

CHAPTER 1

Each time she passed the door, with its locks and bars, Vasilisa paused in her pacing, and stood listening, her body poised and still.

Nothing new. Just the sounds of the quiet house beyond.

It felt like her life, these past few days, had consisted entirely of closed, endless circles. Since discovering her body could heal itself within short hours of being injured, she had been unable to concentrate on reading, unable to settle on any pastime or distraction.

Instead, she had walked ceaseless circuits about the room. Her mind, too, whirled through a closed circuit of thoughts, beginning and ending with the unthinkable, for a serf: escape, for herself and her brother, Pyotr. They would flee, away from this place, from this master, and into the most far flung regions of the empire. Syabera, perhaps. Somewhere safely remote, where Prince Konstantin would never find them.

But how? She kept running up against the impasse of its impossibility. How to bend the bars stronger than adamantite that covered the windows? How to break impenetrable doors?

Alternating with those thoughts was the far more insidious, frightening question of what her master had done to her, and possibly to Pyotr, for she had not seen her brother in weeks. She didn't know whether he was exhibiting the same symptoms or not.

She had tested her newfound ability to heal swiftly several days earlier, by breaking off the leg of a chair that was evidently far flimsier than it looked, since she had barely needed to exert any force at all to splinter the wood. Prying off a sharp sliver, she had used it to slice her forearm, her leg, the back of her hand. Sure enough, they had all healed within the hour.

And so, here she was: trapped and changed, in some profound way that she didn't pretend to understand.

Still no sound from the other side of the locked and barred doors. She resumed her circuit around the perimeter of the vast, elegantly-appointed room.

Damask draperies, thick-pile carpets and a canopied bed, piled high with mattresses, all served as markers of a luxurious lifestyle

that her childhood self, growing up with her extended family in a cramped cottage, would have had difficulty comprehending. And yet, this dull ache of fear, which underlay every moment of her day and night, was more insidious, more wearing, than anything she could remember having experienced as a child. This elegant, luxurious room kept her captive and vulnerable, helpless to do anything except wait for the return of her jailer, a man as elegant, handsome and charming as the room itself. Her handsome prince.

A bitter thought. She had been fooled. Against her better judgment, she had been fooled. When he had penetrated the anonymity of her serfdom, when he had exerted his considerable charm--abetted by his exquisitely golden good looks--she had begun to believe that he was different from his sister, and to accept the fairy-tale he had woven for her.

But like this room, whose charm and elegance drew attention away from its true nature as a prison, she had eventually come to understand the true scope of his mendacity. And it wasn't just she who had paid the price for her credulity; Pyotr had also suffered for it.

Vasya drew in a slow breath against the suffocating pressure of her own guilt, as she approached the window, with its heavy, inflexible metal bars, installed in front of the leaded panes. The sight of the luminous, indigo sky outside gave her pause. Over the past week, the days had grown noticeably longer, and Vasya chafed at the change. If ever she contrived to find where that monster had imprisoned her brother, and to get him away from this place, the longer days and ever-shortening nights would have to be factored into her plans, making them that much less likely to succeed.

But now, after a long day: twilight. She couldn't see the sunset from her window, but she could just make out the pale glow of the moon, peeking out between the dark silhouettes of budding branches. Forest ringed the estate.

She lingered briefly, frowning at the luminous, rounded shape as it rose, a slender fingernail away from being full.

It promised to be a bright, clear night. Perfect for running away--except that even leaving aside the bars that covered the doors and windows, her room was over four stories above the sloping gardens, still ragged from winter's ravages. And she had yet to learn of her brother's whereabouts--or indeed, whether he still lived at all.

If he didn't--well then, there wasn't much point in any of it. If not for her brother's involvement in this, she would have kept her head down and accepted her fate. She was a serf. Servitude was her lot in life, and growing up as she had, she knew that abuse often came along with it. Her owner had the right to treat her as he would, and she had little choice but to accept it. The prince had taken the abuse to a new level, but it was more of the same kind of thing she had endured, working for his sister through the years.

And yet, though the same rationale applied to her brother, who was no less a serf than she, Vasya wanted better for him. She knew it was wrong. She had no right to expect any such thing for anyone enserfed in the Empire of Rynska. But she did.

And so for her brother, she would break the law, become a fugitive and do whatever she had to, to provide him with a chance at a better life. Surely a life of stealth and hiding--and the possibility of freedom--was better than this? Though she had no inkling of his ultimate plans, Vasya had grown convinced that Konstantin had no intention of allowing them to return to their former lives.

Vasilisa resumed her pacing.

When she completed the latest circuit, she paused by the door once again, listening. This time, her ears pricked to the sound of shuffling footsteps, far in the distance, but drawing nearer as she waited. She relaxed slightly. The prince wore boots, and walked with a smooth, confident stride. His footsteps echoed off the marble floors as a series of hard, staccato clicks, not easily confused with the soft-soled shuffle of house serf feet.

The shuffling steps drew closer. Vasya crouched down, watching the outline of the removable panel, cut into the bottom of the door. The footsteps stopped in front of her room, and she heard the familiar sound of someone fumbling with the latch that held the panel shut.

"Hello?" Vasilisa pitched her voice carefully: thin, sweet, vulnerable. Helpless. Which she was. "Please. Help me."

The fumbling with the latch stopped. Vasilisa swallowed, trying to keep the tiny thread of hope from expanding into something bigger--something out of all proportion with that one, brief pause.

"Please," she said again, struggling to maintain the sad, piteous tone, when she could feel the tremor of that hope creeping into her throat. Never, in all this past week, had the mysterious attendant--or attendants?--paused in their unwavering routine. Three times a day,

the panel opened and a tray slid through, containing food, and a syringe loaded with a viscous serum. In the morning and the evening, the tray was followed by a clean, empty chamber pot. She'd slide the previous, used chamber pot out, followed by the previous meal's food tray. The panel would close.

