



Alexei, Ilya and Feo were in sight of the chimney smoke of the village when a thought occurred to her, and she tipped herself off Black's back.

'Why are we stopping?' asked Alexei. 'Come on! We're nearly there.'

'Two reasons. First, I thought it might be best if they didn't see us riding. Just in case.'

'Just in case what?' said Ilya.

'Well – just in case they have laws against it. Or something.'

'Laws against riding wolves on village streets?

Is that likely?' But Ilya climbed off Grey's back and stood beside her.

'Just in case,' she said. In fact, just in case it went badly and they had to make an escape, she thought, it was best if people didn't know how fast they could go. It was best to be wary. 'Let's leave the wolves here, if they'll stay. I don't want anyone to hurt them.' And then, seeing the incredulity in Alexei's face, she added, 'Or the other way round.'

'You said two reasons,' said Ilya.

'I'm hungry. Aren't you? I think I'd feel a lot braver with food. Alexei, did you bring that jackdaw?'

They found a spot where the snow was thin, and Feo tore down some branches for firewood.

Ilya struggled with the fire, fumbling with the matches in his cold hands. She watched Alexei, ready to bite him if he laughed – if anyone was laughing at Ilya, it would be her – but he only squatted on his haunches and stared at the

world around them. She followed his gaze. The sky was the blue of winter palaces. The snow stretched, untouched, for miles, and the half-grown trees dipped like praying polar bears.

'That's a special kind of lovely,' said Ilya, looking up as the fire stuttered into life. 'Even if we get caught, I'm glad I came.'

Feo halved and gutted the jackdaw. They decided not to waste time plucking it; instead they sliced the skin off, and threw it to the wolves.

'How long do you need to cook jackdaw for?' she asked. 'A minute?'

'An hour?' said Ilya.

'Five hours?' said Alexei.

'We'll just have to taste it until it's ready,' said Ilya.

'I volunteer to do the tasting,' said Alexei.

None of them had ever cooked a jackdaw, but Ilya had read a story in which it had been done on sticks. 'Fictional food's not reliable,' Alexei

objected, but Feo agreed with Ilya. They cut one half of the bird into slices and held these on sticks in the flickering tips of the flames, and the other half, still in a lump, they placed in the burning heart of the fire.

Feo threw a few scraps to the wolves on the sly.

The meat from the hot centre of the flames kept catching fire and having to be blown out.

'I think it's ready,' said Ilya. 'It looks cooked. It just doesn't look much like meat any more.'

Feo licked a chunk. It was vile on the outside, tasting of charcoal and stray feathers, but inside it only tasted blank. She and Ilya squatted side by side for warmth. Alexei lay on his back on the other side of the fire. Every mouthful took fifty chews. After forty chews Feo's jaws mutinied against her, and she spat it out into the snow.

'I think,' said Ilya, 'We marginally overdid this one.'

The meat from the top of the flames took

much longer to cook, and Feo's arm was aching by the time she thought her slice might be done. She pulled it off the stick with her teeth. It oozed a little blood, but it tasted magnificent, like a bolder kind of pigeon. It kicked energy into Feo's heart. It was rich and soft and the juice ran down Feo's chin. She fended Black away before he could lick it off. He was wearing a jackdaw's feather over one eye.



Alexei kicked snow over the fire, and White peed on it, and they went on. Feo and Ilya walked, not quite hand in hand, but close enough that their arms bumped against each other, their ears still full of the resentful growls of the wolves.

'Keep your cloak wrapped tight, Ilya,' said Alexei. 'Don't let people see your uniform.'

Ilya nodded, laughing awkwardly, and

wrapped his cloak so tightly around his shoulders that his neck turned blue.

Feo sniffed the air. 'It smells all right,' she said. 'I think I like it.'

'It smells of food,' said Ilya. 'I definitely like it.'

The village was tiny: just a few rows of houses with thin roads between them and a square in the centre. The square had a fire burning in a stone trough, and a few children warming their hands. The houses were small, but each had thick white smoke coming out of the chimney. The square was swept almost free of snow; it was paved with slabs of stone. Someone, long ago, had painted them sun-yellow and red. The red had faded to pink. They shone out, like a sunrise. It was a cheering sight.

'Yana did that,' said Alexei, pointing at the stone. 'She's my cousin. My uncle Grigory smacked her for it.'

There was a huddle of women, their heads

wrapped in scarves, laughing over something in the street. The sun shone through their shawls and cast coloured shadows on to the snow. There were men leaning on doors, arguing.

