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Prologue

A GIRL RODE A BAY HORSE THROUGH A FOREST LATE AT NIGHT. THIS forest had no name. It lay far from Moscow—far from anything—and the only sound was the snow's silence and the rattle of frozen trees.

Almost midnight—that wicked, magic hour—on a night menaced by ice and storm and the abyss of the featureless sky. And yet this girl and her horse went on through the wood, dogged.

Ice coated the fine hairs about the horse's jaw; the snow mounded on his flanks. But his eye was kind beneath his snow-covered forelock, and his ears moved cheerfully, forward and back.

Their tracks stretched far into the forest, half-swallowed by new snow.

Suddenly the horse halted and raised his head. Among the rattling trees in front of them lay a fir-grove. The firs' feathery boughs twined together, their trunks bent like old men.

The snow fell faster, catching in the girl's eyelashes and in the gray fur of her hood. There was no sound but the wind.

Then—"I can't see it," she said to the horse.

The horse slanted an ear and shook off snow.

"Perhaps he is not at home," the girl added, doubtfully. Whispers on the edge of speech seemed to fill the darkness beneath the fir-trees.

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But as though her words were a summoning, a door among the firs—a door she hadn't seen—opened with the crack of breaking ice. A swath of firelight bloodied the virgin snow. Now, quite plainly, a house stood in this fir-grove. Long, curling eaves capped its wooden walls, and in the snow-torn firelight, the house seemed to lie breathing, crouched in the thicket.

The figure of a man appeared in the gap. The horse's ears shot forward; the girl stiffened.

"Come in, Vasya," the man said. "It is cold."



The Death of the Snow=Maiden

Moscow, Just Past Midwinter, and the haze of ten thousand fires rose to meet a smothering sky. To the west a little light lingered, but in the east the clouds mounded up, bruise-colored in the livid dusk, buckling with unfallen snow.

Two rivers gashed the skin of the Russian forest, and Moscow lay at their joining, atop a pine-clad hill. Her squat, white walls enclosed a jumble of hovels and churches; her palaces' ice-streaked towers splayed like desperate fingers against the sky. As the daylight faded, lights kindled in the towers' high windows.

A woman, magnificently dressed, stood at one of these windows, watching the firelight mingle with the stormy dusk. Behind her, two other women sat beside an oven, sewing.

"That is the third time Olga has gone to the window this hour," whispered one of the women. Her ringed hands flashed in the dim light; her dazzling headdress drew the eye from boils on her nose.

Waiting-women clustered nearby, nodding like blossoms. Slaves stood near the chilly walls, their lank hair wrapped in kerchiefs.

"Well, of course, Darinka!" returned the second woman. "She is waiting for her brother, the madcap monk. How long has it been since Brother Aleksandr left for Sarai? My husband has been waiting for him since the first snow. Now poor Olga is pining at her window.

Well, good luck to her. Brother Aleksandr is probably dead in a snow-bank." The speaker was Eudokhia Dmitreeva, Grand Princess of Moscow. Her robe was sewn with gems; her rosebud mouth concealed the stumps of three blackened teeth. She raised her voice shrilly. "You will kill yourself standing in this wind, Olya. If Brother Aleksandr were coming, he would have been here by now."

"As you say," Olga replied coolly from the window. "I am glad you are here to teach me patience. Perhaps my daughter will learn from you how a princess behaves."

Eudokhia's lips thinned. She had no children. Olga had two, and was expecting a third before Easter.

"What is that?" said Darinka suddenly. "I heard a noise. Did you hear that?"

Outside, the storm was rising. "It was the wind," said Eudokhia. "Only the wind. What a fool you are, Darinka." But she shivered. "Olga, send for more wine; it is cold in this drafty room."

In truth, the workroom was warm—windowless, save for the single slit—heated with a stove and many bodies. But—"Very well," said Olga. She nodded at her servant, and the woman went out, down the steps into the freezing night.

"I hate nights like this," said Darinka. She clutched her robe about her and scratched a scab on her nose. Her eyes darted from candle to shadow and back. "She comes on nights like this."

"She?" asked Eudokhia sourly. "Who is she?"

"Who is *she*?" repeated Darinka. "You mean you don't know?" Darinka looked superior. "*She* is the ghost."

Olga's two children, who had been arguing beside the oven, stopped screeching. Eudokhia sniffed. From her place by the window, Olga frowned.

"There is no ghost," Eudokhia said. She reached for a plum preserved in honey, bit and chewed daintily, then licked the sweetness from her fingers. Her tone implied that *this* palace was not quite worthy of a ghost.

"I have seen her!" protested Darinka, stung. "Last time I slept here, I saw her."

