Lest Some Evil Take Me

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CHAPTER 1: THE EYES IN THE TREES

THERE ARE THOSE IN THIS WORLD who do not sleep and do not dream. There are those wretched few who walk this earth in a haze. Hunger and hatred too restless to die. Pain without purpose, and sin without remorse. They live in the trees, silent as the moon. Always watching. Always wanting. You see, the forest has eyes that man knows not of.

But I am not a man, and I have seen those eyes.

My name is Darina Ivashov. When I was very little, my father Mikhail was recruited to leave his home village and travel to the Tzar's new city. You see, my papa was a brilliant craftsman: gifted with any tool in the empire. But he was a poor man, and a poor man never receives the credit he is due. His name held only enough merit to earn him passage to the swamps of Peter's port without the same ankle shackles of so many *kholops*. He traveled far to the north, and farther to the west. When he arrived, I am told it was nothing more than a camp of bearded men shivering and dying in the mud. They spent weeks simply cutting down the trees and pulling them into the salty marsh.

For two years my mother Anna waited for his return. Instead, she received only a few rubles and apologies scrawled out on muddy pages. But my mother was a stubborn woman with a fiery spirit and a thick brow. I was too young to remember, but I am told that instead of spending the rubles on food or clothes, she bought passage to St. Petersburg. She milked our cow once more and then slaughtered her. She sliced and smoked her meat and tanned her hide into a thick shawl and tied me to her back with it. When we arrived at the banks of the Neva, she spent the last of our money to buy a jar of honey and to bribe a sailor who smuggled us onto a supply ferry.

Some short time after our arrival, my mother became pregnant with my brother Yury. We lived in St. Petersburg from then on. I have seen the battles with the Finns. I have heard the sound of cannons on the bay. I have watched thousands of men ferry their way up the river only to fall from chills and fevers or to die in the mud as they tried to flee. But I am not afraid. I do not fear men, and I do not fear death.

But I do fear the eyes.

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It was cold wherever you were. The sea air was wet and wild, and it blew right through the thin boards of our home. The men were at work draining the marsh and building dikes to hold it back.

They carved deep ruts into the salty sludge, casting great stones into the abyss. The air was filled with the stench of the estuary being churned and contained. It is a strange scent; salt mud does not smell like salt, and it does not smell like mud. It stinks like black oil. Like putrid tar and sour blood. It smells like the decay of the sea drifted and distilled on the shores of my home. It is a gritty ooze that seeps into your clothes and into the very flesh of the wood around you. When you burn the wood, it releases it all back into the wind in a greasy cloud that never quite washes from your skin.

My mother had raised two lambs which she kept in the house with us. They were still quite young, but she sheared their wool as often as she could. The air was too cold for them to be kept outside, and we did not have enough food to warm them, so my *mamochka* swept the small bundles of their pellets straight into the fireplace at least five times a day. The rest of her time was spent spinning their wool into yarn and knitting thin caps for the sailors, and light shawls for me and Yury.

I remember always having mud on my face. I'm not sure how young I was, maybe nine or ten, but I remember very clearly what I looked like. There were not many mirrors in St. Petersburg, at least not near our home, but there was plenty of water. I would sit by the banks of the Neva for hours wrenching crusty clumps of bark from logs and crafting them into tiny ships. I peeled back the thin wisps of the birch bark and mounted them on twigs to make sails. I pinched the water from the mud until it could be molded like clay, and I used it to build tiny sailors with stick legs and stone heads. As I bent down to place them in the river, they would always collapse at the hip where the mud was most brittle. It didn't matter. Every ship needed a captain, whether standing or sitting.

When I reached into the water, to set my ships to sea, that was when I would see my face. I tried so hard to keep my face clean, but thin scrapes of mud always adorned my cheeks and forehead from a hundred unconscious wipes with the backs of my filthy hands. My hair was stringy and damp and clung to my brow in strange tangles. The mud was so obvious because my skin was so light. My mother always told me it was because I was very fair and pure, like the sweet girls from the folk stories. She said my skin was the color of blood mixed into milk, just like beautiful Vasilisa.

