

Laughter is a weapon that is fatal to men of marble.

- Volodymyr Zelensky

Dancing With the Tsars

By Emily Greenberg

Translator's Note:

The following diary, written in Russian and attributed to former president and prime minister of the Russian Federation (now Russia, Inc.), Vladimir V. Putin, was discovered floating in a bottle off the Los Angeles coast

along with the remains of an extinct rat species. The diary follows the subject after he was brought back to life to compete on a reality television show with other revived historical figures. A few irregularities and observations are worth noting. My own close reading and archival research indicate that the English language was downloaded onto the subject but not without some technical errors. Video footage from Dancing with the Tsars reveals the subject spoke a heavily-accented English rife with grammatical errors, speech patterns I have endeavored to reproduce faithfully in his dialogue. Although the diary is written entirely in Russian, the subject spoke aloud solely in English, even in private, during this time. Finally, I would like to draw your attention to the subject's irregular pronoun usage. Apart from a single line of dialogue in the diary's final entry, video footage and eyewitness accounts confirm the subject consistently referred to himself in the third person when speaking aloud, although he deferred to the conventional first person for narrative passages in his diary. My translation replicates this split.

My dearest diary,

I, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, was wearing a leotard earlier today. Not just any leotard, mind you, but a silver sparkly one.

I know, I know. It's hard to believe this was real life and not one of those stupid American internet things. Wearing the leotard was more humiliating for me than when East Germany collapsed. More humiliating than when the media falsely claimed my heroic Black Sea diving expedition and recovery of two Greek amphorae was merely a staged photo-op. Ordinarily, I would *never* wear clothes so weak and womanly, but what can I say? Today was the last day before Round 1 on the stupid American television program *Dancing with the Tsars*, and as you know, I am a fierce competitor who will stop at nothing to win, especially when the stakes are high. Lose, and I'd face lifetime exile to Siberia, that melted uninhabitable puddle. Win, and I'd secure my legacy as the greatest tsar of all time. Win, and I'd get a second chance to restore the Russian Empire.

So there I was in my leotard, pacing the dance studio and waiting for my dance partner to arrive. Facing the smartypants¹

¹ In referencing the smart-mirror technology in vogue thirty years ago, the subject uses the Russian word, умник, synonymous with the English colloquial “smarty-

mirrored wall, I flexed my manly arms. The smartypants mirror rotated automatically, adjusting its angle and brightness. As I continued holding the pose, the mirror expanded, snaking along the studio's back wall and enveloping me with smaller and smaller versions of my own handsome face. Infinite Putins like nested matryoshka dolls. "Yes, Putin," I growled, flipping to the side. I gripped my forearm and squeezed my pecs. "You are man amongst mens and greatest tsar of all times. Even in stupid American leotard."

Releasing the pose, I closed my eyes and imagined winning the competition, reclaiming the title rightfully mine: Greatest Tsar of All Time. I could almost feel the blistering hot studio lights on my back and the cool trophy metal sweating in my manly palms. The adoring peasant audience would applaud. Stalin would nod with approval. Even Grandpa Putin would smile down from the Little Russia in the Sky. Best of all, my nemesis Peter the No Longer Great would grovel at my feet, begging I not banish him to Siberia with the other weakling losers. Ha, like I'd even consider sparing him! After winning, I'd continue building my fan base and lining my pockets, then convince the stupid media people to give me my own show.

pants," "smart- alec," etc. meaning "a person who wants to appear clever," "a person who appears to know everything," etc. In keeping with the subject's voice, I have retained this phrasing when he references other smart-technologies.

Eventually, I'd take over the network, the United States, Inc., my beloved Russia, Little Brother Ukraine, the rest of the Russian Empire, and finally the entire world.

Never hurts having ambition, does it?

A door creaked behind me. I opened my eyes and spun around. The mad monk and lowly peasant Grigori Rasputin, my dance partner on the show, was standing in the doorway, making funny man faces at me.²

"Vlad, don't get me wrong dude. I dig the whole exploring your masculinity and experimenting with new fashions bit, but this—I'm just not sure it's you, bro."

The mad monk would know about experimenting with new fashions. Unlike the other competitors on *Dancing with the Tsars*, he had quickly adapted to L.A.'s climate and lifestyle. After shaving his beard and taming his long locks into a "trendy, surfer-dude cut," he'd even enjoyed considerable success with the ladies. Most evenings, he escorted a beautiful young woman back to his room. Not bad for a guy born two centuries ago—I'll give him that—but I'll never understand why women prefer this

² During my extensive research, I encountered production notes about how the teams were paired to generate the most compelling plot lines and catchiest team names. Ivan and Ivan, Putin and Rasputin—hey, I'm not saying they were any good at this, not like you. The notes mention that Putin complained about these pairings, arguing his team was at a major disadvantage because Rasputin was not a "real tsar."

weakling peasant over *me*, a real manly man tsar.³ Dearest diary, as I'm realizing, American women are even stupider than regular Russian women.

"Most dudes put pants or tights on *over* the leo, my man."

"Pants? Putin is not finding pants for costume."

I gestured at the box in the corner where I'd found the leotard. Similar boxes had arrived the previous two weeks with other outfits to try. Two weeks ago, I'd found white tights that left little of my anatomy—large and glorious as it is—to the imagination. Last week, a sequined shirt split open at the chest.

The mad monk bent to examine the box, sifting through its contents. He flipped off his trendy aviator smartypants sunglasses, revealing the hypnotic blue tundra eyes that made him so popular with the stupid American women. Some claimed the mad monk could see straight into the soul. Initially, I was scared to stare into his eyes directly. Then I remembered I didn't have a soul. One of the many things George W. was wrong about.

I stared into Rasputin's eyes now. Nothing. "The man does not see," Zelensky had once said of me. "He has eyes, but he does not see. Or, if he does look, it's with an icy stare, devoid of all

³ According to legend, Rasputin's penis was thirteen inches long and developed a cult following so I'm not sure why the subject is so confused here. Actually, given Putin's obsession with male genitalia, I'm surprised he hasn't mentioned it himself. By the way, one could apparently *view* the penis preserved in formaldehyde at the Russian Museum of Erotica in St. Petersburg. (Some claimed it was actually a horse penis.) Not sure if that place managed to survive the rising waters.

expression.”⁴

Rasputin shrugged. “Guess they forgot to send the pants. Right on.”

“You are recommending Putin should wear something else?”

“Nah, it’s fine. Whatever floats your boat, man. Let’s just practice again so we’re ready for tomorrow.”

He snapped his fingers once, and the queued music breathed through the walls. “You ready, bro?”

I grasped his girly left hand⁵ at eye-level, wincing as his other hand settled under my left shoulder blade. “As ready as Putin will ever be for ballroom dancing with other man,” I said, so he wouldn’t try anything. I’d heard rumors about him and a certain Felix. One early morning, I’d even seen a muscled stud slipping away from his bedroom.⁶

I lightly placed my left hand on his puny right shoulder, and we began waltzing, counting in threes. Right foot step back, left foot sidestep, right foot sweep left. Heel toe, toe, toe heel.

⁴ See Lévy, Bernard-Henri. “Ukraine’s Hero President Z.” *Tablet Magazine*. Feb. 28, 2022.

⁵ Throughout the show, the subject was obsessed with gender roles, a trait even more pronounced in the diary’s original Russian because most objects are designated with a gendered pronoun. Here at least, he is grammatically correct: ‘hand’ (рука) is a feminine noun.

⁶ Notice, too, the subject’s obsession with sexual orientation and habits. I have selectively edited out his more egregious insults but left others so the “flavor” remains.

Falling and rising, rising, rising and falling. After weeks of practice, we finally had the moves down. The mad monk was a surprisingly talented dancer, graceful and flexible with an artistic appreciation the more manly tsars—yours truly, Stalin, and Peter—certainly lacked.

As the music picked up, we added our flourishes. A quarter turn for me, a switch to the right box step. Heel toe, toe, toe heel. Falling and rising, rising, rising and falling. Low bows at the end. Then we ran through the dance several more times until we were both breathless and sweaty and absolutely ready to destroy the competition. Tomorrow, we'd crush our rivals and feast on their bloody pulps!

"So, I'll see ya tomorrow then, bro?" asked the mad monk, standing in the doorway while I finished packing. He'd changed from sweats to his normal beachwear: swim trunks, unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt, and flip-flops. So casual. Like he had all the time in the world. Like we weren't potentially facing banishment to Siberia tomorrow. Like we weren't living on borrowed time.

"Tomorrow," I grunted. "Tomorrow we will be victorious."

Bag packed, I snapped my fingers twice to extinguish the lights and stepped outside onto the fake grass. Already the sun was setting, searing the sky deep orange and tinting the beach islands light pink. In the distance, electric pigeons cooed. Holographic squirrels searched for simulated acorns across

Astro-turfed lots. Squinting into the horizon, I could just barely see Rasputin's girly silhouette, a woman flanking his right arm and a man flanking his left, no doubt headed to their disgusting sex den for the night.

Head down, I hurried home past the stupid Americans, their faces hidden behind smartypants glasses and headsets. Without my own smartypants accessories, I sometimes felt vulnerable and exposed. Occasionally, someone on the street would half-recognize me and smartypants scan my face, then up would pop the stories of my untimely death, Little Brother's victory, videos of the Jewboy sipping ice water, the #longliveukraine internet hamsters sipping ice water, and the person would shuffle away, stifling laughing all the way to their luxury-boat apartment.

The tsars and I lived in a communal cabin on the far end of the beach islands. We shared bathrooms, kitchens, and a living room. Exposed to the elements, the cabin was considered peasant housing. However, equipped as it was with the latest smartypants gear and decades of geeky improvements, I didn't find the accommodations half bad. It wasn't my Black Sea mansion, of course, but it was much better than other places I'd lived: the dull Dresden apartment where I was posted as a young KGB officer, the cramped boathouse Lyudmila and I had shared with my parents, the communal flat in Soviet Leningrad where

I'd spent my childhood chasing rats through the stairwell. Sometimes, I still dreamed of those rats, dreamed they were chasing *me*.

Once inside, I kicked off my shoes and grunted a greeting. Except for the mad monk, the other tsars were all home. Great and Terrible Ivan were playing chess in the living room, Lenin was curled in an armchair reading, and Stalin was hanging a framed photo of our entire household holding hands and smiling awkwardly. Catherine and Peter both had their doors closed so I assumed they were passing the evening as usual, the horse fucker⁷ with a young man plucked from the beaches and the giant drunk in a giant drunken stupor. The latter was confirmed when one of Peter's dwarf attendants carried out an armload of empty vodka bottles. I sighed, shaking my head. Peter was such a tsar's tsar even the media moguls knew it! Why else would they have spent so much money reviving his favorite servants?

I headed for the fridge, hungry for the protein shake I'd prepared earlier. Now that we were all vegetarians, the shakes alone kept me going. I opened the fridge and rummaged around, sifting through Peter's beer and some leftover fake meat burgers. Where was it?

⁷ A nasty legend with no basis in reality, meant to discredit Catherine's legacy. However, it's probably best to lean into the legend for entertainment purposes. Audiences will expect no less.

“Great Ivan, are you drinking Putin’s protein shake again?” I growled, spinning around to confront the old man.

He dropped his chess piece. The others looked over, mildly interested. “Putin, you know I would never—”

“Then where is it?” I seethed, turning from Great Ivan to Terrible Ivan to Stalin and finally, to that weak little library man who’d stolen Mother Russia’s little brothers and sisters.⁸

“It was you, wasn’t it?” I tossed Lenin’s book across the room.

“Oh, Comrade Vladimir,” he sighed. “There’s no need to be a grumpy capitalist. I gave your shake to one of Peter’s dwarves because he was hungry and didn’t have anything to eat. You really don’t get this communal living situation, do you?”

Jabbing a finger at his puny chest, I shook my head. “This is funny joke, no?”

“No, it’s no joke!” Lenin said, shoving me back as the other tsars watched. “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need. You had way more than you needed, especially since you’re not *exaaaactly* contributing according to your abilities.” He pointed at the color-coded chore chart on the

⁸ Several days before invading Ukraine, the subject delivered a speech falsely claiming that “modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia” and laying particular blame on Lenin. See Putin, Vladimir. “Address by the President of the Russian Federation.” *en.kremlin.ru*. Feb. 21, 2022.

wall. It was my turn to mop.

“Yes, as House Manager, I *insist* you contribute or suffer the consequences,” added Stalin.

The nerve of those loser commies! My appetite replaced with rage, I resisted the impulse to punch them both and instead stormed out. “Putin is not mopping floor like lowly peasant!” I shouted over my shoulder.

Once I reached my bedroom, I slammed the door behind me and snapped my fingers three times to close the blinds. Inhaling deeply, I stared around my lonely little room. My Kremlin away from the Kremlin. The walls were decorated with Siberian tiger pelts and shirtless photos of myself riding bears through icy black waters and generally looking like a badass autocrat. Hand weights were strewn across the carpet. On my nightstand, a photo of my childhood KGB idol, Yan Berzin, a framed reproduction of my Leningrad State law degree, and some favorite books: poetry by Omar Khayyam, some Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway, and my competitors’ biographies.⁹ Yes, contrary to popular perception, I read a lot.

⁹ As you continue reading, notice how Putin obsessively studied his competitors’ biographies, paying particular attention to their deaths and legacies. I’m surprised though that he doesn’t include Vladimir Nabokov on his favorite authors list. Perhaps Putin’s too homophobic for Nabokov’s Zembla? If you must know, *Pale*

Although I'd never admit so publicly, I also kept Great Peter's portrait under my bed. The original once hung in my office alongside de Gaulle and Pushkin.

Here was the best part. On the bed, a holographic simulation of my favorite dog, Konni, was dozing.

