



Four hours later, Feo sat by a roaring fire in the middle of the square, wrapped in eight blankets, ducking the grateful kisses of strangers and chewing a kebab on a wooden stick. The juice of it ran down her wrist, and the pup kept trying to insert himself into her sleeve. Her head was still in a whirl.

Alexei had taken in what had happened faster than anyone. Pushing through the crowd of staring men, he had dragged her into their centre and raised her hand above her head like a

prizefighter.

'You see?' he had shouted to the men, who stood, staring and bewildered. *'That's what courage looks like. That's why Rakov is afraid of her!'*

She had wriggled free as soon as she could, but she was unable to avoid the stream of strangers approaching her, clapping heavy hands on her shoulders, embracing her with rough cheeks and callused palms, the women stroking her hair and pressing hot meat into her hands.

They had stayed back, though, from the wolves. In the flurry of the requisitioners' departure, a few stones had been thrown at the animals, but Feo had thrown stones at the throwers and her aim had been better, so it had all stopped fairly quickly.

'They're my friends,' Feo had said. 'They're no more likely to bite than I am.' She did not specify exactly how likely that was.

At last, unable to bear the attention, Feo took the wolves, a lantern and a haunch of beef behind the tree to hide until her head stopped spinning. The meat, at least, did not try to kiss her.

But the space behind the great tree was already occupied.

'Yana!' said Feo. 'Sorry, I was just –'

'Hiding? I know,' said Yana. She edged away from the wolves. 'I thought I'd get out of the way before the dancing starts.'

The thought of dancing was so terrible that Feo pushed it away out of sight. She took a bite of meat, and spoke round the edges of it. 'What happened with the meeting?' she asked.

Yana shrugged. 'Nothing. It was interrupted, wasn't it? They'll decide tomorrow. They'll decide not to fight. They always do. All they do is talk.' There was rage in her voice. It was odd, coming from so soft-looking a person. 'This isn't the first time Alexei's tried to make them. He's

been wanting to fight since he was thirteen. Rakov's never been so bad as this, though. They say he's going mad, did you know?'

'I think he's just plain evil. Those men – they didn't hurt you, did they?'

'No! They just wanted a drink. Though if the grown-ups keep going the way they are right now –' she gestured at the men dancing around the fire, their boots kicking out in the snow – 'there won't be any to give them when they come back.'

'Come back?'

Yana nodded. Her face, Feo thought, was horribly matter-of-fact. 'What you did was wonderful, Feo, but they'll come back. You don't know what it's like here. Rakov's men – the Tsar's army – they always come back for something. Or someone.'

The look on Yana's face made Feo's throat burn. She shook it away and turned to stare at the snow, poking at it with a stick. As she poked,

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the first twitchings of an idea began to flicker.

'But, look – look! See here.' She pointed to the prints Black's paws had left in the snow. 'Look.'

'They're big,' said Yana. 'Big enough to kill you.'

'Exactly! Those men – they won't come back if they see the prints, will they?'

'But the next time it snows they'll be covered,' said Yana. 'It's not ... They're lovely prints, but it's not a long-term solution, Feo.'

'You could make them again, I think!'

'What?' Sergei peeked from around the tree trunk. 'Are you planning to leave the black wolf here? That would be amazing! I'd take good care of it!'

'No!' Feo shook her head so hard that her hair got caught up in her meat. 'Black and I go together. That would be like leaving behind my fingers. And, anyway,' she added, as Sergei pouted, 'he wouldn't stay for long if I left: I can't *make* him do anything.'

'So you can't help us.'

'Maybe I can. I've got an idea. We'll need wood, thick wood. And knives. Can you get those? And some people to help. And Black, as the model.'

The whittling took less time than Feo had expected. Ilya was meticulously careful; Yana was unexpectedly fast with her hands. They hacked the wood into squares with an axe, and then chipped away with kitchen knives until paw shapes began to emerge, very slowly, from the grain.

Every now and then Sergei would yelp, and the snow around him would be flecked with red, but he tried to bite Yana when she suggested he give up on his, so they left him to it.

When they had four lumps of wood carved roughly into something like the shape of wolf paws, Feo took them into her lap and rubbed the edges with the rough sacking of her bag. 'To blunt the edges,' she explained. 'Wolves are

smooth.'

Sergei watched with his tongue poked out in concentration.