I was always bothered by this.

"Mama, why would someone ruin milk with blood?" I would ask.

She would smile and gently bounce my screaming brother. "This is what bothers you, Darina? Ruining milk? Why not worry about ruining the precious blood with milk, eh? Why not worry where the blood came from? My silly, hungry child." And then I would go outside again, feeling silly and hungry with the sour, bloody taste of salt marsh on my dirty lips.

It was on one of those cold, hungry mornings that I first saw the eyes.

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Before I continue, there is something that I must say to you, dear children. Owing to the many rumors and slanderous accusations currently circulating about me and my life, I feel impressed to offer some commentary on this peculiar event. If one were to examine my childhood, searching

for the exact point I began my journey down such a path of *dvoeverie*, this would undoubtedly be the fork in my unfortunate road. For, as you will soon plainly see, this moment sent me spiraling down a series of grim events from which I was never able to return.

Not fully.

To those who share my understanding of this strange, duel world we live in, and its feral doppelganger beneath, I offer you my condolences. You have nothing but my pity and this counsel: always be on your guard, good children of the second sight. To be blessed with such awareness is also to be cursed: to be banished forever to the obscurity of humanity's most noxious nightmares and frantic fantasies. Guard your secret, good children, as I am sure you have learned to guard your name.

Notch these words on your nose that you may never forget them.

* * *

I was coming home from the river when it happened.

I had tried to launch my ship from a new spot, but the bank was too steep, and I slipped. The seat of my dress had only pressed against the ground for a moment, but it was enough to soak straight through to my bare skin. I wiped the mud from my skirt and tried to leave it clinging to the meager blades of grass by the road. It was a spectacular failure, and in the end, my dress was wet and brown and stained green.

As I hurried home, I tried to keep my hands clasped low behind me and my back as straight as possible, all to hide the mess of my clothes. It was a silly thing. The streets were always empty. No one left their homes until the sun cut through the gray clouds at midday, and the men were all off laying stones on the island far toward the sea. There was no one there to scorn my filth. No one to swat my rear and hurry me home. I was perfectly alone on the damp street, and I soon forgot my shame.

But I abandoned my caution as well.

The houses were all of wood and squalor. The streets were laid with cold, gray stone that almost looked blue in the sunless haze. They were large, rough bricks that were supposed to be rectangles. As you stepped on them, black mud would bubble up through the cracks and make my father complain about the work still to be done to tame the swamp.

As I skipped along the street, one particular brick caught my eye. It had been knocked loose, probably by an overloaded cart, and was sitting diagonally with its corner pointed up and out toward the river. I squatted down and dug my fingers into the stinging cold, trying to pry it out so that it could be replaced properly. I sat and tugged at the brick until I was shivering with cold and strain, digging and wiggling to try to break it free of the muck. It occurred to me then that anyone passing would likely accuse me of vandalism, so I cast my eyes about the street.

As I looked around, I felt something sickening tugging at my mind. Something that struck me harder and colder than the most bitter gust of wind off the bay. I blinked and stood up. I think I may even have started to cry, but the sensation passed before a single tear could streak the mud on my cheek. I looked around again and this time noticed a lone lit candle sitting on the windowsill of the house to my left. It was a most peculiar sight, for no one appeared to be in the

house, and no one would knowingly waste a good candle stick. Not in those days. Not in St. Petersburg. I watched the light with unusual fascination. It was such a tiny flame, but it felt quite warm to me.

But my mind still felt sick.

