Samsar
(a history tale for our times)

A play in one act with Prologue, 26 scenes and Epilogue

by Greg Gorel

Cast Size: 7

Original Script

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Cast OF CHARACTERS

PAUL - at first a prince in exile, then the EMPEROR of Russia. Appearance: 30s. Very egocentric and impulsive. Nowadays would be diagnosed with a combination of OCD and ADHD. Megalomaniac. His moods change very quickly from ecstasy to fury to dejection and back. He creates an impression of living in his own world.

Count PALEN - (pronounced PA-len), his top advisor and Chief of Staff. Appearance: 40s or 50s. Calm, thoughtful and reserved.

LUBA, a servant in the palace, then Madame General Samsar. Young, naive, pretty.

NADYA, a servant in the palace, LUBA's roommate. Older and more experienced. Also plays CATHERINE the Empress.

Baron ARAKCHEYEV - (pronounced arak-CHEY-ev), District Military Commander. A typical sycophant and a yes-man with EMPEROR, obnoxious and cruel with all others. You may say he speaks with two different voices. Also plays UNIT COMMANDER, FIRST GUARD, SPEAKER.

UDACHKIN - (pronounced u-DACH-kin), a lieutenant. Appearance: early 20s. Naive and good-natured. Also plays VALET, MESSENGER, SECOND GUARD.

HEAD CLERK - A mid-level official, reporting to Palen. Also plays Udachkin's FRIEND, Paul's TUTOR, Arakcheyev's AIDE, THIRD GUARD, KABAK OWNER

Place of action: Saint Petersburg, Russia

Time of action: the end of the 18-th century

Author's preface.

This play is of mixed genre, some hybrid between the realistic historical theater and dark, grotesque comedy. Perhaps, absurd realism would be a good description. Two main characters and many of the events in the play are not only realistic, but actually historical. (This, by the way, includes an attempted campaign to invade India, as unbelievable as it was). As for the quirky imaginary events: even if they didn't happen as presented, they could have, if you stretch your imagination just a little bit. There is nothing fundamentally implausible about them under the social and political structures in place, and that is the scary part.

My purpose in writing this play was to show how living in the world of absolute power, blind obedience and constant fear can distort people's minds and cause an almost total disconnect from reality. In such a world a tiny clerical error can indeed have far reaching consequences. When, as in the play, a person gets unchecked power over others, but his mental capacity and personal traits make him totally unfit to lead them, all kinds of strange and scary things are bound to happen. When absolute monarchies worldwide were replaced with the constitutional and democratic rule, there were common expectations that such disasters would end. Those expectations were proven to be wrong.

Any look at the contemporary politics in the US and worldwide confirms that the play themes remain, sadly, very timely. Here is just one example. Very recently (2022) the US Supreme Court approved a deportation order for someone who accidentally checked the wrong box on his driver license application (https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/20-979_h3ci.pdf).

One more thing. Because it's not intended to be a truly historical play, the characters speak modern American English, not the aristocratic or diplomatic language of the 18-th century.

PROLOGUE

SPEAKER standing alone on stage

SPEAKER

Many years ago in some faraway land there lived a prince. He spent a lot of his time imagining himself an emperor. He dreamed about how great his huge country would become under his rule. How he'd be able to make everything - EVERYTHING - right, starting from day one. That he was absolutely sure of. The only question for him was: when would he become the emperor? And would it ever happen?

Lights fade and come up again.

(Palen and Paul in the reception room at Paul's estate)

VALET

Count Palen to see Your Highness (shows him in and leaves. Paul appears).

PALEN

Your Highness, it's a pleasure to see you. You look remarkably well.

PAUL

(impatiently). What did she say? Did she?...

PALEN

May I? (pointing to an armchair).

PAUL

Yes, yes, of course. Sit down. Sorry I'm being a little jumpy.

PALEN

(seated). I brought you the answer to your request from your mother The Empress. Unfortunately, Her Majesty still considers your return to the court undesirable at this time.

PAUL

At this time?! I haven't been to the court for, what, almost a decade? I know she wants me to die in here, in this prison. (gestures around the room).

PALEN
Your Highness, please. You live in a beautiful castle with devoted staff, taking care of your every need. (With a smile) You even have your own little army.

PAUL
Thirty soldiers. You call that an army?

PALEN
Well, a mini-army. By the way, when I saw some of them marching on my way here, I noticed that their uniforms look very different from the army standard.

PAUL
(his mood improves, smiling) Of course. Glad you were paying attention. It's my new design. I spent many months on it.

PALEN
Oh?

PAUL
Yes! And they fit much better, too. No wrinkles! Did you notice that?

PALEN
Uh... I didn't look that closely.

PAUL
You should have. An amazing spectacle. Should be the new standard.

PALEN
I see. (Pause)

PAUL
So... what's happening at the Court? Potemkin is still her... (makes a vulgar gesture with his middle finger)?

PALEN
Please...

PAUL
Fine, fine, her favorite. Is he?

PALEN
M-mm...

PAUL
I thought so. When I was a boy, he was always coming
(MORE)

PAUL (CONT'D)
to me with a nasty, condescending smile and messing up my hair with his fat, greasy hands. (Shaking with rage). Pretending to be friendly, you know. I simply couldn't stand it. (Beat) And I bet that, as favorites go, he's not the only one. She is enjoying herself over there, while I am here bored to death in this gloomy, depressing place. I hated it since the day she forced me to move.

Lights fade and come up on Paul having a memory flashback. Paul is with his mother Catherine, who is telling him something.

PAUL
(shocked) Mother, what are you saying? You want me to leave? You can't be serious.

CATHERINE
I'm very serious. You will be moving to your old estate in Gatchina.

PAUL
But why? Why do I need to go? What have I done?

CATHERINE
You know perfectly well what you've done. You burst into my cabinet meeting and interrupted the discussion I had with my advisers. You insulted them and called stupid the law we were discussing. You were spewing some nonsense about how when you are the emperor everybody will be so happy. And it's not the first time you're behaving like this. I simply can't have that.

PAUL
Well, maybe that law was very stupid, did you think about that? (Stony pause) Anyway, I don't want to go to that old crummy palace. It'll be like an exile. Let me stay here. Please. I promise I'll behave.

CATHERINE
The order is already signed. I think it'll be a perfect place for you. Peaceful and secluded. You'll be able to safely play out all your fantasies there.

PAUL
What fantasies, mother? What are you talking about?

CATHERINE
What fantasies? Your plan for all Eastern and Central Europe controlled by Russia. The military plans you kept trying to present to my generals. I can go on.

PAUL
But mother, you don't understand. They are not fantasies! They are perfectly...

CATHERINE
I give you three weeks to complete your move.
(Leaves)

Lights fade and come back up

PALEN
Your Highness, I understand how painful it was for you.

PAUL
Paul. Like in the old times.

PALEN
Paul.

PAUL
It was. And it's even worse now. Nowadays about the only entertainment I have is my valet's stories about his life in Turkey.

PALEN
(happy to change the subject) Really? Your valet is a Turk?

PAUL
(more relaxed, nods with a smile). He was captured during the Crimea campaign. He was an interpreter there, so he can speak Russian fluently. A great storyteller. Telling me all kinds of exotic tales about Turks. (With a smirk). He's my Scheherazade. Keeps me from feeling bored and lonely.

PALEN
I'm so glad to hear that, your Highness... ups... Paul. By the way, your oldest son Grand Prince Aleksandr asked me to send his regards.

PAUL
(his bad mood quickly returns, sarcastically). Oh, he
(MORE)

PAUL (CONT'D)
did, did he? M-mmm. Oh yes, I'm supposed to be very pleased. (Beat) Of course, he couldn't possibly come in person? He hasn't been here for more than a year!

PALEN
Your Highness, please, no reason to get angry. Your son is a very smart and attractive young man, with perfect manners, who enjoys great popularity at the court. You should be proud of him. As far as...

PAUL
(with fury) Proud!? Proud of a son who never showed any love for his father, oh forget that, not even proper respect? Who always shuns me when he can and insults me when he doesn't? The last time he came here, do you know what he said to me?

PALEN
No.

PAUL
That talking to me is like walking on eggshells. And that he 'feels scared around me'. Isn't that an insult?

PALEN
Your Highness, it's very regrettable that your relationship with...

PAUL
And I know exactly the source of all this. It's my dear mother, who is poisoning his mind, while pampering him at every opportunity. And you wanna know why she's doing it?

PALEN
Uh...

PAUL
You wanna know why she's doting on him so? Because she is grooming him to be her successor. It's all prearranged.

PALEN
You think so?

PAUL
I do. Otherwise why I am kept in here? Even though everyone knows that I'm the only legitimate successor.

PALEN
True. But, as you know, the will of the monarch also matters a great deal.

PAUL
'The will of the monarch'! And how legitimate is that monarch herself? How did she become an empress? You know what I'm talking about.

PALEN
(Silent).

PAUL
There. What right does she have to deny me? (Beat) And yet she will push me aside. I know it. I feel it in my bones.

PALEN
Your Highness, let me assure you that...

PAUL
(speaking fast and emphatically) And if you... if you think I'm simply driven by pure ambition, you'd be totally wrong! I'm thinking of Russia. The country is in terrible shape, and our current government is rotten and completely useless. I'm the only one who can save it from the total collapse.

PALEN
Is that so?

PAUL
Yes! Because I possess something very special inside me. It'll always tell me what to do. How to handle any difficult situation.

PALEN
What is it, Your Highness?

PAUL
Uh... I'm not sure how to describe it. A special vision perhaps. Or - more like a special vibe. But I *know* I have it. That's why I know I would be a great emperor. Don't you agree?

PALEN
Uh... (with an uneasy smile) I haven't really thought of that, Your Highness.

PAUL
Oh, stop it! I'm sure you have. Tell me. (Observing
(MORE)

PAUL (CONT'D)
Palen, quick change from excitement to gloom). You... You don't think so, do you?

PALEN
Uh...

PAUL
Why? Tell me why! Is it because I'm... different from others?

PALEN
(reluctantly, trying not to hurt his feelings) Paul, you know that you are often very impulsive. A good ruler must have a steady hand.

PAUL
(after a pause) Well, if it's true, then... why don't you help me with this? To be uh, steady. Remember how when I was growing up you were like a father figure to me? Helped me to stay out of trouble?

PALEN
Oh yes. I remember well.

PAUL
Well, how about you do it for me again? (Beat, then with a sudden inspiration) Wait! Something brilliant just came to me! I have a proposal for you.

PALEN
A proposal? Yes?

PAUL
I know you have influence in the Court. Promise me that after she's gone you'll do whatever you can to help me become the emperor. And I promise something to you too. As soon as I'm the emperor, you will be my right hand, my chief of staff, my top advisor about anything. (Beat) But what's the matter? Why do you look so puzzled?

PALEN
I'm sorry, Your Highness. All this is a little unexpected.

PAUL
Why? It shouldn't be. So. Do you accept?

PALEN
(reluctantly) Uh... Very well.

Paul gets up and reaches across the table to offer a handshake. Palen, after some hesitation, accepts it.

PAUL
There. I now can see how we will change the Russian history. Together we... (Pause)

Paul's Valet shows up at the door with a bow).

PAUL.
(angrily) What is it?

VALET
I beg your pardon, Your Highness. You told me to come at this time with my next story. Should I leave?

PAUL
Ah. (takes a watch out of his pocket, checks the time). The time is correct. Hm. (To Palen) Why don't you stay and listen? He is usually very entertaining.

PALEN
(after a shocked pause, getting up) No, thank you, I must be going. It's getting late.

PAUL
Good bye. (Palen leaves. When he's at the door) Remember your promise!

Lights fade and come up again. Palen is standing alone on stage. The sign above says: Excerpts from Palen's Diary.

PALEN
I'm still thinking of that visit with Paul the other day. He I'm sure thinks himself very smart that he caught me off guard and managed to squeeze that silly promise out of me. Poor doofus. I've always had a soft spot for him. (Pause) I can't imagine him becoming the successor. Still, if it ever happens, if he's the emperor somehow... should I then take his offer? That'd be a hard decision for me to make. I am not young, not very ambitious, I greatly value my peace of mind and my independence. Why would I want the constant tension, high visibility, the inevitable envy from others and maybe even a potential danger? (Pause). The only reason to do it would be for, as the philosophers call it, the common good. It is

(MORE)

PALEN (CONT'D)
better for the country and the people when the emperor's advisor is not one of those rapacious courtiers, who are only after money and influence. At least the guidance I provide will be free from ulterior motives. And God knows he'll need a lot of guidance. Otherwise (shaking his head) there's no telling what he may do.

Lights fade and come up again. Majestic music sounds. A projection shows someone invisible putting a crown on Paul's head. Then lights fade.

(The perfect music for this would be the beginning of the fourth movement of Sergey Prokofiev's Lieutenant Kije suite).

Scene 1

The Emperor's Palace. Palen and Emperor. Palen walks in.

VALET
Count Palen to see Your Majesty.

EMPEROR
(cheerfully) Glad to see you, Count. Come in, take a seat.

PALEN
(sits down and speaks with a studied sad expression) Majesty. Please, allow me to offer my deepest condolences to you regarding a tragic untimely death of your mother the Empress.

Emperor frowns, grunts and makes a wave-away gesture.

PALEN.
(expression returned to normal) And then to congratulate Your Majesty Emperor Paul the First and wish you a long and successful reign.

EMPEROR.
(with a smirk) That's more like it.

They look at each other. Palen shows a diplomatic smile.

EMPEROR
Do you remember the conversation we had some time ago?

PALEN.
Yes.

