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The Neva River cut through the center of St. Petersburg, a mighty artery of ice. On its surface flowed a temporary electric tramway as well as horse-drawn sleighs. The sleigh drivers, bound in sheepskin, their beards white with icicles from their breath, followed paths outlined with pine branches. Police patrols scanned the river for thin spots, marking these with red flags, but in most areas, the ice was now thick enough for workers to cut out piano-sized blocks that would be stored for the hot summer months. Skating rinks dotted the river, enjoyed by those fortunate enough to have leisure time. Below the frozen surface, the water surged inexorably toward the Gulf of Finland, but that was a distant thought to the people of St. Petersburg who had gathered on the Neva and its banks to celebrate the Blessing of the Waters. It was January 6, 1905.

Nicholas II began the day's ceremonies with an inspection of the troops in one of the many grand vaulted halls of the Winter Palace. In his dark blue, gold-studded uniform of the famed Preobrazhensky Guards Regiment, he walked smartly along the lines of men, stopping now and again with the greeting, "Good morning, my children," to which came the swift reply, "Good health to Your Majesty." A slight man, five foot, seven inches tall, the Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russias was known for his tender smile and remorseful blue eyes. At thirty-six years of age, he radiated little of the authority of his father, Alexander III, in whose shadow he perpetually fell. Although Nicholas was weighed down with concern over Russia's war with Japan, now almost a year old, he could expect the day's ceremonies, a blend of religious observance and military pageantry, to lift his spirits.

After the inspection, he proceeded through the 1,054-room baroque palace, a quarter-mile-long monument to the immense, and outrageously concentrated, wealth of the nation. The route through the vast, richly adorned chambers was crowded with people hoping for a glance or a nod from the tsar: Imperial Guards in white gala uniforms with gold and silver helmets crested with the double-headed Russian eagle, Cossacks in long blue robes holding drawn sabers, senators in bright scarlet coats, diplomats and dignitaries in their finest regalia, admirals and generals nearly toppling over with medals, and ladies of the court in flowing dresses of pale green and pink.

Nicholas escorted his mother, the dowager empress, by the arm. His uncle, Grand Duke Alexis, accompanied Tsarina Alexandra, followed by the rest of the royal family. The empresses and grand duchesses wore velvet robes and glittered with diamonds, pearls, and other precious stones. Led by the imperial court's grand marshal, who walked backward and carried a golden staff, they marched from hall to hall, accompanied by the national hymn. Finally, they passed through the 1812 Military Gallery, a long corridor with 332 portraits of Russian officers who fought against Napoleon, and into the palace cathedral. Icons of the patron saints of the imperial family lined the gilded chamber, and the brilliant morning sun shined through the circular windows of the cupola.

In a robe laden with gold and silver, the metropolitan of St. Petersburg, the head of the city's Russian Orthodox Church, began the mass at noon. Nicholas bowed his head and prayed; a heavy incense of cloves and rose oil saturated the air. Surrounded by so many symbols of his power, and the people invested in its continuance, Nicholas might have believed his prayer to God of January 1, that "in the coming year He will give Russia a victorious end of the war, a firm peace and quiet life without disturbances," would soon be answered favorably. After all, the previous year, God had finally blessed him with a son, Alexis.

But centuries of history had shown that the people of Russia, not God, had fulfilled most of the tsar's wishes. The city of St. Petersburg, for instance, raised to give Peter the Great his foolhardy "paradise," came at the cost of the lives of tens of thousands of serfs who drowned or died of cholera while digging the foundations of its first buildings in low marshland prone to serious floods.

In his private life, Nicholas liked to play the part of a common Russian, dressing in a peasant blouse, eating *borscht,* and taking up modest rooms within his grand palaces, but he understood little of peasant lives. Another St. Petersburg existed beyond the towering gold cupolas, elegant mansions, and richly maintained government and military buildings that lined the Neva's granite quays. In this St. Petersburg, as in other Russian cities, workers trudged through dirty snow to labor at factories, where fourteen-hour days yielded only meager wages. Their bosses treated them no better than slaves, and the workers lived in windowless bunkhouses, up to eleven to a room, with wooden benches for beds, rags for pillows, and walls covered with soot from kerosene lamps. They wanted better pay and living conditions — and they had recently grown willing to strike for them.

