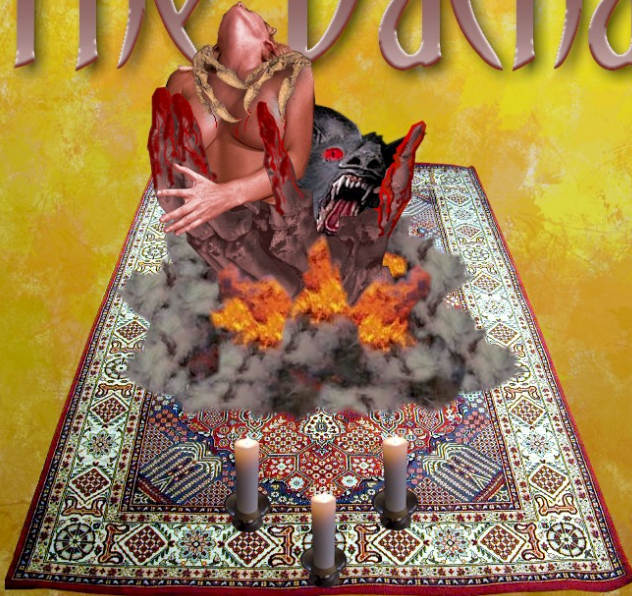


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The Dacha



A NOVEL OF ANCIENT EVIL

SIMON COE

THE DACHA

**By
Simon Coe**

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PROLOGUE

**Terem Palace, Moscow
December 12, 1851**

“Fire!”

Twelve rifles cracked in a volley of death; bits of clothing and tissue spattered from the uniform tunics of the three Hungarians. Their bodies jerked, slumped, then hung in a sickening posture, suspended by wrist manacles hooked to the backside of the post. A bitter moment for patriot soldiers who made the mistake of being on the wrong side. Ideals, hopes, and dreams transformed into corpses in the wink of an eye.

Prince Draja Vishalov watched the spectacle from the window of his ornate apartment on the third floor of the palace. He smirked at the report of the rifles, then turned from the window and concentrated on polishing his monocle with the silk handkerchief he kept tucked in the sleeve of his braided tunic.

“A fitting end for Magyar peasants” he said.

General Nicolas Muraviev ignored the remark. He remained at the window, his hands held behind him. The fleshy part of his bulbous nose crinkled ever so slightly, as if he could smell the foul odor of death. A strange cast haunted his gray eyes; they were saturated with distaste and appeared mesmerized by the limp bodies of the three Hungarian officers. He took a handkerchief from his coat, wiped the beads of perspiration on his baldpate, then dabbed both cheeks along the margins of his close-cropped black beard.

“It’s not an officer’s death,” he said. “Even if they are Hungarians. I’ve never been comfortable with it. It’s like binding a deer to a tree and shooting it.”

Prince Vishalov gave him a sardonic glance and snorted, “You’d feel better if we let them run fifty meters?”

The General didn’t answer. His jaw muscles tightened and flexed while he watched the guards remove the shackles from the limp bodies and toss them on the waiting death wagon. His lips were a thin white line when he turned away from the window and faced the Prince.

“Why do we execute foreign officers?” he asked. “And in the public square, in front of all these people?”

Prince Vishalov fitted the monocle to his left eye and smirked in an aristocratic posture. “Ask the Czar—if you’re stupid enough to be inquisitive.”

The Prince turned from the general and circled his massive Ormolu desk. He paused to puff to his full five-feet, then lifted himself into his throne-like gilded chair. He pompously preened his pencil-thin black moustache with a

manicured finger, then lifted the tip of his nose ten degrees above the horizon and stared at the general—doing his utmost to exert the pressure of his aristocratic presence on his visitor.

“Public execution is a political purgative,” he said nonchalantly. “It keeps the peasants humble and flushes thoughts of insurrection from the minds of rebels.”

Politically afraid to respond to the comment, the general turned and stepped to the window again. Occasional flakes of snow fluttered to the outside ledge. The skies were overcast, a depressing tone of gray exerted an aura of gloom on Terem square. The small crowd had dispersed and the death wagon was gone. Only dark wheel tracks remained in the white snow—a stark image that made him grimace.

The little idiot! I came 1,500 miserable kilometers—to see this.

He took a gold timepiece from his vest pocket and glanced at it, then vented a long breath and faced the prince. “Is this why you’ve brought me to Moscow, your highness? To witness a political statement?”

The general’s attitude and demanding tone of voice was a spark to the disarrayed tinder of Prince Vishalov’s mind; his monocle dropped to his lap and his dark brown eyes transformed into black onyx orbs. Almost instantly, his volatile temper flushed his features to a cherry pink. A thin streak of white outlined the flare of his nostrils. The sudden avalanche of his anger caused his eyes to widen to such extreme proportion they took on a maniacal quality. The left eye heightened the effect: it migrated from the plane of

the right eye and appeared to be looking in another direction. The prince slapped the flat of his hand on his desk.

“Mind your tongue, Muraviev! I am a Romanov, you are a peasant soldier.”

The sharp odor of perspiration was on the air, the prince’s head trembled with his ire and the demeanor of his eyes cycled from near-lunacy to idyllic simplemindedness. But he kept the visual pressure on the general.

General Muraviev stood with mouth agape, locked in a posture of disbelief, alarmed by the display.

Blessed Saint Theodosius! Protect me from the demons in this man.

The general’s pulse pounded, drumming in his ears. For a few careless seconds he’d forgotten how easy it was to make a career-changing mistake when dealing with a Romanov—especially the mad weasel. Recovering in the only manner he knew, he snapped his heels together with a military smartness and bowed from the waist.

“Forgive me, Excellency.”

The words were magic. Just as quickly as he erupted, the prince regained his composure. He retrieved his monocle from his lap and watched the general with a haughty glare as he polished it again, gloating in his dominance.

“You may sit,” he said.

General Muraviev sat stiff-backed in a chair facing the prince, feet together and hands on knees—the disciplined posture of a humbled military cadet. He looked out of place in this setting, dressed in a plain black suit with a winged collar and black and white striped tie. All around

him was the elegance of the Terem palace: silk wallpaper, ornate furniture, Persian carpets. Amid all of the opulence, he looked more like a butler than the Governor General of Siberia.

The trauma of the moment reminded him of an incident in the Polish insurrection, a memory that continued to haunt him. His troops had captured a large insane asylum on the shores of a lake, and some unthinking fool released the inmates. The demented souls were suddenly everywhere, wandering aimlessly in their filthy nightclothes, cackling, singing, making bird-like noises, stumbling into the lake and thrashing wildly. A naked man with beanpole arms and legs had staggered up to him and thrust his emaciated face within six inches of his nose. The hollow cheeks, the decayed teeth and fetid breath, the owlish eyes reflecting the terrible emptiness of insanity—all of this flashed through his mind and a tremor of revulsion ran through his body. Something about insanity horrified him, and Prince Vishalov truly frightened him. He gazed at the prince, trying to be as benign as possible and conceal his uneasiness.

Small wonder they call this little shit the mad weasel.