Four days ago, she had reached out through the open panel, in an attempt to connect with the person on the other side of the door. She had gotten a nasty slice on her forearm for her troubles--a cut that had been the first indication of her accelerated healing abilities. That attendant had whispered, "Don't be tryin' that again, or you'll be lucky to keep your hands at all."

And still the prince didn't come--hadn't come for well over a week. Heavenly father be praised.

"Help me. I'm begging you," she said now.

The person on the other side resumed fumbling with the latch, but this time, it sounded hurried. The panel opened, the tray slid through. The panel closed. The footsteps started moving away.

Vasilisa straightened, her eyes widening. "No! Just news--that's all I want." The footsteps paused. In her desperation, the words came tumbling out, falling over themselves in their eagerness to persuade. "My brother. He's locked up somewhere else. In the other wing. I'm desperate. He's just a boy--fourteen years old. He was sick too--" that was the story the prince had fed them, the story that persuaded Vasya to consent to being separated from her brother. The story that had persuaded her to go into the captivity of this room. It was for her own safety, and for the safety of the others on the estate. The illness could sometimes result in violent outbursts that needed to be contained, he said, by way of explaining the bars on the doors and windows.

"I don't know if he's alive or dead. Some information, anything at all, would help me."

Silence. Then, the shuffle of feet, slowly coming back and stopping in front of the door. Silence once more.

"Please," she repeated. The desperation was not feigned. Given what that monster had done to her... She closed her eyes, trying not to imagine what kinds of horrors the prince might have visited upon her gentle, silken-haired little brother.

Vasya swallowed. She should have hidden him better, should have protected him.

"The lad in the east wing?"

The gruff question startled her. It had been days since she had heard a voice other than her own.

"Yes. Yes, that's him. That's Pyotr." She couldn't quite keep the hope, the eagerness, from her tone and she thought, please, don't let this be another one of the prince's games.

"He's fine, at least that I could tell, milady," the man murmured.

She didn't recognize the voice. The whisperer who had slashed her arm earlier in the week had spoken with a strong Gyorgan intonation, while this man's accent had a northern flavor. Arkongelsh region, perhaps.

"I'm new, so I don't know how he's been all this time. But they sent me to give him his tray this morning. When I collected it later, I saw that he had eaten and taken his medicine."

His medicine. Vasilisa glanced at the loaded glass syringe on the tray. She had been emptying hers into the chamber-pot, ever since the Gyorgan had sliced her arm, and she had watched the trickle of blood coagulate in moments, the skin swiftly sealing itself into a tidy, silvery scar.

She knew too much to be able to trust anything the prince did. If the substance he insisted they inject had changed her enough to promote accelerated healing, then she could only wonder at what else it had changed in her.

Even now, she glanced at her scar and the familiar question slipped into her mind: what kind of devil's work is this? She had discarded such superstition years ago, but nothing she had read in the fields of science and medicine could explain such swift healing.

She heard the man outside the door shuffle his feet, perhaps in response to her long silence.

"They warned me you'd try to get me to talk to you. They said I should plug my ears."

She let out a wry laugh. "Am I so impossible to resist?"

"Master's instructions, they said." A pause. "And I guess they were right. Your voice..."

"What about my voice?" she asked wearily, when it seemed he was not going to continue.

"It... gets into me," he said, after a pause, as if he were struggling to find the right words. "It--it's in my brain, in my blood." A silence. "I don't know that I'll forget your voice, milady. Ever. It makes me want to see you, to talk to you. I'd open the door if I had the key."

Vasilisa frowned. What a strange thing to say. Her voice was perfectly normal--no-one had ever before remarked upon it.

Then, as the rest of what he said sunk in, she brushed the thought aside. He'd open the door...? "You'd help me?" She couldn't believe her luck. "You'd defy the prince--"

"I'd do anything for you, milady." He sounded strangely fervent. "Just to see you."

If it were a trap, she'd willingly take the risk. So the prince would punish her--what could he do to her that he hadn't done already? Kill her, perhaps? She shrugged.

"Are you able to get the key? For my room and for Pyotr's?"

"I'll look into it, milady. I'll find out what I can."

"You must be careful--no-one can suspect."

"Yes, yes, of course." A pause. "I will bring your breakfast tomorrow, milady--and with it, whatever news I can discover."

"May God bless you--what's your name?"

"Boris Mikhailovich."

"May God bless you, Boris Mikhailovich. Be safe in your mission. My brother and I are depending on you."

"I will not fail you, milady." The fervid intensity of his tone seemed strange to Vasilisa, but she wasn't about to question it.

"I will wait for you. Till tomorrow, then."

As his shambling footsteps faded into the distance, Vasilisa reached for the tray he had left, only to find that her hands were shaking. Glancing down at herself, she realized it wasn't just her hands. Her entire body was trembling.

This was what hope did. She closed her eyes and drew in slow, deep breaths, as she tried to steady herself. She already knew it would be a long, difficult night, wracked with anxiety, and, far worse, with the faint promise of a safe future, far away from this place, for herself and her beloved Pyotr.



Sleep evaded her.

After days of sketching the same endless circles--pacing through the same room and cycling through the same thoughts, the closed circuit had been broken and a new series of possibilities had emerged.

The best and most insidiously enticing of them was never far from her mind: if Boris could get the keys, there was the possibility

that she and Pyotr would just be able to walk out of this house. Simple as that.

They'd have to be stealthy--there were others of the prince's serfs in the house whom they'd have to avoid. But still, if they were able to get away, what kind of distance would they manage to put between themselves and this place, before the master returned?

She lay awake, her mind compulsively working through one scenario after another, beginning with Boris getting caught and her hope being snuffed out, just like that. Or perhaps he would let her out, while Prince Konstantin watched, a smile painted across the perfection of his disturbingly handsome face. She'd creep from the room, and her hope would turn to horror as she realized it was a trap. A third scenario, in which she arrived at Pyotr's room to find him barely alive--or worse, no longer living--and she fell to weeping by his side, no longer caring if she escaped or not.