Across the breadth of the Russian Empire — one-sixth of the world's landmass at that time, stretching from the Gulf of Finland east across Siberia to the warm Pacific waters, from the icebound Arctic in the north down to the Black Sea and the borders of the Ottoman Empire — lived the tsar's 135 million subjects, the majority of whom were peasants who worked the land and never left their villages, except perhaps to serve as cannon fodder for their tsar's wars. None of these people would ever see the good Tsar Batyushka (Father-Tsar) that folktales and tradition held him to be, this individual selected by God himself to care for them. All they knew, however, was that many of their sons led off to war never returned, that the land they tilled barely kept them from starving even in the best of years, and that the tsar never appeared to hear their pleas for help.

At 12:45 P.M., the metropolitan finished the mass and the great doors to the cathedral swung open. Nicholas joined another procession, this one led by chanting clergy down the white Carrara marble staircase and outside to the Neva for the Blessing of the Waters. Bareheaded and cloakless, as tradition dictated, Nicholas was struck by the cold like a slap across the face.

As he walked down crimson carpet to the open-air pavilion on the Neva, specially erected for the ceremony with a blue, star-encrusted dome topped with a cross, he could only see devoted throngs around him. They lined the quays, the palace bridge, the steps of the stock exchange, and the river itself. Soldiers kept them at a proper distance. From the windows of the cherry-red Winter Palace, members of his court pressed their noses to the glass, watching with quiet reverence.

A hole had been cut into the ice underneath the pavilion. The flowing water underneath, warmer than the air outside, caused steam to rise from the opening. The ceremony began. Nicholas kissed the hand of the metropolitan and the Holy Book. A choir sang solemn liturgical hymns, and then the metropolitan carried a large gold cross, linked to a chain, to the hole in the ice. After he blessed the Neva by dipping the cross three times into the water, he gave his benediction. Then, across the river, a cannon from the Fortress of Peter and Paul thundered in salute. Its report rattled the Winter Palace's windows. Blue smoke drifted across the river. Simultaneously, church bells rang throughout the city.

Then from across the river, quickly, came another flash of light and a boom. This time the cannon's report was distinctly different, "more rolling and peculiarly warlike," as one witness described it. Panes of glass shattered in the upper windows of the Winter Palace. Someone had loaded a cannon with live rounds instead of blanks. Nicholas crossed himself, believing someone was trying to kill him, but he did not move for cover. Not even a step.

Nicholas was morbidly unafraid of dying. His younger sister Olga once commented that he was resigned to losing his life on the throne. Murder had been the fate of his grandfather and almost half of the other tsars since Ivan the Terrible ruled Russia. After all, Nicholas was born on May 6, making his patron saint Job, who suffered horrible trials by God's hand. Nicholas believed in the significance of such things.

The cannon fire stopped. A policeman at the pavilion's edge had fallen; blood stained the snow by his head. Shrapnel had cut a nearby banner in two. In the palace's Nicholas Hall, ladies and their escorts trembled; several were seriously wounded, many covered in shards of glass. Admiral Fyodor Avelan, minister of the navy, bled from a cut in his face. Yet while shouts of alarm rang throughout the palace and guards scrambled to see what had happened, the tsar completed the ceremony, received his blessing with the sanctified water, and only then returned to the palace. His entourage and the palace court waited for some reaction: anger, a tremble of fear, a hint of gladness that he had survived — anything. He offered none. Eyes downcast, he walked back inside the palace, not stopping or even turning to inspect the damage.

The guard around the palace was doubled, the police hurried to the fortress to investigate, but otherwise the event was soon put out of mind. A state banquet was held while the pavilion, now embedded with shrapnel, was disassembled. The hole in the ice soon closed in the cold. The investigation never discovered whether the Imperial Guard loaded live rounds by accident in a cannon directed at the pavilion where the Romanov family was clustered.

At 4 P.M., Nicholas left the Winter Palace in his carriage, heading to his retreat at Tsarskoye Selo, a half-hour's drive outside St. Petersburg. The day's event represented a bad omen for the coming year. A tide of discontent was rising among his people, and the Russo-Japanese War was going badly: with the surrender of Port Arthur, a strategic Russian naval base on the Yellow Sea, in December, and with the loss of numerous battles in the Far East, Nicholas needed a military success to calm the people and restore Russia's chances for victory over Japan.