Prince Vishalov pursed his lips and drummed his fingers on his desk, never taking his eyes away from General Muraviev. In a strange way, he cracked his knuckles, one by one, then castled his hands in front of his face and stared at the general through the steeple for a long moment.

“The Hungarians you saw were the last of the prisoners we took in the Hungarian revolt in 1849,” he explained. “Are you familiar with the circumstances?”

General Muraviev shook his head. “No Excellency, I went directly from the Polish uprising to Siberia. News does not reach the war. Only rumors travel across battle-fields.”

“It was a simple action, more political than military. The Hungarians revolted—tried to separate from their union with Austria. Emperor Francis Joseph petitioned Czar Nicholas for assistance, and our Cossack Cavalry ended the affair quickly.”

The prince took a folded document from a small polished mahogany chest sitting on his desk. He slipped from his chair and walked around his desk as he unfolded the document and placed it on the desk. It was a detailed map of Russia. He kept his eyes on the map as he talked to the general.

“What should have been a simple gesture of aiding an ally has turned into a complex political problem. Emperor Francis Joseph was so grateful for the czar’s assistance that he gave him a gift of good will—a dacha, a Carpathian hunting lodge built for the Austrian Emperor Francis in 1810.”

General Muraviev’s eyebrows arched. “An impressive tribute, Excellency.”

The prince looked over his shoulder at the general with an aristocratic leer. “You think so, Muraviev? Our Balkan agents tell us the lodge is cursed. The mortar binding the granite walls was mixed with the crushed bodies of gypsy pagans—worshipers of idols and demons. They say strange things happen in the lodge.”

Prince Vishalov hesitantly removed his monocle from his eye, then meticulously polished it yet again with his silk handkerchief. He readjusted the monocle and looked directly at the general in an obvious attempt to underscore his words.

Muraviev didn't respond.

"There are even rumors that it's an entrance to Hell." The prince waited a moment for the words to have an effect, then turned back to the map on his desk. "The Austrian ambassador informed the czar in January 1850 that the lodge was being disassembled by Austrian craftsmen, and would be delivered and erected wherever the czar chose."

Prince Vishalov made a final effort to smooth the wrinkles from the map, then faced the general and leaned against his desk with folded arms.

"The czar has a dozen dachas, he doesn't need another, especially one that's blessed by the devil. But, he couldn't refuse the gift of Emperor Francis Joseph because of political necessity. We are on the verge of war with Turkey and the situation in the Crimea is delicate. We need the military alliance with Austria. So, now the question becomes, where to site the dacha?"

Muraviev nodded.

The prince took a ceremonial dagger from his belt sheath and half turned so he could point to the map, yet still see the general. "At the time this decision was being considered, we had another nasty problem: the Caucasus." He pointed with the dagger to the narrow landmass between

the Black and Caspian seas. “In the settling of our frontier and maintaining the borders with Persia and Turkey, our forces have had an impossible time with the tribes in the Caucasus. The land is mountainous, heavily forested, and the primitive tribesmen are fierce and crafty. There are even rumors of wandering demons—hideous creatures beyond description. Count DeLensky and his Cossack troops have been there for nine years, and the battle is far from won.”

“DeLensky? The butcher of Baku?” General Muraviev asked.

The prince smirked. “When you deal with animals, you need a butcher.”

“Possibly,” the general conceded, as he took a handkerchief from his coat and wiped his forehead and face. “But there’s a limit to everything. DeLensky and his Cossacks overshadow the nightmares of Batu Khan and his golden horde.”

“Yes, many of these tribesmen are descendants of the Khans,” the Prince said. “It is simple. We use one beast to control another. The Caucasus are a terrible mixture of nomadic savages. There are over fifty different dialects spoken between Baku and the Black sea. It is a land sprinkled with mongrel races that have no fear. They worship idols and look upon death as a reward. Idiots!” He stopped and suddenly smiled, then bent over until his face was no more than ten inches from the general’s. “Perhaps you feel you could do a better job, General Muraviev. We could have Count DeLensky and his Cossacks exchange assign-

ments with you. I'm dining with the czar this evening, it would make interesting conversation."

General Muraviev's face blushed pink, a nervous spasm ran through his chest and he began to cough. He covered his mouth with his handkerchief and fought to regain control of his breathing.

You little bastard!

"No, no, your Excellency," he said between breaths. "I wouldn't dare to criticize the czar's wisdom. I was just remarking about the ferocity of the Cossacks." His hand shook as he wiped his baldpate and strained to bring his sporadic coughing under control.

Prince Vishalov smiled; his eyes actually sparkled with the mirth of his game. "I see. Well, perhaps it's a posting you should keep in mind, General—if Siberia becomes too boring." The prince paused a moment, until the general's coughing subsided.

"To get back on point," he continued. He traced a rectangle in the Caucasus Mountains with the tip of his dagger. "This forty-square kilometer section is the crux of the problem. It is mountainous, heavily wooded, honeycombed with caves, unbelievably primitive and near-impassable. It is a stronghold for the tribes of savages that harass the supply lines to Baku, and choke the czar's development of the southern borders."

The prince returned his dagger to the sheath as he circled the desk to his chair. Once again, he slumped back in his chair and castled his hands in front of his face, staring at the general through the steeple. "Count DeLinsky's ap-

proach to maintaining the integrity of Baku and the Persian border has been to allow the savages to attack our supply lines along the Caspian Sea, then cut them off from returning to their lair in the Caucasus, and slaughter them. He refuses to mount a campaign to enter the Caucasus and penetrate the savage strongholds on the basis that it would leave Baku completely undefended against raiding parties of Persians from the south. The czar has not ordered Count DeLensky to penetrate the Caucasus stronghold because his military reasoning is sound—which is unfortunate for us because the attacks continue.”

The prince very suddenly leaned forward and smacked his hand loudly on his desk. General Muraviev jumped and his eyes darted toward the prince. He'd been glancing out the window again.

“Are you awake, Muraviev?” The prince's voice had a sharp falsetto overtone. “Do you not understand the problem? Can you see an answer to the Caucasian puzzle in the gray clouds of Moscow?”

General Muraviev's cheeks colored again and his jaw muscles flexed, his hand trembled when he dabbed the perspiration from his face with his handkerchief. “I meant no disrespect, Excellency. The problem involves difficult military logistics. I was searching for a solution.”

The prince slapped his hand on the desk once more, the general's head twitched again. “Excellent, Muraviev! How very fitting. Because *you* are part of the solution.” He lurched back sharply in his chair and began laughing, not calmly in the aftermath of humor, but hysterically—the

mirth of the deranged.

The statement drained the color from General Muraviev's features. A vision of the Polish insane asylum flashed through his thoughts again, he shifted uneasily in his chair.

This mad little shit will be the death of me.

Prince Vishalov stopped laughing abruptly, he dabbed the tears from his eyes with a silk handkerchief and stared at the general, with a maniacal grin still on his lips. "Would you like to hear the czar's answer to the Caucasian riddle, Muraviev?" The prince didn't wait for an answer. "I'll tell you. It's pure brilliance."

