

RASPUTIN'S MOTHER

by

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## ACT ONE

*A huge, white-tiled wall forms a floor-to-ceiling backdrop to the stage, which is in darkness. The wall is broken only by a single steel door, centre-stage, which resembles a prison cell door. In the shadows, stage right, is a figure huddled in a wheelchair - RASPUTIN. Stage left is a battered old sofa, the only other furniture. There is a series of sudden loud bangs, as of cell doors slamming repeatedly, at approximately one-second intervals, each accompanied by a giant image projected onto the white tiles of the back wall. First, a classic image of Rasputin in his cassock and long beard, then a group shot of him in his salon surrounded by devotees, then Rasputin with the tsarina, Alix, and finally a sequence showing Rasputin's frozen and mutilated body after being dragged from the St Petersburg river, in increasing close-up. With the final bang, the projected images stop abruptly and harsh bright lights flood the wall, silhouetting RASPUTIN. It is immediately apparent that this last slam was that of the on-stage door, where KHVOSTOV and a GUARD have entered.*

KHVOSTOV: Does he know I'm coming?

GUARD: He's been told.

KHVOSTOV: It's just that I'm rather nervous, you see.

GUARD: Understandable.

KHVOSTOV: Is he...?

GUARD: Is he what?

KHVOSTOV: I don't know - talkative?

GUARD: *(Grunting)* Depends what you mean by talkative.

KHVOSTOV: Well, you know, will he answer my questions or do I have to -

GUARD: *(Exasperated)* I know what you mean by talkative.

KHVOSTOV: Oh. Sorry.

GUARD: You bloody people, you swan in from Moscow with your official documents *(he waves a paper in his hand)* and expect everyone to bow and scrape around you, treat us like northern peasants or worse - *(with heavy contempt)* Scandinavians -

KHVOSTOV: I said I'm sorry. *(Pause)* So. Will he talk?

GUARD: It depends on what kind of mood he's in. Which depends on how much he's had to drink.

KHVOSTOV: *(Surprised)* He's allowed drink?

GUARD: Only thing that keeps him sane.

KHVOSTOV: Yes, well, if you've lived the kind of life he has, I suppose you're going to carry around a few demons.

GUARD: I don't know anything about no demons. Well, there you go, Comrade. (*He gestures towards RASPUTIN.*) He's all yours. (*He exits.*)

*KHVOSTOV approaches RASPUTIN's wheelchair tentatively, stage right, uncertain if he is awake or asleep. He clears his throat.*

KHVOSTOV: Er, Comrade?

*RASPUTIN lifts his head slowly, turns to look at KHVOSTOV, and very deliberately spits towards him.*

KHVOSTOV: (*Even more nervous now*) I'm sorry. Father Grigory?

*This time there is no reaction from RASPUTIN.*

KHVOSTOV: I'm told you have been informed about my visit. I have been authorised by Comrade Stalin himself to talk to you. (*He pauses, waiting for a reaction. None comes.*) He felt - the party felt - it was time your story was properly recorded. For the sake of history. (*Another pause.*) It's been nearly twenty years, Comr - (*He stops and reconsiders his tactics.*) Look, my name is Mikhail Khvostov. (*He extends a hand.*)

RASPUTIN: (*Looking up sharply*) Khvostov, you say?

*KHVOSTOV nods.*

RASPUTIN: (*To himself*) Khvostov. There's a name I haven't heard in a very long time.

KHVOSTOV: (*A little more confidently*) I think you knew my grandfather.

RASPUTIN: (*With a mirthless smile*) Oh yes, I knew him.

KHVOSTOV: I'd like to hear about him. From you. If you wouldn't mind talking.

*RASPUTIN studies KHVOSTOV closely, weighing things up. It is a long time before he speaks.*

RASPUTIN: So how does the grandson of an imperial minister come to be interviewing the state's most secret and dangerous enemy?

KHVOSTOV: (*Officiously*) I cannot be held responsible for the crimes of my forefathers.

RASPUTIN: (*Impatiently*) Yes, yes, but why you? You are so young.

KHVOSTOV: (*Modestly*) I have done some... service to the party.

RASPUTIN: (*Nodding to himself*) I bet you have. I bet you have. (*Pause.*) And now?

KHVOSTOV: Now I am researching Soviet history and I wanted to meet you.

RASPUTIN: (*Doubtfully*) Researching Soviet history?

KHVOSTOV: Yes. Comrade Stalin has asked me to clarify certain matters raised by the Commission of Inquiry set up after your... murder.

RASPUTIN: Ah yes, the Extraordinary Commission.

KHVOSTOV: Precisely.

RASPUTIN: So your leaders want to rewrite the history books.

KHVOSTOV: (*Defensively*) The party wants clarification.

RASPUTIN: (*After a pause*) How did you know I was still alive?

KHVOSTOV: I'm afraid I cannot tell you that.

RASPUTIN: But the reports, the photographs? There were crowds on the banks of the Malay a Nevka when my body was dragged out. Did they not see me dead?

KHVOSTOV: They said so, yes.

RASPUTIN: Were my hands not bound? Was I not frozen in the moment of death in the very act of trying to free myself? Was I not been beaten, shot and dumped in the river by my murderers?

KHVOSTOV: Ah, yes, I wanted to ask you about that.

RASPUTIN: (*Ignoring him*) And yet I live. (*Pause.*) How do you account for this?

KHVOSTOV: (*He holds Rasputin's stare.*) How do you account for it?

*They share a moment, sizing each other up, before RASPUTIN breaks it.*

RASPUTIN: No. That is for later. Perhaps. Much later.

KHVOSTOV: (*Tentatively*) Then I may stay?

RASPUTIN: Can I prevent it?

*He looks quizzically at KHVOSTOV, who doesn't answer.*

RASPUTIN: (*Wistfully, to himself*) The power behind the throne in Russia. Ha! There was a time...

*The WOMAN enters stage left, dressed in plain, but elegant, grey satin and wearing a small shawl on her forearms. As RASPUTIN continues, she moves slowly across to behind his wheelchair.*

RASPUTIN: (*Directly to KHVOSTOV, with more vigour*) There was a time - (*with sarcastic emphasis*) Comrade - when I could have prevented it.

KHVOSTOV: I'm sure.

RASPUTIN: When all I needed to do was plant an idea in her mind, let it take root, make her think it was her own... I could do anything.

WOMAN: (*Leaning from behind his chair to speak softly in his ear*) Almost anything.

RASPUTIN: (*Surprised and delighted, hearing her as if a ghost, but without looking at her*) Ah, my child. The voice of an angel.

WOMAN: Heard by the man of God.

*The woman rests her hands on RASPUTIN's shoulders and he reacts, but still doesn't look round.*

RASPUTIN: Your friend.

WOMAN: Our friend.

KHVOSTOV: *(To RASPUTIN)* You were - close to her?

RASPUTIN: *(Sighing)* Not in the way you mean. Not in the way those bastards pretended.

WOMAN: We heard all the rumours. We knew what Petersburg was saying. But in a curious way, that only made it easier. Purer, somehow. Like a prophet in his own land. Nobody understood the holy fool like we did.

RASPUTIN: Of course, there were women. I won't deny that.

*The WOMAN breaks out from behind the wheelchair, suddenly laughing and gay in RASPUTIN's presence. She sits playfully on his knee, wrapping the shawl around his neck.*

WOMAN: *(Teasing)* Oh, Grishka, you promised me there were no others but me. You swore that our sin was the only sin. You made me pray for forgiveness.

*RASPUTIN pushes her off him and leaps athletically to his feet. As the scene unfolds, KHVOSTOV sits in the wheelchair, watching keenly.*

RASPUTIN: And never has there been more need of forgiveness than with you, my darling.

WOMAN: *(Mock indignant)* But there would have been no sin had it not been for you. I had never deceived my husband.

RASPUTIN: Truly? You had never deceived your husband before me?

WOMAN: On my word of honour.

RASPUTIN: Then I believe it. I am honoured to be the first.

*RASPUTIN undoes his cassock, revealing a lilac silk shirt and long boots beneath. Reaching into an inside pocket of the vestment, he pulls out a hip flask, from which he removes the stopper and drinks deeply.*

*The WOMAN circles the stage behind him, and re-enters his space from the other side, re-enacting their first encounter.*

WOMAN: Father Grigory. I'm delighted to make your acquaintance.

*RASPUTIN holds out a hand for her to kiss. She does so, mildly surprised.*

RASPUTIN: Well, let me have a look at you.

*The WOMAN turns round on the spot as RASPUTIN surveys her.*

RASPUTIN: *(Approvingly)* How sweet you are! Well, sit down, sit down.

*RASPUTIN gestures to the sofa.*

WOMAN: Thank you.

*The arm of the sofa gives way under her weight and falls off. She looks amazed, then giggles.*

WOMAN: I'm so sorry. Perhaps you need to call a carpenter.

*RASPUTIN goes to the sofa and tries to fix the arm. After a moment, he gives up and squeezes himself on to the end of it, forcing her to move further along it.*

RASPUTIN: It's that bloody Akilina Laptinskaya. Every time she visits, something gets broken. I like a woman with curves but she -

WOMAN: Father Grigory! This hardly seems appropriate.

RASPUTIN: No, of course. Forgive me. *(He takes her hand.)* May I? *(He begins to study her palm.)*

WOMAN: Well, I -

RASPUTIN: *(Suddenly serious)* My dear! You have suffered much. You have faced great torments.

WOMAN: I have?

RASPUTIN: You are in the midst of a whirlwind of emotions. Your husband is unfaithful, yes?

WOMAN: *(Non-plussed)* How on earth did you -

RASPUTIN: You are truly a sufferer! But the Lord Jesus will help you and your truth will win out.

WOMAN: My truth?

RASPUTIN: *(Looking into her eyes now)* There is no love between you and your husband.

WOMAN: That's a little personal, Father Grigory.

RASPUTIN: *(Angrily)* I'm not talking about lust or sexual relations. I'm talking about love. Love is all. Love is holy. Love is a husband's gift to his wife, and hers to him. This love is sacred and not to be defiled. This love you do not feel.

WOMAN: *(Crestfallen)* No. I don't believe I do.

RASPUTIN: And whatever is not love is a lie. And if a woman does not love her husband yet remains married to him, she is living in the deepest state of sin.

WOMAN: I don't understand. I thought -

RASPUTIN: Oh, the Church would have you believe that it is marriage that is sacred, the wedding vows that are blessed above all, but I say it is love. Love is the gift I offer to the world wherever there is none. Everything that is not true love is repellent and must be driven out. The absence of love in a marriage must be replaced with a new, spiritual and physical union, like one dove with another. I will be your dove. This will be my gift to you.

WOMAN: *(Uncertain)* My dove?

