

The Wolf Wilder Chapter 8



They were in open country and the sky was turning evening-coloured when the wind began to howl. White and Black howled with it.

'Oh, *chyort!*' Feo whispered.

Ilya tried to sing, swallowed a gallon of wind and stopped.

The wolves did not usually deign to notice the wind, but Feo could feel Black's anxiety twitching through his fur. As they sped across the snow Feo saw great chunks of it tumble

across the ground, forming snowballs as big as her head. The wolves' tails stuck fast to their legs and the fur was flattened against their skulls. White was struggling, blown into zigzags as they ran.

'There's a storm smell, Ilya,' she said. 'Blind cold.'

'Is that ... bad?'

'It's not good. It's not even in the realm of good.' She leaned forward and whispered into Black's fur, 'What do we do now?'

The wind gave another howl; it knocked her sideways and slid inside her kneecaps. It felt angry. Feo's body gave a huge, unexpected shiver that made Black flinch under her.

'Stop it!' she shouted.

'I'm not doing anything!' Ilya said.

'Not you! The weather!'

'Oh!'

Together they shouted, 'Shut up!'

There were, in Feo's experience, five kinds of

cold. There was wind cold, which Feo barely felt. It was fussy and loud and turned your cheeks as red as if you'd been slapped, but couldn't kill you even if it tried. There was snow cold, which plucked at your arms and chapped your lips, but brought real rewards. It was Feo's favourite weather: the snow was soft and good for making snow wolves. There was ice cold, which might take the skin off your palm if you let it, but probably wouldn't if you were careful. Ice cold smelt sharp and knowing. It often came with blue skies and was good for skating. Feo had respect for ice cold. Then there was hard cold, which was when the ice cold got deeper and deeper until at the end of a month you couldn't remember if the summer had ever really existed. Hard cold could be cruel. Birds died in mid-flight. It was the kind of cold that you booted and kicked your way through.

And there was blind cold. Blind cold smelt of metal and granite. It took all the sense out of

your brain and blew the snow into your eyes until they were glued shut and you had to rub spit into them before they would blink. Blind cold was forty degrees below zero. This was the kind of cold that you didn't sit down to think in, unless you wanted to be found dead in the same place in May or June.

Feo had felt blind cold only once. It had been one night in February of last year, and the walls had groaned with it. Feo's mother had wrapped her in six blankets, five around her shoulders and one for her head and neck, and they had stood outside in the cold until Feo was convulsing and gasping for air. Then Marina had lifted her in her arms and carried her back in.

'Did you feel that? The cold?' Marina had said.

'Of course I did, Mama.' You could no more ignore blind cold than you could ignore a bear riding a lion. 'Why did you do that? It hurt.'

'Because I want you to be brave, my love, but not stupid. When you feel that coming on the air, you run for shelter. You understand? You run even if your legs are so cold you can't feel if they're still attached or not. It would be stupid not to be afraid of the blind cold.'

'But fear is for cowards,' Feo had said.

'No, Feo! *Cowardice* is for cowards. Fear is for people with brains and eyes and functioning nerve endings.'

'But you're always telling me to be brave!'

'Yes. You don't have to do the things fear tells you to do; you just have to lend it an ear, *lapushka*. Don't despise fear. The world is more complicated than that.'

But the weather, up until now, had always seemed on her side. This was something new. Ilya let out a cry as Grey was suddenly buffeted towards Black and the two wolves collided.

'This isn't good!' he called.

At least, Feo thought, the soldiers would be in

the same weather. 'Perhaps it'll kill them,' she said aloud. 'They're old. Older than us, anyway.' The thought was comforting. Mama had always said, 'You will never be tougher than you are now. Children are the toughest creatures on the planet. They endure.'

The wind blew again, harder, and a snow-covered branch tumbled towards them, scattering the wolves sideways. Feo gripped her knees more tightly to Black's sides.

Ilya called, 'We need to stop!'