He leaned across the map and touched his index finger to the Caucasus Mountains. "The czar has granted the forty square kilometers in the Caucasus to Count DeLensky as an appanage. As you know, members of the aristocracy are not allowed to refuse such a grant. So Count DeLensky has to develop the land."

Muraviev didn't find anything so amusing.

The prince lurched back into his chair and laughed in near-hysteria for fully a minute, then leaned on his desk and wiped at his eyes again. "And that's only half the solution," he said. The leering grin returned to his lips, it was obvious how the elements of misery and misfortune elevated his emotions.

"The czar has notified Emperor Francis Joseph that he wishes to have the dacha erected in the Caucasus—on Count DeLensky's appanage. DeLensky will be forced to clear the land, build roads, and protect the workers. And

his stinking Cossacks will have no choice but to drive the nomadic tribes from the Caucasus... that is, if he wants any peace.”

Once more, the little prince laughed, but only for a few seconds. He very suddenly became strangely quiet, grinning at General Muraviev with obvious anticipation in his eyes. And as much as he detested DeLensky and his Cossacks, the general felt a twinge of empathy for the count. Clearly, the czar’s solution was a death warrant. But what disturbed him even more was the relocation of DeLensky’s forces from the Baku supply lines. It was military blunder. However, he also knew full well it was a mistake to offer any comment; nevertheless, his automatic reaction to military logic made him speak.

“A clever plan, Excellency. But with DeLensky in the Caucasus, who will protect Baku? Who will guard the Persian frontier? And where will DeLensky get the labor force to clear the wilderness. It’s a monstrous task, and Cossacks are fighters, not workers.”

Prince Vishalov’s smile widened to ghoulish proportions. He took the monocle from his eye and leaned nearer the general. “I thought you’d never ask. Why, all this will come from you, General. From you.”

Once again, the color drained from General Muraviev’s features, he pulled at his collar with a single finger and shifted in his chair. “Excellency, my entire Siberian command will be destroyed. The development of Siberia will be set back years, possibly even abandoned, the financial loss alone will—”

“Enough!” Prince Vishalov’s hand slapped the desk loudly. “Stop squealing like a stuck pig, Muraviev. You’re not going to the Caucasus, you’re just supplying the bodies.” He took a sheet of paper from his desk drawer and placed it in front of him, then readjusted the monocle to his eye. “Listen closely, Muraviev. You will select three battalions from your Tartar forces. One field artillery and two cavalry. They will replace DeLensky’s cavalry and become the Baku district guards. You have nineteen prison camps in Siberia. Select four hundred of the strongest prisoners and sixty Yakut guards. They will be DeLensky’s labor force. Promote a senior staff officer and place the entire group under his command, then start them marching to Baku. Count DeLensky has been told they will arrive by June 1st, he is making his logistic plans on that basis.” The prince folded the paper and slipped it back into the drawer.

General Muraviev was stunned. His mouth was ajar, his voice cracked and he stammered when he spoke. “Excellency... that’s a march of over—”

“Yes, twenty-five hundred kilometers,” the prince said. “Get them there however you can. The other sections of the plan are in motion. The Austrians have shipped the dacha and the caravan will be in Tblisi by July first. Count DeLensky’s Cossacks will rendezvous there and guide them to the Caucasus location. Your audience is over, good day General.”

Muraviev was speechless.

Prince Vishalov stood and walked to the door of his apartment, then turned to the general. “A final thought to

warm your nights in Siberia, Muraviev. If your troops don't relieve Count DeLensky by June first, you will immediately assume the Baku defense command."



**DeLensky estate, Caucasus
November 6, 1855**

Major Boris Vichensky looked down on the body and crinkled his nose, a pungent odor of sulfur and strong mildew floated on the air. He held one hand over his nose and knelt to one knee, glancing around the body and noting the signs of battle: trampled shrubbery, broken limbs, deep furrows in the soil.

"Hell of a fight here."

The body was badly broken; both legs at obtuse angles, a seven-inch vee-shaped section cut from the waist, one arm and the head missing. The major's eyes narrowed in a sense of horror and the ridges of his jaw muscles bulged when he saw the ring on the finger.

"It's Dobki, the Count's orderly."

Two hundred yards away, eight Cossack cavalrymen stood patiently beside their mounts in a column of twos; waiting, shifting from foot to foot in the dim light of breaking dawn. They stood in the paddock yard, each man watching Major Vichensky as he knelt in some thick shrubbery about seventy yards from the dacha.

Sergeant Borov, the lead rider, leaned his head near his

companion, Corporal Sergei Murchev, and whispered.

His breath formed steamy vapors in the crisp morning air. “I feel a bad day, Sergei. No breakfast and the major looks pissed.”

The Corporal’s mount snorted and pranced. He put a hand on the mare’s muzzle and nodded. “Something’s wrong. Did you hear those noises coming from the dacha last night? Scary!”

“I heard them,” the sergeant replied. He rolled his eyes and shook his head. “It’s cursed. I wouldn’t step inside the dacha if the czar ordered it.”

Sergei raised his eyebrows. “How about if it was a whore house?”

Sergeant Borov smiled. “It never fails, you find exceptions to everything, Sergei.”

The front door flew open and Sonya, the count’s cook, scurried from the dacha to the edge of the terrace. She whipped the end of her white apron in the air and waved her arms excitedly, yelling at the major. The Cossacks watched as Major Vichensky trotted to the edge of the terrace, then stood listening to the cook. Sonya babbled and waved her arms wildly, interspersing her narrative with emotional sobbing. The major turned abruptly and ran toward the tree where he tied off his mount. He leapt into the saddle and galloped quickly to where the column stood waiting.

“Mount up!” he said. His horse sensed the emotion of the moment and pranced in tight circles. He reined the stallion sharply to bring him into control, standing in the

stirrups so every man in the column could see him.

“Dobki, the orderly, was murdered,” he said in a loud voice. “Count DeLensky and six riders left at four AM, chasing the killer. They rode north, toward the Valley of Ahriman. Keep your eyes open.”

Sergeant Borov glanced at Corporal Murchev and rolled his eyes. The Corporal’s lips silently mouthed the phrase: “The Valley of Ahriman.” He made the sign of the cross on his body and stepped into the saddle. In seconds, the stillness of the morning was punctuated with hoof beats and snorting animals as the column followed the major at a full gallop.

As soon as they cleared the grounds of the dacha, they turned at the first junction and followed the road to the north. Knowing how easy it was to overlook something in the dense stands of trees and shrubbery, Major Vichensky slowed the pace to a cantor. He gestured with hand signals to the right and left, directing each column to concentrate their attention to their side of the road.

They had been riding for fifteen minutes and were approaching a rise in the road when Major Vichensky’s horse suddenly whinnied and reared. The major jammed his knees into the stallion, stiffened the reins and brought the animal under control. He felt the tremors in the stallion’s body, he reached forward and patted him on the neck, his eyes darting to the right and left, searching for what the animal sensed.