Highborn women, who must live and die in towers, were much given to visiting. Now and again, they stayed overnight for company, when their husbands were away. Olga's palace—clean, orderly, prosperous—was a favorite; the more so as Olga was eight months gone with child and did not go out.

Hearing, Olga frowned, but Darinka, eager for attention, hurried on. "It was just after midnight. Some days ago. A little before Midwinter." She leaned forward, and her headdress tipped precariously. "I was awakened—I cannot remember what awakened me. A noise . . ."

Olga made the faintest sound of derision. Darinka scowled. "I cannot remember," she repeated. "I awakened and all was still. Cold moonlight seeped around the shutters. I thought I heard something in the corner. A rat, perhaps, scritching." Darinka's voice dropped. "I lay still, with the blankets drawn about me. But I could not fall asleep. Then I heard someone whimper. I opened my eyes and shook Nastka, who slept next to me. 'Nastka,' I told her, 'Nastka, light a lamp. Someone is crying.' But Nastka did not stir."

Darinka paused. The room had fallen silent.

"Then," Darinka went on, "I saw a gleam of light. It was an unchristian glow, colder than moonlight, nothing like good firelight. This glow came nearer and nearer . . ."

Darinka paused again. "And then I saw her," she finished in a hushed voice.

"Her? Who? What did she look like?" cried a dozen voices.

"White as bone," Darinka whispered. "Mouth fallen in, eyes dark pits to swallow the world. She stared at me, lipless as she was, and I tried to scream but I could not."

One of the listeners squealed; others were clutching hands.

"Enough," snapped Olga, turning from her place by the window. The word cut through their half-serious hysteria, and the women fell uneasily silent. Olga added, "You are frightening my children." This was not entirely true. The elder, Marya, sat upright and blazing-eyed. But Olga's boy, Daniil, clutched his sister, quivering.

"And then she disappeared," Darinka finished, trying for nonchalance and failing. "I said my prayers and went back to sleep."

She lifted her wine-cup to her lips. The two children stared.

"A good story," Olga said, with a very fine edge on her voice. "But it is done now. Let us tell other tales."

She went to her place by the oven and sat. The firelight played on her double-plaited hair. Outside, the snow was falling fast. Olga did not look toward the window again, though her shoulders stiffened when the slaves closed the shutters.

More logs were heaped on the fire; the room warmed and filled with a mellow glow.

"Will you tell a tale, Mother?" cried Olga's daughter, Marya. "Will you tell a story of magic?"

A muffled sound of approval stirred the room. Eudokhia glared. Olga smiled. Though she was the Princess of Serpukhov, Olga had grown up far from Moscow, at the edge of the haunted wilderness. She told strange stories from the north. Highborn women, who lived their lives between chapel and bakehouse and tower, treasured the novelty.

The princess considered her audience. Whatever grief she had felt standing alone by the window was now quite absent from her expression. The waiting-women put down their needles and curled up eagerly on their cushions.

Outside, the hiss of the wind mixed with the silence of the snowstorm that is itself a noise. With a flurry of shouting below, the last of the stock was driven into barns, to shelter from the frost. From the snow-filled alleys, beggars crept into the naves of churches, praying to live until morning. The men on the kremlin-wall huddled near their braziers and drew their caps around their ears. But the princess's tower was warm and filled with expectant silence.

"Listen, then," Olga said, feeling out the words.

"In a certain princedom there lived a woodcutter and his wife, in a little village in a great forest. The husband was called Misha, his wife Alena, and they were very sad. For though they had prayed diligently, and kissed the icons and pleaded, God did not see fit to bless them with a child. Times were hard and they had no good child to help them through a bitter winter."

Olga put a hand to her belly. Her third child—the nameless stranger—kicked in her womb.

"One morning, after a heavy snow, husband and wife went into the forest to chop firewood. As they chopped and stacked, they pushed the snow into heaps, and Alena, idly, began to fashion the snow into a pale maiden."

"Was she as pretty as me?" Marya interrupted.

Eudokhia snorted. "She was a snow-maiden, fool. All cold and stiff and white. But"—Eudokhia eyed the little girl—"she was certainly prettier than you."

Marya reddened and opened her mouth.

"Well," Olga hurriedly continued, "the snow-girl was white, it is true, and stiff. But she was also tall and slender. She had a sweet mouth and a long braid, for Alena had sculpted her with all her love for the child she could not have.

"'See, wife?' said Misha, observing the little snow-maiden. 'You have made us a daughter after all. There is our Snegurochka, the snow-maiden.'

"Alena smiled, though her eyes filled with tears.

"Just then an icy breeze rattled the bare branches, for Morozko the frost-demon was there, watching the couple and their snow-child.

"Some say that Morozko took pity on the woman. Others say that there was magic in the woman's tears, weeping on the snow-maiden when her husband could not see. But either way, just as Misha and Alena turned for home, the snow-maiden's face grew flushed and rosy, her eyes dark and deep, and then a living girl stood in the snow, birth-naked, and smiled at the old couple.

"'I have come to be your daughter,' she said. 'If you will have me, I will care for you as my own father and mother.'

"The old couple stared, first in disbelief, then joy. Alena hurried

forward, weeping, took the maiden by her cold hand, and led her toward the izba.

"The days passed in peace. Snegurochka swept the floor and cooked their meals and sang. Sometimes her songs were strange and made her parents uneasy. But she was kind and deft in her work. When she smiled, it always seemed the sun shone. Misha and Alena could not believe their luck.

"The moon waxed and waned, and then it was midwinter. The village came alive with scents and sounds: bells on sledges and flat golden cakes.

"Now and again, folk passed Misha and Alena's izba on their way to or from the village. The snow-maiden watched them, hidden behind the woodpile.

"One day a girl and a tall boy passed Snegurochka's hiding place, walking hand in hand. They smiled at each other, and the snow-maiden was puzzled by the joy-like flame in their two faces.

"The more she thought of it, the less she understood, but Snegurochka could not stop thinking of that look. Where before she was content, now she grew restless. She paced the izba and made cold trails in the snow beneath the trees.

"Spring was not far off on the day Snegurochka heard a beautiful music in the forest. A shepherd-boy was playing his pipe.

"Snegurochka crept near, fascinated, and the shepherd saw the pale girl. When she smiled, the boy's warm heart leaped out to her cold one.

"The weeks passed, and the shepherd fell in love. The snow softened; the sky was a clear mild blue. But still the snow-maiden fretted.

"'You are made of snow,' Morozko the frost-demon warned her, when she met him in the forest. 'You cannot love and be immortal.' As the winter waned, the frost-demon grew fainter, until he was only visible in the deepest shade of the wood. Men thought he was but a breeze in the holly-bushes. 'You were born of winter and you will live forever. But if you touch the fire you will die.'

"But the shepherd-boy's love had made the maiden a little scorn-

ful. 'Why should I be always cold?' she retorted. 'You are an old cold thing, but I am a mortal girl now; I will learn about this new thing, this fire.'

"'Better to stay in the shade,' was the only reply.

"Spring drew nearer. Folk left their homes more often, to gather green things in hidden places. Again and again the shepherd came to Snegurochka's izba. 'Come into the wood,' he would say.

"She would leave the shadows beside the oven to go out and dance in the shade. But though Snegurochka danced, her heart was still cold at its core.

"The snow began to melt in earnest; the snow-maiden grew pale and weak. She went weeping into the darkest part of the forest. 'Please,' she said. 'I would feel as men and women feel. I beg you to grant me this.'

"'Ask Spring, then,' replied the frost-demon reluctantly. The lengthening days had faded him; he was more breeze than voice. The wind brushed the snow-child's cheek with a sorrowful finger.

"Spring is like a maiden, old and eternally young. Her strong limbs were twined with flowers. 'I can give you what you seek,' said Spring. 'But you will surely die.'

"Snegurochka said nothing and went home weeping. For weeks she stayed in the izba, hiding in the shadows.

"But the young shepherd went and tapped on her door. 'Please, my love,' he said. 'Come out to me. I love you with all my heart.'

"Snegurochka knew that she could live forever if she chose, a snow-girl in a little peasant's izba. But . . . there was the music. And her lover's eyes.

"So she smiled and clothed herself in blue and white. She ran outside. Where the sun touched her, drops of water slid from her flaxen hair.

"She and the shepherd went to the edge of the birch-wood.

"'Play your flute for me,' she said.

"The water ran faster, down her arms and hands, down her hair. Though her face was pale, her blood was warm, and her heart. The young man played his flute, and Snegurochka loved him, and she wept.

"The song ended. The shepherd went to take her into his arms. But as he reached for her, her feet melted. She crumpled to the damp earth and vanished. An icy mist drifted under the warmth of the blue sky, and the boy was left alone.

"When the snow-maiden vanished, Spring swept her veil over the land, and the little field flowers began to bloom. But the shepherd waited in the gloom of the wood, weeping for his lost love.

"Misha and Alena wept as well. 'It was only a magic,' said Misha to comfort his wife. 'It could not last, for she was made of snow.'"

YŢŸ

OLGA PAUSED IN HER STORYTELLING, and the women murmured to one another. Daniil slept now in Olga's arms. Marya drooped against her knee.

"Some say that the spirit of Snegurochka stayed in the forest," Olga continued. "That when the snow fell, she came alive again, to love her shepherd-boy in the long nights."