And their beards were quite amazing. Feo had met few men, and none of them had had beards like these. You could have hidden a family of mice in the smallest; the largest, which bristled down to the man's hipbone, could have sheltered at least two medium-sized cats. They had worn hands with chipped nails, and some were missing teeth. They seemed to have intelligent faces, as far as she could see. It was hard to tell under the beards.

Alexei waved at a man with a high-necked blue jacket and muddied trousers. 'Uncle Grigory!'

The man approached. 'Alexei! It's good to see you alive. We wondered.' He looked at the two children next to Alexei, who were trying to look brave and unobtrusive at the same time. Ilya

pointed a toe and studied it.

'Who are these?'

Strangers made Feo's tongue slow, so Alexei did the talking and Feo did the staring.

'Uncle Grigory, we need help. Rakov's coming after us.'

'What have you done now, idiot boy?'

'Barely anything! But we need somewhere to sleep. Just for a single night. You can help, can't you, Grigory?'

Perhaps because the man was huge, almost twice the height of Feo and three times as wide, his silence felt enormous. Feo stared at him. His face was unreadable, partly because there was so much beard to negotiate, but partly because his eyebrows and nostrils and mouth and forehead – the places humans let emotion leak out – were absolutely still.

When he did speak, it was not encouraging. 'These wouldn't be the child felons? Not the half-grown witches who blinded Rakov?'

'That wasn't me,' said Ilya. 'It was her!'

Feo mouthed, '*Thanks a lot.*' She redoubled her efforts to look innocent, but she wasn't absolutely sure how it was done.

The man grunted. 'You, girl? That doesn't surprise me. You've a face that says there's a knife in your shoe.'

'We just wanted to know,' Feo whispered, 'if you could give us some food.'

Grigory turned to Alexei. 'Is this another of your schemes?' he said.

Alexei grinned, impervious. 'It might be.' He grasped Grigory by the elbow. 'Listen! She's got Rakov on the back foot – he's frightened of her – and I think she could persuade people to fight.'

'She'll do nothing of the kind,' said Grigory. He gave her a glare, and Feo ducked to get out of its way. 'You see that house?' He gestured to one of the buildings. Its door was swinging drunkenly off its hinges. 'That was Alexander's

house: a good man. Rakov took him last week. And my Paul before. Have you forgotten, Alexei? We do nothing to make it worse. *Nothing.*'

'Come on, Grigory!' said Alexei. The grin wavered, but stayed in place. 'Don't be like that. Feo's barely met another human before; you'll put her off grown-ups for life. Look – if people want to listen, that's their own business.'

The older man's eyes were neither kind nor patient. 'If we are punished for *your* folly, that is more than your own business.'

But a cluster of men had approached, and one leaned forward out of the group. His hair was grey, but his voice was colourful and rich. 'Is this the girl? The one who blinded the General? I say we listen to them,' he said. 'No harm in listening. Alexei's a child, not a wizard. We don't lose control of our brains by listening.'

Alexei seemed entirely unconcerned by the growing crowd, by the size of the men, by their

hostile eyes, by their beards. Feo and Ilya edged behind him. The eyes followed.

'Thank you, Nikolai,' said Alexei. 'All I want is for you to listen!'

'I can't take much more of Alexei talking,' said Grigory. 'My ears tire easily these days.'

'But it's different now! Rakov's obsessed! He's not thinking like a general: he's unhinged – or, at least, unhinging! This is the time!'

The grey-haired man turned and called to a cluster of men down the street. 'Call a meeting,' he said. 'Yvgeny! Alix!'

Grigory sighed. 'Call a meeting, then. You!' Grigory pointed at Alexei. 'You, come. But no strangers: that's the law. Leave them in the square. And if they do any damage to the village, I hold you responsible.'

Adults started coming out of the wooden houses, wiping their hands on their trousers, wedging on caps against the cold. Children followed them, staring hard.

The adults, as they passed Feo, glanced first at her red cloak, then at the ice and dirt around the hem of her skirt. Feo tried to look like filthy clothes were in fashion where she came from. She tried to look taller.

'Come on. Let's sit down.' Ilya took her by the hand and they retreated to the oak tree in the middle of the square and sat down against it, blowing on their hands for warmth.

The children gathered in a semicircle. They were all beautifully clean, dressed in thick boiled wool. There were about twenty of them, the oldest at least five years older than her, the youngest only just taller than the snow, with a crop of curls. Feo wanted to touch the curls, but kept her hands behind her back. Toddlers, like wolves, are unpredictable.

'Who are you?' said one.

