

A decorative rectangular frame with ornate, symmetrical flourishes at each corner, enclosing the title 'Prologue'.

## Prologue

Ivan Fedorovich felt a storm was brewing, although the sky, a dome of deep blue like a Ming dynasty bowl that had once been his many years before, gave no sign. He knew such things because he had special knowledge, and he had lived long enough in Siberia to be aware of changes in the air around him. He had never been wrong about the storms, just slightly off in his timing. Recently, his senses had grown more acute. His predictions about the actions of men had likewise become more reliable over the years. The wrong predictions had been made decades ago, before he had the special knowledge. In his youth at Moscow University, Professor Pavlov had told him that his head was the perfect barometer. He was tempted to reply: well, then professor, with people like me around why did they ever invent the instrument? I and those like me could perform the same function; our gift, if you wanted to call pain a gift, might have kept some poor devils gainfully employed, those who were dismissed from service because they suffered from dizziness or headaches. But he kept such subversive thoughts to himself. Perhaps that had been the start of it, the seed from which the special knowledge had come. He had been prepared for it.

Of course, it was one thing to be prepared and another to be fulfilled. If he hadn't been exiled to the far reaches of Siberia, he would never have been fulfilled. Now his predictions were almost always right and not just about the weather. His rational voice still argued, although more weakly as time went on, that his predictions came true because whenever he predicted something, it would happen because people would believe it had to happen and they would

make it happen. He always wanted to write something for the Ethnographic Society about it, but repressed the idea as too dangerous. He was lucky to have been able to leave the farthest reaches of Siberia and come back almost to Russia, to a milder climate, though still severe enough.

He estimated he had a couple of hours before the downpour turned the garden into a quagmire. He hated to write when the headaches threatened; one was already lurking along the left side of his face. And why the left side? An ideological reminder of his radical past? He smiled to himself.

He sat down at the rude wooden table, carved by his own hands, and smoothed out a sheet of foolscap. He examined the nib of his pen. It was wearing down. Had he really put it to such hard use? He wrote "Chapter 26" on the top of the page and in the lower left hand corner he wrote a number. Why did he wish to recall such unpleasant subjects when the sky was tinted the color of a Ming dynasty vase? Better to take a walk, or see how the tomatoes were faring. They might be knocked down if the storm was a strong one, as he felt it would be. Anything but the misery of the subject he had set himself to write about. He put down his pen and left the cabin. He stood for a while staring above the line of birch and larch trees at the eastern horizon. That's where the monster would come from. He sighed and went back into his cabin, rummaged in the bin by the oven and pulled out a burlap sack. He carried it into the garden and filled it with the juiciest tomatoes he could find. As he picked each one, he would sniff it, fully understanding the danger. The pungent aroma would trigger an avalanche of memories; that was part of "the gift." They would be etched so sharply and flit by so rapidly through his mind that he would lose his bearings. No matter! Let the sensations take over. He stood still for a while—how long he would not remember. The memories suddenly receded. He held a tomato up to the Ming sky; a lovely contrast! Of course, he would have liked to have let them ripen on the vine for another day or two. In their present state, they were just a shade under done.

By the time he had finished and glanced up again, a ragged gray line had appeared on the horizon. He cursed it idly and went inside. He put up shutters against both windows and dropped the wooden bar across the cabin door. Suddenly, it was very dark. He

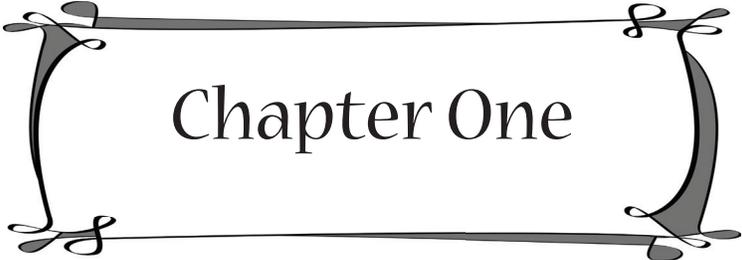
lit a candle and lay down on the bed to wait out the storm. A visitor would have noticed immediately that there was no icon in the corner. Ivan Fedorovich did not believe in God or not in the Christian God.

He must have dozed until he heard the groans of his cabin protesting against the gusts of wind that struck with mounting violence. He reached down in an automatic gesture to comfort Kiki, his dog or whatever she was, only to remember with a pang how she had died a week before and how he had buried her just inside the garden fence. He knew it was the loneliness of an exile living by choice far from the nearest village that made him sentimental about the animal. But she was a beauty, snow white with a single gray stripe running round her neck. She had turned up as though she had dropped from the sky, the same kind of intense blue sky that now heralded the storm. He found her one morning squatting at the door, her tongue lolling, her bushy tail undulating in an almost sensuous way. He inquired of the village elder, did she belong to someone? The elder stared at her for a long time before shaking his head. Ivan Fedorovich had never owned a dog and didn't know what to call her. After a while he noticed how she loved to play tricks on him, harmless, playful little tricks like hiding one of his slippers or pulling off his bedclothes in the middle of the night, but never when it was cold, and always gently and stealthily so that he didn't notice until morning. She was always clean, keeping her fur glossy by licking it almost like a cat, or going off to bathe in the nearby stream, or in winter rolling in the snow and shaking herself until she was shimmering. Other times she would disappear completely, though how that was possible in the open steppe he could not imagine. It was as though she were playing hide and seek. He realized he could not call her back because he had never given her a name, just called her 'dog.'