I walked over and scratched the simulated black lab's ears, fingers passing through her semi-translucent head. At least the stupid Americans had given me this one comfort. Only Konni understood me. Whether intimidating that German cow Merkel or shaming George W.'s puny pup, she was always there for me. My one true companion. I'd loved her more than all my other pets combined, including my ex-wife and two daughters. The night of my first presidential election, I hadn't slept at all—not because the election results were in doubt, but because Konni had just birthed eight puppies. For months after her unexpected

Fire is my favorite novel. In fact, it inspired me to write my own failed novel and flunk a semester of Russian—before the universities stopped teaching foreign languages altogether—so I could enjoy the great master's earlier works in the original. The book consists of a 999 line poem written by John Shade and edited with copiously digressive commentary by his neighbor and friend, Dr. Charles Kinbote, who may in fact be the exiled king of Zembla Charles II, who may in fact be the mentally ill professor Vseslav Botkin, who may in fact have dreamed Shade up, or who may in fact have been dreamed up by Shade, and on and on it goes, depending on which interpretive framework you prefer, never offering any narrative reality. Think of it like Volodymyr Zelensky running for the Ukrainian presidency on television and then using his character's fictional slogan and political party to run for president in real life. Is the president playing an actor, is the actor playing the president, or is the distinction irrelevant? Beneath every mask another. I hope I'm not spoiling anything for you—you don't read books, now do you?

death, I was inconsolable, too devastated to inform the press!

Simulated Konni opened her eyes and passed her tongue through my hand. Lips crinkling into a smile, I glimpsed myself in the smartypants mirror circling the walls.¹⁰ I was wearing gray sweats now and a white t-shirt, never washed. Holding a blue duffel bag with cotton socks and plastic headphones. I blinked. Hundreds of Putins blinked back, the words of that idiot chess boy I'd had beaten up rattling my skull. "It's like living in a house of mirrors," he'd once said of my dear Russia. "Well, the only way out is to smash the mirrors."¹¹ Thousands of Putins. Millions of Putins. Billions of Putins.

I stood. Konni whined, but I ignored her. "Oh, Volodya," I said, staring into the smartypants mirror and shaking my head.

Dearest diary, I hadn't felt this alone since departing this earth for the first time. More on that later, after I brush my teeth and put on pajamas.

The manliest tsar of all time,
Vlad

¹⁰ "*Pale Fire* is not a detective story, although it includes one. Each plane or level in its shadow box proves to be a false bottom; there is an infinite perspective regression, for the book is a book of mirrors." See McCarthy, Mary. "Bolt from the Blue," *The New Republic*. June 4, 1962. That line with the mirrors, a nice literary detail.

¹¹ Kasparov, Garry. *Winter is Coming: Why Vladimir Putin and the Enemies of the Free World Must be Stopped*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2015. Pg. 20.

My dearest diary,

I, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, had died.

We all had. Each and every one of the former autocrat contestants on *Dancing with the Tsars* had passed away, expired, crossed over to the great beyond. This was where the stupid Americans entered, many years after I exhaled my last breath. They'd learned how to revive the dead.

The procedure was very expensive, obviously.

Only the biggest state-sponsored American media companies could afford the technology. Initially, no one knew what to make of it. Whom should they revive? How would it make money? How would it distract and entertain the so-called "viewer-constituents"?

Years ago, the viewer-constituents had abandoned pure fiction. In a world of endless war and spectacle, they craved the appearance of reality no matter how unreal it really was. They tossed their novels for memoirs full of lies. Watched carefully crafted "live" videos instead of films. Hung digitally manipulated street photography where they once proudly displayed abstract paintings. And yes, they even voted for Jewboy comics who once played politicians on TV. Reality television programs with revived historical figures were merely the latest additions, soap operas and revisionist histories rolled into one neat package that also conveniently distracted the viewer-constituents from their

mortality.¹² All the media execs agreed it was brilliant. What better way to engage in that great American past-time of undermining and pillaging other nations' histories? To reinforce that stunningly incorrect notion of American exceptionalism?

The Crocodile Hunter was first. With his charming Australian accent and daredevil attitude, the revived Steve Irwin was an instant success with the new generation until, *déjà vu*, a virtual reality stingray simulation pierced him in the chest, killing him instantly on live television. Ha! The viewer-constituent crybabies were outraged. What a cruel joke, wrote the internet hamsters, watching the beloved, boyish Aussie die all over again and remembering that Australia had once existed, that people had once interacted with non-virtual animals in the wild.

After revived Steve's death, the media execs were desperate. Ratings were plummeting and advertising dollars drying up. The viewer-constituent crybabies were no longer pacified. Unglued from their screens, they began asking troubling questions. Why are all the animals extinct now and the water levels so high? Why are we all so hungry and poor? Why are the media companies running our government? Who are we at war

¹² Here's where I think your project—re-enacting one of these shows through the lens of Putin's diary, a *revival of a revival* with the potential for revivals ad infinitum—is truly innovative.

with anyway?

Take it from me, it's never good when the peasants start asking questions.

Frantic, the media execs pored through old reality TV archives, hunting for ideas to pacify the viewer-constituent crybabies once more. As with most soon-to-be internet hamster hits, *Dancing with the Tsars* was a happy accident, the clerical error of an overeager, under-cafeinated, and deeply dyslexic junior-level employee who mistakenly exchanged an 's' for a 't' in his presentation on an old ballroom dancing reality show.

Here's how it worked. The recently revived signed a contract agreeing to appear on a stupid American reality show. In return, the revived was offered another shot at life, greatness, immortality. Not interested? A laser zap between the eyes until he's deader than dead. Take note, dearest diary: when a revived person dies, that's it. He can't be revived again.

This was my experience.

I woke to bright lights, murmuring voices, humming. I was sitting on a skin-pricklingly icy metal table. My body heavy and stiff, mouth dry. The world was blurred and unfocused, edgeless colors and shapes. Like some half-remembered dream, I recalled leaving this earth. It wasn't a memory exactly, just a feeling. Something I knew like my own name or cock size at various sub-zero temperatures. I had died, I had passed over.

“Welcome to the city of angels,” a male voice whispered.

I jerked forward, surprised at understanding his English. This and the angels reference could only mean one thing. “Putin is in heaven?” I asked.

To my great shame, the voices laughed. My vision cleared. I could see three Americans now, a woman and two men in their thirties. The woman’s white hair was striped crimson—almost like my hit men shot her! The men sported arm tattoos and eyebrow piercings like my Moscow hipster and internet hamster nemeses. Little blinking plastic bits hung from their ears and circled their arms. Electric blue screens blanketed the walls. As I’d later learn, the other tsars were reviving in adjacent rooms.

“Well, the Russian accent’s still thick, not much we can do about that now,” one of the men sighed. “I guess we can sell it to the higher-ups as ‘authentic’?”¹³

Nodding all around.

“A successful language transference on the whole though,” added the woman.

“Where am I?” I asked again.

Those fools didn’t respond. Instead, the ugly woman

¹³ These statements support my earlier introductory remarks about glitches in Putin’s English download. Apparently, the other tsars’ English downloads went perfectly, and they spoke unaccented English, not that this is surprising. Putin long resisted Western tongues and routinely attempted to purge foreign words from the Russian language.

snapped her fingers three times. The screens faded to animated window blinds, then dissolved into clear glass.

“Come on,” one of the men said. He grabbed my elbow and helped me up—I was too dazed to even object. Slowly, unsteadily, I walked to the window. Outside, it was like nothing I’d ever seen or imagined. Blinding white sunlight, so clear I could see the drowned city for miles. We were on a large cruise-ship, I realized, one outfitted with Astro-turf grass, fake plastic trees, and the same electric blue screens on every wall. In the distance drifted smaller, self-steering boats packed with internet hamsters, gays, and hipsters. Further off, little islands with glittering white beaches reminded me of my homeland’s immaculate snowscapes.

“Welcome to Los Angeles,” said the ugly woman, and then she told me the year. Such a high number!

I must have fainted from shock. When I woke, I was lying on the metal table again. The ugly woman poured me a vodka shot. I swallowed gratefully, breaking my normal abstinence. A few minutes later, the room was humming again, the hard edges softening.

They told me I’d been dead for many years, and they’d revived me to star on a dancing reality show. Theirs was a sister network of my beloved Russia, who had lost the war to Little Brother and was now the corporately governed Chinese-owned media conglomerate Russia, Inc. (My poor baby! Better Chinese-

owned than American-owned, but still!) It was difficult recovering my body parts after the destruction, they explained. I was no pristinely mummified Lenin, brain preserved in formaldehyde and glass. Parts of me would never be quite what they were before, they said, careful not to detail the precise deficits. (Later, I realized I was missing several toes and a thigh chunk.)¹⁴ However, there were also certain practical enhancements, they were quick to add. Besides growing two inches, I now knew English and could use all the smartypants technologies without reading instructions.

The show's rules were simple. Three competition rounds, three teams of two. After each round, a single team would be eliminated and banished to a Siberian labor camp. The winner would receive a trophy, freedom, and The Greatest Tsar of All

¹⁴ These deficiencies relate to the post-mortem conditions of the tsars' bodies. Lenin, as Putin mentions, was preserved in nearly perfect condition. I also can't find notable differences in the two Ivan's: The Terrible looks paler in the video footage, perhaps because his coffin was hidden from view. Rasputin's body was covered in burns and underwent extensive grafting and plastic surgery, a fact his many admirers did not mind; in several videos, Rasputin's fans swoon over his scars. Peter, as you'll see later, was prone to leaking water. Catherine needed a new 3D printed heart and, as the surgical residents were especially cruel, was given a horse-based model, a poor choice for obvious reasons; although Catherine tried hiding her replacement heart's origins and attempted to counteract it by instead treating her dance partner like a horse, periodically the heart's programmed horse elements reassert themselves. Notice how she subsists on a grass diet and sometimes neighs. Stalin, though fairly well preserved, lost a few bones when he moved burial sites. These same surgical residents replaced the Man of Steel's missing bones with steel ones—notice he moves stiffly.

Time title. Beach-side lodging and three hot meals a day would be provided, and there'd be five weeks to train, three weeks up front and then a week between rounds.

So, did I want another chance, another shot at life, at greatness and immortality and finishing what I'd started?

My dearest diary, you know how I answered. How all the tsars answered.

Now that you're caught up, I'm going to read my biographies and then get to sleep early so I'm ready to crush my rivals tomorrow.

The handsomest tsar of all time,
Vlad

Reading log entry #1

Great Ivan – d. 10/27/1505, age 65. Ripe, old age for time. Few accounts even mention. Long, stable reign = boring death? Score: 5.

Terrible Ivan – d. 3/28/1584, age 53. As idiot star gazers predicted. Tsar's health declining for months but feeling better that day, was setting up chess board & had sent for chess partner, etc. Bodyguard tells idiot star gazers they're wrong, star gazers respond day not over yet, Ivan faints after setting up chess pieces. Stroke? Poison? Syphilis? Murder by idiot star gazers? Ha, that's one of the best! Score: 6.

My dearest diary,

I survived Round 1! Not that I had doubts—I *am* the greatest tsar of all time—but the day was not without drama.

The lowly peasant and I were in our dressing room when the stupid American television person knocked. “Mr. Putin, Mr. Rasputin, are you ready?”

“Why yes,” I grunted, opening the door. “Putin is *always* ready for crushing of rivals in dance competition.” I punctuated this sentence with a punch. Really, I *did* feel ready. As you know, I’d gone to bed early last night. I had also eaten a large protein-filled breakfast. I had stretched, I had hydrated, I had taken a crap. I had listened to my inspirational music about beating up thugs. I had completed my face exercises. I had flexed and kissed my impressive biceps in the dressing room—I was wearing the silver leotard *under* black pants this time—and had even practiced my victory speech.

The mad monk, still wearing his smartypants sunglasses, asked the stupid American television woman the dance order. She muttered into her headset, then swiped her tablet. “You’re third.”

“Gnarly! Best for second-to-last, eh?” the mad monk laughed, clapping my back before I could duck away.

The television woman yawned and glanced at her smartypants watch. I suppressed the urge to strangle her. “See you backstage. Live in ten.”¹⁵

We finished getting ready. The mad monk combed his hair, and I did fifty push-ups. We were headed backstage when the large body thumped against me.

“Ah, Little Volodya,” barked Great Peter, bending his massive frame to pat my head. The nerve!

“Peter,” I grunted, staring at the exquisitely-costumed

¹⁵ I’ve included some transcribed interviews I came across so you can see the other contestants outside Putin’s observations. Perhaps these can form the basis of re-enacted confessional asides to help with the eventual show’s pacing? Here’s one from backstage just before Round 1.

Transcript #1

REPORTER: I’m here with three *Dancing with the Tsars* competitors. They’re rarin’ to go! Guys, gotta ask, what’s on your minds right now?

IVAN THE GREAT: Bob, it’s been such a journey, coming back from the dead and all, getting to dance with my grandson here. We’re just so excited to be here and take our dancing to the next level. Right, Ivan?

IVAN THE TERRIBLE: It’s such a gift, developing this trust and bond with my grandfather. A true gift, Bob. Family is so important to me.

REPORTER: That’s great to hear, heartwarming. And how’s living with the other tsars? Everyone getting along?

JOSEPH STALIN: Well, Bob, I’m house manager and run a tight commune. There’s only been a little complaining so far. I’ve got a Five Week Plan to keep everyone in line.

IVAN THE TERRIBLE: *Some people* aren’t washing dishes...

giant. His long legs were draped in black, his huge feet enclosed in shiny leather, his hair gelled. An unbuttoned, red silk shirt revealed impressive pecs and many manly hairs. Even that hideous horse fucker had managed to clean up nicely in shimmering satin.¹⁶ Peter's dwarves and Catherine's serfs trailed behind them.¹⁷

"Little Volodya, you ready for Siberia?"