His hope for such a success rested in a squadron of Russian ships, led by Zinovy Petrovich Rozhestvensky, traveling eighteen thousand miles around the globe to crush the Japanese navy.

That same day, Admiral Rozhestvensky and the nearly ten thousand men under his command were waiting, quite literally, in Hellville, a town set on the island Nossi-Bé, off the coast of Madagascar. His Second Pacific Squadron, a motley collection of eight battleships, seven armored cruisers, nine torpedo-boat destroyers, and a number of auxiliaries (tugboats, transports, a water-condensing vessel, a hospital ship, and a floating repair shop), stood in the harbor.

Rozhestvensky's orders from St. Petersburg were to remain at anchor in Hellville and await reinforcements in the form of the Third Pacific Squadron. The First Pacific, the squadron that Rozhestvensky had been sent to connect with in the first place, had been lost when Port Arthur fell. On hearing the news, two weeks before, that he was to stay in Hellville, the admiral told his chief of staff to cable the Naval Ministry: "Tell them I wish to be relieved of my command," he ordered. Then he shut his cabin door, bolting it for good measure, and proceeded to have a mental breakdown.

By most accounts, the fifty-five-year-old Admiral Rozhestvensky was one of the Russian navy's brightest lights. At his squadron's review before departure from Revel in September 1904, standing by the side of Nicholas II, he certainly looked the part. As one attendant described him, "His broad shoulders were decorated with epaulets bearing monograms and black eagles. Medals and stars glittered on his chest. . . . His stalwart figure dominated not only the tsar but all the members of his suite and his piercing black eyes seem to indicate a dauntless will. . . . He stood straight as a ramrod, looking so resolutely at Nicholas that it seemed as if nothing could stop him." Rozhestvensky had excelled at the Naval Academy, he had shown his mettle during combat in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, and, despite a reputation for bluntness and a fast, sometimes cruel temper, he had climbed the naval ranks with his penchant for discipline and exactness, as well as his clever hand at court politics.

When he accepted the command of the Second Pacific Squadron, a position that would require him to travel from the Baltic to the Far East along a route without Russian bases and at imminent risk of attack, to take on the superior Japanese fleet in its own waters, he was falling on his own sword — and he knew it. "We're now doing what needs to be done, defending the honor of the flag," he said publicly before he departed. He understood well that this squadron would either never reach its destination, or, if it did, would likely face a massacre. Nonetheless, Nicholas was determined they should go.

The tsar's execution of the war with Japan was as haphazard as the reasons for its occurrence in the first place — ostensibly, asserting territorial control in Korea and Manchuria. Nicholas had been led into the easily avoidable conflict by his ministers: some were flattering his ambitions of expanding the empire, others were mindful of their commercial interests in the Far East, and a few thought a "little victorious war" would hold back a revolution. These ministers found a welcome listener in Nicholas. In 1890, as a young tsarevich on a grand tour of the East, he narrowly survived an attempted assassination in Otsu, Japan, when an assailant leapt out of a crowd with a sword, slashing Nicholas in the forehead; the assassin's second thrust was parried, but Nicholas was left with a permanent scar. The incident fostered a deep-seated loathing of the Japanese people, whom he dismissed as "monkeys." His bellicose cousin, Kaiser Wilhelm II, also goaded him toward war; a telegram sent to the tsar from the kaiser's yacht reveals his attitude: "The Admiral of the Atlantic greets the Admiral of the Pacific."

When war broke out after a surprise Japanese naval attack at Port Arthur on January 26, 1904, the Russians rallied around the tsar in a fit of patriotism. "We will only need to throw our caps at the enemy to make him run away" was a common expression in the streets. But soon disaster followed disaster on the battlefield. The military campaign was underfunded, ill equipped, and poorly led. Russian generals fought a nineteenth-century campaign, bayonet charges included, against a well-positioned enemy armed with artillery. "Lambs brought to the slaughter," said one observer of the Russian soldiers. For his part, Nicholas sent icons to his troops to boost morale. They would have preferred more modern arms and perhaps fewer officers feuding with one another or drinking champagne on the eve of battle.

