

Sparse street lamplights, though bright, were impotent against the deepening shadows. The glass panels on shop windows were mirrors throwing back a warped reflection he barely recognised as his own. Its blurred face and twitchy gait gave him a sneaking sensation that he was being followed. Petrov frowned, temporarily distracted when an occasional carriage hurtled past, maneuvering the narrow byways at reckless speed in such an unholy hour.

Crossing the street into a new block, he noticed a pair of eyes watching. In them was a terrified hesitation, a silent warning. A hand reached to pull the shutters of the window. Petrov heard the careful swish of the plank sliding to bolt the panels secure, the muffled whispers of a restrained squabble, followed by the soft blowing of a house candle, then silence. The next row of windows told the same story as he wandered along, his brisk walking slowing to a nervous amble. The wind's raging howls carried a sinister creak that matched his pace. He stopped at a cobbled intersection, *creak*, walked further down, paused, then-*creak*. When he stopped, so did the noise. His mind ran wild with unwanted possibilities. His breathing uneven, the stomach heavy with unease, he turned at a laboured pace.

Moonlight shone through the boughs of the rotten willow tree from which a rusty swing was creaking back and forth. An eerie glow seeped through gaps in the trunk, eyes that watched Petrov. He was entranced by the long tendrils of overgrown vines, billowing in the flurry. Then he smiled, *It is all in your imagination.*

Approaching the willow, Petrov heard a rustle further up the deserted street. He hid behind the trunk, but after more hisses and murmurs he permitted himself to take a peek. Silhouettes surrounded a carriage which careened off the side of the road.

In the darkness, Petrov walked close to a guiding fence. His hand brushed against a viscid liquid trickling down the splintered wooden plank. Following the glistening trail on the snow, he saw an injured figure surrounded by a hunched mass. The man gasped for air, legs jerking in spasms as he convulsed. Petrov dared to take another step when the man made a desperate bid to escape, clawing at the dark figures. His face disfigured into a silent scream, eyes wide with terror, he looked at Petrov before falling limp on the ground. Petrov cupped his mouth, muffling a yelp that wrenched itself from his throat. He swallowed back his whimpers as he tiptoed over the snow, stifling the crunch of his boots as he pressed backward. Disturbing the silence would be a mistake he will not live to regret. Before he could get far enough, a barking voice stopped him dead in his tracks.

“Savages! You were supposed to bring them to me! Look at the mess you made!” They cowered under a looming figure. In the reclaimed silence, it was as if they heard Petrov’s breathing. All eyes shone with malevolence as their gaze settled on Petrov.

His human reflexes compelled him to bolt. Petrov did not get far before a rough hand grabbed him. After a rush of cool air, he found himself beside a frozen lake, the lights of the town blinked from a distance. Whoever kept him pinned to the ground could travel fast, too swift for a human. A throng of strange creatures surrounded him, while the apparent leader stood with his foot pushing down a cloaked man onto the snow.

*“O-otče naš, súščij na nebesách,”* The man fingered through a rosary tied at his belt. He began to utter the first verses of the Russian Orthodox prayer in his attempt to wriggle free. He pointed to Petrov, “Take him! I’ll do anything, just please don’t hurt me!” Amused by the pathetic show of self-preservation, the leader gave the go-signal to Petrov’s captor. “Very well, he goes first.”

A sinister laughter exposed the brute’s gleaming set of fangs. He yanked the collar and sunk his teeth deep into Petrov’s neck. The attacker gasped in horror, and leapt away snarling, realising his victim was no ordinary man.

A furious Petrov felt the bite marks heal under his touch, breaking past restraints enforced for months. The human clothes were cast off revealing Caelumair robes, Zedryd’s sapphire eyes blazed enmity.

He zoomed in on the face of his assailant. The creature reeked an awful smell. His pallid complexion streaked with grey and blue veins as if blood froze in its tracks. It was suspiciously strong and agile, yet too weak to be immortal.

The panic that ensued after his transformation caused all but the leader to scurry in different directions like rats. They were swift but their new predator seemed almost omnipresent. Zedryd lunged at the closest fleeing creature. Ignoring its pleas for mercy, he wrenched the spine from his back and kicked the cadaver towards the leader. The corpse exploded in a maggot-infested pool.

The leader stood defiant in the centre of the carnage as body parts whizzed past, landing on the ground with a splatter. Zedryd decapitated a pair with his bare hands and to his right, crushed a skull with a heavy fist.

The Caelumairs and Empyreans who witnessed the massacre were warned off by Zedryd's rough growl, "Move along! This is none of your business...unless you want it to be," His eyes blazed with a menacing threat as they dashed away.

The sound of fragmented bones had the monk screaming for help. He stands at the mercy of a vicious predator and an invisible psychopathic murderer.

His troop decimated, the leader squared Zedryd's scrutinizing gaze. "Wh-who are you?" The words had only just parted from his tongue when Zedryd stood breathing down his neck.

*"What are you?"* The Caelumair growled the words.

Recovering from fright, he turned to flee. The leader veered into the trees, leaping high and low to evade his pursuer. Every time he took a turn or changed direction, Zedryd was beside him in every step, every leap, every bound, studying him. The leader lunged for a high stone wall but Zedryd grabbed his neck to send him flying backward across an entire field. He groaned as his body cleared a path among the trees till he reached the frozen lake. Before his feet could scrape the ice, Zedryd grabbed him by the chest and slammed him near the terrified monk who was wading through the maggoty snow to escape.

*"You can't hurt me!"* mocked the leader.

His head cocked to one side, the Caelumair swaggered towards him, “I wasn’t going to.” He laid a palm upon the leader’s forehead. A bright light flashed, followed by a series of long buried memories searing his mind; a farming trough, old family pictures, a failed crop, a famine, a mysterious lord with a lucrative job offer, peasants going into a castle, screams at twilight, bones to be disposed in the depth of night, a mob of outraged villagers, a castle in flames, the coffin he loaded onto a carriage for his master’s escape, a gift vial with a promise of eternity in one sip.

“Enough!” The leader jerked in vain to free himself from Zedryd’s hand, whimpering. “I can’t take it anymore!”

An insatiable hunger, his own children’s wails pierced his subconscious, or so he thought for the pleas came from his very own throat.

Zedryd, though surprised, remained stoic. “I still do not know what you are and I do not know what to do with the monk, but I will take you to someone who does.”