

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

# Monk: Unyielding

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*"When the ill wind blows, the tree that bends will break."*

Zhota could not silence Akyev's parting words. They had dogged his every step for the past weeks. By day, the memory of his master's voice was only a whisper, but when night came, it reached a fever pitch.

Tonight was the same... Tonight he knew he would be tested again.

The winds had picked up, howling through the Gorgorra like the last icy breath of a dying god. The cold gnawed through his green, white, and blue sashes, biting bone deep. In years past he had endured slashing mountain gales outside the Floating Sky Monastery without so much as flinching, but this wind was different. There was an urgency to it that filled him with disquiet, as if the forest gods – roiling in fear.

Zhota paced at the edge of the campsite, tapping his bo staff on the lichen-covered ground. Mossy pine and birch trees towered around the clearing where he had settled for the night, along with a supremely ancient oak. Its great gnarled boughs arched over the breadth of the camp almost protectively.

The two men near his fire were still asleep, wrapped tight in tattered woolen blankets. He had hoped for a night of solitude, but the refugees had spoiled that by finding him just after sunset. The desire to refuse them a place at his camp had been strong, but Zhota's master had explicitly forbidden him from turning away travelers.

"Welcome them with open arms, but keep your heart guarded," Akyev had ordered. "Observe them with care, for if they are tainted by a god of chaos, it will do all it can to evade your gaze."

And so Zhota had obeyed, examining the strangers closely. It had not taken long for him to judge that they were free of corruption. The gaunt and weary-eyed men were a graying father and his twenty-year-old son, the sole survivors of an attack by a band of savage khazra. The filthy goatmen had taken the refugees' village unawares and reduced it to a smoldering graveyard.

The men hailed from an area of the Gorgorra that held religious and cultural ties to Ivgorod, and they were fleeing north to the safety of the city. Despite the horrors they had faced, the father and son were full of hope, and they believed that finding Zhota was a sign that the god of fate was looking kindly on them. He had felt almost cruel listening to them prattle about the life they would lead once within Ivgorod's walls, knowing in his heart that they would likely die before they reached the city.

As they prepared to sleep, the two had offered the last of their meager provisions in exchange for sharing Zhota's camp. He had politely feigned the urge to accept before he turned the gift away. In truth, he wanted nothing to do with the refugees. He had learned not to grow close to those he met in the Gorgorra for fear that they might become obstacles.

"Then we will give tribute twice over to the gods instead," the father had said, not unkindly. "They were gracious to have guided us to you, holy one. Nothing in the Gorgorra is as it seems."

*No*, Zhota had wanted to reply. *Not even me*.

The other man's words were true enough about the forest. Zhota had been raised on tales of the old-growth Gorgorra south of Ivgorod. Even the youngest trees had been ancient at the time of the monk order's founding. Here, he had always been taught, the balance among the thousand and one gods of order and chaos was immutable. He wondered what the elder monks would say if they could witness the shadowy crucible the forest had become.

Zhota continued his rounds of the campsite, repeating a mantra that opened his mind to the nearby woods, where his eyes could not see. He sensed something stirring out there in the darkness, a presence he had discovered earlier in the night. Slowly, almost methodically, it had grown stronger with each passing hour as if it was moving closer to the camp. Zhota's skin prickled at the sensation of being watched from every direction by a hundred eyes, the observers' true forms hidden from him. Even worse, none of the forest gods of order had answered his prayers to reveal the presence's source. The deities were indifferent... untrustworthy.

The gods had been this way for weeks, ever since the heavenly fire had burned over Ivgorod and landed somewhere south of the kingdom. In its wake, the chaotic gods and their demonspawn had begun prowling the forest while brigands pillaged the Gorgorra's isolated hamlets with impunity. There were dozens of different names and explanations for the comet, but what all of them shared in common were tidings of ill times ahead. Nowhere was the shadow as pervasive as it was in the leagues of dense mountain woodlands that surrounded him. Discovering what the phenomenon truly meant was not Zhota's responsibility. Another member of his order, a peerless monk whom he had always held in high regard, had been sent out to learn more concerning the heavenly fire.

As the night deepened, Zhota grew restless. It seemed as if whatever unholy force was lurking in the woods was toying with him. His hand traced along the hundreds of glyphs and proverbs that he had carved into his staff. They snaked around the weapon from end to end in intricate patterns, every one a reminder of his training lessons. Zhota repeated the inscriptions, hoping for some kind of clarity or resolve. Instead, they dredged up memories of his failures under Akyev's tutelage.

He was reciting the lessons under his breath when the winds died to a whisper.

In the distance, a sharp pop akin to dry timber crackling in a fire echoed through the Gorgorra, followed by another and another. The strange noises were few and faint initially, but they quickly increased in frequency and volume, issuing from all directions around the camp. Zhota strained his eyes and peered into the darkness as the sounds rose to a deafening tumult of rattling boughs and splintering wood. He saw rows of trees just beyond the clearing shake and then spontaneously burst into kindling in successive waves that advanced closer to him and the refugees with each explosion.

The movement stopped at the edge of the camp. A dead stillness settled on the forest.

The old man and his son clambered to their feet, groggy from sleep.

"What is it?" the father mumbled.

Zhota held his hand up in a gesture of silence. He crept toward the darkness, a black abyss devoid of movement or form but heavy with the presence of what he now recognized as minions of the gods of chaos. Although he could not see them, they were so close that he believed he could reach out and touch them. They were everywhere around him, in the soil, the air, the trees.

*In the trees.*

The ground heaved beneath Zhota's feet as realization hit him. A mass of tree roots exploded upward in a shower of damp soil, flinging him through the air. He rolled with the fall, coming to his knees at the other side of the camp.

The trees around him swayed and extended their boughs, creaking and groaning like giants awakening after eons of slumber. Motion flickered in the dim firelight all across the camp as numerous roots slithered up from the dirt and began blindly lashing out toward Zhota and the refugees.

"Stay near the fire!" Zhota barked at the other men.

The father and son scrambled to fish out logs from the flames, waving their makeshift torches at the exposed roots that had reached the camp's center. Zhota charged toward a nearby pine, swiping at the roots that lunged at his feet. He struck the tree with his staff in a flurry of blows and then slammed his open palm against the trunk. Cracks rippled out from around his hand, spiraling up the pine. He leapt backward as the trunk erupted in a deluge of tinder and the tree's upper half toppled into an adjacent birch.