And so the variations continued to play out, until finally she fell into a restless, exhausted sleep.

She dreamed of her childhood. Her grandmother's face, peering down at the cluster of cowering children--Vasya and her cousins--hollow cheeks and knobby features deeply shadowed in the winter lamplight.

"Be good, little children," the old woman hissed. "Don't make a peep, or Baba Yaga will hear and she'll take you away with her forever."

Vasya and her cousins nodded solemnly, suitably cowed by the threat of Baba Yaga, the evil witch, who travelled on a flying mortar. She lived in a house with tall chicken legs that walked about the countryside, collecting up children, who were never heard from again. Baba Yaga would eat the children for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Then, for dessert, she'd save the sweetest, tiniest, most succulent little babies--or at least, that's what Vasya's cousin claimed.

Baba Yaga aside, Vasya's grandmother alone seemed terror enough. Tall, thin and knotted as a hollow old tree whose branches remained bare and bleak even in midsummer, the old woman moved with a creaky inexorability that made her all the more frightening to the cluster of grandchildren she regularly terrorized with harsh words and beatings.

There were other things to worry about as well, like the water rusalka that lived in the pond near one of the fields Vasya's family farmed. They said that more than one of the villagers had been lost to

the creature's seductive song. Vasya had always believed that she would be able to resist--after all, what could be so compelling about a song, no matter how lovely?

And then, one day, as she and her cousin Nadezhda, who at eight, was two years her senior, were walking back from delivering lunch to the menfolk, she heard it. Nadezhda, who always began singing loudly as soon as they entered the haunted wood, began singing even more loudly. Her voice was far from sweet, and her sense of pitch was the most imaginative thing about her. She sang an old lullaby,

"One day soon
 You'll be a warrior
 Bayushki bayu
 You'll ride off on your proud stallion
 I will cry for you.
 You'll protect us
 From the Vilnyets
 Bayuskhi bayu
 I'll give you a holy ikon
 Nadezhda
 For to guard you too."

It helped, but only a little, because still, there was the other singing underneath it. It was sad, but so beautiful that it made Vasya feel warm and tingly inside. Surely, if she just paused a moment and listened, it would carry her away to a safe, beautiful place, where her grandmother would never smack her with the wooden spoon or pull her about by the ear or pinch her because she had spilled precious flour or over-carded the wool.

But Nadezhda pulled her along, ever rushing, and singing loudly to drown out the water rusalka's song... except that she lost her grip on Vasya's hand. Vasya's steps slowed, even as her cousin's momentum kept her moving forward. As Nadezhda broke away, the sound of her voice faltered, and the rusalka's signing flooded Vasya's ears, suffusing her body in moments. Before she even realized what she was doing, she had started towards the pond.

Nadezhda resumed singing, more loudly than ever,
 "Sleep my child, my lovely baby
 Bayushki bayu
 I will tell you tales of
 Fairies, gods and princes too.
 Songs of heroes,

Songs of sadness
 Bayushki bayu
 While you slumber, I will guard you
 Bayushki bayu."

She kept repeating the same refrain in her loud, unmelodious singsong voice as she threw herself at Vasya, knocking her against the trunk of a tree, then seized her wrist and dragged her back to the path, while Vasya struggled furiously and tried to pull free.

But her cousin wouldn't let go--she continued singing, even though by now, the sound of the rusalka's song throbbed through Vasya's blood, whispering to her soul, telling her she had to follow the voice, the ethereal music, wherever it might lead. But still her cousin dragged her along, until finally, they stepped out of the dappled forest and into the bright sunshine of the fields. The song cut off abruptly, as if a thick door had been closed, silencing it.

But Vasilisa never forgot that sound, and even all these years later, it haunted her restless dreams.

She woke to the lingering, ethereal touch of the rusalka's voice, teasing the edge of her consciousness, with sunlight streaming across her bed, and the sound of someone fumbling at the latch.

She rolled out of bed and walked over to the door. "Is it you?" she murmured. "Is it Boris Mikhailovich?"

"Yes milady. It is I--and I have found out where they hide the keys. Be ready for me tonight. I will give your brother the same message, if he is near enough to the door to hear it."



How much had he lost? What had been destroyed?

Konstantin slowed his horse as he drew close to the turn off from the road. He had deliberately made it look like a peasant property--unobtrusive, ill-maintained and poor. A barely noticeable path, and certainly not one that the few people coming along this remote route would conclude led to anywhere of interest. The rare, curious traveller who chose to follow the trail would, in turn, come upon a dilapidated shack, inhabited by a hostile peasant who would run him off, brandishing a standard-issue rifle from the time of Aleksander I, and hurling fluent admonishments never to return, interspersed with a colorful assortment of curses.

Or he would have, until recently.

Frowning, Konstantin scoured the left side of the road, until he finally spotted the gap that marked the path. Recent storms had

brought down branches and twigs, which hadn't been cleared. With the retreat of the snows and the budding of spring, it looked even more overgrown and ill-kempt.

He felt the surge of rage once more, as the horse carefully picked its way along the trail. This same anger had propelled him through the past week, from the moment he had arrived here, ready to work, and found the place not merely emptied, but deserted, half his work destroyed, the remainder in disarray.

The shack was a façade. Deep below the dirt of the forest clearing, he had constructed a stone enclave. His laboratory--or rather, what had once been his laboratory, until about two weeks ago. At that time, the dungeon cages had been opened, the creatures released into the forest, the place half-destroyed. There were some indications that Bogdanovich—the soldier who pretended to be of rough, peasant stock, and kept guard with his old, standard-issue rifle—had been overpowered and possibly killed, but of the body there was no trace. Dammit.

