

The Dreaming Land I The Challenge

E.P. Clark

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From the Author

Hmmm, where to start, where to start...do I explain the background of *The Zemnian Series*, my trilogy in seven volumes? The cultural influences and allusions in this and all the other books? The language and naming conventions? Why and how I came to write these books? These are the difficult choices that face an author wrapping up an epic fantasy series.

I suppose it wouldn't hurt to clarify the overall structure of the series. I originally envisioned it as a trilogy, starting with *The Midnight Land*, continuing with *The Breathing Sea*, and ending with *The Dreaming Land*. Each book would follow one central character and her heroic journey to some kind of wisdom, courage, and self-understanding.

But as Robert Burns tells us, the best laid schemes gang aft agley. Each of the three books flourished wildly as I tried to tell their stories, and I ended up splitting them into two or three volumes for ease of printing and publication. I recommend viewing the entire thing as a TV series, and each of the multi-volume books as a season, with each volume as an episode. Why not? If TV-watchers, hardly the most erudite and sophisticated of mortals (and I count myself amongst their number), can grasp something like that, then surely readers can too.

The world of Zem' ("Earth" or "Land") is based partly on that of Rus', the medieval collection of loosely-allied principalities in what is now Ukraine and Western Russia; and Muscovy, the much more centrally controlled and authoritarian country that rose in its place following the Mongol-Tatar invasion; with hints at Russia proper, the multi-ethnic empire that, under the Romanovs, spread from the Baltic to the Pacific and from the White Sea to the Black Sea.

However, Zem' is by no means a faithful reproduction of Rus', Muscovy, or Russia. I have taken considerable creative license in its construction. Most obviously, I have made it a matrilineal society in which women rule.

This may not be so far-fetched. There are hints of matrilineal and matriarchal societies in what would become Russia in *The Tale of By-*

gone Years, the medieval chronicle of the creation of Rus', societies that were destroyed by the Viking Rus or Ruotsi who gave the fledgling nation of Rus' its name and its ruling family, the House of Ryurik. Further back, the Amazonians lived on the Black Sea, and the Scythians with their women warriors roamed the steppe. Meanwhile, in North America, a number of the Native tribes had matrilineal family structures. The culture of Zem' hints at all these things, while still being its own, unique creature, one that is meant to explore women's stories in a world in which women hold power. As readers of the previous books can attest, my woman-centered world is no paradise. To put it bluntly: people are people, no matter where you go or who's in charge. At the same time, I find it ridiculous to believe that women and men are completely the same, and that a matrilineal, matriarchal society would treat men the way that women are treated in a patrilineal, patriarchal society. Readers are often shocked at how badly men are treated in my books, but that says more about how incredibly coddled and lionized men are in *our* society than anything else. The biggest struggle of my female characters is often against their own desire to be too nice to men who have no intention of returning the favor—a criticism of our own society as much as anything, but also a speculation on how and why we women allowed our own oppression to take place.

That being said, I deliberately focused more on male creations and male characters as inspiration for my heroine Valya. The scene in which Valya almost squashes a duckling, for instance, is a reference to a scene in Mikhail Sholokhov's *And Quiet Flows the Don*, itself a reference to *Anna Karenina*. My inspiration also took a decidedly Westward turn. When I first started writing Valya, I imagined her as a combination of Eowyn from *The Lord of the Rings*, Benedict Cumberbatch's depiction of Sherlock Holmes in the recent BBC TV series, and John Sheppard from *Stargate: Atlantis*. Valya, however, had ideas of her own, as she always does, so it is my hope that she managed to shake off those male-created, Western origins and stand tall on her own two, proudly Zemnian, feet.

A word on naming conventions: Zemnians, like Russians, have three names: a given name, a middle name based off their parent's given name, and a family name. The difference is that Zemnians get

their middle name from their mothers rather than their fathers. These matronymics are formed by adding -ovna/evna for a daughter and ovich/evich for a son to the mother's first name. Family names are also passed down from mother to daughter. Therefore, Valya's full name is Valeriya Dariyevna (Valorous Daughter of Darya, or "Gift") Zerkalitsa. However, in order to strengthen her claim to the steppe and soothe the fears of those who worry that she might press her claim to the throne, she often uses her father's family name, Stepnaya. A man would have the masculine forms of those family names, so Zerkalitsev and Stepnoy.

And now for some historical background: At the end of *The Breathing Sea*, Darya Krasnoslavovna, the heroine of that little miniseries of books, had just decided to go as an emissary of Zem' to the Rutsi, who are fleeing into, or possibly invading, her land in order to escape from the invaders of their own land. Dasha dreams of making the world, or at least her corner of it, a better place, one in which Zem' can live in harmony with their neighbors, and humans can live in harmony with non-humans, instead of locked in cruelty, exploitation, and killing. She even takes an oath before the gods that she will do no harm to any living thing, and that she will not allow the killing of wolves or the capture and confinement of other wild animals, and she swears that her line will uphold her pact. Dasha is a visionary—she even has actual visions—and an idealist (I modeled her in part off of the Buddha), and while she knows that the road ahead will be long and hard, she cannot help but believe that soon, if only people could see the truth that she sees, Zem' will become, if not an earthly paradise, at least a much better place.