RASPUTIN: Your dove.

KHVOSTOV: *(To RASPUTIN)* These women of yours - they included society ladies?

RASPUTIN: I was received in some of the finest salons in Petersburg.

KHVOSTOV: It went further than high society, though, didn't it? A certain Anya Taneeva, maid of honour to the former empress...

WOMAN: *(To KHVOSTOV)* I first met Rasputin at Militsa Nikolaevna's in 1907, a few days before my wedding. As the empress's maid of honour I already knew that the sovereign and tsarina were seeing him at her home. At the beginning of March, Militsa Nikolaevna invited me to visit, warning me that Rasputin would be there. She received me in the living room alone and started telling me about people who are endowed with a gift from on high, and who possess the gift of seeing into the future. Militsa Nikolaevna talked to me for about an hour on that topic and asked me not to be surprised if she exchanged a triple kiss with Rasputin. I was very nervous - more so since she had said, 'Ask of him whatever you wish and he will pray for you. He can ask anything of God.' Rasputin and Militsa kissed each other and then she introduced him to me. I was startled by his piercing eyes, set deep within their sockets. I was concerned about my marriage, since I didn't know the groom very well, and I asked if I should get married. Rasputin answered that he recommended I get married, although the marriage would be an unhappy one.

KHVOSTOV: *(To RASPUTIN)* There was a scandal, wasn't there, over the precise nature of Anya Taneeva's relationship with the former empress?

RASPUTIN: *(Correcting him)* There was talk - hardly the same thing.

KHVOSTOV: But they were close?

RASPUTIN: Rather too close. Hence the talk. Anya's friendship with the empress was explained by some in court circles as an intimacy with - how shall I put it? - unnatural undertones. In order to put a stop to the rumours, Anya chose to sacrifice herself and get married. A married woman could no longer be a maid of honour, you understand.

KHVOSTOV: Of course.

RASPUTIN: The poor empress sobbed like a Moscow merchant's wife giving up her daughter to be married.

KHVOSTOV: And this was to Vyrubov?

RASPUTIN: Lieutenant Alexander Vasilievich Vyrubov.

WOMAN: When we came back from our honeymoon we rented a dacha, first in Petersburg and then in Tsarskoe Selo, near her majesty. My husband was reassigned to the Field Chancery, and in that same year of 1907 we accompanied the royal family to the sea.

RASPUTIN: He was completely impotent, of course. Never consummated the marriage. She complained that he had -

WOMAN: - an extremely perverse sexual psychology that was sadistic and utterly disgusting to me.

RASPUTIN: Eighteen months later they were divorced and the cunning little minx put herself even closer to the empress.

WOMAN: It was his majesty who was my infatuation, at least at that time. I could never let on to anyone that I was in love with him but I saw in him all the history, the power, the majesty of a dynasty stretching back centuries, all embodied in one admirable entity. Such authority, such grace -

RASPUTIN: Such bullshit. It was the tsarina she was in love with. But she understood the dangers of the rumours and put up a show of unrequited love for the tsar to divert attention. I think she fooled the empress. I can't be sure.

KHVOSTOV: (*Consulting his papers*) I have testimony here from an aide to the chief of the naval high command. He claims that when the royal yacht became grounded overnight on one trip, the former tsar slept alone in his cabin while the former empress took Anya Vyubova to her stateroom and spent the night with her in the same bed.

RASPUTIN: As I say, I can't be sure. But in any case, Anya knew that anyone wishing to remain close to the empress had to share her highness's regard for the man of God. (*He indicates himself.*)

WOMAN: I felt his power at once. It was the eyes. For everyone, it was always the same: it started with the eyes. And then, of course, there was the prophecy. He could see my marriage would end unhappily.

RASPUTIN: Everyone could see her marriage would end unhappily.

KHVOSTOV: And at that time, were you yourself close to the former royal family?

RASPUTIN: (*Snorting disdainfully*) I thought you were a researcher? Have you done no homework before coming to plague me?

KHVOSTOV: (*Rather thrown*) I'm sorry, I thought that -

RASPUTIN: She could not be seen to receive me openly. That would have been far too dangerous.

KHVOSTOV: I'm afraid I don't -

RASPUTIN: I was a peasant, an uneducated man from Siberia. Do you think the court would have allowed my presence at Tsarskoe Selo or Petersburg? As far as they were concerned, I was an illiterate monk - one in a long line of charlatans who bewitched the empress.

KHVOSTOV: Ah yes, I wanted to ask you about that.

RASPUTIN: The Blessed Mitya, Matryona the Barefoot, Monsieur Philippe - even the great Tolstoy could not dislodge him.

KHVOSTOV: (*Consulting his notes*) This is the Frenchman?

WOMAN: (*Taking KHVOSTOV's notes from him and reading*) 'Philippe Nizier-Vachod, a Christian occultist who had come from Paris and claimed to speak to the dead and inhabit a world between two worlds.' (*She looks up*) Terrible French accent, as I recall.

RASPUTIN: He was the first one they called 'Our Friend'.

WOMAN: They were desperate for an heir. By hypnotising her, Philippe persuaded her she was pregnant. She refused all meetings with her doctors until the middle of August, when she summoned the obstetrician Ott, though only to consult with him about her sudden loss of weight. Ott declared to her that she was not pregnant and an extremely muddled announcement was published in the Government Herald. The most ridiculous rumours spread, that the empress had given birth to a monster with horns that had to be strangled, and so on.

*The WOMAN moves slowly to the back wall, where she begins to cling to it to hold herself steady.*

RASPUTIN: The episode did not shake the imperial couple's confidence in Philippe in the slightest. He merely told them the failed pregnancy was due to their lack of faith. As soon as she called the obstetrician, the mystical miracle of her pregnancy came to an end.

KHVOSTOV: But she did give birth to an heir?

RASPUTIN: A year or two later, of course. By that time Philippe had returned to Paris, but she convinced herself that it had been his doing. He had urged her to pray to Saint Serafim and in the end her faith triumphed with the arrival of little Alexei Nikolaevich.

KHVOSTOV: And where did you fit in?

RASPUTIN: There were others before I was summoned. Bishop Feofan, Ioann of Kronstadt, who healed Vyrubova of typhus.

KHVOSTOV: Didn't you live with Feofan for a while?

RASPUTIN: For a while, yes. But it was a shabby apartment and there were ladies who had need of my ... talents.

WOMAN: *(From the back wall)* I saw Rasputin for the first time on November the third, 1905. I had grown disenchanted with society life, having undergone a spiritual change, and I was, besides, very sick with intestinal neurasthenia, which tied me to my bed. The only way I could move around was by holding on to the wall. My priest took pity on me and brought Rasputin. From the moment of Father Grigory's appearance in my home I felt completely restored, and from then on was free of my illness.

*She moves away from the wall as if having gained strength, and returns to KHVOSTOV.*

RASPUTIN: It was into Olga Lokhtina's apartment that I chose to move. It was an excellent family home. Lokhtina was a beautiful woman of fashion and had a really charming little daughter. Lokhtin himself was a government official responsible for the roads in Tsarskoe Selo, which inevitably gave him access to all the stories from court.

WOMAN: Father Grigory impressed me at once. He spoke very interestingly about his life as a wanderer, and during the conversation he hinted at the sins of his listeners and forced their consciences to speak. At his invitation I went to visit him at his family home in Pokrovskoe. Travelling with Rasputin was a great pleasure, for he gave life to the spirit.

RASPUTIN: Just a few days after I met her, Lokhtina came with me back to the country. I think she was surprised at my wife's peasant ways.

*The WOMAN falls down at his feet.*

WOMAN: *(Weeping happily)* Oh, Grishka, how good it is to see you again. I know you have been busy in Petersburg but we are so jealous of your time.

RASPUTIN: Get up, woman, we have guests.

*She gets up and begins brushing him down, smoothing down his hair and so on.*

WOMAN: Will you stay long, my husband?

*RASPUTIN throws her aside roughly.*

RASPUTIN: As long as it takes for you to drive me crazy.

WOMAN: *(To KHVOSTOV, by way of explanation)* A husband and wife have to live with one heart. Sometimes you yield, sometimes he does.

*The WOMAN circles round behind RASPUTIN, re-appearing on the other side of him.*

RASPUTIN: We slept little on that trip, often in one room, praying and chanting.

KHVOSTOV: Praying and chanting.

RASPUTIN: Praying and chanting.

KHVOSTOV: Nothing more?

RASPUTIN: *(Suspiciously)* What more?

WOMAN: *(Tentatively)* He did have the custom of kissing when meeting - even embracing - but it is only to bad people that bad and dirty thoughts occur. It is also quite true that on one of my visits to the village of Pokrovskoe I bathed with Rasputin and his family - his wife and two daughters - and in the absence of bad thoughts, it did not seem either strange or indecent to any of us. I was convinced that Rasputin really was an elder, both by his healing of me and by the predictions I had occasion to hear that came true.

*The WOMAN goes behind the sofa, leans across it provocatively and hitches up her skirts.*

KHVOSTOV: *(To RASPUTIN)* So there was absolutely nothing in the claim that you and she were having an affair?

*RASPUTIN follows her behind the sofa, takes out a riding crop from inside his cassock and starts to thrash her as he speaks.*

RASPUTIN: Absolutely none. All my dealings with Olga Lokhtina were sincere and pure.

WOMAN: *(Screaming ecstatically)* Oh, Father Grigory! You are my saviour!

*RASPUTIN begins to take her from behind.*

RASPUTIN: But the bitch just wouldn't leave me alone and demanded sin so that she could be forgiven.

WOMAN: Grishka, Grishka! I am your ewe and you... are... my... Christ!

*Both RASPUTIN and the WOMAN collapse, with the WOMAN left quietly sobbing in a mixture of agony and ecstasy.*

*There is a long pause.*

KHVOSTOV: So, there's nothing in it, then?

*RASPUTIN stands up and straightens his clothes.*

RASPUTIN: (*Matter-of-factly, moving on*) I saw many women in Petersburg in those years. They would come to my salon for guidance and help.

WOMAN: After I learned that my husband was deceiving me I left him and initiated divorce proceedings. He committed suicide and I blamed myself. An acquaintance offered in conversation to introduce me to a certain peasant who could soothe the soul and speak of what is hidden.

RASPUTIN: Khionia Berladskaya, the engineer's widow, was keen to learn.

WOMAN: I tried to submit in everything and when my heart was not wholly in it I would fight it, insisting that it was beyond my understanding, that it was all new, and that his words were a sacred law and not for me to argue with. Sometimes his caresses oppressed me - the constant hugging and kissing and wish to kiss on the lips. I saw it more as a test of forbearance and was glad when it was over.