"The question is, my dudes and dudettes, are *you* ready for Siberia? Like waaaaaay ready?" countered the mad monk.

The equine enthusiast chuckled, adjusting her skirt. "To quote my friend Voltaire, not that brains puny as yours will comprehend his immense wisdom, 'Optimism is the madness of insisting that all is well when we are miserable.'"

"Indeed, whatever delusions help you through the day," added Peter. He sipped from his flask, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and belched loudly in my face. Can you believe it, dearest diary? Seething, I cracked my knuckles menacingly.

"Great Peter," I growled. "You are asking for Time of

¹⁶ Transcript #2

REPORTER: Catherine, the ladies back home want to know, what's it like living with such hunky gentlemen?

CATHERINE: Oh, Bob, these fools can't remember to put the toilet seat down. And the body odors? You ask me, they're all uncivilized animals. Let me tell you, it's no fun being the only woman in the house, no fun at all, and I wouldn't deign to call them gentlemen. But alas, *c'est la vie*.

¹⁷ Will the dwarves and serfs be too problematic for contemporary viewers?

Troubles.”

He laughed—oh, how I hate the sound!—and Great Catherine whinnied. By now, the other tsars had gathered backstage. Lenin and Stalin in Red Army¹⁸ uniforms, the two Ivans in fur-trimmed hats and magnificent wool gowns, all toasting with good luck vodka shots and eagerly watching my confrontation with Peter, hoping for a fight.

“Let it go, my man,” said the mad monk, holding me back as Peter sauntered off dripping wet footprints in his wake. “Let dude and dudette go. Have confidence in yourself, bro. In *us*.”

Still seething, I relaxed my shoulders until the mad monk’s grip loosened. Minutes later, we took our assigned place behind the curtain and heard the host enter to enthusiastic applause.

“Welcome to the first episode of *Dancing with the Tsars*! I’m your host, Brian Seasrising, and I’m SO excited to be here tonight! Are YOU excited to be here tonight?”

I peered through the curtain. The peasants cheered louder, and Seasrising cupped a hand to his ear. The cavernous room resembled an old live-audience TV studio. Same dark walls and stadium-style seating, same raised stage and bright, overhead lights.

¹⁸ Again, Putin has altered the feminine noun, армия (army), crossing out its last letter.

“Alright, that’s what I’m talking about! We’ve got a great group of tsars competing to be the Greatest Tsar of All Time. Among them are conquerors and murderers, dictators and tyrants and *even* a holy man. Are you ready to meet them? I said, ARE YOU READY TO MEET THEM?”

One by one, the other teams took the stage to modest applause. My dearest diary, I hate to admit this, but Great Peter and Great Catherine received an especially warm welcome. With the horse fucker on his shoulders, Peter strode to center stage and kneeled so she could dismount. They smiled, waving at the peasants, Catherine shouting *merci* and Peter sipping vodka. Over deafening applause, the peasants cried “We love you Peter!”, “Conquer us all!”, and “Catherine is golden!” It made me a teeny bit nervous.

Then it was our turn.

Squinting into the bright lights, I parted the curtains and stepped on stage. Scowling, I strutted with my characteristic swagger, Rasputin at my side blowing kisses.

“Grigori,” I grunted, once we’d taken our position beside the others, “why such silliness? Now is time for seriousness.”

“Dude! We have to win them over, don’t you see?” he whispered back.

I didn’t know what he meant until I looked more closely. From what I could tell, the peasants were arranged in blocks

according to their favorite tsar. Those in front wore fake beards and brandished stuffed horse dolls. A few girlier men clutching flowers mouthed Catherine's name. Others waved signs: YOU CAN CONQUER ME, PETER, WOMEN 4 CATHERINE, etc. Up in the nosebleeds, the peasants waved red flags, raised their fists in commie salutes, or donned "I ♥ Rasputin" shirts while heavily muscled ushers wearing laser gun holsters paced the aisles. My fans were probably there too, just hiding.

"That's right," Seasrising continued. "Each team has practiced for weeks perfecting their dance for tonight. The dance order has been determined in advance and at random. The show's rules are simple. The top three teams will advance to the next round, and the losing team is exiled to *Siberia*!"

The peasants gasped.

"Yes, folks, the stakes tonight are very high! Let's go ahead and meet our judges."

A spotlight illuminated a table on stage right that I hadn't noticed. To my surprise, I recognized them all. The ballet traitor Misha, the three pussy rioters I'd jailed, my youngest daughter Katya (!), Weak Nick Romanov and his wife Alexandra, and even my Jewboy nemesis, holding a stupid red hat and still wearing that irritating costume of his: the unshaved face, the mucus-green t-shirt, the little boy's fleece. What an incredibly unjust

set-up for me and Rasputin!¹⁹ Katya, Jewboy, and the pussy rioters glared at me as Seasrising continued introductions.

“We’ve revived Misha Baryshnikov, famed ballet dancer and Soviet Union defector....” Misha waved while Lenin and Stalin supporters booed. “Pussy Riot’s Maria, Nadezhda, and Yekaterina, whose Punk Prayer went viral following their arrests....Katerina Putin, former world acrobatic dance championship competitor and alleged youngest daughter of former Russian president and prime minister Vladimir Putin....Russia’s very last tsar, Nicholas the Second, and his lovely wife, Alexandra. Say, Nick, the audience back home is curious, whaddya actually know about dancing?”

Weak Nick’s face reddened while his wife glared at Rasputin. “Not much, I’ll admit. Oh wait, what’s that dear?” Alexandra whispered in his ear. “Oh, that’s right, I once threw a luxurious ball in the Winter Palace, the Russian Empire’s last great ball, as my brilliant wife reminds me. But I gotta say, my expertise is more in the realm of tsars. *Failed* tsars, more precisely. As a failed tsar myself, I’ll know one when I see him or her—as my brilliant wife reminds me now, a woman can also be

¹⁹ According to the producer’s notes, this was by design. They intended for Putin and Rasputin to lose early on, believing the other teams would generate better ratings.

a tsar—and I'll vote the failed tsars off!"²⁰

"Well, there you have it folks! And of course, last but not least, we have Volodymyr Zelensky, former president of Ukraine and *Dancing with the Stars* champion..."

With a magician's flourish, the Jewboy pulled a smartypants phone from his hat and began filming himself. "I am here," he said in that disgusting rasp of his. "I am not hiding. I am not afraid. Or as Paddington might say..." his voice trailed off as he reached into the hat again, this time lifting a plated orange goo sandwich and a little Ukrainian flag. "A wise bear always keeps a marmalade sandwich and symbol of liberal democracy in his hat in case of emergencies!"

Dearest diary, can you believe the audience actually cheered for this Ivanushka? The man was a joke. A clown no more fit for the presidency than Seinfeld, Groucho, or the rest of his pathetic tribe. I'll never understand why the West wanted to suck his piano-playing dick so hard, this silly little NATO tool with his silly little cartoon bear cum. What kind of fool joins a fictional political party, announces their run for president on a variety show, and holds comedy shows instead of campaign rallies? He had no platform, knew no policy, wouldn't have lasted

²⁰ Similarly, a failed writer, myself included, can always spot a bad script that needs sprucing up. I probably shouldn't keep mentioning my past literary failures since you might lose confidence in my abilities, but you'll no doubt have already paid me when you read my translation.

a day in the KGB. In short, he disgusted me.

Seasrising turned back to the peasants, beaming. “*Now*, getting back to the show. After the four dances, make sure to mindbeam us your favorite. We’ll combine your votes with the judges’ scores to see who advances and who’s exiled!”

Ah, so this was what the lowly peasant meant about winning over the audience. I hated this part, courting voters. During my first presidential election, I hadn’t even bothered. As Yeltsin’s handpicked successor and a virtual unknown, the voters had projected whatever they wanted on me while the media offered ample free coverage. Once I’d taken over the media, the second election was even easier, and later, when the people turned against me, I’d simply rigged the elections and staged elaborate photo-ops to reach rural voter blocs. (Hacking the American election to install my puppet over the she-Clinton? Piece of Russian honey cake.)

“Now, ARE YOU READY?”

“No!” shouted a peasant in the third row, a pale little thing with puny muscles waving a Ukrainian flag. “I want to know why we can’t vote on *real* things. Why just on this show? Why just—” Before she could finish, a muscular usher clamped a hand over her mouth and menacingly patted his laser gun holster. She crumpled back into her seat, dazed. The other peasants quickly lost interest and turned back to Seasrising. The

usher vanished.

Seasrising cleared his throat. “Now, let me ask again, ARE YOU READY?”

After loud applause, the competition was underway, and I was hustled off stage to wait my turn. Dearest diary, I won’t bore you with many details. To my great dismay, much as I hate anything Western, Peter and Catherine’s Viennese Waltz was incredible. The judges were almost speechless. The Greats received perfect scores and thunderous applause. Next up, Lenin and Stalin performed a Soviet ballet routine, a Swan Lake recalling the failed early 90s Soviet coup. Again, the dance was nearly flawless, even with Stalin’s withered arm and stiff steel joints. Katya, the Romanovs, and Zelensky scored them relatively high. Only Misha and the pussy rioters, decrying the Soviet regime, gave middling marks.

Finally, it was our turn, and in my own unbiased, terrifically accurate opinion, we crushed it. Our non-Viennese waltz went off without a hitch just like we’d practiced. Imagine my shock when Misha only gave us an 8, an abomination. Then the other judges revealed their scores, and I couldn’t believe my eyes. Straight zeros. Even from my own little shit daughter.

“What?!” I shouted, fists clenched. “How is it so?”

One of the pussy rioters leaned forward. “Remember, you jailed us for a protest dance.”

True. You see, there were two main classes in Russia at the time: my friends, rich from government contracts, and the peasants. Then among the peasants, there were the religious peasant-peasants in the countryside and the atheist hipster-peasants in Moscow's internet hamster forums. My trick was turning the two peasant groups against each other, and the stupid pussy rioters' church protest dance had provided the perfect opportunity. I regret nothing.

"Fair enough, ," I said. "What about you, Weak Nick?"

The crybaby former tsar's face reddened. "My wife told me to, and—hold on, wait one second—" He leaned over while Alexandra whispered in his ear. "That man," he pointed at Rasputin. "As my wife reminds me, he was our friend. We trusted him with everything, even our ailing son's life, and then he went and got our whole family killed and ended our dynasty!"

"I warned you, but you didn't listen," said the mad monk.

Sighing, I turned to my little shit daughter. "And you, Katya dearest?"

She stared at me for a long time. I thought back to before my unprecedented rise to power. Before I'd pushed my family away to shield them from the press. Surely there were some good times, some pleasant memories like when I saved her from our

burning dacha?²¹

“You were a terrible father,” Katya said bluntly.

My dearest diary, her words may have hurt me if I’d had a soul. Since I didn’t, I simply moved on. “Zelensky?” I grunted.

The Jewboy said nothing, just waved his little flag and sipped ice water.²² Recognizing the internet hamster troll, the peasants howled with laughter. My face burned, and I felt a strong urge to strangle him, silence that idiot bear voice for good. Luckily, Rasputin steered me off stage.

Away from the cameras, I began fretting again. “Grigori, we’re going to Siberia, aren’t we?” I stared at my reflection, still handsome but deflated, in the mad monk’s smartypants sunglasses. “The other teams, they’re more popular with judges and audience peasants.”

“Relax, Vlad,” whispered the mad monk, cool as always. “I’ve got this like, totally rad idea.”

On stage the two Ivans were easing into a passable Russian folk dance. “You have idea, not plan?” I growled, shaking him. “We’re going to be dead meats! Dead *Siberian* meats!”

Without answering me, he approached the curtain and told me to stand behind him, which I did. He removed his glasses

²¹ In his autobiography, Putin recalls his dacha burning. Wearing only a towel, Putin helped his oldest daughter escape through a window and then climbed down himself, losing the towel. Strange but apparently true. A nice, humanizing detail.

²² This will be explained later. Don’t want to spoil the surprise!

and peeled back the curtain.

“What in hell are you doing?” I snarled.

But then I saw. The mad monk locked his beautiful blue tundra eyes with Terrible Ivan and peered into his soul, not that this was terribly difficult given Terrible Ivan’s near translucent skin. It lasted just seconds—Rasputin quickly put his smartypants sunglasses back on—but the effect was immediate. Terrible Ivan stopped dancing. His face was that of the recently revived, confused and disoriented, squinting in too-bright lights.

Dearest diary, the rest is hard to describe. Pacing the stage like a madman, Terrible Ivan began shouting nonsense. How he never meant to kill his son, how he had no choice, boo hoo! At one point, he even confused his grandfather for the dead son. Just as he was about to bash Great Ivan’s head in with a mic stand, that big show-off bastard Great Peter rushed on stage and knocked Terrible Ivan out with a single, well-timed punch. Terrible Ivan fell to the floor, a crumpled stuffed animal.

Everyone stared. No one knew what to do. The peasants and judges looked dazed and even mildly disturbed but didn’t want to break the spell. It was great television. For a moment, there was complete silence. Then, from the back of the audience, a slow clap. More hands joined in, and soon the claps gained speed and volume, building to a standing ovation.

Peter bowed and took a long sip from his vodka flask as

his pores leaked liquid.

After the applause finally died down, he helped Great Ivan up and addressed the judges. “Forgive me, I had to.” He looked down at the crumpled Terrible Ivan, shaking his head wistfully. “Such a weak little tsar, eh? I killed *my* son, and you don’t see *me* losing my mind.”

The peasants clapped while I jealously seethed. Often, I’d wished for a son to kill. Daughters, you see, aren’t worth the trouble.

“You know what this guy needs to leave the Dark Ages? I have a trick, something I insist all my boyars do.” In one smooth motion, Great Peter ripped Terrible Ivan’s beard off. Gasping, I patted my own smooth-skinned cheeks while the peasants cheered. To my surprise, the judges and television people still did nothing.