'There's nowhere *to* stop!' The wind swirled around her tongue and whipped saliva from her mouth. It froze before it met the ground.

'Can't we build a shelter?' he shouted.

Feo's whole face was stinging. 'Where?' They were pacing over what would, in summer, be a vast lake – ten feet of ice topped with half a foot of snow. There was nothing to shelter behind, not even a passing elk.

'This is supposed to be what you're good at!'

It is difficult to pull a face in a storm: the wind keeps trying to rearrange your eyebrows. Even so, Feo managed it. 'Fine! We'll build a shelter! Pile snow – it'll warm us up!' 'Warm up' was, she realised, somewhere between extremely optimistic and delusional, but Ilya was starting to look panicked. She scrambled off Black, blinded by her flying hair.

How?' He said something else too, but it was impossible to hear over the wind. She gestured to him to copy her, and began shaping great armfuls of snow into a ball. Together they rolled the ball across the lake, pushing with their backs and knees, using the wind to help propel it. Feo's blood seemed to defrost as she worked, and soon she and Ilya were sweating, running backwards and forwards with armfuls of powdery snow, piling more and more until the snowball was more a snow hillock.

The wolves watched, apparently unimpressed. Grey stood a little apart, and every so often she

sniffed, connoisseur-like, at the rearing wind.

When the snowball was as broad as a woodshed and tall as a smallish giant, the two children crouched down in the lee of it. Feo pushed her back and bottom into the snow mound and Ilya copied, moulding himself a kind of throne. The wind shifted from a roar to a blur. The relief was overwhelming, and for a minute they sat gasping and laughing at each other's frozen faces. They found that if they carved out a dip in the snow-wall for their heads, the wind was dimmed enough to talk. Feo fished out the pup and held her palms, very gently, over his ears.

'I don't want him deafened,' she said, 'but he needs some air.'

'There's a lot of it available, certainly,' said Ilya.

Feo pulled an apple from her bag and rubbed the ice off it. 'Here,' she said. 'You can have first bite.'

They passed the apple backwards and forwards until it was just the core, which Ilya ate in three gulps like a wolf. Feo was impressed.

'You learn to eat quickly in the army,' he said.

The wolves laid their ears against their skulls and tucked their heads into their hind legs. White's sides were heaving. Feo stroked her ear, but the wolf clacked her teeth together and Feo shied away.

Ilya gasped, and pressed himself backwards into their snow barricade. 'Did she just *bite* you?' His eyes were huge.

'No! She just snapped a bit.' Feo tried to smile, but it was unusual for White to be so short-tempered. 'She's a wolf, you know, not a kitten.'

'All right. I know.'

'She's tired, that's all.' Feo pulled up her hood. 'We need to get to a wood, where she can sleep.'

'Which way, though, to the city?' The compass needle spun uselessly in the wind.

'I think ... over there.' It was very little more than a guess. 'I think there'll be trees that way soon. We can make a fire.' The snow was biting at her eyes.

'Won't we ... I mean, don't take this as criticism, but if we get it wrong, won't we die of cold?'

'I don't know! I don't come out in storms like this, Ilya. You're mixing up being a wilder with being insane.'

As she spoke the wind dipped a little, and they heard a new sound. Ilya let out a burp of shock, then slapped his hand over his mouth. Feo hid the pup under her hair. They stared at each other.

'Is that ... laughing?' said Ilya.

'Maybe it's the wind.' But it wasn't. It came again: guttural. Feo thought of Rakov and his laugh. Was that a soldier's shape in the snow, or a tree?

'Over there! See, the wolves have smelt

something!' She tucked the pup inside her shirt and edged out from behind their snowball blockade. The wind punched her full in the face.

The three wolves came running as she scrambled to her feet, grouping themselves in front of her, facing into the wind. Ilya ducked behind Feo. Grey rolled back her lips: snow blew at the wolf's face and coated her canines, and saliva dripped on to the ground, but she stayed like that, her hackles raised.