How much had he lost? What had been destroyed? The questions nagged at him, a running undercurrent to his every thought and action since he had made the discovery.

Konstantin had come alone, just as he always did, which meant there was no-one to send off with a demand for assistance.

So, instead of beginning his reckoning of the damages, he had been forced to turn his horse around and ride into Saint Pyotrsbern himself, changing at every station, pushing the animals to their limits, while the evidence at the scene of the crime grew stale. The sooner he sent word, the sooner Feodor Denisovich would be on his way--and the sooner the serf would be able to track and punish the cowardly knave who had done this to Konstantin's laboratory. Once that was accomplished, Konstantin would set Denisovich to the task of rounding up the escaped creatures themselves, and returning them to the safety of the laboratory.

After sending the note, to be delivered with the utmost haste, Konstantin had spent further days in the city, making arrangements for Denisovich's passage, obtaining travel papers for his time in Rynska, and in all, ensuring that everything was lined up so that not a moment would be wasted in securing the serf's return.

And now, finally, back to his laboratory, to begin the cleanup and assess the extent of the damage.

How much work had been lost? He had kept years of notes and information stored here. The gnawing fear that he might have lost it all--all his precious research--had nearly driven him to distraction as he made the necessary arrangements. But he had also known that the inventorying of losses would keep--he needed Denisovich's expertise and he needed it soon, because the trails the tracker could follow would be growing colder with each passing day.

He emerged from the trail into the small clearing, with the ugly little shack at its centre. His frown grew darker still as he saw a horse tethered to the side of the shack. As Konstantin dismounted, a man emerged from the hut--a man who was not Bogdanovich. This was one of the attendants from the estate, a serf whose name escaped him, but who most assuredly should not be here at all.

"I thought I told you not to come to this place, except in an emergency."

"Yes my prince. Yes. But this is an emergency, Master." The reply was accompanied by much bowing and obsequious rubbing of hands.

Konstantin shook his head, tempted to horsewhip the man. It would be a nice outlet for his rage. But it would also delay the inventory. Had he lost it all? How far had he been set back from bringing his dream, his obsession, to fruition?

"It will have to wait," he said. He had already begun formulating the ways in which he would make whoever was responsible for this pay--possibly for however long it took him to recover the work that he had lost in this debacle.

He tethered his horse to the other side of the hut and started towards the entrance.

"But Master, wait. The new man we brought in to help with the latest two at the manor has been taken, my prince."

Konstantin stopped and slowly turned to face the man. "What?"

"Taken by the witch woman, I mean. I told him to plug his ears up when he took her the meals, but he didn't. I followed him, and watched. He stood outside her door, talking with her. I had my own ears plugged, so I didn't hear what was said, but you told us that if..." He trailed off his expression uncertain.

Konstantin closed his eyes briefly. This was too soon. He hadn't meant to test the rusalka-distilled wiles on anyone, yet. And now, with his laboratory in shambles, his work possibly in ruins, the timing couldn't be worse. But it had happened. And, without careful

monitoring, it was a situation that could escalate beyond containment. He couldn't afford a repetition of what had happened here.

But he also couldn't keep living with this uncertainty.

He started pacing the clearing, swearing harshly and fluently, as the serf darted uncertain, increasingly uneasy, glances in his direction.

Finally, letting out a growl, he swung back to the man. "Go back. Keep an eye on the situation. I must do a few things here, and then I will follow."

"Yes, master. Right away." The man scurried to his horse. Konstantin was already striding back to the shack. He'd give himself an hour, he had decided. That would be enough to make a start. Once the situation at the estate had been contained, he'd be able to come back and make a more thorough assessment. It was a compromise he would have to live with.

CHAPTER 2

Theo loved lazy mornings. Though not a new indulgence, the novelty of lolling about in bed as the house came to life around him had yet to wear off.

He loved hearing Winston wake before him, in the neighboring room. Theo would doze through the domestic sounds of Win's morning ablutions--doors opening, water splashing as he shaved, the floor creaking, as Win laid out his clothes and dressed for the day. And all the while, the smells of breakfast being prepared downstairs would waft up the staircase, gently rousing Theo's appetite. But still he'd lie in bed, on his soft mattress, curled up under the warm covers.

Only when he heard the sound of Win going down the stairs to the breakfast room would Theo rouse himself enough to ring for his own shave.

Usually, by the time Theo came down, Win would be on his third cup of coffee and would have finished with the broadsheets, which he'd fold and leave for Theo's perusal.

They'd talk, exchanging glances and smiles, as Theo heaped his plate for breakfast and made a good start on it. Then, after Win finished the last of his coffee, he'd leave Theo to the newspapers, while he went off to his study to begin his day's work with a perusal of the morning's post.

It wasn't the most exciting of lives, but then their work provided excitement enough--and in truth, Theo loved the lack of drama. He loved Win's steadiness, his devotion to routine, his love of order and organization. Though Theo himself tended to be more impulsive, he had learned from Win, and continued to do so. The best detectives were measured, observant, objective--and Win was the best.

Indeed, it was to Win, and now to Theo as well, that Alban Court, the most prominent policing institution in all of Anglend, turned when they were stumped and needed a breakthrough on a case.

The sound of Win's uneven gait on the stairs--a childhood bout with polio had left one leg shorter than the other--and Theo sat up in bed, stretching grandly. Smiling to himself, he reached for the bell pull, then settled back under the blankets to wait for the hot water. It was spring, but the mornings still carried with them an edge of chill that made the bed all the more enticing. Besides which, they were between cases. There was no need to rush into the day.

When Theo walked into the breakfast room some time later, Win gave him a frowning glance.

Theo experienced a thread of disquiet. Win was rarely cross in the morning. "What is it?"

"There's a man here for you. Or at least, I think he's here for you. Doesn't seem to speak much Anglesh."

Theo swallowed against a rising uneasiness, threaded through with the faintest wisp of excitement. "Rynskan?"