KHVOSTOV: (*To RASPUTIN*) And how did you teach her?

WOMAN: One evening he lay down beside me and began stroking me hard and kissing me and saying the most tender words and asking, 'Will you marry me?'

KHVOSTOV: (*To the WOMAN*) What did you say?

WOMAN: I replied, 'If necessary'.

RASPUTIN: I find little spirituality in women. The soul does not 'glow'.

WOMAN: I believed my soul would be saved only through him, however that might be expressed. I regarded it all - the kisses, the words, the passionate glances - as a test of the purity of my love for him, and I recalled the words of one of his disciples about a troubling test, a very grave one.

RASPUTIN: At the same time, one must always become more refined.

KHVOSTOV: Refined?

RASPUTIN: That is something womenfolk do not understand. The saints would undress harlots and look at them, and become more refined in their feelings.

WOMAN: Lord help me! Suddenly he suggested that we tempt ourselves in sinful love.

RASPUTIN: To refine one's nerves is to master the flesh.

WOMAN: I was certain he was testing me and was himself pure.

RASPUTIN: In the highest possible state, one can even raise one's body into the air, in spite of its weight.

WOMAN: He forced me to ready myself and began to perform... a husband's duty.

RASPUTIN: Christ's walking on water - even his ascension - wasn't this an example of this ability of the soul?

WOMAN: He threatened me with violence, fondled me, kissed me and so on - forcing me to lie still without resisting.

RASPUTIN: And Christ himself did not avoid Martha and Mary, but was their desired guest.

KHVOSTOV: You compare yourself to Christ?

RASPUTIN: Not my words, my friend. But did Christ not heal the sick and make the lame walk?

WOMAN: My poor boy - I was so worried about him. He had been ill before, but never this bad. It was Anya who first suggested I call Father Grigory. He arrived with Lokhtina. His eyes were striking. Not only was their gaze penetrating but their placement was unusual: they were set deep within their sockets and their whites were somehow raised. The first thing I experienced when he came in was fear. It passed as soon as he started to talk to me in a very simple way.

*As she speaks, RASPUTIN acts out her words, going to the sofa as if it were the child's bed.*

WOMAN: I took him to the nursery where my ailing son was asleep. Rasputin prayed over the sleeping child and then started shaking him, trying to wake him up. I got scared, since I was afraid that the appearance of someone unknown might startle him. But, to my amazement, he woke up saying 'uncle' and reached out to Rasputin. Rasputin held him in his arms a rather long time, and petted and stroked him, and talked to him the way one talks to children, and then laid him back down on the bed. The day after his visit the boy started to get better.

*The WOMAN goes to the sofa and lies back, appearing to fall asleep.*

KHVOSTOV: *(Suddenly officious)* I'm sorry, Comrade, you can't seriously expect me to believe all this mystical nonsense. Science has proved beyond all doubt that it is medicine which brings healing, not some mysterious laying on of hands, or the intervention of a so-called man of God. If, as you claim, this boy did start to get better, there must be some valid scientific explanation.

RASPUTIN: *(Returning to his wheelchair for the first time)* As you say. Now, I am tired. You have wearied me, Khvostov, just as your grandfather wearied me.

KHVOSTOV: *(Personable again)* Ah yes, my grandfather. Tell me about him.

RASPUTIN: *(Waving him aside)* Very tall. Very stout. Fat belly. Now if you don't mind.

KHVOSTOV: *(Trying to control his temper)* A little longer, Comrade, if you please.

RASPUTIN: *(Erupting)* Don't use that fucking word with me, you little shit. I am not your comrade. I am not your friend, I am not your scientific research experiment. I am Grigory Efimovich Rasputin and I ruled Russia.

*RASPUTIN collapses in a fit of coughing from which it takes him some moments to recover, pulling out a silk handkerchief from inside his cassock and stifling the coughs. Eventually he recovers himself sufficiently to speak again.*

RASPUTIN: I'm sorry, sir, but I gave you fair warning.

KHVOSTOV: *(Chastened but still defiant)* Indeed. My intention was not to cause offence. I didn't realise -

RASPUTIN: Your grandfather was the same. He never realised. None of them did.

They all thought I was some upstart peasant from the east, that I weaved some pagan magic charm over her, bewitched her with the eyes - you've heard about the eyes, no doubt?

KHVOSTOV: *(Resorting to the safety of his notes, reading aloud)* 'The instantly blazing, magnetic gaze of his light-coloured eyes in which not merely the pupil but the whole eye stares.'

*RASPUTIN grunts, but it is unclear if it is contempt or approval.*

KHVOSTOV: 'Deep-set, unendurable eyes.'

RASPUTIN: *(To himself)* Deep-set?

KHVOSTOV: 'The hypnotic power shining in his exceptional eyes.' *(He looks up at RASPUTIN)* Yes, I've heard about the eyes.

RASPUTIN: And what do you think? Is the reality as you expected?

*They stare hard at each other for a long moment.*

KHVOSTOV: *(Rather tentatively)* Accounting for the years -

RASPUTIN: Ah yes, none of us improves with age.

KHVOSTOV: A little jaded, perhaps, a little mistier than the photographs.

RASPUTIN: Are you studying my eyes or my soul?

*They hold the gaze for another moment, then RASPUTIN breaks it.*

RASPUTIN: The first time I met your grandfather was with my friend Sazonov, who was an old family acquaintance, I believe.

KHVOSTOV: The publisher?

RASPUTIN: Just so.

KHVOSTOV: But why - ?

RASPUTIN: *(Interrupting)* Oh, the impatience of youth. *(He shifts in the wheelchair, settling himself in.)* Move me to the window, would you?

*RASPUTIN gestures out front and waits for KHVOSTOV to react. After a slight pause, KHVOSTOV goes to the wheelchair and manoeuvres it so that RASPUTIN is looking out over the audience.*

RASPUTIN: *(Wistfully)* The Neva runs dark today. There'll be snow before the week is out. Petersburg winters always seem so grey. Maybe it's the buildings. In Pokrovskoe what you notice is the great, empty white sky. Here, it's the grey.

*Shifting edgily on his feet behind the wheelchair, KHVOSTOV gives a nervous cough.*

RASPUTIN: *(Impatiently)* Yes, yes, your grandfather - I know.

*KHVOSTOV moves round from behind the wheelchair and RASPUTIN turns to look at him.*

RASPUTIN: Tell me, Mikhail Khvostov, what do you know of your grandfather?

KHVOSTOV: Well, his uncle was minister of justice, his family were landowners, he was a renowned right-winger.

RASPUTIN: (*Slyly*) All of which must have made the family name something of a burden for you.

KHVOSTOV: (*Defensively*) No-one should be judged by the actions of their ancestors.

RASPUTIN: (*Laughing derisively*) Ha! Is that a quote from Comrade Stalin, or something? Here, let me give you one: 'For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation.'

KHVOSTOV: (*After a slight pause*) Yes, well, fortunately Comrade Stalin doesn't share your perspective.

RASPUTIN: Hmm. And neither did your grandfather when we visited him in Nizhny. He greeted Sazonov with courtesy, as an old family friend, but was distinctly cool towards me.

KHVOSTOV: Let me get this straight: you and Sazonov turn up unannounced on the doorstep of the governor of Nizhny Novgorod and expect a warm welcome?

RASPUTIN: I was on a commission from the sovereign. (*With some bitterness*) Your grandfather saw us between trains. Didn't even invite us to stay for dinner.

KHVOSTOV: But what could you possibly want with him?

RASPUTIN: Politics, dear boy, politics. I don't suppose you could understand fully. Things have changed so much. It was all to do with the post of minister of internal affairs. This was always a crucial appointment, and the prime minister usually tried to obtain the position for himself. 'A prime minister without that post is like a cat without his balls,' as somebody once delicately put it.

KHVOSTOV: So who held the post at that time?

RASPUTIN: The prime minister, Stolypin. But even with it, he had no balls.

KHVOSTOV: You disliked him?

RASPUTIN: It was mutual. He set up agents to spy on me. He hated me for my influence at the palace. But he seriously underestimated it. That was his downfall.

KHVOSTOV: But I don't understand -

RASPUTIN: I went to see Alexei Nikolaevich Khvostov - your grandfather. I told him of my closeness to the tsar and of having been sent by him to 'look into Khvostov's soul'. After an hour or so talking with him in his study, I offered him the post of minister of internal affairs.

KHVOSTOV: But you just said the position was already occupied?

RASPUTIN: (*Studying Khvostov closely*) Precisely your grandfather's reaction. (*Pause*) I replied that Stolypin would be 'leaving' but your grandfather didn't take me seriously. He refused even to introduce me to his family and we left by the next train. Ten days later, of course, Stolypin was dead.

KHVOSTOV: Murdered?

RASPUTIN: Shot twice in the Kiev Opera.

KHVOSTOV: (*After a pause*) Is that some kind of joke?

RASPUTIN: (*Irritated*) At a gala performance in the theatre. He was shot by a young revolutionary, Dmitry Bogrov. By chance, I myself was in Kiev that very day. The festivities were quite something to behold.

KHVOSTOV: (*As understanding dawns*) I see. And so the new minister of internal affairs was...

RASPUTIN: (*Nodding*) Makarov, yes.

*KHVOSTOV performs a double-take.*

KHVOSTOV: Makarov? Who the hell is Makarov?

RASPUTIN: A question I have asked myself frequently over the past 20 years, believe me. He was a nobody, although he later rose to the post of minister of justice, just in time to run the inquiry into my murder. There must be something about ministers of internal affairs that sets them instinctively against me. I dare say the present incumbent is no different?

KHVOSTOV: I dare say. So then, how did my grandfather - ?

RASPUTIN: Later, my boy, much later. He resigned as governor, retired from the service and got himself elected to the Duma, fronting some Jew-haters called the Union of the Russian People - not that there's anything inherently wrong with that, you understand. He got himself involved with exposing German spies during the war, and he managed to make a good impression on the empress, in spite of the way he had treated me all those years before. But then, it had been made clear to him that the internal affairs ministry was conditional upon his behaving himself. And the matter of my personal security was, of course, taken out of his hands and given to his deputy, Beletsky.

KHVOSTOV: His appointment was your doing, then?

RASPUTIN: (*Nonchalantly*) I didn't stand in his way. And he had proved his worth when the Duma wanted to prepare a resolution of inquiry against me. Rejected it outright.

KHVOSTOV: So you were friends by then?

RASPUTIN: Nasty little weasels, he and Beletsky.

KHVOSTOV: Now hold on -

RASPUTIN: No, you hold on. You were the one who wanted to know about your grandfather. Well, here it is. If you don't like it, you can take your research and shove it up Stalin's arse for all I care.