'There. Now we need string. Do you have any?'

'String's valuable round here,' said Yana. 'But I'll try.'

She returned in ten minutes, her expression guilty. 'I ... borrowed it, from Papa's spare boots.'

'Thank you. Now – look!' Feo looped the string around her feet, then lashed the wolf paws to the soles of her boots so that the print faced downwards. She took the other two in her hands. On all fours she ran a few steps, turned, galloped the other way. She tried to keep her feet close together: wolves run in a compact line. Behind her, the prints of a wolf cut into the snow.

'You could do it every day! And we'll get Black to mark the territory. He's an alpha,' said Feo.

'That way you'll be safe from other wolves.'

'How? Mark how?'

'Well ...' Feo said. 'You know. They pee.'

'I don't want them peeing in my room!'

'No, just on trees! And the outside of houses. It has a scent in it. It warns other wolves to keep away.'

'Like writing a "Keep Out" sign?'

'Yes. Peeing is wolf writing.'

'Ugh.'

'It's an old trick. It's the only trick I taught them. It's what keeps us safe, at home, from the wolves we wild coming back.'

Sergei asked, 'Does it work for humans too? I mean, if I peed on my sister's bed, would she have to leave?'

Ilya let out a snort of laughter.

'No,' said Feo. 'I tried, when I was much smaller. I was angry with Mama about something. It *definitely* didn't work.' The thought of her mother – who, in response to

that incident, had sighed, and then laughed, and swung her body into the tin bath – sent up such a spurt of longing that Feo felt the snow sway under her. She forced the longing down.

Grigory's head peered around the tree. 'Ah! There you are. I heard laughing. You're wanted by the fire. Dancing!'

There was music playing outside the meeting house.

'It's all for you!' said Clara. She gestured at the fire, at the circle of waiting adults, and the man with a fiddle poised under his chin. 'To say thank you! You and the boy are going to do a dance!'

Fresh horror drenched over Feo, far worse than when faced with guns and requisitioners.

'Thank you!' she said. 'But I don't dance.'

'Oh, come on! *I* dance,' said Sergei. He swivelled his hips and windmilled his arms. 'See?'

'Wolf wilders don't dance,' said Feo. She

wrinkled her nose at Clara, and smiled. She hoped the fear didn't show in her face. Feo hated dancing. Dancing was unambiguously to do with being watched.

'You'll have to,' said Yana. She smiled apologetically. 'It's easier just to do it.'

'I don't know it.'

'Yes, you do! Dance, wolf girl!' said Sergei.

In fact, Feo did know the steps to this music: everyone did. Mama had taught her as soon as she was old enough to walk – just in case, Marina had said. Everyone should be able to dance one dance.

The woman's part wasn't difficult. You made little doll gestures with your hands, kept your head and neck still. For men, lots of stamping and head-tossing. If you had a skirt, you swished it. Feo sighed and stuck out her elbows, and swished her cloak. Yana clapped politely. The adults murmured contentedly.

Ilya stepped forward and bowed. He was

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grinning nervously, but there was a spark in his eyes.

'Can we try to do it as quickly as possible?' said Feo. The heat in her face had nothing at all to do with the fire. 'I'm not very good at dancing.'

'Dance!' cried someone in the crowd. Feo suspected it was Alexei. She glared.

The music rose, quickened, peaked. Ilya leapt upwards. Boys do not have skirts to swish – but as Ilya jumped and spun, scissoring his heels in the air, snow flew up around them, and the air itself seemed to swish for him. He leapt again, higher, and as the wolves paced into the circle to investigate, Ilya crouched and split-leapt high over White's back.

Feo let out a gulping laugh of surprise. White snuffed primly. There was laughter from the adults, but Ilya's face was shining with a white, bright seriousness.



Feo stepped through her part, keeping her head down: two skips, twist the wrists. Ilya was ignoring the steps: he found a spot of ice and began to pirouette, one leg straight out from his waist and snow flying from the sole of his shoe. Clara started counting his turns, but at eleven she got confused and cheered instead. The crowd around them was growing. Ilya jumped

like a cat and landed in front of Feo, and crouched, kicking his legs out like a Cossack.

He didn't dance like a soldier, or like a sharp-wristed child who could not light a fire. He danced, Feo thought, like a lost boy found: like a victory parade.

Feo danced herself to a stop. Nobody, she thought, was watching her: so she knelt down by the wolves, one arm round Black's shoulders, staring. Even the wolves seemed more than usually fascinated. The snow had begun to fall again, and the villagers widened their circle to give Ilya space as he threw himself backwards – hands landing wrist-deep in snow – and flipped upright to land on the tips of his toes. He did not wobble. The top of his head had gathered a snow cap. The fiddle-player quickened his pace, and Ilya flew in a circle of leaps and spins, snow and sweat flying off his face. Feo hugged Black tighter, and scrunched up her face so nobody would see the pride in her eyes. She whistled

through her fingers.

He came to a stop as the music softened, and let his arms fall to his sides.

There was silence. Ilya's shoulders fell a little, and his ears began to glow pink. He looked down at his shoes.

The roar of applause hit them like a solid wave. It was architectural.

Ilya let out a choking, strangled snort of happiness. 'I did tell you,' he said to Feo, 'that I never wanted to be a soldier.'



Feo tried many times in the next hours to get Ilya away by himself, so they could be gone. Alexei had stuffed their packs full of cheese, dried sausage and nuts, but every time they crept away from him he seized her and towed her to meet another bearded man or cloaked woman.

'The wolf girl! Look at her!' he kept saying. He grinned at her. 'Look – see, this is the one who attacked Rakov with a ski! You have *cheese* older than her, Grigory! You're willing to let her be braver than you?'

So it was pitch-black by the time Feo found Ilya by himself, and the panic in her chest was rising.

'We need to sleep, Feo,' he said. He was stretched out on a straw-sack mattress on Sergei's floor, looking ostentatiously comfortable. 'And it's dark out there. Tomorrow will be soon enough.'

'It *won't*, Ilya! We need to go *now*. It's Sunday! The city's still more than a day away! And then we need to find a way to get *in*, and get her *out*.'

'Six or seven hours won't make any difference.'

'They *will*, Ilya!' Her voice, she could hear, was growing shrill.

Ilya closed his eyes and snored loudly.

Feo shook him. The snoring grew louder, and the eyes scrunched more tightly closed.

Outside the window the fire was still burning, and the laughter was getting louder and wilder. Men were thumping their fists against their chests; women were dancing in the snow. As she watched, Feo felt her chest contract. She had never been around so many strangers in her life.

Alexei dashed past outside, Clara on his shoulders. He slipped and skidded in the snow. Sergei chased him, trying to touch his cloak, sliding in the ice and shrieking with past-bedtime glee.

Feo thought for one second about joining them, and then pressed herself back against the wall. It wasn't time for playing. They were strangers: everyone, really, was a stranger, even Ilya. Feo tried to fight back the rising panic. It prickled in her stomach, an unfamiliar fear. Even the snow in this place was thinner and

trodden flat. It didn't talk, she thought; it was mute snow. Sitting still became too much to bear.

She ducked outside and caught Alexei by the coat as he ran past.

'Lady Wolf!' He snapped his ankles together and saluted, laughing.

'I need help.'

'Name it!'

'You said you'd tell me about the gates?'

'Ah! The gates. The gates to the city?' He seemed giddy, fire-crazy. 'The gates to heaven? Please specify.'

'Alexei.'

'Sorry. Right, yes.' He grinned. 'But you've got to admit it's exciting! It's happening!'

'The *gates*, Alexei. To the centre of the city. Please. It's important.'

'Well, they're guarded. They didn't use to be, but now Rakov has proxy rule over the whole city. He'll have put them on watch for you, I

think. And they check the papers of everyone. At least, everyone who looks like they might be trouble. Everyone poor.'

'And how do I get past?'

'I don't know.'

Feo stared at him. 'You said you did!'

'No, I didn't! I said I'd tell you what I knew, that's all.'

Feo turned away from him without a word. She didn't glare; this was too serious for glaring.

'No, wait, Feo!' He sounded more sober. 'I'm sorry. There's a castle a day's ride from here. It'll be useful if there's another storm. Once you're there, it's only four hours' walk to the city gates, or two hours on a horse. We can go there tomorrow. We can get the rest of the village to join us. It's a good place to spend the night. It's north-west from here, to the left of the big pine wood as you approach. Nobody lives there: it was burnt out in a fire years ago. The Tsar thinks it's bad luck, you know, to live in a house

that burnt down, and so everyone who's fashionable has to believe it too. Ironic, when you think how much his army enjoys setting fire to things.'

Clara came running, and he scooped her up. 'Come and find some *shashlyk*?' he said to Feo, but he didn't wait for the answer, leaping off into the dark with the little girl squealing in his arms.

Feo looked around, her mouth growing dry. Many of the adults had started to sing, to dance erratically. One of them accidentally put a cigar out on the chin of another.

I should never have agreed to come, she thought.

Feo ducked back into the house. She pulled on the freshly laundered shirt Yana had given her in exchange for her wolf-stained one.

Ilya won't help me, she thought, and tipped out Ilya's bag. She pulled out the lantern and the bowl for the compass. Mama doesn't matter to

him. And Alexei only cares about his revolution. And if he won't help me, why should I help him?

She picked up the pup from his place by the fire, and pushed him down her newly clean shirt. He was affronted but made no noise.

I'll just have to find Mama by myself. I work better alone, anyway. I know about alone.

The wolves were standing guard outside, and they too made no sound as Feo led them, crouched low, out behind the buildings, away from the great oak tree and northwards into the night.



They'd gone an hour, through scattered trees, the lantern swinging from Feo's wrist, when both Feo and Grey heard the noise that was neither their own breath nor the wolves' paws.

The wolf growled.

'What is it?' Feo breathed.

But it wasn't hard to identify: it was the sound of a horse neighing, and then, just audible, the coughing of a human. Feo held the lantern high, but there were only trees. She spat on her fingers and pinched out the lantern's wick.

'It's probably just a traveller,' she whispered to Black. 'Or,' as a sudden warm thought came to her, 'Ilya's followed after all!' But she dared not call out.

White, next to her, stiffened. She had smelt him.

'Hush, *lapushka*,' whispered Feo. She knelt in the snow to stroke White's head, to quieten her. 'We're alone. We're not here to fight. No howling, not now.'

It was no good. Feo had never taught the wolves to be silent. White flicked her nose to the moon and howled.

There was an exclamation from the left. Snow-covered branches moved.

Feo's whole body blanched with fear. She

stared around. The thicker trees were a hundred metres away; Feo ducked her head low and tugged at the three wolves, urging them to go ahead of her. 'Quickly!'

The going was harder as the canopy closed over them and the moonlight grew dimmer. There were fallen trees and bushes with snaking roots. Black, by far the largest, slowed them: the bushes grew too thickly for his bulk to slide between them.

'West a little now. We'll be faster like this,' Feo whispered. She walked carefully, her hands outstretched to feel for trees. 'Come on. We'll find a willow or something: somewhere to hide.'

But as she spoke, Grey turned and began to run, head down, back the way they had come.

'Grey, come back!' Feo hissed. The other two wolves sniffed the air, nudged her and followed. 'White? Black? Please?'

Feo scrubbed the frost from her upper lip and looked around. She took the pup out from inside

her top and stroked him, more to calm herself than to calm him. Something rustled near her feet, and she jumped so violently that she squeezed him too tight and he mewed loudly in protest.

The something rustled again.

'Black? Grey?' whispered Feo. She looked over her shoulder. The shadows moved. 'White?'

She could neither smell nor hear anything, but her skin was prickling with fear. Something nearby was breathing: human, or wolf? Feo unsheathed her knife, and ran to stand with her back against a tree.

A young soldier came bursting out of the undergrowth, a lantern swinging from one hand, a gun in the other. Feo had time only to let out the first half of a scream before he grabbed her and smacked a hand over her mouth.

The trees parted and out of them rode Rakov, his horse led by another soldier on foot.

'Halt!' Rakov called into the night. 'Feo Petrovna!' He pronounced it 'Fear'.

Feo struggled, kicking at the soldier's ankles.

'My head requisitioner reported having seen you. It seemed profoundly improbable that you would be so stupid. But apparently not.'

She tried to bite the soldier's hand, but he slapped her face and she screamed, '*Help!*' Who, though? There was only her.

She stamped hard on the soldier's instep, pulled one hand free and threw her knife into the darkness: it grazed past the foot soldier's shoulder and he swore, both hands on his gun, trying to cock it in the darkness. Rakov sat, unmoving, on his horse. The lamplight shone directly on his smile.