Rozhestvensky knew that his mission was just another in a long series of mistakes by the Russian high command, but if there had to be a squadron, he believed he was the best man to lead it. He was not the only one to suffer from this burden. Few of the sailors aboard the armada had any clear understanding of why they were being sent to fight the Japanese. They had been drafted into the navy from peasant farms or derelict warrens in the cities' slums. Many could not read, and they viewed these battleships as "iron monsters." On the first half of their journey from Libau, down the western coast of Africa and around the Cape of Good Hope, to Madagascar, they endured hardships beyond imagination. In the best of circumstances, the Russian navy was cruel to the lower ranks — sailors faced abusive officers, tasteless food, cramped quarters, and back-numbing work — but this journey descended to a different ring of hell altogether.

Forbidden to stop in most ports because assisting the Russians would violate a country's neutrality, Rozhestvensky made sure the squadron took on as much coal as possible from German merchant colliers that met the ships along the way. Coaling at sea was dangerous in its own right, but living with it stacked on the decks and in cabins, corridors, bathrooms, workshops — everywhere — while steaming through the suffocating, 120-degree tropics, was daily torture. Coal dust stung the eyes and choked the lungs. Men collapsed from heat stroke or simply went mad from the daily strain. Other horrors included the ravenous shipboard rats, the dysentery, the decks so hot that they blistered bare feet, and the hurricanes, during which forty-foot waves washed sailors overboard, never to been seen again.

Somehow, Rozhestvensky managed to arrive in Madagascar with most of his crew, though his orders to wait in Hellville destroyed the entire crew's morale more than the heat and coal dust ever could. Rozhestvensky was crushed. For several weeks afterward, his officers heard him moaning in his locked cabin. When he next appeared, he looked twenty years older, haggard and listless. Some of his staff wondered whether he had experienced a stroke, since he now dragged his left leg. What they did know for sure, as January turned into February, then March, was that their fleet was falling apart.

Each day, black torpedo boats carried out to sea those stricken dead by malaria, typhoid, or their own hand. After a single cannon shot, the bodies, sewn in cloth, were let off the side. Those remaining in the harbor suffered a host of illnesses, as well as rotten food, cloying heat, and torrential rain. Many had tropical eczema, scratching themselves until they bled and treating their weeping grazes with kerosene or eau de cologne. At night they slept naked on mats on the decks. Monkeys, chickens, cows, hares, and pigs, brought on board by the sailors, overran every ship. Their stench was overwhelming. Cockroaches and rats swarmed through cabins. Moss and barnacles grew thick on the ships' hulls, and sharks circled around the fleet, eager to consume any bad meat thrown overboard.

Discipline collapsed. Men got stupefyingly drunk, gambled, stole from the local Malagasies, and disobeyed their officers. Signs of mutiny abounded, yet Rozhestvensky, who was reputed to have punched out a sailor's teeth for a minor transgression, let them off easy. "How can I intimidate men ready to follow me to the death by condemning them to be hanged?" he asked his chief of staff. Order deteriorated further upon receiving reports of mass strikes throughout Russia and how the tsar allowed the butchery of his own people, women and children included, when they marched on the Winter Palace to appeal for a better life. Revolution seemed imminent. What was more, the newspaper editorials were pessimistic about the squadron's own mission — writing that the armada was doomed to the same fate as the one Spain sent against England in 1588.

Finally, on March 4, Rozhestvensky, who through sheer force of will had taken back command of his ravaged fleet, decided that he had had enough. He could no longer stand waiting for a fleet of ancient "self-sinkers" — as he called the Third Pacific — that would likely prove a hindrance in a sea fight. Defying his orders, the admiral left Hellville to steam across the vast Indian Ocean. Unbeknownst to him, that day, thousands of Russian infantry troops died in a rout south of the Manchurian city of Mukden. The battle, where over half a million men confronted one another, was the largest of the Russo-Japanese War, and of modern history. The Russians sacrificed ninety thousand men at Mukden.

