

Chapter Nineteen
Wednesday, July 1, 2015.
Ten Days after the Consecration.
Romanov Medical Clinic, Nazareth, Michigan.

Luke, the medical student, was not especially cool, but he was normally calm and collected. On this sultry Wednesday afternoon in July, as thunder boomed outside and lightning flashes brightened the clinic windowpanes, Luke appeared uncharacteristically anxious as he knocked on the door of Doctor Romanov's consultation room.

"Come in," said Mikhail.

His eyes were pouring over a patient chart, and at first he did not look up. Then suddenly, he broke his concentration and smiled.

"Ah, Luke, it's you. Are you ready to present your last case?"

"Uh ... yes, ... sir."

"You aren't scared of a good old-fashioned Michigan thunderstorm, are you?"

"No, sir. It isn't that. It's this patient, Mr. Kuznetsov. He seems, I don't know ... well, spooky."

"Might that be Alexander Petrovich Kuznetsov?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Let me guess. He's here about his blood pressure, but also another matter which he refuses to discuss with you."

"Why, yes. That's it. How did you know?"

"I met him once before. On an afternoon when we were all trying to get out of here on time, so I saw him myself and spared you and Monica the pleasure of meeting him."

"Well, his blood pressure seems well controlled, and his labs are all normal, so I don't see any reason to change his meds. He's doing well on hydrochlorothiazide and lisinopril."

"And what is hydrochlorothiazide?"

"It's a diuretic. It lowers pressure by reducing the fluid volume in the vascular space."

"Correct. And what is the concern about it?"

"It can cause some potassium loss."

"Correct again. And what is lisinopril?"

"It is an ACE inhibitor."

"How does it work?"

"Well, the kidneys secrete renin, an enzyme which converts angiotensinogen into angiotensin I. Then angiotensin converting enzyme, or 'ACE,' converts angiotensin I into angiotensin II, which causes a rise in blood pressure by making the blood vessel walls tighten. An ACE inhibitor such as lisinopril blocks the ACE so that angiotensin I is not converted into the more active angiotensin II."

“Okay, good. Any other benefits?”

“Yes, lisinopril protects the kidneys against the progression of diabetic nephropathy, and it prevents the ventricular remodeling of the heart which can lead to congestive heart failure.”

“Right again. Any usual side effects?”

“Orthostatic hypotension, urinary urgency, and a dry cough are common complaints.”

“Excellent, Luke. Why don’t you give Mr. Kuznetsov a refill, and send him on his way?”

“He won’t leave until he sees you.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

“Uh, he told me not to come back in the room with you. He wants to see you alone.”

“But why? I still have twenty days left.”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing. I’m just muttering to myself. I’ll finish him up, and you can take off early today.”

The thunderstorm which had been brewing finally unleashed its sudden fury. Rain mixed with intermittent hail pounded the clinic roof, and the wind howled around the corners of the building, blending with the thunder and lightning which were now almost continuous. Not one to believe in the significance of natural portents as if he were some superstitious ancient Roman official, Mikhail nevertheless noted that the sudden sense of impending doom which enveloped him on the way to meet Mr. Kuznetsov was entirely consonant with the wild, uncontrolled weather outside. Having reached the exam room door, Mikhail took a deep breath, and entered abruptly. His military training made it natural for him to take the offensive in any confrontation, posturing as if he were in total command of the situation.

“Hey, doc. Nice to see you again. I’ve been seeing a lot of you lately, all over the television news.”

“You wanted to see me alone?”

“Yeah, doc. See, the people who sent me here before just wanted me to let you know where things stand now, you know?”

“No, I don’t know.”

Mikhail was feeling a mounting sense of dread inside, but was behaving as he was trained: trying to keep the punk on the defensive.

“Remember how I told you before? That I had a message from the Romanov Nobility Organization? Uh, that is, from certain members?”

“Yeah. So what?”