Then he saw it, in a stand of conifers off to the left. About eighty-five meters from the road, a pennant on a bro-

ken cavalry lance fluttered weakly in the bough of a tall pine tree. The major drew his saber and signaled. The column immediately spread into two skirmish wings and followed close behind him at a slow trot—lances at the ready.

When they were within fifteen feet of the pennant, the major's stallion suddenly snorted, started shuffling, stepping and prancing, trying to turn away. The major fought the horse, trying to quiet him, and at the same time, tried to quell the shock of what he saw. Scattered in a small clearing was a grisly disarray of mangled animal carcasses and human body parts.

Major Vichensky dismounted, his hand trembling as he handed the reins of his stallion to Corporal Murchev. For just an instant he thought his legs would collapse, and reached for the bridle of Sergeant Borov's mare, steadying himself. His normally ruddy complexion turned ashen, the shock of the moment made him breathless. He stood there briefly, legs trembling, hanging onto the bridle, trying to gain his composure before he spoke.

"Sergeant," he said in a hoarse voice. "Take one man, make a large circle, see what you can."

Wide-eyed, staring as if mesmerized, Sergeant Borov simply nodded. With mouth agape, his eyes swept across the remains of the carnage for several seconds before he turned his mount and left. The major motioned for one of the Cossacks to follow the Sergeant, then turned and walked to the edge of the clearing and stood there, silently viewing the ghastly panorama again. One by one, the re-

maining six Cossacks drifted to the scene and stood beside the major. Not a word was spoken.

Silently, Major Vichensky counted the bodies of seven horses. Two of the animals had been decapitated and the remaining five carcasses each had several vee-shaped wedges of flesh missing. He noted that all of the wounds were identical: clean and sharp, as if a surgeon had carefully sliced each one. As for the bodies of the men, he couldn't identify even one. Arms and legs, headless torsos, pieces of clothing and bits of flesh were scattered everywhere. Once again, his legs trembled. There was a knot in his chest. And for a moment he thought he was about to vomit. He vented a long breath.

Mother of God!

The clearing was a theater of death and carnage. All around them were the signs of utter chaos; broken limbs of trees, large sections of earth turned into deep furrows. And floating over the grim scene in a noxious pall was the nauseous odor of pungent sulfur and gamy animal fur.

A slight gust of breeze rustled the pines, dislodging the broken lance and pennant, which fell to earth amid the tangle of bodies. A lone feather fluttered down, landing within inches of the Corporal Murchev's feet. But it was no ordinary feather. Sergei removed his riding gauntlet, threw his Karakul riding cape over his shoulder and picked up the feather. He held it upright for the group to see and stared at it in dismay. It was the biggest feather he'd ever seen.

What the hell kind of bird is this?

The feather was jet black, over a meter long and wider

than the span of a man's hand. Something compelled Sergei to sniff the feather, he immediately made a sour expression, dropping the feather and spitting with revulsion on the ground.

Two shots rang out and a terrible scream pierced the silence. All heads snapped toward a conifer grove thirty yards distant.

"That sounded like Sergeant Borov," Sergei said.

The ground started to tremble beneath them in a definite rhythm, like rapidly moving footfalls. Two, thirty-foot, pine trees shook violently, as if in the hands of a giant; limbs shattered and the foliage virtually exploded. Two bizarre creatures burst into the clearing. Fully four meters tall, with ghastly eyes the size of dinner plates and snapping four-foot beaks, powerful churning legs with horny three-toed feet. They were on the group in seconds.



Kirov, Siberia December, 1855

General Muraviev sat at his desk slack-jawed. The dispatch in his hand trembled and his eyes mirrored the sudden emptiness he felt in his chest. The courier who delivered the dispatch stood at attention next to the door of the office. The general glanced at him and waved him away with a brush of his hand.

"No reply," he said, his voice hoarse with emotion.

He ignored the courier's departing salute and let the dispatch fall to his desk, then turned in his chair and stared at the map of Russia, which covered one entire wall. His eyes had the glaze of a man emerging from an extended state of comatose. He blinked his eyes several times, then turned slowly back to his desk and read the dispatch again.

Kirov Command Ctr. December, 1855
Gov. General Nicholas Muraviev
Status: Urgent.

*Count Nicholai Draja DeLensky missing in
Caucasus. Assumed dead. Prepare two (2) divi-
sions for transfer to Caucasian frontier.*

*Assume status of Commander - Baku defense
command.*

Orders follow by courier.

H.R.H. Prince Draja Vishalov.
By order of Alexander II, Czar of the Russias.

The general shook his head, trying to drive the thoughts from his mind. His voice was pure grief, like the whisper of a galley slave.

“Shit!”

PART I

Colonel Alexei Yuri DeLensky

CHAPTER I

Azerbajdzanskaja, The Caucasus April 10, 1917

“Jesus Christ—there’s no head!”

Colonel Alexei De Lensky spit the words out forcefully, his breath making puffy vapors in the frigid air. A deep scowl narrowed his eyes to slits. Tiny furrows of disgust crinkled his wide, bulbous nose. The corners of his mouth turned down in disgust.

The severed edge of the neck was perfectly flat, the flesh and vertebrae sheared cleanly, as if sliced cleanly by a guillotine blade. There were two chunks missing from the body; both wedge-shaped, about forty centimeters long and the width of a man’s hand across the wide end of the vee. The edges of the wounds were sharp and clean; the bones sheared mirror-smooth, like the beak imprint of some pre-historic creature.

Obviously the grisly death was recent, certainly within

the last two hours. Droplets of blood still oozed from the surface of the wounds and spotted the snow. The corpse still maintained enough latent body heat to melt the odd falling snowflake; they glistened like jewels on the tips of the body hair.

It wasn't the death of the stag that bothered him: it was the way the animal had been killed. Every carnivorous beast acquired food by killing a lesser animal in some technique learned through experience. It was a natural protocol of survival. But this wasn't predation—it was something beyond.

In twenty-seven years of service with the czar's Cossack Guards he'd seen death in many forms: shot and saber, knife and lance—and too many times at the end of his ham-like fists. In the sternly ordered mind of Alexei DeLensky, there was a discipline for everything—even a catechism for killing.

What the hell did this?

He stood in his stirrups, leaning forward and probed the body with the tip of his riding lance. It was still soft. The movement stirred the esters in the stag's fur and the lingering scent of fearful death made the colonel's dapple-gray mare flare her nostrils; she widened her eyes and pranced from hoof to hoof.

“Easy, Sacha,” Alexei said. He firmed the reins and tightened his knees against her body. The movement drew his attention from the stag. It was then that he saw the tracks.

Leading away from the body in alternate steps, each

about two meters apart, were the tracks of what appeared to be a bird—a very large bird. Each imprint in the snow was about forty-five centimeters long and shaped like the three-toed track of an ostrich. That is, if they grew to be four meters tall. Alexei stared open-mouthed at the tracks, dismayed, and yet fascinated.

The sound of three sharp whistles snapped him from his trance, Sacha's ears pricked to attention and he turned to look at the edge of the pine forest 200 meters uphill. The long string of horses, the trailing element of the caravan, was just disappearing into the green boughs of the conifers. He slipped his lance into the stirrup boot and spurred Sacha into a fast lope.