Feo looked at each face in turn. They were not friendly, but nor were they unkind. Wary, mostly.

'Why are they calling a meeting? Is it about you?'

Feo shrugged. 'I think so.'

'What have you done?' A boy of about eight, with a gap where his two front teeth should be, stared at them. 'Have you murdered someone?'



'No!'

'Stolen something?' He looked hopefully at her bag.

'No.'

The eldest of the girls stared hard. 'Broken the law?'

Feo was about to say 'No!' when she remembered Rakov's swollen, lividly angry face. She shrugged again.

Ilya said, 'We just needed to know some things about St Petersburg. She's just passing through. We're all just passing through.'

'What *all*?' said the boy. 'There's two of you.'

Feo glared at Ilya. 'He's not good with grammar.'

Another girl kicked a little snow at them. 'So, what do you want?'

'I'm going to find my mother. She was arrested.'

'For murder?' said the gap-toothed boy. The hope was sharp in his voice.

'No!' said Feo. 'I mean - sorry, still no. For

nothing. She's done nothing. But –'

'But that doesn't stop people getting arrested,' said a blonde girl. 'We know that. Being innocent isn't any protection.'

Feo nodded. 'I'm not absolutely ... not exactly absolutely innocent. The man who took my mother – I damaged him. A bit.'

The boy's eyes lit up. 'Did you –'

'No. I – what's your name?'

'Sergei. And that's my little sister, Clara.' He indicated a five-year-old with a wide smile and a runny nose.

'Then, Sergei, I promise to tell you if ever I murder anyone. But he's angry. Because, I don't know, he thinks it's embarrassing to be hurt by a girl.'

The eldest girl squared her shoulders. She was big, with plump knees and strong arms. 'That's not clever,' she said. 'Not clever at all.'

Feo grinned at her, trying not to let the shyness in her chest make her smile go odd.

Older children always made her shy. Smiling and shyness together were difficult: it made her nostrils hurt.

Another child – a girl younger than Feo and with wide-set eyes – pushed forward.

'What was his name? The man who took your mother?'

'Rakov. General Mikail Rakov.'

The hush that fell on the children was sudden, and solemn. They glanced at Sergei and at the eldest of the girls. Mouths pursed and fists clenched.

'Oh,' said Sergei. He sounded half proud, but his eyes were miserable. 'We know about him. Don't we, Yana?'

'Yes. He took our brother, Paul,' said the eldest girl, 'to be in the army. But Paul didn't want to – he ran away.'

Sergei screwed up his face and, under pretence of itching his eyebrows, dug his fists into his eyes.



'What happened?' said Ilya. His voice was flat. He sounded as if he had already guessed.

'He died, didn't he?' said Yana. 'Rakov shot him.'

'What?' said Feo. 'Is that ... I mean, how is that allowed?'

'I don't know. He did it, though. They tried to take Alexei too – that's our cousin.'

'We've met him,' said Feo.

'They tried to take him, but he fought them. He's fast, you see. And he kicked them in the – well, anyway.'

'In the *bits!*' said Sergei. 'He did!'

Yana nodded. 'He went to hide with his sister. She's ten years older, and she'd bite the head off a wolf to protect him.'

'Why would Rakov shoot your brother, though? What had he done?'

'Nothing!' said Sergei. 'He hadn't even *killed* anyone.'

Feo glanced at Yana, who nodded over

Sergei's head. 'He's right. Paul did nothing: he was just nice, and big, and a bit slow sometimes. I don't know. If you make it random, nobody's safe, are they? So everyone's afraid. Maybe Rakov likes that.' Yana seemed to come to a decision. She hiked her skirt higher on her waist. 'If you're Rakov's enemy, you're my friend. Even if you are just a kid. Do you need food?'

'We do, quite badly. Do you have something we could carry easily? Bread, or cheese?' Some of the children were nodding. One or two of them were smiling, or, at least, staring unblinkingly in a more friendly way.

'What are the adults deciding, then?'

Feo shook her head. 'Alexei wants them to fight.'

'Rakov?'

'Yes. But it's not much to do with me – I'm going to do what I'm going to do.'

'Are you going to fight?' said Yana. 'I would.'

'I don't know,' said Feo. 'It wasn't in the plan. But some of the things Alexei said ... I'm thinking about it.'

It was then, with truly terrible timing, that the pup decided to pee. Wolf urine has a strong smell, and the day was clear and windless. Everyone, like a chorus, sniffed.

Feo groaned. She reached down her top and fished out the ball of damp fur. He was still peeing.