This was a moment I can never forget. You see, it was the moment I first learned that I had a soul. It seems a funny thing that this would be the first time that a christened child such as myself would have encountered eternity. Here on the muddy banks of the Neva, not in some *tserkov* filled with gold and incense and stern-faced saints, but it is true all the same. The more I felt that warm, little light call out to my body and mind, the more I felt my spirit quiver at its sight. There was something ghastly about it, and I knew deep within that it meant me harm. There is no way to describe this knowing, but it came to me in uncomfortable waves, like nausea shooting up the veins in my chest until it clawed at the chilled edges and damp roots of my scalp.

Just as I was about to listen to my soul and flee from the candle's spell, the flame moved. It was slow and subtle, and at first I thought it was just the wind. But, as I watched it more carefully, the flame moved again. There was no mistaking it. It slipped gently down the wick, silently twisting along its fibers. As it passed, the wick looked fresh and clean, as if the flame had never been there.

It continued to fall, slowly sliding down the wax and onto the iron mount. The flame followed the curve of the handle and wiped itself off onto the windowsill. It did not even occur to me to fear that the wood might ignite. My mind was too transfixed on the dance of that sinister little flame. It swayed back and forth across the wood: calling to me, pulling me in. My mind was no longer in control of my body, and I felt numb and light on my feet. I was sure that, if I wished it, I could float straight across the Neva, or sail up into the clouds.

As I stepped toward that peculiar light, it slipped off the windowsill and hovered in the air, falling a hand's breadth before gently drifting up to the level of my chest. I watched in frigid silence as the flame floated along the wind, bobbing like a bird on the bay.

And I followed.

I could do nothing else.

The numbness in my mind was only broken by a piquing childish curiosity. It was just strong enough to make me forget my fears and walk along the path behind the guiding, floating flame.

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I cannot recall how long I walked, but the stone trail became pressed dirt, and the pressed dirt became tan clumps of grass. Soon I was passing skeletal birch trees clinging to what life could be pulled from the frost-bound soil. The flame quickened when we reached those wild, lonely lands, forcing me to trot along the soggy ground. But as fast as it went, I always kept its pace. I couldn't leave it. Nothing was forcing me to go further, but it was a draw I had never felt before. It was almost a desperation. A ravenous hunger from somewhere deep within me.

Or perhaps it was from somewhere far away.

The trees around me thickened, the flaky birch bark crusting into gray knots with bulbous, black ribs. The flat, marshy land contorted into a twist of dark roots and rotting leaves. Shards of crumbling ice clung to every shadowed surface and scratched the bare skin above my ankles. It was as still and cold as fallen snow under the canopy, and what little light there was had been all but snuffed out by the gloom. But my flame was always there, always floating just close enough for me to follow. Often, I could only see its distant gleam against the side of a tree, but I never lost it. I couldn't lose it. Such was that furious hunger within me. But, despite my fervor, the woodland path was thin and convoluted, and as I ran, I tripped and hit my knee hard against a root.

Such a blessing, that little root was.

I quickly stood and lifted the hem of my dress. A fresh drop of blood pooled to the surface of my skin. A gray chunk of flesh was clinging from the side of my kneecap, barely connected to my body. The sting hadn't hit me yet, but I cried. I cried, and my tears had nothing to do with the wound in my knee. I felt a fresh wave of emotion come over me, feelings that couldn't be farther from tripping or scrapes or even physical pain. No, it was not pain that made me cry. In fact, the pain had been my savior. It woke me up from the numbness.

From the fervor.

From the spell.

I was suddenly very afraid, and I was suddenly very aware that I was lost. Even if I turned back now, there was no assurance that I'd be able to follow the path back to the Neva. What if it forked? What if it was obscured under the brush? What if it grew too dark for me to see it? I had been focusing so intently on the flame, that I hadn't paid the slightest attention to trails or landmarks.

I pushed against the wound, trying to force it closed. The sting swelled at my touch and I wailed into the trees. I had forgotten my drive to follow the light. That desperation was entirely replaced with a new, visceral panic to find my way back home.

And as I threw my eyes around the forest, I noticed movement.