Most of the upper valleys of the Caucasus range were a tangled patchwork of conifers and shrubs punctuated by small pastures of wild grasses. There were no roads, only primitive trails formed by the seasonal migration of Kazak shepherds and their flocks. Under the best of conditions, the trails were difficult. They widened and narrowed, snaking right and left, following the path of least resistance through the disordered matrix of brush and dense pine forest—and always leading uphill.

A recent snowfall made the trail next to impassable. Heavy drifts of wind-driven snow choked the gullies and depressions, swallowing the wheels of the wagons and slowing the caravan to a crawl. But for a rider on horseback, it wasn't a problem. Alexei trotted easily past the long string of wagons and rode until he caught sight of Lieutenant Androvitch, 200 meters ahead of the column.

Yuri Androvitch's black karakul riding cape and tall karakul headpiece made him look like a huge black bear perched on a horse. He sat just beyond the edge of the conifer forest, on the berm of a ridge overlooking a small valley. His field glasses were up to his eyes.

"You signaled, Yuri?" Alexei said. He dropped the reins and gave the dapple gray her head, she obediently edged next to the lieutenant's black gelding.

Yuri lowered the glasses and nodded. "Yes, my colonel." He flipped one side of his black karakul-riding cape over his shoulder and pointed into the valley. "I think that's the Village of Zakataly."

Alexei opened his cape and put his field glasses to his eyes and scanned across the settlement. After a moment, he let the glasses fall to his chest and half-chuckled, half-grunted. "It's a wart of a village. I didn't know what to expect, and I'm still disappointed."

It wasn't much of a village and not exactly sitting in a valley, it was more like a circular depression in the side of the mountain, roughly 500 meters in diameter. The site was bordered on three sides by a rising ridge that terminated where the conifer forest began. On the fourth side, a shallow creek wound back and forth across a long sloping pasture for a half kilometer, then tumbled as a waterfall over a sharp drop-off overlooking the Sirakskaja steppes, some 4000 feet below.

The settlement was a scattering of eclectic structures, each of them suggesting a quality of life that was near pathetic. They weren't arrayed in any sort of a pattern that

would suggest a planned municipal design, and no two dwellings faced in the same direction.

The four largest buildings had thick sod roofs; they were extremely primitive and half buried in the soil. Of the remaining dwellings, nine were crude single-room log cabins, and eleven were Spartan nomadic Yurts: a circular pole frame structure covered with black felt roofs and animal hides. In the exact center of the community was an out-of-square rectangular building constructed from rough-hewn logs, many of the timbers still covered by patches of bark. In this raw setting, the crude structure could have easily been mistaken for a trapper's cabin, except for the characteristic onion dome sitting atop a steeple base that straddled the vee of the roof.

In sharp contrast to the primitive construction of the building, the fluid curves of the bulbous dome were layered with copper and precisely joined; obviously the work of a master craftsman. The dome was painted with swirling stripes in alternating hues of gold and maroon, and a slender staff bearing the distinctive three-bar patriarchal style cross of the Russian Orthodox Church projected from the top.

“It’s a goddamned church,” Alexei said. His voice was tinted with surprise. “In this stinking village?”

He studied the village for a long moment, trying to make sense of the arrangement of the buildings, then shook his head and brushed at the hoary coating of frost crystals clinging to the gray hairs of his Vandyke beard. Immediately on his left, a rabbit broke from cover in a flurry of

flying snow and disappeared in the twisted bramble dotting the slope of the ridge. The sudden movement startled him and alerted his dapple-gray mare. She pranced nervously and Alexei stilled her with a slight pressure from his knees.

“Easy, Sacha,” he said.

The steamy vapor of his breath billowed in the air and the mare snorted lightly, as if in reply. He stared at the spot where the rabbit disappeared and wondered how anything so defenseless could survive in this frigid wilderness. Immediately, the thought stimulated a vision of the dead stag—and the strange tracks. He shook the disturbing images from his mind and removed his karakul wool headpiece, then ran one hand through the short-cropped curls of his silver-gray hair. The memory of the disfigured stag continued to haunt him, and made him feel edgy. By force of habit, Alexei raised his huge nose and sniffed the air. There was tension here; his senses whispered it, and his knees felt it in the mare. He brushed his headpiece across his leg to remove the loose snow from the curly wool, then readjusted it on his head.

A partridge burst from the forest on the opposite ridge of the valley. Alexei followed the flight of the bird for a second then swept his eyes across the ridge and edge of the forest slowly, searching. He didn’t look at the lieutenant when he spoke.

“Something scared that bird.”

Lieutenant Androvitch nodded and glanced at the spot where the partridge appeared. He suggested, “Maybe just a fox.” He watched the partridge take to the air again and

land in a distant bramble. “Staying alive has to be tough in this country.”

Alexei grunted, but he didn’t take his eyes from the ridge. The hairs on the back of his neck tingled, a subtle sense gave him the impression he was being watched. He didn’t like that feeling.

Yuri Androvitch returned his attention to a folded chart he held in one hand. He brushed the frost crystals from the bottom of his full black moustache with the side of his index finger and shook his head.

“This chart they gave us in Tbilisi is primitive,” he said. “If this is the Village of Zakataly, then we’re on your land colonel.”

Alexei grunted again in response, not really hearing Yuri’s remark, still absorbed in suspicion. He half-turned in his saddle and swept his vision across the rim of the entire valley, then looked back at the caravan, now 100 meters behind them.

The column of wagons stood wheel-deep in snow at the bottom of a sharp rise in the trail. Billows of steamy vapor puffed from the nostrils of the resting mules, they twitched their ears and stared placidly at the snow-covered ground. Scattered throughout the caravan, the troop of Cossack cavalrymen stood at the ready. A few of the men dismounted and checked their tack, while others watched for movement in the heavy growth of conifers surrounding them.

“I have a bad feeling, Yuri,” Alexei said. “We’re a long way from Moscow, but those goddamned Bolsheviks are everywhere. They’d love to slit our throats.”

Yuri nodded. “Difficult to believe they’d get this far from civilization, my colonel. I think it’s more likely we’ll run into fragments of the White Army.”

“Maybe. Just the same, we won’t take chances. Check the village as a hostile site. Take twelve men and ride a wide skirmish line on both sides. The remainder of the troop stays with the caravan.”

“Yes, my colonel.” Yuri swung his mount a quarter turn, gave three rapid hand signals to the caravan, then edged his mount alongside Alexei’s mare. He made a special effort to keep the muzzle of his black gelding one meter behind the muzzle of the dapple gray. In the strict tactical protocol of the Czar’s Cossack Guards, the colonel always led the troop.

Within minutes, the cavalrymen were aligned along the ridge in skirmish position: six to the left and six to the right of the Colonel. Alexei checked the formation, then slowly drew his saber and raised it above his head. He tightened his knees to Sacha’s flanks and was about to release the riders when a loud howl came from the edge of the forest on the opposite ridge.