'Ugh!' she said. 'Oh, *lapushka*. You could have warned me.' Her front was spattered with pee. 'Ugh.'

Every child, as though in a carefully choreographed ballet, took two steps backwards.

'All right, little one,' said Feo. She squatted down and held him at arm's length, and when he was finished she wiped her hands on the snow. The wolf gave a short sharp howl. It was small and shrill, but unmistakably wolf-like.

The children were already staring bug-eyed. Now, suddenly, their stares became thick and cold.

'Is that a wolf?'

'Yes,' Feo admitted. 'But only a very small amount of one.' The watching eyes were very hard. She covered him with her hair and held him close.

'You're that wolf girl!' said someone at the back. 'We heard about you. There's money on your head.'

'What?' Feo tried to sound calm, but her eyes flicked to left and right, looking for an escape route. 'Is there?'

'A lot of money. They said you're not to be trusted. You're a witch.'

'Who said that?'

'A soldier came through the village yesterday to tell us to look out for her. For *you*. We should hand her in!'

Feo felt sick rising in her throat, but she got

slowly to her feet. 'Do you want to come closer and say that?'

Ilya scrambled up and stepped in front of her. She was astonished to see the anger in his face. 'Yes, they're looking for her! But those soldiers don't just want her. They want her wolves too. To kill them. Anyone who hands us in is a murderer.' He took the pup from Feo and held him out.

The pup was growing daily – when he sat in Ilya's cupped hands his legs and tail spilled over the sides. He paddled with his paws.

Clara let out a sigh through her nose, and a button of snot flew out and landed on the pup's face. He ate it. Sergei clapped.

Ilya looked from child to child. 'Do you want to be on the side of people who believe he's not worth anything?'

There was a very elaborate silence.

Then: 'He looks hungry,' said Yana. 'Does he want some milk? I can get him a cupful.'

Ilya glanced at Feo, who nodded. 'Milk,' he said grandly, 'would be gratefully received.'

But as he spoke the pup jumped – more like a cat than a wolf – and landed, twisting, in the snow, hissing. As Feo scrambled to pick him up she heard screams, and cloaks flicked past her face as the children tore back up the long street to their homes.

'What's going on?'

'Something over there,' said Ilya, and then, as what they were running from became clear, he added, 'Oh, *chyort*.'

At the far end of the road were three horses, and on them three men. They stood, fairytale tall, sniffing the air.

Feo ducked behind the tree, scooping up the pup, pouring him down her shirt, trying to muffle his protests. Fear had turned her fingers wet and weak: she unsheathed her knife, dropped it. Ilya stood in full view, his eyes wide.

'Hide!' She reached out, seized his leg,

dragged him around the back of the tree trunk.

The men were coming closer. As they edged out of the glare of the sun, Feo saw them more clearly. Their jackets were not grey. They were shabby men with brown cloaks. Their shoes leaked toes.

Ilya let out a sigh of relief that ruffled his fringe. 'Requisitioners! Feo, they're not soldiers!'

'What are requisitioners?' Feo stayed firmly behind her tree.

'Servants of soldiers. Rakov sends them through the villages to collect food and animals.'

'Who for?'

'For the army.'

'That's stealing!' said Feo.

'Well, they don't call it that.'

'They should! Otherwise it's lying *and* stealing. So ... they're not looking for us?'

'I don't see how they could be. They just go from village to village, you know. They're not

very important. There's hundreds of them, though. People call them Rakov's locusts. Didn't they ever come to your house?'

'I suppose they were afraid of us. Wolves have that effect on some people.'

The horses came at a walk into the square.

'Where are the men?' called one of the riders.

The doors of the houses stayed shut. There was a crunch of slamming bolts.

Then, just as Feo was letting out a great sigh of relief, Yana stepped out of the largest house, holding a cup filled to the brim with milk in both hands. She froze as she saw the men.

'Where's your father, my lovely?' said the rider. He was a broad-shouldered man, with a large mole between his eyebrows.

'At – at the meeting.'

'Get him, then, my sweet, won't you?' He leered at Yana, showing teeth coloured a variety of different browns. 'Tell the men we're working under Rakov's orders. We've got a list, shows

what's owed by each village. In your case that's a hundred kilos of grain. Twenty kilos of meat. And I wouldn't say no to a kiss, if you've got one going spare.'

Yana backed away. 'But we can't,' she said. She was looking around, but the main street looked deserted. 'We would starve! There are little kids here.'