"Indeed." Win's features had grown impassive. It was the expression he wore when he was in the throes of an investigation. Even after years in his company, Theo still had difficulty reading it. "He seems to be asking for a Feodor Denisovich Malenkov."

Theo let out a hard breath as he dropped into his usual seat. "Dear God."

And so, the moment had come, after all this time. He had sent letters weekly--progress reports, to ensure that Prince Konstantin

knew his money was not going to waste, but he had never gotten a word in response. Still, he had known the day would come when he would be expected to repay his master's generosity.

"So you know what this is about." Win was watching him, his gaze suddenly cool and assessing.

"And so do you," Theo said, still trying to catch his breath. He didn't want to go. And yet... How would the prince look, after all these years? Would he be as handsome, as kind, as charming?

He didn't want to leave Win, didn't want to go back to the benighted cesspool that was Rynska--the place that treated its poor with such contempt. He had lived like an animal there, a feral child, struggling for survival on the harsh streets of Saint Pyotrsbern. But the prince... the prince was a romantic dream, embodied. Theo experienced a fugitive thrill at the thought of seeing Konstantin once more, even as he knew it was merely the flutter of a childhood crush or a first love--a residue of feeling and not to be taken seriously. Win was his true love. "I told you."

"Years of silence. And now, he snaps his fingers and you go." Finally, a tiny crack in the façade, and a flash of anger in Win's dark eyes. "You've been self-supporting for years now. Haven't touched a penny of his money."

"And I've slowly been paying back what he spent on my education, yes. But that's not what this is about, and you know it."

Win shook his head. "I have savings. I can pay the rest of it and possibly even buy you out--you won't even have to pay me back, though knowing you, you'll insist on it."

"Winston."

Win continued as if he hadn't heard. "That'll sever the last of his ties--"

"Winston." Theo kept his voice low, but Winston broke off, glaring.

"It's nonsense," he said.

"He owns me, Win. I know it's hard for you to comprehend. You were born free. But I wasn't. My time here has been by his express permission, and the fact remains that I am a serf. Given how much he has invested in me all these years, he'd likely ask more than we could realistically afford for a buyout of my bond--though if he needs my services after all this time, it's entirely possible he won't sell me at all, and that's his right, as well." A pause, as Win continued to glare.

It was Win who broke the stare, glancing away, his expression darkening. "It's barbaric."

"Yes. It's a barbaric country. I'd be the first to admit that. I hate the place--and after all these years of silence, I had begun to hope that perhaps the prince had just forgotten about me. I hoped that I'd never have to go back."

"We could fight it. I have some pull at court. I could petition the queen--"

"He's an aristocrat--of one of the high-ranking, old families. It could cause an international incident. And frankly, it's not worth it. Even if he didn't own me, I'd still go. It's a matter of honor."

"Because he paid for your education." Win laced his tone with contempt.

Theo shook his head. "If not for him, I'd be dead--I'm sure of it. I don't talk of it, because I don't like remember those days, and what I was, what I had to do and how I had to be, in order to survive. The prince plucked me off the streets of Saint Pyotrsbern, purchased me from my previous owner, and took me under his wing."

"Yes, yes." Win let out a long, angry breath as he dropped his gaze from Theo's. "I see that. I do. It's just... it doesn't mean I have to like it."

But Theo wasn't finished. He knew he needed to press his point--to make it absolutely clear to Win why he had to answer this summons.

"And then he sent me off, to be educated. To learn tracking and investigation--all of it on the express understanding that I would be at his disposal whenever he required it of me." He paused, watching Win's face. "He made me the man I am today, thanks to his kindness and generosity. In fact, the only good thing I can say about Rynska is that it has produced a man like Prince Konstantin."

Win reached across the table and touched the back of Theo's hand--an unusual gesture from a man who wasn't given to demonstrative displays outside the privacy of their closed bedroom doors. "And as far as I'm concerned, it is you that Rynska should be proud of having produced."

Theo smiled, even as his throat tightened and he wondered how he would ever bring himself to leave Win. But it had to be done. It was time to repay his debt to the prince--for his life, for his education, for the gift of these years, living as a free man among free men, in the greatest country in the world. There was no question--he

would go and he would serve, for as long as Prince Konstantin required it of him. And, perhaps if he served well and if he were very lucky, then at the end of it all the prince would grant him leave to return to his life here in Anglend--or allow him to purchase his freedom.

"I won't ask you to wait for me, Win. I don't know when--or if--I shall ever be granted leave to return."

Win frowned and sat forward, holding Theo with his gaze. "I will wait."

Theo had never seen such ferocity in his expression, never heard such intensity in his voice. He blinked rapidly, and prayed silently for a successful mission and for the understanding of Prince Konstantin, his saviour, his patron, his master.



As she waited out the endless daytime hours, Vasya held herself back from pacing. Instead, she sat by the window and willed herself to remember everything she could about the house and the grounds.

When Prince Konstantin had first brought her and Pyotr to the house--back when he still wore his façade of charming attentiveness--they had been given their freedom to wander. For those weeks, it was as if she had stepped into a fairy tale.

She had been reluctant to believe his vows of adoration and devotion, at first. More than reluctant--an utter skeptic, fearful of the prince and of the power he wielded, as their owner, over her and Pyotr. She knew his family too well, though he himself had rarely visited the estate where she had worked as a house serf and attendant to his sister, Princess Svetlana.

Sveta was pretty, winsome and cruel. She had decided Vasya would be her life size plaything, and had wielded her power with unmistakable relish, hitting, pinching and abusing Vasya at will. It was Vasya who would be whipped when Sveta acted out--and sometimes the princess acted out for the simple pleasure of seeing her pet serf get punished.

