

## One for Sorrow, Two for Mirth

*Sochyava, in the year of our Lord 1733.* The night is an affair of knives.

The wind howls betwixt the trees, slashing ‘gainst boughs that rattle and sigh o’erhead. The earth beneath him is treacherous; it is soft with rain and slick with filth, and riddled with roots that rise as the grasping fingers of the dead. His legs threaten collapse, yet he drives them forward still, staggering through the mire with ragged breaths.

Trailing him are voices—distant, yes, but too many by far. The hunt endureth.

Vissarion Krylovsky has evaded death ere now; he has met its hollow gaze and turned away untouched. But tonight, it seems, death is hungered. Tonight, it pursues him with cruelty, trailing through branch and briar like a bloodhound with a scent caught keen. And once it has a taste, it shan’t be stayed.

Pain coil’th in his arm—with each movement, it sharpens anew—and blood slicks his sleeve with sluggish warmth. It is an ugly wound, and whether it was left by blade or bullet, he does not know. Rain and filth weigh heavy upon his coat, his vision swims. One misstep, and his boot skids upon the moss-slick stone. He catches himself ‘gainst a tree, and with a breath drawn sharp, presses forward once more. The shouts behind him fade at last, swallowed whole by the hush of the woods. He doesn’t dare slow. The trees warp at the edge of his sight, swaying like phantoms in fever’s grip. A trembling hand presses hard ‘gainst the wound at his arm. *It bleeds, still.*

*How much farther?*

The storm bites through cloth and flesh alike, threading its sepulchral chill through his ribs. The scent of pine and damp earth mingles with the bitter tang of his own blood, filling his lungs.

But lo! The forest breaks at last. Beyond the thinning wood, a village slumbers beneath the bloated moon. Low houses huddle like beggars ‘gainst the cold, their thatched roofs crusted in frost. A church bell sounds once, and the sound is hollow and lonesome. Vissarion stumbles forward, swaying. His body drags him along the muddy path, down to where the only fire yet burns: a roadside inn. It is modest, but its windows glow with warmth. From within, hearthlight spills, casting a pool of gold upon the narrow stairs. It promises a place to hide and rest, if only for a moment.

His steps falter now as relief flickers in his heart, but exhaustion is quick to smother it. His breath rasps low; every muscle begs mercy. And at last, his knees give way, boots squelching through the mire. With a final lurch, he throws himself forward.

Slender fingers graze the doorframe.