But things rarely work out the way we want. In the intervening 100+ years between the end of *The Breathing Sea* and the beginning of *The Dreaming Land*, humans have not suddenly become dramatically better than they were before. While most people more or less—sometimes less, as we shall soon see—adhere to the prohibition against killing wolves that Dasha instituted, the overall harm done to the creatures of the forest and the land they roam has if anything only increased, and the creatures of the barn and farm are as unprotected as they ever were, something that Valya, our heroine of these books, has

to wrestle with as she digs into the trade in all kinds of flesh, human and non-human alike.

And while Dasha was successful in preventing the Rutsi, the Tanskans, and the distant empire from the Middle Sea from overrunning Zem' completely, it was a very close thing, with the Rutsi uniting and nearly taking Krasnograd during the reign of Dasha's granddaughter Raisa. You can read about that in the free collection *Winter of the Gods and Other Stories*. They were repelled with the help of the mighty steppe army, but the experience left deep scars and caused a rift between the different branches of the Zerkalitsy, the ruling family of Zem'. It is now up to Dasha's great-granddaughters, the first cousins, or as the Zemnians call them, second-sisters, Valya and Sera, to heal the breach and their country, even as they face an insidious but growing threat from their borders to both the East and the West...

Epigraph

Night darkness lies on the hills...

The river roars before me.

I am sad and at ease; my sorrow is bright...

Nothing torments my desolation,

Nothing disturbs it.

And once again my heart burns with love,

Because love it must.

ASP

Chapter One

I was teaching my daughter to ride when the summons to Krasno-grad came.

Well, not exactly teaching her to ride. Like any child of the steppe, she had started riding before she could walk, and at eight, she was already an accomplished horsewoman. But I was trying to teach her the finer points of training a young horse to jump. It was already apparent to all three of us—her, me, and most especially Romashka, the poor pony I had chosen for our ill-advised training session—that this had been a big mistake, as neither my daughter nor I were known for our patience. But since neither were we known for our willingness to give up, even when doing so would be advisable, we were stubbornly pressing on, growing ever more short-tempered, until a woman I didn't know appeared by the fence of our paddock and saved us from our own foolishness.

“Valeriya Dariyevna?” she called, bowing. “May I have the honor of a word with you at your earliest convenience?”

“Let her trot around and look at the rails one more time, and then walk her out and put her away,” I told my daughter. “She's had more than enough for the day, poor thing. Give her an apple, too.”

“Next time I think you should ride her, or have Irina Yaroslavovna work with her,” said my daughter. “Trying to tell me what to do isn't working and doesn't make any sense, especially when you don't have a plan yourself.”

“If you don't practice, you'll never learn,” I told her. “Repetition is the mother of learning. If you want to become as good as Irina Yaroslavovna, you'll have to practice lots.” For such was my daughter's ambition, to become as skilled a horsewoman as Irina Yaroslavovna, our mistress of horse. It was a laudable ambition, and one I encouraged, and perhaps it would have been better served by having Irina Yaroslavovna herself conduct my daughter's lessons. Such thoughts often come after the fact, at least to me.

“Is that Miroslava Valeriyevna?” asked the unknown woman, bow-

ing in my daughter's direction. "Greetings, young princess!"

My daughter waved at her distractedly and then, to my relief, trotted the long-suffering Romashka, who had never done anything in her blameless three years of life to deserve being made my daughter's practice pony, over the poles scattered around the paddock without incident, and then pulled her up and began walking her out. Innochka, the stable girl in charge of Romashka, came over and said she could take care of things from there, and I turned to see what my surprise visitor wanted.

She was a few years older than me, and had the lean figure and weathered face of someone who spends most of her time on the road. "A messenger?" I asked.

"From Krasnograd, Valeriya Dariyevna," she said with another bow. "From the Tsarina herself, in fact."

So, something serious, then, but, judging by her manner, not too serious. If the Empress were, say, dead, she would not have been so calm. Probably the long-threatened summons.

"Is the Tsarina calling me to Krasnograd, then?" I asked.

"I see tales of your acuity have not been exaggerated, Valeriya Dariyevna," said the messenger, with another bow. "She begs me to deliver this message from my hand directly into yours, and to await your reply, before returning at all speed to convey your answer."

"You're very fair-spoken for a messenger," I said, taking the scroll case she handed me. I noted her slanted gray eyes, wide sharp cheekbones, and lithe slender body of a steppe warrior. In a certain light we could be sisters. "Are we by any chance kin?"