EMPEROR
Then you must have a pretty good idea why I invited you to come right after the coronation.

PALEN
Uh... perhaps.

EMPEROR.
No need to be diplomatic here. As promised, you'll be my chief advisor. I want you to start immediately. We have so much to do, don't we?

PALEN.
Pause) Majesty. I consider your offer a great honor. (beat) But I must tell you that I feel a certain apprehension before accepting it.

EMPEROR
Apprehension!? Why?

PALEN
Permit me to explain. The advisor to any king will inevitably encounter situations when his advice may not please the king, it may not be what the king wants or expects to hear. And yet in many cases his advice will be the only right course of action. Will the advisor always be able to offer it without fear and with confidence that it will be heeded? That, Majesty, is the source of my hesitation and my concern.

EMPEROR
(dismissively) Oh, no, no, no. You don't need to be concerned about that. Not at all.

PALEN
I am so glad to hear Your Majesty say it. Our best poet in one of his poems has a line 'The truth to
(MORE)

PALEN (CONT'D)
czars delivered with a smile.' ([1] - see comments at the end) (Smiling gingerly). May I hope that I too shall be able to deliver it to Your Majesty with a smile instead of fear and anxiety?

EMPEROR
Certainly. And I will be listening with a smile - see? (He bares his teeth and makes an artificial smile). (Beat). Here, let's test it now. Give me advice about something.

PALEN
(Pause) Very well. Since you have became Emperor, you've received many letters with congratulations and best wishes. I would like to present to you an interesting one sent to me on your behalf by one German philosopher. He calls for you to be (reads from the letter) 'an enlightened, benevolent ruler in the traditions of the late emperor Frederick the Great. As an enlightened monarch, you will strive to improve life conditions of all your subjects. You will provide education and cultivate morality for them.'

EMPEROR
(speaking fast) That's what I've been saying all along. What the country needs is a New Moral Order based on the universal principles of virtue. Don't you agree?

PALEN
(pause) Not completely. You see, such broad all-encompassing principles always sound good in theory but can be dangerous in practice. The Jacobins, for example, made very similar declarations to justify their reign of terror. They even used almost the same words.

EMPEROR
What? No!

PALEN
Alas, it's true.

EMPEROR
Hm. But then how can we know who's really moral and virtuous? What's your view on that?

PALEN
My view, Majesty, is that we should know them, so to
(MORE)

PALEN (CONT'D)
speak, by their fruit.

EMPEROR
By fruit?! Why?

PALEN
It's in Matthew 7. Remember, it talks about good and bad trees, and how a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. (Seeing Emperor's puzzled face) It means judging by results.

EMPEROR
uncertainly) Oh. Of course, of course... But as far as the fruit from my tree, you wouldn't need to worry about it. Right?

PALEN
It'll be my duty to make sure of it, Your Majesty.

EMPEROR
That's good. Anything else your philosopher says?

PALEN
(continues reading) 'All your actions will be reasonable and follow the natural law. You will always be (speaking with emphasis) steady and steadfast in achieving your goals, never acting on a whim. Rulers like you would be the best argument against republican ideas, unfortunately spreading all over the world'.

EMPEROR
He's right, of course. About rulers like me, I mean. But spreading all over the world? I don't think so. After all, such abomination exists only in France.

PALEN
Your Majesty forgets about the North American colonies that also proclaimed a republic with no role for royalty. And even in England itself the king's power is now restricted. We live in very challenging times.

EMPEROR
Well, one thing I know: it would never happen here, when I am the father of the nation. (Pause) Going back to France, what happened there? Some change of government?

PALEN
Yes. The directory is dismissed, and Napoleon Bonaparte has declared himself the First Consul and the head of the French government. Actually, it's no less than a coup d'état.

EMPEROR
(making an angry gesture). What? That insolent little man? The one who imprisoned the pope?

PALEN
Yes, Your Majesty.

EMPEROR
Hard to believe. The whole thing is absurd. France, run by a bunch of commoners led by a Corsican lieutenant? They'll collapse very quickly, don't you think?

PALEN
I'm not so sure. So far he's not suffered any defeats.

EMPEROR
Well, we have our troops in Switzerland and Italy. I know he dreams himself a military genius but I'm sure together with Austria and England fighting on our side we'll soon cut him down to size.

PALEN
Uh... I hope and pray Your Majesty is right.

EMPEROR
I'm sure I am. That's enough for today. I feel a little tired.

Palen bows and leaves. Lights fade and come up on Palen standing alone on stage. The sign above says: Excerpts from Palen's Diary.

PALEN
Once I decided to take his offer, I was wondering what I could do to get him to listen and pay attention. And then this idea of a letter from some phantom German philosopher came to me. Perhaps, if it comes from a foreigner and a philosopher, he'll take it more seriously. It will have more weight with him. (Pause, a chuckle). Of course, I had to rewrite it a few times to get just the right combination of
(MORE)

PALEN (CONT'D)
substance and flattery. The question is, have I succeeded? Will at least some of the letter's advice stay with him? Or the only thing he's going to remember will be the part about 'rulers like me'? (Beat) We'll see...

Scene 2

(Palen and Emperor)

PALEN
Your Majesty looks tired today.

PAUL
I did not sleep well. I was having a terrible flashback from that day. (Pause. Palen looks quizzically). The day my father was assassinated.

PALEN.
Oh. How old were you - seven, I think?

EMPEROR
I was eight. But I remember it as if it were yesterday. Every detail. I was playing with my soldiers when he came.

PALEN
He?

EMPEROR
My tutor.

Paul is having a flashback from his childhood. Lights fade and come up on him playing with tin soldiers when his TUTOR comes in.

TUTOR
Your Highness, may I ask you to put your soldiers aside for a moment?

PAUL
Why?

TUTOR
I have something important to tell you. The Emperor your father has just abdicated the throne.

PAUL
What? I don't understand, abdicate.

TUTOR
It means that he's no longer the emperor.

PAUL
Why?

TUTOR
I'm not in the position to answer that question, Your Highness.

PAUL
Fine, I'll ask him. (Loudly) Daddy! (To the tutor). Take me to him.

TUTOR
It cannot be done, I am afraid.

PAUL
Why? What's going on!?

TUTOR
I'm going to ask your mother the Empress to explain it to you.

CATHERINE
(walks in). I have sad news, my son. Your father killed himself today.)

PAUL
What? Why-y??

CATHERINE
Uh... I believe he was mentally unstable.

PAUL
Huh?

CATHERINE
Weak in the head. You can say a little crazy (She moves her finger around her temple).

PAUL
looks at her for a long time, then screams). YOU - ARE - LYING!!

Paul starts attacking her and smashing things around him

CATHERINE
Stop. Stop that right now. Stop, I said. (to Tutor). Get me some draught to calm him down. Quick.

TUTOR
There.

Paul makes a choking sound as his mouth is being forced open.

End of flashback. Lights fade and come up

PALEN
You have my deepest sympathy, Majesty. What a horrible thing to experience for a child.

Pause. The Emperor hesitates before speaking again.

EMPEROR
About my father... I want to ask you something but only if you promise to tell me the truth. Will you?

Palen nods.

EMPEROR
Was he... was the late emperor really my father? You must know.

PALEN
(after a pause, slowly) In all honesty I don't, Your Majesty. I heard the same rumors you did, but beyond that I don't really know.

EMPEROR
Then I probably will die not knowing... Not knowing who my father was: the emperor or one of his assassins.

Palen is sympathetically silent. Pause

EMPEROR
Anything else?

PALEN
Just a small matter. On my way here I noticed our Dutch ambassador, waiting for an audience with you. He was suddenly recalled back to St Petersburg and arrived today after a week's journey. He doesn't know why he's here.

EMPEROR
Dutch... Oh yes, I remember. When I talked to him
(MORE)

EMPEROR (CONT'D)
during the coronation, he had a kind of evasive look, which I didn't like. I had a feeling that perhaps he is not completely loyal to me.

PALEN
Sire, I can assure you, he's totally loyal. It could be just his manner. I vouch for him.

EMPEROR
Hmm... All right, if you say so... But I prefer when you feel their loyalty and devotion instantly. Without any doubts.

PALEN
Perfectly understandable. But Majesty, surely you don't expect a nobleman and a senior diplomat to act like a dog devoted to his master?

EMPEROR
I don't?

PALEN
Well, you shouldn't.

EMPEROR
(smiling amusingly) Hm... Perhaps, you're right. But. frankly, when I hear many of them act like this, it feels very... uh.... comfortable? Gets me to relax. (Beat). It's like - don't laugh - like tasting some really good raspberry jam with my morning tea. By the way, did you notice it wasn't that good last couple of days?

PALEN
(pause) Then I can tell the ambassador over there that...

EMPEROR
Yes, absolutely. Tell him to go back right away. Enough time has already been wasted.

Palen raises his eyebrows, bows and leaves).

Scene 3

(Palen and Emperor)

PALEN
Your Majesty looks very happy today. Good news from somewhere?

EMPEROR
(smiling) Good guess (Shows a letter). Listen to this. 'The knights of the Sovereign Order of Malta humbly beseech Your Majesty to become their Grand Master and Protector'. And a bit later, 'we humbly request Your Majesty's help in restoring our order in its original location on the island of Malta'. (Keeps reading silently for a moment). Looks like the British authorities have some qualms over this. (Reads a bit more). And the end is simply lovely: 'May God bless your wise rule and provide divine guidance to all your undertakings'.

PALEN
(in a lukewarm voice) Very nice.

EMPEROR
Very nice, that's all you can say?! Me as the Grand Master and Protector. A celestial sound.

PALEN
Well, the truth is that not many people know or care about the Order of Malta. But anyway, what have you decided?

EMPEROR
What? Naturally, I accept with gratitude. Draft a response to that effect. And have our British ambassador write a memorandum to the British, strongly supporting the full restoration of the Order on the island. Make sure to mention that as their Grand Master and Protector I take personal interest in the matter.

PALEN
Your Majesty, I'm not sure it will be good diplomacy. The British may take it as an interference into their internal affairs. It's their island, after all.

EMPEROR
What, after I stated my full support? Of course, they'll agree. I'm sure of it.

PALEN
Uh... What if we instead just give the Order some money - say, 5000 rubles?

EMPEROR
Good idea. Give them ten. But do have the ambassador write that memo.

(Palen sighs, gives a nod).

PALEN
Very well.

EMPEROR
See, this kind of thing is what being an emperor should be all about. Making everybody happy. This and making new laws, of course. Laws - that reminds me I have something to ask you. I remember that in my youth members of the court had a strange nickname for me: the lawmaker. I often overheard, when I was coming in: 'Shh, the lawmaker is here'. Do you have any idea where that came from?

PALEN
(reflecting). It may have started on that occasion I remember. It was a ball; the empress discussed with us some new law recently introduced; and you being a teenager were quite bored, I imagine, and didn't care to dance as you were supposed to. Instead, you came close to us, listened for a bit and then announced very loudly: 'I think this law is very stupid. Just makes people miserable. When I am the emperor, I will make laws that make everybody happy. You'll see' and looked defiantly at all of us.

EMPEROR
All right! (thumb up gesture). So, what happened?

PALEN
(with a chuckle) You were escorted out immediately. But after that the empress started calling you in a conversation 'our little lawmaker', and I suppose the word got around.

EMPEROR
(angrily) It's so typical of her. She always put me down. Never took anything I said seriously. All my life. You have no idea how much it hurt.

PALEN
(quietly and with sympathy) I understand.

PAUL
And others too. Every time I showed up at the court, they were giving me dirty looks, sneering, gossiping.
(MORE)

PAUL (CONT'D)
You were the only one who spoke to me normally, who I felt cared for me.

PALEN
I did, Your Majesty. And I still do. You were a very unhappy boy.

EMPEROR
(expression changed to confident) But look what we have now. The old witch is dead, my so-called fantasies have become realities and my laws do make my people happy. A total triumph, in short.

PALEN
(after a pause) Well, it's absolutely true that fortune in history can be very fickle. There are so many examples of that.

EMPEROR
A fickle fortune? More like a divine justice after all those years of my suffering! After long dark night, finally, a beautiful sunrise. Don't you think so?

PALEN
Uh... It's a pleasure to see Your Majesty in such a good mood.

EMPEROR
I certainly am. I feel great today.

PALEN
Majesty, permit me to remind you that tonight your Imperial Theater presents a first performance of a new play *The Snitch* by Wassily Kapnist, one of our finest writers. Perhaps, you would like to attend?

EMPEROR
Theater! I haven't been to the theater since I was a boy. A new play, you say? What kind?

PALEN
It's a comedy in 5 acts. About a corrupt judge.

EMPEROR
Ah. So you've read it?

PALEN
Yes.

EMPEROR
Is it moral? I cannot allow anything against my New Moral Order.

PALEN
Totally moral, Your Majesty.

EMPEROR
Good. I will come. See you at the theater.

Palen bows and leaves

Scene 4

Palen hurriedly walks into Emperor's loge in the theater. Palen's expression is of worry and concern. Emperor is furious.

PALEN
Majesty, I was told that after the 3-rd act you ordered to stop the show and put the author under arrest. Wh...

EMPEROR
Your scoundrel author will tomorrow be on his way to Siberia, and I have only one regret: that I didn't have him go there on foot. And you, perhaps you would like to keep him company?

PALEN
But why, what's the matter?

EMPEROR
How dare you ask me that! Were you trying to mock me?

PALEN
(after small pause, scared but with dignity) I... I must insist that you tell me the reason for your wrath, because I am completely unaware of what could cause it.

EMPEROR
Unaware? Didn't you tell me that the play is totally moral?

PALEN
Yes. I did.