Proceeding at a sluggish six knots, experiencing engine breakdowns and other severe mechanical problems such as one battleship's loss of steering, the squadron made its way across the ocean. Lost to Japanese scouts and the Russian high command for three weeks, the squadron finally appeared off Singapore's coast in four columns; several days later, it anchored in Camranh Bay off French Indochina. On direct orders, this time from Nicholas himself, Rozhestvensky waited again for the Third Pacific. A month later, the squadron arrived. Before dawn on May 14, the combined fleet set out for the naval base in Vladivostok, where Rozhestvensky hoped to service his battleships and restore his sailors' spirits before facing the Japanese fleet. The squadron charted a course through the Korea Strait, the narrow waters between the Japanese coast and Tsushima Island. Rozhestvensky prayed they would elude their enemy in the mist and fog, but his fortune, now in the hands of famed Japanese admiral Togo, would not accommodate his wishes.

"Enemy squadron square 203 . . . apparently bearing eastern passage." The 4:45 A.M. message from a Japanese scout came as welcome news aboard *Mikasa,* the Japanese fleet's flagship. Admiral Togo Heihachiro, who was five foot, three inches tall and weighed a scant 130 pounds, had been waiting for the appearance of the Russians for months. At last, this hero of the Japanese navy, responsible already for several brilliant triumphs over the Russians, could finish off his enemy in one decisive battle. His Zeiss binoculars around his neck, his black uniform buttoned tight under his chin, and his beloved sword in a gold scabbard on his left hip, he calmly began to give orders to his officers on the bridge. Sprays of saltwater splashed over the decks as his fleet moved southeast from its base. A lone sailor sang, "And raging storms dispel the morning dew. . . . So shall the triumph by our vessel won . . . Scatter the Russian ships and all their crew."

By late morning, back on the *Suvorov,* Rozhestvensky watched four Japanese cruisers shadow his fleet's movements like wolves scouting their prey. There would be no slipping through to Vladivostok. Radio intercepts indicated that Togo was on his way. The night before, the mood throughout the Russian fleet had been one of nervous expectation. Sailors slept by their guns or looked out over the railings into the black sea; in the shadows cast by the moon they perceived torpedo boats that never materialized, and they shared their fears. "She'll never get over it if I get killed," said one. "Brrr! It's horrible on the bottom," said another. Rozhestvensky had managed a couple of hours of sleep in an armchair on the forward bridge but had been hunched over his charts from an early hour. Despite the approaching battle, he ordered every ship to pay their respects to the anniversary of the tsar's coronation. Priests moved quickly through the prayers. Tots of vodka were raised: "To the health of His Majesty the Emperor and Her Majesty the Empress! To Russia!"

Before the ceremony's end, action stations were called throughout the fleet. After crossing themselves, sailors hurried to their posts to await the battle. The morning mist cleared, and Tsushima's cliffs towered above them to the west.

At 1:19 P.M., the admirals of the two fleets spotted black smoke on the horizon and, minutes later, each other's fleets. At ten miles' distance, the Japanese were a streak of uniform gray against the heavy, rolling seas. The Russians, their battleship funnels painted yellow, made easy marks. On paper, the two fleets were more or less evenly matched. They each had twelve line-of-battle ships, and although the Japanese had more guns, the Russians boasted heavier weapons. Togo held an advantage in speed and in numbers of destroyers and torpedo boats, but this challenge was by no means insurmountable if Rozhestvensky played his hand right. However, the Russian admiral was no longer the bold, resolute leader who had left Libau eight months previously.

From the day's beginning, Rozhestvensky, who was leading a total of forty-eight ships into battle, weakened his chances by muddling the chain of command and offering the sparest of battle plans. Throughout the engagement, he issued only two orders, both before the first shot was fired. His first order, given even before sighting the Japanese fleet, deployed Rozhestvensky's fleet in a line-abreast formation (perhaps because the admiral feared an attack from the east and did not want to be exposed). His second order, delivered after spotting Togo's ships directly ahead of him, remanded the first order, instructing his fleet to return to single-file, line-ahead formation. This order came too late and only furthered the advantage of the Japanese, who seized upon the Russians' confusion by perfectly executing one of the most daring maneuvers in naval history.