"Very distantly, Valeriya Dariyevna," she said with yet another bow. "My mother is a many-times younger sister of the Stepnaya line. The Empress took me into her service in order to carry the most sensitive messages, ones that could only be entrusted to blood kin. Do you have a reply, Valeriya Dariyevna?"

"Well, I'll have to go, obviously," I said, having opened the scroll case and read the message by then. It merely said, in what I recognized to be the Tsarina's own hand, *Come to Krasnograd at once. Bring Miroslava. Your sister.* I rolled it up and put to back in its case. "At once, it seems."

“Very good, Valeriya Dariyevna. When should I say you can be expected to arrive?”

I looked up at the sky. It was a fine summer day, the Black God take it, and it was likely to be a fine summer day the next day and the next. No excuses for delay there.

“Two weeks,” I said with a sigh. “Two weeks from tomorrow. No doubt we will be ready to set off tomorrow morning, and the weather is fair. Even at Miroslava’s pace, it should take us no more than two weeks, perhaps less if we are lucky.”

“Very well, Valeriya Dariyevna. I will set off directly to convey your response.”

“At least spend the night,” I said. “You should rest after your journey, and it’s a sad day when a Stepnaya can’t stay at Stepnoy Dom.”

The messenger bowed yet again, but said, “Thank you, Valeriya Dariyevna, but I must set off as soon as I have a fresh horse. Irina Yaroslavovna has already promised to have one saddled for me.”

“Oh very well,” I said. “What prompted all this haste, anyway?”

“I’m sure I couldn’t say, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said the messenger, bowing again and disappearing into the stable in quest of a fresh horse, leaving me to inform my daughter and the rest of my family that Miroslava and I would be setting off for Krasnograd first thing the next morning, the gods help us.



Predictably, Miroslava was thrilled down to the marrow of her bones at the news, and just as predictably, my parents were not.

“What do you think it is?” fretted my mother, while my father looked at the scroll with distaste and said, “It’s not as if she’s even your real sister.”

My mother and I both gave him a look.

“Well, not your full blood sister,” he said. “Only a second-sister.”

“Second-sisters are still sisters,” I said, sounding rather grim about it, to which my father could muster no argument. My poor father was not particularly cut out to be Prince Stepnoy and father to the Empress’s second-sister. No one who looked at him or spoke with him would ever guess that the blood of generations of steppe warriors flowed through his veins. He was tall and thin and had long wispy

brown hair going to gray and was only at home amongst his books and his scrolls and his herbs, and really would have been better off at a sanctuary, which is where both my uncle and my brother had elected to end up, after the wolf incident that we all preferred not to speak of.

“Could it be about...the Eastern situation?” my mother said apprehensively. “I know you wrote to her about it, and so did I, but...”

“I’d like to think so,” I said. “But then why would she send for me to come to Krasnograd? If it were about that, I’d think she’d send someone out here, not order me to present myself there.”

“Well then, do you think...Valya, do you think she’s going to...name Mirochka as her...her successor?” asked my mother. Just as my father was no one’s idea of a steppe prince, no one at first glance would have guessed that my mother was a Tsarinovna, daughter, sister, and aunt to empresses. And possibly grandmother, if the succession played out in my daughter’s favor or disfavor, depending on how you looked at it. Where I came from, the gods alone knew. Both my parents had sworn a dozen times over that I was their true-born daughter and heir, and it was most likely true, but I resembled neither of them in mind or body. No one who had met me had ever doubted for an instant that I was the daughter of Tsarinas and steppe warriors. Luckily for all of us, since either the governance of the Stepnaya province, or the rule of all of Zem’, was going to fall to me eventually, and that was a burden that someone in the family needed broad shoulders for, and it was handy that that someone was obviously me. I had even managed to conceive an heir by my twentieth summer, which was more than most of my family could say. Out of wedlock of course, which didn’t matter so much, but I hadn’t followed up yet with a second one, which did matter a lot. Both Stepniye and women bearing Imperial blood were thin on the ground right now. Which could mean...

“I don’t know why the Tsarina summoned us,” I told my mother. “But I think if she were about to name Mirochka formally as her heir, she would have sent more of an escort. It wouldn’t do for the future Tsarinovna not to be brought into Krasnograd by a dozen of the Imperial Guard’s best men, and a whole gaggle of princesses, too. No, I suspect something else.”

“Like what?” my mother pressed, as if my heavy face shouldn’t

have already told her.

“Marriage,” I said. “She’s been threatening to make alliances for both me and Mirochka for years. I wouldn’t put it past her to finally make good on her threat.”

