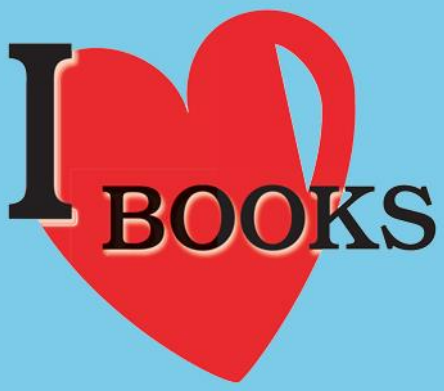


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Written by

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Illustrated by

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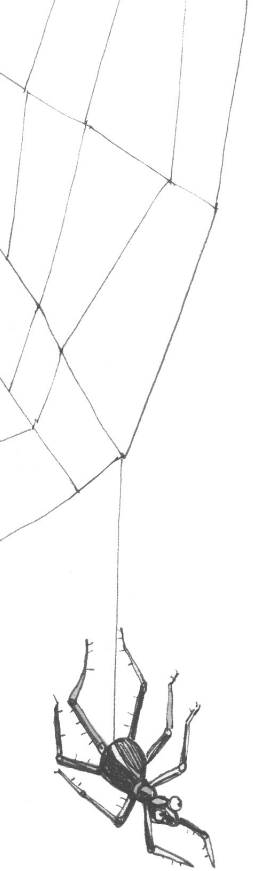
A furry-tailed fairy tale



Sam Gayton

Illustrated by Peter Cottrill

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(A Note on Names)

This is a tale from Petrossia, a land far from where you or I sit now. The king there is called the Czar, which is pronounced 'zar'. The stories say it was actually spelled zar once too, but that was before he decided to wage war on the letter C and force it to join his name. After a long and ferocious battle, C was eventually defeated, and the victorious zar told it to march as a herald at the front of his name for ever.

The letter C had to obey.

But it wasn't going to cheer about it.

So now you know why, when you say the Czar's name, the C is silent.

PART ONE

CATASTROPHICA

I came, I saw, I conquered.

– Julius Caesar

Anything that can go wrong,
will go wrong.

– Sod's Law





Bad News at Breakfast

Bloom and Swoon and many a moon ago, in the lands beyond the Boreal sea, there lived a mighty king who loved conquering. He conquered crowns and cities and countries. His name was the Czar.

Conquering was the Czar's favourite hobby. He practised all the time, so he was really rather good at it. He could conquer a whole kingdom guarded by ten thousand soldiers using nothing but a tin whistle, a fishing rod and a herd of reindeer.[1]

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1 This actually happened. On the first day of Bloom, the Czar had ridden north to the kingdom of Laplönd, and challenged King Harollia to single combat.

Normally, of course, no king would accept such a challenge. It would be suicide. But the Czar had carried no weapons: only a tin whistle and a fishing rod.

So, arming himself with battle-axe and bommyknocker, King Harollia accepted.

When he charged, the Czar climbed a fir tree and proceeded to play an irritating Yuletide tune very badly. The noise enraged a herd of nearby reindeer, who stampeded through the valley, sweeping King Harollia away. Up in his tree, the Czar used the fishing rod to pluck the crown from King Harollia's head as the reindeer carried him past.

He was a terrifying beast of a man – broad as a bear, strong as an ox, clever as a pig, and hairy as a goat. His burgundy boots shone, his midnight cloak swished, and his Iron Crown sat slowly rusting on his head. He could crush coconuts with his hands and do press-ups with his moustache. He was simply the mightiest conqueror of all time. Everyone agreed. And if you didn't, the Czar would fight you until you changed your mind.

✣

One bleak morn at the end of Dismember, the Czar woke late and sat down to conquer his huge breakfast of twelve ostrich eggs. He cracked the shells first, one by one. It was his favourite part. He liked imagining they were skulls.



He dipped all his buttered soldiers, gobbled them up, then called the butler and demanded reinforcements.

The butler left to inform the cooks. After a while, the doors to the chamber crashed open. On a velvet cushion by his elbow, the Winter Palace poodle wagged his tail and sat up, as the maids marched up from the kitchens with silver platters of salami, dumplings and borscht.

'Down, Bloodbath,' growled the Czar, jabbing the poodle with his fork. '*My* breakfast.'

But the Czar and his poodle were surprised by another visitor along with the maids. It was one of the Czar's War Council. And he was carrying bad news.

The Czar's War Council was made up of five of his most powerful soldiers – and surely the bravest and toughest of them all was his Warmaster, the barbarian warrior Ugor, who stood before him now. Ugor had fought in every single one of the Czar's conquests. He had been slashed with swords, stabbed with spears, and recently poked in the eye with a chopstick.[2] But the Czar had never seen him look so afraid before. Ugor's one unbandaged eye was filled with fear as he announced that a terrible catastrophe had befallen the

2 Last summer, when the Cczar had surprised the Ninjas of Soy during breakfast and conquered them before lunch.

Czar's six-year-old son and only heir – Alexander, the Prince of Petrossia.

'What do you mean, "a terrible catastrophe"?' scoffed the Czar, catapulting breadcrumbs out of his mouth and across the breakfast table. 'Has my son been kidnapped? Ha! Kidnapping doesn't worry me in the slightest, Ugor! I will simply invade any kingdom holding him to ransom.'

'No, Majesty,' grunted Warmaster Ugor, turning pale. 'Badder than kidnap.'

'Worse than kidnapping?' cried the Czar. 'You mean my son has been murdered? Then I must try to fulfil my ultimate ambition: conquer the land of the dead, and bring Alexander back from the afterlife!'

'No, Majesty.' Ugor's knees were knocking together. 'Badder than murder too.'

'Worse than murder?' cried the Czar, and even he began to feel a little afraid. 'What has happened?'

But Ugor was so overcome with terror, he fainted and toppled with a thud to the floor.

With a scowl, the Czar booted Bloodbath out from under his ankles. The poodle scampered over to the Warmaster, licking and slobbering all over Ugor's face until the barbarian regained consciousness. Finally, the

Warmaster sat up and managed to inform the Czar that Prince Alexander, his only son and heir to the mighty Petrossian Empire, had somehow been transformed into a fluffy-wuffy kitten.

The blood of the Czar himself ran cold. 'You mean to say that the heir to my great empire is now a . . . a . . .'

'Kitten,' confirmed Ugor with a groan. 'And, Majesty?'

'What?' said the Czar in the barest whisper.

'He's got fleas too.'

Even Ugor – Warmaster, and bravest of the Czar's War Council – could not meet His Majesty's smouldering stare of rage.

'How?' growled the Czar. 'How did this happen?'

'A potion, Majesty,' Ugor said whilst hiding behind his beard.

'Alchemy?' The Czar clenched his fist until his knuckles cracked. 'Who brewed and bottled it?'

'Two children,' said Ugor. 'Boy and girl. Lord Xin catch them. Got them in dungeons now.'

'Assassins, no doubt. The Duke of Madri must have sent them on a revenge mission.' The Czar glared down at Bloodbath, who whimpered and hid under the table. 'I never should have kidnapped his poodle.'