Peter raised a finger to silence the crowd. “And while we’re at it.” He yanked off Great Ivan’s beard and flung both beards into the audience.

I opened the curtain wider for a better look. Never had I seen anything like this. As the beards somersaulted through the air, the audience members positioned themselves for the catch. The beards reached their peak and then descended sharply like the Kremlin’s northern goshawks. A young girl shrieked. Grown men dove and pushed each other until two emerged victorious,

raising the beards in crazed salutes.

“Well, that’s that,” said Peter, dusting his hands. “Take ‘em away, boys!”

The curtain rustled, and Peter’s dwarves appeared with a stretcher. Terrible Ivan was tossed on and hauled him off stage. Peter followed, exiting to great applause.

Was this really happening? I pinched my arm. The beardless Ivan was still on stage, mere feet away from where the mad monk and I stood behind the curtain. Repeatedly, he lifted his hand to his face and dabbed the bloody, rash-like wound. Finally, Peter’s applause died down, and Seasrising returned. All the judges held up zeroes as the audience votes rolled in: an extra ten points for Peter and Catherine (Team Great), four extra points for us (Team Blue Eyes), an extra two points for Lenin and Stalin (Team Soviet), and only a single pity point for the grandfather/grandson duo (Team Ivan).

We were safe! I exhaled with relief.

Seeing the final vote tallies and the two burly ushers approaching, Great Ivan dropped to his knees and pleaded with the audience. The ushers pounced, pinning him to the ground and binding his hands with plastic zips. Ivan screamed. When they lifted him, his legs were shaking and his nose bleeding. He turned to Seasrising one last time, desperate.

“Please not Siberia,” he muttered. “Anything but Siberia.”

“I’m sorry,” Seasrising said, smiling pityingly as the ushers dragged Great Ivan away.”But you’re not the greatest tsar of all time.”

Dearest diary, I don’t need to relay the rest, do I?

Let’s skip to the good stuff. My fans. After Ivan was carried away, reporters and peasants pushed backstage. The mad monk’s admirers ran their fingers through his hair, Lenin lectured his supporters on their revolutionary potential,²³ Peter’s dwarves distributed membership applications for Peter’s All-Joking, All-Drunken Synod of Fools and Jesters, Catherine’s many lovers offered her flowers, and Stalin threatened his followers with agonizingly slow deaths.

As you know, dearest diary, I’m not so charming or charismatic. I am, however, a master of television. Within my presidency’s first year, I’d brought the three main stations under my command, and the Kremlin directly or indirectly controlled almost all the media by the end of my second term. Winning followers on *Dancing with the Tsars* required airtime. I grabbed a reporter²⁴ and told him to interview me or I’d murder his family.

²³ Initially, I was surprised the media execs didn’t nip this in the bud. Were they not concerned about being overthrown? As you’ll see later, however, the media execs were always ahead of the audience and knew how to make them *feel* like they were rebelling even when true resistance was impossible. It’s important to stress this *now* so it doesn’t seem like a plot hole later.

²⁴ Transcript #3

Shaking, he asked how I expected to win peasant support, and I told him I was a specialist in human relations from my KGB days. Naturally, I also fed him the same tough guy lines I'd used when vowing revenge against Chechen militants. "We'll bang the hell out of those bandits," I growled. "We're going to be after them everywhere. If they're on the dance floor, we'll waste them there. If they're in the toilet, we'll waste them in the outhouses."

Real crowd pleasers, those lines. Soon, a small group had pushed the reporter away and gathered around me, pumping their fists. They were uniformly muscled with shaved heads and tough-guy demeanors, hulking physiques, hunting laser rifles. Just my types. One pushed forward and asked me to autograph his bicep.

"Mr. Putin," he asked, handing me a marker and flexing. "I

REPORTER: Here with a few contestants now. How's it feel surviving Round 1?

PETER THE GREAT: Well, I'd say it's a relief, Bob, but it's not. I'm the greatest tsar of all time, and Catherine's the greatest tsarina of all time so obviously we made it through the first round. We're Team Great.

REPORTER: True enough, true enough! And what are your plans for Round 2? Will we see a similar routine, or will you switch it up? What's the strategy?

PETER THE GREAT: I can't tell you that, of course. All I'll say is that we plan to dominate, and we're certainly training like it. I plan for every dance like I'm about to conquer another country.

REPORTER: Well I'll say, you certainly looked like champions tonight. Rasputin, what do you have to say to that? Are you nervous about taking on Team Great in Round 2?

GRIGORI RASPUTIN: Nah, you just gotta ride the waves as they come, you know? I'm all about like, the aimless wandering, the experience and the journey of this dance we call life.

have to ask. Is it true? How you died.”

“Does it seem true?” I snarled, taken aback.

“Well, I don’t know,” the man said sheepishly. “It seems kinda embarrassing, not something you’d let happen, I guess.”

“Then you have your answer,” I said, patting his shaved head. “You are smart pet.”

I scribbled my last name in all caps and returned the marker. He practically pissed his pants with joy. Dearest diary, sometimes kindness feels good. I’m a merciful tsar when my subjects are deserving, am I not? Didn’t I let Khodorkovsky out of prison early?

The most merciful tsar of all time,
Vlad

My dearest diary,

That night, I dreamed of the rat. I was a child again, back in the miserable communal flat. Cardboard walls and no hot water. Stick in hand, I chased him into a corner. With nowhere to run, he threw himself at me, plunging his teeth into my chest, and then I was the one running. I was the hunted. Right before waking, I slammed the door on his nose.²⁵

The dreamiest tsar of all time,

²⁵ Here, Putin recalls an apparently true episode from his childhood that would give me nightmares if rats weren’t already extinct.

My dearest diary,

After yesterday's excitement, I was hoping to sleep in a little. Wishful thinking living with five tsars! Around six, I heard loud noises and went to investigate. Dearest diary, would you believe Stalin was Photoshopping Great and Terrible Ivan from our house photo? Or that Great Peter and Catherine were nailing wooden signs—St. Petersburg and Yekaterinburg—to the Ivans' former bedroom doors? Of course you'd believe it because this is what tsars do. They conquer. They pillage. They erase.

Why was I so stupid? Why hadn't *I* thought to annex their rooms and occupy them as my own Little Sister Crimea?

Head hung, I returned to my room. To lift my spirits, I connected to the internet on my smartypants mirror and searched for video clips of my tough guy lines to the reporter. Surely, my fans would have posted by now with #greatesttsar #mostbadasstsar? Dearest diary, imagine my surprise when I found the internet hamsters had edited the clip, passing my incredibly handsome face through a kittycat smartyfilter! As if that weren't bad enough, the more creative internet hamsters had also spliced this footage with clips from Mr. Paddington Bear's dick dance, substituting my kittycat face for the piano to make it look like he was face fucking me. It was just like during

the war with Little Brother, Zelensky's selfies besting me while his people ridiculed me through memes and broadcast the most grotesque casualties, turning world opinion against me. Actually, it was just like before the war too, the Jewboy mocking me on his shows and everyone laughing. If there's one thing I can't stand, it's being laughed at!

The rest of the morning, I sulked in my room. That afternoon, while everyone else was out practicing, I abandoned my better instincts and confronted the lowly peasant about his little stunt yesterday.

"So how are you doing this tricking of eyes?" I asked, trying to act casual.

It was late afternoon, our first team meeting since the competition. We were seated at opposite ends of the kitchen table, sunlight streaming through the window. The mad monk's smartypants sunglasses were perched on his forehead, his expression pained.

"Like I said when we first met, my man, I have the most excellent power to heal."

"But you didn't heal him," I argued. "You made him lunatic asylum crazy. You made him lose gray matters and marbles!"

Without speaking, the mad monk stood and walked to the window. In the late afternoon sun, his cheekbones appeared

more severe, his eyes more intense. “Ivan did some pretty gnarly things in his first life, you know?” he finally said, his eyes never leaving the window. “Some say he’s paranoid from his turbulent, orphaned childhood. Others say losing his wife so young ruined him. Who knows? What we *do* know is all these tragedies mixed with the mercury poisoning that wasn’t discovered until after his death, a poisoning that makes one prone to rage...well, it’s like the dopest recipe for madness.”

He turned from the window and stared at me, unblinking. “With my eyes, I healed Ivan’s mercury poisoning and rage, and once I did, he looked at these awful things he’d done and lost his mind. Impaling enemies, boiling dissidents in oil, slashing tongues, murdering his own son and heir.... You name it, Ivan did it. He looked in my eyes and couldn’t face what a bad dude he’d been.”

It was too much to wrap my head around. I sighed, studying my palm’s creases. “This tricking of eyes, hypnosis, whichever.... How are you knowing it will work with other tsars? They are not having this mercury poisoning of Ivan. We are seeing how Peter has no guilt over killing his own son, correct? Putin himself, healthy as day he joined KGB, has no feelings for the numerous assassinations—”

“So, we’ll like, totally beat them the old-fashioned way then,” snapped the mad monk. “Through hard work and talent.

Also, we can count on the female vote. I have a special way with the babes, if you haven't noticed."

"Are you dumb kulak?" I shouted, slamming my fist on the table. Konni lifted her head and pricked her ears from the room's corner. "The judges hate us, and you are not so sexy as Peter!"

The mad monk shrugged. "Bro, you got another idea?"

Dearest diary, can you believe he asked this? Obviously I had another idea, always the same idea. Wordlessly, I lifted a small, X-marked glass vial from my breast pocket and placed it on the table.²⁶

Rasputin's eyebrows lifted. "So, the rumors are true? You totally did poison Navalny and Romanovich and all the others, didn't you?"

I laughed. "Being legally and most excellently educated, Putin can neither confirm nor deny your suspicionings. Putin can only say that they—how to say stupid American way?—received 'what was coming' just like Great Peter and Catherine will also receive 'what was coming.' Justice—is only fair, no?"

"Vlad, we can't—"

I leaned over the table, my nose now just inches from the stains on his teeth and the cheap vodka on his lips. "You want we

²⁶ Apparently, the producers were fully aware of Putin's poison vial and thought it made an excellent subplot. I *do* think it's a good move to introduce the poison early on, keep the audience in suspense.

are being banished to Siberia? You are wanting this? Because if you are wanting this—dumping second life in garbage after everything stupid American television persons have accomplished receiving you back from coffin—we can with certainty be adopting that.”

I leaned back, crossing my arms. The mad monk stared at his feet. The little fan in the corner hummed violently. Konni whined. She ambled over and placed her semi-translucent head in my lap.

“You know, I had the gnarliest gnarl dream last week,” the mad monk said at last. “A dream before the competition even started. A dream that we waaaay cheated, and something terrible happened.”

“Something terrible?” I laughed, my fingers gliding through the dog’s ears like water. “Something terrible like we are winning? Like we are liftdeading trophies? Putin *laughs* at terrible somethings.”

“No, something terrible like the way I felt before Nick went to war. I told him not to do it. Told him that Russia would lose terribly, that it would end the Romanovs. I begged him, but bro wouldn’t listen.”

I snorted, rolling my eyes. The mad monk was always saying how if only Weak Nick had listened, Russia wouldn’t have entered World War I, the autocracy would’ve remained intact,

and I would've been a tsar. A *real* tsar like the others. Not a wimpy Western-style president pretending to obey term limits.

"Rasputin, this is not about Weak Nick. You are knowing it, Putin is knowing it. This is about 1916. How you died."

The mad monk looked away. Death was a touchy subject for the revived. No one liked reminders, especially me.

"Please," the mad monk said, the memory's pain evident in his voice. He reached across the table and placed a warm hand on my forearm. "Please don't do it. You've got to listen to me because I am *always* right. Always. The poison will ruin us. Promise me you won't."

I stared at the lowly peasant's slender hand on my arm. On a normal day, I would bat it away and sternly reprimand him for this intimacy outside the dance studio. But today was no ordinary day. Nudging Konni off my lap, I stared into Rasputin's eyes. The color had drained from his face, but his eyes appeared more luminous, more alive, than ever.

"Putin is promising," I finally said. "For now."

Dearest diary, can you believe I said that?

The wisest tsar of all time,
Vlad

My dearest diary,

This evening, I accidentally intruded on the mad monk.

He forgot to lock the bathroom door and was strutting around in all his glory. Let's just say, the rumors are true. I now understand why he's so popular with women. He's a real manly man after all.

The most impressed tsar of all time,
Vlad

Reading log entry #2

Great Peter

d. 2/8/1725, age 52. Was inspecting coastal iron-works when dove into icy Finnish waters to save sinking boat's crew. Pretty badass, cements legacy as larger than life legend, hero, should emulate, etc. Bladder problem, fever, kidney failure, gangrene from icy water? Slipped into coma writing will, dies w/o successor. Fitting for cocky bastard believing no one could replace him. Score: 9.

Great Catherine

d. 11/17/1796, age 67. Did not really die fucking horse. Also false: ex-lover handpicked sexual successor, countess friend test drove men, assassins planted razor blades in toilet, toilet cracked under fat ass & bled to death from shards, etc. True: had 22 lovers like badass, some as young as 16, collapsed in bathroom but probably from stroke. True: will still call her horse fucker. Score: 3.

My dearest diary,

Last night, I dreamed of an endless white hallway with soft shadows. I was wearing a cotton suit. My body was light and strong, my hands unbloodied but translucent. Tissue paper skin. Palms to the light projecting landscapes of blue vein rivers and chalk-white bone mountains. As I ran down the hallway, my footsteps echoed off cool tile. I kept running the whole night, never once tiring, every so often glancing over my shoulder for the rat.

More later, after Rasputin and I practice.

The dreamiest tsar of all time,
Vlad

My dearest diary,

What a busy day!

