

The Hand that Rocks the Cradle

June 2022 – Commission

Chapter Six

What a difference a few weeks could make!

Katarina gazed absently out the little living-room window, half-lost in thought as she listened to the comfortable sounds of a homey Sunday afternoon. The quiet ticking of the clock on the mantel. The soft rise and fall of voices from her parent's bedroom: the low, reassuring rumble of her father's voice, and the lighter tones of her mother...

Yes, her father was back at last! And oh, what a reunion they'd had – welcoming him back with open arms, and tearful laughter, and the joy that comes when loving hearts are restored once again to one another.

There had been rumors these last weeks, too: rumors of the great and wonderful changes happening in the government, and of the dictator having lost his mind, and of the merciful benevolence of his wife who was setting all the prisoners free. No one seemed quite sure of what had happened, much less what was about to happen. But that was where today came in – a day that promised to become the most momentous day for the nation in many long years.

For in not five minutes' time, a public address to the nation was scheduled to begin. In it, so the rumor ran, all would be explained. Everything would become clear. The Supreme Leader and his wife would appear, and the rumors would finally be laid to rest.

Katarina suppressed a smile at the continued low murmur of voices from her parent's room. Her parents knew. They'd heard the news about the impending speech. And lost in one another's company as they were, they frankly couldn't be bothered. Dear Katya would fill them all in later, right? Of course she would. She was such a good, smart girl...

She rose and fetched the remote for the dilapidated old television, switching it on with a grimace at the striped and grainy picture. Such a pity they'd had to pawn the new TV during the Changes. But no matter. She could still make it work. She'd be absolutely sure to catch everything that happened...

Or at least, everything the public was supposed to know had happened.

It took a bit of time until the pomp and show had finally died down and the address could finally begin. But when it did, the breathless Katarina bent forward, her breath catching at the sight of the Supreme- *No, not the Supreme Leader's wife*, she had to remind herself, as the fiery red curls of the inimitable Julia flashed onscreen. She was Julia. The freedom fighter. The woman who had guided Katarina, aided her, encouraged her and smiled upon her and given her hope.

The speech was unlike any that the nation had ever seen. For there were many astonishing things to convey, and fearful rumors to quell. Julia regretted to announce that her husband, the Supreme Leader, had suffered in a truly extraordinary fashion the last few weeks. He had been feeling unwell this whole time, and his mental capacities were now proving to have been fatefully compromised. As the doctors were not hopeful that he would ever recover, there was nothing to be done but to step forward and ask the people for their understanding and support...

And there, before the entire nation, the most unexpected sight unfolded. For right before the eyes of Katarina and millions of her fellow citizens, Julia motioned to the fore her husband... or rather, what remained of him.

There he sagged, limp as a boned fish, strapped securely into what appeared to be an oversized pram. In his mouth there appeared to be a rubbery guard of some sort, strongly reminiscent of a baby's pacifier. He was wearing the sort of uniform one might expect of a mental patient: snug and secure and unflattering as it displayed not merely his distended belly, but also the uncanny bulge of some sort of protective clothing between his legs. And though the screen did poorly at conveying it, to the rapt Katarina it seemed that in his eyes was nothing but vacant discomfort.

It was Anton, the former Supreme Leader. The tyrant who had nearly ruined his country. The man who had taken her father, and who only a few weeks before she had reluctantly given such revolting sexual favors.

"You see what he has become," Julia resumed, after the murmur of shock and horror had subsided into titters of enthusiastic mirth. "And yes, I see that for many of you this is something to rejoice in. I will not tell you that you should not do so. No, for that is not my place. My place is to ask with you today: why is it that citizens of this country might be happy to see this man – my former husband – in such a state?"