My father wrinkled his nose in distaste, but my mother cheered up at that prospect. “And perhaps that’s for the best, Valya,” she said. “It’s high time you took a husband and gave Mirochka some sisters, and there’s certainly no use in hanging around waiting for...well, never mind. But perhaps she could find you an eligible match, someone worthy of you—perhaps someone of high blood who wouldn’t mind coming out to the steppe—I’m sure there are many young princes who would be glad to join us out here—and it wouldn’t be so bad to have her make a match for Mirochka, as well. Not that we can *force* anything on them, of course, but throw them together and one thing will lead to another...I’m sure she knows of many boys of noble blood whose mothers would be glad for us to foster them, and then he could be raised here amongst us and brought up to be a fit companion for Mirochka, instead of having to take our chances when she’s older—you know how faithless young princes can be—I mean, I’m sorry, my dear, I didn’t mean it like that, but you *do* know, and this way there would be no danger of that, and, well...”

“Yes,” I said, in order to stop her. To be honest, I was only partially convinced by my own arguments. It seemed like there had to be something more, something besides just a marriage, although... “Well, we’ll find out soon enough, won’t we?” I said. “And now perhaps I should make our arrangements. Whatever else the Tsarina wants from me, she wants me to present myself in Krasnograd as soon as possible, and that won’t happen on its own. I need to go speak with Irina Yaroslavovna about horses.”

Chapter Two

We set off the next morning as early as could be expected, given that I had had to muster up an escort and a wagon and pack horses to supply us. I would have preferred to travel light, but with Mirochka joining us, and an Empress waiting for us at the end of our road, that was not to be.

The journey was as unremarkable as two-week journey across the steppe could be. Mirochka was bored and whiny part of the time, and the rest of the time required constant watching to keep her from getting into mischief. We lost a day due to a torrential rain, and as soon as we left the steppe (I couldn't help but think it was an omen) one of the packhorses stepped on a stone and bruised her foot, requiring us to redistribute our load and leave her at the next waystation, but other than that, our trip was without incident, and all too soon we were in the fertile black earth region of the Krasna riverlands and approaching Krasnograd.

Mirochka's excitement reached a fever pitch as we came in sight of the walls and the forty forties of towers of Krasnograd, so that I feared I would have to take her off her pony in order to keep both of them safe. It was her first time seeing it, as the only time I had come here since her birth, I had left her behind with my parents at Stepnoy Dom.

I was rather less excited to be returning, but I put on a brave face for her and told her as much about Krasnograd as I could. I also avoided the East Gate, which was the most direct entrance to the city from our road, and instead circled around to the South Gate. In the past generation the shantytown of Outer Krasnograd had been cleared away from the South and West Gates, so that one could ride in and out of the city there without witnessing the muddy alleys, leaking shacks, and other signs of the squalor that marked Outer Krasnograd. Of course, the squalor had simply moved to the East and North sides of the city, so that there was now what amounted to practically a second city outside the real city's walls, but one that consisted entirely of poverty and desperation, without any of the green parks and fine

buildings that graced the better parts of Krasnograd proper. The road to the East Gate was particularly unpleasant, leading as it did past the stockyards and abattoir whose filth and misery fed the heedless dwellers of the walled city. Including, when I was there, me, as my mother had rebelled against the Imperial oath made by our foremother Darya Krasnoslavovna, and raised me and Mirochka in that rebellion too.

I couldn't help but suspect that Mirochka and I would be called upon to honor the terms of Darya Krasnoslavovna's oath, and that we would be able to ride past the abattoir without any personal guilt, but it was still (I thought with weak-willed squeamishness) not a sight for a little girl. It was something that Mirochka would need to see someday, but it should not be her first introduction to Krasnograd. Let her see that—although I doubted it myself—there was something to it other than cruelty. There would be plenty of time for disillusionment later. So, although part of me condemned my actions as cowardly and hypocritical, I took us well around Outer Krasnograd and up the broad, smooth road to the imposing South Gate, which was solid enough to withstand an army and yet had gold filigree that flashed from the top of the wall in the sun.

The gate guards, all with the round rosy faces and round blue eyes of black earth boys, straightened up as soon as I gave my name, and said that the Tsarina had left orders for our party to be escorted directly to the kremlin as soon as we put in an appearance, and for us to be given lodging there.

"My family has a house here in Krasnograd," I said. "There's no need for us to be quartered in the kremlin."

"Your father's family has a house here, begging your pardon, Valeriya Dariyevna," replied the guard with a bow. "But the place for your mother's family is in the kremlin. The Tsarina ordered us to convey those words exactly. She would like you to stay with her there, just as you did the last time you were here, for she may have need of you again."

"Did she also ask for those words to be conveyed to me exactly?" I asked. The mention of my last stay in Krasnograd was not a good sign. Not a good sign at all.

"Not as such, Valeriya Dariyevna, but she did say something like

that,” said the guard nervously, put off by the intensity of my question.

“I see.” I was liking this less and less, but perhaps I was overreacting. Just because my previous two visits to Krasnograd had ended in disaster didn’t mean that this one had to as well. “Of course we would be honored and delighted to accept the Tsarina’s hospitality,” I told the guards, since there didn’t seem to be any way out of it, and Mirochka’s eyes were shining at the thought of staying in the kremlin. I tried to forget the ominous reference to last time. Perhaps keeping us in the kremlin would be the best way to ensure that we would be forced to mingle with whatever princes she had in mind for us, if that was in fact what she had in mind. She was certainly planning something, something that seemed to involve bringing me closer to my mother’s family and to the throne.