Olga paused again.

"But some say she died," she said sadly. "For that is the price of loving."

A silence should have fallen, as is proper, at the end of a well-told story. But this time it did not. For at the moment Olga's voice died away, her daughter Masha sat bolt upright and screamed.

"Look!" she cried. "Mother, look! It is her, just there! Look!... No—no! Don't— Go away!" The child stumbled to her feet, eyes blank with terror.

Olga turned her head sharply to the place her daughter stared: a corner thick with shadow. There—a white flicker. No, that was only firelight. The whole room roiled. Daniil, awake, clung to his mother's sarafan.

"What is it?"

"Silence the child!"

"I told you!" Darinka squealed triumphantly. "I told you the ghost was real!"

"Enough!" snapped Olga.

Her voice cut through the others. Cries and chatter died away. Marya's sobbing breaths were loud in the stillness. "I think," Olga said, coolly, "that it is late, and that we are all weary. Better help your mistress to bed." This was to Eudokhia's women, for the Grand Princess was inclined to hysteria. "It was only a child's nightmare," Olga added firmly.

"Nay," groaned Eudokhia, enjoying herself. "Nay, it is the ghost! Let us all be afraid."

Olga shot a sharp glance at her own body-servant, Varvara, of the pale hair and indeterminate years. "See that the Grand Princess of Moscow goes safe to bed," Olga told her. Varvara too was staring into Marya's shadowed corner, but at the princess's order, she turned at once, brisk and calm. It was the firelight, Olga thought that had made her expression seem an instant sad.

Darinka was babbling. "It was her!" she insisted. "Would the child lie? The ghost! A very devil . . ."

"And be sure that Darinka gets a draught and a priest," Olga added. Darinka was pulled out of the room, whimpering. Eudokhia was led away more tenderly, and the tumult subsided.

Olga went back to the oven, to her white-faced children.

"Is it true, Matyushka?" snuffled Daniil. "Is there a ghost?"

Marya said nothing, her hands clenched together. The tears still stood in her eyes.

"It doesn't matter," said Olga calmly. "Hush, children, do not be afraid. We are protected by God. Come, it is time for bed."

Two Holy Men

Marya woke her nurse twice in the night with screaming. The second time, the nurse, unwisely, slapped the child, who leaped from her bed, flew like a hawk through the halls of her mother's terem, and darted into Olga's room before her nurse could stop her. She crawled over the sleeping maidservants and huddled, quaking, against her mother's side.

Olga had not been asleep. She heard her daughter's footsteps and felt the child tremble when she came close. The watchful Varvara caught Olga's eye in the near-dark, then without a word went to the door to dismiss the nurse. The nurse's stertorous breathing retreated, indignantly, down the hall. Olga sighed and stroked Marya's hair until she calmed. "Tell me, Masha," she said, when the child's eyes had grown heavy.

"I dreamed a woman," Marya told her mother in a small voice. "She had a gray horse. She was very sad. She came to Moscow and she never left. She was trying to say something to me, but I wouldn't listen. I was scared!" Marya was weeping again. "Then I woke up and she was there, just the same. Only now she is a ghost—"

"Just a dream," Olga murmured. "Just a dream."

III

THEY WERE AWAKENED JUST after daybreak by voices in the dooryard.

In the heavy moment between sleep and waking, Olga tried to recover a dream of her own: of pines in the wind, of herself barefoot in the dust, laughing with her brothers. But the noise rose, and Marya jerked awake. Just like that, the country-girl Olga had been was once again gone and forgotten.

Olga pushed back the covers. Marya popped upright. Olga was glad to see a little color in the child's face, the night-horrors banished with daylight. Among the voices spiraling up from the dooryard was one she recognized. "Sasha!" Olga whispered, scarcely believing. "Up!" she cried to her women. "There is a guest in the dooryard. Prepare hot wine, and heat the bathhouse."

Varvara came into the room, snow in her hair. She had risen in the dark and gone out in search of wood and water. "It is your brother returned," she said without ceremony. Her face looked pale and strained, Olga did not think she had slept, after Marya waked them with nightmares.

In contrast, Olga felt a dozen years younger. "I knew no storm could kill him," she said, getting to her feet. "He is a man of God."

Varvara made no reply, but stooped and began to rebuild the fire.

"Leave that," Olga told her. "Go to the kitchens and see that the ovens are drawing. Make sure there is food ready. He will be hungry."

Hastily, Olga's women dressed the princess and her children, but before Olga was quite ready or her wine drunk, before Daniil and Marya had eaten their honey-drenched porridge, the footsteps sounded on the stairs.

Marya flew to her feet. Olga frowned. The child had a fey gaiety that belied her pallor. Perhaps the night was not forgotten after all. "Uncle Sasha is back!" Marya cried. "Uncle Sasha!"

"Bring him here," Olga said. "Masha—"

Then a dark figure stood in the gap of the door, face shadowed by a hood.

"Uncle Sasha!" Marya cried again.

"No, Masha, it is not right, to address a holy man so!" cried her nurse, but Marya had already overset three stools and a wine-cup and run up to her uncle.

"God be with you, Masha," said a warm, dry voice. "Back, child, I am all over snow." He put his cloak and hood aside, flinging snow in all directions, made the sign of the cross over Marya's head, and embraced her.

"God be with you, brother," Olga said from the oven. Her voice was calm, but the light in her face stripped away her winters. She added, because she could not help it, "Wretch, I was afraid for you."

"God be with you, sister," the monk returned. "You must not be afraid. I go where the Father sends me." He spoke gravely, but then smiled. "I am glad to see you, Olya."

A cloak of fur hung clasped about his monk's robe, and his hood, thrown back, revealed black hair, tonsured, and a black beard rattling with icicles. His own father would barely have recognized him; the proud boy had grown-up, broad-shouldered and calm, soft-footed as a wolf. Only his clear eyes—his mother's eyes—had not changed since that day ten years ago when he rode away from Lesnaya Zemlya.

Olga's women stared surreptitiously. None but a monk, a priest, a husband, a slave, or a child might come into the terems of Moscow. The former were generally old, never tall and gray-eyed with the smell of faraway on their skin.

One serving-woman, gawky and with an eye to romance, could be heard incautiously telling her neighbor, "That is Brother Aleksandr Peresvet, Aleksandr Lightbringer, you know, the one who—"

Varvara smacked the girl, and she bit her tongue. Olga glanced at her audience and said, "Come to the chapel, Sasha. We will give thanks for your return."

"In a moment, Olya," Sasha replied. He paused. "I brought a trav-

eler with me out of the wild, and he is very ill. He is lying in your workroom."

Olga frowned. "A traveler? Here? Very well, let us go see him. *No*, Masha. Finish your porridge, child, before you go racing about like a bug in a bottle."

YIX

THE MAN LAY ON A FUR RUG near the stove, melting snow in all directions.

"Brother, who is he?" Olga could not kneel, vast as she was, but she tapped her teeth with a forefinger, and considered the pitiful scrap of humanity.

"A priest," Sasha said, shaking water from his beard. "I do not know his name. I met him wandering the road, ill and raving, two days from Moscow. I built a fire, thawed him a little, and brought him with me. I had to dig a snow-cave yesterday, when the storm came, and would have stayed there today. But he grew worse; it seemed he would die in my arms. I thought it worth the risk of traveling, to get him out of the weather."

Sasha bent deftly to the sick man and drew the wraps from his face. The priest's eyes, a deep and startling blue, stared up blankly at the rafters. His bones pressed up beneath his skin, and his cheek burned with fever.

"Can you help him, Olya?" the monk asked. "He'll get nothing but a cell and some bread in the monastery."

"He'll get better than that here," Olga said, turning to give a rapid series of orders, "although his life is in God's hands, and I cannot promise to save him. He is very ill. The men will take him to the bathhouse." She surveyed her brother. "You ought to go as well."

"Do I look as frozen as that?" the monk asked. Indeed, with the snow and ice melted away from his face, the alarming hollows of cheek and temple were evident. He shook the last of the snow from his hair. "Not yet, Olya," he said, rousing himself. "We will pray, and I

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will eat something hot. Then I must go to the Grand Prince. He will be angry that I did not come to him first."

YŢ

THE WAY BETWEEN CHAPEL and palace was floored and roofed, so that Olga and her women could go to service in comfort. The chapel itself was carved like a jewel-box. Each icon had its gilded cover. Candlelight flashed on gold and pearls. Sasha's clear voice set the flames shivering when he prayed. Olga knelt before the Mother of God and wept a few tears of painful joy, where none might see.

Afterward they retired to chairs by the oven in her chamber. The children had been led away, and Varvara had sent off the waitingwomen. Soup came, steaming. Sasha swallowed it and asked for more.

"What news?" Olga demanded as he ate. "What kept you on the road? Do not put me off with mouthings about the work of God, brother. It is not like you to miss your hour."

Despite the empty room, Olga kept her voice down. Private talk was almost impossible in the crowded terem.

"I rode to Sarai and back again," said Sasha lightly. "Such things are not done in a day."

Olga gave him a level glance.

He sighed.

She waited.

"Winter came early in the southern steppe," he said, relenting. "I lost a horse at Kazan and had to go a week on foot. When I was five days, or a little more, from Moscow, I came across a burnt village."