And yet, it was because she insisted on Vasya's constant attendance that Vasya ended up sitting through all the lessons that Svetlana was too stubborn to absorb properly. While Sveta threw tantrums and played power games with her governesses and tutors, Vasya quietly learned the material Sveta couldn't be bothered with: reading and writing, in Rynskan, Galieush and even a little bit of Anglesh. A smattering of geography, rudimentary mathematics, a

touch of science and philosophy. Sveta's instructors had noted Vasya's interest and discreetly encouraged her, no doubt grateful to have at least one attentive pupil.

Konstantin had been away at school during those years, and he spent most of his holidays at the family home in Saint Pyotrsbern. The family would join him during the breaks, providing Vasya and all the other serfs at the country estate with a breath of relief, and the opportunity to spend time with their own families. Vasya would rush off and visit with Pyotr. She had sworn to keep him away from the grand house, and from the risk of being singled out for the peculiar misery that was house serfdom. Instead, he lived with the elderly babushka who had taken both of them in after their father was conscripted into the army and their mother died in childbirth.

In those years, Konstantin had been a distant figure: handsome, clever, the only son. The rest of the family spoke of him in the hushed, reverent tones normally reserved for the Almighty himself. Vasya herself harbored a vague sense of gratitude towards him, because it was thanks to his penchant for Saint Pyotrsbern that she had the opportunity to visit with her brother several times a year. Many house serfs were not so lucky.

Between that, and the idealized stories told of the young prince, she had come to believe that he might be cut from a different cloth than his sister.

Until, that is, he came for a visit. She had been no more than ten at the time. Konstantin was in his late teens. At least from a distance, he had seemed as charming and as kind as everyone claimed. But then one day, Vasya had been out playing in the garden while Sveta went calling with her mother. Vasya heard the sound of whistling. Fearful of being caught by one of the other servants and put to work, she darted behind a shrub. Konstantin came into view soon after--young, golden, godlike in his perfection.

No doubt, he would have moved along and passed out of sight, except that one of the many cats that were kept around the stables ambled by.

Konstantin smiled and leaned forward, making a clicking sound with his tongue. The creature was soon lured towards him, and he began petting it gently and lovingly. Soon it was purring under his expert hand, rubbing its head against his wrist and nudging its body against his pant leg. It flopped down on its side and turned its belly up.

Watching all this, Vasya found herself smiling and thinking how wonderful he was. She didn't even notice the metallic gleam in the corner of her vision, didn't see his raised hand, brandishing the blade--not until he had already slashed the creature's throat with a swift, clean slice.

She let out a gasp of smothered protest that was fortunately drowned out by his laughter—an incongruously joyful sound that only added to Vasya's sense of sick anxiety. She held in that nauseous feeling of fear and prayed that he wouldn't look over and see her.

At one point, his glance ranged in her direction and lingered on her hiding place for several moments, before moving away. He returned his attention to the small furry body, which had stopped twitching as the last of its life bled away, and tilted his head, frowning slightly as he wiped his blade on a patch of grass, then turned the corpse over and made an incision along the length of the torso.

Vasya didn't want to see whatever came next, but some deep instinct wouldn't permit her to look away—because what if he started coming towards her while her gaze was averted?

He made a brief examination of the creature's anatomy, prodding and poking at it without much interest, before wiping his blade once more. He sheathed it and pocketed it, then walked away.

Once she was certain he was gone, she walked over to where the body of the cat lay. Sinking to her knees, she burst into tears--for the poor creature, for the gentle, affectionate trust it had so easily yielded up in return for a kindly touch, and for the way in which that trust had been violated with such careless, clinical ease.

When she had finally met him, all these years later, she naturally mistrusted him. He had spotted her and Pyotr on the road leading to the estate. Sveta and the rest of the family had settled in Saint Pyotrsbern permanently, having turned their minds to the effort of securing her an advantageous marriage. Still, they insisted the country house and the staff always be at the ready.

Konstantin's arrival had been unexpected, heralded only by the approaching sound of galloping hooves on the road behind them. By the time she realized that it was he, any attempts to conceal Pyotr from sight would have been observed--and would likely have drawn his attention. And so, she prayed that he would just ignore them, as lowly serfs, and keep riding. He didn't.

And, for all her mistrust, he had smiled and been kind. He had insisted they accompany him back to the house. As the property of his family, neither Vasya nor Pyotr had the right to refuse--but he behaved as if they did, as if they were all three of them equals.

In the days that followed, he remained attentive, and never once forced himself on her. He treated Pyotr with an avuncular affection, and the boy responded swiftly, having never known his and Vasya's father. Within days, Pyotr was in full worship mode. Vasya prayed that Konstantin would leave soon, before the boy could get any more deeply attached.

When the prince gave orders that his boxes be packed a few days later, she thought that her prayers had been answered--until she learned that she and Pyotr would be accompanying him to his own estate.

"I could not bear to leave you, my beautiful Vasya," he said. "And I have come to care for Pyotr as if he were the younger brother I never had. Please say you'll come with me."

As if they had a choice. But Konstantin behaved as if they did, imploring her with soulful glances and pleading avowals of eternal devotion. Knowing her place--and disarmed, in spite of herself, by his consistent kindness and generosity, she agreed.

Her resistance to him had begun to ebb. She began to hope that he had changed from that boy she had observed all those years ago.

Even on his own estate, he treated them as equals. The house had been fully staffed at the time--not the skeleton staff of these past weeks--and he had given commands that they be treated as his peers. Konstantin himself continued to lavish them with adoring solicitude.

When the weeks passed without even a glimpse of any cracks in his kindness, Vasya began to believe that he might truly have changed. She knew that in the years since his long-ago visit to his parents' estate, he had gone to Zurensch to study medicine, even though it was a commoner's trade--well below the dignity of an aristocrat--and in express defiance of his parents' wishes. She had been skeptical at the time, but now, witnessing the dramatic change in his demeanor, she thought, perhaps, that he might actually have learned compassion while pursuing his studies and treating patients.