At 1:55 P.M., as the two fleets jockeyed for position before engaging, Togo lifted his right hand and cut a semicircle in the air. The shout "Hard to port!" was raised throughout his ships. Due to the heavy seas and smoke, Togo had misjudged the Russians' initial approach and found himself poorly placed to follow his original plan of isolating two of his enemy's divisions. After his ships passed from starboard to port in front of Rozhestvensky's fleet, heading in the opposite direction, he gave the order to completely reverse direction. For several minutes, his fleet would be exposed at a single spot for the Russians to focus their fire. It was a gamble, but if the ships survived the turn, his fleet could run on a parallel course, and then, with their superior speed, the Japanese could cross in front of the enemy's formation, an ideal vantage point from which to rake them with fire.

During the execution of the turn, guns roared from the flagship *Suvorov,* but most of its shells fell wide and short. Worse, most of Rozhestvensky's fleet, which should have been blanketing the *Mikasa* with shells, was in chaos because of his second order to return to single-file formation. Ships had to slow down, some to a complete stop, so as not to ram those ahead of them. This also made them easy targets for the devastatingly accurate Japanese gunners.

"Open fire! Open fire!" First Togo's *Mikasa,* then each ship coming out of the turn, directed salvos from over five hundred guns at the Russian flagship and at the *Oslyabya,* which spearheaded the fleet's second division and was one of the ships that had pulled to a standstill. Within minutes, the range of the Japanese shells closed. The *Oslyabya,* a modern yet oddly shaped battleship with a high, sloping hull and tall stacks, received a large-caliber hit at the waterline near the bow. The sea poured into the ship's compartments, and soon it began to list dangerously to port, bow down. The Japanese exploited their advantage, showering the *Oslyabya* with shell after shell. The bow turret was ripped away, decapitating one sailor and crippling the rest inside. While being carried below on a stretcher, a sailor with his foot shorn off cried, "Monsters! Bloodsuckers! You see what you've started! May you be swept off God's earth!" An officer stumbled about nearby, his chest ripped open. Most of the shrieks and moans of the dying were lost in the continuing barrage that turned the ship's hull and decks into confetti of twisted steel. Fire leapt across the ship, the acid in the Japanese shells feeding off the paint. The *Oslyabya* shook from bow to stern as it was struck again and again. Soon most of the guns aboard were silenced. Dense black smoke rose from every quarter, and the air bent in the intense heat. Chunks of flesh scattered the decks where there had once been men. As the ship's second officer ran about in a panic, the bow eased deeper and deeper into the water. Still the shells came. The captain, who had died three days before, was lying in a coffin in the ship's chapel, the only one to enjoy peace that day.

Admiral Togo stood unprotected on his upper bridge, one foot forward, lips pursed, watching his fleet advance on the Russians and firing as quickly as his crews could reload the guns. His staff officers tried to get him to move to a safer position — twelve Russian shells had already hit the *Mikasa* — but Togo liked his view. On the foremast to his side battle flags, raised at the engagement's start, signaled that THE RISE OR FALL OF THE EMPIRE DEPENDS UPON THIS ONE BATTLE. DO YOUR UTMOST, EVERY ONE OF YOU.

In the *Suvorov*'s cylindrical conning tower, Rozhestvensky watched the battle unfold through the sliver of a porthole cut in the ten-inch-thick steel structure. The *Oslyabya* had fallen out of line. Most of the fleet was in disarray from the savage Japanese attack, and Togo's ships had closed to within two miles. The distance tightened every minute.

"Your Excellency, we must change the distance," yelled Rozhestvensky's commander, over the roar of explosions. "They've got our range already and they'll make it hot for us."

The admiral turned, a gleam in his eye. "Not so fast. We've got the range too."

Above and all around him, the four-foot-long Japanese shells wailed through the air before hitting. Outside Rozhestvensky's armored tower, the *Suvorov* was in desperate shape. Men scrambled through smoke and over slick pools of blood to help the injured, to escape the fires, or simply to take cover from the rain of hot metal. The gunners continued at their task, but most of the range-finder operators had been killed and the gunners were essentially aiming in the dark. The main mast had disappeared. The signaling halyards were gone. Throughout the ship, separate conflagrations began to join into one leaping inferno.