It was soft. Just a delicate shift of a frame, not even true movement. I dried my eyes and stared into the gloom. There was nothing there. Nothing but trees and dark and leaves. My thoughts turned briefly to stories of wolves and bears, and I forgot the sting in my leg. I stepped forward, my frantic eyes shooting back and forth around the black wood.

But still there was nothing there.

"Hello?" My voice was timid, and it shook as it met the chill in the air. I suddenly realized how cold and damp I was, and then I realized how dangerous that was.

"Please help me," I whispered again to whatever it was I swore I had seen.

And then I saw it again.

It was a shudder, almost like a ripple across a pond. It passed through the bark of the trees as if they were the lapping edges of a river. There was no change of light or color, just a brief shift in the static bark. It was a shadow from the canopy, quietly rearranging in the unfelt wind. It was a wisp of mist dissipating in the dark. Nothing more.

My tears had stopped, and I reached up to wipe the cold droplets from my cheek. I felt cold inside and out, like I was somewhere very far from where I belonged. Somewhere much farther than an evening's walk upstream. Somewhere much more dangerous than the untamed woods. I stepped back toward the path I'd left, and I froze. There was no path. Had there never been a path? Had I truly wandered off among the unmarked maze of trees?

My fears spiked. How would I find my way now? How could I have been so foolish? I would die in these woods, far away from anything soft or warm or kind. Far away from my *mamochka's* love, or Papa's stories, or Yury's laughter. I collapsed to the frosted sticks and ferns at my feet and buried my cold nose in my arms. I had no idea what to do, but I kept calling and calling for help. My throat burned and my voice seemed to freeze against my teeth, but I cried out into the darkness for as long as I could, praying to heaven that when I looked up I might see my mother's face staring back into mine.

I saw something very different.

I don't know what made me finally look up from my despair, but when I did, the forest was watching me. I jerked back in fright, and the trees twitched as well. I gaped and felt my heart sputter away. All around me, the trees had eyes. And more than that. Much, much more. The trees had faces. I saw them. No one believed me when I spoke of it, but I saw them there. The faces of women. All of them young, and all of them beautiful. They shied away from my gaze, as if they were ashamed, as if they wished to be forgotten.

But I was a cold, cruel, hungry child, and I could not forget magic like that.

I backed away until the seat of my dress had climbed the roots behind me, but when I felt motion at my back I shrieked and leapt to my feet.

There was a woman in that tree too. I have no other way to describe it. She was somehow in the tree. It was as if her body were veiled behind the bark. It crusted her naked torso like a second skin. She stared down at me with beautiful eyes of eggshell white, and irises as warm as toffee. They were the only thing that did not bear the color and texture of a tree. They were the most remarkable things I had ever seen.

But they held such sorrow.

That was the most frightened I had ever been. I was not frightened of the magic. No, the magic was beautiful. I feared the sorrow in those eyes. Her lovely, tortured eyes. How could something so gentle and so beautiful hold such potent pain? I suppose I was too young to have learned that sometimes beauty breeds pain.

The woman in the tree rolled onto her side, as if the core of the gnarled oak were no more than a downy mattress, the bark a wonderful, skintight quilt. Her slight frame melded with the ribs and ruts of the knotted bark, but I could still see the outline of her shoulder, the side of her head, and the small of her back leading to her hips. The rest of her body was buried deep in the tree's trunk, far away from my cruel, child's gaze.

I heard the groaning of the woods around me and turned to see the other trees restless in their trunks. They were all staring at me. All of them held the delicate frames of beautiful young women, all of them veiled in gnarled bark with nothing human showing but their eyes. My heart

was pounding against my ribs. So much sorrow. So much pain. All around me the eyes of the woods were silently screaming, weeping without tears, pleading without words.

But I was just a little fool.

A tree off to my left was rocking gently, its wood creaking and grinding with strain as the woman within struggled to free herself. I stepped towards her, tears glittering my eyelids as her eyes as blue as the sea screamed into my soul words that I was too numb to hear. Her knees and shoulders and bosom jutted out of the tree as if her wrists and ankles were bound to the branches behind her. Her lips and the ridge of her brow shook, and I realized she could not open her mouth.