The mad monk and I began with choreography. Despite my toughness, I have a real talent for this.²⁷ As I explained to the

²⁷ As chess champion and dissident Garry Kasparov described in *Winter is Coming*, Putin had turned Russia into an “elaborate modern ballet of pseudo-democracy and pseudo-choice [where] the modern dictatorship was taking place behind the scenes,

mad monk, the dance must suggest a narrative beyond the surface. Take my rise to power. Behind the curtain, I was stealing televisions, seizing assets, and jailing opponents while on stage, I was still the freely elected president of a democracy, attending the G8 and shaking hands with American presidents. The dual narrative, I explained, was key.

I also convinced him we should change costumes frequently. The trick was to constantly evolve and stage the best photos. That way, the peasants never compared you to your previous self. As president, I explained to Rasputin, I'd rarely worn the same outfit twice. I was always changing and adopting new personas, never aging like Brezhnev or growing frail like Yeltsin. I was Putin the deep-sea diver and Putin the Siberian tiger hunter, Putin the race-car driver and Putin the shirtless horseback rider. I was strong and energetic and immortal. Dearest diary, you of course know none of that's true. But hey, it's all about the optics.

Here's what we decided, one for each of us:

Round 2: jive to "Secret Agent Man" in James Bond tuxes

Round 3: line dance to Boney M.'s 1978 euro disco hit

but the performance of democracy was continuing on stage" (19-19, 213). He was referring, of course, to the show trials. The elections with predetermined outcomes. The supposedly independent press whose content Putin controlled. The protest rallies Putin allowed, fully intending to prosecute the leaders later.

“Rasputin” with Rasputin dressed as himself and yours truly alternating between Alexandra and Felix costumes

In case you were wondering, yes, the latter was a h, but he eventually came around. I came around, too, agreeing to wear a dress as Alexandra. Life’s all about trying the unexpected, no? We figure the dance will at least win over Weak Nick, if not his wife.

The most secret agent-y tsar of all time,
Vlad

My dearest diary,

The second round’s nearly upon us. For the past week, the mad monk and I practiced our secret agent dance twice daily, mornings and afternoons. We studied tapes of famous dancers and spies. We ran five miles daily, stretched thirty minutes, slept eight hours. Rasputin even abstained from sex and alcohol, and I blocked the internet from my smartypants mirror to avoid distractions—that’s how serious we were.

After every practice, we met with fans. The commoners, the peasant folk, whatever they’re called these days. While the mad monk posed for photos, I told my thugs crude stories. From what I can tell, the show’s quite popular. Great Catherine’s young men are constantly leaving flowers and haystacks on our

doorstep, Great Peter's fans always delivering vodka. Stalin moustaches and Lenin bears are fashionable among the hipster peasants.

Optimistic as I am about Round 2, the week was not without mishaps. On Thursday, Great Peter drank heavily and nearly burned down our practice room. Then Lenin and the equine enthusiast argued about serfs—Lenin called her an “un-enlightened despot,” which sounds complimentary to me, but she got really upset. Women and their feelings. She should just embrace her inner autocrat, you know? In retaliation, the horse fucker then name dropped all her philosopher friends and taunted Lenin for not presiding over Russia's golden age. He was furious! Stalin had to threaten famine and labor camps while I pried them apart.

Anyway, I'm going to read some commie biographies, then bedtime. Victory awaits.

The hardest working tsar of all time,
Vlad

Reading log entry #3

Vladimir Lenin

d. 1/27/1924, age 53. Suffered many strokes in final years, was often bedridden & partially paralyzed. Ironically lost speaking ability. Interesting legacy. Became idealized, a myth as airy as his loser 'share everything' philosophy. Body mummified, big brain sliced into 31,000 glass-mounted sections under lock & key. Three days, millions of mourners awaiting coffin. Statues everywhere, writings like holy scriptures, face stamped on posters, Petrograd renamed Leningrad, etc. Last testament criticizing Stalin ignored, widow ignored. Hated personality cults but became god. Not bad for a weak little library man. Take note! Score: 8.²⁸

²⁸ Transcript #4

REPORTER: Lenin, the fans are asking what you'll do if you win. What are your plans for after the show, should you be crowned greatest tsar of all time?

VLADIMIR LENIN: Well, Bob, my intentions are pretty obvious if you know anything about me: turn over power to the fans. As Marx says, the class struggle necessitates a proletariat dictatorship before the abolition of class and a classless society.

Joseph Stalin

d. 3/5/1953, age 74. Forbade guards from entering private chambers. Once, faked agonizing injury & then executed loyal guards who rushed to aid. Ha, such a badass! Backfired after all-night dinner & movie with Politburo when no one checked on him in morning. Was eventually found on floor, paralyzed, urine-soaked. Even in death, continued terrifying underlings claiming stroke, too scared to admit Man of Steel was probably assassinated w/ rat poison. Urine unfortunate but terrified underlings a nice touch. Also, unlike American pet Donald, left no pee tape *kompromot!* Man of Steel \neq Man of Steele Dossier.²⁹ Score: 6.

REPORTER: Some are questioning that strategy, asking why you aren't involving fans in your revolution and accusing you of seizing power for yourself. What's your response?

VLADIMIR LENIN: Well, um, you see...hmmm...Well, it's like this, Bob. The fans, the proletariat, have a false consciousness thing going on. The true revolution requires a top-down approach, a vanguard of professional bourgeois revolutionaries like myself, those well versed in history and philosophy who can see through false consciousness.

REPORTER: So, you don't believe in the fans? Wouldn't a tsar say that? Wouldn't a tsar trick fans into believing he'd eventually hand them power but then hoard it for himself sort of like when you were alive?

VLADIMIR LENIN: No, no, that's not what I'm saying. I'm no tsar. I'm no hypocrite. That's not what happened!

²⁹So the Steele dossier, pee tape, etc. were discredited. So what? Leave it in—audiences will love the scandal!

My dearest diary,

The peasants have lost their minds!

As I write to you, the chaos still rages outside. I might not have much time. Let me explain.

Nothing went our way this round. Dressed as French nobles, Peter and Catherine performed a dance from Peter's Russian balls, a Baroque-era minuet, and again received perfect marks. Katya was like a little girl again, blushing and falling over herself complimenting Peter. Can you imagine, dearest diary? My own flesh and blood, rooting for the enemy! Then during our turn, those pussy rioters stormed the stage and, accompanied by Mr. Paddington Bear's dick on piano, performed their stupid Punk Prayer in the middle of my "Secret Agent" song! The nerve! My darling daughter couldn't stop laughing. Even Misha only gave us a 2. As Lenin and Stalin began their Russian Lyrical to "Moscow Nights," I panicked backstage.

"We should've used the poison," I told the mad monk.

He held up a finger to silence me. Again he removed his smartypants sunglasses and peeled back the curtain. This time, he locked eyes with the library man, who promptly stopped

dancing. Lenin's hands fell to his sides, and blood drained from his face. "Comrade Stalin," he announced loudly enough for the peasants to hear, "I cannot abide this corruption of Soviet ideals any longer."

I glanced at the judges. Misha, Zelensky, and the pussy rioters were whispering excitedly, but Weak Nick and Alexandra were wide-eyed with terror. Seasrising mouthed something to the producers backstage. In the audience, the muscular ushers stole nervous glances at each other.

"I don't see what you mean, Comrade," said Stalin, stepping forward stiffly. He reached for Lenin's hand to resume the dance, but Lenin backed away.

"Don't you see, Comrade? We've become the very tsars we detested. The very tsars we sought to overthrow!"

"But Comrade..."

"Don't comrade *me!*" Lenin snapped. "We're on *Dancing with the Tsars*, competing to become the greatest tsars of all time. Comrade Marx is rolling in his grave!"

Before Stalin or any of the stupid television people could intervene, Lenin was at the front of the stage in full speech mode, glasses askew, mic in hand. As his voice grew louder and surer, I felt a tiny flicker of hope that they wouldn't finish their dance.

"Workers and peasants of the proletariat," shouted Lenin, his voice echoing in the cavernous theater. "Do you not see what

we have done to you? We have *starved* you. We have become your new overlords.”

The peasants blinked stupidly.

“Comrades, don’t you see? Before, you were slaves to those who held the means of production. The factory owners. The industrialists. The wealthy. And yes, the ruling classes like the tsars. Now, the ruling classes have merely altered names and forms. Instead of the means of industry, they now hold the means of entertainment. Of media! They are the media moguls as well as the entertainers, the producers, the actors.” He gestured backstage at us contestants. “And yes, even the tsars.”

A hush fell over the peasants. A young man stood and began chanting Lenin’s name, and the others quickly followed. An usher fired a warning laser zap to no avail. The cameras kept filming.

“We are all president now,” Zelensky called out.

“That’s right,” Lenin shouted, finding his rhythm. “Now, rise up. I know you’re scared of getting laser zapped, but there are more of you than them. They can’t laser zap you *all*. Workers and oppressed peoples and nations of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!”

That’s when things got messy.

As if they were only waiting for permission, the stupid American peasants began wreaking systematic havoc on the

studio. I'd heard rumors of such American wildness on Black Friday and other national consumer holidays but never seen it firsthand. Those stupid Americans! Lasers crisscrossed the room like fireworks. The peasants ripped out seat cushions and flung Big Gulp sodas in the air. Wrestled ushers to the ground and stole their laser guns. Trampled babushkas. Snapped microphones in two. As Lenin continued shouting about the revolution, they hoisted him on their shoulders and began chanting, "Down with the tsars! Down with the media!" A lone peasant cried, "Long live Ukraine!" Before I could fully process this idiocy, one peasant tore open the curtain and hopped backstage. He wore a cowboy hat and held a stolen laser gun. "Down with the tsars and the media!" he shouted, a wild gleam in his eyes.

Rasputin and I locked eyes in mute horror. "Run! Run!" he shouted, shoving me toward the exit as the laser zaps crackled behind us. Dearest diary, terrifying as it was, I was also very excited. After all my desk-bound KGB years, here I was, finally a real spy in a real chase scene! We raced for the backstage exit, hot on Peter and Catherine's heels, and broke from the dark studio into bright sunlight. Outside, the air burned my throat, and salt stung my eyes. Up ahead, I could just make out the shining metallic stairs that would lower me from the cruise ship to the beach, and I pumped my legs harder, grateful for my excellent

fitness.

Then things took a turn.

As my hand grasped the silver handrail, a hot searing pain tore through my very muscular leg. Howling in agony, gritting my teeth, I limped down the stairs and collapsed into the burning sand. Warm blood was spilling from my chest, ruining my beautiful secret agent tux! So, I'd been laser zapped, maybe multiple times. I called for help,³⁰ but no one stopped. Not the stupid American television people. Not the peasants. Not Great Peter, galloping past with Great Catherine on his shoulders.

Lying in the sand, I recalled my last Dresden days. My own personal Time of Troubles. Several weeks after the Berlin Wall fell, I had to disperse protesters outside KGB headquarters. Afterwards, knowing danger still lurked, I phoned a Red Army tank unit's headquarters and requested backup. The officer said he couldn't send anyone without orders from Moscow. When I asked why, he paused. I could sense he was uncomfortable, carefully measuring each word. "Moscow is silent," he finally whispered. After the officer hung up, I listened to the dial tone, trying to wrap my head around his words. Overnight, the Soviet state had disappeared. I had no government. I was at the mercy of the mob. Dearest diary, how to explain the depths of a

³⁰ Must have killed him to ask for help. Here, he doesn't even cross out the final letter of the feminine noun, *помощь*.

loneliness omitted from every history book, a loneliness so slight beneath the weight of world events but still so painful? On that bleak and forsaken day, I vowed that if I ever got out, I would *crush* the mob. Until my dying breath, I would restore order and glory to the state, to Mother Russia, and that's exactly what I did during my first lifetime, before Little Brother intervened.

Now after all these years, the mob had finally defeated me. I stared at the blood bubbling from my fingers. This was it. Badass as my secret agent tux was, I would die all over again with no hopes for revival. I'd be dead for eternity. With my last bit of strength,³¹ I crawled to a simulated palm tree for shade and privacy, determined to face the void like a man.

Imagine my shock when the mad monk appeared, laying warm hands on my chest.

"No touching," I wheezed, barely conscious.

"Shut it," he said, ripping off my bloody shirt to expose a deep wound on my studly stomach. He swept his hands across my manly chest, and warmth radiated from my belly to each muscular limb. With a little pop, the blood in each laser wound congealed and thickened into a scab.

"What's happening?" I gasped, fearing I was hallucinating.

"Shhh, shhh, it's best to be quiet," he said, lifting a finger

³¹ Here, Putin returns to crossing out the final vowels from the feminine noun, сила (strength).

to his lips. He didn't look at me when he said this, just stared intently at the last wound on my stomach. His eyes were more radiant than ever, as electric blue as the screens covering every wall.

"This is the most serious one," he said. He bent closer, placed his pointer finger across the hole, and pushed gently. Then he rested his palm over the wound. The blood stopped flowing, the pain disappeared. I felt only a cold numbness, a faint tingling. He removed his palm, and I lifted my head to look. Dearest diary, it was a miracle. My wound was gone. My skin unblemished as a newborn's, no trace of scar tissue. For a moment, we were both still. Then I heard a loud pop, and the mad monk went down in the explosion, shielding his eyes.³²

The most worn out tsar of all time,
Vlad

My dearest diary,

Last night, I dreamed the whole world was burning. I was on a wooden boat in the middle of the ocean, my eyes seared shut from the heat. My nostrils were filling with burning flesh, flames licking my feet. I yelled at my daughters to get out, to run far and fast, but the flames swallowed my words. It was just like '96, our

³² Don't worry! He's not actually dead! Maybe leave this ambiguous for your viewers, create a cliffhanger that leaves them wanting more?

dacha by the lake. Our boat was melting, the rat was laughing,
and all the world's water couldn't extinguish those flames.