Yet with the pine's destruction, Zhota did not perceive that the demon within it had died. Rather, it seemed that the unholy presence had merely diminished in power. He opened his mind to the trees encircling the camp. They were all tainted, but they were only puppets being controlled by a single entity.

His eyes settled on the ancient oak, which had remained still and lifeless. Within its weathered trunk, he could suddenly feel the demon spreading its influence into the surrounding forest.

In response to Zhota's discovery, the oak's trunk wrenched open to form what resembled a gaping maw frothed with moss. It wailed a shrill cry that pierced the night and made Zhota's knees go weak. The refugees dropped to the ground, clutching their ears and screaming in agony.

The other trees stilled as the demon coalesced its power, drawing it all back into the oak. The boughs swung down across the camp toward Zhota like dozens of jagged-edged lances. He dove to his side and swept his bo in a wide arc, sending an invisible blade of pure air ripping through the gnarled branches.

The oak shrieked in fury and renewed its attack with what was left of its broken limbs. Zhota somersaulted over the branches as they whipped through the air, landing at the base of the oak. With one vicious thrust, he plunged his bo into the tree's jaws, focusing his mind on a single point at the end of the weapon.

The oak convulsed, its trunk pulsating as a torrent of divine fire flared out from its maw. The flames burned through the tree's core, and it withered into a blackened, smoking husk.

"Holy one!" the father yelled behind him.

Zhota turned and saw that one of the oak's limbs had pierced the son's shoulder, pinning him to the ground. The young man was unconscious but alive.

"A flesh wound. He will live with your help, holy one," the father said as he knelt next to his son.

Yes, Zhota wanted to say. Like all monks, he had been trained well in the arts of healing. He inspected the skin around the severed oak limb. The blood was a healthy crimson with no sign of corruption... yet.

The father stared up at Zhota, eyes full of hope and expectation. "Surely you can heal him?"

Zhota forced himself to speak the empty words that he had been ordered to recite. "He is tainted now. The corruption will evade my holy powers until I am gone. Only then will it emerge and overtake your son's mind and body. We must give him to the gods so that he may be at peace."

"No!" the old man cried in shock. "He will fight it. He is strong. Leave him to me. I swear to the thousand and one that if he shows corruption, I will kill him with my own hands. He is the last of my blood."

The father grasped feebly at Zhota's feet, pleading out of sheer desperation. None of this seemed right to the monk. He should be giving others hope, not stripping it away from them. For a moment, he considered leaving. But as soon as the thought had arisen, memories of Akyev came unbidden to him.

Zhota could almost see his master standing before him in the campsite now, looking at his former pupil with shame and disgust. The last time he had met Akyev had been weeks ago, after Zhota had passed the rites of monkhood and been tattooed with the circles of order and chaos on his forehead. It was a day after the heavenly fire had appeared over Ivgorod that his master had called him out to an open-air terrace of the monastery, the mountain winds whipping at the elder monk's earth-toned sashes of brown, black, and gray. The Unyielding, Akyev was sometimes called. His strength and resolve were everything Zhota strove to emulate but feared he would never achieve.

"Those who are touched by the spawn of the gods of chaos must be purified. Do not ask questions. Do not attempt to mend their wounds. We must make certain the taint is staunched quickly," Akyev had said, relaying the instructions passed down to him by the nine Patriarchs—the heads of the Sahptev religion and the supreme rulers of Ivgorod. As the militant arm of the faith, monks were charged with carrying out the decrees issued by the kingdom's divine leaders.

"The Patriarchs ask a hard task of you, one reserved only for the most devout of our order," the Unyielding had continued. He stared at Zhota for a moment, frowning his brow. "You have attained the rank of monk, but there are times when I wonder if you are truly ready. There are times when I think you are still that fool boy who first came to the monastery. More beast than man, really... a wild thing with eyes clouded by emotion and intuition and all those other fleeting feelings that change on a whim just as swiftly as the winds. Are you that boy, or are you a monk?"

"That boy is dead," Zhota had answered.

"Then prove it. And remember that when the ill wind blows, the tree that bends will break."

The next day, Akyev had set out from the monastery on his own mission. Zhota had departed not long afterward, but his master's words had stayed with him, a constant reminder of his past failures.

Akyev's voice was louder than ever now, the sound grating in Zhota's ears like the keening of steel swords. Anger filled him at his previous thoughts of abandoning duty. It was enough to push him forward.

*Duty is everything, he told himself. The word of the Patriarchs is the word of the gods. Who am I to question their methods? I am their instrument.*

Ivgorod's hallowed leaders were the reincarnations of the nine original humans who had been chosen by the gods to rule the kingdom. Four were pledged to order, four to chaos, and one remained neutral. They had always worked to uphold balance. Sometimes this meant asking the monks to perform difficult acts, but such was the nature of the world. It was all part of maintaining equality between order and chaos so that neither side reigned over the other.

"Step aside," Zhota ordered, but the old man did not move.

"My boy *never* dishonored the Patriarchs! This is how they reward him?" The refugee drew back and pulled a dull knife from his belongings near the fire. He lunged at the monk in a wild swing.

Zhota caught the old man's wrist, twisting it until he dropped the knife. The father yelped in pain and crumpled to his knees. "He is my only son," he sobbed.

By then, all the fight had gone out of the man. He slunk down and groveled in the dirt.

Zhota slowly moved toward the son, reciting one of the monk order's ancient oaths in his head. *I walk among the gods of order and the gods of chaos. I channel both, becoming neither. I am the warrior who straddles the divide. So long as I act to uphold the balance, I am without sin.*

*Without sin.* He mouthed the words in silence as he placed his palm on the young man's chest. Zhota closed his eyes and then whispered a mantra to fill the son with holy energies. It was a form of mercy killing that the monk had learned from Akyev, used to grant a peaceful and painless death to those who had been mortally wounded and were beyond the order's healing powers.

He felt the young man's heart beat slower and slower, until at last it stopped. Afterward, Zhota built a wooden pyre and purified the corpse in flames.