KHVOSTOV: Comrade Rasputin -

*A glare from RASPUTIN halts him in his tracks.*

RASPUTIN: What have I told you about that word?

WOMAN: What, then?

RASPUTIN: 'Father' will do.

KHVOSTOV: (*Defiantly*) But you're not my father.

RASPUTIN: And bloody glad I am of that fact. (*He pauses and thinks for a moment*) 'Grishka', then, if it doesn't seem too personal for you. It suited your grandfather - for a while.

KHVOSTOV: (*Tentatively*) Grishka. A little presumptuous, perhaps, but if you insist on not being addressed as a comrade.

RASPUTIN: (*Sullenly, reaching for his drink flask*) I spit on you and all your comrades.

KHVOSTOV: I noticed. Now, I think you were referring to my relative as a 'nasty little weasel'. Do go on.

RASPUTIN: (*Eyeing him suspiciously*) Yes, I can see the family likeness, all right. He thought he could get the better of me too. He and Beletsky. They worked together to get me out, you know.

KHVOSTOV: No, I didn't.

RASPUTIN: Just like all the others - no idea what they were dealing with. They began by trying to conceal their acquaintance with me - too dangerous for the times, you see. Hadn't even told their wives. So I started phoning their apartments.

*The WOMAN, who is still lying on the sofa in semi-darkness, speaks as if answering a telephone, but with her eyes still closed.*

WOMAN: Hello? Father who? Oh, I see. Well, I think he may be engaged in a meeting with someone. I don't think he'll be able to spare the - I'm sorry? Me? How can I help? Well, I really don't see how my receiving them can possibly... Four nuns, you say. With petitions for my husband. Yes, well I quite understand that they're disappointed. But what can I - (*Distinctly flustered by now*) Tomorrow? At three? But Father -

*The line has evidently been cut off. The WOMAN opens her eyes and sits up angrily.*

WOMAN: (*Shouting*) Alexei Nikolaevich Khvostov, spare me from Rasputin!

RASPUTIN: (*Chuckling to himself*) After that they tried to spy on me by planting Natalia Chervinskaya among my salon. They even resorted to bribery but the sums were laughable.

KHVOSTOV: Really? Why?

RASPUTIN: Because, my dear boy, I was receiving hundreds of thousands of roubles from willing supplicants eager to feast on my wisdom and exploit my contacts. Your grandfather handed me a grubby brown envelope containing a pitiful fifteen hundred, and thought he was buying me off.

KHVOSTOV: I can't believe my grandfather would have stooped so low.

RASPUTIN: (*Snidely*) Oh, lower, dear boy. Much lower. He tried to have me beaten up, but the agent he used was one of my circle, and we spent his remuneration drinking vodka at the Palace Theatre.

KHVOSTOV: What did my grandfather do?

RASPUTIN: What could he do? To make a fuss would have revealed his ploy. No, he had to take his humiliation in silence, like a good little performing bear. But I am convinced it was then he hatched the plot to have me killed.

KHVOSTOV: Murder? I don't believe it.

RASPUTIN: Oh, save your petty whining for someone who cares. What were you - a baby? How could you know the character of your fat-bellied forebear, the stupid giant with no understanding of the workings of the political machine. He thought he was going to be the next prime minister, for God's sake! The short-sighted neanderthal couldn't even see that his right-hand man, his deputy Beletsky, was plotting against him for his own job.

KHVOSTOV: Beletsky?

RASPUTIN: The two of them were so busy planning each other's downfall that they could not see to plan mine. Beletsky implicated Khvostov, Khvostov implicated Beletsky. The merry-go-round of politics.

KHVOSTOV: So what happened?

RASPUTIN: Your grandfather tried one last desperate throw of the dice, circulating a rumour that my apartment was to be searched for evidence of pro-German espionage.

WOMAN: Her highness immediately told me to write Khvostov a letter instructing him not to search Rasputin's apartment.

RASPUTIN: Friends in high places. Fat Belly was 'retired'.

KHVOSTOV: *(With some bitterness)* You made him, you finished him.

RASPUTIN: Oh, I rather think he managed that by himself, dear boy.

KHVOSTOV: And Beletsky?

RASPUTIN: Ruined his chances of succeeding your grandfather by spouting the whole business all over the newspapers. Everybody loves a scandal - except those who are closest to it - and washing the dirty linen in public proved more than his career could stand.

*KHVOSTOV appears to have a brainwave.*

KHVOSTOV: But the murder you claim my grandfather plotted - what about that? Surely the Extraordinary Commission would have revealed such a conspiracy if it really existed?

*RASPUTIN smiles patronisingly at KHVOSTOV.*

RASPUTIN: What faith you have in your party. Anya Vyubova burned everything, of course.

WOMAN: I burned almost nothing.

RASPUTIN: A person who is degraded and in trouble becomes a child. She lied childishly to the Commission. What else could she do in her position?

KHVOSTOV: *(To the WOMAN, re-enacting the Commission's interrogation)* So you are claiming that your interest in Rasputin was the same as your interest in many other people in your life? Or did he still have exceptional interest for you?

WOMAN: *(Shocked)* Exceptional? No! Listen, do you think it was easy for me living at court? I was envied. It was hard for an upright person to live there, where there was so much envy and slander. I was simple, so for those twelve years, except for misfortune, I saw almost nothing.

RASPUTIN: Naïve and dim-witted, they called her.

Couldn't understand how someone so slow could possibly become so close to the empress.

KHVOSTOV: *(To the WOMAN)* But you were involved in political intrigues. You belonged to Rasputin's salon. You took an active part in the former empress's decisions.

WOMAN: *(With surprise)* Rasputin and I talked only of religion.

*KHVOSTOV takes out a sheaf of correspondence from his folder.*

KHVOSTOV: But why are people who have no connection to politics and are interested only in prayer and fasting carrying on a correspondence about political matters?

*The WOMAN sighs heavily.*

WOMAN: Everybody came by with all sorts of questions.

KHVOSTOV: I suppose you could argue that they came by for a day, a month, a year, but here they came by for many years on end.

WOMAN: *(Growing flustered)* It was terrible, that's what it was. They never left me alone. And now I have to suffer more ordeals from your guards. They spit at me, they strip me naked, they beat me. Oh, how they test my Christian forgiveness, for they know not what they do.

KHVOSTOV: If you have been mistreated in the Fortress, then those responsible will be held to account.

WOMAN: No, no - you must not punish them. That would only make things worse.

KHVOSTOV: Then perhaps a transfer?

*The WOMAN looks hopefully at him.*

KHVOSTOV: *(Returning to his folder)* But why did you burn a whole stack of documents?

WOMAN: *(Simply, as before)* I burned almost nothing.

KHVOSTOV: *(Exasperated, breaking out of the re-enactment)* Oh, this is hopeless. *(To RASPUTIN)* In any case, it's all a waste of time. The murder plot was unsuccessful.

RASPUTIN: Evidently.

KHVOSTOV: As was an earlier attempt on your life.

RASPUTIN: Are you asking me or telling me?

KHVOSTOV: *(Realising the stupidity of this line of questioning)* Of course. You survived. But the woman who attacked you that time in Pokrovskoe - was she mad or an agent of the state?

RASPUTIN: *(Shrugging)* Is there a difference?

WOMAN: After the midday meal I saw Grigory Rasputin coming back from church. He was almost home.

I asked him for alms and as he reached for money I pulled out my dagger from under my skirt and stabbed him once in the stomach with it. Rasputin ran away from me while I rushed after him in order to inflict a fatal blow. He picked up a shaft on the ground and hit me on the head with it, knocking me down. People came running from all directions and said, 'Let's kill her' and picked up the shaft. I quickly got to my feet and said to the crowd, 'Hand me over to a constable. Don't kill me.' They tied my hands and took me to the regional office, and on the way they kicked me, but they didn't beat me.

KHVOSTOV: So was it politically inspired?

WOMAN: I consider Grigory Efimovich Rasputin a false prophet and even an Antichrist.

RASPUTIN: It was politically handled.

KHVOSTOV: Meaning?

RASPUTIN: Meaning there was no trial. It would have been far too scandalous for the imperial family.

KHVOSTOV: And none too comfortable for your public profile.

RASPUTIN: (*Ignoring the implication*) She was sent to a hospital for the insane in Tomsk.

WOMAN: I am in my right mind and I remember clearly: I meant to stab him with a knife.

KHVOSTOV: Two conspiracies to assassinate you, then, even before that night at the Yusupov Palace. Such infamy must be difficult to bear.

RASPUTIN: (*Shrugging again*) I have lived with infamy my whole life.

KHVOSTOV: Even some of your closest associates have been your biggest enemies.

*RASPUTIN gives him a withering look.*

RASPUTIN: I assume you're referring to Prince Felix?

KHVOSTOV: He was part of your crowd, was he not?

WOMAN: Felix Yusupov met Rasputin at my apartment in November 1916. Felix was complaining of chest pains and I saw an opportunity to bring together two people I loved dearly, Grishka and little Felix.

RASPUTIN: Ah, the Little One.

WOMAN: I advised him to go and see Rasputin at his apartment. The prince and I went together twice at the end of November and the beginning of December.

*As the WOMAN describes the scene, she and RASPUTIN act it out, she playing Felix's part.*

WOMAN: After tea Rasputin admitted Felix to his study, a little room with a leather sofa, several chairs and a large desk. The elder ordered him to lie down on the sofa.

*The WOMAN lies down, as if she is Felix.*

*RASPUTIN goes over to her and moves his hands over her head and upper torso, then kneels and places his hands on her head.*

*He closes his eyes and mumbles a prayer before leaning his face close to hers and staring deep into her eyes.*

*Then, suddenly, he gets up and begins making sweeping passes above her body with his hands.*

WOMAN: *(As if in thrall to RASPUTIN)* His hypnotic power was enormous. Felix said he felt Rasputin's strength enter him in a warm flow and take hold of his entire being. His body grew numb and when he tried to speak his tongue would not obey.

*RASPUTIN breaks from the re-enactment and addresses KHVOSTOV.*

RASPUTIN: *(Matter-of-factly)* I took a liking to him at once and quickly came to trust him completely.

*KHVOSTOV grunts at the irony.*

RASPUTIN: We saw each other almost every day and talked about everything.

KHVOSTOV: But how is one to explain such trust when you were prepared to trust nobody? There had already been two attempts -

RASPUTIN: *(Wistfully)* Who can begin to understand the workings of the mind?

*KHVOSTOV reaches into his papers and pulls out a report.*

KHVOSTOV: *(Reading)* The police agents report that when he visited you he used the back stairs.

RASPUTIN: *(Suddenly wary)* What of it?

KHVOSTOV: Prince Felix was notorious for his - what shall I say? - unusual appetites.

RASPUTIN: I don't know anything about that.

