

## Inner Demons

Evening of the 1<sup>st</sup> of March 1881, St. Petersburg, hours after Tsar Alexander II assassination.

“Царь мертв (The Tsar is dead)!” proclaims a local boy, hollow-faced, wearing an ushanka that draped over his eyes. Manoeuvring through the dimly lit street, cramped with animated citizens, I push my way into the derelict apartment at the end of the alley. Ascending the rotten-wood stairs, gently pushing ajar and passing through the withering door, the putrid stench of nervous sweat and urine poisons my lungs, as five sets of fearful eyes swiftly turn towards me. Emotionless, I declare, “The Tsar is dead, murdered by Ignacy, may he rest in peace. We did it.” One second passed, then a second, then a third and then the room was set alight by hysterical euphoria, as the hope in liberty was rekindled.

Opening my eyes as the light of dawn seeped through the cracks in the walls, loneliness and fear flooded my nervous system. What had we actually achieved? Terror is beginning to take root in my feeble mind and panic stricken, I descend the stairwell in a hurry. Bursting out of the flimsy, front door, the crisp, morning, polluted air drowns the sorrow out of my lungs, replacing it with an endless abyss of uncertainty. Was it all for nothing? Around me, haggard beggars line the damp pavement and factory workers mindlessly rush off to work. Following the congested stream of bodies, our path becomes interrupted by a crowd of protestors, chanting, “Down with Tsarism!” CRACK! A member of the Okhrana fires into the air and the congregation rapidly disperses, like wood chips in the wind. My feet finally come to a standstill on the banks of the Obvodny Canal and hunching over, catching my breath, the realisation strikes me that this is what we were fighting for, to help create a world with liberty, equality and fraternity.

Revitalised with the fire of revolution, I swiftly stride back to the apartment, as the sun is beginning to reach its halfway point. Crossing the lifeless street, my optimism disintegrates, as the splintered and distorted front door comes into view. Darting through the gaping hole and up the stairs, pushing the half-open door, it reveals a hopeless scene of despair. Gliding into the room reeking of death, a primal throb escapes my throat, as Nikolai’s motionless corpse lay on the ground. I want to look away, need to tear my eyes away, but cannot, the image of sweet, innocent Nikolai swimming in his blood haunts me and my legs buckle from the weight of resignation. CREAK! Footsteps sound from the hallway and fear envelops my body, as if I was a rabbit that had heard the howl of a wolf, but it is only Tyrkov, a comrade, that strides into the room. “Miss Perovskaya, we need to leave,” he whispers gently, then, firmer, he commands, “We have to move Sophia, we are not safe here.” With his assistance, my legs begin to bear my weight and we slowly evacuate the apartment. Was it all worth it?

The pale crescent moon shone like a silvery claw in the night sky, as shadows danced across the street. My feet crunch into the icy snow as I begin the perilous journey, alone, as lonely as a crow in a strange country, to the outskirts of St. Petersburg. Reminiscing the sacrifices

made, powerlessness begins to consume my mind, like a virus its host, perverting my inner resistance and nullifying my fight. Is freedom even worth it? Turning the corner, with resignation at the forefront of my mind, the moonlight glints off the deep red paint words smeared on the walls, which reads 'Людям (To the people)'. Realisation dawns on me that yes, it was worth it, for we had sparked the hope in revolution, the belief in a life with freedom, the only existence worth living. Ultimately, for the good of Russia, "there may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest."