

THE QUARRY

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Dasvidaniya

I was taught to be brave. To hold my head up. To keep smiling. Some days it was hard, especially towards the end. My feet were tired from running, then walking, limping, then holding my aching body up and dragging it across the ground. The shawl I had stolen from a farming couple's laundry along the way slipped from my shoulders, the rough material grazed my neck, tempting my fingers to lean back and scratch. Instead, as I half ran half staggered, my fingers combed through my now tangled red locks. With each step a fresh shot of pain raced up my leg. I walked until I couldn't take the throbbing in my leg anymore, my breath coming out in staccato gasps as I gripped myself, mentally trying to overcome the pain of my escape.

Frantically looking to my left and my right then both behind and in front of me, even above and below in case someone was to crawl out from the ground or jump on top of me from one of the tall overhanging trees, I looked to see if I was followed. Pausing a moment I held my ragged breath so that I might listen for the tell-tale signs of an intruder. After a moment when there was no sound of foot fall I let out a tiny gasp of relief and hobbled over to some nearby shade. Collapsing beneath the entangled limbs of a giant tree, I leaned my head back and shut my eyes. Curling a small tendril of hair about my finger, I tried to process what had happened. Silent tears trundled down my cheeks as I fell into an uneven slumber.

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‘Come quickly!’

The little girl gripped her mother’s hand, her red curls bouncing against her back as they followed after her four older siblings, her father and her younger brother. They continued to walk until they stood before a short older man whom introduced himself as Yakov Yurovsky.

Head held high, her father looked Yakov in the eyes as Yakov spat that, as the Tsar, her father was to be put on trial for his handling of the workers strike, now known as Bloody Sunday. The Bolsheviks wanted him to be present for his trial, but he was not permitted to wear any epaulettes, they would not give him that honour.

The older two girls gasped. The eldest, Tatiana, went to say something but was silenced by her father with a stare. The little girl bit her lip as she reached for her hair, tangling a single strand around her finger, she watched in silence as her father won the unspoken battle between himself and her older siblings.

‘I would ask that-’

‘You dare ask for anything?’ Yakov raged. ‘After everything you have done to this country! For Bloody Sunday. For the war! For listening to that snivelling *svoloch*, Rasputin! You have done enough for this once great nation.’ Motioning to the guards he demanded they take them from his sight.

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Unable to fitfully sleep, I picked the lining on my dress. The thread barely giving as the dirt clumped the strands together, making it difficult to get to the tiny fragments hidden beneath. Hints and glimmers of emerald, rustic traces of ruby and small suggestions of diamond could be made out through the grime beneath the fragments of thread I was tugging at. They were sewn into pouches beneath the lining of my dress created by myself and my sisters to conceal the jewels whereabouts. It felt like only days before that Mama sent a telegram telling me to hide the family medicine. My eldest sister was unsure of the coded message, but it was written for me, why hide medicine after all? I gathered the family jewels and made my sisters aware of the meaning behind Mama's simple scrawl. It took us days to successfully sew the jewels into their hiding spots. It all seemed like a pointless waste of time.

My nails wedged dirt into the crack beneath my nail bed as I scraped the thread, my concentration focused solely on my task to remove the precious gems I had sewn into the lining merely days before. The more I scraped, the more frustrated I began to get. The pattern of removing the jewels now reminiscent of when my sisters and I had first hidden them. My lip began to quiver as I mentally urged it to stop. A sob escaped my unsteady lips as I tried to hold myself together. Tears fell freely, drawing paths through the dirt on my face. A mix of homesickness and pain from the throbbing wound beginning a fresh batch of tears. Drawing myself into a ball, I could see that the base of the boots I was wearing had started to crack. Head throbbing in time with my heart I cried until I was raw.

With an unsteady breath, I gathered my skirts and eased myself back onto my feet. A shot of pain rushed up my leg as I unsteadily regained a standing position. Throat parched, every muscle in my body begged me to stop, lie down, to rest. I wondered how far I had walked, if I had made it out of Yekaterinburg and if the bullet that tore through my upper calf would get infected. Pausing against a thick barked tree, I swiped my blood soaked dress from my legs and prodded the wound. Tiny stabs of pain prickled where I touched. Drawing my head closer for a better inspection, the clumps of dirt, drying and still liquid blood, and the oozing bits of yellow ignited a strong queasy feeling within my stomach. Dropping my dress, I

leaned over my shoulder and heaved everything left in my stomach onto the drying clumps of grass behind me.

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The little girl, who was now almost a woman, could hear the whispered voices from down the hall as they slowly got closer to where she was hidden. Her hair, darkened to a burnt red with age, was tied back in a style more fitting for a Tsar's daughter than the loose curls she had adorned before. She held her breath, knowing full well the repercussions if she was to be discovered this far from her assigned quarters. The footsteps stopped a couple feet from her hiding place.

‘We cannot let the white army get them.’

‘What shall we do?’

The thunderclap of a pair of steel capped boots pounded the tiles and the imposing voice of Yakov broke the silence. ‘Gather the Tsar, the Tsarina and her children, take them to the cellar. Tell them it is for their own protection.’

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I would not be moving from this spot for some time. Wincing slightly, I tugged at the thread and watched the first jewel fall from its hidden spot. Finally. Rubbing the small gem between my thumb and index finger a silent tear rolled down my cheek as I recalled Mama. Her smile would lighten up the ballroom as the nobility, the Dvoryanstvo, would beg for a single dance. Falling elegantly at her hips, her dress, an off-white colour, would stand out in the court as so many others opted for bold hues. Smiling, I recalled the soft ruffles as they embraced her torso, my father smiling sweetly as her hand lay in the crook of his arm.

I pulled another thread and another gem, this time a ruby, fell into my palm. This one had been hit by one of the many bullets. It was broken into a thousand fragmented pieces, the jagged edges getting caught on the material. Bits of the

disintegrated jewel blew in the breeze and clung to and around my open wound. Shiny hints of red now seen intermingled with the drying darkened clumps of blood. A soft breeze rustled my hair as I inspected the jewels, wisps of red grazed my vision as I lent closer to inspect. Tucking the loose strands behind my ears, I threw the broken pieces of gem in frustration. They hit the bark of a tree a few feet from me. I must not let it get to me. I was taught to be brave. To be strong.

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The young woman ran back to her assigned quarters. She regaled Tatiana and Olga, her older sisters, what she had just over heard.

A look of understanding passed Tatiana's eyes. Her long brown hair contained small traces of Romanov red when she stood in direct light. Rushing to the closet, she threw two dresses upon the bed. 'Get dressed,' she urged her younger sibling, 'quickly.'

'What is to happen to us?'

In response Tatiana threw the beautiful brocade the sisters had earlier modified with hidden gems towards both her sisters. Instructing them to adorn them silently and quickly. Once dressed, she asked her younger siblings if they were able to move freely.

'Yes, if need be. What is it, Tatiana? You're scaring me,' the young woman whispered as she tangled a strand of red around her finger.

Tatiana opened her mouth then shut it quickly, a guarded look replacing her features. She marched towards the door then paused at the threshold, her delicate hand resting on the handle. With a quick glance at her younger sibling, she instructed her to remain alert and be ready before passing through the still open door.

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Carried on the next gust of wind, I could hear a faint chanting. Someone was approaching! My heart thudded against my chest as the voices hit a crescendo. The pattering of boots against the ground drummed against the dirt in a rhythm parallel to my heartbeat. It must be quite a large group! The rumbling of a horde of boots vibrated the earth. Panicking I began to fear the worst.

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Shoving and butting their rifles, the soldiers prodded the young woman and her family, directing them towards the cellar. The soldiers lined them up against the back wall under the directive of Yakov. The oldest two girls clasping the younger two's hands. Their mother and father stepping forward to protect the children. That's when the firing began.