KHVOSTOV: And he was rather a beautiful young man, by all accounts.

RASPUTIN: If you have something to imply -

KHVOSTOV: *(Quoting from the report)* 'The Little One entered by the back door.'

*RASPUTIN reacts furiously, lurching towards KHVOSTOV.*

RASPUTIN: You filthy little shit.

*KHVOSTOV steps away, laughing at the reaction.*

KHVOSTOV: Touched a raw nerve, have we, Comrade?

*RASPUTIN checks himself and pulls back.*

RASPUTIN: Prince Felix Yusupov will always be a raw nerve. *(Mock casually)* He tried to kill me, you know.

KHVOSTOV: So I hear.

*There is a long pause as both men take stock of their position.*

KHVOSTOV: Tell me about your murder.

*The WOMAN assumes the guise of Irina, Yusupov's wife, as the following scene is played out.*

WOMAN: My husband, Prince Felix Yusupov, was no fool. A little insane, perhaps, but not stupid. He had spent many weeks cultivating his friendship with Rasputin and he wrote to me in the Crimea, where I was staying at our country estate with his mother.

*The WOMAN takes out a letter from her skirts and reads.*

WOMAN: 'I'm terribly busy working on a plan to eliminate Rasputin. You too must take part in it. Dmitry knows all about it and is helping. It will all take place in the middle of December, when Dmitry comes back. How much I want to see you before that, but it will be better if you do not come earlier. Not a word to anyone about what I've written.'

RASPUTIN: The same day he wrote that letter he came to see me.

KHVOSTOV: And...

RASPUTIN: And told me some extraordinarily intimate things about his wife.

KHVOSTOV: What things?

RASPUTIN: About her demon of lechery, for instance. About how she needed curing, exorcising.

KHVOSTOV: *(Sarcastically)* And you were just the man to do it.

RASPUTIN: Don't mock what you can't understand. You have no idea of the power I exerted.

KHVOSTOV: Oh, I think I'm beginning to see.

RASPUTIN: It was all a sham, of course. A lure to get me to the Yusupov Palace that night. I was supposed to visit the pair of them and heal each in turn of their vices.

KHVOSTOV: Using your familiar techniques, I presume?

WOMAN: Rasputin agreed to the suggestion that he come and meet me but only did so on the condition that Felix himself pick him up and take him back home. Felix's plan was that he should take Rasputin into the dining room in the basement on the pretext that I was entertaining unexpected guests upstairs. While he waited to meet me, Felix would supply him with poisoned pastries and wine.

RASPUTIN: It was after twelve when I started to get ready to go out. Munya had spent the day with me, and Anya had visited that evening. Around ten I received another caller, Sister Maria, who helped me to remove the tension that so often took hold of me. My daughters and niece came home around eleven and went to bed, but Protopopov, the minister of internal affairs, called at twelve.

KHVOSTOV: A busy evening for you.

RASPUTIN: I got rid of him quickly. I was expecting Yusupov. I dressed in a light blue shirt embroidered with cornflowers, then lay down to wait for him.

WOMAN: Uncle lay down on his bed just after twelve in his clothing. When I asked what he was doing, he replied, 'I'm going to visit the Little One tonight'. The 'Little One' was what Uncle called Yusupov.

KHVOSTOV: But of course, he wasn't alone.

RASPUTIN: There were five of them in the conspiracy. One, of course, a member of the royal family.

KHVOSTOV: Dmitry?

RASPUTIN: Dmitry.

KHVOSTOV: But nothing was ever proved. Felix and Purishkevich swore he had no blood on his hands.

RASPUTIN: Of course they did. Dmitry would have been a legitimate pretender to the throne. How would that have looked - a murderer trying to claim the crown? They had to deny his involvement.

*KHVOSTOV takes a sheaf of papers from his bag and waves them at RASPUTIN.*

KHVOSTOV: I have a transcript of the testimony of Purishkevich.

RASPUTIN: And you have fallen for his lies.

KHVOSTOV: *(Beginning to read)* 'I shall try to recount with photographic accuracy the whole course of the historically significant drama that unfolded. On that night, the weather - '

The WOMAN crosses to KHVOSTOV and takes the papers from him, freeing him to re-enact the events with RASPUTIN.

WOMAN: *(Picking up from KHVOSTOV)* ' - the weather was a mild two to three degrees above freezing and wet snow was falling.'

Snow begins to fall on the forestage, signifying the courtyard outside the Yusupov palace, and continues to fall throughout the scene, creating a kind of curtain between the audience and the action.

WOMAN: 'We five met that evening in the basement, which had been transformed into an elegant bonbonniere in the style of the ancient Russian palaces.'

*The white-tiled wall across the back of the stage flies out to reveal the basement dining room, which then trucks forward to fill the stage. KHVOSTOV moves some of the furniture about to replicate the description and re-enacts the poisoning of the cakes and wine.*

WOMAN: 'That charming room was divided into two parts. One was a sort of miniature dining room with a fire cosily burning, the other a sitting room with a polar bear skin on the floor in front of the settee. The pastries were well matched to the dining room - little pink and brown petits fours, chosen to complement the colour of the wall.

Dr Lazavert put on gloves and began to chip the poison - pellets of potassium cyanide - on to a plate for inserting into the little pastries with the pink cream filling. The chocolate ones were left unpoisoned. Into the wine he poured a solution of the mixture. When we heard Felix's car pull up with Rasputin, we went upstairs to create the illusion of the unexpected guests, while Felix took him into the basement.'

*RASPUTIN takes off his cassock as if it were an overcoat and throws it over a chair. He begins to navigate the room, inspecting the furniture.*

KHVOSTOV: Some wine, Grishka?

RASPUTIN: *(Absently)* Hmm?

*KHVOSTOV pours a glass from the bottle and offers it to RASPUTIN.*

RASPUTIN: Some tea, perhaps.

*KHVOSTOV is clearly disappointed, but pours tea nonetheless, taking it across to RASPUTIN with a plate of the pastries.*

KHVOSTOV: Cake?

RASPUTIN: I don't eat cakes. They're too sweet.

*RASPUTIN takes the tea and sits at the table.*

*KHVOSTOV returns the plate to the table.*

KHVOSTOV: *(To himself)* The animal will not eat or drink. *(To RASPUTIN)* If you'll excuse me, I shall go and see how long Irina is likely to be with our guests.

*KHVOSTOV exits, leaving RASPUTIN sipping his tea. After a moment, he looks at it in distaste, notices the wine bottle and pours himself a glass, which he downs in one gulp before pouring a second. Then he takes a cake from the plate, sizes it up and eats it.*

*KHVOSTOV returns and sits opposite RASPUTIN at the table.*

RASPUTIN: What is going on up there? Where is your wife?

KHVOSTOV: It would be difficult for her to absent herself without being noticed. There aren't many guests left so in all likelihood she'll be down in ten minutes or so. Another glass?

*KHVOSTOV refills RASPUTIN's glass and he drinks. Suddenly, he leaps to his feet, clutching his stomach, and goes to the settee, where he sits heavily, with his head in his hands.*

KHVOSTOV: Are you all right, Grishka?

RASPUTIN: *(Waving a hand)* Pour me a cup. I'm very thirsty. Those cakes...

*There is the sound of voices from off-stage.*

RASPUTIN: What's all the noise?

KHVOSTOV: The guests are probably leaving. I'll take a look.

*KHVOSTOV exits. After a moment, RASPUTIN appears to recover and stands again. He goes over to the cabinet where the large crucifix is standing and begins to study it. KHVOSTOV returns with a pistol concealed behind his back.*

KHVOSTOV: I like that crucifix very much.

RASPUTIN: *(Disdainfully)* I think I prefer the cabinet.

KHVOSTOV: *(Taking out the pistol and pointing it at RASPUTIN)* Grigory Efimovich, you would do better to look at the crucifix - and pray to it.

*As if in slow motion, RASPUTIN turns fully to face KHVOSTOV and spreads his arms, in echo of the crucifix behind him. KHVOSTOV shoots, RASPUTIN lets out a howl of pain and falls back heavily on to the bearskin rug. The tableau is frozen for a moment.*

WOMAN: 'There wasn't any doubt. Rasputin was dead. We turned off the light, locked the dinning room door and went upstairs to the study. Everyone was elated.'

*KHVOSTOV goes over to the WOMAN and retrieves the papers from her, reading himself.*

KHVOSTOV: 'I felt an irresistible desire to look at him and returned to the basement. The dead Rasputin lay by the table where we had left him. He wasn't moving, but after touching him I was convinced he was still warm.'

*KHVOSTOV hands the papers back to the WOMAN and crosses to where RASPUTIN is lying to take his pulse.*

WOMAN: *(Reading)* 'Then, bending over, I started taking his pulse but couldn't feel any. Blood was seeping from his wounds in little drops.'

*KHVOSTOV grabs RASPUTIN's shoulders and starts to shake him violently. When he lets go, RASPUTIN's head falls back limply. KHVOSTOV stands and turns away from the body, but RASPUTIN suddenly leaps to his feet with a roar and sinks his clenched fingers into KHVOSTOV's throat.*

RASPUTIN: *(In a hoarse whisper)* Felix! Felix!

*KHVOSTOV struggles to free himself and finally breaks away, leaving one epaulette in RASPUTIN's hand. KHVOSTOV runs off-stage, shouting.*

KHVOSTOV: *(Terrified)* Quick, shoot! He's still alive!

*RASPUTIN falls to his knees and begins crawling after him, then struggles to his feet and lurches onto the forestage, into the falling snow. He staggers from one side towards the other but, halfway across, KHVOSTOV appears behind him with the pistol and shoots twice, missing. KHVOSTOV bites his hand to focus his mind, and at the third attempt, he hits RASPUTIN in the back, sending him to his knees. Then he walks closer, takes aim at his head, and fires again. RASPUTIN collapses in the snow. KHVOSTOV, a look of blind fury on his face, goes to the body and pistol-whips it manically, finally collapsing, exhausted, on top of it. There is a long pause.*

*As the WOMAN speaks, KHVOSTOV rises to his feet, goes to the sofa and sits down in a daze.*

WOMAN: 'I was drawn irresistibly to that bloodied corpse. I no longer had the strength to struggle against myself. Rage and malice suffocated me. I was overwhelmed by a state I cannot explain. I flew at the corpse and began to beat it. I struck indiscriminately in my rage and fury, flouting every divine and human law.'

KHVOSTOV: *(Vacantly)* The most amazing thing was that Rasputin was still alive.

*RASPUTIN reaches out his arms feebly towards KHVOSTOV, the hands clawed in the same position as in the image of his frozen body which was projected on to the wall in the opening sequence.*

RASPUTIN: *(In a hoarse whisper)* Felix! Felix!