A figure was struggling through the wind towards them, shouting something they could not hear.

Feo held her knife in both hands in front of her. *This is it*, she thought. *He's come.*

The figure carried something black and limp swinging from one hand. Feo squinted into the wind; it looked like he had an axe in the other. Soldiers, as far as she knew, did not wield axes. And his coat, she saw, seemed to be made of ragged squirrel furs. Squirrel fur is not soldierly.

The relief of it made her want to leap around, but instead she shouted across the field, 'Who are you?' The wind took her words, so she tried again, roaring, 'Who?'

The answer got whipped away by the wind. But the face approaching was a promising one, Feo thought: young and unpanicked. He was grinning, struggling across the field towards them, and despite her ice moustache Feo gave a quarter of a smile back.

'What do you want?' she called.

'Need help?' he roared back. He was close enough now to see it was a boy: a boy as tall as a man but, as far as she could tell under the snow, barely older than Ilya. He was startling to look at, partly because of the sharpness of his bones, but mostly because, when he lifted his feet from the snow, she saw he wore socks, but no shoes.

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'No,' Feo shouted. 'Cold!'

'Unsurprising!' he roared back, as another rush of snow came flying at their faces. He gestured with the thing in his hand. It was, Feo saw, a jackdaw. 'Help?'

'Help,' said Ilya fervently, 'would be much appreciated.'

Feo only nodded, as much as her frozen spine allowed. The storm, which renders most people unbeautiful, didn't seem to have touched this boy. His hair was dark, sculpted into wildness by the wind.

'Fast, then!' he roared. He came closer and squinted at them. He pointed at Grey, at White. 'Dogs?'

Feo shrugged: it was a shrug that you might, if you wanted to, interpret as a nod.



The boy grinned up at the sky. 'Quick! Getting worse!'

'We can ride —' began Ilya, but Feo elbowed him in the belly button and he bit his lips shut.

'Yes! Come!' said the young man.

'You, hold on to my coat,' said the stranger. He held out the edge of his coat. 'Going to run. I'll pull you! Hurry.' A thought seemed to occur to him, and he pointed to his chest. 'Alexei Gastevski!'

Even in the wind, even with the cold coiling inside her stomach, Feo had time to note that the boy was surprisingly bossy. She stared around the clearing, the feeling of unrest growing in her chest, but there didn't seem to be any choice.

'Come!' said Alexei. He set off at a lope, running bent half double in the wind. Ilya's face was white and speckled with ice, but his eyes were bright.

Blinded by the wind, Feo ran in the footsteps

of the stranger, the wolves following. Every few moments, Grey's nose touched the back of her knees.

They jogged north-west, as far as she could tell, through a swaying, creaking landscape. After ten minutes Feo's eyes and lungs had turned to ice, and her feet had turned to fire. She was starting to wonder whether death wouldn't be the more comfortable option when suddenly dark shapes grew out of the white.

'Rocks?' said Ilya. At least, she thought he did: the sound was torn away on the wind.

'No! Houses!' shouted Alexei.

They weren't, in fact, houses. It was a ring of ex-houses. Seven buildings, set back from the road and with plots marked out for vegetables: all of them burnt hollow, soot mixing with the swirling wind.

At that moment the storm gave a roar and shoved at them from behind, and Ilya stumbled forward on to his knees. Feo hauled him up.

‘Careful!’ said the stranger. He gave a guilty, noiseless laugh and gestured onwards. ‘Come on! Very close!’

They picked their way through the rubble and snow. There was smashed pottery on the floor and a tin kettle with a foot-shaped dent in it. Black prowled around, growling.

It smelt of destruction, Feo thought, and of hard work undone.

Alexei beckoned them on. Twenty paces away was a stone building not much bigger than a shed. It had one window, and the smoke coming from the chimney looked neat and deliberate.