Olga crossed herself. "Accident?"

He shook his head slowly. "Bandits. Tatars. They had taken the girl-children, to sell south to the slave-market, and made a great slaughter among the rest. It took me days to bless and bury all the dead."

Olga crossed herself again, slowly.

"I rode on when I could do no more," Sasha went on. "But I came

across another village in like case. And another." The lines of cheek and jaw grew more marked as he spoke.

"God give them peace," Olga whispered.

"They are organized, these bandits," Sasha went on. "They have a stronghold, else they'd not be able to raid villages in January. They also have better horses than the usual, for they could strike quickly and ride away again." Sasha's hands flexed against his bowl, sloshing soup. "I searched. But I could find no sign of them, other than the burning and the tales of peasants, each worse than the last."

Olga said nothing. In the days of their grandfather, the Horde had been unified under one Khan. It would have been unheard of for Tatar bandits to strike Muscovy, which had always been a devoted vassal-state. But Moscow was no longer so tame, so canny, nor so devoted, and, more important, the Horde was not so united. Khans came and went now, putting forward now this claim, now that to the throne. The generals fought among themselves. Such times always bred masterless men, and everyone within the Horde's reach suffered.

"Come, sister," added Sasha, misreading her look. "Do not fear. Moscow is too tough a nut for bandits to crack, and Father's seat at Lesnaya Zemlya too remote. But these bandits must be rooted out. I am going back out as soon as can be managed."

Olga stilled, mastered herself, and asked, "Back out? When?"

"As soon as I can gather the men." He saw her face and sighed. "Forgive me. Another time I would stay. But I have seen too much weeping these last weeks."

Strange man, worn and kind, with his soul honed to steel.

Olga met his glance. "Indeed, you must go, brother," she said evenly. A keen ear might have detected a bitter note in her voice. "You go where God sends you."

The Grandsons of Ivan Moneybags

THE GRAND PRINCE'S FEASTING-HALL WAS LONG AND LOW AND DIM. Boyars sat or sprawled like dogs at the long tables, and Dmitrii Ivanovich, Grand Prince of Moscow, held court at the far end, resplendent in sable and saffron wool.

Dmitrii was a man of ferocious good humor, barrel-chested and vivid, impatient and selfish, wanton and kind. His father had been nicknamed Ivan the Fair, and the young prince had inherited all his father's pale good looks: creamy hair, tender skin, and gray eyes.

The Grand Prince leaped to his feet when Sasha came into the long room. "Cousin!" he roared, face alight beneath his jeweled cap. He strode forward and upset a servingman before he stopped, recalling his dignity. He wiped his mouth and crossed himself. The cup of wine in his free hand marred the gesture. Dmitrii put it hastily down, kissed Sasha on both cheeks, and said, "We feared the worst."

"May the Lord bless you, Dmitrii Ivanovich," Sasha said, smiling. As boys these two had lived together at Sasha's monastery, the Trinity Lavra, before Dmitrii reached his majority.

A babble of men's voices filled the smoky feasting-hall. Dmitrii was presiding over the remains of a boar. The light women had been pushed hastily out, but Sasha could smell the ghost of them, along with the wine and the greasy ends of meat.

He could also feel the boyars' eyes on him, wondering what his return foretold.

What, Sasha had always wondered, made people want to cram themselves into grimy rooms and shut away the clean air?

Dmitrii must have seen his cousin's distaste. "Baths!" he cried at once, raising his voice. "Let the bathhouse be heated. My cousin is tired, and I want some private talk." He took Sasha's arm confidingly. "I, too, am weary of all this clamor," he said, though Sasha doubted it. Dmitrii thrived on Moscow's noisy intrigues; the Lavra had always been too small and too quiet for him. "You there!" called the Grand Prince to his steward. "See that these men have all they need."

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Long ago, when the Mongols first swept through Rus', Moscow had been a crude and jumped-up trading post—an afterthought to the conquering Horde, beside the glories of Vladimir and Suzdal and Kiev herself.

That was not enough to keep the city standing when the Tatars came, but Moscow had clever princes, and in the smoking ash-heap of conquest, the Muscovites at once set about making allies of their conquerors.

They used their loyalty to the Horde to further their own ambitions. When the khans demanded taxes, the Muscovite princes delivered them, squeezing their own boyars in order to pay. In return the khans, pleased, gave Moscow more territory, and still more: the patent for Vladimir and the title of Grand Prince. So the rulers of Muscovy prospered and their little realm grew.

But as Muscovy grew, the Golden Horde diminished. Bitter feuding between the children of the Great Khan shook the throne, and the whispers began among the boyars of Moscow: The Tatars are not even Christians, and they cannot keep a man on their throne six months before another one comes to claim it. Why, then, do we pay tribute? Why be vassals?