I wondered (growing ever more worried) what had brought this on. Second-sister to the Tsarina I might be, but despite the issue of succession, I had always been treated, and was accustomed to thinking of myself as, the Stepnaya heir, not another Zerkalitsa. The old Tsarina, my mother’s sister, had been very careful to make it clear that her daughter, not her sister, would inherit the Wooden Throne and the rule of Zem’, and following the Western invasion and its successful repulsion by the steppe army, she had married my mother off to the only child of Princess Stepnaya at the first opportunity, thereby renewing the blood ties between the Stepniye and Zerkalitsy, and ensuring that the issue of the Stepnaya succession, which was precarious due to the unfortunate fact that the old Princess Stepnaya had only had a single son, was resolved in Krasnograd’s favor. The steppe army may have saved Krasnograd from the enemy at its gates, but that only made it more imperative that it be kept under the firm hand of Krasnograd’s rule. No one loves a conqueror, even one on their own side.

Claiming the double right of Stepnaya blood on her mother’s side, and marriage to a Stepnoy prince for her own part, my mother became the new Princess Stepnaya, and I was her heir in turn. My mother had retired gratefully from Krasnograd to the steppe, and it had been assumed that I would spend my life out there with her, ruling the steppe as the next Princess Stepnaya when the time came. But all that had been thrown into doubt when I had borne a daughter, while

my second-sister had had nothing but a succession of sons, each one leaving her more weakened than the last. The last time we had spoken, when I had been preparing to leave Krasnograd, despairing of the future and out of favor with the other princesses yet again, she had said that Mirochka and I could not be allowed to rusticate forever on the steppe, and that the time would come when we would be called to Krasnograd to take up our position as Zerkalitsy. It appeared that that time had come, much as I might wish it hadn't. Serving the Zerkalitsy, especially when one was a Zerkalitsa, tended not to go so well for the server.

Mirochka, though, seemed unaffected by my misgivings, which I had never shared with her anyway, and looked this way and that and questioned the guards about everything strange and new that she saw, which was everything, since we had no cities on the steppe. The guards answered her questions indulgently, and by the time we reached the kremlin, appeared completely charmed by her. I tucked that information away to consider later. Mirochka had never had occasion to charm strangers before, but it seemed she had a knack for it. There could be worse skills for the heir to all of Zem' to possess.

There was a slight hitch when we arrived at the kremlin and stablehands came to take our horses away. Mirochka did not want to entrust her pony, or any of the other horses, to strangers, and it was only when the kremlin's own mistress of horse came out and assured her personally that our horses would receive the best of care that she agreed to relinquish her reins to the waiting groom, and then only with reluctance and with many dire threats as to what would happen of any harm should befall any of our mounts.

I attempted to quiet her and to assure her that her fears were groundless, but all the guards and stablehands appeared not to take it amiss, saying with approving smiles that they could see Mirochka was a steppe princess as well as a Zerkalitsa, and they wouldn't want to curb her fiery spirit for anything. While I approved of the sentiment in principle, at the moment I found Mirochka's fiery spirit rather annoying, and it was all I could do to keep my patience with her and with everyone else as we finally, finally left our horses and baggage with the servants and allowed ourselves to be escorted inside.

The kremlin was just as I remembered it from my previous visits: large, with long wide corridors leading to massive halls, and everywhere bustling with servants and guards and petitioners and princesses and all the other folk who populate the seat of Zem's rule.

Despite her earlier brave words, Mirochka was overwhelmed by it all, and took my hand without being directed to do so. When serving women came and led our companions off to the chambers they had been given, while informing us that we were to be taken directly to the Tsarina, Mirochka's grip on my hand grew quite death-like, and she clung to my side all the way down the long whitewashed corridors and into the Hall of Council.

To my relief, since I didn't know how Mirochka would react to a crowd, there were only half a dozen people there, but as one of those people was the Empress, the Hall of Council seemed very full. Even though she was my sister, I always felt as if she took up all the space in any room she happened to be occupying. My heart was beating faster than I would have liked to admit, and I felt dizzy, to my shame. The last time we had seen each other had been in her private chambers, and there had been blood and fear and great oaths sworn. Seeing her here in the Hall of Council again, where she was meant to be, caused something to squeeze in my chest the way that it did sometimes when I looked upon Mirochka and realized how dear she was to me, but I could not reach out and take her into my arms the way I could with Mirochka. Most likely she would wish to forget all that had passed between us when I was last in Krasnograd, and would greet me just as she would any other noblewoman presenting herself in the kremlin. And most likely that would be easier for me as well.