At 2:30 P.M., the conning tower — the ship's brain, as one observer put it — was hit. Twice. The armor deflected the force of the broadside, but shell splinters ricocheted about the small chamber until they sliced through flesh. Rozhestvensky and his commander suffered cuts on their faces and arms. The helmsman and flag gunnery officer were killed and now lay face-down at their instruments, blood coating the panels. On his knees, the admiral stayed in the tower, but his telegraph and voice tubes were damaged, his rudder was jammed, and he could see nothing through the smoke and flames enveloping his ship. Less than half an hour into the battle, Rozhestvensky had completely lost control of his fleet. The Russian armada disintegrated, every man and ship for himself. Togo maintained his attack in formation, knowing he had won.

At 2:50 P.M., the *Oslyabya* was the first battleship to sink. With its engines stopped, guns silent, and bow underwater, the ship took an eight-hundred-pound shell on the already-listing port side. Then another. Then another. Water gushed through a hole "big enough to drive a troika through," as a survivor described it. As the ship went vertical, sailors spilled over the sides into a sea of flame. An officer yelled, "Get away from the ship, the devil take you! If you don't, you'll go down in the suck! Away!" Over two hundred men never had even that small chance of escape. Locked under shellproof hatchways and forgotten by their comrades, those in the engine rooms and stokeholds went down with the ship, screaming for help in the darkness until the cold sea closed over them.

By that time, Togo's fleet had already turned its broadsides on the other Russian battleships. By 7 P.M., the battle was effectively over. Through the night, Togo's torpedo boats and destroyers picked off those ships that had avoided the day's annihilation. By the morning of May 15, the bodies of thousands of Russian sailors littered the waters of the Korea Strait. With his entire fleet, Togo surrounded the surviving four Russian battleships and demanded their surrender. A few vessels had escaped during the night, including a torpedo boat carrying a blood-smeared, delirious Admiral Rozhestvensky, who had abandoned the *Suvorov* before it sank. A Japanese destroyer captured him later that day.

In winning one of history's biggest naval battles, comparable in scope and significance to Admiral Horatio Nelson's victory at Trafalgar, Togo had lost a sum of three torpedo boats.

Word reached St. Petersburg the next day.

On the morning of May 16, the frozen surface of the Neva River was breaking up. From the quays and surrounding streets, it sounded as if some invisible force was striking the ice with a giant ax. First, cracks had appeared across the surface, then gaps widened between chunks of ice. The river's surface, a smooth blanket of white throughout the winter, was now crowded with clumps of soot-gray ice. Slowly, the current began to move these enormous floes downriver. They collided, spun, and broke apart into smaller pieces, loosening the stubborn ice on the riverbanks. In the weeks ahead, the Neva's flow would finally run clear into the Gulf of Finland. It was a relentless, inevitable process.

Fifteen miles south of St. Petersburg that same morning, Nicholas was horseback riding through Tsarskoye Selo. The air smelled of wet lilacs. Nicholas treasured his country estate. Set behind a tall iron fence and guarded by mounted Cossacks, Tsarskoye Selo was a paradise far removed from the city's chaos. On the eight-hundred-acre park where Nicholas galloped stood two palaces with extensive gardens, a zoo, triumphal arches, numerous chapels, paths weaving through forest groves, an artificial lake dotted with sailboats — even a Chinese pagoda and Turkish baths.

Nicholas finished his ride in front of Alexander Palace, where he had retreated after the Blessing of the Waters ceremony in January. Built a century before, the hundred-room palace was modest compared to the nearby Catherine Palace, which rivaled Versailles in size and opulence. Even so, Nicholas and his family were not at a loss for luxury amidst the long gilded halls and mauve boudoirs lit with crystal chandeliers and scented with fresh-cut flowers. There, hundreds of smartly dressed servants tended to their needs. As Nicholas walked through the palace that morning, however, the luxurious surroundings must have been lost on him. He desperately awaited news of Rozhestvensky's squadron.

The night before, he had shut himself away with his war council in the walnut-paneled study, poring over charts to ascertain where the fleet could be. His naval minister, Admiral Avelan, had reassured him that even if Togo attempted to elude the Russian fleet, Rozhestvensky would draw the Japanese out completely, even if he had to bombard one of their ports. Such was the bravado of Nicholas's inner circle.