The light of dawn was creeping through the forest by the time the bones were charred black. Zhota set out alone, knowing that he should raise his head high in triumph at having fulfilled the Patriarchs' will. Instead, all he could think about was the broken old man behind him, the last vestiges of hope fading from him as he kneeled over his son's remains and prayed to gods who no longer listened.

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Zhota found the slaughtered caravan three days later.

There were eight corpses in all, strewn about a small clearing blanketed with a layer of fallen pine needles. He pulled the sash wrapped across his chest up over his nose to ward off the stench, and he opened his mind to the surrounding area, searching for the presence of demons. He discovered none.

More than two dozen sacks of provisions lay scattered next to a stocky packbeast, cleaved in half at its immense shoulders. There were too many supplies for the one animal to bear, even as strong and tenacious as packbeasts were. Near the road, Zhota came across three sets of hoof tracks, each leading in a divergent direction.

The human corpses were ripe, the caravan no more than a day dead. Most of the victims wore drab gray robes common among those who dwelled in the Gorgorra. Yet finely crafted swords and axes sat beside many of the bodies, belying their simplistic garb.

He kneeled by one of the dead, a well-built man with the calloused and scarred hands of a warrior. Maggots squirmed around a number of wounds on his arms and chest. It appeared that nearly all of the travelers had been tortured before being killed.

One body in particular truly piqued Zhota's interest. The woman had been stripped naked and thrown upon the now-blackened fire pit at the center of the camp, her legs charred to a crisp. Unlike the other victims, she was missing her head. Zhota scoured the clearing again but did not find it.

The massacre had been calculated. There was a story here, he knew, but the Patriarchs had not sent him into the Gorgorra to puzzle out mysteries. He needed only to purify the corpses before he departed.

Zhota spied something half buried in the ashes of the fire pit and pulled it free, an ornately inscribed wooden flute adorned with brass studs. It was a child's toy. He remembered that he had brought one of the instruments with him to the monastery when he had begun training. Music had always been honored in the monk order and Ivgorod as a whole, but Akhev did not share his comrades' love of the arts. Immediately after he had found the flute among Zhota's belongings, he had snapped it in half and cast it off a cliff at the edge of the Floating Sky Monastery.

Zhota brushed soot from the instrument and put it to his lips. When he blew, the notes were a broken disharmony. They were as empty and meaningless as his life had been before he joined the monk order. He prepared to toss the toy back into the pit but ultimately stayed his hand. Something about holding the flute was oddly emboldening, and he felt almost tranquil. He tucked it into his sash, convincing himself that it would be a reminder of the weak, ignorant boy he had once been.

The dense canopy at the edge of the clearing suddenly rustled with movement.

Zhota bolted up, turning toward the sound. "Show yourself!"

Dead leaves cascaded to the ground just beyond the clearing. Zhota was creeping into the forest gloom when a small figure dropped from a massive birch and plunged deeper into the woods.

Zhota gave chase. The runner had donned the same drab robes as the dead travelers. It was a child, from the looks of it, and a clumsy one at that. The figure stumbled over roots and shouldered into tree trunks as it fled.

Finally, he tackled it to the forest floor. The child squirmed beneath his grasp and started to sob. When Zhota drew back the figure's hood, he saw an abomination that sent an icy chill through his spine.

It was a boy no older than ten. Long, almost translucent hair flowed out across the cold soil, framing a thin, mousy face. His skin was the color of sun-bleached bone. And his eyes...

His eyes were stark white, and they wept tears of blood.

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The blind child was silent for days after Zhota had purified the slain travelers and resumed his journey, ignoring the monk's questions about what had happened to the caravan. He began thinking that the boy was also mute, until one night, the child muttered, "Mother," in his sleep.

The youth had tried to flee on several occasions, forcing Zhota to remove one of his sashes and bind the boy's hands with it, using the clothing as a leash of sorts. The decision to bring him along in the first place had not come easy. The very sight of him filled Zhota with foreboding. For a time the monk had toyed with the idea that he was a demon in the guise of a child, but the thought had passed quickly. *Nothing in the Gorgorra is as it seems.*

The boy was freakish, that was true, but Zhota had not sensed anything demonic within him. He seemed mindful of his surroundings in a way that only one who had never relied on his eyes could be. Even so, the child constantly tripped over mossy rocks or exposed roots, slowing Zhota's pace to a snail's crawl.

Of greater concern was that the youth had the stamina of a dying dog. He couldn't travel more than half a mile without stopping to catch his breath. Whenever the calls of birds or other beasts echoed in the nearby forests, he would wander off toward the sound, enraptured with childish curiosity. Zhota had a mind to leave the boy behind, but the monk hoped to learn more about what had assailed the caravan.

The child's stubborn silence, however, persisted. If the little one wanted to play games, Zhota decided, the monk would play as well.

"Faster, demon child." Zhota tugged on the boy's leash.

"Mind your step here, demon child," he said as he led the youth over a bed of rocks.

He goaded the boy for the rest of the day, watching as the child's skin flushed red with rage. Finally, the youth bristled, yanking against Zhota's grip. "I'm not a demon!"

"So you do speak."

The child cringed in defeat and lowered his head.

"Give me your name, boy. I am here to help you."

"Liar. You tricked me. You played the wrong song."

"Tricked you? Perhaps I should have left you back there. How long do you think one blind boy would last in the Gorgorra—" Zhota was saying when he remembered the flute tucked into his sash.

He withdrew the instrument and held it out to the child. "I take it this is yours, then."



The youth groped the air until he found the flute, then he hugged it to his chest. Blood tears poured down from his eyes, trailing thin red veins that made it look as if someone had slashed his face with a fine blade.

"Mother..." the child whispered. "She promised she would call me back with our song. When I heard the music, it was wrong... all wrong... I thought she had forgotten." He turned his sightless eyes to Zhota as if the boy could truly see him, wrinkling his face in anger. "What did you do with her?"

"If your mother was at the camp, she is with the gods now," Zhota said, recalling the headless woman in the fire pit. He saw no point in tempering the truth with vagaries or false hope. "She and the others met their fate long before I ran across them."

"The gods told me as much," the boy said, "but I didn't want to believe them."

"Whatever ill force that slew them is gone. It will trouble you no more."