The dreamiest tsar of all time,
Vlad

My dearest diary,

You want to know whether I left him? Believe me, it wasn't intentional. After the explosion, I must have passed out. I don't remember how I got home, you see. My next memory is Great Peter hauling me in and barricading the door. Inside, the Man of Steel was fuming about Lenin's betrayal,³³ and the horse fucker was consoling her lover boys. When Peter offered me vodka, I broke my normal abstinence (again) and accepted. A tad drunk, I must have grown ever so slightly emotional. Not that I cried or anything womanly, but I must have looked blue because

³³ Transcript #5

REPORTER: Hi everyone, here with Joseph Stalin. He's all holed up with the revolution still raging outside and such so I'm interviewing via video. Bear with me. So, this was certainly a surprise for folks at home, your partner leading a rebellion against the tsars and the media. Was this planned? Were *you* expecting this?

JOSEPH STALIN: Absolutely not, Bob. He betrayed me. In the end, he always betrays me. This is 1923 and *Lenin's Testament* all over again, but I'll have the last laugh. Oh, I'll always have the last laugh! Even if it's in Siberia, I'll make that bastard pay! I'm the Man of Steel!

REPORTER: Oh, well, Lenin better watch out! If you could go back in time, would you change anything?

JOSEPH STALIN: I'd request a different dance partner, that's for sure. Someone who's not selfish. Someone with better communication skills. Someone who cares about *me* and *my* feelings.

the horse fucker was nice for once.

“*Mon ami*, you’re worried about him, aren’t you?” She caressed my cheek. I thought about how I hadn’t fucked in so long. No, no, no, I had standards. I batted her hand away and leaned back. Told her I wasn’t concerned. The mad monk could handle himself.

The drunkest tsar of all time,
Vlad

My dearest diary,

Day 2 of the uprising. Almost slept with the horse fucker this morning from sheer boredom. Luckily, Peter caught me staring and made threats, said she was like his sister. To pass time we played board games and Twister. (The Man of Steel’s surprisingly limber, but it’s hard staying upright with Peter leaking water everywhere.) In the afternoon, I reconnected my smartypants mirror to the internet, but there was no news of Rasputin, just endless selfies of the mucus-shirted Jewboy passing out orange goo sandwiches to wounded peasants and memes of him rebuffing the American television peoples’ offers to evacuate him: I NEEDZ DEMOCRACY, NOT A RIDE. The latter, of course, often accompanied by a meme of Great Peter yanking me inside the cabin, limp as a dish towel, my face kittycat-filtered beneath dancing ice cubes and the text, INDOOR ONLY KITTY. Those damn internet hamsters! Naturally, I disconnected the

internet again. Now I'm re-reading Rasputin's biography for the umpteenth time, focusing on his final days and hoping he has one last miracle left. Nothing's forever, you see. Not promises. Not diamonds. Not an empire or an emperor or even an all-powerful autocrat.

The most morbid tsar of all time,
Vlad

Reading log entry #4

Grigori Rasputin

d. 12/30/1916, age 47. Frequent assassination target. Was visiting wife & children in Siberia when noseless peasant stabbed him outside church on 7/28/1914, same day Gavrilo Princip lodges bullet in Archduke Ferdinand's jugular.³⁴ Dominos falling, war imminent. Peasant crying that she's killed anti-Christ & mad monk fighting her off like true badass, clutching intestines, stumbling through village like drunk, bleeding ten hours. Another ten days on death's doorstep & six weeks blissed on opioids. In hospital, mad monk starts drinking again, claims powers dulled, grows paranoid, watches signs. Cautions Weak Nick against war & predicts end of monarchy & Romanovs. Weak Nick doesn't listen, second assassination attempted in 1915. Mad monk sees death everywhere. At

³⁴ The dates are fuzzy due to the different calendars so possibly another mistranslation. Some say same day. Others disagree. I personally believe the events are linked, that there's a little unspoken magic we can't totally understand, you know?

end of 1916, writes Weak Nick with more ominous prediction: *I shall depart this life before January first. If one of your relatives causes my death, then none of your children will remain alive for more than two years. And if they do, they will beg for death as they will see the defeat of Russia, see the Antichrist coming, plague, poverty, destroyed churches, and desecrated sanctuaries where everyone is dead. The Russian tsar, you will be killed by the Russian people and the people will be cursed and will serve as the devil's weapon killing each other everywhere.* 12/29/1916. Weak Nick's relative Prince Felix Yusopov lures to St. Petersburg, promising beautiful princess's presence. Felix opposes Rasputin's influence over Weak Nick, is crybaby sissy cross-dresser, loves mad monk, etc.³⁵ Mad monk arrives, eats poisoned cakes, nothing. Felix desperate & shoots him, leaves him to die. Returns later & sees body crumpled on bearskin rug, limbs bent, hair oiled & matted, blood everywhere but still not dead. Rasputin blinks eye, lunges at Felix. A deadly dance of strangulation: fingernails in shoulder, blood oozing

³⁵ There's some evidence that Felix was bisexual and enjoyed dressing as a woman. Some accounts claim Felix sought revenge after Rasputin rejected his sexual advances, but this probably isn't true. Makes a great soap opera though—use it!

from lips, eyeballs bulging from sockets. Mad monk slips past Felix & crawls to garden, Felix's friends shoot him again & again. Still not dead! Beaten w/ clubs, stabbed w/ knives, castrated, clothes torn & burned, bleeding body bound w/ weights & chains & wrapped in heavy carpet, heaved from bridge into freezing Malaya Nevka River. Body discovered three days later. Autopsy confirms impossible, water in lungs, was still alive when thrown in freezing river!³⁶ Mad monk buried at royal palace but no RIP. After revolution, after true predictions, after Weak Nick & fam exiled & executions all but assured, is dug up & cremated in nearby forest. Flames lick corpse. Mad monk sits up. Twists limbs! Lowly peasant laborers tasked w/ cremating body nearly faint, cross themselves, shout that devil has risen from grave. Finally, body collapses back into fire, bones melting to ash. A real badass, best death of all. Score: 10.

³⁶ He's twisting the facts, but whatever. It's beautiful, some made-for-TV shit right here. Makes me feel totally worthless as a storyteller.

My dearest diary,

Sorry for not writing yesterday. A lot happened. After three long days, the uprising finally wore itself out. This stupid American city now resembles a post-apocalyptic film set—or Bolotsnaya Square before my third inauguration, thanks to she-Clinton's incitements. Those crybaby viewer-constituents smashed or burned everything in sight. You can't move now without stepping on glass or broken smartypants mirror shards. The air smells plastic, so heavy you can almost feel the cancer seeping into your pores. Shattered electric blue screens litter the Astro-turf sand like sapphire stones, and holographic wildlife fizz and sputter as the Wi-Fi coverage drops off. Ash heaps blend with scorched sand. The few remaining real fish are floating belly up in contaminated oceans.

The media moguls tore a page from my book and decided against interfering. You see, riots are cyclical. Periodically, the crybabies gotta purge some nasties. Always, they crawl back, pitiful pets preferring their food bowls and daily leash walks to the untamed, unbearable fend-for-yourself streets. The weaklings, always needing a strong leader to save them from

themselves! Sure enough, with nothing left to destroy, the crybabies regained their sanity. They looked around at all the broken screens and sobbed. What now? They were so, so very bored. In their abundant leisure time, they thought too much about the meaning of life or, more precisely, the *lack* of meaning in their lives. They thought about death, no longer so distant. They thought about how much time they'd wasted before screens, how many relationships had lapsed, the endless wars and floods.

Pathetic fools, they protested outside the television studios. They marched, waved posters, and begged for their screens and shows, surrendering their laser guns and Ukrainian flags. Even Zelensky got in line, sniveling in that idiot bear voice that he was but a “servant of the people” and this their will. The media moguls happily obliged, of course—apparently, they store extra screens and equipment in impenetrable bunkers for precisely these occasions. Just like that, the city began humming again. The peasants were allowed to mindbeam vote retroactively on our dances (the Jewboy and pussy rioters received the most votes—I was furious), Lenin and Stalin were exiled to Siberia, I annexed Stalin's room, Catherine took Lenin's, and within the week, everything returned to normal with one exception.³⁷

³⁷ Transcript #6

The shrapnel had blinded Rasputin.³⁸

Nothing the stupid American doctors could do. They were sorry, truly they were, but this was the new reality. The media moguls agreed to delay the final round by a week, and for the most part, the mad monk adjusted remarkably well to his new condition. He adopted a holographic seeing eye dog and bought even more stylish aviator sunglasses to cover his damaged eyes. He claimed his other senses had sharpened. That he was now more sensitive to touch, sound, smells. If anything, his many admirers claimed to prefer his new condition. They said the mad monk was a more sensitive lover now, that they felt less self-conscious about their physical appearances and could connect with him on a deeper level. Stupid Americans.


I've heard the other tsars visited Rasputin in the hospital. Before they were exiled, Lenin and Stalin apparently swung by, bickering bitterly about the failed coup. Lenin offered Rasputin a Braille Marx. Stalin recalled his own debilitating injury, a childhood carriage accident that required many surgeries and

REPORTER: How's the house now that you've lost your house manager? What's happening?

PETER THE GREAT: It's awesome! Stalin was so strict. Now I can throw house parties whenever I want!

CATHERINE THE GREAT: A mess, to be honest. At this point, we've completely abandoned the chore chart. Hugely embarrassing when I bring lovers over.

³⁸ Undoubtedly, Putin viewed Rasputin's blindness as effeminate: 'sight' or 'eye' (глаз) is a masculine noun. Regardless, I'm crying about Rasputin. You're crying about Rasputin. :(The audience will love this. :)

left one arm shorter than the other. Even Peter commended Rasputin for suffering his injuries like a real tsar, and the horse fucker told him he looked handsomer and less stupid than before. The mad monk's numerous admirers and even a few of my thugs visited, donning "I  Rasputin" shirts in solidarity. Although the judges were prohibited from interacting with the tsars outside competition, an orange goo sandwich arrived in the mail with flowers.

Only I kept my distance.³⁹ Leave the doctoring to the doctors, I reasoned. I had a training regimen to maintain and fans to woo, especially now with a useless invalid partner. This was nothing new for me. Years ago when my wife was in a car

³⁹ Transcript #7

REPORTER: Rasputin, good to see you. Many fans, myself included, thought you were a goner.

GRIGORI RASPUTIN: Thanks, my man. For a hot second, I thought I was like, totally a goner too. Sometimes you see that big wave coming and...

REPORTER: My condolences on your vision loss.

GRIGORI RASPUTIN: Appreciate it, bro.

REPORTER: So I have to ask, how do you feel about your prospects now? Has the vision loss affected your strategy for the next round? The fans at home want to know.

GRIGORI RASPUTIN: Of course it has, Bob. It's a really gnarly thing to happen during competition. I'm not sure what's gonna happen, but I believe in myself and my main dude, Putin.

REPORTER: Your main dude, huh? Your main dude who didn't visit you in the hospital? Does that hurt?

GRIGORI RASPUTIN: Well, you know how these things go. I don't wanna say anything bad about my dude, really I don't, but well...you see, bro, it's like...it's like, it *does* hurt some, yeah.

accident, I was too busy running the country to visit her in the hospital. Such are the sacrifices of power. I sent an underling with flowers, of course—everyone always forgets this thoughtful detail.

I didn't see the lowly peasant until the day before the final round. As I was finishing my stretches in the dance studio, the door creaked open. Warm air rushed in. Konni, along for company, pricked her ears and wagged her tail.

I looked up. A holographic yellow lab with a service vest was ambling across the wood-grain, her leash trailing behind her.

"Vladimir?" a familiar voice called from the doorway.

He was wearing a shirt split open at the chest, his long locks gathered in a ponytail. Same flip-flops, same swimming trunks, but he was pale from his hospital stay. Thin. A faint scar halved his left cheek.

"Vladimir, you there?" the mad monk called again.

I cleared my throat. "Indeed, Putin is here. Former Leningrad judo champions don't take breaks, you know."

He smiled. "Right on."

"But Putin is surprised to see invalid such as yourself in dance studio. Putin has been theorizing he will dance alone." I laughed, but the mad monk didn't join. Why does everyone laugh at the Jewboy's jokes but not mine?

"You know I'd never let you down like that, my man. We're

a team. One last practice run?" He bent to unleash his dog. His fingers traced the leash to the dog's neck, fumbling the clasp. The dog held still. I looked away.

"Yes, yes, we should get on with it."

I snapped my fingers. The queued music breathed through the walls. We began dancing, but without sight, Rasputin's rhythm was off. A major problem, even for our stupidly simple line dance. Multiple times, that bastard cripple crushed my toes!

"Goddamn," I cursed the third time this happened. I snapped my fingers again, and the music stopped.

"Sorry, dude. Really am. Thought I could do better."

I exhaled. "It's no problem. We just need to use hypnosis eyes tricking again. Putin is thinking Great Peter will not show remorse, but maybe Great Catherine? She's reading all those books but still keeps serfs, no? Can you get a good look at her?"

The mad monk shook his head. Now I began really worrying. He was hunched on the floor now, back against the smartypants mirrored wall.

"Vladimir, let me tell you a story."

He blabbered on for ten minutes, all nonsense from his childhood on a Siberian farm. How he watched his sister drown and his brother succumb to pneumonia. How he discovered he could heal animals. Boo hoo! Did he expect comforting? He told me he saw the Virgin Mary and spent fifteen years of his youth

wandering the countryside. He was a sinner. He'd done horrible things.⁴⁰ He'd tempted himself with sin and repeatedly failed. Like I hadn't heard that crybaby story a million times. As he continued, his voice grew dreamier and wispier. Then he paused, swallowed.