She should have known better, but it was a compelling fairy-tale, and as the weeks passed without even a glimpse of that frightening boy she remembered, she began to doubt the recollection. Perhaps it had simply been a particularly vivid dream?

And yet, it was her everyday reality that seemed more of a dream. It was as if she had suddenly stepped into a world and a life that as a serf, she had always been forced to watch from the outside, looking in.



Soon after he brought them to the mansion, Konstantin examined each of them with his medical instruments. Afterwards, he announced that both she and Pyotr were ill.

"The bacterial strains are closely related but slightly different from each other," he said. "Fortunately, I've seen these before. I have the medications each of you will need to regain your health."

And so the injections began. Konstantin would come and go with some regularity, sometimes spending several days at a time away. Several weeks after they first arrived, he tested them again. He had them bend metal bands and break wooden sticks. He tested their reflexes, peered into their ears and moved candles across their lines of sight.

He looked grim as he turned away from them to jot down a series of notations. "This is turning serious," he muttered.

"But--" Vasya didn't understand.

Konstantin wasn't listening. "I will have to quarantine each of you. Separately."

And from then on, everything changed. Once the doors to her luxurious new chambers, with their bars over the windows and doors--"for your own protection"--had been locked and she truly was contained, the façade fell away. Though his tastes had grown more intricate and subtle, Konstantin was still the same boy who slashed the throats of small animals for fun.

A few days into the quarantine, when he had finally revealed his true colors, he had taunted her with that incident. "I saw you there, you know--in your little hiding place. I crept back and watched you crying over the cat. It was hard not to laugh at the sight of you boo hooing over some wretched creature. And then seeing you all these years later--you've grown into quite a beauty. I almost didn't recognize you--except that I saw your mistrust and thought, there's only one person on this estate who would have reason to look at me that way."

He grinned. "How could I resist?"



The full, rounded curve of the moon had just started creeping up above the tree line when Vasya heard the scratching at her door. She hadn't bothered to light the lamps in her room--it hardly seemed necessary, with the pale slant of moonlight shining in through the window.

She hurried over to the door and stood beside it. "Is that you, Boris Mikhailovich?"

"Yes."

The sound of a key, jiggling in the lock. The door handle turned for the first time in days, and the door swung open. A squat, slightly homely man stood on the other side of the bars and Vasya stood, watching tensely, as he jingled through the keys, located the correct one to open the bars, and slipped it into the final lock that stood between her and escape.

"Thank God," she said. "Let us be on our way."

He didn't budge. "First, let me just see you for a moment," he said, and again, she detected that odd fervency in his tone. He held a lamp in his free hand, and as he spoke he brandished it towards her.

She glanced at him, taking in the shortish, squared-off physique and the broad, plain features, topped off by a shock of dense black hair. "Yes, of course." She allowed him to angle the lamp so it illuminated her face properly, even as she tried to check her impatience.

Her thoughts elsewhere, she waited several moments for him to complete his perusal. But, when the seconds stretched out in silence, she shifted her attention to his face, only to find it oddly frozen and staring. She frowned.

"What is it?" she asked.

Still in a daze, he didn't appear to have heard her.

"Boris Mikhailovich, we do not have time for this. We must get my brother and flee."

"Yes, of course. I will come with you when you leave this place."

Vasilisa opened her mouth to protest, then realized that he probably no longer had a choice. The group of servant serfs that ran the house wasn't big enough that he'd be able to conceal his actions in aiding the escape. Once word reached Prince Konstantin, the man would be as good as dead.

But still, she felt a twinge of uneasiness as she noted his strangely glazed expression.

"Yes, of course. You must come with us."

"And I swear to you, I shall love you forever. I will be the best of lovers and husbands to you."

What was he talking about? A declaration of love? Moments after they had met? It was nonsense, of course, though perhaps a marriage of expedience might not be a bad idea. Still, now was hardly the time. "Boris, we will discuss this later. First we must get away from here. Away from the prince."

He shook himself, finally breaking his fixed stare. "Yes, of course. The prince." He looked back at her, frowning. "Did he--was he... intimate with you?"

The question brought up a dark, churning montage of unwelcome memories that held her momentarily transfixed with shame and fear, edged by nausea. Her throat tightened at the remembered horror she had felt every time he came to her. It took several moments for her to fight her way free of the potent emotions. Clenching her fists so hard she could feel her nails digging into her palms, she shook herself. "Now is not the time," she said, as much to herself as to him. "Where have they got my brother?"

But Boris would not be diverted. "Of course you were intimate. Who wouldn't have been? He was in love with you, no doubt."

She didn't like the fierce, possessive anger that suddenly darkened this stranger's expression. "Love, I suspect, had little to do with it. I don't know that the prince is capable of such emotion."

"He hurt you, then. I will kill him."

Enough. Vasya grabbed his shoulders. "My brother. Where is he?"

Boris blinked at the force of her tone. It took several moments for her question to sink in. Then, finally, "In the west wing, on the third floor. Once you go up the stairs, you must turn right and then left. His room is along that corridor."

Vasya nodded. It wasn't the room Pyotr had used before they had been imprisoned. That, of course, would have been too easy. "Give me the key. I'll go find him. You must secure us some horses. We'll meet you in the stables."

"I will not leave you--"

Vasya straightened to her full height--several inches taller than he. Using her most commanding voice, she spoke with a harsh, stark clarity, "Boris Mikhailovich. If you want either of us to get away from here alive, you will do as I say. Now."

His gaze clouded briefly, then cleared. "Yes. Yes of course. I will do as you say."

He had already turned and was walking away when she called after him, "The key. I need it--the one for my brother's room."

"Yes." He jogged back to her while reaching into his pocket and withdrawing the clinking ring of keys to all the lockable doors in the manor. Then he stilled once more, like a golem, waiting to be commanded.

Vasya frowned. Was he perhaps a little weak in the head? "I will see you at the stables as soon as I retrieve my brother." Again, she kept her voice clear and commanding.