"Greetings, sister," said the Empress, rising as we approached the dais. "I see you have arrived in good time, just as you promised. An auspicious start to your sojourn here with us in Krasnograd, my dearest Valeriya Dariyevna. And this," she continued, ignoring my bow and stepping off the dais, "must be my second-niece, Miroslava Valeriyeвна."

She smiled kindly at Mirochka, and then moved to embrace me. I allowed it, trying not to betray the shock I felt when, as she drew me close, I realized that she was with child. It was still early yet, I

could feel, early enough that it was not visible under the loose sarafan she was wearing, but her firm rounded belly pressed unmistakably against me, and when she stepped back and looked me in the eyes, my expression must have shown her that I knew, for she smiled a smile of half-joyful, half-chagrined admission, before withdrawing from me and smoothing her face into a look of Imperial welcome once more.

“I trust your journey was uneventful?” she asked. “You look hale and hearty as always, my dear sister.”

“As uneventful as could be expected, Tsarina,” I told her, surprised at how well my lips moved and how smoothly the words came, given the state of shock I was in. My sister with child! After all that had happened...I wrenched my mind away from that. There would be time to confront her about it later. “And we are delighted to be here and ready to be of service the moment you should deign to call upon us. The honor that you...”

“Oh, enough of that, Valya,” she said, smiling the girlish smile she liked to use with me. It seemed odd, almost wrong, that someone destined for such a grave situation in the world, and who truly was a woman of great power and force of will, should be able to smile like that, as if thrones and empires and the rule of nations weighed only lightly upon her. “I am overjoyed that you were able to come, and so promptly, too! And to bring your darling daughter at last to Krasnograd. My dear, let me look at you.” She knelt down in front of Mirochka, causing a stir amongst her attendants, and looked her in the face. “How old are you now, dear, eight?”

“Eight,” confirmed Mirochka, and bobbed a quick bow just to be sure, almost hitting the Empress’s face with her own and then clutching my hand even harder in her confusion.

“You’re a fine, large girl for eight,” the Tsarina observed. “And no doubt very active. Do tell me, my dear, what are your accomplishments?”

From another woman it would have sounded condescending, but from her it sounded genuine, and Mirochka, after a quick glance at me, relaxed and answered proudly, “Riding, and shooting, and fighting with a short sword—although mama says I may have a long sword when I am big, like she is—and tracking, and herding—well, only a

bit, as yet, but when I'm bigger and can ride a full-sized horse I will be allowed to do it more—and I am also learning which wild plants are good to eat, although I don't know how to cook yet. Mama is teaching me a bit about camp cooking, and says I will learn more when I'm big enough to lift the pots over the fire without burning myself."

"Very impressive," said the Empress. "I see you're a true steppe princess, my dear." The nobles around us all grimaced in distaste at those words, but my sister only looked up at me and raised an eyebrow. "Tracking, Valya?"

"Reading sign can be the difference between life and death on the steppe," I told her, trying not to sound defensive.

"And can she read words on paper as well?"

"Mama has taught me my letters, and I can spell my name and hers," Mirochka put in. "And we read a book together this spring. She promised that we would read more books in the winter, when we would have time."

"Well, I'm glad of that, at least," said the Empress. "You seem a very promising young woman, my dear." She stood back up and cocked an eyebrow at me again. "Can she really *track*, my dear Valya? And shoot? And forage for wild plants on the steppe?"

I stroked Mirochka's hair soothingly, since I could feel that she was starting to become angry over having her abilities questioned. "She is but a child, Tsarina," I answered. "But I would still bet on her tracking abilities over any one of your fine princesses here in Krasnograd. And while she can only draw a child's bow as of yet, she can hit her target nine tries out of ten. I would..."

"Yes, I'm sure you would, Valya," said the Empress, cutting me off before I could become too heated in Mirochka's defense. "I have no doubt that your flesh and blood is very resourceful and would put any of us Krasnograders to shame...on the steppe." She gave Mirochka a considering look. "I see her blood runs true," she said. "She has the look of Darya Krasnoslavovna, and no mistake."

"I am glad to hear it, Tsarina," I said. I had never met Darya Krasnoslavovna, but the Empress, who was a good ten years older than me, remembered her fondly from her girlhood, and took after her in body as well as inclination. Now that I looked at Mirochka and my sister

together, I could see the resemblance, down to the red in their hair. The Northern heritage, which seemed to have passed me by entirely. It was silly, as I'd seen Mirochka almost every day since she had been born, but for the first time I saw how much she took after my sister and how little she took after me. It would not have worried me, except for the hungry look that my sister gave her. My sister, after all, needed a daughter much more than I did.