"No," the youth shot back. "The demon that attacked us is still out there. The others at the camp, they hid me in the tree and then set the beasts loose to fool it, but when it finds I'm not with them, it will come looking for me again. Mother said it will never stop chasing us until we are both dead."

"The demons here kill indiscriminately. They do not chase travelers for days on end. Now, tell me your name and where you came from. Do you have relatives in the Gorgorra?"

"You don't believe me," the child said. He ignored the rest of Zhota's questions.

That night, after Zhota made camp, the boy curled up to sleep by the warmth of the fire, the flute tucked between his arms. The youngster's obstinacy was infuriating, but the monk had to wonder why the gods had crossed their paths if not for him to safeguard the child. He was helpless... alone... afraid...

"The commoners you meet will try to lead you away from the path of duty with their tears and their sorrows. You must be wiser than they are. You must not stray," Akyev had warned him.

There was wisdom in Akyev's words, Zhota had to admit. He had been dispatched to restore balance in the Gorgorra, not to shepherd orphans. But he couldn't bring himself to abandon the boy.

Zhota traced the lessons engraved on his bo with his fingers. His hand stopped at a deep gouge near the center of the staff. The notch was an ugly thing that marred the otherwise beautiful inscriptions he had carved, but Akyev had forbidden Zhota to repair it, for otherwise he would forget its meaning.

"Your weapon is only as strong as your spirit," Akyev had said to him the day his staff was cut. The monks strove to hone their bodies and minds into instruments of divine justice. Swords, staves, and other tools of battle were, in truth, unnecessary. Even so, the order valued training with all manner of armaments to strengthen its martial prowess. It was not uncommon for a monk to wield one type of weapon and use it as an extension of his perfectly balanced spirit to mentally focus his attacks. Akyev was an adherent of such a method, and he had spent a great deal of time imparting his philosophies about weaponry to Zhota over the years.

"The ignorant will see your bo as mere wood, something easily broken," Akyev had continued. "Yet it will only splinter when you hesitate, and so long as you walk the path of duty, there is no reason for that to happen."

Zhota and his master had gathered at one of the monastery's walled training grounds to spar with real weapons. The days of practicing with blunt-edged swords and hollowed-out staves were over.

The younger monk had arrived full of confidence, but it had all melted away when Akyev drew his scimitar. The sword was unadorned, but Zhota had known that it was anything but ordinary. The Unyielding had forged it with his own hands, folding the steel on itself again and again for months. Every morning, he had prayed to his patron deity—Zaim, the god of the mountains—to infuse the blade with indomitable strength. It could part solid stone and plate armor as if they were water.

"The weapon is an ornament," Akyev had said upon seeing the fear in Zhota's face. "The Patriarchs deem that my blade is no greater than your staff. Do you think to question their divine wisdom?"

"No," Zhota had answered, trying to sound as if he truly believed the word.

After that, the sparring had begun. When Akyev's first strike had come crashing down, doubt and uncertainty had gripped Zhota. It wasn't the sword he saw before him but the man wielding it—the man who was always his better, who never flinched from any task given to him, no matter how arduous.

The scimitar had cleaved Zhota's bo, driving him to his knees. His master had yanked the blade free and roared in fury. "Fool! I could have killed you. You allowed your fears to guide you."

Akyev had eyed the green, blue, and white sashes around Zhota's body in disgust. "You have too much of the rivers in you... Sometimes still and calm, sometimes turbulent."

The tones of Zhota's clothing were emblematic of Ymil, the god of the rivers. The deity was associated with emotion, intuition, and the life-giving properties of water. Yet there were some monks, Akyev most of all, who argued that Ymil was capricious and indecisive. As a result of Zhota's choosing this god as his patron, the Patriarchs had paired him with Akyev. The hope had been that the elder monk's rigid demeanor would temper the younger's hesitant nature, and vice versa.

"Our tasks are simple; our orders are clear. Why do you complicate them with uncertainty?" Akyev had said as he inspected the cut in Zhota's staff. "This is the cost of disobedience. This is what happens when you stray from duty. And when the ill wind blows, the tree that bends will break."

The moon was high by the time Zhota stopped reliving the memory of that day in his mind, his thumb raw from tracing the jagged cleft in his bo. The boy was still sleeping. The sight of him made Zhota livid. He wished he had never stumbled across the child in the first place.

*He does not matter*, Zhota told himself. The orphan's past and all of the mysteries of the slaughtered camp were distractions. As the night wore on, the monk made his choice. There were villages south from his current location. If they had not been scoured, he would find someone there to look after the child.

If they had been, and if there was no safe haven to be found in three days' time, he would give the boy the only option left: peace.

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Zhota stood in a shaft of light that cascaded through the forest canopy, embracing the cleansing dawn sun. He rose to the tips of his toes, his arms raised high and his head held down so that his chin touched his chest. He maintained the pose, eyes closed, for more than ten minutes, silently chanting mantras to clear his mind.

His morning meditations were the closest thing to rest that he allowed himself. He had scarcely slept in the past few weeks, traveling by day and keeping watch at night.

Five days had elapsed, and the child was still alive. As the monk had feared, the villages he had visited had been empty. With each passing day, Zhota had made some excuse as to why he had not given the boy to the gods yet. Today, he tried to justify his hesitation by convincing himself that another village lay not far ahead.

"Mishka... that is my name," the child said, interrupting Zhota's peaceful state.

"Zhota," he grunted in reply, and he refocused on his mantras.

After a moment, he heard an alien sound—something oddly sweet that did not belong in the Gorgorra. When he opened his eyes, he saw Mishka playing a few tremulous notes on the flute.

The boy brought the instrument down. "Do you know 'The Trickster of the Moss Barrows'?"

"No," Zhota said in irritation, although in truth he knew it. It was children's music, full of outlandish heroics—exactly the type of song that he himself would have played in his youth.

"That was Mother's favorite song, the one she would play when things were safe." Mishka smiled bittersweetly. "I can teach it to you."

"That is not nec—" Zhota began, but the boy started the music anyway.

Zhota sighed and broke out of his meditative pose.

*Let the youth have this if it will make him content. It will all end soon,* he told himself.