And then, as Katarina watched with wide eyes, it began: the fiery core of Julia's speech that long after glowed strong and proud in the hearts of her fellow people. She spoke of the country that had thrived during good Alexei's reign. She spoke of the tragedy of his passing, and of the rise of Anton

to power, and of the means by which he had trampled upon every civil liberty and democratic institution he could. She called him what he was: a tyrant. And she spoke of the hardship the people had endured, and how some had resisted, and how that even in these hard times there was now a new light of hope.

Then she came at last, amid cheers from the rapturous audience, to the future. A referendum would be held in two weeks' time, she declared – a referendum in which the people would be asked who they would wish to lead their country for the next five years. For now, she would guide the ship of state, but she would step aside if the people so wished...

Amid cries of "No, never! Julia forever!" she smiled gratefully, and tossed her head, and waved for silence. For there was more to say: of the emptying of prisons, of diplomacy and the restoration of international trade, of domestic spending and financial assistance to the people through the sale of Anton's ill-gotten gains. She explained how the Cabinet would be reformed, and the system of checks and balances restored once more to the nation...

And then, she concluded with the personal. "You knew me as the Supreme Leader's wife for these past years," she confided, bending forward with earnest resolve. "But I am no longer that tyrant's wife. He is mentally unfit, as much to be a husband as he is to lead this nation. And so, I ask that you know me simply as Julia. Your champion, your servant, and your advocate." She bowed her head, then glanced back up and met the people's gaze with a glimmer of a smile. "Do not be concerned about your former leader. Rest assured that he will be given the very best attention: precisely the sort of attention fitting for a man of his position and character..."

Those words were echoing in Katarina's mind the next day as she stepped briskly off to the post office. Oh, how cleverly that Julia had worded it! Before her very eyes she could still see the vision she'd witnessed in that high-security medical facility: Anton, bound and struggling, moaning and gurgling as the doctors forced him into humiliatingly infantile submission. How it was possible for a grown man to have been so quickly reduced to the empty-minded, drooling state that she had seen yesterday on television, she could not have said. But it had clearly happened – and frankly, it couldn't have befallen a more deserving guy.

Hmm, what's this? Quite an important-looking letter!

Katarina's eyes widened as she stepped out of the little post office and she caught sight of the

sender. It was from the former dictator's residence – and written in flowing green ink. What on earth-? Was this-

It was. Her breath caught as she slipped the heavy, gilt-edged paper free and began scanning the beautiful script. Julia had written directly to her... in person. Thanking her for her assistance. Assuring her of- of gratitude. Repayment. Something about chances to interview for positions in the new government, should she and her family wish to take them. Encouragement to finish her degree at college... and suggestion that she might begin a simultaneous apprenticeship at a certain medical institution...

Katarina's heart was in her mouth, her heart pounding as she glanced up at the world once more – a world seemingly lit anew in warm sunlight. This was... incredible. Her father was back. Her mother was happy. Her own life, restored and better than ever.

On down the road she skipped, toward the grassy common through which she had slipped that dark night that now seemed so long ago. Here it lay before her: clear and bare and welcoming in the sunlight. A perfect place to exult, to think, to clear her mind and reread the letter and let the elation swell and burst within her...

Of course, even now she wasn't quite so naive as to forget reality. She had a nagging conviction that the dark days of the Changes might never truly vanish from her memory. She would never quite forget the horror and fear of dealing with Anton as she had, or of seeing and feeling the piggish breath of tyranny. But that wouldn't matter now, she reflected with thoughtful eyes. Not really. All those memories would eventually fade and soften, slipping gently into the past and leaving her – her father and mother's dearest Katya – to dream and hope and work her way forward into a bright new future.

She giggled and spun in giddy excitement in the morning sunshine. And really, who could say? If she took up that apprenticeship like Julia had suggested... maybe, just maybe, she'd find herself back in that absurd nursery. Looking down into the bleary eyes of the tyrant-turned-infant. Dealing out the mortifying treatment that justice demanded. Locking him away into his crib... an infantile prisoner helpless to resist anything she and Julia and the cadre of female nurses might choose for him...

Now that was a future to look forward to!

THE END