"Well, we must speak of that and many other things," said the Empress. "We have many things to speak of, Valya. I have my own news to give you, and I have received the letters you sent me, detailing your concerns about...the situation in the East. But I will stop detaining you and allow you to refresh yourselves after your journey. And then I must beg you to join me for some supper after you are washed and changed. In my chambers, I think, a little family party. And tomorrow we will have a feast to celebrate your arrival." She nodded at one of the attendants who were loitering a discreet distance away from us, and the woman bowed and disappeared silently out a side door. The Tsarina, my sister, folded me in an embrace once more.

"I'm so glad you're here, Valya," she said into my ear, her arms hugging me convulsively as her rounding belly pressed against my side. A little shiver of alarm ran up my spine. Something was wrong here: wrong with my sister and wrong with Krasnograd, and somehow I was going to have to make it right.

"I am always glad to be of service, Tsarina," I told her. I knew that that was not what she wanted to hear, that she wanted something more of me, but it was what I had to offer and I meant it sincerely, even as the little shiver of fear ran all over my body and told me that whatever had prompted her to summon me here to Krasnograd, it was more than whatever I could have guessed back home on the steppe. My service would be more than mere words before the end, I was sure of it.

Chapter Three

The dinner with the Empress started off innocuously enough. I had, much to Mirochka's disapproval, steamed and scrubbed us within an inch of our lives and stuffed us both into our best sarafans, something to which she took particular offense, as at home neither of us wore gowns from one moon to the next. Trousers were ever so much more convenient for riding, and no one on the steppe would think that a princess was lowering herself by dressing like a man. But here in Krasnograd noblewomen wore gaudy sarafans that came down to the tips of their boots and held enough gold and silver to serve as armor in a pinch, and right now I was determined that we would also wear sarafans when dining with the Tsarina, distasteful as the experience was to both of us.

"My dear Valya," said the Empress as soon as we were shown into her private chambers. "I see you have refreshed yourselves from the road, but I must apologize for the laxity of my maids. Surely they could have taken better care of your clothes. I will have new ones assigned to you immediately."

"There is no need, Tsarina," I told her quickly, bowing as low as I could in order to soften the refusal. "I dressed us both myself. Your maids are blameless."

"I see. Well, in that case, my dearest Valya, you must allow me to have some of my attendants fit you with some new gowns. Is that the same one you wore when you were last here three years ago?"

"Yes, Tsarina," I admitted. I even managed not to grit my teeth. What in another woman would have been snide was in her merely taking a benevolent interest, but here in the Krasnograd kremlin I was suddenly ashamed of my rumpled, out-of-fashion sarafan, and having it thrown in my face, even with the best of intentions, was paining me more than I thought it should.

"I take it, then, that there is not much call for fine sarafans and headdresses back on the steppe?" she asked, raising her left brow in the way that she did that was so charming, and that almost took the

sting out of her question. For a moment I was distracted, jolted as I had been by our discussion of Mirochka's appearance and her resemblance to the Empress and to Darya Krasnoslavovna, by the glint of fire in Sera's brow, showing up as it did against her milky-white skin. Too white, I thought, and too milky. Despite all her appearance of health, the pregnancy was already starting to tell on her.

"No, Tsarina," I admitted, forcing myself not to search her face for further signs of ill health.

"Well, and perhaps that is just as well, but, my dearest Valya, I fear that you and your darling Mirochka will have to array yourselves in our fashions, at least during public occasions. Not that either of you need any adornment, you are both so handsome, but it would please me so much to see you both looking as fine as possible. I would have everyone in Krasnograd know that you are both my most valued guests and kinswomen."

"As it please you, Tsarina," I said, with another bow.

"Now Valya! Please! We are sisters, you know. Enough of this 'as it please you, Tsarina' nonsense. I have a name, and if a sister won't use it, who will?" She smiled at me again, and I was struck against my will by the strain behind the warmth in that smile.

"As it please you, Serafimiya Raisovna," I said.

"Oh please! Call me Serochka, as you did when we were girls together—or the last time you were here."

"I don't know that we were ever girls together, Sera," I said, choosing to ignore her reference to my last visit to Krasnograd. "Seeing as you were already a young woman when I was toddling around in diapers."

That made her laugh, and she chatted lightly as the food was brought in and the table laid, asking me about my family and telling me about her own minor doings until her husband and three sons came in and joined us and we all sat down at the small table and ate the excellent supper. The strain behind her smile seemed to ease as she ate, and I began to hope that perhaps it had just been hunger and tiredness, which certainly plagued women with child, and that there was nothing seriously wrong with her and that I had only been called here in order to solidify the ties between us and demonstrate to the

world that the steppe still stood behind Krasnograd, ready to defend but never, never to conquer.

“Now, boys,” she said as the maids were clearing away the table. “Take your sister Miroslava Valeriyevna and show her your games, won’t you? I’m sure she would be delighted to see them.” Noticing my expression at the thought of Mirochka leaving us, she patted my hand and said, “Don’t worry, my dear Valya, my boys will take care of her, and two guards and a nursemaid will be with them in case, I don’t know, an invasion breaks out or something while we’re sitting here.”