When he and Mishka set out for the day, Zhota hefted the boy onto his back. Two nights before, the child had stumbled over a fallen tree and nearly broken his arm. Since then the monk had taken to carrying Mishka from time to time to quicken their pace and keep the boy out of trouble.

As Zhota trudged through the dense mountain woods, the child continued his song. Zhota tried ignoring the tune, thinking that the boy would tire of it, but before long the sun was setting and Mishka was still blaring with the instrument.

It wasn't until that night, after Zhota had made a new camp, that the music really hit him. In a distant corner of his mind, he heard the sound of laughter and saw bare-footed children racing through a village of thatch-roofed hovels without a care, innocent and ignorant of the precarious balance between order and chaos in the world. It took him a moment to realize that it was his own childhood.

"*When the ill wind blows, the tree that bends will break.*" The words rang in his head.

"Enough!" Zhota yanked away Mishka's flute and tucked it into his sashes.

"I only wanted you to hear the song," the boy said, furrowing his brows.

"Once would have sufficed, not a thousand times," Zhota growled before reining in his irritation. When he saw Mishka lower his head in guilt, the monk put in, "It is dark, and you draw unwanted attention."

He had meant the words as an excuse, but not half an hour later they proved to be true.

Two sharp whistles pierced the night. Zhota opened his mind to the woods in search of movement, but the gods were as reluctant as ever to guide him. Before long, two men emerged from the forest, clad in a motley array of battle-worn armor.

Zhota knew from the first glance what they were. *Brigands... mercenaries... godless men.*

They hesitated at the edge of the camp and exchanged looks. One of them, a brute with thick sinewy arms and a glistening scar that stretched from his left ear to his chin, glared at Zhota and then turned to leave. The other stopped him. He had a clean-shaven, handsome face framed by shoulder-length jet-black hair. His emerald eyes glimmered hungrily in the firelight, staring intently at Mishka.

"The night is dark, holy one," the handsome man said, finally breaking his gaze.

"Then let the light of my fire ease you," Zhota replied, finishing the ancient greeting. Even with these men, he couldn't find it in himself to ignore Akjev's command to observe travelers.

"What brings you this deep into the woods?" Zhota asked as the two brigands settled near the fire. He kept his breath measured and his face calm, but behind his still mask he judged both of the newcomers' movements, finding their weaknesses. The travelers were armed: the brute with a monstrous battle axe, and his companion with a bastard sword slung on his back.

"Same as you." The handsome man warmed his hands by the fire. "The monks are spread thin, it seems, and your order has called on those with steel to lend aid."

*Lies*, Zhota wanted to spit back, but he held his tongue. The thought of the Patriarchs using brigands to uphold their divine will was sacrilege. Godless men only revered one thing in life: gold.

"When did the Patriarchs issue such a decree?"

"Not them directly. It was one of your brothers patrolling these parts. He told of a demon loose in the woods. A devious little whelp that wears the face of a blind child, with skin and hair as white as snow." He was smiling at Mishka as he spoke. "Looks like you've already caught the wretch yourself."

Mishka stirred. "I'm not a demon!"

"Then why are you bound?" The scarred man chuckled.

"The one chasing me is the demon. It killed Mother and the rest of them." Blood began pooling under Mishka's eyes.

"Blood tears..." The handsome man cringed. "If you're not a demon, then you're cursed."

"I can't control it. It's been that way since I was born. Mother said only fools think it's a curse." Mishka outstretched his bound hands and groped for Zhota. "You believe me, don't you?"

"Quiet," Zhota replied as fear and uncertainty ripped through him.

*Nothing in the Gorgorra is as it seems.*

It was possible, he had to admit, that some foolish member of his order had enlisted the help of mercenaries. And if this monk considered the boy to be a demon... Had Zhota been deceived all this time?

*No.* He had watched him for days. Mishka was just a child, albeit one cursed by the gods. Surely tales had spread about a hideous boy traveling the forests, and the other monk had taken them as truth.

"Where is this monk? I must speak with him about the child."

"About the demon, you mean?" the handsome man said. "West of here, last we saw. He finds us, not the other way around."

"Give us the creature," the scarred man put in. "The monk promised us the thing's weight in gold if we delivered it. We need that coin. We've been living off roots and carrion for days."

Zhota ignored him. "West, you said. I will seek out this other monk."

"We'll join you," the brute stated. "The monk owes us something for our part."

"Your work is done." Zhota rose and pulled Mishka up.

"Do you have the coin to pay us, then?" the handsome man asked.

"Your reward is the gratitude of the Patriarchs."

The scarred man spat near Zhota's feet.

His comrade sighed. "See, that's where we run into a bit of a problem. Duty and honor are all fine and good for you and your bald brothers, but not so much for the likes of us."

Zhota took a few measured breaths to calm his anger. He had suffered the presence of these men for too long. "That is why your kind lives in filth and ignominy."

The scarred man bristled, but his companion only laughed, making a hoarse sound rife with contempt and condescension. He was still chuckling when he drew the bastard sword from his back.

"Stubborn, aren't you?" he said. "Your beard is much shorter than the other monk we met. Must not have been long ago that you were suckling from the Patriarchs' holy teats at your mountain hovel."

Zhota remained motionless, every muscle in his body coiled. "Long enough ago for me to deal with two godless men."

"Two? Perhaps. But three?" The handsome man whistled.

From the darkness behind Zhota came the shriek of steel-tipped wood soaring through the air. He whirled and swung his bo in a swift arc, snapping the arrow in half scarcely a foot from his chest.

When he turned back to see the camp, the handsome man was charging around the fire at Mishka. Zhota thrust his staff toward the flames. A wave of air surged off of his bo and crashed into the fire pit, hurling smoldering logs at the brigand. Most of the fiery debris ricocheted off his armor, but one ember sliced across his face and sank into his right eye. The man cried in agony as the blaze spread, setting his hair alight.

The brute leapt over the fire pit and lumbered toward Zhota, his battle axe raised overhead. Zhota held his ground as the brigand brought the immense weapon downward. At the last moment, the monk sidestepped the graceless attack, and his foe's axe cleaved into the forest floor. With his staff, Zhota cracked the man's forearms, and they shattered like wine-filled pottery in a gush of blood and splintered bone.