Wild rumors ran throughout St. Petersburg. Some talked of a great Japanese victory. Others said that the Russian fleet had arrived in Vladivostok unscathed; the newsboys in St. Petersburg were already selling that story in the streets. But if Nicholas believed every wire report or consul message, then Rozhestvensky had already successfully waged his fight a month before in the Strait of Malacca off Indochina, and the tsar's worries were over.

But they were not; he was very worried. The past four and a half months had trampled his hope for a quiet, peaceful year. On January 9, three days after he escaped death on the Neva, 120,000 workers and their families, dressed in their Sunday best, had converged on the Winter Palace to petition him to ease their oppression. The defenseless crowd, carrying icons and his own portrait, refused to disperse, and his soldiers led cavalry charges against them, killing 130 and wounding many more. "Bloody Sunday," many were calling it.

Mayhem erupted in the days and weeks that followed. As one of Nicholas's faithful described it at the time: "Strikes are rolling over Russia as feathergrass over the steppe, outrunning each other, from Petersburg to Baku, from Warsaw to the heart of Siberia. Everybody is engaged . . . workingmen, students, railway-conductors, professors, cigarette-makers, pharmacists, lawyers, barbers, shop-clerks, telegraphists, schoolboys . . . The atmosphere is overcharged. . . . People cross themselves asking 'What is going to happen? What is going to happen?'" In the countryside, Nicholas's "dear" peasants either ransacked their landowners' manor houses or simply torched them to the ground. Most high officials feared for their lives. On February 4, a terrorist assassinated the governor-general of Moscow, Nicholas's uncle, Grand Duke Sergei, by throwing a bomb into his carriage as he left the Kremlin. Noblemen-turned-liberals pressed for a voice in ruling the country. Meanwhile, revolutionaries made it clear they would be satisfied only with the tsar's head. By May, even though Nicholas could not expect outright victory against Japan, he had to question what would happen within Russia if Rozhestvensky failed.

As he walked through Alexander Palace after his ride, Nicholas received his first reliable piece of information, a cable from the captain of the cruiser *Almaz,* which had managed to elude the Japanese and had recently arrived in Vladivostok. He reported that the *Suvorov,* the *Oslyabya,* and the cruiser *Ural* were lost and the battleship *Alexander* crippled. The *Almaz* had departed the Korea Strait before the battle had ended, but no other ships were in Vladivostok. The captain asked in his cable, "Could it be that none of the squadron's ships has reached Vladivostok?" It was inconceivable that all the others had been lost.

Over the next two days, however, the terrible facts of the battle arrived from the Far East. History has recorded different anecdotes depicting Nicholas's reaction to the developing news. One account had him at a court dinner receiving a telegram about the fleet, taking out his gold cigarette case, and having his master of ceremonies announce, "His Imperial Majesty permits smoking." In another story, he was riding on the imperial train with his minister of war and reacted to the grim reports with élan, formulating new plans for the war within minutes. Still another had him opening the dispatch while playing tennis. "What a terrible disaster," he apparently said, then was handed his racket and finished his game.

One or none of these may be true, but Nicholas was indeed famous for retreating into himself, never exposing his emotions when dealing with problems. Yet in his diary, usually reserved for pedantic accounts of his meals, leisure activities, and the weather, he was forthcoming. On May 16 and 17, he was "depressed" and frustrated at the inadequate, often contradictory news. On May 18, he wrote of a "difficult, painful, and sad" feeling in his soul. The next evening, he seemed to come to terms with the truth: "Now finally the awful news about the destruction of almost the entire squadron in the battle has been confirmed. Rozhestvensky himself is a captive!" In the same entry, he lamented how the gorgeous spring day had only deepened his sorrow.

Government ministers, liberal groups, exiled revolutionaries, and world leaders rushed to assign blame, forward their agenda, and predict the tsar's political future. The Russian and international press followed every move, often unabashedly pushing their own viewpoint. Yet nobody spoke directly for the roughly 4,830 sacrificed at the Battle of Tsushima, nor for twice that number wounded and captured. Until, that is, a band of sailors from the Black Sea Fleet made their voices heard.