‘Here! See, stone doesn’t burn well. My sister’s place.’ The boy leaned against the wall, under the shelter of the slate roof, panting and grinning. ‘Go in! What are you waiting for?’

The wolves faced the house. They sniffed suspiciously. Black let out a growl; Alexei’s eyes widened, and he stared at Feo. It was not an angry growl, in fact – there was wariness in it,

and exhaustion – but, Feo thought, if you didn’t know the difference, it might be frightening.

‘I’m not sure if there’ll be room for all three dogs,’ said Alexei. ‘Maybe –’ his attempt at nonchalance was not impressive – ‘leave the angry one outside?’

Feo nodded. Grey, she knew, wouldn’t go inside anyway, and neither would Black. Houses reminded him of his early captivity. But White’s injury was oozing nastily.

Feo kissed Black and saluted Grey. ‘White!’ she said. ‘You *have* to come in. That wound needs cleaning.’

Black settled himself against the wall of the house and closed his eyes. But Grey paced away, back into the storm, and lay down amongst the burnt houses, where she could see the road. She set her nose to point north.

‘Come on, White!’ Feo tugged at White’s scruff. ‘We need shelter!’ When White didn’t move, Feo picked the wolf up by her armpits

and dragged her towards the door. White snarled, but did not bite.

Alexei was knocking at the door and, as Feo approached, it was opened by a young woman. She wore a baby on one hip and a hunting rifle on the other.

'Who?' she said to Alexei, nodding at Feo, who still clutched White in her arms. Feo tried to smile charmingly. She suspected it came out more desperate than she'd intended.

'I don't know – I found them inside some kind of snow castle. I liked their faces! Come on, they need to be near the fire.'

The woman looked into Feo's eyes, into Ilya's. She sighed. 'Come in.' She raised an eyebrow as Feo pulled White past her, but said nothing. Her face was very like Alexei's, Feo saw – the same beautiful high bones and sharp edges – but older, and it was muted where Alexei's sparked.

Inside was blissfully warm, and the wind, though not silent, was infinitely softer. Feo

scraped the snow off her eyelids and looked around.

There was furniture piled in the corners, some of it burnt in patches and smelling of charred wood, but beautifully made. A pot of water hung on an iron hook over the fire. The fireplace itself was big enough to stand up in, and Alexei dropped the jackdaw next to the flames. Feo felt her whole body prickle as it came alive in the heat. It smelt safe in here, and soft.

Alexei grinned at them and pushed them bodily closer to the fire. Ilya began unlacing his boots.

'There!' Alexei said. 'Now we can talk properly! It's best not to talk too much in a storm: the snow gets into your throat. Once, my uncle's tonsils froze and snapped off, honest to God.'

'Alexei!' said the woman, but she smiled.

Alexei laughed his noiseless laugh. 'What are your names? This is Sasha, my big sister.'

As he spoke a slab of snow flopped off the front of Ilya's uniform and on to the floor. Under it was his jacket in boiled grey wool, the leather strap across the chest, the gold buttons.

Sasha's face went suddenly slack with horror. 'Alexei, what have you done?' She fumbled with her gun, struggling to cock it with the baby in her arms.

'What? I've done nothing!' Alexei looked suddenly younger, and more like a schoolboy. Feo stared, bewildered, from one to the other.

'You brought a soldier home? You brought death home for dinner?'

'No!' said Ilya. 'I'm not one of them!' He had been laughing at Alexei, and his laugh was still on his face but frozen into misery.

'Get out. Get away from my child!'

'I wouldn't ever ... Nobody would. I mean, you've got a *baby* ...' He stopped.

'Leave!' said the woman. 'I swore I would burn the next soldier I saw.'

Ilya kept shaking his head, but before Feo could stop him he had turned and headed for the door. Two tears were skimming down towards his chin.