The loud crackle of ignited gunpowder echoed in their ears as they fired first at the Tsar, then moving swiftly on to his wife, and then their children.

The Tsarina was barely given a chance as she rushed to push her body in front of her offspring. Her only thoughts were of the lives of her children. Stumbling back she fell next to her husband. Each child slowly falling after hers. Their bodies convulsing with each bullet tearing its way through their flesh and blood spraying with every impact of metal to busted flesh.

The pelting of the bullets lessened as the soldiers slowly ran out of ammunition. The soldiers then began stepping over the fallen bodies as they waded their way through the room. They prodded the bleeding corpses avoiding the blood and bits of flesh cascaded across the floor as the gun smoke slowly settled about the room.

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Attempting to stand, I pushed myself up against the tree, using the firm structure as a wall. My leg throbbed where the wound was located and my legs gave out as I collapsed back against the tree, letting out a faint strangled cry. The footsteps were

coming closer. Tugging the dress, another couple of broken gems tumbled to the ground. I kicked them away, as they would only prove my identity. Wide holes now replaced the rubies location in such a way that I could now hide other items if need be. Wrapping the shawl about myself, I arranged it in such a way that it would cover the most of my bloodied dress. I dangled it across my shoulders and positioned it in such a way that it hid the tops of my legs, hiding the still bleeding wound from sight.

The beating rhythm of soldier's boots slowly hit its crescendo until they were nearly upon me. Before they made it past the copse of trees and would be able to see me, I grabbed handfuls of dirt and rubbed it vigorously through my locks to dim the vibrancy of the red. Smearing leftover smidgeons of dirt across my face, I hoped to conceal my face. I scrubbed with an intensity yet unbeknownst to me, with a strength I did not believe I had left. Tucking the edges of my skirt into the bottoms of my boots, I tarnished over the blood spots until they too were invisible. Pushing the majority of my skirts in between my legs, I hoped to conceal any trace of blood upon my dress that might still be visible lest I forgot any small smidgeon. With a small gulp, I looked towards my fate.

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Blood trickled down the young woman's leg and dripped from the base of her shoulder as she slowly lifted her head. Bodies were strewn haphazardly, limbs entangled every which way as blood smeared every crevice. An indiscernible mess.

Soldiers stepped carefully, their guns held at eye level and extended towards the closest body to them. Some were fearful, others showed no emotion, each remained alert.

'This one's not quite dead, her body lattice seems to be working as some sort of armour, *komandir!*' A tall soldier shouted above the din. The young woman made him out to be closest to his mother. Soft whimpering could be heard. She prayed they would spare whichever poor soul it was that made such a mournful noise.

'Shoot her again then! This time, aim for her head,' Yakov spat.

The young woman kept silent. A single boom ricocheted off the walls. She fought to gain control over her quivering lip and shudders before the soldiers made their way towards her. She willed her shoulders to stop shaking and her breath to even out enough so as to make it unnoticeable. Words she longed to scream would fester and burn inside her. If she was to release them, they would sear anyone who heard them. Instead she remained quiet, hoping to be overlooked, to be spared.

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I could see a couple of soldiers making their way towards me. They were dressed in the dark green colours of the red army. I tried to quieten my quivering heart, fearful that they could hear it pounding from my chest. One was shorter and stockier than the other; they must've lost the bet to check on me as they both looked upon me with upturned noses.

The closest turned to his companion upon sight of me. Arms crossing against his chest he exclaimed, 'Pah! Tis but a *krest'yanin*, a lowly peasant girl.'

Without a second glance, they turned their backs to me. As I watched them walking back to their group, I could hear small snippets of conversation on the wind, 'we must keep searching.... he believes her still alive...'

They were almost out of hearing range when the shorter companion's response set my nerves alight once more, 'the Romanov's might be all dead, though one daughter may be still alive.'