“Well, doc, now they want you to know that you can stop worrying.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, there’s not going to be any thirty-day deadline anymore. You don’t have to decide whether to revert to your old Faith or renounce the throne.”

“Really?”

“See, doc, the family are good people. They see that most people in Russia have had a sudden change of heart about Catholics. Plus, people over there are already beginning to talk about restoring the monarchy. And not only that, your picture is showing up in the Russian news every day as the most likely candidate for the new Tsar. So you see, even the part of the family that didn’t really want you, well, now they can’t be seen trying to stand in your way.”

“So then there is no deadline?”

“That’s right. Most of the family really likes you, doc.”

“So let me get this straight. You say that I no longer have to give up either the throne or my religion?”

“That’s right. Not as far as the Romanov’s are concerned.”

“So is that what you came to tell me?”

“Well, there is one more thing, doc.”

Now Mikhail felt a pang of dread in his belly. Punks like this guy always kept the bad news for the very end, just for effect. So Mikhail adopted a menacing stance, just to remind him who would win any physical altercation that might ensue.

“Yeah, well tell me about it, punk.”

“Hey, doc, relax. I know I had to bring you some pretty bad news last time. But things have changed. This is good news.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. See, there is already talk of having another Romanov Ball in the fall. But for the first time since 1917, it would be in Russia.”

“Wow. Where?”

“Just outside Saint Petersburg, in the Alexander Palace at Tsarskoe Selo. Where the last Tsar lived. It would kind of symbolize the Romanov dynasty picking up right where the family left off.”

“How soon?”

“They’re talking about having it on Friday night, November 4, which is Russian Unity Day.”

“Yes, that’s a major national holiday in Russia. It has something to do with all levels of Russian society pulling together, regardless of their class or position, against a common enemy.”

“Right. That was back in 1612. And in the next year, 1613, the Romanov dynasty was founded, when the first Romanov Tsar, Michael, at age sixteen, took the throne.”

“It seems to me, if I remember my history correctly, that young Michael had no desire to be Tsar, and cried when they told him he had been chosen to take the crown. His mother was a very holy woman, and comforted him with some icon, I believe.”

“Yes. After Boris Godunov was elected king, he punished his too-powerful Romanov rivals by forcing Filaret and his wife Martha to take religious vows and be locked inside religious houses. So young Michael’s mother became a nun, and his father was imprisoned in a monastery. But when Godunov fell from power, Filaret was released and was made the

Patriarch of All Russia, with his young son ruling as Tsar. It was the Icon of Our Lady of Saint Theodore, also known as the Black Virgin of Russia, that Michael's mother Martha gave him when he became the first Romanov Tsar. So, that icon became the Patroness of the Romanov Dynasty."

"A king cannot do better than to have deep devotion to the Mother of God," said Mikhail, suddenly feeling amazed at how this dreaded encounter had turned, almost, into the beginning of a friendship.

Mr. Kuznetsov reached down and opened his briefcase, extracting a gold-framed picture.

"The family wants me to present this to you, doc. It's an expensive copy of the icon. The Black Virgin of Russia."

Mikhail was deeply moved. He fought back tears of profound joy and wonder, and realized that his military "tough guy" technique had by now been completely neutralized.

"Tell them I am very grateful. Tell them I plan to do everything I can to bring honor to the family name. Tell them that, if I am called, it will be to be the servant of the Russian people."

"Okay, doc, I'll tell 'em. And listen, if I want to come back to Russia someday, and they try to give me immigration problems, do you think you could help me?"

Mikhail took out one of his clinic business cards, and wrote on the back: "Alexander Petrovich Kuznetsov is my friend, and is to be afforded every kindness and consideration. Mikhail Nicholaevich Romanov. July, 2015."

"Here, you keep this, Mr. Kuznetsov. Who knows, perhaps one day it will be of some use to you, and may even be worth a bit more than the paper on which it is printed."