EMPEROR
And now I see this villain, this so-called judge sentencing an innocent man after accepting a bribe and bragging about it! You call that moral? a good example? Answer me!

PALEN
(sigh of relief) Now I understand. But Majesty, that's not how it ends! The villain will be unmasked in Act Four and deservedly punished in Act Five. I assure you that at the end the virtue will triumph.

EMPEROR
How can it be? It looks pretty hopeless for this poor man now.

PALEN
Ah, but this, Majesty, if I may say so, is a sign of a good play. That's what the author wanted you to believe at this moment.

EMPEROR
(considering) Well. Maybe for you it's good. For sensitive people like me it's painful.

PALEN
How do you mean?

EMPEROR
Say, you're a highly moral person sitting over there. And you *don't* know how the play ends. When you see the innocent man dragged to jail and hear that low-life judge brag how smart he is, won't you feel offended? Outraged even? For moral, sensitive people to see such injustice is simply intolerable.

PALEN
But uh...

EMPEROR
I think I know what we need. In all my theaters, before any show starts, announce from the stage that any evildoers and slanderers in the show will fail miserably and won't escape justice. Knowing that would make the whole experience much more relaxed and enjoyable. Right?

Palen initially wants to object, but then thinks better of it and nods

EMPEROR
(briskly) Good. Tell them they can continue with the show. And after it's over, come back. I'll tell you what I think.

(Palen nods, leaves. Lights fade and come back. Palen entering).

EMPEROR
(smiling) There you are. Excellent play it turned out. Especially the way they revealed the bastard's true identity - very clever. (Now with a smirk) Between us, I admit that I may've slightly overreacted earlier. Wasn't as *steady* as you always remind me to be. (Beat) So, go ahead, release the author, and tell him that the emperor is very pleased and wants him to continue writing in the same manner. Give him some diamond ring from the treasury as a reward. (Beat) And if he asks why he was put in jail, you can describe to him what the first three acts made me go through. I'm sure he will understand. I really don't want him to feel bad over this.

Palen looks at Emperor, bows and leaves. End of scene

Scene 5

(Servant Quarters at the Palace. A simple room, two beds, two chairs, a table. Nadya is sitting at the table. Luba knocks at the door. She is timid, nervous, eager to please).

NADYA
Who is it? Come in.

LUBA
Good afternoon. I am Luba... a new servant at the court. They said that I'd be your roommate.

NADYA
Nadya. Sit down. (Points to a chair and observing her). A new servant, eh? (Luba nods) How long have you been in the capital?

LUBA
Uh... Only five weeks.

NADYA
I thought so. You look awfully fresh. (Beat) Did they tell you what you're gonna be doing?

LUBA
Serving tea mostly. And deserts.

NADYA
Sweet. You probably will be serving with me then. In the same room. I've been a waitress there for five years now.

LUBA
(smiling) Oh, that's good. I'm sure I can learn many things from you. Because I'm not, uh, very experienced.

NADYA
Maybe not, but you're pretty. They liked it. Trust me on that.

LUBA
Oh no, I'm not.

NADYA
(flirting) You are. And you know it, too.

LUBA
Ah... (blushing and giggling) Anyway, I was so glad when they agreed to take me! Even though I couldn't give any references.

NADYA
How come? You don't know anybody in the city?

LUBA
No. Well... one. But, uh... I couldn't mention him at the interview.

NADYA
Let me guess. A boyfriend?

LUBA
M-mm...

NADYA
(looking at her and shaking her head) Just five weeks, and already a boyfriend? And looking so innocent. As they say, still waters run deep.

LUBA
(taken aback). No, no! Please, don't think that I am... He promised to marry me! He said next month or maybe the month after.

NADYA
Sure, sure. The month after. (Beat) Who is he anyway?

LUBA
A lieutenant. Here in the regiment.

NADYA
Right. (Beat) Where do you two meet, I wonder? (sarcastically). Walking on the palace promenade hand in hand?

LUBA
(chortles) No, no. (Beat) You promise you won't tell anyone? See, Fedya knows this place behind the barracks, it's like a little cave. You can't really see it from the outside. He swears nobody else knows about it. We are very, very careful. Honestly.

NADYA
You better be. And don't let him do anything to get you in trouble. Know what I mean?

LUBA
(Embarrassed silence)

NADYA
You did? Uh-uh.

LUBA
Uh... Just once. But... he gave me something to chew right after and said it'd take care of it.

NADYA
Chew *what*?

LUBA
I don't remember. Some herb. Very bitter.

NADYA
And that's all you did?

LUBA
Y-yes...

NADYA
(stares at her in disbelief, then gets up and
(MORE)

NADYA (CONT'D)
gestures Luba). Come on.

LUBA
Where?

NADYA
Just come with me. I'm gonna show you something.

LUBA
What?

NADYA
What you need to do. If it's not too late. (Luba is reluctant). Come on! I don't bite.

Leaves the stage, Luba follows.

Scene 6

(Palen and HEAD CLERK, then Palen and Emperor)

Count Palen is checking his watch impatiently, taking it in and out of his pocket. Finally, he angrily gets up and at that moment hears a high, wailing voice begging "Please... please, sir... Really quick" and a thunderous reply "You go to hell really quick. His Excellency is waiting. Wanna go back to the barracks? Can be arranged." Next minute the HEAD CLERK, breathing heavily, runs into Palen's office and puts a document on his desk.

PALEN
What's going on?! I'm going to be late for the emperor because of you!

HEAD CLERK
Uh... My deep apologies, Your Excellency. Here are the orders for the regiment. One of my clerks spilled some ink, ruined a sheet and had to start all over. He says that because he was in a rush there might be one or two errors. Can they be corrected now?

PALEN
(glancing at his watch again). No time. We're already late. Find out what they are and report to me later
(MORE)

PALEN (CONT'D)
today.

Gestures him to leave and starts walking briskly. Lights fade and come up. Palen is walking into The Emperor's Reception Hall.

PALEN
(out of breath) Good morning, Your Majesty.

EMPEROR
Good morning, Count. You're 7 minutes late. (gestures to a chair)

PALEN
(getting seated) My humblest apology, Your Majesty.

EMPEROR
Any news from the war?

PALEN
Sadly, yes. Our Austrian allies just suffered a total defeat in the battle of Marengo.

EMPEROR
(angrily) That little man again?

PALEN
That's right. We now need to revise our strategy in regard to our own troops in Switzerland. They may be in danger of being separated from the allies and, as a consequence,...

EMPEROR
But why did they lose? They weren't supposed to. Didn't you say last time that they had more troops? And anyway, Arakcheyev told me the other day that as long as you attack Napoleon the correct way, he is bound to lose.

PALEN
Sorry, who did?

EMPEROR
Arakcheyev. The new commander of St. Petersburg's military district.

PALEN
Ah. Well. (sarcastically). It's a great pity then that the Austrians did not learn that in time before the battle.

EMPEROR
You think so? I think what we need is to have better allies. That is the problem. I don't want to be stuck with losers.

PALEN
I hope Your Majesty does not mean it. You often say how highly you value loyalty. What would you say if we lost a battle and our allies abandoned us because of that?

EMPEROR
Well, I'm not sure it's the same thing... But anyway, let's change the subject to something more cheerful. What do you hear people say about our new uniform?

PALEN
(with slightly pursed lips. He knew that was coming). Everybody thinks it looks great, Your Majesty.

EMPEROR
A piece of art, isn't it? Do you know what the Spanish ambassador told me yesterday?

PALEN
What?

EMPEROR
That last Sunday he watched a parade and it never looked as splendid as now.

PALEN
Happy to hear that. Um... my duty, however, forces me to mention that many officers find it a little awkward to wear. As a matter of fact, one division commander wrote that...

EMPEROR
(The smile is gone, replaced by an angry outburst). Awkward?! In the old one they looked like they are marching inside body bags! Everything under the late empress and her favorites was very loose. Everything: morals, discipline, and yes, the uniforms, too. (getting more and more agitated and out of control) We need to clean up everything from that woeful time, if we are serious about restoring Russia's greatness. I've been saying this from day one.

PALEN
Your Majesty, since you became the emperor, haven't you changed many things already?

EMPEROR
Not enough. Much more must be done. (Now speaking in a different tone, plaintive and resentful) And this uniform - you know how much time we spent on it. We perfected every detail. I myself tried it on so many times. And now you say - awkward?

PALEN
But you really mustn't treat the matter as your personal...

EMPEROR
(theatrically) I do not wish to talk about it any further. This conversation is painful to me. (Beat) Anything else for today?

PALEN
No.

EMPEROR
Good bye then.

Palen gets up, begins to leave and then turns around.

PALEN
My apologies, Majesty, I almost forgot. May I ask you to sign these?

EMPEROR
What's that? (pointing to the paper held by Palen)

PALEN
These are the orders for the officers of the 3rd regiment of Saint Petersburg district, ready for your signature. (Shows him the paper). As usual, there are three columns from left to right: new additions, promotions or demotions and those deceased or otherwise removed from service.

EMPEROR
Let me see who is new. We need fresh blood. (goes down the list). Sam-SAR? Who's that?

Here and throughout the play Samsar is pronounced with the stress on the second syllable SAR).

PALEN
looking in) A new lieutenant, Your Majesty.

EMPEROR
An exotic name. Almost like some czar. (Palen smiles and snickers tensely) What do you know of him? French?

PALEN
Uh... I believe so, Your Majesty.

EMPEROR
All right. Here is my order. Put him under secret observation and report to me in a week. He may be a French spy.

PALEN
It will be done.

Emperor signs the paper and hands it back).

PALEN
Will that be all, Your Majesty?

EMPEROR
For now.

Palen bows and leaves the room.

Scene 7

Palen at his desk. The HEAD CLERK comes in, carrying some papers.

HEAD CLERK
Your Excellency, I found out what the errors were in the report for the 3rd regiment.

PALEN
Well?

HEAD CLERK
In the first column, listing new arrivals, there is one extra entry at the very end, which shouldn't be there.

(Points to a line in the sheet).

PALEN
(looking). Samsar?!

HEAD CLERK
Yes, Your Excellency. The clerk says he started writing 'Samsaritsky', but then noticed that the name was already there.

PALEN
Damn it!

HEAD CLERK
S-so sorry, Excellency. Uh... Is it that bad?

PALEN
Never mind. Anything else the clerk says?

HEAD CLERK
He also says that, because he didn't have time to check properly, he might have accidentally put someone in the wrong column. But he's not sure.

PALEN
Who?

HEAD CLERK
Doesn't remember with certainty.

PALEN
(Beat) Doesn't really matter. The emperor signed the order, it cannot be changed. We'll have to live with it.

HEAD CLERK
Yes, Your Excellency. (Pause) Your Excellency?

PALEN
Yes?

HEAD CLERK
The clerk begs, please, give him any punishment, but do not dismiss him. His wife just gave birth to a child.

PALEN
Fine. Give him something mild, (considering), say two days in solitary on bread and water. But what is most important...

HEAD CLERK
(interrupting, quickly) Thank you so much, Your Excellency. May God reward you for your kindness.

PALEN
(Slowly and emphatically). What is most important: what occurred is a top state secret. Nobody talks about it. Is that understood?

HEAD CLERK
I solemnly swear...

PALEN
Good. Go.

The HEAD CLERK leaves. Palen sits at his desk, shaking his head.

PALEN
A name in the wrong column, even if it did happen, doesn't concern me, because what is the worst thing that could happen? Someone will not get their promotion in time, that's all. But the Emperor, suddenly picking out Samsar out of the whole list... ugh. (Beat) I just hope that by the time of the next meeting he'll forget all about it.

Scene 8

(Udachkin sits on a bench, looking restless. He has a letter in his hand. His Friend walks in).

HIS FRIEND
Hey there.

UDACHKIN
(absent-mindedly) Oh, hi.

HIS FRIEND
(sitting next to him) Are you ok? You look kind of restless.

UDACHKIN
(taken aback). I do? I don't know.

HIS FRIEND
What's this? Is that from home? (points to the letter)

UDACHKIN
Yeah. From my mom.

HIS FRIEND
You're lucky you still have your mom. Mine is gone. What does she say? Good news?

UDACHKIN
Well, uh, good and bad. In the last letter mom wrote that my younger sister met someone she really liked. And the whole family liked him, too. Now they got engaged and want to get married, but don't have enough money for the wedding. So mom asks if this month I could possibly send them 10 rubles more. She says for a simple wedding even extra 5 may be enough.

HIS FRIEND
Oh, so you support them?

UDACHKIN
Yeah. They have almost nothing, and I'm the only son.

(Pause. Udachkin in an agitated state turns his head around, as if looking for someone)

HIS FRIEND
What are you cranking your head for? Looking for somebody?

UDACHKIN
Uh... You know that guy who normally brings in orders for the whole regiment once a month? I think today's the day.

HIS FRIEND
Yeah, I saw him in the morning. What about him?

UDACHKIN
(excitedly) You did? So the orders are already in?

HIS FRIEND
Probably. Why? You expecting something?

UDACHKIN
(pause) Can you keep a secret?

HIS FRIEND
Sure. What?

UDACHKIN
Our commander told me the other day that he had recommended me for promotion. To the First lieutenant.

HIS FRIEND
No kidding. Really?

UDACHKIN
Yeah. He said that, if the promotion approved, it should come with the next order for the whole regiment. And the extra pay is 20 rubles a month. Will make huge difference for the family.

HIS FRIEND
Well, good. Congrats.

UDACHKIN
I'm still very nervous that it won't be approved.

HIS FRIEND
Eh, don't be ridiculous. They would not question what was sent from the unit. Come on, they don't even know who you are or I am or anyone here. It's like a big machine stamping papers: chok, chok, chok (doing a hand gesture).