Grey came flying out of the wood. Feo had never seen anything run so fast.

The young soldier aimed his gun at her head but the wolf was on him. She rose on her hind legs and tore at his arm. He shrieked and ran,

and Rakov's horse reared, its hooves drumming at the air.

Feo screamed and kicked out at the soldier holding her. As she did, Grey leapt at his shoulder and tore at his skin. The man screeched like a drunkard and turned, bleeding, clawing at the wolf with his nails. His face was lit up with rage and pain.

It was like being protected by a myth, by legend and spit.

Feo's legs loosened. She ran stumbling through the dark, heading for the pine trees with low branches, the pup in her arms, looking over her shoulder as she ploughed through the snow. She reached the nearest tree and scrambled against the trunk for a foothold, trying to close her ears to the hideous screaming and growling coming from below. Feo hauled herself into the lowest branches, and turned to see the second soldier run, stumbling, into the woods.

There were pine needles in her face. Her heart was beating so hard it shook her cloak.

A shot rang out.

'No!' Feo screamed, but it came out as a wordless roar.

There was a growl of pure animal fury and Black rocketed out of the shadows, followed by White, making straight for Rakov's feet. His horse let out a shriek, and Feo twisted in the tree to see him jerk sideways, away from the wolf, his gun dropping into the snow. The horse kicked and turned to gallop through the trees, tearing through the branches and whinnying in terror, the rider pressed flat against its back.

She had expected White and Black to chase him, to kill him, but they stood, their noses touching Grey's fur.

For one terrible moment Feo thought they were biting her. Then she saw they were licking a wound in Grey's side and she let out a cry, higher and louder than the last. Snow fell from

the tree into her face and mouth. The wolf was not moving.

'No!' Feo dropped down to the ground, landed in shin-deep snow. 'I'm coming!'

She ran, tripping on roots under the snow, towards her trio of wolves, then stumbled to a halt, digging her fists into her eyes. Her mother's favourite wolf lay on her side, her body on top of the pistol. There was blood in her breath.

'Where are you hurt?' Feo crouched, laid a hand on Grey's muzzle. The blood was spreading through the snow, still running from the wolf's stomach. Feo whispered, 'No. No, no, no, no.'

The wolf's eyes opened, rested on the girl's face, closed again.

'I'm so sorry – I ... What've I done?' Feo thought of Ilya sleeping by the fire, of Alexei's axe, of the safety of the vast bonfire. The pup nuzzled at Feo's hands: Feo brushed him away.

'I'll get a – I'll make you a bandage. Like we did for White. It'll make it better.' Feo fumbled for the hem of her cloak to tear off a strip of cloth. 'Think of Mama, yes? Think of how happy she'll be to see you when we find her.' Tears were casting the moonlit night into a blur. Feo's chest heaved, and she struggled to rip the material. 'Please, please stay with me,' she whispered. 'Don't – don't go.'

The wolf's breath was more audible now: it sounded thick and wet.

'I think ...' – a gasp, and she controlled her voice – 'I think this will help.'

Feo tried to wrap the bandage around the wolf's wound, but it was so dark and so cold. She had never known snow so cold. Grey shied away from the bandage and shivered. Feo had never seen a wolf shiver.

She untied her cloak from under her neck and draped it over Grey's flanks.

The wolf gave a growl of pain.

It was like watching a forest burn, like watching an army fall.

Feo lay down beside the she-wolf, slipping in the ice and snow. Grey's side barely moved as she drew slow breaths, but she moved her muzzle to rest against Feo's chin. Feo touched her nose on the wolf's nose and bit her lips together with a desperate effort at silence. She kissed Grey's ears.

She had never dared to kiss a wolf as proud and royal as Grey.

Every minute fresh sobs wracked Feo's throat and chest, but she beat them down so that they could not shake the wolf where she lay.

Black came and sat on the other side of Feo, and breathed wolf breath into her hair. White stood guard.

Feo and Grey lay side by side until sunrise. Feo's body went from cold, to agonising, to numb. Shivers ran through every inch of her skin, but she clenched her fists.

The wolf began to move her shoulders as the dawn came. Her movements were very slow.

Feo whispered, 'Please don't go. Wait until we find Mama. She'll know what to do.'