'No, but *look!*' said Feo, and she ran to him and spun him round to face the woman, and scraped his icy hair back off his forehead so the woman could see the cleverness of his mouth and the goodness in his eyes. 'See, look at his face! He *was* training to be a soldier. But now ...' Now, she thought, *he's in the pack. He's learning to be wild.*

'They're not dangerous, Sasha,' said Alexei, though he was flushing. 'I told them they could come. I said you wouldn't mind.'

'My father made me – he said I had to be a cadet or a beggar. He lied and told them I was fifteen,' said Ilya. 'I actually wanted to be a ...' but then he jibbed, and bit his lips shut.

'No.' The woman did not put down the gun. 'Alexei, after everything –'

Feo took hold of the woman's elbow with both hands. 'Please. A man – General Mikail Rakov – is looking for me. And ... I need help.' She needed someone – someone older, who knew facts about the world and not just guesses – to tell her it would be all right. 'Please.'

'General Rakov?'

'Yes. He's taken Mama to prison, even though she didn't do anything at all. He's coming for me now.' It sounded so melodramatic to say it that she winced and gave an awkward grin. 'Probably.'

The woman stared at them: a long, sad look. She put down the gun, but kept the baby. 'Give me your cloaks, then.' Feo saw that the dark patches under the woman's eyes reached halfway down her face. 'Come on – don't look so worried, I'll give them back. They need drying.'

'Thank you!' Ilya's voice clashed with Feo's. 'Thank you so much!' They unhooked their cloaks and stood shoulder to shoulder, looking

up at the woman.

'Tell me what happened.'

'We're going to St Petersburg,' said Feo, which wasn't exactly an answer. She reminded herself to tell as little as she could. She hoped Ilya would do the same. If not she might have to tread on him a bit.

Feo went on, 'We'll go as soon as the snow calms down.' She whispered to Ilya, 'Let's stay near the door. Just in case.' And louder: 'Come, sit here, White.'

'*Everyone* should sit,' said Alexei. 'We've got no chairs, but that's best quality Russian dirt floor. You're wasting it by standing on it.'

Feo sat, and White leaned against her shoulder. Her breath was rough. Feo stroked her, and helped her lie as comfortably as she could on her uninjured side.

'What happened to your dog?' said the woman.

'Rakov,' said Feo. 'Not the first time, but the

second ... It's quite complicated, but, basically, Rakov happened. What happened here?'

Alexei put his hands in the tips of the flames to warm them. He smiled half a smile. 'Rakov happened. Not personally, of course.' He swivelled in his position, and set his elbows in the flames. 'He sent a dozen men. They rounded us up. They said we had a choice: we could run, or be shot.'

'What?' said Feo. Ilya only groaned.

'Most people ran to the next village. Sasha couldn't – her husband's away – and Varvara had a fever. I helped them hide. Our grandfather used to keep horses in here. It was my fault – sort of my fault – that they came at all.'

'Why?' said Feo, just as Ilya said, 'Was anyone hurt?' Ilya edged closer to Feo, and she put her arm around him, shielding the sight of his buttons from the woman and baby.

'Yes, hurt, but nobody was killed this time, except some animals: eleven cats, a horse. They

shot the horse, burnt the cats.'

'Burnt the cats?' said Feo. She swore the worst word she could think of.

Ilya nodded. 'That makes sense.'

Everyone turned to stare at him. 'Do you want to ... elaborate on that statement?' said Sasha.

'They used to say at the camp that he likes fire. He says nothing scares humans more than to see the things they love burn.'

'There used to be a store here,' said Alexei. 'It had a dozen sacks of sugar. When they burnt the store, it turned to toffee. It's the only thing that didn't turn to ash, so we've been eating that. You'd be amazed how quickly you get tired of it.'

Sasha smiled. Her smile was two parts exhaustion, one part sadness.

'When was it?' asked Feo.

'Two days ago.'

There was a long and meaty silence.

'Can I hold the baby?' asked Feo. It seemed a good way to change the subject. She had never

met a baby properly. It was surprisingly heavy, and the head lolled around alarmingly, but it was warm to touch. Its hair was soft as wolf fur.