UDACHKIN
Yeah, I know. You're probably right. I just can't help it. (smiling apologetically) Don't wanna do anything to scare my luck away.

HIS FRIEND
(smiling back) Ah, stop being such a worry-wart.

(They give each other high-fives. The Unit Commander walks in. Both Udachkin and his friend quickly get up and salute).

UNIT COMMANDER
(to Udachkin) There you are. I was looking for you. (Gestures to Friend). You can go.

Udachkin's friend leaves, quickly glancing back at him before leaving the stage.

UNIT COMMANDER
(Takes out a paper). I received the Emperor's order for the regiment. It states here that second lieutenant Udachkin is to be separated from the service for the reason of being deceased.

UDACHKIN
De-cease?

UNIT COMMANDER
Dead. You must leave the unit immediately.

UDACHKIN
But sir, uh... it's a mistake. I mean...

UNIT COMMANDER
Mistake!? See for yourself. (showing him the paper) Is that your name? Right here, in black and white.

UDACHKIN
(looks at the order). No-o-o!

The Commander looks at him and turns away.

UDACHKIN
Sir, please, sir! Talk to me, sir! I... I am not dead!

UNIT COMMANDER
(turns back). What did you do?

UDACHKIN
N-nothing, sir. I swear.

UNIT COMMANDER
You must've done *something*. It's an Emperor's order. I bet I'm not even supposed to talk to you.

UDACHKIN
No, please, sir! I have a perfect record. You wanted to promote me. Can you, please, fix it?

UNIT COMMANDER
You are crazy, aren't you? I cannot fix Emperor's orders.

UDACHKIN
But then... what should I do?

UNIT COMMANDER
How the fuck should I know? Go try to see Arakcheyev. Maybe he can do something.

UDACHKIN
(with visible discomfort). Arakcheyev?!

UNIT COMMANDER
One thing for sure: there's nothing I can do.

Udachkin, distressed, salutes and leaves.

UNIT COMMANDER
(shakes his head and mutters.) Don't know how to talk to dead people.

Scene 9

(Palen and Emperor. Emperor is visibly in the bad mood)

PALEN
Your Majesty today looks upset. Something's wrong?

EMPEROR
(curtly) Not really. You remember my Turkish valet, the storyteller? I think you met him once.

PALEN
Oh, yes, yes, how is he? I'm sure he was very happy when Your Majesty became the Emperor.

EMPEROR
He was. And he was even happier when about a month ago I made him a count and gave him a large estate. About 5000 serfs.

PALEN
That's very gene...

EMPEROR
I put down only one condition. I told him he must come to the palace every week to continue telling his stories. And he swore to that. Since then it was two weeks and three days and...

PALEN
Oh, but Majesty, with all the things around his new estate he's probably just too busy.

EMPEROR
(speaking like a jilted lover). Too busy for me? Really? (Beat). I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'll take it all back, both the estate and the title. That will be a good reminder for him.

PALEN
Oh, but that won't do at all. Think of your reputation. Consider the vicious gossip that will follow.

EMPEROR
Gossip? Am I supposed to worry about that? Only two hundred years ago for a slight like this someone would be impaled on a stake. And there would be *no gossip!*

PALEN
(shocked) But Majesty... I mean... What are you trying to say? Surely, you don't...

EMPEROR
(with a smirk) I don't, Count. Relax.

PALEN
(still shaken) What I mean is... Of course, the expectations of behavior for the monarchs have changed with times.

EMPEROR
(contemptuously) Ha. Noblesse oblige, you mean?

PALEN
Exactly.

EMPEROR
Fine. I'll remember that I am supposed to be (in a mockery tone) an enlightened monarch. (theatrically) I won't be bothered by his despicable ingratitude. Not going to force him. Let him enjoy his estate.

PALEN
(Pause) Majesty, may I be permitted to ask you an impertinent question?

EMPEROR
Like what?

PALEN
Does Your Majesty feel lonely?

EMPEROR
(long pause, during which they are looking at each other). Your question is absurd. Why would a powerful monarch like me feel lonely? (Beat)

PALEN
(Silent)

EMPEROR
What's true is that when I meet with all those men at the Court I don't feel loved. Only feared. (In a lower voice) And what particularly rankles me is when
(MORE)

EMPEROR (CONT'D)
I recall how she was loved. But for what, I cannot imagine.

PALEN
She? Oh yes, I understand. (Pause)

EMPEROR
And another thing. I often get a feeling that, no matter how hard I try, no one appreciates all my efforts. I may be the most unappreciated monarch in history!

PALEN
Majesty, please...

EMPEROR
I had a meeting yesterday with Arakcheyev, the new district commander. What do you think of him?

PALEN
Uh... I don't know him very well, and so reluctant to pass judgement. In my interactions with him he, uh, didn't impress me as very bright. Was it him who said he knows an easy way to defeat Napoleon?

EMPEROR
Yes. So I was initially considering sending him to Europe to lead our efforts there.

PALEN
(incredulously) You mean putting him in charge!?

EMPEROR
Yes. But later I started having doubts, because he's never even been to Europe. I now think it may not be such a good idea. Do you agree?

PALEN
Wholeheartedly.

EMPEROR
(somewhat uncertainly) R-right. I have to say though that during the whole conversation I felt his total loyalty, total devotion to me. And total appreciation of everything I do! That's something, I have to say, I often don't feel with you during our meetings.

PALEN
I'm sorry to hear that, Majesty. But did you consider that someone may pretend to be devoted and loyal in
(MORE)

PALEN (CONT'D)
order to deceive you?

EMPEROR
Oh, come on. You think that'll work with me? You think I won't be able to see through any such deceit?

PALEN
Majesty, flattery can be a very dangerous trap. So many people fall for that.

EMPEROR
You know that I'll never allow any flattery. Let's move on. How's the construction going for my new residence?

PALEN
Very well. It should be finished the next fall.

EMPEROR
Make sure it will have the maximum security possible. Guards everywhere. No repeat of what happened to my father.

PALEN
It'll be done. Anything else?

EMPEROR
Not at the moment... Ah, yes. Did you get a report about that new lieutenant - what was his name - sounds like a czar?

PALEN
(after a pause, suppressing his emotions). Your Majesty means Samsar?

EMPEROR
Yes. Samsar.

PALEN
Perfectly good behavior. Nothing suspicious.

EMPEROR
Excellent. Continue to keep an eye on him. He may have a good potential. (Beat) Sam-Sar. I like the sound of it.

Palen bows, leaves.

Lights fade and come up on Palen standing alone on stage. The sign above says: Excerpts from

Palen's Diary.

PALEN
So he didn't forget after all. I hoped he would. Who knows why. His feeling lonely? Or simply the sound was so appealing to his ears? (Beat), Funny that now in addition to the chief adviser I also have to function as a psychiatrist. (Pause) But I remember how - when he started talking about the impaling - I felt genuinely scared. I felt not as the Emperor's top advisor, but as an animal tamer inside the tiger's cage.

Scene 10

(Servant Quarters at the Palace. Nadya is walking with Luba toward the bed, holding her closely. Luba walks shakily).

LUBA
What happened? Did I faint again?

NADYA
You were carrying a tea set on a tray, and then bam! fell and spilled the tea pretty close to someone's feet. I had to get you up and out of there before the supervisor saw it.

LUBA
Oh, shit. I'll be in trouble. They're going to kick me out.

NADYA
I hope not. But Luba, listen. You know what this kind of thing means. Don't you?

Luba looks at her helplessly and makes a weeping sound without answering.

NADYA
Remember, we talked, I showed you what to do, and you said you'd take care of it?

LUBA
I thought I had! I did... did everything you had told me to.

NADYA
But you still feel it?

LUBA
Y-yes.

NADYA
Shit. Then you better get married, and quick. Tell him he must, or else.

LUBA
I was going to. But we were supposed to meet yesterday, so I went, waited the whole hour, and he didn't show up! I smuggled a note to him - no answer. I think he may be scared to come there again.

NADYA
Pause) Could be that. Or could be even worse.

LUBA
What d'you mean?

NADYA
He may be in prison, you know. Or already in Siberia.

LUBA
horrified) Why?

NADYA
I overheard one officer telling another that they caught someone sneaking back to the barracks at night.

LUBA
They did? (started crying) Poor Fedya!

NADYA
Listen, girl, rather than cry for him, you better think how to take care of yourself. Because once they see this (points to her stomach), they'll kick you out of the palace, and then where will you go? Back to your village?

LUBA
I can't. I have no one's left there since my aunt died. I'll stay in the city and find something else.

NADYA
You think it's that simple, don't you? First of all, no one will hire you in your condition. Second, for you even to walk on the street around here in Petersburg can be dangerous.

LUBA
Dangerous? Why?

NADYA
Don't understand why? You are an unmarried woman with a belly, that's why. They would stop you for something, find out you have no husband, haul your ass to a judge, he declares you a whore and sends you off to Siberia to sweep roads. Simple.

LUBA
You... You're serious? They do that?

NADYA
Absolutely. Especially now. Remember what they said when they gathered all of us two weeks ago. Under the old empress there was indecency and - what was that? - li-cen-tious- ness, well, not anymore. New Moral Order from now on.

LUBA
Li-cen... what does it even mean?

NADYA
I know what it means. It means: you do it, you better cover it up.

LUBA
(after a pause) Please, don't tell anyone, but I think that's all phony, that moral order. Everybody's the same as always.

NADYA
Yeah, and? How does it help you?

LUBA
Then what... uh... What should I do then?

NADYA
(Pause. Deep sigh) I think, if you really tried everything already, you just have to go to a woman I know in town. She helps with... that kind of trouble. I don't see any other way.

LUBA
(Shrinks uncomfortably) Ew!

NADYA
Yeah, ew. Exactly. But what's the choice?

LUBA
How much is it? I have very little saved.

NADYA
Don't know how much it is now, it goes up every year. But don't worry. I'll lend you the money.

LUBA
You will? Thank you!

NADYA
That's all right. (Beat) I care about you, you know.

LUBA
(Pause) I have this strange feeling, like this thing (points to her belly) got hold of me and is pulling me down, lower and lower, and I just can't stop it. I hate it. Does it make any sense?

NADYA

silently nods

LUBA
(after a long pause) Nadya, listen. Some crazy idea just came to me. What if I... (whispers something into Nadya's ear)

NADYA
(snickering) You must be kidding me. It's like waiting for pigs to fly.

LUBA
You think?

NADYA
Well... no harm to try it, I guess. Everybody says he's like this (moves her arm up and down quickly). No telling what he'll do. So go ahead, try.

LUBA
But how do I get to him?

NADYA
(considering) He often takes early morning walks in the rose garden behind the palace. When the weather is good. You just have to find the right moment.

LUBA
I see.

NADYA
Yeah. But listen. Even if you manage it, don't be stupid to sit and wait for the answer, you know. Go to town.

LUBA
Oh God, I'm so scared...

Scene 11

(Luba, any Guard and Emperor)

The Emperor walks with Guard (any) next to him. Luba suddenly appears and drops to her knees in front of the emperor, a letter in her outstretched hand.

EMPEROR
What!? Assassin! (To Guard) Grab him!

LUBA
Majesty, I beg you, please help me!

EMPEROR
Oh... Uh... Get up.

Luba gets up

EMPEROR
Who are you?

LUBA
(bows). Just a court servant, Your Majesty.

EMPEROR
And what's this? A petition?

LUBA
Yes, Majesty. It's about my fiancé. We, uh, lost each other. Please, help me find him. (tries to hand the letter to him)

EMPEROR
(takes her hand, but not the letter) Hm... Fiancé, you say?

LUBA
(visibly uncomfortable) Y-yes, Your Majesty.

EMPEROR
(still holding her hand and looking her over) You're a very pretty girl. Your fiancé is lucky.

LUBA
Uh... Thank you...

EMPEROR
(pulling her closer) Why don't we go to the palace and talk more about it. (to Guard). Take her to the palace.

LUBA
No, no, Majesty. I can't... Please, don't...

EMPEROR
What's the matter? You don't like your emperor?

LUBA
(desperately). Yes, yes of course. I, uh, admire you. And (a sudden inspiration) Your Majesty, I admire your New Moral Order. Everybody thinks it's so wonderful.

EMPEROR
Hmm? So people are talking about it?

LUBA
Oh yes, every day.

EMPEROR
(finally releasing her hand) I knew it! Excellent. What do they say?

LUBA
Uh... That before people did... uh... many bad things, but now... now it's all different.

EMPEROR
Exactly right.

LUBA
Yes. Because before there was Li... I forgot... But now we are all... very moral.

Emperor hesitates, glances at the Guard. The Guard's expression is impassive.

EMPEROR
Very well. Give it to me. (takes the letter from her). I'll see what I can do.

LUBA
(Bows). Thank you, Majesty.

Emperor and Guard leave. Luba takes several deep breaths, then crosses herself with a sign of relief.

Scene 12

(Palen and Emperor)

EMPEROR
What is the news from Europe?

PALEN
(with a sigh) I'm sorry to disappoint Your Majesty. We have a reply from London to our memorandum about the restoration of the order of Malta. They are not going to restore the Order of Malta on the island.

EMPEROR
What? It's spitting in my face! Why?

PALEN
They didn't provide any reason. Another piece of news from England is that His Majesty King George the Third is mentally unstable and occasionally behaves like he's mad.

EMPEROR
He IS mad! He must be truly mad to do this to me.

PALEN
It probably wasn't his decision, Majesty.

EMPEROR
It's still an outrage! I will not stand for this.

PALEN
(calmly). But it's such a small matter. Surely, we can find some accommodation for the knights elsewhere. For example,

EMPEROR
(loudly) I want to sever all ties with the British.

PALEN
(taken aback). Your Majesty, such an act will have huge repercussions for our foreign policy. That's not a decision to be taken lightly.

EMPEROR
(looking at him with a scowl). I do not take anything lightly, Count. If they don't behave as an ally should, they won't have us as an ally. Period.

PALEN
But what do you propose instead? Surely, not an alliance with the French?

EMPEROR
And why not? Napoleon is a strong leader like myself. Not like that half-mad king.

PALEN
(after a pause, uneasily) I see.

EMPEROR
Yes. Contact the French government about our alliance. Write a memorandum outlying our new policy. Compile a list of all pro-British diplomats in the service. I want all of them replaced by some fresh people not corrupted by connection with the British.

PALEN
(in exasperation) Majesty, please. Why punish the diplomats? Only 5 minutes ago your whole government, including yourself, was staunchly pro-British and anti-French.

EMPEROR
(with a scowl) I wish you wouldn't remind me of that. (Beat) Fine. Leave the diplomats alone. Do the rest.

PALEN
(in a stifled voice) Yes, Your Majesty.

EMPEROR
Talking about fresh people. I've been thinking lately. Did you keep track of lieutenant Samsar, as I told you? His service is still exemplary?

PALEN
(first looks at the Emperor incomprehensibly, then nods). Yes. Uh... exemplary.

EMPEROR
See, my instinct was right again. That special vibe I felt about him. Promote him to colonel. (Pause).

PALEN
It will be done (gets up, bows and leaves).

EMPEROR
Wait! (Palen returns) Is he single? And not engaged to anyone?

PALEN
Uh... I believe so, Your Majesty.

EMPEROR
Good moral character?

PALEN
Y-yes.

EMPEROR
Perfect. (hands him a letter). Here. This girl, a servant at the court, suffered a misfortune. Her scoundrel fiancé abandoned her. Have her marry colonel Samsar instead.

PALEN
(after a pause, haltingly). Yes, Your Majesty.

EMPEROR
What's the matter, Count? You look puzzled and confused. You disapprove of my proposal? On what grounds?

PALEN
Oh no, Majesty. I am just amazed how... how quickly you can come with such... uh... creative solutions for all kinds of problems we face.

EMPEROR
(smiling condescendingly). Simple. Trust yourself and don't analyze too much. Move aside (makes an aside gesture) all those long discussions you always try to impose on me. (Beat). This is a perfect example. I made two of my people happy in less than two minutes.

Palen bows and leaves. Lights fade and come up on Palen standing alone on stage. The sign above says: Excerpts from Palen's Diary.

PALEN
What a day. First, once our cranky boy learns that he's not going to get the toy he wanted, he throws a major temper tantrum and turns upside down all our foreign policy. And now with this crazy marriage proposal we have an intrigue in the manner of a Moliere farce. I can only wonder what the ending will be like. (Beat) What I should have done at the beginning is reporting Samsar shot as a French spy. There, problem solved. Too late for that now.

(Lights fade)

Scene 13

A line of applicants to see Baron Arakcheyev, controlled by The Aide. Udachkin is first in line. Someone walks out, looking down and visibly shaken.

THE AIDE
(barking) Next! (Udachkin walks in).

(Arakcheyev sits at his desk and writes something. Does not turn around to look at Udachkin).

ARAKCHEYEV
And you, what do you want?

UDACHKIN
(uneasily). To, uh... be restored in His Majesty's third regiment... Your Excellency.

ARAKCHEYEV
Were you separated from the service?

UDACHKIN
Yes, Your Excellency.

ARAKCHEYEV
(still with his back to him). For what reason?

UDACHKIN
Um... There was an order of separation because...
(MORE)

UDACHKIN (CONT'D)
because I'm dead. But it's not true!

ARAKCHEYEV
(finally turns around and looks at Udachkin intensely). Did you come here to crack jokes?

UDACHKIN
Oh, no, Your Excellency, sir. Here... Here is the explanation.

Hands Arakcheyev his petition. Arakcheyev frowns and reads.

ARAKCHEYEV
(slowly, now with full attention). There is an order signed by the Emperor, which declares you separated from the service for the reason of being deceased?

UDACHKIN
Yes. But, as you see (with an ingratiating smile), I am not deceased. (smile gone). I don't know what happened. There must be some mistake. I beg Your Excellency to correct it.

ARAKCHEYEV
The emperor's orders can be changed only by the Emperor himself. Submit this to His Majesty's Chancellery. (Stretches his arm with the petition, indicating that Udachkin should take it back).

UDACHKIN
Yes, sir, I understand. But Your Excellency... You see the emperor often, can you, please, ask him to reverse it? Please, I beg you. (Speaking very fast). The last several days were pure hell. They turned me out of my room. Had to sleep on the floor. No meals in the canteen. One server has pity on me and puts leftover plates on the floor for me, like I'm a dog. I've done nothing wrong. I have a perfect record. Ask my commanding officer. (With high pitch). It's not right!!

Immediately after this outburst Udachkin looks scared, with the expression: what did I just say?

ARAKCHEYEV
(severely). The monarch issued an order, and you stand here expressing an *opinion* that it's not right? That kind of thinking leads to sedition. What are
(MORE)

ARAKCHEYEV (CONT'D)
you, a radical?

UDACHKIN
Oh no, no. Please, please forgive me. I am not rad... what you just said. I just... feel desperate.

ARAKCHEYEV
Do you swear you've done nothing to cause it?

UDACHKIN
N-nothing, God is my witness.

ARAKCHEYEV
(considering) Hum. Very well. As an exception, I will intercede with the emperor on your behalf. But make sure that during your service things like that will never happen again. (Severely) Do not make me regret it.

UDACHKIN
Oh no, Excellency. I solemnly swear. (Bows and leaves).

THE AIDE
Next!

Scene 14

(Nadya and Luba, later Messenger)

LUBA
(standing in front of Nadya). Does it show?

NADYA
Not too bad so far. I'll lend you a larger skirt.

LUBA
How much time do you think I have? Before they start noticing?

NADYA
I dunno. Two weeks maybe. Or even less. (Beat) Luba, I'm telling you for the last time. Stop dawdling, go to town and get it done. What's holding you? I already gave you the money.

LUBA
Yes, I know. I, uh... just can't make myself. I did try yesterday. I went, walked halfway there and then turned around and came back.

NADYA
(shaking her head disapprovingly) What d'you think it is, a game? The more you delay...

LUBA
I know! But Nadya, please don't be angry with me! Don't you see I'm already shaky? (Beat) (speaking with difficulty) I want to ask you something. Someone told me that last year two girls died after going to her. Is... is it true?

NADYA
(comes to Luba and holds her hand. Pause) Yes.

LUBA
Oh! (shudders)

NADYA
I think the other three did OK, though. (Beat) Anyways, tell me, what else is there for you? Or you're still waiting for a word from the palace?

LUBA
No, no. I haven't even been thinking of that... well... maybe, dreamed a little in the beginning. That's not why. I... I've just had that stupid hope that (starts crying) he'd still show up and then... then we could...

Strong knock on the door. For a moment both women look frightened, then Luba's expression changes to jubilant.

LUBA
I knew it!

She jumps and runs to the door, full of hope. She opens the door and then steps back, her expression changed from happy back to scared. Messenger in all black, looking sinister, comes in.

MESSENGER
I am looking for (reads from the paper he holds) Lubov Orlova.

LUBA
(even more scared). That's me.

MESSENGER
I have a message for you from His Excellency the Emperor's Chief of Staff Count Palen.

Gestures peremptorily to Nadya to leave the room; she bows and leaves quickly; Luba is looking at him with wide eyes.

MESSENGER
It is a wish of His Imperial Majesty that you marry colonel Samsar.

LUBA
I?... Colo-nel Sam-sar?

MESSENGER
Colonel Samsar. He is currently away performing a secret service for the Emperor. Because of the nature of his service, any information about him, including his location and appearance, constitutes a state secret and is not to be disclosed to anyone. Is that understood?

LUBA
Ye... uh... Yes, sir.

MESSENGER
The date of your wedding will be set later. However, as appropriate for a colonel's future wife, you will be given an apartment in the city center, two servants and a monthly stipend of 200 rubles.

LUBA
S-stipend, sir?

MESSENGER
Yes, 200 rubles every month. You will be moving to your new address in three days. That's all for now. You will receive further instructions. (leaves)

LUBA
shell-shocked) Stipend... Servants...

Nadya reenters, sits near Luba, they look at each other wide-eyed. Pause.

LUBA
I'm so glad you're here. I thought I was going mad.
(MORE)

LUBA (CONT'D)
You know what he said? That I have to...

NADYA
(makes a stop gesture) I heard everything. Every word.

LUBA
What... what do you make of it? Do you think it's some kind of a hoax?

NADYA
(shakes her head). I don't think so. He sounded real to me.

LUBA
See, when I heard the knock I was sure it was Fedya, and instead - this. (Beat) But uh, why?

NADYA
(without enthusiasm) It was the letter, I bet. Doesn't matter why. You won a lottery. Congratulations.

LUBA
But I don't want to marry that... colonel whatever! I asked to find Fedya! That's all I asked!

NADYA
(staring hard at Luba) You want to fuck with the Emperor's wish? You serious?

LUBA
(after a pause) No. I'll go along.

NADYA
Phew. For a moment I thought that you did go bonkers.

Luba shakes her head. Pause.

NADYA
Luba?

LUBA
Yes?

NADYA
Did he say that you'd be leaving in three days? Have I heard that right?

Luba nods.

NADYA
So... soon.

Luba nods again and spreads her hands as a nothing-can-be-done sign.

NADYA
(Beat) Well, uh... I'm going to miss you, girl. We... were getting along really well. Didn't we?

LUBA
Oh, yes. And I'm gonna miss you, too.

NADYA
(her expression changes to a somewhat forced merriment). But - I'm so happy for you! And you, you should be ecstatic. Things like that don't happen in a thousand years.

(Luba nods, smiles wanly and then suddenly starts crying).

NADYA
Hey! What's wrong? Why are you...?

LUBA
I... now know that... I'll never see him again.

She keeps crying. Nadya puts her arm around Luba and tries to solace her).

NADYA
There... There... (She kisses Luba)

Scene 15

(Palen and Emperor)

PALEN
Good morning, Your Majesty.

EMPEROR
I had a strange dream last night. I don't often dream about my childhood, but this one was. I saw a big gathering, my father and mother in the center.
(MORE)

EMPEROR (CONT'D)
Everybody around them has a glass in their hand and it looks like they're ready to make a toast. I look closer and see that my father is wearing a crown, and then I realize: it must be his coronation. I make my way to them, and shout: 'My father is the emperor now! My father is the emperor!' They both smile and nod, and then I look up at them and ask: when I grow up and become an emperor too, will I have a celebration like this? They smile and nod again, only I notice that my mother's smile is too fixed, too rigid and her teeth are exposed. But then I forget about it and start singing loudly: Paul The First, It Sounds Grand, Paul The First, It Sounds Grand, Paul The First,... and then I notice another boy, older, who looks at me defiantly and shakes his head. I look at him and frown, but he's still doing it. Then I get very angry, scream 'It Sounds Grand!!', throw myself at him and... that's when I woke up. The whole thing was very vivid. What do you think was the meaning of it?

PALEN
Hard to say, Majesty. I am no Joseph. As you know, your father's death occurred only a few months later; perhaps, there is a connection.

EMPEROR
Well, what's happening in the world? Where is Napoleon now? Still in Egypt?

PALEN
Yes. According to the latest report, he recently captured the port town of Jaffa. That should allow him to continue his conquest into Syria.

EMPEROR
I see.

PALEN
The report also mentions that this particular campaign has an unusual element. Bonaparte brought with him the best French scholars with instructions to learn as much as possible about the history of Egypt. The report says they already discovered several ancient temples and tombs plus a huge stone tablet with three sets of hieroglyphs on it, which they are still trying to decipher. ([2] - see comments at the end)

EMPEROR
All the signs of a truly glorious adventure. I envy Bonaparte. To accomplish so much while still so young...

PALEN
Majesty, it's not at all clear that he'll succeed in there. His army has to fight under extremely harsh conditions and deal with all kinds of local insurgency. Plus, he has the British trying to stop him at every step.

EMPEROR
Anything we can do to help him defeat the British?

PALEN
Nothing beyond what we are doing already. (With some apprehension) You are not suggesting, I hope, that we send our troops to Egypt?

EMPEROR
(after a longish pause). I think I can see now the meaning of my dream.

PALEN
Yes?

EMPEROR
It calls on me to do something truly grand. Something bold, and unexpected, and glorious. Something which will make the whole world say: Paul the First, this name is grand indeed.

PALEN
It's wonderful that your dream will serve as such an inspiration. Perhaps, I can make a suggestion?

EMPEROR
Of course.

PALEN
We desperately need peasant reform. Our country is the only one in Europe, where peasants are still semi-slaves, not allowed to move freely and work for themselves. Changing their status and allowing them more freedom would indeed be a bold, courageous act of great historical significance. (Beat) And, I must add, it will secure your reputation as an enlightened ruler.

EMPEROR
(after a pause). M-mm... No, that's not what I have in mind.

PALEN

No?

EMPEROR
(curtly) No. We would only repeat what other countries have already done. What's the glory in being like everybody else? (Beat)

PALEN
Uh... Well, then, uh, what is it you have in mind, Majesty?

EMPEROR
(an odd gleam in his eyes) I'm not sure yet... But I know it'll come to me.

PALEN
(warily) Majesty, when it happens, I should hope to learn promptly what kind of a bold action you have decided to embrace.

EMPEROR
(smiling slyly) Don't worry. You will.

(Palen bows, leaves, shaking his head with a worried expression)

EMPEROR
(after Palen left the stage, speaking to an invisible aide) Send Baron Arakcheyev to me now!

Lights fade, then come back

Scene 16

(Arakcheyev and Emperor)

EMPEROR
And so this is my grand plan of action. What do you think of it?

ARAKCHEYEV
Sire, I am utterly astonished. I cannot find words to describe how I feel. This is the...

EMPEROR
(interrupting) I hope you realize the enormous historical significance of this. If we're successful, it will be a turning point in history. The whole world will be watching us in awe.

ARAKCHEYEV
Oh yes, sire.

EMPEROR
I feel in my hands (connecting fingertips) the destiny of Russia. And not only of Russia. Of the whole world.

ARAKCHEYEV
Yes, sire.

EMPEROR
I admit I am very nervous. Such undertaking would be a severe test for any ruler. Even for me.

ARAKCHEYEV
Yes, sire.

EMPEROR
But I still think we will succeed.

ARAKCHEYEV
Oh yes, sire.

EMPEROR
But what... What if - against all odds - we fail? Such thought is simply terrifying to me.

ARAKCHEYEV
Majesty, please. No need to be negative. Be optimistic. Remember, you are the greatest military leader in the world today. Napoleon is nothing compared to you.

EMPEROR
Don't say that! He is a great general, and our best ally. I have always admired him. I won't allow anyone to denigrate him in any way.

ARAKCHEYEV
Yes, sire.

EMPEROR
When I hear you speak like this, it makes me angry. What are you trying to do, *flatter me*? You should
(MORE)

EMPEROR (CONT'D)
know I will never stand for it.

ARAKCHEYEV
Majesty, I am so very sorry. Of course, he's a great leader and our ally. (Beat) Will Your Majesty then permit me to say that Napoleon is your equal?

EMPEROR
Hmm... (Pause). I'll have to say No. Objectively speaking - and, as you know, I always try to be objective - even that would be premature. I may be a great strategist, but I have not yet led any army into battle. (Beat) Well, if you don't count those mock games I had with my 50 soldiers - or was it 30? - in my estate. (Beat) But if this campaign is successful...

ARAKCHEYEV
After the success of this campaign you will be the greatest Russian emperor since Peter the Great.

EMPEROR
Hm. You really think so?

ARAKCHEYEV
Oh yes, Your Majesty. No doubt at all.

EMPEROR
Well. True, he's always been my inspiration. (Beat) But even he never attempted anything as grandiose as this.

ARAKCHEYEV
No. Never.

EMPEROR
That's what I want you to do. Go and ask people in the court confidentially what they think of our plans, and then report back to me what you heard.

ARAKCHEYEV
Will be done.

EMPEROR
Tell them that they can speak their mind freely without any fear.

ARAKCHEYEV
Will be done.

EMPEROR
Don't mention any of this to my chief advisor Palen. I will tell you the reason for that later.

ARAKCHEYEV
Will be done.

EMPEROR
And remember: I want only the truth. (Waves his finger). NO FLATTERING.

ARAKCHEYEV
Your Majesty, an old soldier like me never flatters. Will that be all?

EMPEROR
Yes. (Beat) No. Wait. Last week you brought to me a petition from... uh... some dead lieutenant or something. Here (reads). 'For Your Majesty's consideration. Following Your Majesty order 357, lieutenant Udachkin of the 3rd regiment was removed from the service as being deceased. He now petitions to be reinstated in the regiment.' What's that about?

ARAKCHEYEV
He came to see me, claimed to be in a desperate situation and begged to be allowed to return to the regiment. He did look very miserable. He believed that it was some kind of mistake.

EMPEROR
M-mm... Well, if he came and talked to you, he's not really dead, is he? Why did the order say so? (Beat) You know I don't like mistakes.

ARAKCHEYEV
I was not able to ascertain that, Your Majesty.

EMPEROR
Hm. Strange. Regardless, if he's not dead, I suppose you can reinstate him. I leave it up to you.

ARAKCHEYEV
Will be done. (Bows)

EMPEROR
Good. (Beat) (Speaking without anger, more like a schoolteacher explaining a lesson). I have to mention though that you did not follow proper procedures here. According to the regulations, all non-urgent matters like this one first must be sent to the
(MORE)

EMPEROR (CONT'D)
regiment's commander, then to the division commander, then to the district and finally to me. Very clear and orderly, don't you think? So, strictly speaking, it would've been better if you went through proper channels.

ARAKCHEYEV
(visibly upset) Uh... Oh...

EMPEROR
See, it's the same principle as with the new uniform. No shortcuts. If you do something, just do it right.

ARAKCHEYEV
(after a pause speaks very solemnly, as if at a funeral). Your Majesty, I deeply apologize for the misplaced leniency and lack of judgement I showed in this case. I humbly ask Your Majesty to select an appropriate punishment for my offense.

EMPEROR
(smiling) A very correct attitude to be sure. But no need to go that far on such a small matter as this. You still have my confidence as a loyal and devoted servant.

ARAKCHEYEV
Your Majesty's kindness...

EMPEROR
Don't mention it. (With a smirk) Remember that you are dealing with an enlightened monarch, not some bloody tyrant. Focus on the grand things we've discussed, and don't be distressed by something so inconsequential.

Arakcheyev bows, leaves. After he closes the door behind him, his facial expression changes from solemn to furious. He quickly scribbles something on a sheet of paper and gives it to the aide, sitting outside.

ARAKCHEYEV
(peremptorily) To the commander of the 3rd regiment. Now.

Scene 17

(Arakcheyev and Emperor)

Emperor and Arakcheyev are inside a room. The Aide is sitting outside.

EMPEROR
(in a dreamy voice) This morning I had a vision of what the whole operation would look like from above. Many thousands of men marching under the sun rising over the horizon. They all are in our crisp new uniforms, each perfectly fit, no wrinkles. I see many thousands of young smiling faces, proud and grateful that they are now making history, being a part of the most important historical event of our time.

ARAKCHEYEV
Such an uplifting image, Your Majesty. I'll make sure that it will serve as a great inspiration for all men who would be recruited for the campaign.

EMPEROR
Isn't it? I've been feeling very happy and excited since the idea first came to me. It was when Palen was talking about Napoleon in Egypt. That was the source for my inspiration.

ARAKCHEYEV
I see.

EMPEROR
Yes. And this feeling of wild excitement has never left me. Since when I was a little boy, I knew I wanted to command an army. I still fondly remember tin soldiers I always had with me. And now I feel like my dream of a life-time is finally coming true.

ARAKCHEYEV
Indeed.

EMPEROR
I asked you to talk to people in the government and the court to find out what they think of our plans. What was their reaction? (Severely) I want you to tell me the truth.

ARAKCHEYEV
Majesty, it was positive beyond any expectations. Many told me they believe that's exactly what our country needs right now. Some of them added how proud
(MORE)

ARAKCHEYEV (CONT'D)
they are to serve under your rule. Two or three said they see it as a part of God's plan to establish His kingdom on Earth.

EMPEROR
Amazing, simply amazing. And no one expressed any concerns?

ARAKCHEYEV
Only very few. (Beat) Unfortunately, Your Majesty's son, Grand Prince Aleksandr, was among them.

EMPEROR
(with an angry gesture). I'm not surprised at all! He's always been a total disappointment to me. He would never understand what we are trying to achieve.

ARAKCHEYEV
Per your instruction, I did not say anything to your chief advisor Count Palen.

EMPEROR
That's correct. (Pause) Do you want to know why I told you not to talk to him?

ARAKCHEYEV
If it pleases Your Majesty to tell me.

EMPEROR
For a very simple reason. Because I had a feeling that he would try to talk me out of it. It has already happened so many times. I suggest something and he finds some convoluted arguments why it's not a good idea. I reluctantly give up and then feel very frustrated!

ARAKCHEYEV
Oh, sire, I understand completely. I feel your pain.

PALEN
(appearing agitated and speaking to THE AIDE outside). I need to see the Emperor now regarding a very urgent matter.

THE AIDE
Your Excellency, my apologies. His Majesty is occupied right now.

PALEN
Who is he with?

THE AIDE
Baron Arakcheyev.

Palen groans and stands back with the expression of anger and frustration. He remains on the stage

EMPEROR
That's why I did not want him to know. I had a strong suspicion that he may find something wrong with the whole plan.

ARAKCHEYEV
What could it be?

EMPEROR
I don't know. But I know that he's almost always found something in the past.

ARAKCHEYEV
Majesty, let me assure you that it will remain a secret from him as long as possible.

EMPEROR
Oh but unfortunately he'll learn about it soon enough. I should expect him any time now. And I already anticipate an ugly conversation, even though I think my whole idea is a stroke of genius.

ARAKCHEYEV
Majesty. Please, forgive me if what I say is impertinent. But if your chief advisor is such a smart man, what objections could he possibly have to your bold, grand vision for Russia's future?

EMPEROR
Exactly. That's what I ask myself too. (Pause) Ah! A brilliant idea just came to me. I'll make him an offer which I think no one would be able to refuse. Something very clever. (Chuckling) I bet when he will hear what I'm going to offer to him, he'd just melt.

ARAKCHEYEV
If Your Majesty thinks it's the best course of action for a great and powerful ruler like yourself.

EMPEROR
It's just to avoid all those unpleasant discussions, which I hate so much. (Pause) But I know one thing. No matter what he says, this time I really don't want to give up my dream. This time I won't let him draw
(MORE)

EMPEROR (CONT'D)
me in those complicated arguments which always bore me to death. I'll stick to what my inner voice tells me.

ARAKCHEYEV
Sire, I beg you. Don't give up. Be very firm. Do not let anyone sway you from your historic vision. Remember, the whole nation stands behind you.

EMPEROR
Thank you. I shall remember that when I talk to him. (Beat) And now when I think about it... maybe, I do listen too much to him. Maybe, I... overrated him as my advisor (Beat). What about you? Can I always rely on you?

ARAKCHEYEV
Sire, you know me. My love and personal devotion to you is timeless. I promise to faithfully serve Your Majesty in whatever position and on whatever level Your Majesty will bestow on me.

EMPEROR
Hum. Very good. I'll keep that in mind. (Pause). How many troops have already received orders to start?

ARAKCHEYEV
Twenty thousand.

EMPEROR
We will need at least three times more than that. All tough, experienced soldiers. I want you to be in charge of the selection.

ARAKCHEYEV
Yes, sire.

EMPEROR
Now go and ask Palen to come and see me. I might as well deal with him now.

Arakcheyev steps out of the room and sees Palen waiting. Two men look at each other for a couple of seconds without saying a word. Palen's facial expression is deep, anguished worry, whereas Arakcheyev's face carries a sign of malicious triumph.

ARAKCHEYEV
The Emperor wishes to see you now (leaves).

Scene 18

(Palen and Emperor)

PALEN
(walks in agitated). Your Majesty, I heard that you ordered 20,000 troops from the Don to march to India!?

(Emperor looks at him coldly; his voice indicates he anticipated Palen's disagreement and is ready for a fight)

EMPEROR
That's correct, Count. Take a seat.

Palen is seated

PALEN
Your Majesty, I believe that as your chief of staff and top advisor I should have been consulted on such an important matter.

EMPEROR
I consult members of my cabinet when I see the need for it. But - and you must know it by now - I also rely on my vibe, my inner voice, which I value higher than any kind of outside advice (Emperor's voice raised). And my inner voice tells me that this campaign is now absolutely essential for Russia. Do you know why?

PALEN
Uh... N-no.

EMPEROR
Then let me patiently explain it to you. (Pause) First of all, we must help France. As you know, it's always been our best ally, and now it's fighting against the British, our common enemy. So let's attack the arrogant Albion where she's the weakest, and liberate the people of her largest colony from their rule. Do you follow me so far?

PALEN
Uh...

EMPEROR
And that's not all. Do you realize that by conquering India we will reshape the world's science? We will follow Napoleon's example, combining the military conquest with the cultural exploration. I'm sure we'll have many great discoveries there. And my name, the name of Paul The First will be forever attached to them. That would be the true fulfillment of my prophetic dream. Are you on board now?

PALEN
Uh...

EMPEROR
No? These reasons should be more than sufficient for anyone. But if you're still uneasy, I will offer you a personal incentive. You'd be able to bring home and keep as many elephants as you like, even establish a personal elephant farm for your pleasure for the first time in Russian history. How does that sound?

PALEN
Huh?!

EMPEROR
And if elephants are not your cup of tea, what about rubies? I was told India has the best rubies in the whole world. Do you like rubies?

PALEN
Majesty, please, uh... you can't be serious. It doesn't make any sense...

EMPEROR
(sternly) Be careful, Count. What you just said is Lèse majesté, an insult to a monarch. If something makes sense to me, it makes sense. Remember that in the future.

PALEN
I beg your pardon, Majesty. But, uh, I don't know where to begin... even with all other considerations aside... look at the map... With the distance and all the obstacles in their path, when the army arrives there, it won't be a strong fighting force. Also...

EMPEROR
Ah, but remember, it's only the start. Many more divisions will follow in their steps. Relax, would you? You and some others are of such a little faith. My genius - remember? - tells me it's going to be a
(MORE)

EMPEROR (CONT'D)
glorious campaign.

PALEN
And even if we somehow defeat the British, then what? To keep the whole huge country under occupation and deal with constant insurgency?