Dmitrii, bold but practical, had eyed the unrest in Sarai, realized that the Khan's record-keeping must be five years behind, and quietly ceased paying tribute at all. He hoarded the money instead, and dispatched his holy cousin Brother Aleksandr to the land of the pagan to spy out their dispositions. Sasha, in his turn, had sent a trusted friend, Brother Rodion, to his own father's home at Lesnaya Zemlya to warn of war brewing.

Now Sasha had returned from Sarai, in the teeth of winter, with news that he wished he was not carrying.

He leaned his head back against the wooden wall of the bathhouse and shut his eyes. The steam washed away some of the grime and weariness of travel.

"You look dreadful, brother," said Dmitrii cheerfully. He was eating cakes. The sweat of too much meat and wine ran off his skin.

Sasha cracked an eyelid. "You're getting fat," he retorted. "You ought to go to the monastery and take a fortnight's fasting this Lent." When Dmitrii had been a boy in the Lavra, he had often sneaked into the woods to kill and cook rabbits on fast-days. Sasha thought, judging by the look of him, that he might have kept up the practice.

Dmitrii laughed. His exuberant charm distracted the unwary from his calculating glances. The Grand Prince's father had died before Dmitrii reached his tenth year, in a land where boy-princes rarely saw adulthood. Dmitrii had learned early to judge men carefully and not to trust them. But Brother Aleksandr had been Dmitrii's teacher first, and later his friend, when they had lived in the Lavra before the prince's majority. So Dmitrii only grinned and said, "A night and a day with the snow falling so thick—what can we do besides eat? I cannot even have a girl; Father Andrei says I must not—or at least not until Eudokhia throws me an heir."

The prince leaned back on the bench, scowled, and added, "As though there is a chance of that, the barren bitch." He sat a moment grim, and then he brightened. "Well, you are here at last. We had despaired of you. Tell me, who has the throne at Sarai? What are the generals' dispositions? Tell me everything."

Sasha had eaten and bathed; now he wanted only to sleep, anywhere that was not the ground. But he opened his eyes and said, "There must be no war in the spring, cousin."

The prince turned a flat stare onto Sasha. "No?" That was the voice of the prince, sure of himself and impatient. The look on his face was the reason he still held the throne after ten years and three sieges.

"I have been to Sarai," said Sasha carefully. "And beyond. I rode among the nomad-camps; I spoke to many men. I risked my life, more than once." Sasha paused, seeing again the hot dust, the bleached steppe-sky, testing strange spices. That glittering pagan city made Moscow look like a mud-castle built in a day by incompetent children.

"The khans come and go like leaves now, that is true," Sasha continued. "One will reign six months before his uncle or cousin or brother supplants him. The Great Khan had too many children. But I do not think it matters. The generals have their armies, and *their* power holds, even if the throne itself is tottering."

Dmitrii considered a moment. "But think of it! A victory would be hard, and yet a victory would make me master of all Rus'. We will pay no more tribute to unbelievers. Is that not worth a little risk, a little sacrifice?"

"Yes," Sasha said. "Eventually. But that is not my only news. This spring, you have troubles closer to home."

And Brother Aleksandr proceeded, grimly, to tell the Grand Prince of Moscow a tale of burning villages, brigands, and fire on the horizon.



WHILE BROTHER ALEKSANDR ADVISED his royal cousin, Olga's slaves bathed the sick man Sasha brought with him to Moscow. They dressed the priest in fresh clothes and put him in a cell meant for a confessor. Olga wrapped herself in a rabbit-edged robe and went down to see him.

A stove squatted in one corner of the room, with a fire new-laid. Its

light did not quite pierce the dimness, but when Olga's women crowded in with lamps of clay, the shadows retreated, cringing.

The man was not in bed. He lay folded up on the floor, praying before the icons. His long hair spread out around him and caught the torchlight.

Behind Olga, the women murmured and craned. Their din might have disturbed a saint, but this man did not stir. Was he dead? Olga stepped hastily forward, but before she could touch him, he sat up, crossed himself, and came wavering to his feet.

Olga stared. Darinka, who had invited herself along with a train of bug-eyed accomplices, gasped and giggled. This man's loose hair fell about his shoulders, golden as the crown of a saint, and beneath the heavy brow, his eyes were a stormy blue. His lower lip was red: the only softness amid the fine arching bones of his face.

The women stuttered. Olga got her breath first and came forward. "Father, bless," she said.

The priest's blue eyes were brilliant with fever; sweat matted the golden hair. "May the Lord bless you," he returned. His voice came from his chest and made the candles shiver. His glance did not quite find hers; he gazed glassily beyond her, into the shadows near the ceiling.