KHVOSTOV: He gasped for breath and the pupil of his right eye rolled and gazed emptily and horribly at me.

RASPUTIN: Felix!

*RASPUTIN finally gives up, his arms falling to the ground as his blood spreads across the snow.*

KHVOSTOV: I see that eye before me to this day.

*KHVOSTOV closes his eyes at the painful memory and leans back on the sofa, covering his head with his hands.*

END OF ACT ONE.

## ACT TWO

*The curtain rises on the same white-tiled wall with a cell door at its centre. The stage is again in darkness, but the sofa is now stage left, with a drape over it. The wheelchair stands empty stage right.*

*The same sequence of sudden loud bangs, accompanied by the same pictures, concludes with the final image of the frozen RASPUTIN, hands clawed. This time, the image takes longer to fade, and as it does, the lights come up a little to reveal that KHVOSTOV has entered through the door with the GUARD. They lurk upstage, beside the door, KHVOSTOV studying the sofa carefully.*

KHVOSTOV: Does he know I'm coming?

GUARD: He's been told.

KHVOSTOV: It's just that I'm rather nervous, you see.

GUARD: Understandable.

KHVOSTOV: Is he...?

GUARD: Is he what?

KHVOSTOV: I don't know - pissed off?

GUARD: (*Grunting*) Depends what you mean by pissed off.

KHVOSTOV: Well, you know...

*The GUARD shoots KHVOSTOV a withering look, cutting him short.*

KHVOSTOV: Right. Yes.

*There is a pause, in which KHVOSTOV doesn't move. The GUARD shuffles from foot to foot.*

GUARD: So, your people in Moscow, they sent you back, then?

KHVOSTOV: (*Without taking his eyes off the sofa*) It's... complicated, you see.

GUARD: Complicated.

KHVOSTOV: Complicated, yes. (*He turns to the GUARD at last*) You do know what complicated means?

*The GUARD stares hard at him, bristling and weighing up a clever answer. After a long pause, he gives up.*

GUARD: Sod off.

*The GUARD turns to the door, opens it and leaves, slamming it behind him.*

*After a moment, KHVOSTOV moves upstage tentatively and clears his throat.*

KHVOSTOV: Father Grigory?

*There is no movement from the sofa.*

KHVOSTOV: Comrade?

*There is still no movement.*

KHVOSTOV: *(Still more tentatively)* Er... Grishka?

*Slowly, the drape is drawn back from the sofa by RASPUTIN, lying beneath it. Painfully, he sits upright, never taking his eyes from KHVOSTOV, and very deliberately spits towards him.*

KHVOSTOV: Look, I know things were left a little - *(he gestures towards the forestage where RASPUTIN had been left at the end of Act One)* - messy the last time I saw you, and you've got every right to be angry with me -

*RASPUTIN grunts disparagingly at him.*

KHVOSTOV: - but I was hoping we might be able to... I don't know, start again?

*KHVOSTOV steps forward with his hand outstretched. RASPUTIN looks contemptuously at him.*

RASPUTIN: Exactly the same as your grandfather. Time moves on, but the blood remains the same.

KHVOSTOV: Look, about my grandfather -

RASPUTIN: You know nothing about your grandfather, do you? And, what's more, you don't even care. That's not why you're here, is it?

KHVOSTOV: I told you, I'm researching Soviet history.

RASPUTIN: Bollocks. How did you know I was still alive?

KHVOSTOV: I cannot tell you that.

RASPUTIN: Listen, you steaming pile of horse shit, if you want to talk to me, you'd better get used to the idea that it's going to be on my terms. You want to know how I come to be here, in the Fortress of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, twenty years after I was beaten, shot and dumped in a freezing river? Then start giving me something in return. Now how did you know I was alive?

KHVOSTOV: I saw... documents.

RASPUTIN: What documents?

KHVOSTOV: My grandfather -

RASPUTIN: Your grandfather was long out of office by the time Yusupov and his crew got to me.

KHVOSTOV: He still had... connections.

RASPUTIN: *(With dawning realisation)* Beletsky. His old deputy.

*RASPUTIN looks at KHVOSTOV, who nods.*

RASPUTIN: But they betrayed each other?

KHVOSTOV: That was the official record, yes. In reality, they remained close.

RASPUTIN: And Beletsky was at the heart of the cover-up over my murder.

KHVOSTOV: My understanding is that it was he who organised the doubles.

RASPUTIN: I had had doubles for months. It was the only way the secret service knew to keep me alive. And as long as there was a tsar in Russia - not to mention a tsarina - he knew I had to be kept alive.

KHVOSTOV: So it was not you, that night at the Yusupov palace? I had suspected...

RASPUTIN: Three bullet wounds, a pistol-whipping and being bound and drowned in the Malaya Nevka.

KHVOSTOV: Even you are not that charmed.

RASPUTIN: Are you sure about that?

KHVOSTOV: But how did your double manage to fool Yusupov?

RASPUTIN: I never said when the substitution took place.

KHVOSTOV: You mean, you did go to the Yusupov palace? But then, it must have been you who ate the poisoned cakes, drank the wine. It was you they shot and beat. It was your body they dumped in the river.

RASPUTIN: And dragged out hours later and took away for an autopsy.

KHVOSTOV: *(Slowly, working it out in his head)* But you were somehow still alive? So you're telling me that everything they said about your powers was true?

RASPUTIN: They could hardly admit that, could they? So my double served one final purpose.

KHVOSTOV: And because they couldn't kill you, they did the next best thing and locked you up in here.

*There is a long pause as KHVOSTOV weighs up what has just dawned on him.*

KHVOSTOV: But after the revolution, why keep it a secret then?

RASPUTIN: After the revolution, secrecy was all the more important. Can you imagine the kind of figurehead I might have been to those opposed to the new regime?

KHVOSTOV: So why did they not try to kill you then, have you executed like the imperial family?

RASPUTIN: Now there you have me. Perhaps your friends in Moscow believed I might be able to tell them useful things. More likely is that they feared me - still fear me - for my gifts. Superstition can be a powerful thing, you know. How else do you account for my continued existence?

KHVOSTOV: How indeed.

*They share a moment, sizing each other up, before RASPUTIN breaks it.*

RASPUTIN: So. Tell me, Khvostov, why have you returned?

KHVOSTOV: I didn't want to leave things that way.

RASPUTIN: What, with me collapsed in agony after you took our reconstruction just a bit too far?

KHVOSTOV: Oh come on, Comrade -

RASPUTIN: What have I told you about that word?

KHVOSTOV: - You were drunk, man! I never laid a finger on you. You drank your way through a whole bottle of wine and God knows how much liquor from that hip flask of yours. That's why you collapsed. For all I know, your liver's shot to pieces.

RASPUTIN: You don't know me. You're supposed to have read the record? Then you should know that I was famous for my ability to consume alcohol in vast quantities, yet when she called for me, I could be sober in an instant.

*The WOMAN enters stage left, dressed in the same grey satin and shawl, and crosses to stand behind RASPUTIN.*

KHVOSTOV: No man can be sober in an instant.

RASPUTIN: That depends on the necessity. When she called for me, I could be sober.

WOMAN: *(Softly, in his ear)* Our friend.

RASPUTIN: *(To her, but without turning)* Your friend.

*KHVOSTOV takes a long look at RASPUTIN, weighing up his next question.*

KHVOSTOV: You were close to her, weren't you?

WOMAN: *(To RASPUTIN)* How wearisome it is for me without you. I am calm in my soul, I am able to rest, only when you, teacher, are sitting next to me and I am kissing your hands and resting my head on your blessed shoulders. Oh, how easy is it for me then. I wish only one thing then: to fall asleep, to fall asleep for ever on your shoulders, in your embrace. Oh, what happiness it is even to feel your presence near me. Where are you? Where have you flown? It is so hard, and what anguish there is in my heart. Will you soon be back by my side? Come back soon. I wait for you and am in torment without you. I entreat your holy blessing and kiss your blessed hands. I love you for ever.

RASPUTIN: *(To KHVOSTOV)* Not in the way you mean.

KHVOSTOV: How, then? Explain it to me.

*The WOMAN and RASPUTIN re-enact the encounter.*

WOMAN: Father Grigory. We are delighted to make your acquaintance.

*RASPUTIN holds out a hand for her to kiss. She does so, mildly surprised.*

WOMAN: We have heard a great deal about you. Please, won't you sit down?

*The WOMAN sits on the sofa and motions to RASPUTIN to sit beside her.*

*He goes over tentatively, sits down and breaks the arm off. He tries to cover it up from her but she has noticed.*

WOMAN: Oh, don't worry about that. I'll call a carpenter to fix it.

RASPUTIN: Forgive me, Ma'am. I am but a coarse peasant.

WOMAN: You are too modest, Father Grigory. We hear you have special gifts, and we are in much need of them.

*RASPUTIN looks deep into her eyes with his famous staring gaze. There is a long pause.*

RASPUTIN: My dear! You have suffered much. You have faced great torments.

WOMAN: I have.

RASPUTIN: You are in the midst of a whirlwind of emotions. You fear uprising, yes?

WOMAN: *(Non-plussed)* You see much, Father Grigory.

RASPUTIN: You are truly a sufferer! But the Lord Jesus will help you and your truth will win out.

WOMAN: My truth?

RASPUTIN: You must spit on all your fears, Ma'am, and rule.

WOMAN: *(Taken aback)* Father Grigory!

RASPUTIN: *(Quickly)* Forgive me if I speak honestly to you, Ma'am, but I see all. You are frightened, very frightened, and the thing you fear is losing the love of your people.

WOMAN: *(Grasping at his words)* Yes, yes!

RASPUTIN: But you and the Tsar Father are given to the people by God, and you must fulfil your destiny.

WOMAN: Oh, Father Grigory, such sweet words.

*RASPUTIN takes out an icon from his cassock and offers it to the WOMAN.*

RASPUTIN: *(Formally, as if well-rehearsed)* Ma'am, I have recently arrived in this city from Siberia and I would like to offer you this icon of the righteous Saint Simeon, the miracle worker of Verkhoturye, in the faith that the holy saint will keep you all the days of your life and aid you in your service for the advantage and happiness of your loyal sons.

WOMAN: Saint Simeon?

RASPUTIN: Without Saint Simeon I am nothing. Simeon the righteous healed me of the affliction of insomnia. Every spring I would not sleep for forty nights. Thus it had been from the age of fifteen to thirty-eight. But Saint Simeon, whose coffin had risen up out of the earth fifty years after his blessed death, and whose uncorrupted remains have healed pilgrims for two centuries - that same Simeon healed me of my affliction.

WOMAN: Have you always been so virtuous?

RASPUTIN: *(With false modesty)* Ma'am, I take no delight in confessing considerable weakness in younger days.