EMPEROR
What nonsense. The Indians will love us there. I actually believe that when we come they will greet us with flowers as their liberators, and from then on we will become one large, happy family.

PALEN
Majesty, before I came to you, I talked to several people. They all have high positions in the government and in the army. Each of them is horrified, but too afraid to speak out.

EMPEROR
This, Count, is an example of spreading false information! Just before talking to you I received a classified intelligence report and, according to it, the overwhelming majority thinks that the India campaign is exactly what our country needs at this historic moment. (Beat). And for those few opposing it, well, we just need to identify and eliminate those traitors. Arakcheyev will see to that.

PALEN
(desperately) God help me. I simply don't know what else to say to convince you. Majesty, I beg you, please, please give up on this... I see thousands of men dying for absolutely nothing. (Beat) It's not going to end well!

EMPEROR
I believe you're totally blind. History will judge it as my highest achievement, the crown jewel of my reign. (Beat) And now, Count, you have a choice: join our effort or resign, leave the government and the court and be treated as a traitor to the Motherland. But I warn you, I will not tolerate any sabotage. You stay?

PALEN
Uh... (longish pause)

EMPEROR
(briskly). I take it as yes. Good. Here's what I want
(MORE)

EMPEROR (CONT'D)
you to do. Yesterday I received a classified report from the city of Ensk that the 7-th division's commander being drunk criticized my policy of disengagement from England. Remove him from the command and put him under arrest. Promote colonel Samsar to a major-general and put him in charge, effective immediately.

PALEN
(in a tired voice) The vibe again?

EMPEROR
(angrily) What's that supposed to mean?

PALEN
Nothing. Nothing at all. As Your Majesty wishes.

Lights fade and come up on Palen standing alone on stage. The sign above says: Excerpts from Palen's Diary.

PALEN
What a stupid idiot I was! I'm sure now that it was I that flipped that switch in his brain. (Touches his temple).(Parodying himself). Oh, oh, History of Egypt… French scholars… Temples and tombs… That's what did it, that’s what gave him his crazy idea! It just didn't occur to me that he would try to imitate Napoleon. (Beat).'Bold, unexpected and glorious'. God help us. (Beat). the thing about it when you speak to a crazy, you cannot just speak what comes to your mind, because you never, never know how he would take it. With most people it's of little consequence. But not when the crazy has unlimited power over millions... (Sigh, pause)

So, what should I do now? Resign? That would mean Arakcheyev in charge and I’m in exile or worse. No. I will stay and try to slow things down whenever possible. (pause)

What hurts me most is the realization of how far and how fast I’ve fallen! I am now reduced from a top advisor to a beggar. (Beat) And, on top of everything else, Samsar, his obsession, his idee-fixe is back in the game.

Exits. Lights fade.

Scene 19

(Nadya and Luba)

(Nadya sits at the table, drinking tea. Luba, exuberantly happy, very fancily dressed and very pregnant, bursts in. Exclamations, hugs and kisses. Luba speaks and acts very different from before, with a newly-found confidence)

LUBA
Nadya! So glad I found you at home!

NADYA
Wow, what a nice surprise! (Beat) I'm sorry. I have absolutely nothing to offer you.

LUBA
Please, don't worry (a dismissive gesture). (Takes out a mirror from her purse). Aw, I look like a mess (arranges her hair).

NADYA
I, uh... I didn't expect to see you again. I heard you're a big shot now.

LUBA
No, no. I haven't forgotten you. It's just been so crazy!

NADYA
What, being a colonel's wife with servants? I believe it.

LUBA
Forget the stupid colonel wife! I am Madam General now.

NADYA
What? You're kidding me, right? Or you are really nuts.

LUBA
(speaks fast) Hell, maybe I am. Listen. A courier came yesterday. In a carriage. Everything very fancy, carriage, horses, livery, you name it. And hands me a letter. Here. (takes the letter out of her purse and reads it in a different, quasi-official voice). 'By the order of His Imperial Majesty your husband,

(MORE)

LUBA (CONT'D)
colonel Samsar, is now a commander of His Majesty's 7-th division in the town of Ensk. He is promoted to the rank of major-general'. See? (that in her own voice) - and then lots of bla-bla about his special status. But listen to the bottom line: a country estate with 2,500 peasants and 3000 rubles for the move and the settlement (that's on top of regular monthly pay). I am to leave in two days. I'm just speechless. Here, it's 100 rubles for you. (Hands an envelope to her). Buy yourself some nice dresses or lingerie.

NADYA
Wow. Thank you. (Nadya kisses Luba on the cheek, then looks at her intently, admiring her. Pause).

LUBA
Why are you looking at me like that?

NADYA
I'm sorry. I just can't get over how everything about you feels so different . Not just clothes and makeup, that's for sure. But something else, too.

LUBA
What?

NADYA
(considering) Uh... I don't know how to say it. Confidence?

LUBA
You think? M-mm... maybe. (Beat) But if you think I'm different now, you should've seen me in a wedding dress. I never even knew such dresses exist.

NADYA
Wait! So the wedding already happened?

LUBA
Yes. Two weeks ago. (Beat). And you wouldn't believe all the food over there. All kind of things on three tables, most I've never seen before. I didn't care for caviar, though - too salty. But truffles... oh! That's something to die for.

NADYA
About the food later. Tell me how... how did it go after the wedding. Was he nice? Did it hurt?

LUBA
(looking at her with an ironic smile) He wasn't there.

NADYA
What!?

LUBA
You heard me. He wasn't.

NADYA
I don't get it. Have you ever seen him even once?

LUBA
No. I was told that he's still at that... uh... special service. (Beat) Even at the wedding, there was only an empty stand, and some aide was standing behind it and saying 'I do' for him.

NADYA
No!

LUBA
Yes! (Both laugh. Pause)

NADYA
So... What now?

LUBA
Who knows? (Beat) But I guess when he comes back I'll have to meet him and... honestly, I worry a little what he'll be like.

NADYA
What are you worrying about exactly? That he won't be a young, handsome, dashing general on a white horse?

LUBA
M-mm... (chortles)

NADYA
Well. Let me tell you, if he turns out to be old and sick, that may be even better (winks).

LUBA
I know. But - it's not even that. I feel uneasy because, remember, even his appearance is a state secret. I mean, what if he's a werewolf or a vampire?

NADYA
(with a smirk) Yeah, right...

LUBA
Well, it won't be any more bizarre than everything else. (Both laugh) Anyway, I don't mind being solo. Sometimes life is easier with no men around. Especially with this (points to her belly).

NADYA
Talking about men. What would he say when he sees you with a belly, and it's not his? Most men would get really mad.

LUBA
I know. I was thinking of that, too. But hell, it was the emperor's order, so he better be happy with it, or else... (Pause).

NADYA
(hesitantly) Luba, I want to ask you something, but I'm not sure I should. Maybe I better not.

LUBA
Go ahead, ask.

NADYA
OK. Do you still think of that, uh, Fedya sometimes?

LUBA
(Her facial expression changes to earnest, merriment is gone. Pause). At first I did. A lot. I cried almost every night. But then, I slowly learned to let it go.

NADYA
I see.

LUBA
I still think of him now and then. Of him and what happened between us and what could've been. But with time it is getting less and less real. As if it was with a different person, not with me. Do you think it's strange?

NADYA
No. I think it's normal.

LUBA
So now I try to focus on what the future is for the baby and me. And that also looks very blurry.

NADYA
Blurry?! Why? To me, your future looks dazzling, not
(MORE)

NADYA (CONT'D)
blurry! Didn't the letter say you're going to get some country estate?

LUBA
Right. And I have no idea what that will look like. Just as I have no idea who I'll be living with.

NADYA
I am trying to imagine your estate, and cannot. I've never in my life seen any estates.

LUBA
Well, how many do you think I have? (chuckles)

NADYA
Do you think it will have a big castle? With towers and a moat?

LUBA
That I don't know. (Dreamily) I'd love to get a castle, though. Remember, how it always was in girls' fairy tales? First everything's bad, then suddenly a prince out of nowhere, then love and at the end happily ever after in a castle.

NADYA
M-mm... Sweet.

Both nod with dreamy smiles, remembering the sweet childhood.

LUBA
(as if waking up from a dream) What time is it? (takes out a fancy watch). I got to go. It's a long way back. My carriage is waiting.

NADYA
(looking at Luba imploringly). Well. Good bye. Am I... Am I going to see you again?

LUBA
(After a pause) Oh, sure. I'll come again. (Beat) Or - maybe I could do even better. I could send for you to come and stay with me. (looking at her) If you like.

NADYA
(overwhelmed) You... You mean it? You invite me to stay with you?

LUBA
Yes. In my castle. (Smile) If there's one.

They hug and kiss. Luba leaves, turns back to wave. Nadya waves back.

Scene 20

(Palen and Emperor)

Scenes 20,21,22 follow in rapid progression, as parts of the same scene.

PALEN
(walks in). Your Majesty called for me?

EMPEROR
Yes. Take a seat. (Palen is seated).

EMPEROR
The India campaign is not progressing according to the plan. Several reports from the field mention lack of coordination and low morale in troops. The overall commander repeatedly questions my guidelines instead of addressing his own mistakes. I am recalling him and putting general Samsar in charge. Bring him back to Saint Petersburg. I want to instruct him personally.

PALEN
(after a pause). But Your Majesty, you sent him to Ensk just a little while ago. I believe he is on his way there.

EMPEROR
Count, in a war situation like this one must learn to be fully flexible. Let Arakcheyev find a suitable replacement. The campaign is in dire need of strong and loyal leadership.

PALEN
(after another pause). It will be done.

(Bows and leaves)

Scene 21

(Palen and Emperor)

PALEN
(walks in) Your Majesty, I have very disturbing news. General Samsar on his way back to Saint Petersburg fell dangerously ill.

EMPEROR
Where is he?

PALEN
In a local hospital.

EMPEROR
I'll go see him there.

PALEN
No, Your Majesty. The doctors suspect cholera-morbus. You cannot put your life at risk. Russia needs you.

EMPEROR
(after a pause, in a low voice). True.

PALEN
Your Majesty will receive daily reports about his condition.

EMPEROR.
(menacingly) Tell them that he better be cured. If not...

PALEN
I assure you that everything humanly possible will be done.

(Deeply bows and leaves)

Scene 22

(Palen and Emperor)

Palen walks in slowly with a funeral face. Emperor looks at him fully anticipating the bad news. Emperor's agitation is gone.

PALEN
Your Majesty. General Samsar...

EMPEROR
Dead.

PALEN
(beat) Yes.

EMPEROR
I knew it. I expected it since... since you told me about his illness. (Pause). I want to know about his last hours. Who was with him when he was dying? His wife?

PALEN
Oh yes, Your Majesty. My reports say she couldn't stop crying. Just imagine, less than a week ago she gave birth to his son.

EMPEROR
My best, my finest... Fate is cruel to me.

PALEN
No words can describe my deepest...

EMPEROR
(looking at him with hostility). Spare me your false condolences, Count. I'm sure you feel very happy about his death. Happy and relieved.

PALEN
Your Majesty, how can you say it? I've always felt a very deep affection for, uh, the late general. Really, I can say that in a way I was (with a tiniest smile) like a father figure to him.

EMPEROR
Father figure? You must be joking. You were envious f his success. You felt threatened by him. I bet you worried that eventually he will replace you.

PALEN
Ah...

EMPEROR
(angry and fast) And you were not the only one who always tried to make him fail! You, and my treacherous son Aleksandr, and those rotten old timers in the Court. All of those opposing the India campaign were his enemies, ready to stab him in the back. You knew that with him in charge the campaign would be a total triumph. And now he is dead - what a relief for you all!

PALEN
Ah...

EMPEROR
(ominously) And... something just now occurred to me. What if... what if it was a setup from the start? Maybe... maybe there was no cholera at all.

PALEN
But, Majesty...

EMPEROR
Yes, I see it all clearly now. How could I be so blind? It was not a tragic fate, but a conspiracy to get rid of him. It was a murder. By Grand Prince Aleksandr and you.

PALEN
Majesty, please, I beg you, what conspiracy? Cholera was the cause of death.

EMPEROR
D'you think I trust you one bit, Count? I will order a very thorough investigation. I'll trace every step, every minute of his tragic journey and untimely death. And if my suspicions are confirmed, if you and Aleksandr are involved in any way, believe me, you'd be sorry you were ever born!

PALEN
B-but...

Emperor cuts him off with a peremptory gesture. Pause. Then speaks in a different voice, cold and official.

EMPEROR
Give general Samsar the state funeral with full military honors required for his rank. Compose a note to his wife with my deepest condolences. Inform her that as his widow she will receive 3,000 rubles monthly pension. Now go and arrange the funeral. I wish to be alone.

Visibly scared Palen bows and leaves. Lights fade. The audience hears a weeping sound.

Scene 23

(Palen alone pacing on stage)

PALEN

I am back from this ghostly funeral. The whole thing was bizarre. He led the procession, wept a couple of times. Every time it happened, people behind him were pulling out their handkerchiefs and pretending to sob. I stayed in the back to avoid an encounter with him and to hide my disgust. And now I'm just pacing here aimlessly, while my life is hanging by a thread. I have to quickly decide what to do next. (Pause) It's strange. Something from my childhood just came up to the surface. I had a dog named Rex, a very sweet Shepherd, we were inseparable. Suddenly he went mad and started attacking everybody around. After he badly bit my little brother, my father looks at me and says he should be shot. I start begging, 'Father, please, do we really have to? Is there another way?'. He shakes his head and then does something that completely startles me: hands me a rifle and says 'Here. You're old enough for this'. I try to say no, he's not having it. (Beat). So I take the rifle and try to shoot but it's no use. I can't aim, my hands are too shaky. Father looks at me for a minute with narrowing eyes, then takes the rifle back, kills the dog with one perfect shot, then turns to me, shakes his head reprovingly and says 'That was something unpleasant that had to be done. I asked you to do it. First you tried to wiggle out of it, and then just went to pieces. Not good. My son should be a man, not a sissy'. And then he walked away. (Pause)

I haven't recalled that scene for decades. Why now? (Beat) (Speaking quietly) I think I know why. 'Something unpleasant that had to be done.' Yes. And then 'not to be a...'.

