Ivan was a timid little man – so timid that the villagers called him ‘Pigeon’ or mocked him with the title, “Ivan the Terrible.” Every night Ivan stopped in at the saloon which was on the edge of the village cemetery. Ivan never crossed the cemetery to get to his lonely shack on the other side. That path would save many minutes, but he had never taken it - not even in the full light of noon.

Late one winter’s night, when bitter wind and snow beat against the saloon, the customers took up the familiar mockery. “Ivan’s mother was scared by a canary when she carried him.” “Ivan the Terrible - Ivan the Terribly Timid One.”

Ivan’s sickly protest only fed their taunts, and they jeered cruelly when the young Cossack lieutenant flung his horrid challenge at their quarry.

“You are a pigeon, Ivan. You’ll walk all around the cemetery in this cold – but you dare not cross it.”

Ivan murmured, “The cemetery is nothing to cross, Lieutenant. It is nothing but earth, like all the other earth.”

The lieutenant cried, “A challenge, then! Cross the cemetery tonight, Ivan, and I’ll give you five rubles – five gold rubles!” (Rubles are coins used by the Russians, much like a quarter or dime in our country)

Perhaps it was the vodka. Perhaps it was the temptation of the five gold rubles. No one ever knew why Ivan, moistening his lips, said suddenly: “Yes, Lieutenant, I’ll cross the cemetery!”

The Saloon echoed with their disbelief. The lieutenant winked to the men and unbuckled his saber. “Here Ivan. When you get to the center of the cemetery, in front of the biggest tomb, stick the saber into the ground. In the morning we shall go there. And if the saber is in the ground – five gold rubles to you!”

Ivan took the saber. The men drank a toast: “To Ivan the Terrible!” They roared with laughter.

The wind howled around Ivan as he closed the door of the saloon behind him. The cold was knife-sharp. He buttoned his long coat and crossed the dirt road. He could hear the lieutenant’s voice, louder than the rest, yelling after him. “Five rubles, pigeon! If you live!”

Ivan pushed the cemetery gate open. He walked fast. “Earth, just earth…like any other earth.” But the darkness was a massive dread. “Five gold rubles…” The wind was cruel and the saber was like ice in his hands. Ivan shivered under the long, thick coat and broke into a limping run.

He recognized the large tomb. He must have sobbed – that was the sound that was drowned in the wind. And he kneeled, cold and terrified, and drove the saber through the crust into the hard ground. With all his strength, he pushed it down to the hilt. It was done. The cemetery…the challenge…five gold rubles.

Ivan started to rise from his knees. But he could not move. Something held him. Something gripped him in an unyielding and implacable (unbending or unmerciless) hold. Ivan tugged and lurched and pulled – gasping in his panic, shaken by a monstrous fear. But something held Ivan. He cried out in terror, then made senseless gurgling noises.

They found Ivan, next morning, on the ground in front of the tomb that was in the center of the cemetery. He was frozen to death. The look on his face was not that of a frozen man, but that of a man killed by some nameless horror. And the lieutenant’s saber was in the ground where Ivan had pounded it through the dragging folds of his long coat.

The Path Through the Cemetery

Directions: Use your annotations from the story to complete the questions below. Online students may highlight the correct response.

Task 1: Vocabulary & Central Idea

1. What kind of person is Ivan?
   a. jovial
   b. fearful
   c. intimidating
   d. powerful

2. Which of the following text examples best supports the answer in question 1?
   a. “Ivan was a timid little man"
   b. “Ivan started to rise from his knees."
   c. “He buttoned his long coat and crossed the dirt road."
   d. “Ivan took the saber."

3. What is the central message in the story?
   a. Ivan’s desire to prove himself to the lieutenant cost him his life.
   b. Bets and gambling encourage people to engage in risky behavior.
   c. Ivan’s overwhelming fear ultimately drove him to death.
   d. Cemeteries are haunted and full of horrors.

4. Cite specific textual evidence to explain your answer from question 3.
5. What is the meaning of the word jeered as it is used in the text?
   a. cheered
   b. shouted
   c. questioned
   d. mocked

6. What is the meaning of the word implacable?
   a. monstrous
   b. invisible
   c. weak
   d. unshakable

Task 2: Discussion Questions: Answer each question in complete sentences. Be sure to support your response with details from the text.

7. What happened to Ivan at the end of the story? Cite specific textual evidence to explain your answer.

8. How does the setting of the story contribute to its mood?

Task 3: Written Response

9. Identify the main idea of the story, and cite specific evidence from the text to provide an objective summary (a summary that just gives the strict details and facts about the text and is not influenced by your own personal feelings or opinions) in which you analyze the development of the main idea. (Write your response on the back of the page or staple your own paper to the packet)