The barely discernible twang of a bowstring sounded behind Zhota. He dove to his side as the arrow sang past his shoulder and pierced the scarred man's chest. A curse echoed from the unseen assailant, followed by the patter of footfalls retreating deeper into the forest, away from the camp.

Zhota surveyed his surroundings. The handsome man was dead now as well, the skin on his neck and face a mass of blood and blisters. Mishka, however, was gone.

"Mishka?" he called. A sliver of fear crept through him.

"Here," the child said as he crawled out from beneath an overturned tree. "They lied. The demon sent—"

"Silence!" Zhota roared.

Thoughts were racing through his head. He could hear Akyev's voice berating him. *"It has all been a ruse to put you off your guard. Were you so foolish that you did not see it?"*

"Why don't you believe me?" Mishka asked. He reached out and clutched Zhota's hand.

There was something ironic about the child standing in front of him, so innocent, when days ago Zhota had decided to kill him. It was then that the monk became aware of how much Mishka reminded him of himself as a child, full of trust and hope and all those other things that the Unyielding had despised. They were the mires on the path of duty—the childish parts of himself that Zhota thought he had killed in training.

But they had never truly died. They revealed to him a truth that was difficult to believe: that Mishka *was* only a boy, alone and afraid and blind, searching for a hand to guide him through the shadows of the Gorgorra. There was a reason that the god of fate had led them to meet.

"The truth," Zhota said. "What is this demon? Why is it chasing you?"

The boy chewed his bottom lip, hesitant, but eventually spoke. "Father sent it."

"And what would make a man do that?"

"My father... he's not *just* a man," Mishka said timidly.

Then he recounted the story of his past.

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A thick fog descended on the Gorgorra, diffusing the midday sun and painting the forest in tones of decay. Zhota had carried Mishka on his back in circles for hours, going west of their camp, hoping in vain to find the monk spoken of by the godless men. Not for the first time Zhota considered himself a fool for taking their words at face value.

Still, he trudged on. If one of his order was truly out there, he had to find him and tell him the truth regarding Mishka. The boy had talked of his past well into the night, a story so blasphemous that even listening to it had made Zhota feel unclean. The more that he thought about it now, the more implausible it seemed. *And how do you propose to convince a monk of its validity?*

He quieted his doubts and continued moving. It was another hour before the fog rose and Zhota caught the scent of incense as he entered a small clearing. It was faint at first, an odor in stark contrast to the forest's damp and earthy aromas. It took him a moment to discern hints of bloodrose and jadewood, but when he did, he froze.

He recognized that scent.

"What is it?" Mishka whispered.

Zhota didn't reply. He couldn't. His body had turned as rigid as stone. He knew that smell as well as he knew his own name. It was from Akyev's incense, and it had clung to the older monk every day of Zhota's training.

He felt suddenly small and weak... just like the boy he had once been before Akyev had killed that part of him, or at least tried to...

The air had been crisp and clear the morning that Zhota first met Akyev. The Unyielding had called him out to one of the monastery's terraces at sunrise. The younger monk had heard many tales of his master's renowned strength, and he had been counting the hours until he could finally meet the Unyielding and begin his training.

But Zhota's youthful bliss would die that day. He would learn that the Unyielding was somewhat of an oddity in the order, a man who was willing to do anything if it meant fulfilling commands. His might and resolve were matched only by his fanaticism and uncompromising nature.

"Jump," Akyev had said, pointing over the terrace's edge, which ended at the top of a sheer seven-hundred-foot cliff face.

It took a moment for Zhota to realize that Akyev was serious. That was when the fear hit him. He knew that he would die if he obeyed the command, and yet a small part of him believed he would be safe. The feeling did not originate from his desire to blindly follow orders; it came from deep within himself. Ultimately, however, Zhota attributed the notion to pure madness.

When his master grabbed him by the neck and dragged him to the edge, Zhota screamed for mercy. The Unyielding answered his pleas by throwing him into the abyss. He closed his eyes, awaiting his death, until he slammed into a rock ledge a few feet down from the monastery—a ledge that hadn't been there previously.

That was before he learned of the monastery's secrets: the walls that were not walls, the stairs that were not stairs, and the many other illusions meant to keep initiates alert at all times.

After Zhota's fall, Akyev had hauled him back up from the ledge. The young monk was shivering uncontrollably. "You tremble like a leaf in the wind," his master had chided. "You are a slave to fear. That is why you will never be a monk. You are nothing but a scared boy who has no place in this order."

When Zhota had mustered the courage to look Akyev in the eye, the Unyielding had then asked, "You must choose. Are you that boy, or are you a monk?"

"I am not that boy," he had answered, wiping away his tears.

"So be it. Should he ever show his face again, there will not be a ledge to save him from the fall."

Zhota snapped out of the memory and shook his head. He had ignored his intuitions that day. It would not be for the last time. Over the years, the Unyielding had worked feverishly to suppress his pupil's insistence on trusting in himself when presented with difficult situations. Whether or not Zhota's insights were correct didn't matter to Akyev. He believed such reliance on the self would compromise one's ability to obey the Patriarchs' commands and prosecute their divine will.

"What is it?" Mishka asked as he climbed down from Zhota's back.

"Nothing." A cold uneasiness was coiling in his stomach. If it were any other monk, perhaps Zhota could convince him of Mishka's innocence. But not Akyev. Not the Unyielding.



Zhota considered departing this area of the forest, but his master found him and Mishka before he could act on the shameful thought. Akyev had emerged from behind a colossal pine, leading a packbeast laden with leather satchels of various sizes. The elder monk looked just as he always had—calm and composed, not a trace of gray in his black beard. The circles of order and chaos on his forehead were still vivid, as if they had been tattooed there yesterday rather than years ago.

"Zhota," Akyev said. He glanced briefly at Mishka, but there was no sign of surprise on his face.

"Master." Zhota placed his palms together and bowed low.

The elder monk strode forward in slow, measured steps until he stood in front of his former pupil. Zhota was a head taller than his master, but he felt as if he were standing before a giant nonetheless.

"I had feared you were not ready, but it appears you have proven me wrong." Akyev turned his gaze to Mishka. "You have succeeded where even I had failed. The gods are mysterious indeed."