My father would send me for grain and hay to Tyumen and I would come back on foot, without money, beaten or drunk, and sometimes even without the horses. But at the age of fifteen in my village, when the sunshine burned brightly and the birds sang heavenly songs, I would dream of God. My soul yearned for what was far away. I dreamed of God many times and wept without knowing why or where my tears came from. I was dissatisfied. There was much I found no answer to and I turned to drink, as my father had turned to drink. Until I was twenty-eight and married, I lived, as people say, 'in the world'. I was with the world - that is, I loved what was in the world. Even my name, Rasputin, meant 'good-for-nothing' to the peasants around me.

WOMAN: But surely your name could be changed? It seems so inappropriate for such a holy man.

RASPUTIN: Ma'am, you are too kind. In that dissolute way my youth passed: in a kind of contemplation, a kind of sleep. And then, after life had touched me, I ran to a corner and secretly prayed.

WOMAN: Life touched you?

RASPUTIN: I was carrying travellers along the highway with my horses one day when I met a seminary student on his way to Tyumen. He began talking to me about God, about a merciful God who will wait patiently for the prodigal son to return, even if the return only comes with his final breath. In the eleventh hour it is still not too late to come to him. That student's words stayed with me: 'Go and be saved.' So I began my search for the angelic bread of the human soul.

WOMAN: You became a strannik.

RASPUTIN: A wanderer, yes. I gave up my former life of drinking and smoking. I stopped eating meat and sweets. I walked to monasteries many miles from my home. And all around me I saw the creator. I saw before my eyes the image of the Saviour Himself walking along the shore. Nature taught me to love God and converse with Him. Once I spent the night in a room where there was an icon of the Mother of God. I woke up in the middle of the night and saw that the icon was weeping: 'Grigory, I am weeping for the sins of mankind. Go, wander, and cleanse the people of their sins.'

WOMAN: You see visions?

RASPUTIN: I have a certain gift.

*More than a little overcome, the WOMAN crosses herself and looks heavenward.*

WOMAN: Heaven be praised. (To RASPUTIN) But how did you live?

RASPUTIN: I would walk from place to place with just my knapsack on my back. I would beg for alms or a place to rest my head at night.

WOMAN: You must have encountered great danger?

RASPUTIN: There were times, yes. But if a robber accosted me on some lonely road, I would say to them, it is not mine but God's. Take from me: I give it to you gladly.

WOMAN: But how did your family react?

RASPUTIN: They found it hard at first. My father and my mother - they are simple peasants, you understand - needed my help in the fields.

But my calling was elsewhere.

WOMAN: And your wife?

RASPUTIN: Praskovia Fyodorovna is a good wife. She has borne me children and their hands are almost as good as mine for the family's work. I had to search, you see. For experience and to test myself, I frequently did not change my undergarments for six months at a time when going from Tobolsk to Kiev, and I would often walk for three days, eating only the slightest amount. On hot days I would impose a fast on myself. I would not drink but would work with the day labourers just as they worked. I would work and then take my repose in prayer. Oh, great, great is the peasant in the eyes of God. I have had to spend too much time among the hierarchs. I have spoken to them at length. Their learning remains insignificant. Learning has confused their minds and bound their feet, and they cannot walk in the footsteps of the Saviour.

WOMAN: (*Admiringly*) And yet you, a simple, uneducated peasant from Siberia, have all the wisdom they lack. You, our friend, are the one who walks in the footsteps of the Saviour.

*The WOMAN and RASPUTIN hold a look until  
KHVOSTOV interrupts the re-enactment at last.*

KHVOSTOV: So when did you first see the boy?

*RASPUTIN breaks his exchange with the WOMAN  
and resumes his conversation with KHVOSTOV.*

RASPUTIN: The poor boy - she was so worried about him. He had been ill before, but never this bad. It was Anya Vyubova, her maid of honour, who suggested she call me. I went with Lokhtina.

*RASPUTIN, his eyes now penetrating as in the Act  
One description, re-enacts the scene with the  
WOMAN.*

WOMAN: I am so frightened, Father Grishka. Sunbeam is so very ill.

RASPUTIN: Calm yourself, Mama, Grishka is here.

WOMAN: But his fever - he seems so -

*RASPUTIN lays a comforting hand on the WOMAN's  
arm.*

RASPUTIN: (*Gently but firmly*) Mama. Take me to him. Grishka is here.

*They move to the sofa, where RASPUTIN has left the  
draped cover as if it were the boy, lying down. He  
kneels beside the sofa and closes his eyes.*

RASPUTIN: (*Praying*) Lord, let your eyes fall on this, your child, and do not harden your heart towards him.

*RASPUTIN takes a cushion in place of the boy and shakes it roughly, as if to waken him. After he moment, he shakes it again then, as if in response to the boy waking, he hugs it to him, stroking it and muttering soothingly.*

RASPUTIN: My boy, my boy.

*The WOMAN breaks down in tears of relief and crumples on to the sofa beside RASPUTIN.*

*After a pause, KHVOSTOV begins a slow, sarcastic hand-clap.*

KHVOSTOV: Very touching, I'm sure. And the next day the boy started to get better.

*RASPUTIN breaks from the scene, stands up and goes to the wheelchair, where he sits wearily. He takes out his hip flask and drinks.*

RASPUTIN: As you say. Now, you have managed to weary me again, Mikhail Khvostov.

*KHVOSTOV ignores the hint.*

KHVOSTOV: I'm curious about the name thing. You did change it, didn't you?

RASPUTIN: *(Sighing)* For a time. But it was not my idea.

WOMAN: 'Good-for-nothing' - it just seems so wrong. Our friend is no good-for-nothing. It is so inappropriate for such a holy man. Father Grishka must petition the minister of internal affairs for a name change, and his request must be respected. He will be Rasputin-Novy.

KHVOSTOV: 'New' Rasputin?

RASPUTIN: *(Nodding resignedly)* 'New' Rasputin. And no sooner did I appear in the doorway of the nursery than the heir started clapping his little hands and babbling, 'the New one, the New one, the New one!' They were his first words. The tsar then gave the order to call me not by the name Rasputin, but Novy.

KHVOSTOV: I take it that didn't last.

RASPUTIN: My fame was too great. I have lived with fame my whole life.

*RASPUTIN takes his hip flask out again and takes another drink.*

KHVOSTOV: And so your association with the former royal family continued.

RASPUTIN: I was their friend.

KHVOSTOV: You were more than that, surely?

*KHVOSTOV takes out some letters from his bag and reads.*

KHVOSTOV: 'Head and eyes ache and my heart feels weak. Heart bleeds from fear and horror.

I write down the sayings of our friend and the time passes more quickly.’ (*He looks at RASPUTIN*) The former empress seems devoted to your healing powers.

WOMAN: (*Weeping*) I have cursed my Sunbeam with my blood. He is sick because I have made him so.

RASPUTIN: (*To the WOMAN*) Calm yourself, Mama. You are in safe hands. Your sins are forgiven in heaven and you must rejoice in the certainty of the divine reward that is to come for all your sufferings.

*RASPUTIN goes to the WOMAN and cradles her head in his hands.*

WOMAN: I am tormented by these headaches.

RASPUTIN: Let your pain be gone. Let your torments disappear. Let love relieve you of your anguish.

*The WOMAN relaxes visibly at his touch.*

WOMAN: I am calm in my soul, I am able to rest, only when you, teacher, are sitting next to me and I am kissing your hands and resting my head on your blessed shoulders. Oh, how easy it is for me then.

RASPUTIN: Do not fear for your son, Mama. As long as I am alive, the dynasty shall live.

KHVOSTOV: And she believed you?

RASPUTIN: What cause did she have not to? She saw me predict the weather, the date of her husband’s return home - if I was right in these small things, why would she not trust me over the most important things in her life?

KHVOSTOV: And she chose to turn a blind eye to the rumours.

RASPUTIN: The rumours?

KHVOSTOV: Of your... other associations.

RASPUTIN: (*Coldly*) The charge of being a member of the Khlyst sect was never proven.

KHVOSTOV: Despite repeated investigations. Yes, I know. And yet your behaviour was strongly reminiscent of Khlyst activity. The bathhouses, for instance.

RASPUTIN: I readily admitted that. The bishops who investigated understood.

KHVOSTOV: Understood what?

RASPUTIN: That in my home province it was the accepted custom for men and women to bathe together. It had nothing to do with immorality, but was rooted in the peasant way of life.

KHVOSTOV: And yet they advised against it?

RASPUTIN: There are many among the saints who went to bathhouses with women on purpose, and were abused and reviled for it, although they were nonetheless great saints. I wanted to test myself, to see if I had extinguished passion in myself.

KHVOSTOV: (*Persisting*) And yet they advised against it?

RASPUTIN: They believed I was on a ‘dangerous path’.

KHVOSTOV: But the former empress did not.

WOMAN: We knew of his visits to bathhouses with society ladies, but we also knew he never went with one person alone, always in company. He regarded pride as the greatest sin. The society misses were undoubtedly puffed up with pride and in order to deflate it, it was necessary to humiliate them by forcing them to go to the bathhouse with a dirty peasant. (*Uncertainly*) Even so, Papa decided it might be best not to see him for a while.

RASPUTIN: Papa and Mama asked me to pray for them but were afraid to receive me. It was suggested I undertake a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

KHVOSTOV: And did you?

RASPUTIN: Of course. And very edifying it was, too. I wrote about it extensively on my return, if you'd care to search the archives.

*RASPUTIN takes a drink from his hip flask.*

KHVOSTOV: (*Ignoring the comment*) What brought you back into favour?

RASPUTIN: What else but the boy? When he fell desperately ill, nothing would stop her from contacting me.

WOMAN: Alexei had been suffering from secondary haemorrhages for several days. The swelling was followed by blood poisoning. We sent him a telegram with the request that he would pray.

RASPUTIN: (*To the WOMAN*) God has seen your tears and heeded your prayers. Your son will live.

WOMAN: (*Breaking down in sobs*) God be praised - a miracle before our very eyes. By prayer alone he has saved our son.

RASPUTIN: (*To KHVOSTOV*) You must remember, this was a dark time. Then, as now, the storm clouds of war were gathering. Put together with her natural inclination for the dramatic, it was clear that the future held many terrors for her.

KHVOSTOV: The war with Germany must have seemed disastrous to her - a German, after all?

RASPUTIN: And in direct opposition to all I had advised. I sent a telegram to the tsar. 'A threatening cloud hangs over Russia: misfortune, much woe, no ray of hope, a sea of tears immeasurable, and of blood? What shall I say? There are no words: just an indescribable horror. You are the tsar, the father of the nation. Do not permit the mad to triumph and destroy themselves and the nation. Everything drowns in great bloodshed.'