‘Hello,’ she said. ‘Hello, pup.’ She rubbed her nose against the baby’s. Sasha, watching, flinched a little, but did not move.

The noise that came from the baby was not a howl, but a mew – the sound of a small person deciding whether to cry. It was also, coincidentally, the sound of a newborn wolf pup.

Feo felt the wolf pup jerk into wakefulness inside her shirt. There was a scrabbling – she winced as one of his claws got stuck in her skin – and then the nose of the wolf pup appeared under her chin. The baby mewed again. The pup mewed back.

‘This is my other ... dog,’ she said, indicating the wet snout.

Sasha looked from her baby to the pup, and back again.

Feo said, ‘He’ll be good, I promise. He’s got no teeth yet, so he can’t bite. And he won’t pee on the baby or anything. Probably.’

The pup sniffed the air, making the bubbling noises in his chest that were the closest he could get to growls. Then he caught sight of the baby and gave out three tiny yaps of horror.

Feo laughed. She sat the baby in her lap, propped against her stomach, and scooped up the pup. ‘It’s just a baby, *lapushka*,’ she said. ‘A human one. See? Hush, please! We’re guests.’

She set the pup in front of the baby. They sniffed each other, then the pup licked the baby’s bare feet. The baby squealed gleefully. It was the best noise Feo had heard for what felt like a very long time. She bent so her hair fanned over both the babies, and sang to them in a whisper.

Sasha watched, unsmiling but uncomplaining.

‘He’s quite clean,’ said Feo. ‘No ticks or fleas. I would know: he’s been living mostly inside my

shirt. See? No bites.’ She lifted her shirt to show them her stomach, bite free. She pointed at the baby. ‘Is it old enough to eat?’ Then she realised how that sounded, and blushed. ‘To eat food, I mean – not to be eaten!’

‘*She*,’ said the woman. ‘Her name’s Varvara. Yes, she would be. But I keep her on milk for now. There’s not much food around.’

There is a look that people get when they have not eaten for a few days, a tightness in the jaw and eyes. Feo knew the look: she had seen it in travellers passing by the house. It is not a look you can forget.

‘What do babies eat?’ asked Ilya.

‘Bread in milk,’ said Sasha. ‘Fruit.’

‘I have some bread!’ said Feo. ‘And some apples. If we roasted them and mashed them up – would that be too rich? For the baby, I mean.’

‘No,’ said Sasha. For the first time, she smiled properly. She put her hand to her head, as if dizzy. ‘That would be good.’

‘Could we swap you for some milk? For the pup? Just a teaspoonful?’

‘Yes. Yes, I – of course.’

‘Here, then!’ Feo upturned her pack. ‘Six apples! If we put them straight in your kettle, they could be apple stew. Mama makes it at Easter. There’s a tiny bit of cheese too. Cheese and apples are good together. They taste of summer. And chocolate – that must have been here since the autumn. It might taste a bit sacky.’

‘You shouldn’t, child,’ said Sasha. But she looked suddenly sweeter, and younger.

‘Yes, she should!’ said Alexei.

‘Yes, exactly – yes, I should!’ said Feo. ‘It’s what animals do. They feed the pack.’

Ilya was making a face. He knelt and put his mouth too close to Feo’s ear, and whispered wetly, ‘We need to save some. You don’t know how long it’ll be before we next get food.’

Feo’s face burnt hot. It can be inexplicably

embarrassing to be caught mid-generosity. 'We'll be *fine*.' She changed the subject. 'Why did the soldiers come? It wasn't anything to do with me, was it?'

'With *you*? No! Why would it be?' Alexei began sharpening a knife, occasionally stabbing it at the apples bubbling in boiling water. 'I need it sharp. For next time they come,' he said. 'They burnt my shoes and my books. I tried to stop them: the books, especially. I know they don't like you reading Marx, but I hadn't *finished* it. I've been told the ending's the best bit. It's inhuman to take your books away before you know the end.'