Pride welled up in Zhota. Akyev had never praised his efforts previously. His master had always found fault in everything he did. During his time at the monastery, Zhota had witnessed other monks fostering positive relationships with their acolytes. When mistakes were made, pupils were not necessarily punished; they were shown the right way. That had not been so with Akyev. Zhota fought against the intoxicating nature of his master's rare affirmation, reminding himself of the child's plight.

"You are searching for a demon, but the boy—" Zhota started, but his master interrupted him.

"—is not a boy. Nothing in the Gorgorra is as it seems. Look at what has become of this sacred place. Balance has been lost. This, Zhota, this is the moment that we have trained for our entire lives."

Akyev lowered his voice to a whisper and pointed at Mishka. "The gods of order tremble with unease. This abomination wearing the skin of a child is just one more indication of the dire state of things."

The boy had been oddly silent throughout the exchange. Zhota saw now that he was frozen with terror. Blood flowed down from his eyes, and his body shook uncontrollably.

"*It's the demon!*" Mishka suddenly screamed. "The demon!"

"Do you see?" Akyev calmly said. "The wretched creature will spread any lie to hide its true form."

*Abomination.* The absurdity of Mishka's tale weighed heavy on Zhota. He knew he had to act quickly before he gave in to his doubts, and so he purged the reservations from his mind and recounted the child's story...

The night prior, Mishka had confided that he was the son of a Patriarch and his concubine. Due to the boy's deformities, his father had considered killing him, but his mother had convinced the Patriarch to confine him to a corner of Ivgorod's palace instead. There Mishka had lived for years in isolation until the heavenly fire scorched the sky. As tales of dark and unholy forces rising in the Gorgorra and other regions had reached Ivgorod, fear and paranoia had taken hold in the kingdom. Tensions had flared among the terrified common folk as they looked to the Patriarchs for answers... for salvation.

The Patriarchs were the voice of the gods themselves. They were paragons of righteousness. For one to sire a child like Mishka would be seen, at best, as an ill omen. But in these bleak and ominous times, such a progeny would cast doubt on the Patriarch's own purity. For this reason, Zhota surmised, the holy leader had finally ordered that his son be put to death. Only through the work of his mother and a few loyal servants had Mishka been spared his fate and whisked away from Ivgorod, deep into the heart of the Gorgorra.

When Zhota finished speaking, Akyev regarded him for a long moment, never arguing or questioning the story. He merely said, "You have heard only the lies that the demon has fed you."

"It is hard to fathom, I know, but I believe he is innocent."

"You *believe*? Would you swear on your honor as a member of our order that it is true?"

"Yes," Zhota answered, but his voice lacked conviction.

Akyev lowered his head and took a deep breath. "Then I was wrong..."

"It is as you said: nothing in the Gorgorra is—"

Akyev cut the words short with a roundhouse kick to Zhota's sternum that crushed the air from his lungs.

The world went black, and bells clanged in his head. Above the din he could hear Mishka screaming. When Zhota's vision returned, he saw Akyev looming over him, grasping the child by the hair.

"I was wrong about you," Akyev spat. "How could you have strayed so far? It was one of the Patriarchs who informed me of the demon and its deceptions! Who are you to question him?"

Zhota planted his staff in the ground and struggled to his feet as the Unyielding's words hit him. *One of the Patriarchs ordered him to do this. Did the other eight not have any part in the mission?*

"Kill the creature," the Unyielding commanded, "and you will be forgiven for your transgressions."

The desire to obey was oppressive. He had lived by his master's teachings for so long that defying them almost made him physically ill. Yet a voice deep inside of Zhota whispered for him to do just that; it was an intuition, a flare of insight, like those that Akyev had always told him to silence during his years of training. It went against everything he'd learned was right, but in its own unexplainable way, it shone with the light of truth.

"No... He's not..." Zhota managed to say through wheezing breaths.

His master sighed. "I held on to hope that you would be strong, that you would overcome the weaknesses within you. But you are still a boy. I have only myself to blame for your failures."

"The gods are uneasy, as you said." Zhota steeled himself for the blasphemy he was about to speak.

"The Patriarch who dispatched you is no longer concerned with upholding the balance," he continued.

"The demon you seek, if it exists, is out there even now."

Akyev drove his knee into Zhota's stomach, and he crumpled to the ground. He looked up in time to see his master's free hand flash forward. Pain lanced through Zhota's forehead. Something warm and wet trickled into his eyes and down his nose. When Akyev drew his hand back and flicked a bloody scrap aside, Zhota realized that it was the skin where the circles of order and chaos had been tattooed on his forehead.

"You have no right to wear those holy symbols! You are not a monk... No. Return to the monastery at once and await my arrival. Your sacrilege will be brought before the Patriarch."

The Unyielding walked away, pulling Mishka after him. Zhota rose, fighting back the shame. The failures and lessons inscribed on his staff seemed to burn his hand wherever he touched them.

Rage... rage at all those times Akyev had bested him, all those times Zhota had wanted to believe in himself only to have the Unyielding belittle him, surged through his veins like fire.

He charged at Akyev, closing the distance with him, and whipped the side of his master's neck with his bo. The blow caused Zhota's arms to shudder as if he had hit solid granite. His staff buckled, and a long crack ripped up along the length of the weapon.

Akyev staggered slightly, enough for Mishka to wiggle free.

"Hide the way your mother told you!" Zhota bellowed. "Only come out when you hear her song!" Mishka stumbled away, deeper into the woods. He wouldn't get far on his own, Zhota knew.

But Akyev took the bait. He drew his scimitar and pursued, the blade shining dully in the forest gloom. Zhota drove his staff toward the Unyielding's chest. Akyev parried the assault with ease and then moved his sword in a low arc with blinding speed. Zhota planted his foot on the tree behind him and flipped over the elder monk and his attack.

The Unyielding's blade sheared the tree trunk clean through. The towering pine began to topple down into the clearing, toward the packbeast. The animal snorted and lumbered forward just as the tree's boughs raked across its back, stripping away the satchels. Zhota flinched when the pine crashed to the forest floor in a thunderous boom.

Akyev's belongings scattered in all directions. The largest of the bags tore open, and something rolled out of it on a bed of salt and herbs. It was pallid and decayed, with wispy strands of black hair.