Snow flew into the air and the drooping limbs of a large conifer shattered as an ancient farm wagon erupted from the thick cover. It was pulled by a pair of thick-hoofed black Percheron plow horses, bouncing and pitching wildly as it careened down the side of the ridge at breakneck speed.

The bed of the wagon was filled with men, all straining to keep their feet. They staggered and teetered against each other and braced themselves by holding on to stakes se-

cured to the wagon bed. They screamed and wailed insanely as they plummeted down the slope, some waving long sticks in the air and a few holding burning torches above their heads.

About 80 meters from the edge of the village there was a small berm, built to channel drainage water seeping down from the slope away from the village. When the wagon struck the berm, it skidded crazily and the left front wheel flew from the axle. The wagon bed dropped and dug into the earth, the shock fractured the whipple tree and the team of wild-eyed horses galloped off, trailing harness and pieces of the split axle behind them. The sudden stop flipped the wagon and cleared the bed of passengers; some were catapulted through the air, some had the presence to jump, and a few hit the ground running.

Whatever force drove the men also protected them, for none were injured. Within seconds, they gained their feet and congregated in a large circle, dancing in an endless conga line, waving their arms and wailing anew. The circle broke and some of them joined arms and spun in smaller circles, others danced a primitive jig, and a few completely saturated with the emotions of the moment hopped spastically in erratic patterns—a fire drill at the insane asylum.

The bizarre spectacle made Alexei slowly lower his saber. “What in the hell?”

“Maybe it’s a religious rite,” Yuri said. “They’re all wearing gowns.”

“More like a bunch of idiots from a sanitarium,” Alexei said. He returned his saber to the scabbard and looked

through his field glasses, studying the antics and gyrations of the strange throng.

“Jesus Christ, Yuri! Their faces are painted with symbols. They’re fucking lunatics.” A chilling sensation ran up his back and once again he felt the hairs on his neck tingle. He shot a rapid glance at Yuri, who stared in open mouth disbelief, then returned his attention to the spectacle.

The double doors of the church suddenly swung open, and a bent-over man dressed in the black garments of a priest hobbled out and stumbled to his knees in the snow. He was carrying a large cross, mounted on a long staff. Obviously not an agile man, the priest awkwardly braced himself with the staff to regain his feet, then raised it above his head and struggled toward the group with a pronounced limp.

When the group saw the priest they froze in position for a only a second, then, as if led by a master conductor, they issued a wild scream in unison and descended on the cleric and the church as a raging mob. They swept across the priest like an advancing tide. He was knocked to the ground, trampled, kicked, and a few of the mob paused long enough to swat him with the long staffs they carried. But the priority target of the horde was the church. They assaulted the structure as if it were a living being. Those with torches tossed them on the roof and beat insanely at the log framework with their bare fists. Some of the group raced inside the building, others pounded on the logs with staffs. One group of five attempted to scale the side with the obvious intent of destroying the colorful onion dome.

Alexei yanked his saber from the scabbard and dug his spurs into the flanks of his mare. The animal reared slightly in surprise then leaped forward, and along with the movement came the entire skirmish line of Cossack Cavalrymen. Howling and hooting, they cleared the ridge and plunged down the slope as a unit, troopers with their lances braced, Alexei in the lead with his flashing saber at the ready; creaking leather, thundering hooves, screaming men—a wave of death.

Four of the Cossacks, the outer two on each end of the skirmish line, swung their mounts wide and circled the village in a flanking ploy, while the remainder of the force threaded through the buildings of the village and descended on the church.

At the head of the charge, Alexei toppled the pyramid of men struggling to reach the roof with a vicious sweep of his saber and continued at full gallop past the church. Four meters in front of the open door of the church, a wild-eyed zealot with a bleached white face and black rings around his eyes stood poised over the fallen priest with an upraised pitchfork. After issuing an animalistic howl, he lunged at the cleric. The swinging arc of Alexei's saber stopped the pitchfork in mid-flight; it severed the handle of the tool and continued on to decapitate the man.

Only a meter behind Alexei, Lieutenant Androvitch swung his mount hard around the corner of the church and stepped from the saddle on the run, his Tokarev pistol held at the ready. He raced through the open door of the church and confronted two of the horde about to leave. They froze

in position, wide eyed, mouths agape, their arms full of sacramental goblets and pitchers. He shot them where they stood.

The Cossack riders struck the mob like the waters of a bursting dam; those that weren't impaled by lances or trampled by horses, were swept from the church into the clearing where their wagon overturned. Four of the retreating men tried to run for the cover of the woods and were promptly dispatched. The remaining five huddled in a tight group and stared at the circling cavalymen with fearful eyes.

Alexei whirled his mount in a tight circle and surveyed the scene. The battle was over. He trotted quickly around the perimeter of the church and checked each of his men to be sure they were unharmed.

After viewing several of the bodies of the attackers, it occurred to him that except for facial features, they were like a group of clones. Each man wore a dirty gray muslin robe that fell to his ankles, saturated with body odor, an obnoxious stench that you could smell from several feet away. Every man had filthy long hair that fell past the shoulder, and each one had the same strange red and yellow symbols painted on his face. The observation made him uncomfortable, so he dismissed it and trotted his mare back to the front of the church.

Alexei dismounted and watched the priest struggle to gain his feet by leaning heavily on the staff bearing the cross. The frail cleric tried to straighten his garment and brushed awkwardly at the clinging bits of snow. His move-

ments were extremely clumsy and Alexei realized the man was crippled. His left arm was shriveled and he carried it pathetically, like a sparrow with a broken wing.

As he tried to pick bits of soil and debris from his tattered garments, the cleric wavered slightly and his hand trembled with palsy. He was obviously a very old man. His body was slight and his back was bent from age. His gray hair had not been cut in years, and his ancient gray beard hung in disarray nearly to his waist, tangled with the heavy cross he wore about his neck. The black clerical frock he wore was held together simply by repairs, not by the base material, a plethora of patches that gave mute evidence of a Spartan existence.

Lieutenant Yuri Androvitch stood next to the fumbling cleric and shook his head slowly in a gesture of disbelief. He removed his karakul-riding cape and slipped it across the narrow shoulders of the trembling priest, then helped him to the door of the church.

“Are you injured?” Alexei said.

The priest shook his head slightly and looked up with the most beautiful blue eyes Alexei had ever seen.

“No,” he replied. “The hand of God has saved me.”

“God didn’t have a damned thing to do with it. You were spared by the lances of my cavalymen, and the cold steel of my saber.”

“But it was the will of God that sent you here.”

“My inheritance sent me here... that and the collapse of Mother Russia. You priests are all alike. If something turns out well, it’s the will of God. If it doesn’t, then it’s

the hand of Satan.”

A fleeting expression of alarm flashed through the priest’s eyes. “You speak like an atheist.”

“I am a realist,” Alexei said. “I do what has to be done. That’s survival. If I sat around waiting for the limp wrist of philosophy to save me, I would have died years ago.”

