. Only the Imperial Air Force - the service that in recent years I'd come to know best - was free of the infiltration, but I couldn't see how it would have much part to play in the events to come.

'Did you think it would happen so quickly?' I asked her.

She considered for a moment before answering. 'We all knew it would be this year. Like you, we had a timetable, but revolution has a life of its own.'

'Like us?'

‘I was told it was planned for next month. Nikolai would be deposed. The tsarevich would succeed, with his uncle as regent, and a few senior nobles would hold the real power.’

She was right. I wasn’t a part of the plot, but I knew all about it. It would have been a very Russian way for power to change hands, like when Yekaterina had her husband, Pyotr III, imprisoned, or when a handful of senior officers murdered Pavel I and set his son on the throne as Aleksandr I. But I wasn’t going to admit anything to her.

‘I’m hardly a noble,’ I said.

‘Oh, come now, Colonel Danilov.’ She’d switched to addressing me more formally simply to tease me. ‘You’re a member of the nobility by dint of your rank alone. And your family’s reputation goes back to the Patriotic War. You should relish your status. In a few days it will mean nothing.’

I laughed briefly. She had no idea just how high-born I was – the bastard son of Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolayevich, Tsar Aleksandr II’s brother. It was a quarter of a century since my father’s death. I never saw him in his last years. He had a stroke and his wife took control of his affairs. She made sure his mistresses and his illegitimate children never got to visit him, though I don’t think she ever knew about me, or my mother, Tamara Alekseevna. And Mama was already long dead by then.

‘So a plot set for March would have beaten you then,’ I said. ‘I take it you were planning something for May Day.’

‘Perhaps,’ she replied, noncommittally. ‘But then fate trumped us both – the hint of an early spring, and the streets are filled.’

I looked around. Only a Russian would see any signs of spring here, but the winter had been particularly harsh and so any slight thaw was a respite. We were just crossing the Fontanka. The ice on its surface was still thick. The streets were covered with snow and it was mostly sleds, not wheeled carriages, that travelled up and down Nevsky

Prospekt. The automobiles couldn't replace their wheels with runners, but their tyres were wrapped in chains for grip. It was still below freezing, even in the middle of the day, but only by a few degrees. That meant people weren't afraid to come out on the streets. Nevsky Prospekt was crowded, even for a Saturday. Mind you, with so many strikes the factories were mostly empty, and where else were people to go? The warmer weather had started two days earlier on International Women's Day. Everyone knew there'd be demonstrations and the people had taken to the streets. They'd begun to sing the Marsiliuza - the Marseillaise, if they'd known how to pronounce it - recalling another revolution of over a century before. Nikolai had banned the song, just as Bonaparte did in his day. But it was a signal to all that Nikolai could no longer expect such pronouncements to be obeyed. If it hadn't happened now, it would have been on May Day, or some day before very long.

'I'll take my leave of you here,' she said.

We both stopped. She glanced ahead, meaningfully, and I looked to see another confrontation about to take place. Further up Nevsky a crowd of workers stood tightly together, their backs towards us. Beyond them I could just see the upper bodies of mounted troops, blocking their way. Yelena offered me her hand and I shook it.

'Keep in touch,' she said as her fingers squeezed mine, making sure I understood it was no simple platitude.

She turned and made her way along the embankment of the Yekaterininsky Canal. Ahead of her I could see the coloured onion domes of the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ, better known as the Church of the Saviour on Spilled Blood. The spilled blood in question had been that of Tsar Aleksandr II and the church had been built to mark the spot of his assassination, on 1 March 1881. It had been carried out by an organization known as *Narodnaya Volya* - the People's Will. I had been a reluctant member, though

I'd not been there to witness my uncle's murder. I'd been close though; just a few blocks away in a tunnel beneath the street.

However tragic 1 March had been for Russia, for me it was a day of celebration. It was then that I'd finally destroyed the monster who had plagued my family for three generations, a vampire who called himself Iuda, or sometimes Cain, or a dozen other names. In 1812 he'd murdered three of my grandfather's closest friends. In 1825 he'd forced my grandfather, Aleksei Ivanovich Danilov, into exile for thirty years. In 1856 he'd finally killed Aleksei, and tricked my uncle, Dmitry, into becoming a vampire himself. But in 1881 I'd had revenge for all of them, and for my mother too, and killed Iuda. I'd lured him down into that cellar just a few blocks east of here and exposed him to a new form of electric light, one which had the quality, if not the intensity, of the sun itself. It was enough to incinerate the flesh of any vampire, and so he had died in deserved agony. I'd never encountered a *voordalak* since. But that didn't mean they weren't still out there, somewhere. I was always on my guard.

I carried on over the canal towards the crowd, as did almost everyone else on the street. A few, like Yelena, decided to turn away, but for the majority it was confrontations such as this that were the purpose of the day. We were just outside the Kazan Cathedral. The mounted troops were Cossacks again, but not the same ones I'd seen earlier. They were stretched across the street, three ranks deep, stopping anyone from going further. The Winter Palace, just a little way beyond, was the focus of attention for most of the protestors, even though its significance was purely symbolic - the tsar was seldom in residence, and certainly not today.

The crowd was pushing left, towards the Kazan, in some sort of outflanking manoeuvre that was never going to work. The cathedral's two curved wings attempted to