"Vladimir, I need to tell you something really un-dope. Don't freak, ok?"

"Putin is not a freak out," I lied, heart racing.

The mad monk inhaled deeply, then sighed. "My powers, they're like, gone."

"Gone?"

Dearest diary, in that moment, I again wondered what having a soul would feel like. Would I have responded kindly? Would I have apologized for slowing him in the riot or thanked him for saving my life? If I'd had a soul, maybe I wouldn't have cursed him out or punched the wall. We'll never know. Alas, it's hard being so macho. Sometimes, I don't know my own strength.

The strongest tsar of all time,

Vlad

⁴⁰ Hate to break it to you, but Rasputin was likely a rapist. I know, I know, not what you want to hear. I didn't either. As your translator/editor, I humbly but strongly urge you to consider #cancelling this inconvenient detail. Aren't there enough terrible people in this story? Can't we pretend there's at least one good guy, one sympathetic character worth rooting for? Are we terrible for wanting to believe that fiction?

My dearest diary,

Over the last few hours, I've been reflecting and know I should probably feel badly about what happened earlier. After my little wall altercation, I stormed out, slamming the door, not even bothering to help the blind bastard home. Well, what was he expecting? I'm very competitive, and this is Siberia we're talking about.

Siberia. Where I died.

Yes, dearest diary, it's time I finally told you the whole story.

By the year 2022, I had become the most powerful, most photographed man in the world.⁴¹ An Alexander. A Napoleon. A Mao. "My son is like a tsar!" Papa Putin had declared on his deathbed, but even he could never have predicted my power and success. It was just like I'd imagined as a boy, when I first saw *The Sword and the Shield* and dreamed of becoming a spy. Here I was, a single individual rerouting history! The people had loved me for the economic boom and apocalyptic vision. And then when times grew tougher, when our oil started drying up and we risked economic dependence on our Chinamen neighbors, when I

⁴¹ The subject here seems to grossly exaggerate his own power and popularity. I can't find evidence supporting the claims made in the next few passages. The international community largely viewed the war with Ukraine as a political disaster for Putin. Expecting quick victory, he had instead suffered major casualties, lost international support, and accelerated Ukraine's NATO entry.

showed them tough love and seized even greater power for their own good, they feared and respected me. When I spoke, people listened. When I threatened, maps were re-drawn. When I ordered, missiles were launched, and armies dropped quivering to their knees. Declaring war on Little Brother brought even more renown. My face was plastered across billboards, tattooed on arms, carved in mountains, pressed to coins. My image graced *Time*, hung in every Russian household,⁴² and haunted the dreams of every sissy Western head of state. St. Petersburg was renamed Putingrad. Vladimir and Vladimira became the most popular baby names. Everyone wanted to be me, to look like me. Around the world, average-looking men piled into plastic surgery waiting rooms hugging the *Time* cover. The plastic surgeons learned to copy my features, to sculpt my cheeks and mold my hollow eyes. Rogaine went bankrupt, blue contact lenses dominated the market, and models shrunk and widened. Androgyny was out, judo in.

Long divorced from Lyudmila, I had fucked a succession of women, each more beautiful and powerful than the last. I dated Olympic gymnasts and international super models, heiresses and movie stars, women who ran Fortune 500s and

⁴² In his 2019 inaugural address, Zelensky famously told the Ukrainian people not to hang portraits of him in their offices: “The president is not an icon. Hang pictures of your children in your offices and look them in the eyes before every decision.”

women who inherited them. I never saw my own daughters, could barely remember what they looked like. Katya, I guessed, was probably still making traitorous Zelensky babies.⁴³ Masha had likely moved her medical practice back to Holland, where she'd once socialized with lesbian artists and gay fitness instructors during med school. We hadn't spoken in years. For her own protection, I told myself, because her friendships with the gays would jeopardize my policies, and I wasn't just *her* father but the father of all Russia. The man without a face. I was everyone you wanted me to be and then, when you changed your mind, I was that, too.

I was still mortal, of course. Knew everyone must die. Knew *I* must die. In a way, I even welcomed death. I imagined parades, cheering in the streets, banners and streamers, monuments and statues. My death, like my life, would be super badass and cement my legacy as the greatest Russian ruler of all time. Every morning, before opening my eyes, I pictured the glorious, manly end. Bleeding out fending off trained assassins or suffocating wrestling a bear or straining my heart in the throes of orgasm.

As I grew older, I even prepared for these glorious deaths.

⁴³ At the time, multiple news outlets reported that Katerina was living with Igor Zelensky, former director of the Munich state ballet, and their young child in Germany. Apparently, Igor and Volodymyr weren't related—too bad!—but I think we should act like they were. It's juicy.

I practiced judo religiously, trained to fight bears, and wore my sexiest underwear in case I died during intercourse. Worried that death might reach me less glamorously, I also took numerous precautions. Servants tasted all my meals. I hired a body double and had my plastic surgeon craft an identical face for him. Then I hired another and another. I taught them to talk like me, to walk like me, to kill like me. Dozens of Putins. Hundreds of Putins. Thousands of Putins.

But then death arrived most unexpectedly.

I was sick of my war-time bunker, you see. The feud with Little Brother had dragged on longer than expected, but we were at last on the verge of welcoming him back to the family.⁴⁴ With victory all but assured by week's end, what was the harm in celebrating a few days early with some fresh air? Soon we'd have a family reunion with all the former Soviet bloc cousins, and never again would Moscow be silent! To my advisors' great irritation, I slipped away to the Siberian taiga with two of my dogs, Yume and Buffy. It began as an ordinary enough day in the wilderness. With a backpack of provisions, we set out for a hike just before sunrise. Around midday, we paused at a clump of frozen trees, breathing heavily. The sunlight was filtering

⁴⁴ Again, I can't find any evidence to support these claims. Instead, all the news reports suggest Putin's long bunker stay took a toll on his mental faculties. Likely, he was delusional.

through the naked limbs and icicles, the temperature warming. My armpits were damp, my forehead glistening.

“Some view, eh?”

The dogs wagged their tails and stared hungrily at my bag. Slipping it from my shoulder, I reached a gloved hand inside and felt for some chicken. Then I ripped it into chunks and tossed one in the air. The dogs panted as the meat descended, eyes focused. They hadn’t eaten all day. Yume leaped, and Buffy wrestled her to the ground, snarling.

I loved watching the dogs fight because I never knew what would happen. Buffy was larger and heavier, Yume quicker and smarter. Scrappy. She reminded me of my younger self picking fights with bigger kids, matching their brawn with my judo skills. Yume would do anything to win, the tough bitch. I admired that.

I held up more chicken. “You want more, eh?”

But the dogs didn’t hear me and continued tussling over the first scraps.

“Hey, hey,” I tried separating them. Yume doubled down, but Buffy, seeing the new opportunity in my hand, relinquished his hold. He leaped, pressing his heavy paws to my chest.

“Eh, not so fast, doggy,” I grunted, shoving him off. “See,” lofting the scraps even higher, “Putin is still—”

A sharp pain, then everything faded. When I finally came to, I was pinned beneath the trees, a large icicle protruding from

my chest. Gasping for breath, I tried lifting the icicle. My gloved hands slid over the slick surface. The blood pooled and froze. The icicle was too heavy. I stared into the naked tree limbs and the other glittering icicles.

“Yume!” I wheezed. “Buffy!”

Dutifully, the dogs trotted over. By now, they’d demolished all the meat. Ignoring the icicle, they licked my face with warm, rough tongues.

“Bark for help,” I grunted. We were in remote territory, it was true, but sometimes there were hikers. I only needed two strong hands. “Bark for help!”

But those stupid dogs just kept licking me, lapping up salty blood. I thought of the sailors trapped on the *Kursk* submarine, dying while I vacationed by the Black Sea. I thought of the hostages in the Nord-Ost siege, choking on chemical gases because I refused to appear weak negotiating with their captors. I thought of the nearly five hundred Russian troops on the banks of the Donets, massacred trying to cross as I dined on boiled quail eggs from the safety of my luxurious, anti-nuclear bunker. Their torn, mother-laundered uniforms flapping from desiccated trees, their twenty-year-old bodies buried in the mud. I thought of myself in Dresden, waiting for help that never arrived, betrayed by those I’d trusted most.

I screamed. Did I really deserve another betrayal? After

everything I'd done for my dogs? For Yume, I'd even fended off an unwanted Japanese suitor, a male Akita gifted from Shinzo Abe.

"Yume," I groaned. "Putin is not fending off least excellent Japanese suitors for these treatments."

Dearest diary, can you believe that bitch just stared at me, cocking her head like she didn't even remember the Akita? Konni would never have done that!

My body wasn't discovered until the next day, when a Siberian peasant stumbled upon the dogs gnawing my bones, their traitorous lips smeared red, pink icicles dangling from their teeth. At first, the authorities tried covering up my death, fearing their fates rested with mine. My face was so badly damaged, they argued in the media, how could anyone know whether it was truly me? But then the dental records were leaked, the Siberian peasant came forward to tell his story, and Mr. Paddington Bear saw his opening.

"Brothers and sisters, enough is enough," he declared in a joint address to the Russian and Ukrainian peoples that also conveniently doubled as his EU/NATO membership application essay. In the footage I've since watched, his face is haggard, his voice hoarse and weary, his mucus-shirt stained with sweat. "So much blood has been spilled on both sides. For too long, the world has watched this madman take our loved ones from us and destroy our nations. But he is gone now, he is dead." He paused

and took an excruciatingly long sip of ice water for posterity. Even when he was trying to be serious, the fool couldn't resist mocking the humiliating manner in which I'd died!⁴⁵ "From this day forward, let us lay down our arms. Let us go forward in peace, as neighbors."

Can you believe my men retreated, dearest diary? After everything I'd done for them, the pitiful dogs? Even my one-time oligarch friends eventually sold my beloved Russia, now broke and fatherless, her institutions and rule of law destroyed. She went to the highest bidder, a Chinese media conglomerate. Needless to say, this was not the legacy I'd envisioned.

⁴⁵ It's not entirely clear that Zelensky meant to make a joke. His demeanor was otherwise quite serious, but people will see what they want. As you're probably already aware, the clip went viral and spawned numerous ice water drinking challenges whose proceeds were donated to ALS charities: *Are you tougher than Vladimir Putin? Can you withstand a little ice? Accept the challenge!*

Reading log entry #5

Vladimir Putin – d. too soon, age too young. Struck by icicle & devoured by dogs. Not exactly badass. Score: 1.5 if being generous.

My dearest diary,

Oh, the humiliation! Decades later, the memory still stings! That's why I can't get exiled to Siberia. Why I must win at all costs, that blinded bastard's warning be damned! My dearest diary, you know what this means, don't you?

The most humiliated tsar of all time,
Vlad

My dearest diary,

It was inevitable.

While the others slept, I broke into Great Peter's room, stepping over empty vodka bottles and passed-out dwarves. The tsar was sprawled in bed, snoring loudly and still leaking fluids, a soaked sheet pulled to his waist and a flask clenched in his right fist. Clearly, he'd had a party. My nostrils recoiled at the smell, a mixture of sour piss, manly body odor, and vomit that reminded me of my first trip to the West. Decades later, I still remembered the red-light district performers in vivid detail: their neon-lit shoulders and vacant Coca-Cola eyes, those cigarette legs and faded blue jean minds. Most of all, I remembered what I'd

learned from them, that freedom leads to chaos, then decadence and weakness and eventually little Jewboy dicks playing pianos. Apparently, Peter never learned this lesson. Now it would be his downfall.

Lifting the glowing poison vial from my pocket, I approached the sleeping giant.⁴⁶

My dearest diary, it's hard to describe how I felt. How was I supposed to feel? Guilty? Remorseful? I'd killed before, it was true, but always indirectly. I'd sent men to war unprepared. I'd hired hit men or hinted that my subordinates should hire hit men, that an opposition leader or oligarch was growing too strong, that a former spy or one-time patron or freethinking journalist was becoming a nuisance. I'd propped up brutal dictators. I'd ordered bombs dropped on crowded markets, air strikes on hospitals and schools. I'd failed to enter negotiations, condemning innocents rather than appear weak myself.

Yes, I'd done all this. But I'd never killed with my own hands. I'd bragged about these hands, portrayed myself as a manly street thug—a brawler, a man of action—but I'd never gripped a man's neck with these hands and crushed his final breath, had never punched a man so hard he never stood up, had

⁴⁶ Supposedly the producers didn't know Putin would poison a fellow competitor. (Really, guys?) They had surveillance but decided not to interfere—says so right in the production notes. A surprising, controversial twist, they called it, hopefully good for ratings.

never pulled the trigger or held the knife or planted the poison.⁴⁷

Dearest diary, there's a first time for everything, no?

Steadying my wrist, I tipped the green liquid into his flask. Briefly, I remembered Rasputin's warning, then pushed it away. I'm not one for regrets.

The deadliest tsar of all time,
Vlad

My dearest diary,

Last night, I dreamed of the *Kursk* submarine with the dead sailors and their widows and mothers. I was wearing an itchy black polo shirt under my best black suit. Lights flickered. Stale air burned my lungs. Dearest diary, imagine slowly drowning. A single water drop crashes through the ceiling, piercing your sweating head. You wipe it off, but the rain keeps falling. The drops blossom into puddles and then the water creeps to your knees and shoulders. You are sinking. The dead-eyed sailors are looking at me, the mothers scratching the skin off my face with bare nails. All the mothers have the same face, her face. Short, blonde hair and a puffy, white jacket. "You better shoot yourself now," she whispers in my ear, her breath hot and

⁴⁷ Doubtful but keep it. Raises the personal stakes.

bitter. “We won’t let you live, bastards.”⁴⁸ Her words spool through my mind, tuck themselves into my neural folds so I can’t stop hearing them. *You better shoot yourself now you better shoot yourself now you better shoot yourself now. Moscow is silent Moscow is silent Moscow is silent.* I am sinking. Finally, I plunge the syringe into her neck. As she falls, the dead sailors become the drowned Syrians and the muddled corpses on the Donets. When she hits the ground, I see the Ukrainian mother and her two children lying on a mortar-shocked concrete bridge with their damaged luggage. Their parkas are bloodied and torn, their mouths slightly open, frozen in forever screams. Then they all turn into rats who gnaw my eyes.