"Yes. At the stables," he said, in that same, dazed voice. And then he was jogging down the corridor, towards the stairs, taking the lamp with him and leaving her in the darkness.

She darted back into her room for a lamp, her hands shaking with haste as she struck the match--and stopped suddenly, entranced by the flame. There was... something about it. Something compelling, beautiful. She wanted to lose herself in its flickering brightness. How had she never noticed before this how exquisite fire could be?

She shook herself. What was she thinking--and at a time like this? She lowered the match to the wick, forcing herself to ignore the thread of hot, liquid excitement that curled in her belly at the soft sound of the flame devouring the air, the sight of the yellow-orange flare, the clean, acrid smell of the burn, as the oil-soaked wick ignited.

She replaced the glass cover to protect the flame, pulling her gaze from its steady burn. She didn't have time to dwell on this peculiar and sudden fascination.

Her ears strained to hear any sounds of movement in the house. As far as she could tell, after he had put them under so-called quarantine, Konstantin had retained only a small contingent of servants, certainly not anything like the full complement that a mansion of this size would normally require. With any luck, most of them would have retired for the night. But what if...? What if one of them heard something suspicious and came to investigate?

She couldn't allow such thoughts to slow her down any more than reasonable caution required, she resolved, making her way back to the corridor, before setting out in search of the stairs.

Where had Boris said they were keeping Pyotr? The west wing, on the third floor. She tried to fit the route Boris had described into

her recollection of the sprawling mansion, but she drew a blank. Instead, she gathered her skirts and strode swiftly towards the nearest staircase. She still remembered where that was located, at least.

"And what have we here, now?" The voice emerged from the darkened doorway alcove of one of the rooms just ahead. A squat man stepped into the corridor, effectively blocking her route. She couldn't turn around--her room marked the end of the hallway. She tried to step around him, but he kept side-stepping to block her path.

"Planning an escape with little Boris, are we? I think the master might not be too happy with such a plan." Gyorgan accent. The man who had slashed her.

"And how would he know?"

He frowned, seeming to hesitate as she spoke, then shook himself. "Because I told him, that's how. I saw you talking with the fool and figured you might have gotten to him." A pause, as they remained in standoff. "You're not to say another word to me. Just go on back to your room."

As he spoke, he stepped forward, grabbing her arm. Their gazes clashed. The moment he saw her face, he froze. His expression stilled and grew slack.

Vasya felt a tremor of fear at the sight of his blank look. What had the prince done to her? Why did Boris, and now this man, stare at her as if they had just been bludgeoned? She hadn't seen anything amiss earlier, when she had glanced at her reflection while getting dressed for her escape. As she struggled with the thought that their reactions might somehow be related to the prince's serum, another thought slipped in. If the man were under some kind of compulsion, she might be able to command him, as she had commanded Boris.

The thought made her queasy. As a serf, she knew all too well how felt to have your freedom to refuse, or to make choices, denied. But, for her brother... She swallowed. She'd settle accounts with her conscience later.

Vasya drew in a deep breath and braced herself. "Release me now," she said, in her most commanding voice.

His expression shifted, his brows drawing into a dark scowl. "And let you escape? Not likely. But I can't take you back to your room--he'd just find you there."

"Boris?"

"The prince. He'll want you for himself. But he can't have you--you're mine." He had turned and started pulling her down the corridor, casting about. "Now, let's see, where can I put you that he won't--"

Vasya stopped, wrenching her arm free with surprisingly little effort. "This is nonsense."

He reached for her arm again. "You're mine. There's no point fighting it."

She tossed her head. "You said the prince was on his way."

"He should have been here by now."

"Then I don't have time for this." Vasya thrust the lamp into a nearby alcove and planted her feet on the floor, knees bent, posture ready. She wasn't going to let him take her anywhere without a fight.

"No." He was staring at her now, his gaze slipping over her body in a way that left her in no doubt about the direction of his thoughts. She couldn't suppress a shudder. Just being watched by him felt like a violation. "You belong to me."

"Repeating it won't make it true."

"But this will." He was faster than he looked. He stepped forward and grabbed her, pulling her against him. Even as her nostrils filled with the smell of his sour, dry sweat, Vasya kned him in the groin, while pushing him away as hard as she could manage. Even considering that he was disabled by the pain of her attack, it was easier than she expected. He staggered back at just the lightest shove, his hands over his crotch as he continued to groan.

She turned to run, reaching for the lamp, but then hesitated. He might be incapacitated for now, but he'd recover soon enough--and the last thing she needed was to have him pursuing her, particularly if Konstantin were truly on his way. No. She needed to deal with him now.

She turned back.

He was still groaning and bent double. Vasya grabbed hold of his collar and his shoulder and ran him at the wall, hard. She wouldn't have expected it to look at him, but he was as light as a child. She shoved, and his head mashed against the plaster. With a quiet grunt, he went down. She stood, frowning at his unconscious body. Blood trickled across his forehead, from where the impact with the wall had broken the skin of his skull.

Hopefully that would keep him down for a while, without causing lasting damage. Still, she felt uncomfortable as she noted

how still he was--and the awareness of how easy it had been for her to overcome him, despite his stolid, muscular physique, truly sank in.

With the notable exception of the bars on the doors and windows, neither of which had budged under her repeated assaults these past weeks, Vasya had found that many of the items in her room were surprisingly flimsy and fragile. She had been able to pull apart furniture and snap chair legs as if they were made of twigs.

But it was only now, after this latest altercation, that she began to wonder whether her ease in breaking up the furniture had more to do with her than with the furniture. If the injections had caused accelerated healing, as well as eliciting some kind of strange fascination from people who saw her face, then it seemed possible that they might also have enhanced her strength.

Her stomach tightened with that same sick feeling of blended horror and disgust. Konstantin had done this. And now, he was on his way here.

She started towards the steps at a run.



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