'Why, then? Were they ...' – she tried to sound as adult as she could – 'drunk?'

'Nothing like that, bless you,' said Sasha. 'It was because our young Alexei is an agitator.'

'Really? Are you sure?' Feo had heard of agitators and seen prints of them. They were like crocodiles, but with longer snouts. 'That just

seems ... so unlikely.'

'*An agitator is a person who acts against the Tsar,*' said Ilya, as if reciting. 'They are enemies of the government. I read that somewhere.'

'Oh! Like they said about Mama.' *That makes me one too*, Feo thought, but she did not say it.

'Yes!' said Alexei. He stabbed at the apples in the pot. 'And I'm proud of it! The Tsar may not be cruel, but he's stupid, stupid in the heart, which is the worst place to be stupid. I read about it: it's a failure of intelligence, and of governance.'

'Governance,' said Ilya, nodding wisely. He shifted to sit an inch closer to Alexei. 'Not good at all.' Alexei thumped him on the back. Ilya turned a red to match Feo's cloak.

'Exactly! We've got to change things.' Alexei broke off a bit of cheese and fed a crumb to the baby. 'If we can just –'

Sasha laughed and took the cheese off Alexei. 'No politics!'

'At home,' said Feo, 'if Mama has travellers for dinner and they start talking about the Tsar, I'm allowed to say "Forfeit!" and get down from the table.'

'It matters, though!' said Alexei. 'It's not *politics!* It's life!'

'It's more likely to be death,' said Sasha. 'Stop it, just for now, Alexei. Remember, you promised to stop once the soldiers came. Have pity on your poor big sister. I'd like you to reach your sixteenth birthday unarrested, please.'

Alexei ignored her. He lay back until his hair was almost in the fire and talked about serfs and revolutions and the persecution of the Jews and a man called Marx until Feo's ears buzzed. He talked at twice the pace of anyone Feo had met, and tugged at his hair until it crackled with electricity. He talked over Ilya's interjections, over the baby's giggling in a pile with the pup, and as the storm grew louder he talked harder and faster than the wind. It was dizzying.

Suddenly, abruptly, he stopped, grinning and breathing as if he'd run a race. He sniffed. 'Those apples smell done, don't they, Sasha?'

Sasha smiled, shaking her head at him, and reached down some bowls from the mantelpiece.

'Food,' he said, 'is the only thing more important than justice.'

'We ate a big lunch,' lied Feo. 'We only need a little bit.'

The apples were sweet and hot. Sasha produced some slabs of the burnt sugar, and they used them to spoon up the pulp. Feo ate hers too quickly, and spent the next ten minutes picking the peeling skin off the roof of her mouth. She shared out the bread, and she and Ilya made sandwiches with lumps of cheese softened over the fire. The taste was spectacular after eating nothing but snow.

She shook White awake and held out half her sandwich. White had always loved cheese, and

as the wolf chewed it seemed to give her courage. Cheese often does. White approached Alexei and sniffed his feet. The boy stiffened.

‘Does he bite?’

‘She. I don’t actually know,’ said Feo honestly. ‘She’s never met so many strangers at one time before.’

White was not growling; she looked warm and tired. ‘No. Probably.’

White’s tongue came out. Alexei gasped as it reached his ankles. Then White began to lick Alexei’s toes.

‘That tickles!’ he said, but he kept his feet still, and the expression on his face was respectful, Feo thought. She grinned at him.

‘That blood, there – is she all right?’

‘I don’t know.’ Feo chewed on the inside of her mouth. ‘I think not really, but I’m not sure what to do.’

‘Do you have bandages?’ asked Sasha.

‘We don’t,’ said Ilya. ‘Just our socks.’