I wake shouting.

The dreamiest tsar of all time,
Vlad

My dearest diary,

I, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, was wearing a dress. Not just any dress, mind you, but a tsarina’s dress. Heavy satin with a

⁴⁸ Putin is referring to Nadezhda Tylik, who was sedated while confronting Putin following her son’s death in the *Kursk* submarine tragedy. Later, Tylik claimed the sedation was not forced. “They gave me a shot in the presence of my husband because I did not feel well. It is my husband who turned to a doctor for help,” she later said. See Chazan, Guy and Philip Sherwell. “I was not silenced, says Kursk mother,” *The Telegraph*. 27 Aug. 2000. I’m highly suspicious of this account. Another “mistranslation”?

floral applique bodice and train. Under this, I wore a twentieth century Russian nobleman's dress uniform.

Last night, I'd tossed and turned. What if Peter didn't drink from the flask? What if the poison didn't kill him? What if someone found out? Bags hung under my bloodshot eyes. Yellow tinged my skin.

A stupid American television person knocked on my door. "You're up second. Be backstage in five."

"Oh, Volodya," I sighed.

Shaking my head, I exited the dressing room and headed backstage. The mad monk and his dog stood beside Great Peter and the equine enthusiast, the stupid television people swarming them like Russian locusts.⁴⁹ Eyeing my dress, Great Catherine covered her mouth, giggling. Peter grinned broadly. "Ah, Little Volodya," he shouted, waving me over.

⁴⁹ Transcript #8

REPORTER: I'm backstage with the heavy favorites. Peter and Catherine, the fans are behind you. How are you feeling about Round 3?

PETER THE GREAT: Never better! We've trained like champions from day 1, and today we're bringing it all home.

CATHERINE THE GREAT: Yes, yes, we've had so much fun. Fans keep asking how we'll top Round 2, but it's like my friend Voltaire always says, "It is the flash which appears, the thunderbolt will follow." Today, we're bringing thunder.

REPORTER: Can't wait! Good luck to you both!

CATHERINE THE GREAT: *Merci, merci!*

Bristling, I approached the giant, disappointed to find him as vigorous and damp as ever. Why hadn't the poison worked?

"Little Volodya, we're toasting your imminent return to Siberia." He pointed to a small table with four empty shot glasses. My heart soared. Sure enough, he lifted the poisoned flask from his pocket and filled the glasses. So, he hadn't drunk the poison yet, but he would now. Everything might work after all.

"To victory, eh?" Peter sneered, offering me a glass.

I waved it off. "Putin is abstaining from alcohol."

"Ah, I forgot you only drink *on the rocks*," Peter laughed, turning to the mad monk. "And you, good sir?"

A knot tightened in my throat. Before Rasputin could answer, I intercepted the glass and lowered it to the table. "Rasputin is also abstaining for competition," I announced, and the mad monk didn't argue.

"Have it your way then," said Peter. He and the horse fucker clinked glasses and swallowed the shots. Licking their lips, they slammed the glasses back on the table. I smiled so they wouldn't suspect anything.

Finally, it was time. Rasputin and I waited backstage while Team Great entered to thunderous applause. Seasrising announced that, in the great tradition of Great Catherine's Bolshoi Ballet, they would perform a dance from the Nutcracker.

As the music began, he said some stuffy French words I didn't understand and then faded into the background. I peered through the curtain.

It was just like I'd hoped. Halfway through the song, the horse fucker was twirling around like some demented spinning top when Peter tried lifting her. His arms wobbled uncontrollably. Both tumbled to the floor.

The peasants and judges gasped.

The horse fucker regained footing first and tried helping Peter stand, but all his limbs were wobbling now. He collapsed again.

More audible gasps. A few of the horse fucker's young men dropped their flowers. Some Peter fans lowered their signs.

The mad monk tapped my shoulder. "What's happening, bro?"

"Putin is not knowing with certainty, but they are looking like sick," I said in my best innocent voice.

"What do you mean, sick? What do you like, see?"

My mouth went dry. Catherine had collapsed. The two autocrats were now writhing and clutching their throats in a pool of water, mouths foaming.

"It's hard...it's hard for Putin to describe. You have to see with own eyes."

The mad monk shook his head, muttering about a

headache and needing water. “Be quick,” I whispered, as he wandered off searching for a drink. “Putin is thinking we’ll be called any minute.”

I returned my attention to the stage, where Seasrising was kneeling over the inert bodies, feeling for pulses. Were they dead or just comatose? Either way, they were incapable of finishing the dance. Seasrising stood and raised his hands over his head, signaling the dance was over. A few peasants looked distraught, but others cheered when the judges flashed os. Peter’s dwarves rushed out with stretchers and hauled the bodies away.

“Well, that was certainly unexpected,” Seasrising told the peasants. “Up next then, our final two competitors!”

I turned to my side, but the mad monk hadn’t returned yet.

“Rasputin!” I hissed over my shoulder. “Let’s go! It’s time.”

“Hold on,” he called out. “Let me just finish this, liquid courage.”

I turned around just in time to see him set down the now emptied shot glass of poisoned vodka.

My heart froze. What had I done?⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Part of me believes this was Putin’s intention all along though he plays it off as a mistake. There can only be one Greatest Tsar of All Time, not two. Was John Shade also killed by mistake in *Pale Fire*? Did the Zemblan assassin Jakob Gradus intend to kill the deposed King Charles II instead? Did escaped asylum inmate Jack Grey


We were pushed onstage, and I squinted into bright lights. Was this really happening? I stared into the sea of blank peasant faces, and they stared back. I heard my name announced, saw the tech people cue the music.

*There lived a certain man in Russia long ago
He was big and strong, in his eyes a flaming glow
Most people looked at him with terror and with fear
But to Moscow chicks he was such a lovely dear*

We began our line dance. Unlike during practice, the mad monk had regained his balance, his steps firm and sure. Maybe he would be ok? Peter and Catherine had drunk larger shots, and Rasputin had survived all those assassination attempts in his first life, hadn't he? I flung off my dress, changing from Alexandra to Felix and allowing myself to hope.

We were halfway through the dance when he stumbled.

I tried pulling him up, but he only fell again, gasping and flailing like a Black Sea herring out of water. "Is someone doctor?" I called out. "Can someone help? Please!"

But no one stood. No one helped. Not even those wearing
"I  Rasputin" shirts. They simply stared, mesmerized.

intend to kill Judge Goldsworth? And what of Nabokov's father, himself mistakenly murdered? Or Boris Nemtsov, the opposition leader murdered within view of the Kremlin? Was that a mistake, too?

Dropping to my knees, I pried open Rasputin's foaming mouth. "Grigori, it is of most necessity that you are unsnapping from this," I said, lightly slapping his cheeks.

He continued choking. The smartypants sunglasses slid from his face.

For the first time since the accident, I stared directly into Rasputin's eyes. Dearest diary, I have seen many blinded men in my life but none like this. Wise men say the eyes are the windows to the soul. Well, his were mirrors. Literal eye-shaped mirrors.⁵¹ I stared and stared and only saw myself over and over and everything I'd done. I did this to his eyes, I told myself. I cost him his vision, his powers, his life. This must be how the other tsars felt when Rasputin stared into their souls, I now realized. Like they were seeing themselves for the very first time. *The man does not see*, Zelensky had once said of me, words I had not fully understood until now. *He has eyes but does not see*.

Dearest diary, is this what having a soul feels like? Did I at last have one?

Replacing Rasputin's glasses, I held his hand as he gasped for breath. "I'm right here," I whispered, knowing it wouldn't be long now. "Just listen to the music." I sang the last stanzas to

⁵¹ Possibly Putin was hallucinating. I can't see Rasputin's eyes in the grainy video footage, and no other accounts mention this. Still, use it. It's a good detail. The makeup people can figure something out.

him,

*Ra Ra Rasputin
Lover of the Russian queen
They put some poison into his wine
Ra ra Rasputin
Russia's greatest love machine
He drank it all and said, I feel fine*

*Ra ra Rasputin
Lover of the Russian queen
They didn't quit, they wanted his head
Ra ra Rasputin
Russia's greatest love machine
And so they shot him 'til he was dead*

Oh, those Russians

He was no longer trembling. I folded his hands across his chest. When the dwarves rushed out with the stretcher, I turned away. The peasants cheered as he was carried off, a slow clap at first, then a thunderous ovation that drove Rasputin from my mind.

The peasants were cheering for *me*!
I stood and bowed.

“No!” yelled the Jewboy, as the others held him back. “It isn’t right!”

The pussy rioters had tears in their eyes, Misha’s mouth had fallen open. Without bothering to wait for the final score, which wouldn’t have mattered, I walked to center stage and grabbed the gleaming trophy from Seasrising. When you want something badly enough, you must stop at nothing until it’s yours. I stared at my reflection in the polished gold. Dozens of Putins wearing the Russian nobleman’s uniform. Hundreds of Putins. Thousands of Putins. Millions and billions of Putins. I hoisted the trophy overhead, the peasants screaming with glee, Zelensky weeping, the announcer’s voice ringing over the deafening applause congratulating me and *me* alone, the last and greatest tsar of all time.

My dearest diary, would you believe the victory still feels hollow?⁵²

True, I’m very excited about my plans to restore the Russian Empire and take over the world. But as I sit in my dressing room, even as my adoring peasant fans pound the door, I can’t help thinking about how alone I am. Everyone who matters is gone.

The tsar with the heaviest soul of all time,

⁵² A moment of vulnerability here, a few eye drops in the actor’s eyes so they really glisten.

My dearest diary,

My heart only grows heavier as I write this final entry. Let me explain. Moments ago, I was sitting in my dressing room staring at my handsome reflection in the shining trophy and noting how badass I looked when I saw the craziest thing, a little pink nose poking over the rim. Yes, I'm ashamed to admit I ran away screaming like a little sissy girl.

It was a rat.⁵³

Not a simulation or holograph. A living, breathing rat with beady black eyes, twitching whiskers, flaring nostrils, and a slimy pink tail. Between his yellow teeth, he was nibbling a small Ukrainian flag like the one Zelensky had held, no larger than my hand, on a plastic stick. As that furry bastard scurried around my dressing room, hissing and slapping its tail, I dropped to my knees nearly in tears. Dearest diary, you must understand. The rat was possibly the last non-human animal left on our melting

⁵³ At first, I thought he was hallucinating this too, but as you know, the diary was discovered with a real rat corpse. Scientists have no explanation for the surprising, short-lived re-emergence of this extinct species.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ So I may have invented the rat, but it's good, right? Audiences love supernatural mysteries.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ And it might make a good spinoff? You could have scientists, priests, and philosophers all trying to explain how the rat became un-extinct. Some profound metaphysical stuff to fill our viewers' spiritual voids.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ And mine.

planet. Although I'm not religious, I crossed myself and said a prayer to Grandpa Putin and Little Russia in the Sky.

"Here, little ratty rat," I called, crawling after him. "Come to Papa Putin."

The furry bastard stopped scurrying and stared at me, twitching his whiskers. He stood still as I approached.

"Putin is going to pet you now," I said, still not believing it. Slowly, hand shaking, I slid a single finger down his coarse fur. It wasn't like petting Konni, my fingers passing through her like a shiver. This was real, physical. My dearest diary, it was exquisite! The most pleasurable sensation you can imagine, better even than murder or sex or clinching the presidency for the first time.

If only the mad monk were here enjoying it with me! If only *anyone* were here enjoying it with me.

Wiping away tears, I cradled the rat to my chest and kissed its head.

And then of course the damn thing dropped the flag and bit me.

Cursing, I asked myself how I could be so stupid and sentimental, trusting a rat. Now was my moment of truth. Was I the hunter or the hunted? The beaten-up little kid or the champion judo fighter who charged bullies twice his size? Dearest diary, the answer is always so obvious. In this harsh world, on our drowning planet, soul be damned, it's kill or be

killed. We are always alone. Like a badass tiger stalking prey, I backed the fucker into a corner, closed my eyes, and swung my trophy. A loud crack, metal colliding with bone, the spine snapping, a little ratty shriek. The slimy tail tensing and slackening. Ha! I wiped the disgusting rat guts from my beautiful trophy, lifted the rat by the tail, and flung open my dressing room door, ready to impress my adoring peasant fans with my latest conquest.

They were all gone.

All my fans and all the stupid television people. There was only an old man with a very long, white beard. He was wearing a crimson and gold robe, a sword in one hand and a crucifix in the other. Probably a lost Peter fan.

“Sir, that is certainly most disgusting,” said the old man, in an accent I couldn’t quite place. “But are you almost done? I’d like my dressing room now.”

Still holding the rat by the tail, I fumed. Who’d he think he was talking to me like that? Me! “*Your* dressing room?” I hissed.

Dearest diary, more than anything else, his next words destroyed me.

“Oh, have you not been watching? I’m Charlemagne from *The Emperor’s New Clothes*. I’m going to be the greatest and most stylish emperor of all time! And if you don’t mind my

asking,” the man smiled. “Who are you?”

I swallowed hard. After a long silence, I finally spoke, saying the words I knew were no longer true but hoping if I said them aloud, I could pretend a little longer. Pretend and delay the inevitable laughter.

“I am Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin,” I said. “The greatest tsar of all time.”

The greatest tsar of all time,
Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin