

Chapter 1

The heat of summer had been oppressive but it was pleasant enough in the forest, the tree canopy acting as a shield against the burning rays of the sun. But the whole village was rejoicing in the fact that the high temperatures were rapidly ripening the rye in the fields. No one would starve this winter at least. Mikhail Petrov slung the brace of rabbits over his shoulder and walked out of the trees to amble along the dirt track leading to his home, the village of Andreevskoe, a settlement of two hundred souls approximately a hundred miles from the city of Moscow. It could have been two thousand miles because few if any of the villagers ventured beyond its confines. The business of surviving from year to year consumed too much time to think about what lay beyond Andreevskoe's borders, though a few did leave, most to take a chance on finding work in Moscow. Others, the unlucky ones, were taken by the army to fight the Tsar's foreign wars. But for the majority life revolved around growing crops and raising families, practices that had been followed for time immemorial.

Mikhail's father remembered a time when the villagers had been serfs, akin to slaves who worked the land for the local lord. But the tsar of the time had freed the serfs and a new age had begun, or at least that is what the tsar's officials and the clergy had told them. The reality was the peasants were still tied to the land to eke out an existence and the lords became even wealthier. The serfs had indeed been freed and granted a portion of the nobles' estates, for which the government compensated the nobles handsomely. The peasants in turn paid the government for the land, the annual sums heavier than the rents they had formerly paid to the nobles. In addition, the lands the villagers were given were often infertile because the nobles kept the best parts of their estates for themselves.

'I hope you have not poached those rabbits.'

Mikhail rolling his eyes, turned to smile at the fat man on the horse.

'I found them lying on the road. I would not dare poach on your father's land.'

Timothy Cookovski edged the brown mare nearer to Mikhail, his piggy eyes darting from the strapping man on foot before him to the animals slung over his shoulder.

'Quite right,' spat Cookovski, 'theft is a serious offence. What are you doing here anyway?'

Mikhail smiled at the ridiculous fat man on his horse and held up a dog-eared book.

'Reading.'

It was not only a declaration of fact but also of triumph, one that Mikhail knew would annoy Cookovski intensely. The pompous oaf sniffed in contempt.

'I'm surprised you have the time for such useless pursuits. Keep off our land, Petrov, or face the consequences.'

He turned his horse, dug his spurs into its side and galloped off. Mikhail spat on the ground.

'Try not to fall off your horse and break your neck, little tsar.'

The 'little tsars' were the land captains, the central agents of the real tsar who carried out his wishes in the countryside. Drawn mainly from the gentry they had the right to adjudicate in village affairs and dismiss elected peasant officials. They were hated and feared in equal measure. Cookovski, the son of a minor noble, lived in what he called 'the big house', a stone building five miles from Andreevskoe set amid undulating terrain blanketed in forest, which he owned. The forest was full of game that villagers such as Mikhail availed themselves of whenever possible to supplement their meagre rations.

He threw the rabbits on the stove inside his family's home.

'Something for the pot, mother.'

Agrafena Petrov gave him a faint smile and rubbed his cheek.

'You are a good son.'

The mother of six children she looked much older than her forty-five years, her face etched with worry lines, her hands calloused, her expression one of permanent tiredness.

'I ran into "the little tsar" on my way back,' he informed her. 'I swear he gets fatter by the month.'

She began skinning one of the rabbits.

'Fat off the backs of our labour, Mikhail. May God forgive him.'

She turned and bowed her head at the icon in the alcove in the corner of the hut. A deeply religious woman, she thanked God for the three sons and three daughters she had been blessed with, even though each birth had taken its toll on her slight body.

The interior of the hut was exactly the same as the other dwellings in the village: a cooking corner, a corner for icons and a sleeping corner. The walls were made of weathered, unpainted logs and the roof was wooden boards. The plentiful supply of wood meant dwellings could accommodate large families easily, along with the cockroaches, lice and bed bugs that infested every home.

'Been reading again?'

Mikhail smelt his father before he saw him, a toxic mixture of alcohol fumes and the stench of an unwashed body. He sighed and turned.

'Father.'

Bogdan Petrov had turned to the bottle years ago, though of late his consumption of alcohol had increased markedly. It was fortunate that he had six children to work in the fields because he was almost incapable of undertaking manual labour, his body damaged beyond repair from drinking vodka. He gave his son a sneer and held his stomach as he coughed, spitting out black phlegm on the boards.

‘Get your lazy arse to the fields where your brothers and sisters are.’

‘Mikhail has brought us some rabbits to cook,’ said his mother.

His father looked at the animals. ‘They won’t feed eight.’

‘I will see you later, mother.’

Mikhail kissed his mother on the cheek, brushed past his father without saying anything and went outside into the street, though dirt strip would be a better description. Like the vast majority of Russian villages, the houses of Andreevskoe were set in parallel lines next to a water source, a lake in Andreevskoe’s case. As the population increased new structures were added running parallel to the original lines. Like a peasant’s life there was no deviation from the drab norm and routine.

The dirt felt warm under the heels of his feet, the air heavy with the scent of ripening rye in the fields surrounding the village.

‘Mikhail, wait a moment.’

He smiled when he heard the gruff voice of his friend and mentor. Sergei Semenov was in his mid-forties and was as far removed from men such as Mikhail’s father as could be imagined. He was a reformer, a man who could read and write and who wanted to transform the lives of Russia’s peasants. Indeed, he had taught himself to read and write in between working in factories in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, Russia’s capital. It was his great fortune to encounter the legendary writer Leo Tolstoy who, taking an interest in Semenov’s writings took him under his wing. This was most fortuitous because Sergei’s reforming zeal brought him into conflict with the authorities. His ideas had earned him the animosity of traditionalists and the church, and had resulted in him receiving a six-month prison sentence for sorcery. In the great revolutionary period that had swept Russia ten years before he and others had organised peasant reading clubs, cooperatives and unions. For his efforts he had been sent into exile abroad for two years. But every cloud has a silver lining and with Tolstoy’s financial help he had spent those years travelling through Britain and France, studying their agricultural methods. When he returned to Russia he set about making peasant practices more efficient and profitable.

‘You will come to the meeting tonight?’

‘Of course,’ said Mikhail, ‘though I think it is a waste of time. The village elders will never agree to your proposal.’

Sergei gave him a wink. ‘You underestimate my powers of persuasion.’

He saw the well-thumbed book sticking out of one of the pockets of Mikhail’s tunic.

‘I would have thought you had read it all by now.’

‘Many times,’ smiled Mikhail, ‘but I like to read it again when I can.’

It had been Sergei who had taught him to read and write, along with a few other boys in the village. He had even established a village library, though in truth it was a wooden hut to the rear of the Semenov home. It contained tomes that had been donated by Tolstoy himself: some works by Lermontov, Gogol, Goncharov, Turgenev, Dostoevsky and the great man himself. But Mikhail’s favourite work was by a French author: *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas. Semenov had given him a translation and it was his prize possession. His only possession. Being able to read was an escape, albeit temporarily, from the drudgery and pain of everyday life. He loved to read about the exploits of d’Artagnan and his comrades in seventeenth-century Paris. He may have been poor but the gift of literacy was a priceless one.

The meeting was worse than Mikhail could have imagined. It was held in the open by the lake as the sun began to go down. Many of the men were inebriated by vodka supplied by the village elders. Like thousands of other villages Andreevskoe was administered by its *mir* – a community of peasant households. The *mir* was run by the village assembly, made up of the heads of individual families, which invariably meant old men. These ‘elders’ elected one of their own to represent the village, in Andreevskoe’s case a heavily built man who was also a heavy drinker and who had a white beard and a red-blistered face – Grigorii Maliutin.

Maliutin despised Semenov. He had had him arrested, beaten up and denounced to the church as an ‘agent of Satan’. Like the vast majority of peasants Maliutin was illiterate and viewed any attempts at educating his fellow villagers as dangerously subversive. He had poured scorn on the idea of a village library and was appalled when Mikhail and a few other young men in the settlement took advantage of Semenov’s offer to teach them to read. He threatened and ridiculed the young men, denouncing them as women and stating they should wear skirts instead of tunics and leggings.

Maliutin, seated on the porch of his home, held up a hand to still the commotion, the air thick with the smell of tobacco smoke.

‘What do you want, Semenov?’

The peasant writer, flanked by his family and friends, removed his cap and stepped forward.

‘I thank the elders for agreeing to this meeting...’

‘Get on with it,’ snapped Yefim Stepanov, Maliutin’s closest ally, rumoured to be the most miserly man in all Russia. He possessed one coat, one tunic and hoarded what little money he had, to the detriment of his family who went barefoot and threadbare most of the year. Hoots and cheers from his inebriated followers greeted Stepanov’s demand.

Semenov held his nerve and waited for the din to die down.

‘It is quite simple. I request funds to purchase fertiliser for next year’s crops.’

Uproarious laughter greeted his request and Mikhail shook his head. The men of the village, most of whom were now drunk, roared with laughter. Even the ugly face of Maliutin cracked a smile.

‘Silence!’ he barked. He jabbed a finger at Semenov.

‘Even an idiot knows that comes out of the arse of a cow and horse. Why should we pay for something the Lord provides for free?’

‘Idiot,’ repeated Stepanov.

Semenov smiled. ‘Because the fertiliser I wish to purchase is far more effective than animal dung. I have seen for myself what the results are when it is used.’

‘When you were in exile?’ sneered Maliutin.

‘That is correct,’ replied Semenov.

‘We are about to harvest the crops, we don’t need any foreign fertiliser polluting our land,’ stated Maliutin loudly, to even louder cheers.

‘This year’s crop has been abundant, I agree,’ said Semenov, ‘but next year’s might not be. It would be prudent to insure against a poor harvest.’

‘Whether the harvest is good or bad is in God’s hands,’ shouted Maliutin, ‘your request is denied.’

Stepanov and the other five elders nodded their heads in agreement and Maliutin waved Semenov away. The reformer replaced his cap, turned and walked off. At that moment one of Stepanov’s sons, a gangly youth with a lazy eye, dashed forward and grabbed Semenov’s cap, tossing it into the air. Mikhail stepped forward and punched the youth in the jaw, knocking him to the ground and rendering him unconscious. Stepanov himself stepped down from the porch to confront Mikhail but was promptly punched in the stomach by the young man. He instantly crumpled into a pathetic heap at Mikhail’s feet. Cue pandemonium.

Mikhail’s friends – Dmitri and Pasha – sprang to his defence as the meeting degenerated into a fist fight. Men started brawling with each other for no other reason than violence had erupted, stoked by liberal quantities of alcohol.

Dmitri Burgov was a giant with a gentle soul and thoughtful mind, but when his anger was roused woe betide anyone who got in his way. He swung his fists with abandon, knocking two men to the ground. They did not get up.

Pasha Suvorov was physically very different: lithe and tall. But what he lacked in physical attributes he made up for in cunning and foresight. He ducked and weaved as drunken men stumbled towards him, taking ill-aimed swings at him with their fists. He stood with his friends and battled the followers of Maliutin, their brothers and allies lending a hand.

Mikhail was thumped hard just above his right eye. He went down but retrieved his footing to punch his opponent hard on the nose, breaking it and causing blood to flow. He roared in triumph but then fell silent as a gunshot sounded. It was an old musket that Maliutin had inherited from his father, and his father before him. It was rumoured to have been first used when Napoleon had invaded Russia, though that was probably an invented story.

‘I will have order,’ commanded the village spokesman.

Men dusted themselves down and examined their jaws, Mikhail, his eye rapidly swelling, grinned at his friends. Sergei Semenov was mortified.

‘This meeting is over, go back to your homes,’ said Maliutin, ‘apart from you, Mikhail Petrov.’

Pasha and Dmitri stood beside their friend but he told them it was fine. They slapped him on the arm and sauntered away. His father, too drunk to have taken part in the brawl, gave his son a murderous look and his brothers grinned admiringly before being cuffed by their father. Yefim Stepanov’s two sons, the gangly one, wobbly on his feet, assisted their winded father away, as Maliutin squared up to the oldest Petrov boy.

‘You are an insolent, ill-mannered waster, Mikhail Petrov,’ he fumed. ‘I should have you flogged for your behaviour here today. I have already had the son of the land captain roasting my ear about your insolence and thieving.’

Mikhail said nothing but just stared at the blustering elder, his cheeks reddened with rage and alcohol, his breath strong enough to down a bear at fifty paces.

‘You carry on like this and you will end up the same as Semenov, except you do not have a rich backer to support you. You will end up in Moscow starving to death on a street corner.’

At that moment a street corner in the big city was very appealing to Mikhail.

The older man saw the book poking out of his pocket and pointed at it.

‘You think because you can read you are better than the rest of us, don’t you?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Let me tell you about your life, Petrov,’ said Maliutin smugly. ‘You are a peasant; you will always be a peasant. Your destiny is to work this land until you drop, or drink yourself to death like your father is doing. You will never leave this place, you will never rise above your present position and no one will mourn you when you are dead.’

‘You honour me, sir.’

Maliutin continued to point at the book. ‘You would do well to burn that, along with the others you store in Semenov’s woodshed.’

‘Is that all?’

Maliutin struck Mikhail violently across the face with the back of his hand. Mikhail was gripped with rage and clenched his fists, ready to beat the old man into a pulp.

‘You kill me and your family’s home will be burned to the ground and they will be exiled from the village,’ threatened Maliutin.

Exile was akin to a living death and would certainly hasten the deaths of his mother and father. His arms fell to his sides. Mikhail cast his head down and slouched off, scuffing the ground with the soles of his feet. He found his friends waiting for him, together with an irate Sergei Semenov.

‘That was a mistake, Mikhail,’ the reformer told him. ‘When you resort to violence you lose the argument.’

‘But win the fight!’ grinned Dmitri.

Semenov shook his head. ‘My young friends, for centuries Russia has relied on ignorance and violence to govern the people. You may have cracked a few skulls but this evening backwardness has triumphed once more. Men like Maliutin are more than happy to see bloodshed break out if it means they can preserve the old ways.’

‘Then what is to be done?’ asked Pasha.

‘Use the power of speech and the written word to achieve your goals,’ Semenov told them. ‘Persuasion is a powerful weapon. What did Maliutin want?’

Mikhail shrugged. ‘To remind me what a worthless worm I am.’

Pasha slapped him on the back. ‘Even a worm is more useful than Grigorii Maliutin.’

When he returned home Mikhail’s father was already in a drunken stupor, snoring loudly in the corner. His sisters and brothers grinned at him as they settled down for the night around their father, pulling old, moth-eaten blankets around them although the night was far from cold. His mother was finishing cleaning the stove by the pale light of a candle.

‘I will finish that, mother.’

She looked at him with pain-filled eyes, a woman broken under the blows of crushing poverty.

‘Thank you, Mikhail.’

Her face registered anguish when she saw his swollen eye.

‘You are hurt.’

He brushed aside her concern and kissed her on the cheek. ‘It is nothing. Get some sleep.’

He finished cleaning the stove, sat on the floor beside it and pulled out his copy of *The Three Musketeers*, placing the candle beside him to allow him to read the words. His parents and siblings sleeping, he eagerly began to read the pages and travelled to the world of d’Artagnan, Aramis, Porthos and Athos and the magical landscape of seventeenth-century Paris.

This was his escape from the reality of his life: hours snatched here and there reading the book that inspired him to... To what? He knew he would never escape his life as a peasant and so did Grigorii Maliutin and his cronies. But at least his mind could be free when he read the pages of his book. He had read others, of course, those that were deposited in the village library, but it was the tale of the musketeers that fired his soul. He would always be grateful to Sergei Semenov for teaching him to read, showing him a window into another world, a world filled with honour, fine buildings, beautiful women and heroic deeds. He was young, strong and full of vim but his best years would be wasted toiling on the land to feed his family.

The peasants might not have been serfs any more but they were certainly slaves to the land. In theory each family owned their own land but in reality that land was divided into long, narrow strips scattered all around the village. The dozens of strips, most no wider than three or four feet, formed part of a land commune controlled collectively by the village, though the elders of each settlement maintained rigid control over property rights and tax obligations.

Semenov had told Mikhail of machines that ploughed the land and threshed the crops in Britain and France, but in Russia the peasants cleared, ploughed and sowed the land by hand, without the benefits of machinery, beasts of burden or the fertiliser Semenov had asked for. Like they had done for centuries the peasants operated a three-field form of the open-field system, in which the winter field was planted with rye or wheat, the spring field with oats or millet and the third field left to lay fallow. Semenov’s sterling efforts to improve things were fighting not only the village elders but also seven hundred years of tradition.

Mikhail rubbed his eyes.

It was two days after the mass brawl but only now was the swelling on his eye subsiding. He blew out the candle and lay down, but then sat up when he saw more flickering lights

through the cracks of the window shutter. Not a candle burning but something far bigger. He jumped up and opened the shutter, to see the library behind Semenov's house alight.

'Fire!' he shouted, running to the door and racing into the street.

He ran down the dry dirt track fronting the row of houses until he came to Semenov's, the occupants already awake and shouting for assistance. He dashed along the side of his mentor's home to come across the shed cum library now ablaze; roaring flames engulfing the structure and everything inside. Semenov was sitting forlornly on the ground with his head in his hands, his children vainly running back and forth from the lake to fill buckets with water in a forlorn attempt to douse the flames. Mikhail felt despair well up inside him, which turned to rage when he spotted shapes disappearing into the trees behind the row of houses. He caught sight of a horse and a fat figure in the saddle.

'Cookovski.'

He ran past the inferno consuming the shed and on into the trees, the light of the raging fire casting the foliage in a pale-yellow glow. He saw figures scattering before him, but he ignored them to concentrate on the son of the land captain. He sprinted after him and vaulted on to the back of his horse, before dragging him off the beast. They both crashed to the ground, Cookovski desperately trying to get up and retrieve his horse, which was bolting away into the woods. But Mikhail was on him in an instant, raining punches on his head and face in a frenzy of hate. Cookovski went down again and did not get up. Mikhail continued to beat him, the fat man using his arms in a futile effort to shield his face from the peasant's fists. He screamed for mercy but Mikhail had none, his knuckles turning red as he bloodied his enemy's features. He suddenly stopped when a stave struck his back, before sinking into unconsciousness when another blow struck his head.

He regained consciousness when a bucket of water was thrown over him. It was light when he was dragged out of the cabin and hauled into the street in front of Maliutin's house. Mikhail's head was throbbing and the bright sunlight made his suffering worse. He squinted in the brilliance and tried to collect himself, becoming aware that the entire village was around him. Men, women and children stood in silence as they beheld the sorry sight of Mikhail Petrov on all fours in front of them.

'For too long this village has tolerated the crimes and insolence of Mikhail Petrov.'

He could not see him but there was no mistaking the booming voice of Grigorii Maliutin, thundering with anger as he denounced Mikhail. The latter was hauled to his feet by men armed with wooden clubs to stand before his accuser.

‘Last night this wretch assaulted the son of the land captain,’ stated Maliutin to loud gasps from the villagers. ‘Only days after he struck Yefim Stepanov.’

‘He and others burnt down our library,’ said Mikhail.

Maliutin stepped down from his porch and slapped him around the face, to polite applause from the majority of the peasants.

‘We all regret the burning down of Sergei Semenov’s wood shed,’ said Maliutin, ‘but that had nothing to do with the son of the land captain.’

‘That is a matter of opinion,’ shouted Pasha, earning him a verbal battering from his father.

Mikhail looked at his accuser, a smug expression on his blistered face, and then smiled with satisfaction when he saw the bruised and bloodied fat face of Cookovski standing beside him. Even though his son had been assaulted the land captain himself was not present. He was a recluse who kept himself to the ‘big house’, content to let his son administer his estate and financial interests.

‘Mikhail Petrov will be publicly flogged to show that acts of lawlessness will not be tolerated in Andreevskoe,’ announced Maliutin.

Mikhail felt his legs weaken beneath him and there were gasps from the onlookers and howls of protest from his mother, which were waved away by the village elder.

‘No, Agrafena Petrov,’ said Maliutin coldly, ‘we will show no mercy because for too long your son has challenged the established order of things, encouraged by the seditious beliefs of Sergei Semenov.’

The peasant reformer now stepped forward and pointed an accusing finger at his nemesis.

‘Mikhail Petrov was defending my property, which was being subjected to an arson attack.’

Cookovski stepped forward. ‘That is a serious accusation which requires proof.’

‘The proof is the pile of ash behind my home,’ replied Semenov dryly, ‘which you of course would have seen as I saw you on your horse near my home on the night in question.’

‘A coincidence,’ said Cookovski dismissively. ‘I was taking the night air when I was assaulted by him.’

He shot a finger in Mikhail’s direction, anger in his eyes.

‘Mikhail was trying to apprehend those who had set fire to the library.’

Cookovski walked over to the peasant. ‘I hope you are not accusing *me* of burning down your shed.’

‘Someone did,’ said Semenov to murmurs of agreement from the villagers.

Cookovski shrugged. 'I assume it was one of your enemies. I have heard you have many and a man who has enemies puts himself, his family and his property in danger.'

'As a sign of goodwill,' said Maliutin loudly, 'we will rebuild your wood shed.'

But Semenov was far from satisfied. 'Will you also replace its contents?'

'Firewood?' smirked Maliutin. 'Certainly.'

There were sniggers from his supporters but Yefim Stepanov, still nursing a bruised belly, was in no mood for levity.

'We have wasted enough time discussing the contents of Sergei Semenov's shed. Mikhail Petrov must be punished.'

Two of his henchmen grabbed Mikhail's arms and began to frogmarch him towards a post that had been sunk in the middle of the street. Maliutin licked his lips with relish, knowing that every stroke of the lash that would cut Mikhail's back would also wound Sergei Semenov, the real target of his wrath. Andreevskoe had been a much happier place when the troublemaker was in exile. His broad smile began to fade when he spied horsemen at the far end of the street, three of whom were carrying lances. All chatter stopped when others noticed them and turned to watch the cavalymen approach. They were all wearing light grey tunics and caps, blue leggings and black boots. The rider at the head, an officer with elaborate shoulder boards, carried no lance but like the others had a sabre in a scabbard at his left hip.

An ominous silence descended on the village as the officer raised a hand to halt his men. He scanned the assembled villagers, his eyes resting on the figure of Mikhail still being restrained.

'Who is in charge here?'

Grigorii Maliutin stepped down from his porch.

'I am, sir.'

'I am here for two reasons,' said the officer, still looking at Mikhail, 'first to tell you all that Mother Russia is now at war with Germany and Austria-Hungary.'

The villagers looked at each other with blank faces. The vast majority had never been beyond the confines of Andreevskoe's fields. What was a foreign war to them? The officer smiled when he recognised the ignorance of the peasants, which he had encountered on countless occasions.

'Secondly,' he continued, 'I am here to impress four men for service in the army.'

Blank faces turned into worried expressions at the idea of the village losing some of its menfolk, especially on the eve of the harvest when every pair of hands was needed.

The officer tilted his head at Mikhail. 'Is this man under arrest?'

'He is a notorious troublemaker, sir, who was about to be flogged.'

'I will take him off your hands, then,' said the officer, 'him and three others.'

'No, please.'

Mikhail's mother ran forward and clutched her hands to her breast. Agrafena Petrov may have been a poor peasant woman but she knew the law.

'Lord, my son is only twenty and cannot be conscripted until he reaches his twenty-first year.'

The officer laughed. 'Your knowledge of military customs is to be commended, mother, but these are exceptional circumstances. The tsar needs all his sons to flock to the colours. Your son is young and strong; his place is in the army.'

Yefim Stepanov stepped forward, doffed his cap and assumed a deferent stance.

'Captain, sir, you should also take Dmitri Burgov and Pasha Suvorov. They are also troublemakers who are quick to resort to violence.'

'Just the sort of men you need in the army,' added Maliutin.

The captain averted his eyes from Mikhail.

'These men will step forward.'

There was a collective groan from the villagers when the two shuffled forward with heads down. The captain examined them briefly.

'They will do. Stand over there with him,' he commanded, pointing at Mikhail.

The mothers of Dmitri and Pasha were weeping but their fathers and siblings stood in stony faced silence. Being drafted by the army was one of the things a male peasant could not avoid, not unless he hid in the woods and lived like an animal. It was unfortunate to lose a son on the eve of the harvest but then again, come the winter it was one less mouth to feed.

'I need one more,' said the captain.

Mikhail seized his chance. Sergei Semenov had once told him that he had an enquiring mind but he could also be scheming and so it was now.

'Viktor Stepanov should be the fourth recruit, captain,' he urged. 'He is not afraid to fight.'

'Who is this Viktor Stepanov?' asked the captain.

The elder Stepanov blanched. 'He is my son, sir.'

'Let him step forward,' demanded the officer.

Viktor Stepanov, swarthy, duplicitous, took two steps forward, shock etched on his face.

'He'll do,' said the captain. 'All of you have five minutes to say your goodbyes.'

Mikhail tried hard not to laugh. It was a kind of victory to know that the son of Maliutin's chief lackey would suffer the same fate as him. He did not hate Viktor Stepanov; indeed, he

hardly even considered him. Despised would be a more accurate description. But he both loathed and despised Yefim Stepanov and Grigorii Maliutin, who did everything in their power to thwart the reforms of his friend Sergei Semenov.

Yefim Stepanov looked pleadingly at Grigorii Maliutin.

‘Viktor Stepanov is needed for the harvest, captain.’

‘Mother Russia’s need is greater,’ replied the captain. ‘If you have any objections to any of these men being taken for the army I suggest you write to the governor to seek redress.’

Mikhail chuckled to himself. That would be difficult seeing that neither could read nor write. His farewell to his mother was emotional, the two embracing tenderly and weeping together. It was at that moment that Mikhail realised that he might never see her again, might never see any of his siblings again. They all wrapped their arms around the two and said their goodbyes. His father, already reeking of alcohol, merely nodded his head and wiped his nose on his tunic. Mikhail had lost respect for the husk of a man long ago and would not miss him.

‘Time,’ called the captain.

His troopers surrounded the new recruits and levelled their lances menacingly to urge the men to break contact with their families. They did so reluctantly, all four with tears in their eyes and apprehension on their faces. Sergei Semenov ran forward to embrace Mikhail.

‘Keep you head down, keep your tongue in check and keep yourself alive,’ were his words of advice before a lance point was placed between them and Mikhail and the others trudged from Andreevskoe. At that moment he would have gladly taken a severe flogging to remain in the village where he had grown up.