Grey gave a little panting, whistling noise. Feo gulped in breath. 'You can't die. I love you. I love you too much for you to die.'

She focused on breathing on to the wolf's nose, so that the air the wolf inhaled would be soft and warm and familiar. She screwed up her eyes so that they could not leak. Grey had never liked tears, nor rain: only snow.

The sun rose over the forest in splashes of red and purple. When the light hit the wolf's closed eyes she must have felt it, for her hind legs quaked with the pain as she heaved herself to her feet.

'Grey!' Hot hope surged into Feo's chest, and she sprang forward to help. 'Are you feeling better?'

But Grey's footfall was not steady. The wolf

paced to the edge of the forest and dropped there. She arranged her great paws to point north. Her muzzle, rough and soldierly, faced the dark and the journey ahead. Her chest rose, and fell.

And did not rise again.

Feo curled up into a ball and stuffed handfuls of hair into her mouth, and roared into the snow.

The pup was nuzzling at her neck, mewling feverishly, trying to get back close to warmth, but when Feo tried to reach out to scoop him nearer she found she could not move. Misery and guilt had frozen her joints where ice and snow could not.

The pup stumbled away from her towards Grey. When he reached the body, he clambered up on to her side, nuzzling at her jaw. It seemed to take him several moments before he realised something was wrong. He sniffed the blood. He gave a tiny, piccolo growl. And then he set back

his head and howled.

Feo's hands shook so hard they lifted her gloves off her fingers. The pup's first real howl was thin and high. It made Feo want to cover her ears or to scream. But she sat on her hands and kept her eyes open.

'I'm so sorry, Grey,' she whispered. 'I'll kill him.'

Slowly, she knelt up. The trees and wind together sang a nothing song.

Black and White howled too, then. The sound pulled down icicles from the trees. It was rougher and more ragged than any howl Feo had heard. It sounded of things lost and not regained. Feo crawled over to Black and knelt with her head against his chest, and, dizzy and exhausted, she wept as if the world itself had broken.



Marina had always said that the Russians, of all nations, know best how to meet death. You treat your wounded, bury your bodies. You cry, and you sing, and you cook. You do these things not for yourself but for the people left behind.

In this case, for two grown wolves and a wolf pup with a runny nose and a shiver, there was nothing to cook, but Feo shared out some of the dried elk in her pack. She ate some snow. She wiped her face.

Then Feo began to dig using her gloved hands. Digging through the snow was not difficult, but every inch of her body ached, and her arms were slow and unfamiliar. The thought of what her mother would say when she knew was terrible; it sat blackly in her insides.

Soon Feo's gloves met earth, earth frozen solid and harder than rock. She sat back and wiped sweat and snow and dirt across her face. White seemed suddenly to understand what she was doing; the wolf edged Feo aside with her

bloody muzzle and set her claws into the earth. Black joined her. At first each went straight down, two separate holes in a row – and Feo couldn't think of a way of showing them what she wanted. Cautiously – she did not know what sort of blood thoughts they might be having – she nudged Black and thumped her glove at the untouched earth between their holes, collapsing it.

Feo paused, and warmed a little snow in her mouth for the pup to eat. She felt very old and tired, more than she had felt in her life before. She had never been more ready to kill.

She scratched Grey's name into a tree and, below it, Rakov's. Below that, just in case he returned – just in case – she scratched: *We are coming.*

Grey was far heavier in death than Feo expected and she staggered sideways, but it would have been wrong to drag her. At the last moment her arms gave out and she half

lowered, half dropped her into the grave, then pushed the earth back. The wolves let her. Feo stamped on the earth and kicked snow on top, ignoring the numbness in her feet.

The snow was mixed with mud, and it was obvious someone had been there, but when she felt sure the smell of blood had gone and no stray foxes would come and find Grey, she sat down on top of the grave, stroking the disordered fur of the pup, and rocked backwards and forwards with her chin on her knees. The pup's tired keening kept time. As she rocked, Feo sang, a lullaby mothers sang to newborns.

Black and White lay around her in a ring, tail to nose and still as stones. Their eyes were open. Surrounded by their warmth, Feo's last waking thought was one of small victories: there will always be things that money cannot buy, things that you have to earn. It seemed right that Grey, the bravest creature Feo had known, should

have her grave marked with something beyond the reach even of the Tsar: a wreath of wolves.