"I honor your piety, Father," said Olga. "Remember me in your prayers. But you must go back to bed now. This cold is mortal."

"I live or die by God's will," replied the priest. "Better to—" He swayed. Varvara caught him before he fell; she was much stronger than she looked. An expression of faint distaste crossed her face.

"Build up the fire," snapped Olga to the slaves. "Heat soup. Bring hot wine and blankets."

Varvara, grunting, got the priest into bed, then brought Olga a chair. Olga sank down into it while the women crowded and gawped at her back. The priest lay still. Who was he and where had he come from?

"Here is mead," said Olga, when his eyelids fluttered. "Come, sit up. Drink."

He drew himself upright and drank, gasping. All the while he

watched her over the rim of the cup. "My thanks—Olga Vladimirova," he said when he had finished.

"Who told you my name, Batyushka?" she asked. "How came you to be wandering ill in the forest?"

A muscle twitched in his cheek. "I am come from your own father's home of Lesnaya Zemlya. I have walked long roads, freezing, in the dark . . ." His voice died away, then rallied. "You have the look of your family."

Lesnaya Zemlya... Olga leaned forward. "Have you news? What of my brothers and sister? What of my father? Tell me; I have had nothing since the summer."

"Your father is dead."

Silence fell, so that they heard logs crumbling in the hot stove.

Olga sat dumbstruck. Her father dead? He had never even met her children.

What matter? He was happy now; he was with Mother. But—he lay forever in his beloved winter earth and she would never see him again. "God give him peace," Olga whispered, stricken.

"I am sorry," said the priest.

Olga shook her head, throat working.

"Here," added the priest unexpectedly. He thrust the cup into her hand. "Drink."

Olga tipped the wine down her throat, then handed the empty cup to Varvara. She scrubbed a sleeve across her eyes and managed to ask, steadily, "How did he die?"

"It is an evil tale."

"But I will hear it," returned Olga.

Murmurs rippled among the women.

"Very well," said the priest. A sulfurous note slipped into his voice. "He died because of your sister."

Gasps of delighted interest from her audience. Olga bit the inside of her cheek. "Out," Olga said, without raising her voice. "Go back upstairs, Darinka, I beg."

The women grumbled, but they went. Only Varvara stayed be-

hind, for propriety's sake. She retreated into the shadows, crossing her arms over her breast.

"Vasya?" Olga asked, rough-voiced. "My sister, Vasilisa? What could she have to do with—?"

"Vasilisa Petrovna knew neither God nor obedience," the priest said. "A devil lived in her soul. I tried—long I tried—to instruct her in righteousness. But I failed."

"I don't see—" Olga began, but the priest had hauled himself higher on his pillows; sweat pooled in the hollow of his throat.

"She would look at things that were not there," he whispered. "She walked in the woods but knew no fear. Everywhere in the village, people talked of it. The kinder said she was mad. But others spoke of witchcraft. She grew to womanhood, and, witchlike, she drew the eyes of men, though she was no beauty . . ." His voice fractured, rallied again. "Your father, Pyotr Vladimirovich, arranged a marriage in haste, that she be wed before worse befell her. But she defied him and drove away her suitor. Pyotr Vladimirovich made arrangements to send her to a convent. He feared—by then he feared for her soul."

Olga tried to imagine her fey green-eyed sister grown into the girl the priest described, and she succeeded all too well. *A convent? Vasya?* "The little girl I knew could never bear confinement," she said.

"She fought," agreed the priest. "No, she said, and no again. She ran into the forest, at night, on Midwinter, still crying defiance. Pyotr Vladimirovich went after his daughter, as did Anna Ivanovna, her poor stepmother."

The priest paused.

"And then?" Olga whispered.

"A beast found them," he said. "We thought—they said a bear."

"In winter?"

"Vasilisa must have gone into its cave. Maidens are foolish." The priest's voice rose. "I don't know; I did not see. Pyotr saved his daughter's life. But he himself was slain, and his poor wife with him. A day later, Vasilisa, maddened still, ran away, and no one has heard any-

thing of her since. We can only assume she is dead as well, Olga Petrovna. She and your father both."

Olga pressed the heel of her hand to her eyes. "Once I promised Vasya that she could come live with me. I might have taken a hand. I might have—"

"Do not grieve," the priest said. "Your father is with God, and your sister deserved her fate."

Olga lifted her head, startled. The priest's blue eyes were expressionless—she thought she had imagined the venom in his voice.

Olga mastered herself. "You have braved dangers to bring this news," she said. "What—what will you have in return? Forgive me, Father. I don't even know your name."

"My name is Konstantin Nikonovich," said the priest. "And I desire nothing. I will join the monastery, and I will pray for this wicked world."