'That is a commonplace excuse.' The second man's voice was sharp. He was chewing on tobacco, and he spat it down into the snow where it lay steaming. 'We've heard it before. They will not starve. You will find a way.'

The first rider sniffed. 'What's that smell?'

Feo held her breath. She held the pup to her damp front.

Yana was icy white now. 'What ... smell?'

'Borscht!' said the rider, slapping his hand on his horse, who whinnied, easily alarmed.

'Ah,' said the second. His nostrils stretched. 'Good.' The men dismounted and pushed past

Yana into her house. 'Bring us soup. All of it. We'll find out if you hold any back. And vodka.'

Yana's voice was shaking. 'Or what?'

'You know the law – or we take your eldest boys, my sweet. Get us some soup and get the men, in that order.'

Feo's heart was straining against her ribcage in fury. 'I've got an idea,' she whispered to Ilya. 'I need your help.'

'Anything,' he said. 'What?'

She told him.

'It's too risky,' he said.

'I can't think of anything else. Can you?'

'No. But I'm still not sure –'

'Wait here.' Feo handed the pup to Ilya and ran to the nearest of the houses. She beckoned through the window. Two heads poked out of the door.

'Who here has good aim?' she whispered.

'I do,' said Sergei. 'And Bogdan.' He indicated a boy of about ten breathing through a half-

blocked nose. He didn't look promising. 'And Yana.' Sergei looked around, as if expecting to see her pop out from the snow. 'She's not here. They haven't taken her, have they?'

'No, Sergei, nothing like that. But I need help. Will you help me?'

Sergei looked from Feo, to Ilya, to the pup. 'Yes, definitely! Are we murdering someone?'

'Close enough. Come with me.' She led them, crouching low, back to the tree. 'We need snowballs. And we need to be quick,' said Feo. 'They're drinking vodka. I don't really know how long that takes.' She started packing together snowballs, making them as big as melons.

'Quicker,' said Ilya. His hands were fumbling in the snow. 'We need to be quicker.'

The smaller boys worked fast, but not fast enough. Feo doubled her pace. 'They need to hurt,' she said. 'Pack them tight. Good! That's enough.' She gathered the snowballs in her cloak. 'Come on.' She led the way to the house

nearest the horses – a small one with greying bricks – and ducked behind it. Ilya was still making snowballs as he ran. He was whispering instructions to himself under his breath, but when he saw she was looking at him he attempted a grin. It was lopsided and far more toothy than usual, but it gave her a burst of courage.

'When I shout,' she said, 'aim for those men's eyes. It's important: eyes and mouth, but especially eyes.'

'What's going –' began Sergei, but Ilya put a finger to his lips.

Feo turned to the woods, and cupped her hands to her mouth, and howled.

There was a beat of silence. Children's faces appeared at the windows all along the street.

Feo howled again, and from the woods came a reply: Grey's guttural cry, and then Black's. Feo nudged Ilya, and he joined in. His howl was surprisingly excellent.

The requisitioners stumbled out of the house, a jug of spirits slopping in the hand of the tallest. They ran, lumpen and staggering, towards their horses, struggling to cock their rifles. 'Wolves!' one of them roared, and then tripped over his toes and performed a painful-looking split on the ice.

Feo picked up a snowball in each hand. She howled again. The men heaved themselves on to their horses, their feet slipping drunkenly in and out of their stirrups.

And from the woods came the pack of wolves, running low, the fur on their backs rippling as they approached. Her wolves, Feo thought, definitely had a sense of theatre.

'Now!' cried Feo. As the men lifted their rifles, the children attacked. Sergei and Bogdan came charging out from behind the house, hurling snowballs at the men's eyes, hands, ears, gun barrels. Sergei's aim was erratic, but Bogdan's was brisk and true.

'Devil take –' roared a requisitioner. 'Wol–!' He raised his gun to his eye, just as Feo's snowball caught him in his open mouth.

Behind them, out of the corner of her eye, Feo saw the meeting house door burst open. The requisitioner's rifle rang out and a bullet drove into the snow, metres away from the approaching wolves.

'No!' Feo's heart caught in her chest. 'Get them in the eyes! Make sure they can't shoot!' She kept hurling snowballs, showering the men with ice that cut at their faces and knocked them sideways. Feo howled one last time, and Grey leapt, her jaws bared, at a horse's side. Feo hadn't meant her to get so close. She shouted, 'Grey, no! Back!' – but even as she did, the horses reared. Screaming in terror, they fled down the main road. The sacks, loosely empty over their saddles, bounced against their sides. The men, hanging blindly on to their horses' necks, disappeared over the horizon.