A woman's head, the mouth stretched wide and frozen in a silent scream.

The puzzle pieces fell into place. The slaughtered caravan. The headless body. The demon.

Zhota looked at Akyev, not wanting to believe. His master was many things—perhaps the cruelest and most severe of the monks—but Zhota had never thought he could be a murderer.

He couldn't imagine the Patriarchs would condone the butchery of the caravan under any circumstances. No, this was all wrong. It was evident that Mishka's father was one of the Patriarchs pledged to chaos and that he was acting without the consent of the other rulers. Perhaps that was why he had chosen Akyev—a man who would obey without hesitation to any end asked of him.

Akyev did not give the head a second glance. His scimitar bit deep into Zhota's left bicep in a perfectly placed strike that severed the muscles in his limb. His arm went slack, and he took a few haphazard steps away from the elder monk before recovering.

Zhota swept his staff one-handed toward Akyev's head in a feint, and then he kicked at the Unyielding's gut. Akyev caught his ankle and flung him into the fallen tree.

Before Zhota could roll to safety, his master leapt forward and drove his scimitar down. Zhota lashed his staff out with his right arm to deflect the blow, but he suddenly felt helpless against the legend he faced, his mind turbulent with doubt just as it had been during training. The sword splintered his bo, but the defensive measure was enough to divert the elder monk's attack. Akyev's scimitar sliced diagonally across Zhota's chest, leaving a shallow wound.

Zhota struggled to rise with his good arm, but he sank back to the ground in pain and defeat.

"You fought as I had expected, without grace or resolve," Akyev stated.

"You know the boy is not a demon," Zhota managed to say.

"I know what the Patriarch has told me. I do not question him."

"The caravan... You killed those people."

"I fulfilled my duty."

"Did it require you to hire godless men? To murder innocents?"

"The brigands were tools, just as I am an instrument of the divine ones. I would have sent them to the gods for judgment if they had delivered the demon to me. As for the others, they sheltered the creature. When I asked where it had fled, they cursed the Patriarchs. The travelers died like the dogs they were."

Akyev gestured to the severed head. "That belongs to the demoness. I took it as proof of her demise. She was the thrall of the demon-child, a whore whom the creature would send into villages to lure out new victims."

"A lie," Zhota said. "His father, the Patriarch, has turned to murder due to his fears. He believes the commoners will think him tainted, perhaps will even rise up against him, if they know he sired a deformed child. He has abandoned the system of balance to pursue his own ends."

"You will never understand what it means to follow duty," Akyev retorted. "You condemn my actions with a human heart when they are dictated by the gods. You are less than a heretic. You are a stain on my honor and that of our entire order. I will give you to the gods to be judged."

"You know he is only a boy, don't you? But you choose to ignore the truth," Zhota said as the Unyielding raised the scimitar high overhead. There was the briefest flash of uncertainty in his master's eyes.

Akyev swung his blade regardless. Time seemed to slow as the steel hurtled down... down... down. With sudden clarity, Zhota realized that it was not he who had wavered; it was Akyev. The Unyielding, in his weakness, had bent before the rising chaos and closed his eyes to truth.

Zhota prayed to the silent gods around him for strength. If there was anything innocent left in the Gorgorra, he knew that it was Mishka. Zhota focused on this one thought, reminding himself that he was acting according to the principles of balance. He quieted the fear and pain, concentrating on the surface of his right palm and willing it to be strong as he shot it up to meet the blade.

The Unyielding's scimitar crashed into his hand. The sword's weight was like an entire mountain pressing down on him. Yet the weapon's edge did not pass through Zhota's skin. He would not bend like Akyev. He would not break.

"He is just a boy," Zhota grunted through his teeth as he clenched his fingers around the sword. "You can still do what is right!"

"*Silence!*" the elder monk bellowed. Sweat beading on his brow, he fought to rip his scimitar free of Zhota's grasp. When he found he could not, the Unyielding leaned forward, pushing the steel against Zhota's hand.

*I will not bend. I will not break.*

Zhota gave a primal roar and twisted his wrist. Akyev's weapon snapped like dead wood, and the elder monk toppled at the sudden release of tension. Zhota flipped the broken blade laterally in his hand and arced it up in a tight swing, slicing through his master's neck with a cut so clean that Akyev's head stayed on his shoulders until his body slammed into the ground.

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Zhota couldn't recall later how long he lay on his back, staring up with a mind as clear as the cloudless sky above the forest canopy. Nor could he recall performing the tasks he did afterward: dressing his wounds and chanting healing mantras, struggling to build a pyre to purify Akyev's body as he slowly regained mobility in his left arm. The first thing he remembered was bringing the flute to his lips and blowing. He had been afraid that he wouldn't recollect the song's notes from when he had played them in his youth.

But the tune must have been right, because Mishka emerged into the clearing.

"Zhota?" he asked meekly.

"Here."

Mishka followed the sound of his voice and stood at his side.

"The demon..."

"He was not a demon, but he is dead nonetheless," Zhota answered.

Zhota removed the sash binding Mishka's hands and then walked the boy to his mother's head. He wanted to give Mishka a chance to say farewell before the monk gave it to the gods. But the child only replied, "No... I don't need to. I have the song."

After the work was finished, Zhota pondered which direction to set out in. He was unsure how the Patriarch would react when Akyev failed to return with evidence of Mishka's death. Regardless, Zhota knew it would be nearly impossible for the ruler to find another monk like the Unyielding—one unopposed to carrying out acts of wanton destruction and cruelty that went against the nature of balance.

Despite the terrible things he had learned of late, Zhota found solace in the fact that Akyev and the Patriarch were aberrations. Like the state of the Gorgorra itself, they were evidence of the troubling times that had settled on the world, wrongs that could be righted. Other monks, honorable warriors who would never have done what Akyev had, were risking their lives to drive back the burgeoning forces of chaos. They had not closed their eyes to the righteous tenets upon which the monk order had been founded, and neither would Zhota.

He led Mishka by the hand out of the clearing and turned north toward Ivgorod, intent on bringing word of everything that had transpired to his order's attention. His path had never been so clear as it was now, and for the first time in his life, he felt as if he truly understood what it meant to be a monk.