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The Secret Name

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CHAPTER II

That shiver came again, when in the evening, they set forth to drive the eighteen kilometers to the palace. It came again, and yet again—a shiver of dread, vague, insistent. The glories of the night were as wonderful as had been those of the day: more wonderful; for now, in the stead of the sun's solitary magnificence, the infinite splendor of the stars wrote the miracle of their orbits in letters of fire. But, to the Princess their loveliness was chill—or pitying. The air, too, was no longer the marvelous elixir of the day; only deadly cold, thrusting its rapier blade through the armor of furs, touching its point of ice to her heart.

The Princess strove to cast off the dismal mood from her spirit, but the effort was in vain. The impalpable misery would not be denied. It descended like a weighted pall, inevitable, crushing. Beneath it, she fell to trembling. Her soul sickened against an unknown terror. The subtle instinct of woman cried aloud, a wordless Cassandra, prophesying evil. The Prince offered no diversion from the mysterious melancholy. As before, his whole attention went to the mastering of the three thoroughbreds, racing so madly over the frozen road. Vera bent her head, and whispered the secret name to the child's ear, beseechingly, as it were, a prayer. But there came no comfort.

Of a sudden, a soft sound leaped from the night's stillness. The note held for a moment—died. In that instant the Princess's nebulous terror swirled into a word of definite, anguished fear. The Prince, too, heard the sound. The wife felt that his form stiffened, and that he waited rigid, listening. The horses heard the sound. They plunged riotously forward, as if a madness grew. Vera, like her lord, rested rigid, listening.

Again the sound thrilled on the air, which seemed poised as if in fearful waiting for this coming. It was a gentle note, as it darted from afar, musical, unutterably sad. The Prince muffled it with a discord of a curse.

"They are out, after all!" he stormed. "Bozhe moy! Mikhail said—" His voice trailed off into profane maledictions against the steward. With a movement of amazing quickness for one of such bulk, he sent the whip writhing cruelly over the withers of the leading stallion. The furious beast screamed, and flung itself forward in more frantic flight. The Princess still sat motionless and tense; but her crooked arms held the child closer.

The sound rang out again. It was louder now; louder and harsher. The sadness was there as before, resonant throughout the long-driven note; but with it throbbed undertones of menace. And, as this sound died, a sullen chorus of its fellows beat upon the silence—the wolf-pack's hunting

cry. The ruthless hunger-lust clamored hideously. In it shrilled the clash of ivory fangs, the last shriek of the victim.

Second by second the howling grew in volume. Soon—horribly soon!—a slim shape of dusky silver showed flittingly afar on the plain against the blue-white of the snow; and with it another, a third, a fourth, a horde. The Prince cursed again, and sent the lash hissing. He had thought for an instant of Jan's cottage, hardly two kilometers back; but the cry of the pack came from behind; in front, four kilometers away, the refuge of the town waited. The Princess swayed a little, and clutched the child to her heart convulsively. But she uttered no word. Of what avail?

The scent of the beasts stung the nostrils of the horses. Thereat the three raced frenziedly, so that, for a minute, they held their lead. The Prince saw; he shouted exultantly. Surely, the stars in their course must war for their salvation! Vera felt a surge of hope pound in her breast. . . . Alas, here was only the mirage of escape. The stress of the pace soon weighted the thudding hoofs. The starved wolves, now that they drew nigh the feast, touched belly to snow in Gargantuan leaps. Swiftly, and ever more swiftly, the distance lessened. Though the troika skimmed onward marvelously fleet, the space between it and the pack grew narrower with pitiless haste. Vera turned, in anguished fascination, to stare over her shoulder. She beheld slaving red mouths, wherein the teeth grinned in obscene mirth; she met the glare of eyes aflame with bestial desire to rend, to devour. The lithe undulation of the brute's movement rhythmized a threat of death. The Princess, straining the baby to her breast, waited in an ecstasy of despair.

CHAPTER III

The Princess was aroused from a stupor of fright by the voice of her husband, shouting blasphemies. He was risen to his feet now, the better to scourge the straining horses, of which already the flanks ran red with blood. The scent of that stream reached to the wolves, brought them to famished rage in the pursuit. It was now that the crazed man turned on his wife, and screamed at her. His face was furrowed, livid; his voice raucous:

"The boy!" he shrieked. "Throw out the boy!"

Vera tore her gaze from the snarling pack, to stare uncomprehendingly at the mouthing man. Again the Prince screamed at her, his voice piercing shrill in the rage of terror:

"Throw him out! Throw Ivan to the wolves!"

The mother's face grew even whiter than before, as, slowly, the significance of the command penetrated her numbed consciousness. Then, when at last she understood fully the vile purpose of the man, a holy rage flamed in her. She forgot the church's ban; let the tide of hate against him sweep