I was weeping then, horrified at the pain I saw. I ran to her, placing my hand against her cheek. It felt like nothing but hard, cold bark, but the woman pressed back against my touch, her trembling eyes closing for an instant of comfort that she knew could not last. She wrenched against the hidden splinters of her prison, her wide, wild eyes burning as they pleaded into mine.

I tried to speak to her, but I could only weep. I looked around and found that the other eyes were filled with the same speechless horror, the same wordless pleading.

"What do you need?" I cried to them.

But they could not respond, and I could not understand.

"Please! I'll do anything!" I wept for them, fool that I was.

They wept for me.

It was then that my sight was coaxed away by a gentle, familiar glow. I looked and beheld the dancing candle's flame floating in the distance. It was something so warm when I was so very cold. My head turned toward it, the strings of the fervor pulling my skin and hair like a little *marionetka*. The flame flickered, and the women in the trees shrank away: from it or me, I couldn't tell.

I wish I could tell you I turned away. I wish I could tell you that I finally understood the warning of those sweet women trapped in the trees, that I shook myself free of the flame's spell and ran for home.

But I have a soul, and I have learned that I must not tell lies.

The light bobbed along into the thicket. The trees grew denser, and the eyes grew greater. All of them were staring, gaping, screaming, but I saw only my little light.

The thicket opened into a quiet clearing. The branches overhead were so knotted together that the only light came from the flame drifting me forward. The light slipped along the still air, illuminating a patch on the barren soil.

What I saw stole the very air from my lungs.

The flame alighted on a candle, a candle resting on a clean, woven shawl. At its center was the most beautiful meal I had ever seen. There was a full half of a roast chicken, and its richly seasoned skin was as flakey and buttery as any pastry. Beside it was a pile of *pelmeni*, each dumpling pinched as delicately as a crocus in March, crowned with a scoop of sour cream and then sprinkled with dill weed. There was a slice of *marlenka* with more layers than I could count. Beads of honey pooled along its crust like sap on a snapped branch, and there was even a

crystal glass of warm, frothy milk beside it, a curl of steam rising from its rim like the evening smoke from my *babushka's* chimney.

I had never felt desire like that before. Never. Not when I'd longed for home huddled in the cramped decks of the smuggler's ship. Not when my mother had suddenly had eyes for Yury alone. Not even when I'd prayed in secret those two, long, lonely years for the Tzar to send my papa home. My gut twisted and cramped inside me, and I took two, dreadful steps toward the glowing meal.

But I felt the tip of my shoe brush up against something soft.

I glanced down and saw a mushroom. Its surface was grey and slick, its gills ruffled and mussed against my laces. Something about it struck me as odd. And given what I had seen that morning, there must have been something very odd indeed about that little mushroom for it to have drawn my attention so. As I studied it, I noticed it was not alone. There was a line of mushrooms. A trail of them that ran in a full circle around the beautiful shawl. The mushrooms were just within the candle's glow, so far from the light that they didn't even cast shadows. If they had been growing even half a step back, they would have been lost to the darkness of the grove.

And that was when my soul started screaming.

It is a solemn thing to feel your own spirit wrestling against you. My advice, should you ever find yourself in such a treacherous place, is always believe the warning. Trust the whisperings of your soul over the hunger of your flesh. The answer is usually simple yet difficult, but that is how you know it is true. And, if the whisperings become naggings, and the naggings become screaming, then your time to follow that warning has nearly run out.

I knew then that a terrible choice had been placed before me. I did not know it in my mind or even my heart, but somewhere deep down inside me, in that part of us that brushes up against eternity when the waxing and waning of the veil has worn it very thin, I knew that to take one more step was to face a peril I simply could not comprehend.

So, I ran. I ran, and I lived.