

The prey

Alexander Vasiliev was the first to awake, as always. He crept out of the bear skin cover of his bed and the subconscious embrace of his stolen wife. The warmth of the furry blanket still clung to his bare chest as he readied himself for the wearisome day ahead.

He pulled on his molded winter's coat, handy water proof gloves, furred boots attached to webbed snow shoes, and heavy pack all in one robotic movement. He fetched his gun of choice from a rack upon the wall in the limited seating area located at the centre of his household. He was accustomed to these mornings, when he left his sleeping family at the break of dawn with the question of his return lingering in the dust of his absence.

Placing a kiss upon each of his small children's brows, he turned without a second glance and headed towards the door. A raw snake of cool air slithered through the weaknesses of his jacket as he took the first steps to what he was confident was going to be a very perilous day.

At the edge of the vast forest his men awaited him. He had never heard them complain once about the daily early rise or risk of their lives at the cost of his mistake. Lately, though, his senses have not been as perceptive as usual.

"Let's get going, before I freeze to death at the sight of the lot of you. Separation is not an option today. Nor retreat. If I catch any slackers the last thing they'll see is the barrel of my shooter. Do I make my self *clear*?" Alexander yelled to his comrades above the wail of the coming storm.

"Yes, Sir!" They answered him in unison as they forcibly stomped off behind their harsh lieutenant. He was envious of their gallant nature. He disguised his jealousy behind a warning tilt of his prized artillery, aimed at the faces of every follower that watched him with a fearless stare.

The brutal Alexander Vasiliev and his group were halfway through the wilderness and in the midst of the hazardous blizzard when he sensed a movement in the beeches from the corner of his eye. He almost stumbled as the edge of his snow shoe caught in a long silver object. He bent on his worn knees as his curiosity killed the cat inside him, reaching for the thing. As Alexander brought it into view and away from the blurring snow, he acknowledged it as a serrated knife with an intricate handle made especially for barbarous hands.

Out of instinct, his fingers went to the ragged scar that travelled the full length of his left jaw to the corner of a bright hazel eye. Despite his regenerated body heat, chills ran like a waterfall of fear down every inch of Alexander's body.

He knew the owner of this weapon.

"Run!" He screamed desperately, leaving the essence of an unwanted memory as he attempted to sprint blindly into the solitary white wall that surrounded him. He somehow managed to keep a hold of the human slayer's deadly steel.

He was snared like a helpless rabbit within the next five feet. He dangled up side down from one leg in mid-air, grappling for his gun.

"Well, well, what have we here? A little lamb caught in the midst of a hungry wolf?" Vladimir Ivanov clicked his tongue, glaring at Alexander. He noticed the black object that closed the distance between them. "None of that!" He said quickly, snatching it away.

"*Vladimir.*" He dragged out the name and spat in his face.

"Remember your manners, Alex dear. Wouldn't want to have to carve another reminder of discipline into your appearance now would we?" He patronized his hanging opponent and slapped the marred tissue, hard. "That's the cost of the prey. They always get the sharp edge of the cutter; as they should."

"I am not an animal!" Alex said his cheek stinging and his skull in danger of splitting.

"No, but I am, in the figurative sense. And unfortunately for you, The Predator never loses."

Alexander took this opportunity to jab the stolen knife into Vladimir's side without hesitation. His tormentor hissed and shouted in discontent as he fell backwards into a growing pile of snow. Alex reveled in a sickening satisfaction at the folly of the other man when a sudden crash of a fallen tree took him off guard.

Lazarus Adolphus stood with his nose pointed towards the never-slacking wind, his ears on red alert and his eyes searching the perimeter. He heard a soft shriek caught in the cool defiant breeze along with a lone snowflake melting on the soft flesh of his ear. An inquisitive smell filled his nostrils, the scent of dried blood and something else he couldn't recollect. His keen eyes spotted a fallen tree. Some helpless creature trapped under it, perhaps. Lazarus and his kin would have a feast tonight.

"Fresh meat ahead, boys," he quickly barked behind him as he picked up speed with each powerful stride. The excitement of his pack was overwhelming, but nothing he couldn't keep under control. The newly discovered hunger of all the predators rumbled with their every step, he could feel it. He was quite a vicious animal on the outside, which encouraged most of his followers, with shining white teeth and a prominent tilt to his snout. Lazarus was the best of the best. He always knew what was right for his people, even if they didn't always believe it. They would never howl in unison with Lazarus, even when the orb of night was in its final phase. Their fear of him left doubt in their strong canine hearts, but their intelligence kept them with him. But he did not want their fright; he wanted their reverence.

He led the way through the maze of white evergreens and beech trees, keeping his pace just ahead of the rest. He allowed only one to run beside him, Tancred Ivanov, his most trusted and thoughtful acquaintance. They shared a secret between them, and from the seed of this mystery have grown a beautiful flower of allegiance.

As he drew nearer, the strange smell grew deeper into his nose, intoxicating his mind. He glanced at Tancred and immediately knew from the shake of his snout that he smelt it too. Then he saw them.

"Humans?"

