



# ABSOLUTION'S PREY

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**Absolution's Prey**  
**by CA Jarrett**  
*Excerpt*

*I*

*I have no memories of a beginning. There is no beginning.*

*I existed in a warm void, an abyss of love and assurance, where all was right and good. There was only one Voice that called to us, and it was all we needed.*

*There was no form, or shape, or purpose, until called. When called we would become what was needed and with a glad heart go forth to accomplish the missions of our Father.*

*We could do nothing else.*

*I had no name. I had no sex. I had no sense of self. None was needed. We were joined by spirit, and there was no individuality to introduce chaos. We were one but many. We existed only to serve.*

*And I was content.*

"You have been summoned, out of your brethren, for this course."

"Yes, Elder."

"For this purpose you have been given form. A human form. Learn it well. You will be existing as such for the duration. You must abide."

"I shall abide, Elder."

"A key has been found in the Great Battle. A key that the enemy must not take. You will protect this key, protect his soul, for the duration of his days. The life of a human is but fleeting. You will not have to endure long."

"It is of no moment, Elder."

"Ah, yes. You have never served in this form. It will be difficult to adjust. You will know pain, and hunger. You will know longing, and desire. You must abide. Do not let it sway your purpose."

"Our Father's love will sustain me, Elder."

"Amen."

"Amen."

She (for the form was definitely female) gazed around her with newly-formed eyes. The palatial room seemed to be entirely carved from a mountain of alabaster. All glowed with a silvery blue light beneath the large full moon which hung in an endlessly black night. Graceful columns supported a domed ceiling liberally frosted with frescoes depicting winged figures triumphant in battle against horned foes.

"Do you like it?" the Elder asked her.

"I...I believe so. It is very pretty."

"It is done in the Greek tradition. They were proficient at naming, and gave us many, including the one we bear for humanity. This temple is to honor them, and what they gave us."

"This is important?" This body felt strange, much different from the form she ordinarily took for battle. It was heavier, and clumsier, and strange fluids rushed through it, with even stranger processes taking place within.

"Yes. Humanity finds it important to do honor."

"Only Father deserves honor."

"There are degrees of honor, and you will learn this. The highest of honors is of course reserved for Father, but lesser honor can be paid to those who have earned it. Honor and respect are very important to humanity. It is all part of the test of Pride."

"I see."

"So you will be sent. Serve well. Complete your mission, and return to us whole. You will be confused and lost on many occasions, but know that we are with you, and the guiding hand of Father is ever upon you."

"Yes, Elder."

She closed her new eyes, and she learned the sensation of falling.

## II

*I was given form, but a form unlike any I had ever experienced. This form, while capable of battle, was capable of more. I was granted independent thought, and emotions. They would be needed for my assigned purpose. I was also given rudimentary knowledge, I understood that this knowledge was to impart necessary skills for my mission. Human things like cooking, cleaning, and the necessity for such.*

*I noticed things with my new eyes, things I had seen but never comprehended. Handsomeness in the physical, whispers of the wind against my cheek and the sound of the leaves of the trees as they trembled. It was disconcerting, and wondrous, and I was grateful that I was able to experience such things for the first time.*

*The pounding of the newly created heart beneath my breast and the rushing of strange blood was ever-present, and would not be shed. I found a still pond and gazed at myself for the first time in the history of my existence.*

*The form was pleasing. Beautiful even. But of course it would be. I was a direct creation of my Father, and no piece of my Father could ever be less than beauty perfected.*

*Ukraine, 993 A.D.*

"I am here to serve the priest."

The man behind the simple stone chapel looked up in surprise at the feminine voice lilting over the sound of his axe striking wood. She was tall for a woman, but not so tall as a man, and her bright clear blue eyes seemed to see more than she let on. Her skin was smooth and pale, her hair was modestly covered with a babushka, but strands of silvery blond managed to escape. The clothing she wore was simple, peasant clothing, but colorful as was the tradition.

Her step on the newly pounded dirt road seemed hesitant, but determined, and she kept glancing at the thick trees that lined it and encircled the chapel property as if she couldn't keep her eyes away from them. For all that she had walked from the village, her spartanly embroidered skirts were barely touched by dust, and the shoes peeping out from beneath the hem were sturdy thick-soled leather, and seemed brand new off the cobbler's bench.

He should have thought her beautiful, her face was pleasing enough, but there was something about her that cooled a man's natural reaction to a lovely woman. Some strange combination of the ethereal and the innocent. Just as well.

"I am he."

"You?" she asked, finally paying proper attention to him rather than the trees, eyes showing obvious misgiving.

"Yes," he said with a laugh. "Me. I am Father Ilya Gavril." He gestured to the woodpile he'd been steadily increasing since that morning. "Obviously I will be glad of assistance. Rechka is not so large a village as to afford much for the shepherd Kyiv sends here. I will be glad of the help. And you are?"

She gave him an hesitant, uncertain smile as she approached. It was then he saw a small bundle under one arm, neatly tied into a scarf. "I am called Varya Nadeanenko."

"Please to meet you tovarichka Nadeanenko. Is that all you have?" he asked, setting aside the axe and taking up his black cassock.

"Yes, Father Gavril."

"That's good. We don't have much room here, as you can see."

The small stone chapel behind him was spartan, but solidly built. The feldspar of the stone sparkled in the morning sun. He saw her delight in it. It made him smile.

