



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

THE TWILIGHT WATCH
by Sergei Lukyanenko

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PROLOGUE

THE GENUINE OLD communal courtyards in Moscow's apartment blocks disappeared sometime between the eras of the two popular bards Vysotsky and Okudzhava.

It's a strange business. Even after the revolution, when for purposes of the struggle against 'the slavery of the kitchen', they actually did away with kitchens in housing blocks, nobody tried to get rid of the courtyards. Every proud Stalinist block that displayed its Potemkin façade to the broad avenue beside it had to have a courtyard - large and green, with tables and benches, with a yard-keeper scraping the asphalt clean every morning. Then the age of five-storey sectional housing arrived - and the courtyards shrivelled and became bare, the yard-keepers who had been so grave and staid were replaced by yard women, who regarded it as their duty to give little boys who got up to mischief a clip round the ear and upbraid residents who came home drunk. But even so, the courtyards still hung on.

And then, as if in response to the increased tempo of life, the houses stretched upwards. From nine storeys to sixteen, or even twenty-four. And as if each building was allocated the right only to a certain volume of space, rather than an area of ground, the courtyards withered right back to the entrances and the entrances opened their doors straight onto the public streets, while the male and female yard-keepers disappeared and were replaced by communal services functionaries.

Okay, so the courtyards came back later, but by no means to all the buildings, as if they'd taken offence at being treated so scornfully before. The new courtyards were bounded by high walls, with fit, well-groomed young men sitting in the gate lodges, and car parks concealed under the English lawns. The children in these courtyards played under the supervision of nannies, the drunken residents were helped from their Mercedes and BMWs by bodyguards accustomed to dealing with anything, and the new yardkeepers tidied up the English lawns with German mowers.

This courtyard was one of the new ones.

The multistorey towers on the bank of the River Moscow were known throughout Russia. They were the capital's new symbol - replacing the faded Kremlin and the TsUM department store, which had become just an ordinary shop. The granite embankment with its own quayside, the entrances finished with Venetian plasterwork, the cafés and restaurants, the beauty salons and supermarkets and also, of course, the apartments with two or three hundred square metres of floor space. The new Russia probably needed a symbol like this - pompous and kitschy, like the thick gold chains that men wore round their necks during the period of initial accumulation of capital. And it didn't matter that most of the apartments that had been bought long ago were still standing empty, the cafés and

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restaurants were closed, waiting for better times to come, and the waves lapping against the concrete quayside were dirty.

The man strolling along the embankment on this warm summer evening had never worn a gold chain. He possessed a keen intuition that was more than adequate as a substitute for good taste. He had switched his Chinese-made Adidas tracksuit in good time for a crimson club jacket and then been the first to ditch the crimson jacket in favour of a Versace suit. He was ahead of the game even in the sports that he played, having abandoned his tennis racket for mountain skis a whole month before all the Kremlin officials . . . even though at his age the pleasure he could get from skis was limited to standing on them.

He preferred to live in his mansion house in the Gorki-9 district, only visiting the apartment with the windows overlooking the river when he was with his lover.

But then, he was planning to get rid of his full-time lover - after all, no Viagra can conquer age, and conjugal fidelity was coming back into fashion.

His driver and bodyguards weren't standing near enough to hear what their employer was saying. But even if the wind did carry snatches of his words to their ears, what was so strange? Why shouldn't a man make conversation with himself as the working day was drawing to a close, standing all alone above the dancing waves? Where could you ever find a more sympathetic listener than your own self?

'Even so, I repeat my proposal . . .' the man said. 'I repeat it yet again.'

The stars were shining dimly through the city smog. On the far bank of the river, tiny lights were coming on in the tower blocks that had no courtyards. Only one in five of the beautiful lamps stretching along the quayside was lit - and that was only to humour the whim of the important man who had decided to take a stroll by the river.

'I repeat it yet again,' the man said in a quiet voice.

The water splashed against the embankment - and with it came the answer.

'It's impossible. Absolutely impossible.'

The man on the quayside was not surprised by the voice that came out of empty space. He nodded and asked:

'But what about vampires?'

'Yes, that's one possibility,' his invisible companion agreed. 'Vampires could initiate you. If you would be happy to exist as non-life . . . I won't lie, they don't like sunlight, but it's not fatal to them, and you wouldn't have to give up risotto with garlic . . .'

'Then what's the problem?' the man asked, involuntarily raising his hands to his chest. 'The soul? The need to drink blood?'

The void laughed quietly.

'Just the hunger. Eternal hunger. And the emptiness inside. You wouldn't like it, I'm sure.'

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'What else is there?' asked the man.

'Werewolves,' the voice replied almost jocularly. 'They can initiate a man too. But werewolves are also one of the lower forms of Dark Others. Most of the time everything's fine . . . but when the frenzy comes over you, you won't be able to control yourself. Three or four nights each month. Sometimes more, sometimes less.'

'The new moon,' the man said with an understanding nod.

The void laughed again:

'No. Werewolves' frenzies aren't linked to the lunar cycle. You'd be able to sense the onset of the madness ten or twelve hours before the moment of transformation. But no one can draw up a precise timetable for you.'

'That won't do,' the man said frostily. 'I repeat my . . . request. I wish to become an Other. Not one of the lower Others who are overwhelmed by fits of bestial insanity. Not a Great Magician, involved in great affairs. A perfectly ordinary, rank-and-file Other . . . how does that classification of yours go? Seventh-grade?'

'It's impossible,' the night replied. 'You don't have the abilities of an Other. Not even the slightest trace. If you have no musical talent, you can be taught to play the violin. You can become a sportsman, even if you don't have any natural aptitude for it. But you can't become an Other. You're simply a different species. I'm very sorry.'

The man on the embankment laughed:

'Nothing is ever impossible. If the lowest form of Other is able to initiate human beings, then there must be some way a man can be turned into a magician.'

The dark night said nothing.

'In any case, I didn't say I wanted to be a Dark Other. I don't have the slightest desire to drink innocent people's blood and go chasing virgins through the fields, or laugh ghoulishly as I lay a curse on someone,' the man said testily. 'I would much rather do good deeds . . . and in general, your internal squabbles mean absolutely nothing to me.'

'That . . .' the night began wearily.

'It's your problem,' the man replied. 'I'm giving you one week. And then I want an answer to my request.'

'Request?' the night queried.

The man on the embankment smiled:

'Yes. So far I'm only asking.'

He turned and walked towards his car - a Russian Volga, the model that would be back in fashion again in about six months.

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