

DRAKON



A.M. TUOMALA

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EREKOS

DRAKON

A NOVEL



A.M. TUOMALA

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For Kylee, who gave me the dream;
for Pip, who showed me the Intrepid;
and for Waverly, who never let me falter.

ДРАКОН

BOOK ONE



И. БИЛИДИНЪ. 1906

А. КАВЪ. 1906.

PROLOGUE

By noon, the cold had grown so deep that Elizaveta was forced to give up her spyglass. The heat of her body was fogging up the eyepiece, and no amount of wiping could get it to stay clear. Not that it would do much good in any case, since the clouds lay so thickly across the sky that she couldn't find the sun through them, but it wasn't the Tarasov way to let incapacity stand in the way of work. Her father had manned the gunnery turrets whilst drunk, enraged, and plagued with the gout, and he'd take it very poorly if Liza let a bit of a chill stand in her way.

The cloudy days were the worst, although the clear days were colder. On a truly clear day, with her spyglass, Liza could see all the way to Turkey. Even on a hazy day, she could still make out the sinuous shapes of the dragons against the sky.

She took a swig of vodka—poor stuff, but it warmed her belly—and wiped the back of her mouth with a gloved hand. “The clouds are too thick,” she muttered, passing her father the bottle. “If there were a dozen up there, we'd have no way of knowing it.”

“They can't climb that high. Too much meat on them.”

"These clouds are low, though," insisted Liza. "You could graze them with a shot, and you can bet the dragons know to hide in clouds like these. Regular volleys, that's the only way of keeping the rails safe when the clouds are low."

"If it'll please you, make a pass with the gun. But you won't bring anything down, and then what? The whole town in a stir, just because you wanted to shoot something." And then Nastya would refuse them credit at the tavern and Kostya would charge them more for ammunition, and no one reputable would gamble or drink with them. Liza knew this just as well as her father did.

Vladimir Petrovich offered her a gap-toothed smile. It resembled nothing so much as an old battlement devastated by centuries of cannonades. It was the kind of smile that made children run for cover and dogs bark at him in the street. "Keep an eye on the rails, not the sky. The Moscow train will have our guests...and their rent."

"You could've asked more for billeting them and they wouldn't have said a thing against it. They have no idea what's reasonable rent in Russia, and I'd bet you my best pocketwatch they don't speak enough Russian to ask. You might've got double—"

"Their lieutenant writes good Russian, whether he can speak it or not," said Vladimir coolly, "and if he can't, Nastya knows enough French to take their money. Then what? She'd have their rent, and we'd have nothing but their strutting and prying. This vodka is swill." He didn't offer the bottle back, instead finishing it himself and then taking out his pipe. As he was filling it with tobacco, he remarked, "When you're my age, Liza, you'll be a better gambler. Today, though, you'll give me your best pocketwatch."

Vladimir struck a match and lit his pipe, then cast the match over the wall and into the courtyard below. Sweet-scented smoke rose from the bowl, the smell almost sharp on the chill air. To the east, the last leaves on the cherry trees and the plums clattered in a sudden, brisk wind. Liza

pulled her muffler over her nose and let her breath warm her wind-chapped skin.

To the west, a smudge of smoke on the horizon signaled the arrival of the Moscow train.

Under her woolen muffler, Liza grimaced. Their guests were coming, and she wouldn't bother to conceal that they weren't welcome east of the Volga.

CHAPTER ONE



Innokentiy Vladimirovich Tarasov was called Kesha by his intimates, of whom he had very few. He lived with his brother in the spare rooms of a respectable widow, who lodged scholars at discounted rates out of a sincere approbation for classical education. She imagined herself a patron of St. Petersburg's intellectuals, a hostess of *salons* in the style of Madame de Staël (notwithstanding that the *salon* had dropped from fashion more than half a century ago). Among her regular guests were clerks and journalists, lawyers and surgeons; divinity students could be heard discoursing loudly upon the question of how sanctity manifested in the flesh, while fresh-faced radicals demanded that the church's traditional territories be remanded to the Tsar and redistributed among former serfs.

Her guests never spoke of dragons, or of gunnery turrets, or of gambling debts. They spoke of the Turks as abstractions, safely squared away behind a boundary line on a map. Kesha found such gatherings unfailingly congenial.

It was at one such gathering, while Kesha was listening with half an ear to a disquisition upon Tasso, that a stranger in a soldier's uniform tapped him by the shoulder and gestured him step aside. He found the prospect of a soldier's

conversation even less enticing than the young wit's encomiums on *La Gerusalemme liberata*. "I'm engaged," he said, but as he tried to turn back to the conversation, the soldier held him fast.

"You're Tarasov, aren't you?" he asked. His accent was faintly but distinctly Polish. "You have their look. I have a letter for a Tarasov." He withdrew a crumpled letter from the breast of his uniform.

Kesha put aside teacup and saucer to take the folded paper. To *Pyotr Vladimirovich Tarasov*, read the outside face, and although it had been nearly six years since he had seen that handwriting, there was no mistaking the queer, left-handed slant of each upright.

Interesting.

"Yes, I'm Tarasov," he answered. "Thank you, Monsieur..."

"Jaworski. Captain Jaworski. I'll come at eight tomorrow for your answer," replied Jaworski with a cramped bow. As the stranger threaded through the gathered scholars, Kesha excused himself from the discussion of Tasso, pleading a sudden headache. Once he had burst free of the close gathering and stolen up the narrow back stairs to his room, he turned up the gaslamp by his writing desk and sat to examine his purloined correspondence.

Kesha worked free the string that bound the letter closed, carefully preserving the knots. The letter itself was almost insultingly brief, although his sister had clearly attempted to pad it with civilities.

Dearest Petya, (the letter began)

I hope you are well in St. Petersburg and are civil to your landlady, who is—you say—a good sort and deserving of civil treatment from a boy of your family and education. Things continue well at home, with six dragons redeemed since your last visit. Father's gout has been pretty severe, but he says, May God damn him if gout cripples him before a battle does.

I am writing because it is urgent that you return home at once, and I have entrusted our messenger, who is a reliable man, with funds sufficient for your ticket. We expect to be beset soon with the English, who have designs on our holdings, and if we are to make a fair showing, we must present them with the full strength of the Tarasov family, which they will have no cause to criticize. If you will not come, then I swear by my faith, you will no longer be my brother or my father's son.

*Earnestly,
Elizaveta Vladimirovna Tarasova.*

For a long moment, while the sounds of the salon filtered up through the floorboards, Kesha sat unmoving. His brother's fate lay in his hands. Even if Kesha had been disowned, Petya still had some credit with the family, and he might hope to inherit not only the name but also their goods and perhaps even the Tarasov estate—such as it was. To deny him the letter, or to counterfeit a response, would sever for good the tenuous ties that still bound Petya to father and sister, and thus bind him all the more firmly to Kesha and St. Petersburg.

The green light of the gaslamp shone soft upon the paper. Beneath it lay one of Petya's sketches for a flying machine, all intricately detailed gears and wheels and bolts. Petya was doing well in his studies, and in a year, he might easily gain a recommendation to whatever industry he cared to enter. It would be a kindness, truly, to keep Petya here, with his books and his playing-cards and his sketches of wheels. To return him to the borderlands, on so slight a pretext as the arrival of the English, would do irreparable harm to his career.

The moment passed.

Kesha folded the paper again, carefully sliding the string over the corners and rearranging it until it lay perfectly about the parcel. He imagined Petya's blunt fingers (no

doubt stained with ink or grease) upon the paper. His own fingers were long, thick-knuckled, each nail bitten to the quick. Hardly any resemblance. They mightn't even be related.

Messenger will return at eight for reply, he scrawled neatly beneath the salutation. He blew on the ink to dry it, then placed the letter on Petya's pillow before he could change his mind.

With his heart pounding, Kesha turned out the lamp and undressed for bed by moonlight.

CHAPTER TWO

“esha.”

Kesha muttered something unintelligible and turned over.

“*Kesha.*” This time, Petya caught hold of his shoulder and shook him lightly. At once Kesha’s hand closed over his wrist, vise-tight and hot from the bedclothes. His eyes were wide and unseeing, pale as a dead man’s in the moonlight. “It’s only me!” said Petya, trying to unclamp his brother’s hand. “It’s only me.”

Slowly, Kesha blinked. When his eyes opened again, he seemed to recognize Petya’s face, and at length he released the wrist. “Petya,” he said, and Petya nodded. “Have you *any* idea what time it is?”

“Half past one,” ventured Petya, because if Kesha was being rhetorical then it wouldn’t make matters worse to answer him, and if he was sincerely asking, it might make matters a good deal better. “We finished very late. Misha asked me to give you his—”

“I don’t give a damn about his regards,” said Kesha, levering himself out of the bed and groping for his matches. There came a scent of sulfur and a flare of light, and then the glow of the candle cast Kesha into shadow. “I suppose

you've found your letter and want to speak with me about it, or else you wouldn't have shaken me awake at half past one in the morning. Well?"

On his own side of the bed, Petya drew up his legs to sit tailor-fashion, his thumbs fiddling with the string from the letter. Now, with his brother awake and irate, his red hair catching the candlelight like a saint's halo, it seemed utterly foolish to ask his advice or his blessing. Nonetheless, now that he had begun, Petya felt compelled to press on.

He turned to light the candle on his own side of the bed; it felt eerie to speak with Kesha without being able to read his face. "It's a letter from Liza, but I'm sure you've guessed that already," he began while his back was still turned. The match wouldn't strike. "She—well. She wants me to come home."

"And why does she want that?" asked Kesha.

"She says they're—oh, devil take this match!" His face heating, Petya took a second match and struck it neatly, lighting his candle at last. He shook the match out and set it in the chipped saucer that caught his candlewax, and since he could delay no longer, he turned to meet Kesha's eyes. "She says that the English are coming to drive her and Father out, and she wants to..."

With Kesha's eyes on his, Petya could not help being conscious of the import of what Liza wanted. It seemed suddenly cruel to him to beg his blessing, when Kesha would receive no benedictions in return.

"To bring the family back together," supplied Kesha, and his eyes were surprisingly gentle. "Of course."

"I *want* to stay. I love you, and I love my studies. I'd stay if I could—"

"But you're a Tarasov, and you'll never stop owing your life to your father."

Petya reached across the bed to press Kesha's hand. "He's your father, too, however angry he is with you. I know you both regret what happened."

Kesha's eyes flashed. His lips pressed tightly together, and he drew his hand away with more than usual violence. "I regret *nothing*," he said, low and dangerous as a serpent-charmer. "What I did, I did from necessity—a necessity to which he forced me. If he wants to see peace between us, let him send a letter calling me home. Let Liza call me her dearest—"

A cold sensation stole over Petya's limbs. He felt light-headed, as though he'd drunk too much wine, although he'd only taken tea at the *salon*. "You read my letter," he whispered, and somehow that whisper silenced Kesha's tirade. "You read my letter, and then you asked me why she wanted me home, but you already *knew*. Name of God, Kesha, sometimes I *understand* why Father won't speak with you!"

He realized that he was shouting only because his throat felt raw, and his hands were bunched into fists in his lap. Kesha looked as stricken as if Petya had clouted him across the face.

"We...we shouldn't speak of things like this at half past one," said Petya, when the silence had grown unbearable. "You read my letter. What of it? A man may read his brother's letters. I owe you so much—"

"You owe me no more than you owe him, Petya," answered Kesha. "What I give you, I give you because I love you. I'd be a miser indeed if I only gave away what I expected to see returned. I don't expect my gifts to be returned with interest, as our father does." He looked poised to take Petya's hand, his fingers twitching upon his knee.

The anxious anticipation grew unbearable, and at length Petya reached for his hand to still it. Kesha favored him with an ironic smile at the gesture, telling him with an air of feigned solemnity, "My metaphors are terrible after midnight. You really shouldn't surprise me when I'm not at my best."

"I won't. I swear."

"On your faith?"

“On my faith,” answered Petya warmly.

They sat in silence then, listening to the settling of the house and the whistle of wind through the chinks in their window. Petya had tried to seal the gaps more than once, first with wax and then with melted lead, but the disaster of the second attempt had made their landlady bar them from further experimentation with her fixtures. The room grew colder than was truly comfortable in winter, but they’d secured a promise of curtains before the onset of the White Nights.

“You should go,” said Kesha, drawing Petya from his reverie. “You didn’t wake me for my advice. You wanted my blessing, so I’m giving you my blessing.”

“I was just thinking...” He hesitated, unsure of whether to unburden his heart—or indeed, of why it felt burdened at all. “I was thinking of how much at home I’ve felt here. Of how I set the windowsill on fire—”

Kesha burst out laughing, his laughter ringing rich and loud against the walls. Over their heads, one of the servants threw something heavy at the floor to shut them up, and the sound only made him laugh harder. “My God,” he said, when he could catch his breath long enough to speak at all. “My *God*, when you set the windowsill on fire—”

“Ssh,” Petya said, elbowing him hard in the ribs. “You’ll wake Madame.”

“If *you* haven’t roused her with your shouting,” retorted Kesha. At length, he composed himself. “Will you go?”

“I’ll go,” answered Petya.

“Very well. Then I’ll go back to sleep so that I can help you pack and see you off in the morning.” With that, Kesha shifted over to his own side of the bed, blew out his candle, and drew his bolster over his head. Even beneath it, though, his expression was so grim and determined that Petya could scarcely stifle a laugh.

Kesha would find his peaceful repose if he had to hunt it down with a harpoon. He was, far more than Petya,

temperamentally suited to their family business. If he hadn't been so determined to study in the city, then perhaps—

—well. There was no sense in *perhaps* or *might have been*. Petya blew out his candle and drew the bedclothes over himself, suppressing a hiss at the shock of the cold fabric on his warm skin. Although Kesha deplored the habit and would complain in the morning that his blankets had been stolen, Petya wrestled enough of the blankets free to wrap himself up like a well-swaddled infant.

This place felt like home. He knew the sound of his brother's breathing at night and the creak of the boards and the way the wind sounded in the cracks around the windowpanes.

He would miss it.

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO. THE DRAGONS LEFT RUSSIA.

The year is 1881. A hundred years ago, the Ottoman Empire bought the allegiance of the dragons—and ever since, the Tarasov family has stood guard on the disputed borderlands.



Now, with the autocratic patriarch Vladimir Petrovich at their head, the Tarasovs have become a tattered remnant of their former glory. Elizaveta, the last Tarasov soldier, heir to Vladimir's cruel legacy. Pyotr, the engineer with dreams of flight. And Innokentiy, the traitor who fled to the academies of Saint Petersburg. As war looms in the south and foreign troops crowd Russia's fortresses, Vladimir's three children must return to their ancestral home to confront the past that drove them apart.

But the bloodthirsty dragons they've fought all their lives aren't what they seem, and neither are the humans around them, friend and foe alike.

Splintered by internal strife, hounded by interlopers, and beset by Turkish forces, the Tarasov family must overcome their bad blood—or tear each other apart.

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