"I am glad you see beauty in this," he told her, shrugging into the cassock with a grimace, as he had not rubbed the sweat off before putting it on. The chapel was set apart from the village, and he had not expected anyone to see him in such a state.

"Of course, it is a temple to give praise and thanks to Father."

He blinked. "You have an interesting way of addressing it."

Unexpectedly she blushed and began fidgeting with the small bundle. "Is that wrong?"

"No," he said slowly, brow wrinkling at her confusion. "Not wrong, just unusual. Who knows? Perhaps if more people felt such a connection with the Lord, there would be more rejoicing and less fear."

The smile she gave him was blinding in its radiance. He began to have misgivings. Had the village sent him a zealot? It would be difficult to do the Lord's work if she tried to lead by forceful words rather than charitable action. He decided it would be wise to exercise caution. Perhaps he could teach her temperance.

"Come," he said, gesturing to the front door of the chapel. "Enter. I will show you your room. This was intended at first to be a monastery, so I am afraid it is little better than a monk's cell."

"It is of no moment," she said, following him at a respectful distance. "My needs are very few."

"The chapel in and of itself is unusual for the region," he told her, leading her inside the small vestibule, no more than a foyer. The nave was large enough for about fifty people to stand to service before the altar. "As it's made of stone and not wood. There is talk of adding a makovica to the cupola. But that decision will be made in Kyiv, after they have seen my progress here. It is an undertaking to add such a dome to such a relatively rude structure, and my parish would have to grow significantly to justify it."

"I see," she said. Sneaking a glance over his shoulder, he saw her staring around the nave. He was glad not to see any scorn in the primitive architecture. Compared to the great cathedral in Kyiv, this was little better than a mud hut. He was pleased that there was no derision in her face, only a type of fascination, as if she'd never seen anything like it before. His doubts grew. Was there intelligence behind those limpid eyes? It was going to be a long winter indeed if he had no companion for conversation.

Immediately he struck the thought from his mind as uncharitable and un-Christian. She was serving him for no more than a pittance, a pallet to sleep on, and the simplest of simple foods. He was hardly one to judge her on anything.

There was a door to the back of the church, on either side of the altar. He took her through the left one where there were two rooms and another door that led outside, opposite of where he had been chopping wood.

"The privy is through that door, and this is your room. Mine is in the other wing, along with my study. The room next to yours is the kitchen and where we will dine."

Reaching out he turned the handle and opened the plain wooden door. The room inside was indeed a simple cell, with a pallet on the floor and a small shelf for any personal belongings. Worship was done standing so no need for anywhere to kneel.

"It was originally intended for a monk, or perhaps a nun, so it's bare."

He stepped back and she moved forward into the room, placing the small bundle on the shelf before turning to him.

"It is more than serviceable. I do not sleep...much."

"I am glad you find it to your liking."

She smoothed her skirts with both hands. "Now, please put me to work. What are my duties?"

He proceeded to show her around, outlining her chores. "They mainly consist of cleaning and cooking our meals. We do have some small livestock, you will have to care for them, gather eggs and milk the cow. Also, you will be buying supplies from the village. It's something of a walk, are you prepared for it?"

"I am stronger than I look, Father Gavril."

"This is good, tovarichka. Being the assistant of a priest trying to convert the local population is no easy task. It is hard work, and with the harsh winters, bound to get harder. My days generally revolve around preparing services and helping in the village. I may need you to accompany me on occasion. I also study a great deal. I will not want to be disturbed."

"Yes, Father Gavril."

"You may address me as just 'father'. No need for that much formality."

"Yes, Father."

They were in the meager kitchen, where she was examining the wood stove and pantry. As with everything else, she seemed to be taking a certain newfound delight in crude surroundings. Her hands ran sensuously over the wood and iron, and her smile was enigmatic as she stood surveying the stores he'd laid in.

"If I may ask a delicate question..."

She turned to him, large clear eyes seemingly laid bare to him.

"Yes, Father?"

"Why did the village send you? I mean, a woman, and no disrespect intended, but a lovely woman. The work is hard, and you will not be able to socialize with other people your age. You will be isolated here, and there is bound to be gossip regarding a relationship between us."

Abruptly she blushed to the roots of her fair hair, peeking out from her babushka.

"I—I will do my best to forestall such rumors, Father."

He had to smile again. "I only speak of human nature, it isn't so mysterious. I did not mean to discomfit you."

"I—I—my apologies. I have not been...brought up to know human nature very intimately."

"Ah, are you intending to take orders?"

"I devote myself to God as best as I can. He guides me in all my ways."

"I am sure you will make a fine nun. Forgive my questions."

With a bit of visible struggle, she regained her composure. "No, your questions are understandable, Father. They chose me because I was the only one who can do this job as it should be done. I know all of the Hours and Octoechos, and am the most suitable Chanter to attend you. I am also fully knowledgeable on the liturgical calendar. I am also skilled in cooking, washing, and mending. You require constant care, and I am best to accommodate."

*What ideas do they have about priests around here?* he asked himself, but nodded instead of speaking it. "Hopefully my needs will not be so demanding, and your devotion to learning the services is both commendable and appropriate for someone intended for the monastery. Now, is there anything you need?"

She took an apron someone had thoughtfully left hanging on a hook beside the door and donned it. "Only a task."

"You are eager indeed!" Gavril said with a laugh. "Very well, I have laundry that has been lamentably piling up. You can find it in my room."

"Yes, Father."

Thank you for reading!

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