When he related all this to the peasant elder who visited him once a week, the man shook his head again; "she's a regular Kikimora." Ivan Fedorovich remembered what they had told him in the East. Kikimora in Siberian folklore was a mischief making demon married to the forest spirit or *leshii*. "Some o' them they can wreck a household. But yours, it seems, has taken kindly to you. She'll protect you, but you mustn't ever scold her," the elder said.

So Ivan Fedorovich had taken to calling her Kiki. She continued to play harmless tricks. Then one night when he had fallen asleep with the candle lit, she wakened him with fierce barking, pulling on his trouser leg. The flames had just caught the curtain and he was able to dose it with a bucket of water he kept as a fire precaution just as the peasants had taught him. No red cock for him; that's what the peasants called the dreaded fire that could burn a cabin, a man and his family in a flash. Now he missed her. Her protection was gone.

It was a sturdy cabin but the storm was fierce. Though the logs fit well, they had not been recently tarred. The rising wind blew in strongly and snuffed out his candle. He thought about just lying in the dark, but then decided to light another candle. He got up and went to the carved wooden cabinet hanging over the stove next to his drum when he heard the pounding on the door. For a moment he could not imagine any living thing having been caught by the storm in his remote corner of the world. A wild animal? No, the pounding was too regular, too insistent like the throbbing in his head. For one frantic moment he thought it might be Kiki coming back. Was he going insane? He groped his way to the door, unbarred it and threw it open. A vision of Hell greeted him.

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## Chapter One

The two Russians and the two Americans had been making good time along the Siberian post road until the storm threatened to overtake them just beyond the boundary marker between Perm and Tobolsk Provinces that announced the beginning of Siberia. Riding in the lead *tarantas*, a heavy four wheeled carriage drawn by three horses, Inspector Vasili Vasilievich Vasiliev of the Moscow City Police leaned forward, peering at the gray clouds massing ominously in the east before turning to his companion, Sergeant Serov.

“We should tell the driver to pull up the hood or we’ll be drenched before we get to the next post station. Wouldn’t do to have our guests washed away.”

He jerked his head back in the direction of the second *tarantas* following close behind. He noticed that the two men were also leaning forward, perhaps because they were not accustomed to the hard seats, or they may also have seen the signs of the approaching storm. He wasn’t really worried about them. Although they were Americans, one of them, the journalist, George Kennan, had spent some time in Siberia a few years before and had even written a book about his adventures. The other man, a Mr. Frost, was an artist who had accompanied him to sketch the landscape and perhaps other things as well. A novice to Russian life, he was having a harder time of adjusting, but he never complained which endeared him to Vasiliev. For the past few *versts*, the Great Siberian Road had been deeply rutted and they were badly shaken up. Could American stagecoaches be any more uncomfortable?



Transport wagons

Vasiliev signaled to them that they would stop at the next post station. Before they arrived the wind was already gusting as they passed a bivouac of transport wagons drawn up on the side of the highway under a stand of pines. The leader must be an optimist, Vasiliev thought, to expect shelter from the downpour that was sure to come. Just as the storm broke, the post station came into sight, a collection of weather worn wooden buildings crouching close to the ground as if expecting another beating from the forces of nature.

The Americans were laughing as they ducked their heads to enter the log cabin of the post master.

Vasiliev smiled in return. "What's so amusing?" he spoke to them in their own language, a slightly accented 'Oxford English', as Kennan playfully called it.

"I was just thinking that we might meet Pushkin's *kapitanskaya dochka* or rather her grand daughter." Kennan spoke back to him in slightly accented Russian which Vasiliev playfully called the 'Baltic Baron's Russian.'

"Alas," said Vasiliev, "in all my travel around this country I have never caught sight of a beautiful post master's daughter or her granddaughter."

"Just bad luck, my friend."

"You're still a bit romantic about Russia, aren't you, Mr. Kennan? I'm afraid you may be cured of that charming trait by the end of this trip."

"Perhaps. But if I do I'll just think of you and Sergeant Serov and my feelings will return."

"Always the master of compliments."

"Easy when the subject is so attractive."

"You see what I mean!"