‘No, keep your socks,’ said Sasha. She was watching from the one chair in the place, balancing the bundle of pup and baby on her lap. The pup held the baby’s hand in his jaws and was drooling lovingly. ‘You’ll need them. Socks are key ingredients for adventures.’

‘How do you know we’re –’

‘I just do. But you could clean the wound, at least. Alexei, my towel’s over there – use that.’

Feo’s cloak was steaming in front of the fire. The smell, more than the sight of it, sparked an idea. ‘Would it work if we cut the hem off my cloak? I know bandages aren’t supposed to be made of velvet, but it would be better than nothing, wouldn’t it?’

Tending to White’s bullet wound took the best part of an hour. She lay still while the three of them swabbed ice and bark and dirt from her side. Once or twice the wolf growled, and each time Ilya and Alexei leapt backwards, knocking heads. Feo tied the knots: her hands knew how

to read the twitching of the wolf's muscles, when to pull tighter, when to loosen. When they had finished, White's back half was entirely encased in red velvet, and she was much steadier on her feet.

'That looks a good job,' said Sasha. 'You've got old hands for someone so young.'

Feo did not, at that moment, feel very young, but she grinned. The warmth was prodding her brain back to life. 'Could we do the same for Alexei? To make him some shoes?'

'Yes!' said Alexei. 'Can you?'

Sasha smiled, but shook her head. 'They'd need to be waterproof.'

Ilya cleared his throat. 'Have you got any cooking oil?'

'A few spoonfuls in a jar somewhere, I think,' said Sasha. 'Most of it burnt.'

'And soap?'

'I've got a bit,' said Alexei. 'I can skip washing. Nobody really needs baths in the winter. Why?'

'Well,' said Ilya, 'if you mix oil and soap and ashes, you get a waterproof mixture.' And, in answer to Feo's startled face, 'I read a story, once, where the hero makes a cloak out of it. We could coat some strips of velvet with that, and weave them triple-thick. It would be better than nothing.'

The shoes took even longer than the bandage, partly because Alexei was not good at sitting still while they wrapped the cloth around his feet, but when they had finished the effect was spectacular. They looked, Feo thought, like enormous blackish-red slippers.

Alexei did a moonlit lap of the house to test them, and came back grinning. 'Watertight!' he said. He slapped first Feo and then Ilya on the back. 'One point to us, no points to Rakov.'

Nobody changed their clothes for bed: nobody had clothes to change into. Sasha brushed Varvara's tuft of hair, and then Feo's. Feo plaited it, wound it around her head and held it

in place it with her knife, safely in its scabbard.

‘Very nice. In St Petersburg they would call that a fashion statement,’ said Sasha.

Ilya laughed. ‘The statement is: this person is probably going to kill you.’

The baby cried a little when she was placed in her cot – it was made of a drawer, well nested with furs. Alexei stopped talking about the Tsar again for long enough to sing. He sang old Russian peasant songs in a voice that made Feo think of mountains. Ilya listened with his chin on his knees and his eyes screwed tightly closed. He wasn’t, as far as Feo could see, breathing.

Feo lay awake, twisting under her blanket, for hours after the snores of the two boys had filled the house. The wind had stopped, and the snow outside looked soft and familiar. She took the thick blanket Sasha had given her, the last of the stewed apples and a burning branch from the fire. She filled her hood with firewood.

Black was waiting exactly where she had left

him. A few metres away Grey lay unmoving, watching the road and the north. Feo piled branches on the ground, lit them with the taper. Black was aloof at first, but once Feo gave him the apple sauce and rubbed both wolves down with the blanket, he unbent enough to give her knee a bite and to chew on her hair. Feo rolled herself in the blanket and lay with her face inches from the cinders. Black paced over to her and lay down across her legs, and there is no warmer blanket than a wolf. From her fire a smell rose up: flames burning night air, mixed with frost and the wolves’ familiar earthy smell. It was like breathing in hope. Feo lay awake for as long as she could, and it was to the song of the flames and of Black’s breath that she at last fell asleep.