Tancred Ivanov stooped in his tracks, spraying the loose layer of fresh snow into the air around him. He peeked over his flea bidden shoulder to check for the others. They were out of earshot of him and Lazarus, and would be for a while. This gave them time to dispose or decide what to do with the freaks. He had heard of humans, with their metal shooting weapons and their fierce ways. They had little fur and strange white faces. He had never encountered one in his life, and usually new things fascinated him, but something inside him had told

him to stop. Almost like a silent voice that had been waiting for the right moment to speak up. Then a memory that he had locked away in a safe zone of his thick beastly skull plowed its way through his uppermost thoughts. He gasped as he experienced it all again, blood, cold steel, *pain*; then new found strength, warmth, *power*.

"What should we do with them, Tancred?" Lazarus asked him, eyeing the two men hungrily. He would not act without his opinion, especially in these circumstances.

"They are injured," Tancred said, observing the mangled face of the one in the tree and the bloody open wound of the one lying on the ground.

"Maybe we should put them out of their misery," Lazarus said, licking his chops.

"I must already be dead, I can hear them. Somehow I am listening to their disgruntled words at this very moment. I, Vladimir Ivanov, have lost my sense. They are deciding whether to kill us or not, and hopefully it is the latter, I cannot live with this contamination stuck to my brain. Lucky for you Alex, you're head was never right," said one of the men.

Tancred spun around and in reflex pounced on the man who spoke, pressing his large paws into his heaving chest.

"I take that as a yes, Tancred old friend," Lazarus said and jumped from his hind legs to reach his suspended victim and intending for a kill, slashed his razor-like claws across the man's face.

"No! Wait, I heard a sound come from this one, and I-I think I understand it."

Lazarus did not move away from his desired prey, but with a growl under his breath retracted his bodily use of weaponry. His thin line of patience was ready to snap.

Tancred leaned in closer, so his snout was almost touching the man's face, and looked into his eyes. They were a matching set of Tancred's own, the same eyes he saw every time he took a drink in the lake.

"What do you see, Tancred?" Lazarus asked curiously.

"Myself," he answered, inching away from his apparent clone, a *man* named Vladimir Ivanov.

"This is an *outrage!* Tainted blood! Traitor! In *my* pack! I swear Tancred Ivanov, if you were not a *friend* I would have you put to death at my paw this instant." Lazarus howled, showing his carnassial teeth and pacing in a circle.

"Calm yourself, Lazarus. Maybe we can make a deal with the humans. Make peace, perhaps."

"They are not trustworthy! And neither are you, if you side with them."

"Have you forgotten already? I cannot help but side with him. You see the signs as well as I, Lazarus. He is the *One*."

Lazarus's features cooled into a settled understanding. "Well," he said, "You know what you must do, Tancred. I apologize for my rashness. I shall go rally the rest of our group. If anything will earn their regards, it will be this."

The pack formed a protective ring around the two fugitives, suppressing their savagery with every contraction of their throats. In the centre stood Vladimir and Alexander, now free, carefully watching the wolves and calculating an escape plan. Tonight they would not be successful.

"Vladimir Ivanov, do not be alarmed!" Tancred exclaimed, "I have the great honor to welcome you to our pack, dear brother. For many years Lazarus and I have searched for your presence in the wood, with no result. You see, Vladimir, you and I are special. We are hybrids. You are the key to the forest. What a great feat it is to have found you."

"I refuse the offer, you filthy animal. Stop filling my thoughts with your twisted words!" Vladimir spat at the wolf's feet.

"What if I told you you could have your one wish, the one thing you have thrived for all your life, in exchange for your human soul?"

"Never!" he replied, but Tancred could see past the weak word. He knew he had struck the mark.

"You have nothing to live for, your new wife and heir now dead by the hands of Alexander's men. Correct me if I am mistaken, but hasn't he *already* ruined your life once before? If you come with us, you can avenge them and start a new life, even chose to erase them from your heart, if you wish."

Vladimir fell to his knees, pounding the snow with each sobbing intake of air. "*Lies!*"

"I am afraid I speak the truth, *brother.*"

Rage filled the veins of Vladimir Ivanov's body, turning him into a burning globe of hate. He despised the man standing next to him, Alexander Vasiliev, a situational friend, forever and always his eternal nemesis. He was such a fool, believing him to be an honest man. The liquid anguish upon his cheeks hardened in the freezing wind, but he could no longer feel the glacial air. All he could feel was the knife at his belt, pounding into his side and screaming for blood.

"What will it be, fellow Ivanov, bearer of noble blood?"

"I shall give you my soul, blood, and Ivanov honor. I shall let myself become one of you, and be granted my wish, on one condition." Vladimir said through the grit of his teeth as he reached for his weapon.

"Excellent! And what will this term of commitment be, Vladimir?"

"I kill Alexander Vasiliev, savor on his flesh and chew on his bones. Drink his blood dry and consume his entrails until there is no trace of his existence!" He screamed viciously, not waiting for an answer, cutting open Alexander's skin with the tip of his carving knife, relishing in the helpless cry of his lifelong enemy. With every slash grew a claw, a patch of hair, an invulnerable muscle. With every strike Vladimir Ivanov transformed into a monster.

"The Predator never loses, after all..." Lazarus Adolphus said as he and Tancred Ivanov exchanged cryptic grins.

Lazarus, the great leader, had finally gotten the respect he had yearned for, and Tancred, the troubled half breed, was free of his singularity.

This time, when Lazarus lifted his pointed snout to howl into the midnight sky under the silvery aura of the long awaited full moon, no one refused.