Vasiliev laughed displaying his crooked teeth; it was part of his charm in Kennan's eyes, the crooked teeth in the face of an aristocrat. Well, they did say he was the illegitimate son of a Count and a peasant girl.

The post master did indeed have a daughter, but she was not the ideal subject for a poet's verse. She served the four travelers a frugal meal, for which they paid an exorbitant sum, and she prepared a rude bed of damp straw mattresses for each, but none of them was tempted to share it with her. They agreed to rise early in hopes the rain would stop during the night and that the road might be passable in the morning. As it turned out, a muddy track was not the main problem facing them in the light of morning.

Vasiliev was sleeping less and dreaming more the closer they came to the Tiumen Forwarding Prison. He was desperately afraid of what he would find there. His last word of Irina had come to him in a roundabout way a year ago. She was working in the prison hospital with 'Letchik', the Healer as they called him, her comrade from the revolutionary organization known as Land and Liberty, or the Partition of the Land. They had been arrested shortly after the assassination of Alexander II although they had not been involved in the conspiracy. Vasiliev replayed in his head a hundred times their last meeting in a Moscow prison. They had cut her beautiful

auburn hair and dressed her in drab prison garb, but they could not strip her of her noble bearing, her calm demeanor, her tough realism. "No romantic gestures," she had told him. She would survive Siberia, she assured him, until he obtained a pardon.

He stared into the darkness and silently cursed the departmental heads, the court notables, the Tsar himself for their stubborn refusal to pardon her. And what was her crime? She had done everything in her power to help him try to prevent the assassination of the Tsar, supplying him with details of the plot until the very last moment. "The white handkerchief will be the signal," she had let him know, and she was right; he was there—he saw it flutter at the end of the Quay—but he had failed to save the tsar. Irina, the "Swan" was her conspiratorial name, had been condemned for revolutionary propaganda, for belonging to an organization that preached socialism to an uncomprehending peasantry. They should have given her a medal. Now he was determined to free her.

He dozed off but suddenly woke with a start. Another bad dream? He could not recall anything more than feeling a vague disquiet. His mouth was dry. He got up quietly and thought about going out to the pump for a drink of water but was afraid of waking everyone. Instead he stole into the kitchen. Perhaps there was some water left in the samovar. Anything would do. His hand closed around a jug. He sniffed the contents. A strange bitter-sweet odor. What the Hell, it couldn't be poison. He took a deep draught. Was it fermented? He couldn't tell, having never tasted anything quite like it. He replaced the jug and crept back to his bed.

He heard Frost mutter in his sleep; Kennan was breathing quietly. What strange company for his mission. They had no idea of what he had in mind. They knew nothing of Irina or of her exploits. Somehow, Kennan had received permission to examine the Siberian exile system. The authorities must have been mad. What did they think he was going to write after he saw the real conditions that had been hidden from the world? But Vasiliev no longer cared about Russia's reputation. Somewhere along the line he had lost his faith in the possibility of reform without being converted to a new faith, that of revolution. Now he thought only of helping or saving the good people. The idea of justice seemed too abstract, too remote, unattainable. He wondered why it had taken him so long to reach that simple conclusion.

His assignment to accompany the Americans had been engineered by his old friend Ivan, known in Petersburg society as the Iron Colonel for his ability to survive wars, bureaucratic in-fighting – and worse. He was a force to be reckoned with, though he had lost some of his influence. Still loyal, even though the new Tsar, Alexander III, had disappointed him by turning away from reform. What Ivan did not know was that he, Vasiliev, no longer felt himself to be a defender of the realm. There was only one thing that was driving him now: to find and free Irina. After that, he was not sure. But his thoughts were beginning to move in a direction that surprised him. A year ago, he mused, he could not have imagined it. Was he really prepared to flee the country with her? If so, that's where Kennan would be useful. Vasiliev laughed to himself. Un-suspecting Kennan! Little did he know what might be in store for him. There would have to be a careful plan. It was no joke to cover two thousand miles of rough terrain, mostly wilderness just to arrive on the shores of the Pacific. And then what?

He had been talking to Kennan about the United States. Kennan called it the land of opportunity. Well, he had heard those words applied to Siberia too. He was more interested in how the law worked. Kennan was a mine of information. Vasiliev was convinced he could get the American to help him reach the United States once he had crossed the Mongolian frontier. They might be leaving the country as fugitives. "No romantic gestures," Irina had said. Well, this one would stagger even her imagination...if it worked.

He turned again, trying to make as little sound as possible. But Serov lying next to him was alert to his every move and interpreted his every sigh. It had always been that way, ever since their childhood together in the village, he the son of a count, Serov a serf boy, freed only in 1861. That was the other problem that worried Vasiliev. What would Serov choose to do? Go with them or stay behind? It was unthinkable to Vasiliev that Serov would break the tie that had bound them together; yet it was equally unthinkable that he would leave Russia. These thoughts tormented him until he fell into a light sleep toward dawn.