The priest stared at Alexei for a long moment, and then glanced at the bodies the cavalrymen were stacking on the bed of the broken wagon and made the sign of the cross on his body.

“Whatever your role in this event,” the old man said, “I thank you.”

One of the cavalrymen dismounted and grabbed a foot of the man who tried to kill the priest and dragged the corpse toward the growing pile of bodies. Alexei watched him briefly then spoke to the priest.

“These are strange people. Who are they?”

“They are evil. They are the fingers of Ahriman.”

“That’s not an answer, Priest. Who are these lunatics, and why did they attack you and your church?”

“They are the followers of the woman from Karabaugh, the Zoroastrian witch. They would erase all that is good because pure evil cannot exist in the presence of Christ.” He made the sign of the cross on his body again and kissed the gold cross hanging from his neck. “She consorts with Ahriman, she brings his creatures across the veil.”

“Ahriman? Creatures? What the hell are you talking about?” Alexei’s voice was sharp. He frowned at the priest. “Do you realize these idiots tried to kill you?”

The old priest looked up at Alexei and his features wrinkled in a smile of serene peace, there was a twinkle in his blue eyes. “You think I’m senile, don’t you? An old man lost in his imagination.”

Alexei was surprised by the response.

The old man is quick. He acts lucid when I confront him, but his words are riddles. Maybe this is how the mind goes when you get old

He stared at the priest thoughtfully for several seconds, pondering an answer to the question.

“I’m not sure,” he said.

“Well, I’m not,” the priest said. These heathen have been here before. The last time was at night.”

“How did you drive them away? Did your neighbors help you?”

“Oh no, they won’t come out. They’re just simple shepherds, who huddle in fear in these humble dwellings.”

He paused a moment and glanced at the surrounding buildings and Yurts, then nodded his head as if answering a silent question. “They were afraid one of Ahriman’s creatures was with the mob. They’ve seen them in the woods.” He half-turned and gestured at the pine forest covering the ridge, then faced Alexei. “You must understand, a demon is a very frightening thing.”

Alexei didn’t respond, he looked blankly at the priest for a long moment then put his arm around Yuri’s shoulder and led him about fifteen feet away.

“His mind wanders in nonsense,” Alexei said in a hoarse whisper. “And we can’t waste any more time on

this wart of a village. Have your men gather up limbs from the fallen trees and stack them on the bodies, then burn them. Leave two riders with me and go back to the caravan. Try to find a trail around this village, I don't want any of the families to see the bodies. The old priest may be able to give me directions to the dacha. I'll follow after I talk to him." He slapped Yuri on the shoulder and walked back to the church.

The priest watched Yuri step into the saddle and ride away, then remembered the karakul cape and struggled with his single functioning arm to remove it from his shoulders.

"I must return this garment to that young man," he said.

Alexei placed a restraining hand on the cleric's shoulder. "Keep the cape, Priest," he said. "Consider it a donation."

The old man glanced at Alexei as if he were about to protest, then paused and traced a trembling hand across the silky curls of the Karakul wool. His beautiful blue eyes became dewy and he nodded his head.

"God is most kind to me," he said in a whisper. Then he shot a quick glance at Alexei and smiled. "And I thank you."

"Perhaps you can help me, Priest," Alexei said. "I am Colonel Alexei DeLensky... formerly of the Czar's Cossack Guards. I am here to claim the appanage granted to my grandfather, Count Nicolai Draja DeLensky. His estate was willed to my brother, Ivan, and me."

Alexei reached inside of his riding tunic and withdrew a packet wrapped in oilskin. He opened it with care and took

a folded parchment from a sheaf of papers and handed it to the cleric. “I’m looking for the dacha that’s mentioned in this deed.”

The priest took the document but didn’t read it immediately. “The Czar’s Cossack Guards?” There was a tone of surprise in his voice. “That’s an important-sounding job, Colonel. You’re a long way from Terem Palace. What will the czar do without you?”

“There is no czar any longer. Nicholas II abdicated the throne on the 15th of March. Mother Russia is retired and so am I.”

The priest’s eyes widened. “No czar? But what of the government?”

“There is no government, the Duma is dissolved. There’s nothing but confusion in Moscow and Petrograd. Mensheviks argue with the Kadets and Octobrists, and the revolutionists follow a man named Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov. He calls his party Bolsheviks, and goes under the name of Lenin. Everybody is unhappy for one reason or another. Trouble is everywhere.”

The priest shook his head slowly, on the edge of mourning, but not knowing for whom. “I know nothing of politics, those names are meaningless to me. What is to become of Mother Russia?”

Alexei had no reply, just a slight shake of his head. The cleric stared at him briefly, then turned his attention to the deed he held in his hand. Again, he shook his head. “My eyes are not what they once were, Colonel. If you’ll allow me to get my glasses.” He turned to enter the church then

stopped abruptly and faced Alexei.

“Where are my manners?” he said. “You’ve given me aid and I haven’t even introduced myself, forgive me. I am Father Gregorovitch. Would you like a cup of hot tea while I read this document?”

“Tea is good,” Alexei said. “It will chase the chill.”

Father Gregorovitch nodded and hobbled through the chapel, Alexei followed him.

Like all churches of the Russian Orthodox faith, there were no pews; only a crude stand that supported a holy-water stoup and a simple altar containing a large Biblical text and tray for the sacramental ware. The solitary decorative furnishing was an ornate chancel screen with two icons. It stood on the left side of the altar, shielding a door that led to the parsonage.

Father Gregorovitch paused in front of the door and looked at the lintel; it was just a few inches above his head. He glanced back at Alexei and smiled. In his bare feet, Alexei stood 6 foot 7 inches and weighed 270 pounds; he was a huge man. Now, wearing his riding boots and fully dressed in his uniform, riding cape and tall karakul Cossack headpiece, he looked as big as a mountain.

“You may have trouble getting through this door,” he said. “But it’s the only entrance to the parsonage.”

Alexei didn’t comment; he took off his headpiece, got down on his knees and edged through the narrow opening sideways.

The parsonage was incredibly bleak. It was a single room containing nothing but the meager living necessities

of the priest. All of the walls were the faded ochre of unfinished lumber, so barren and dingy that it immediately depressed Alexei. A simple cot stood in one corner and a battered wood stove was positioned against the opposite wall. In the center of the room there was a crude table and a single chair. A narrow window above the cot admitted just enough daylight to make the room dim. Alexei noted that there was only one chair, so he grabbed a large chunk of firewood, placed it on end and used it as a seat.

Father Gregorovitch took two ancient tea glasses from a shelf above the head of his cot and placed them on the table. He shuffled to the stove and moved a simmering teakettle to the hot section of the stove and held it against the cast iron surface.

“This will only take a minute,” he said.

While he waited for the tea to heat, the priest studied the Alexei’s features. His closely trimmed, Vandyke beard covered most of Alexei’s face, muting the fact that he had a bad complexion and wasn’t a good looking man. He had a wide bulbous nose and his eyes were a pale gray, not warm like the dawn, but flinty and shifty. Service as the body-protector of the czar and his family had surely made them that way.

When the steam puffed from the spout of the kettle, the priest took a small container from a shelf above the stove and poured some tea into the kettle. While it steeped, he continued to study Alexei. Even though the lighting was poor, he could see the healed ridges of several scars scattered across Alexei’s face.

He has the mark of a warrior. He'll need all of his skill to survive in this land

Father Gregorovitch filled both of the glasses with steaming black Georgian tea; the pleasant smoky aroma added a sense of comfort to the stark quarters.

"I cannot offer you sugar," he said. "There is none available until late spring."

"No matter," Alexei said. He took a silver flask from his tunic and winked at the priest as he placed it in the center of the table and removed the stopper.

"This is also a donation to the church," he said. "It will help fight the chill of this land."

Father Gregorovitch leaned forward and sniffed the flask. He smiled and his blue eyes became moist. "Thank you my friend. Indeed, a touch of brandy protects one against the winter sickness."

While Alexei sipped the hot tea, Father Gregorovitch slipped on his square, silver-rimmed glasses and began reading the deed. It was only thirty seconds before he raised his eyebrows and nodded his head.

"Oh, yes! Yes," he said. "This is the Muraviev estate, I know it well."

"Muraviev, hell!" Alexei snapped. "It's the DeLensky estate. That property is an appanage, granted to my grandfather by the Czar in 1850. An appanage is a bloodline grant. It's the property of the DeLensky family as long as the family line survives."

"Forgive an old man for his ignorance, my friend. I called it the Muraviev estate because that's what I was

told—by General Muraviev. The main dacha is only three kilometers from here. I lived there from 1878 until just two years ago.”

“What does the church have to do with my land?”

Father Gregorovitch blinked his eyes, startled by the gusto of Alexei’s brusque reply.

“Don’t worry, the church has no claim on your land, Colonel DeLensky. The former tenant, Nicholas Muraviev, was the governor general of Siberia at one time, and then the commander of the Baku District. He had tremendous political power. Who is to question such a man?”

Alexei said nothing.

Father Gregorovitch explained, “He retired here with his family in 1873. His wife and two daughters were more accustomed to the civility of Moscow, and there were some problems.” The elderly cleric paused, as if searching for a special word. He picked up the cross hanging from his neck and stared at it, then kissed it and looked at Alexei with a worried expression.

“There are unexplained phenomena in the Caucasian wilderness,” he said. “Strange creatures, idolatry, heathens practicing witchcraft, a force of dark powers that overwhelms ordinary men. The Muraviev women experienced frightening things in the dacha—voices, spiritual happenings. They threatened to leave, so Nicholas Muraviev petitioned the patriarchs of the Holy Trinity at Zagorsk to send a priest. So in 1878, I was sent directly here from the monastery. I gave spiritual guidance and support to the family until Nicholas Muraviev died in 1890. The family

tried to stay, but the... *happenings*... in the dacha grew worse and they left. The Holy fathers at Zagorsk directed me to remain and serve the Lord. I stayed on the estate until I was driven off, in 1915. I haven't returned since."

"Driven off?" Alexei scowled. "By who?"

"By the forces of evil, the Zoastrian witch and her followers. The same ones you killed today. They appeared in force one day and took over the dacha and all of the buildings. They erected idols and desecrated the church, I tried to stop them."

He paused and held up his withered left arm for Alexei to see. The elbow appeared to be locked and the muscle tissue had atrophied to the point where there was little but bone and skin. The limb was useless.

"They did this to my arm. I somehow made it to this village, and the shepherds took me in."

Alexei's jaw muscles tightened visibly and his nostrils flared. A blush of color tinged his cheekbones. "So tell me, Father, is this *witch* and her followers still on my land?"

"I suspect they are. But I can't be certain because the shepherds are too terrified to go on the land. They won't even go into the woods. There is much evil there."

"How do I get to this dacha? Is there any kind of a trail?"

"It is not as you think, Colonel. The estate is not raw wilderness like the trails you followed to get here. It is highly developed. Just 200 meters north of the village is the beginning of a fine system of well-drained gravel roads.

"Nicholas Muraviev sent unlimited labor to develop the

estate. As governor general of Siberia he controlled all of the labor camps. At one time there were over 400 prisoners here, and many Yakut guards to watch them. I have been told they were treated like animals, many of them worked until they dropped where they stood. They cleared the land, built the dacha and many other buildings. They built many kilometers of fine roads, tilled the fields and bordered them with stone fences. The wretched souls were but slaves. Less than 100 survived, and those poor devils were marched to the Valley of Ahriman, only to be buried alive in the caves.”

The old priest paused and made the sign of the cross on his body. He leaned his head nearer to Alexei and lowered his voice to a confidential level.

“I am told, by those who have seen the valley, that it is cursed by demons of many forms. Strange bird-like creatures, and hairy beasts that walk upright. Even miniature devils.”

“Ha!” Alexei snorted. “Do you believe in curses and demons, Priest? Do you support Dvoeverie?”

Father Gregorovitch’s demeanor remained unruffled. If Alexei’s taunt shook him, it wasn’t obvious.

“I am a religious man, Colonel. I am pledged to the glory of Christ and the forces of good. But, by the same token, I am practical enough to realize that evil is not limited to the devil alone. Evil takes many forms.”

Alexei laughed and slapped his hand on his knee.

“Ha! You priests are all alike. Philosophers! I will tell you what evil is. It is your enemy! It is whoever tries to

overpower you by force or thought. And the best cure for this evil is a strong saber arm!” He accented his words by striking his knee with the edge of his hand, as if he were chopping off the head of a chicken. “There! It is done! Now tell me Priest, did you see these evil things? These... *demons?*”

Father Gregorovitch shook his head. “No, I have not personally seen a demon, but evil entities are not always visible. They promote evil and fear by their thoughts, and they influence—”

“Enough!” Alexei cut him off loudly. He stood and took the deed from the table, replaced it in the oilskin packet, and stuffed it inside his tunic.

“The saber is my philosophy, Priest. I’ll show you how a Cossack deals with evil. My family waits in a caravan just west of this village. I go now to prepare the estate for their homecoming. When I have settled this matter, you are invited back to the estate. The church shall be yours as before. I thank you for the tea.”



Alexei drew up the stallion just twenty meters short of the lead wagon. Yuri was quickly at his side.

“Report, Lieutenant.”

“All is well, my Colonel.”

“Good. The old priest told me there’s an excellent road 200 meters north of the village. I want you to lead the caravan there and wait on the road for one hour, then follow

me. The main dacha is only three kilometers. I'm taking six men and going ahead to establish security, and light fires in the stoves. If there's a problem, I'll send a runner."

"Yes, my Colonel." Yuri reined his black charger firmly, but didn't whirl the mount and charge off to execute the orders as he usually did. There was something in the colonel's eyes that bothered him.

"My Colonel," he said, still uncertain that he should question his superior. "Are there any special orders?"

Alexei grinned and reared his mount in a quarter turn. "Yes," he called out over his shoulder. "The priest told me there were demons running around in the woods. If you should see one, I order you to run your saber up his ass."