(Pause. Palen stops pacing, makes several steps to the stage exit, then stops and turns around).

A very good chance it won't work. And even if it does, Aleksandr could later decide to make me a scapegoat. Plenty of such examples in history.

(Hesitates for a moment, crosses himself and then quickly exits).

Scene 24

(Three guards, later Palen)

Three guards are sitting at a long table. On the table there are plates of food, several bottles of vodka, glasses. Guards are eating, drinking and talking.

FIRST GUARD
I'm f-king exhausted. The procession to the cemetery and standing at attention during all those f-king speeches, that can really wear you out.

SECOND GUARD
Why did they drag us there anyway? We are night guards. We're supposed to sleep during the day.

FIRST GUARD
State funerals are like parades. Everybody must attend. Do you think they care that you don't get enough sleep? (Sniggering all around).

THIRD GUARD
Who was this fucking general anyway? I never heard of him before.

SECOND GUARD
I heard that he was the emperor's favorite. That's why he got so high so fast.

THIRD GUARD
Favorite, eh? You mean like favorites under the old empress? Being big and hard where it counts? (First guard smirks, Second frowns)

SECOND GUARD
Watch your tongue, you guys!

FIRST GUARD
Hey, relax. No informers here.

Second guard shakes his head, unconvinced

THIRD GUARD
Na-a, our emperor is not that way. The new moral order, remember? (More smirks). I guess, he just liked him.

FIRST GUARD
More than 'like him'! He made him the head of this whole India campaign.

SECOND GUARD
Oh God, don't mention it. I heard two divisions are already on the way. I'm scared to even think about it. Marching for weeks to like the end of the earth...

THIRD GUARD
And especially in this straightjacket (points to his uniform. The other two nod).

SECOND GUARD
Honestly, if they send me to India, I don't know what I'd do.

FIRST GUARD
Don't know what you'd do? I'll tell ya. Salute and march off, that's what. Unless you wanna march to Siberia instead.

THIRD GUARD
Or to be kicked out dishonorably like that one... uh, what the fuck his name is?... Udach-kin?

FIRST GUARD
Oh yeah. You know what I heard, by the way? That Arakcheyev kicked him out of the regiment with no overcoat and no warm underwear.

SECOND GUARD
In February? (shudders) God! Why?

FIRST GUARD
No clue. The rumor is that he was trying to complain about something.

Palen is seen pacing outside the room door, as if trying to make a decision. He comes close to the door, and then steps back).

THIRD GUARD
Listen, I wonder what that general Samsar was like. Have any of you guys ever seen him?

FIRST GUARD
I haven't but my buddy in the 5-th says he saw him when he was a guard at some ball in the palace. Tall, very elegant, all those Frenchy words of course, a
(MORE)

FIRST GUARD (CONT'D)
fancy wig. A typical nobleman.

SECOND GUARD
That's right. I heard that he was a bastard son of some French duke.

THIRD GUARD
That's for sure. Must be a son of some f-king prince or duke or count or whatever. They have everything served to them on a plate, we have to struggle for 10, 15 years before any chance to move up.

FIRST GUARD
And lately it got really bad. The uniform. All those crazy new rules. The f-king moral order. The commanders change almost weekly. And now India. They just play you like checkers.

THIRD GUARD
And the worst thing is that you feel totally helpless. Sometimes I just...

The door opens. Palen walks in. All guards immediately jump up, stand in attention and salute.

PALEN
At ease, at ease.

Sits and gestures for them to sit down as well. His chair is positioned so that he can see all of them easily. They are looking at him warily.

PALEN
I know you all wonder what brought me here today. It's a very deep concern we have about the emperor's state of mind. (Puzzled glances). We noticed that the emperor has been acting very strange lately. There is a concern that he is going mad. I don't need to explain why it's so frightening. In the country we live in, if our leader is unstable and mentally ill, all of us - you, me, everyone - will have to worry day and night what's the next crazy thing he may do. (Pause). I just talked with (raising an index finger) His Imperial Highness Grand Prince Aleksandr. We both agreed that the only remedy, the only way to stop this madness is for the emperor to rest undisturbed for a very, very long time.

Palen looks intensely at the guards to make sure

they understood. Third guard sniggers; Palen looks at him severely; the guard immediately assumes a contrite expression. Palen continues after a pause.

PALEN
And that's where you, who are assigned to guard his sleep every night, come in. It is your duty to make it happen. Think of that as... mm... a kind of urgent medical care procedure necessary to save your country. And it is very urgent. It must be done tonight. (Pause) To make it easier for you, I brought you some, uh, some incentives. You'll receive three times as much, if you succeed.

Palen hands a small bag with coins to each of the guards and then looks at them intently.

PALEN
Now I ask: are you all clear on what's expected of you? Can I rely on you?

GUARDS
Uh... Yes... Yes, sir... Yes, Your Excellency. Yes...

PALEN
Very good. Do what you need to do with utmost diligence. and you can be sure that when the Emperor is finally resting in peace, all of us, including you, will be much relieved.

Palen gets up. All guards instantly get up as well and salute. Palen makes 'at ease' gesture and leaves the room. After the door closes behind Palen, guards exchange looks with each other, trying to gauge the consensus about what just happened.

FIRST GUARD
Wow. That was unexpected.

SECOND GUARD
I would say. But what are we gonna do?

THIRD GUARD
I know what I'm gonna do. Count.

Opens his bag and starts counting. Two others follow suit.

FIRST GUARD
Wow. It's four months pay.

THIRD GUARD
Yeah! And triple afterwards, remember.

SECOND GUARD
It's a lot, I agree. But... I don't know. I... I don't think we should.

THIRD GUARD
You don't think so? To me it was like an order. He was pretty clear, wasn't he?

SECOND GUARD
Yeah, but it doesn't mean we have to. We can tell the emperor about it, when he comes in. Maybe, he'll rewards us too.

THIRD GUARD
Maybe. Or maybe he'll start screaming, soldiers come and we'll be killed on the spot. Because he is crazy, remember that. Tell a crazy man about a crazy thing coming, something really crazy may happen. (Laughs)

FIRST GUARD
Yeah. (Beat) Plus, even if we tell him, Palen may still wiggle out of it, and then we're dead for sure.

THIRD GUARD
I agree. Remember how he talked? Like a snake. (gestures). Nothing to pin him down. (Beat) And even if he's gone, there is still that f-king Grand Prince...

SECOND GUARD
Uh... I still think we better not. What if it's a setup? I mean we do it and the first thing he does is order us killed.

FIRST GUARD
Sure. Possible. Also possible: we don't do it, and he or Alexander gets us killed tomorrow. We are in the fucking soup now.

THIRD GUARD
No, we can't just keep the money and do nothing. This much I know. (Pause).

FIRST GUARD
Guys, you know what? Let's just go ahead. I don't
(MORE)

FIRST GUARD (CONT'D)
wanna give up this little candy. Never had that much money in my whole fucking life. (lifts his bag, shakes it to hear coins clink, then brings it to his face and smacks his lips). Yum-yum.

THIRD GUARD
Well, and also didn't we just talk how shitty everything is in here? So this may be our chance.

SECOND GUARD
Uh... I want to ask you something... remember, he said that afterwards we'd feel much relief. What do you think he meant?

THIRD GUARD
Yeah, I wondered about it, too. (Beat) Maybe it was a hint that India would stop?

FIRST GUARD
Hum. Could be.

SECOND GUARD
Oh, if only you're right, I'd be in heaven.

THIRD GUARD
Stay fucking on Earth a moment. Are you in it or not?

Second Guard hesitates, shrugs his shoulders and nods.

THIRD GUARD
All right, let's start preparing.

Lights fade

Scene 25

Palen sits at his desk, anxiously waiting for something. You can hear a clock ticking. Then you hear an agonizing scream, followed by loud commotion. When Palen hears that, his facial expression changes from very tense to deeply relieved. He exhales deeply and crosses himself.

PALEN
Thank you. (Beat) What a relief. After long, dark turmoil a light at the end of the tunnel. (Beat) And, maybe more than that? Maybe, after so much pain - a
(MORE)

PALEN (CONT'D)
turning point for us? Oh, how I wish it would be.

Scene 26

Lights fade and come up on Palen standing alone on stage. The sign above says: The Last Entry in Palen's Diary.

PALEN
I am back from my first meeting with the new emperor. I had such high hopes for it - and what bitter disappointment. (Pause) It started well enough. No scapegoating anyone. Secret pensions for the perpetrators as long as they keep their mouths shut (they will). As far as India, an order for all the troops in motion to immediately return to their bases. I remember how elated I was to hear that. Finally, the return to sanity. But from that moment on it all went downhill. (Pause)

I brought with me a list of essential, urgently needed reforms. I was hoping that he'd adopt at least some of them. He glances through it, smiles, shakes his head and says: my dear Count, the country is not ready for any of this. Let's look at them again in ... m-mm... 40 or 50 years. First blow. Then I make some proposals for more personal freedom and less government's censorship. The same result, we are not ready. I am tempted to ask when we'll ever be ready, but bite my tongue and ask him about Arakcheyev. Does Your Majesty intend to keep him?

He: I know he's a little crude and you don't see eye to eye with him on most things. But I have to say I sleep better knowing that he's in charge in Saint Petersburg. I'm shocked, don't know what to say. And then he adds insult to injury. He says: see, some people like him, totally loyal and obedient, are indispensable in any government. On the other hand, men with high principles and not enough flexibility can sometimes be, shall we say, ... problematic? And then, looking at me with a smile: I hope you won't take it personally.
I didn't say anything, got up, bowed and left. I'll submit my resignation tomorrow. (Beat) I wonder
(MORE)

PALEN (CONT'D)
sometimes: is there an eternal curse hovering over my country? Before the meeting I believed Russia will never again be ruled by a madman. Now, I'm not so sure. French like to say that the more things change, the more they stay the same. In Russia it's true more than anywhere else. (Exits.)

EPILOGUE, PART 1

SPEAKER alone on stage with an open book

SPEAKER
This is from the Russian Military History book of the 19th century. (Reads). Samsar Maurice Pavlovich (1765-1801) - a Russian general during the reign of the emperor Paul I. Came to Russia at a young age as a French émigré. Had a very successful military career, culminating in receiving the rank of the major general. Participated in the ill-fated India campaign. Was married with one son. Died in March 1801 during the cholera epidemic. Buried with top honors in the St Petersburg military cemetery.

EPILOGUE, PART 2

Lights fade and come back again.

Udachkin with an outstretched hand is begging in front of a kabak (a small tavern). He looks dirty, disheveled, with the untrimmed beard, his old army uniform dirty and torn. He is feverish and has a persistent cough. He has the look of a typical homeless person. An empty can stands near him.

UDACHKIN
For Christ's sake, please, something for a former officer... Please, for something to eat... Anything...Starving... (A passerby drops another kopeck in the can). Thank you. For Christ's sake, something for a former officer...

KABAK OWNER
(steps outside, with a smirk). Starting bright and early, huh?

UDACHKIN
(turns to face him, plaintively) Hungry.

KABAK OWNER
Same every morning. Stay here.

Hands him a large piece of bread. Udachkin eats greedily. The owner pours himself a glass of vodka, drinks and makes a sigh of deep satisfaction. Udachkin points to vodka and makes a begging sound.

KABAK OWNER
What, vodka too? Eh, all right. (pours a little to another glass and hands to Udachkin). There. Drink to the health of the new emperor.

UDACHKIN
N-new empe-ror?

KABAK OWNER
Yeah. Yesterday a policeman came, said we got a new emperor now and left this. (Shows an officially looking paper). Hey, wait a minute. You know how to read?

UDACHKIN
Y-es, sir.

KABAK OWNER
Read it to me then.

Hands him the paper. Udachkin reads, once or twice stumbling and coughing in between words.

UDACHKIN
'With the deepest sorrow we announce that our beloved Emperor of All Russia Pavel Petrovitch died an untimely death in a fit of apoplectic seizure. May God be with us and help me lead our holy mother Russia to her new glory. Signed: Aleksandr'. (Stops and shakes his head). Na-a...

KABAK OWNER
What'd you mean, na-a?

UDACHKIN
Nah-nah-nah... no seizure... uh-uh... but I feel very sorry for him. For what's happening with him now...

KABAK OWNER
What's happening with him now? Nothing's happening with him now. He's dead, dummy.

UDACHKIN
Yes. That's when... that's when it starts and then goes on... never ends... gets only worse and worse...

KABAK OWNER
What does?

UDACHKIN
All of this tt... torment.

KABAK OWNER
I think you got totally off the rails. I have no clue what the hell you're talking about. What torment? When?

UDACHKIN
Y-you know... When... when they s-say that you're dead.

Lights fade, then come back.

On the screen in BIG letters:

Udacha (Russian) - Luck

Samsara (Sanskrit)- Illusion

THE END

The play uses motifs from the novella

'Lieutenant Kije' (Подпоручик Киже) by Yuri Tynyanov (1927)

[1] - Felitsa, a poem by Derzhavin (1782)

[2] - The discovery of the Rosetta Stone (1799)