KHVOSTOV: A dark time indeed.

RASPUTIN: It wasn't so bright for me, either. That was when that crazy woman stabbed me.

KHVOSTOV: Ah, yes, the first assassination attempt.

RASPUTIN: She came up to me, asked for a three-rouble note, I got out my purse and was rummaging in it. While I was rummaging, she stabbed me in the stomach with a big knife. I started running and she ran after me with the knife, the stupid woman. I yelled, 'Drop it, bitch!' But she didn't drop it. Then I picked up a birch stake and I'm thinking, 'At what point do I split open her head?' Then I felt sorry and hit her pretty lightly on the shoulder.

She fell down and people grabbed her by the arm - they wanted to tear her apart. I stood up for her, and then my strength failed me and I fell down.

WOMAN: Our friend stood on a tightrope between life and death for several days. We sent him telegrams expressing our wishes for a speedy recovery and we made sure his assailant was removed to an asylum.

RASPUTIN: (*Bitterly, to KHVOSTOV*) From which she was freed after your revolution, of course.

WOMAN: We did not see him again until the end of August 1914 when, after recovering from the attempt on his life, he returned to Petersburg. He walked around hunched over in a gown, since his wound was still bandaged and he wasn't allowed to wear his normal clothing. His mood was noticeably depressed. He told us about the attempt, how some 'stinker' had wounded him, how he had run away pressing his shirt against the wound, how they had operated on him in Pokrovskoe using stearin candles for light, and how amazed the doctor had been that he hadn't died.

*RASPUTIN takes out his hip flask and takes a deep draught.*

RASPUTIN: Constitution of an ox.

KHVOSTOV: The war, the tsarevich's illness, the attempt on your life - she must have thought the gods were against her.

RASPUTIN: And there were plenty who had their knives out for me, metaphorically as well as literally.

KHVOSTOV: How did she react to that?

RASPUTIN: She wouldn't stop seeing me, if that's what you mean. I meant too much to them by that time. But I could hardly be received at the palace, unless it was to treat the boy.

KHVOSTOV: So what did you do?

RASPUTIN: I would visit her maid of honour, Anya Vyubova, at her little house on the estate. Of course, if the empress happened to call by chance...

KHVOSTOV: Vyubova was her maid of honour, after all. It's only natural.

RASPUTIN: Quite. And besides, she needed advice on how to govern while his majesty was away at war.

*RASPUTIN takes another swig of drink, becoming steadily the worse for wear.*

KHVOSTOV: Do you think you should be drinking so much?

RASPUTIN: (*Suddenly angry*) What the hell's it got to do with you?

KHVOSTOV: (*Backing down*) Nothing, nothing. (*After an uncomfortable pause*) Have you always drunk this much?

RASPUTIN: (*Turning on him*) Look, Khvostov, I was drinking considerably more than this before you were even born, so don't start lecturing me on how much I can take. I used to spend whole days drinking, singing, dancing, and I could still be sober as a judge when she called for me to visit. Anya Vyubova took me to task over it one day, but no Vyubova - in fact, no one at all - could influence my behaviour.

Even if I were to take off my boot and make her kiss my foot, she would do so.

WOMAN: We were furious at the reports of our friend's drunkenness. Who did these informers think they were dealing with? This was not some reprobate from the provinces, this was a man of God in the ancient tradition of the saints: he had to endure their abuse, and it was our job to defend him from those people. That was the cross we had to bear. Every tale of 'the drunken exploits of Rasputin' was met with a swift response: we ordered the police to find the scoundrel who was impersonating him.

KHVOSTOV: But it was the police themselves who were reporting on you?

RASPUTIN: Of course. I was told I was being given a 'guard' to protect me, but they were all agents of the minister of internal affairs.

KHVOSTOV: Who reported on your every action.

RASPUTIN: And tried to frame me with reports of drunken orgies, visits to prostitutes, and so forth.

KHVOSTOV: Frame you? Really?

RASPUTIN: (*Pointedly*) Frame me. Exactly. But everyone who made a stand against me made a stand against her, and they suffered for it.

KHVOSTOV: Including my grandfather.

RASPUTIN: Fat Belly? Yes, including him.

KHVOSTOV: (*Angrily*) Now look -

RASPUTIN: Oh, save your breath. He tried to have me killed.

*RASPUTIN drinks again from the hip flask.*

KHVOSTOV: You said.

RASPUTIN: With finance supplied by the mother of our old friend Prince Felix Yusupov.

KHVOSTOV: Yusupov?

RASPUTIN: That surprised you, didn't it? Princess Zinaida never liked me. The aristocrats couldn't get used to the idea that a humble peasant should be welcome at the imperial palace. They were consumed with envy and fury. But I wasn't afraid of them. They couldn't do anything to me. I was protected against ill fortune. There had been several attempts on my life but the Lord always frustrated these plots. Disaster came to anyone who lifted a finger against me.

KHVOSTOV: That didn't stop her trying.

RASPUTIN: When your grandfather failed to get rid of me, she simply looked a little closer to home for an assassin.

KHVOSTOV: He has documented it, you know.

RASPUTIN: Prince Felix? I had heard a rumour.

*KHVOSTOV searches in his bag and pulls out a bound document, Felix's memoir.*

KHVOSTOV: I have received a copy of his memoir from Paris since our last meeting. Are you interested?

RASPUTIN: In my own murder? Who wouldn't be?

KHVOSTOV: (*Reading*) 'Rasputin was much changed since the time I had first seen him. His face had grown puffy' -

*RASPUTIN snorts.*

KHVOSTOV: - 'and he had become quite flabby. He was dressed in a simple peasant's coat and a light blue silk shirt and wide peasant trousers made of velvet. He behaved in a highly familiar manner. He kissed me.'

RASPUTIN: Yes, yes. Get on with it.

*KHVOSTOV flicks through the memoir to another page. As he starts to read, the white-tiled wall flies out again, revealing the Yusupov Palace basement room.*

KHVOSTOV: 'Three vases of Chinese porcelain adorned niches in the walls. Old chairs -'

*The WOMAN crosses to KHVOSTOV and takes the papers from him, picking up the speech herself.*

WOMAN: 'Old chairs of carved wood upholstered in leather had been brought from the storerooms along with precious chalices made of ivory. There was a cabinet of the period of Catherine the Great and placed on the cabinet was a crucifix of sixteenth-century Italian work made of rock crystal and chased with silver. Spread on the floor was a Persian carpet and in front of the cabinet lay an enormous polar bear skin. Positioned in the centre of the room was the table at which Rasputin was supposed to drink his final cup of tea.'

*RASPUTIN, looking a little nervous now, takes another drink from his hip flask. KHVOSTOV, sensing he has the upper hand for the first time, moves towards him and eventually behind him.*

KHVOSTOV: You always resort to drink in times of stress, don't you?

RASPUTIN: (*Testily*) What are you talking about?

KHVOSTOV: There's plenty of evidence in the files.

*The WOMAN begins searching through KHVOSTOV's bag, pulling out sheets from which she reads.*

WOMAN: 'Towards the end he drank heavily and that made me pity him.'

RASPUTIN: You don't know anything about me.

KHVOSTOV: Don't I?

WOMAN: (*Reading*) 'I noticed there was wine on the table and that he had drunk a lot of it, as if to quiet a terrible foreboding.'

RASPUTIN: You've got nothing I fear.

KHVOSTOV: I've got the testimony of hundreds of people who gave evidence to the Extraordinary Commission less than a year after your murder.

WOMAN: *(Reading)* 'He was very tired, he was in pain, he said only God could help him.'

RASPUTIN: Each with their own agenda, no doubt.

KHVOSTOV: And what agenda would that be?

RASPUTIN: To distance themselves as much as possible from the imperial family.

KHVOSTOV: Perhaps. But then, wouldn't it have made them look good to seem involved in bringing down the mighty Rasputin?

WOMAN: *(Reading)* 'It has pleased fate for him to fall at my hand.'

RASPUTIN: I have nothing to hide. I have served Mother Russia.

KHVOSTOV: By betraying your emperor?

RASPUTIN: *(Outraged)* Betraying? I never betrayed -

WOMAN: You left us, Grishka.

RASPUTIN: But I was powerless -

KHVOSTOV: *(Mocking)* The great Rasputin, powerless?

WOMAN: You abandoned us in our greatest need.

RASPUTIN: I was locked up here, for Christ's sake!

KHVOSTOV: While your double - not you - took three bullets and a bludgeoning for your sake.

WOMAN: You predicted our deaths would follow hard on your own.

RASPUTIN: I'm not dead!

KHVOSTOV: But they are.

WOMAN: You were supposed to be our friend.

RASPUTIN: *(Desperate)* I am your friend.

KHVOSTOV: Does a friend desert you in your darkest hour?

WOMAN: You've let us down, Grishka. You've let us all down.

RASPUTIN: *(With contempt)* Well now you just sound like my mother.

WOMAN: *(Softly and simply)* You stupid cunt, I am your mother.

*RASPUTIN drops his hip flask. There is a long pause.*

*Snow begins to fall on the forestage.*

*Behind RASPUTIN, KHVOSTOV draws a pistol from inside his coat and moves into his field of vision. The WOMAN replaces him behind RASPUTIN.*

KHVOSTOV: And now - *(with heavy emphasis)* Comrade - I am going to complete the job my grandfather could not.

*There is another long pause before RASPUTIN collects himself enough to speak.*

RASPUTIN: You haven't got the balls.

*KHVOSTOV begins to tremble as he points the pistol at RASPUTIN, clearly struggling with himself.*

RASPUTIN: Just like your grandfather. When the time comes to make history -

*There is a gunshot but it has not come from KHVOSTOV. RASPUTIN lets out a howl of pain and falls forward into the snow, adopting the same position as at the end of Act One. Behind him, the WOMAN is revealed with a pistol of her own.*

WOMAN: - you need balls.

*KHVOSTOV rushes to RASPUTIN and starts to shake his shoulders. When he lets go, RASPUTIN's head falls back limply. KHVOSTOV stands and turns away from the body, but RASPUTIN suddenly leaps to his feet with a roar and throws his arms around KHVOSTOV.*

RASPUTIN: *(In a hoarse whisper)* Mikhail! Mikhail!

*KHVOSTOV struggles to free himself and finally breaks away, pushing RASPUTIN back to his knees in the snow. With sudden resolve, KHVOSTOV points his own pistol and shoots RASPUTIN in the back of the head. RASPUTIN collapses in the snow.*

*KHVOSTOV goes to the sofa and sits down in a daze. After a moment staring vacantly at the body, he closes his eyes painfully and leans back on the sofa, covering his head with his hands.*

END OF ACT TWO.