“May I go, mama?” asked Mirochka, clearly intrigued by her new brothers and the promise of new games and toys. Somewhat guiltily, I reflected that there had not been many toys and games in her life, and certainly no brothers. Not that she lacked companionship or things to do, but learning to shoot and track was not the same as carefree play with the finest toys money could buy, something that was her birth-right just as much as her steppe upbringing had been.

“Of course, but,” I leaned down and whispered into her ear, “you must be very careful with your new brothers! I fear they are much more fragile than you!”

“I will, mama!” she promised, giggling at the thought of the oldest boy, Ruslan, who was four years older and more than a head taller than her, requiring delicate handling. The four of them went off, accompanied as promised by two guards and a nursemaid, to the nursery to play.

“She’s a fine girl, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Sera’s husband, watching her go. “You must take great pride in her.” His expression was wistful as he said it, and so, for a moment, was Sera’s.

“As you must in your sons, Vyacheslav Irinovich,” I told him.

“Ah yes, our sons,” said Sera. “We do indeed take pride in them, Valya. I love them, and take pride in them, and they will never want for anything, never, not as long as any of them shall live. But they are not daughters, are they?”

There didn’t seem to be any answer to that, so I merely nodded, while the wistfulness on Vyacheslav Irinovich’s face deepened into sorrow. He had a fine, elegant, intelligent face, rather like my father’s, and sorrow suited it, but I would have rather not seen the sorrow, even

so. He was, to the best of my knowledge, devoted to Sera, and she to him, and their union would have been ideal in every way, except for the lack of an heir. Three boys, and at least as many miscarriages, every one more damaging to her health than the last, and yet here she was with child again.

“Tsarina,” I said abruptly. “Sera. Forgive me, but I must speak plainly. I could not help but notice that...your condition. Are you sure it is wise?”

“Wise, Valya?” she asked with a smile. “Why would it not be wise?”

“Your health, Sera. I know how much you suffered with the boys, and how...how close we came to losing you the last time I was here, during the last...the last incident. You promised me then that that was the last attempt you would make, and I swore to you that Mirochka would be ready to take up her place at your side, if you should need to call upon her, and you promised to summon us to Krasnograd when that time came. When I first saw your messenger, I assumed that that was why you had sent for us, but now I am at a loss to explain our presence. I know that she is not the product of a lawful marriage, and that thus far her upbringing has not been that of an heir to the Wooden Throne, but she is of the Zerkalitsa line and she and I are ready to serve you, whenever you may need us, however you may need us. Do not endanger yourself for no reason, Sera. Zem’ needs you. Surely—if you will forgive me for saying so—it is not too late. Last time you saved yourself just in time, and this time too you could end this...this madness before it ruins you entirely.” I stopped just as abruptly as I had begun, surprised to realize that my cheeks were burning and my breath was coming fast. “Please don’t do anything to endanger yourself, Sera,” I said. “I couldn’t stand it if anything happened to you.”

“Oh, Valya...” She had to stop to wipe her eyes, before smiling again and continuing, “Blood will tell, will it not? I knew the moment you were born that I had been given a gift in you. Although,” she tried to smile, “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you make such a long speech before. You’re not normally so...chatty.”

“I chat a lot inside my head. This time I just let it come out.”

She smiled and reached over and stroked my cheek. “And you meant it, did you not? You would give me yourself, and Mirochka too,

if it meant keeping me safe?”

“Of course, Sera. Without a moment’s hesitation. I have already promised.”

“Yes you have. I do not forget the...the extraordinary honor you did me the last time, when you promised that I could have anything I would ask of you, including your life and that of Mirochka as well, if I would only save myself from what all agreed was my inevitable death. And so I did. I credit you with saving me: your courage, your loyalty, Valya, that are more than any sister could expect, even an Empress.

“And yet this time I fear I must go through with this, Valya. How it came about...I had not intended for this to happen, and yet I had been thinking and thinking of how cruel it was to make you and Mirochka my heirs, and how Zem’ would be thrown into disarray if...if Mirochka were to inherit. You know they *might* tolerate it, although I fear there would be some initial mutterings, and no small amount of opposition from the black earth princesses, but ...well, perhaps they’d accept her eventually, but there would be some hard feelings because of her...situation. I even thought for a moment of making Ruslan my heir—after all, some princesses do pass on their titles to their sons, if the need is dire, or they find them suitable partners to rule with them, as was done with your father—but I fear that would throw the country into even worse disarray than handing the throne to you and Mirochka. Inheritance through the male line is much too chancy a thing to risk an empire on. Anyway. I had been thinking and thinking those thoughts, and then one day I realized what had happened, even though I had thought it impossible. I have consulted with the healers, Valya, the best Krasnograd has to offer, and they all agree that risky as it is to go through with it, ending it now would be even riskier, so I decided that perhaps it was for the best. Perhaps this means my own daughter will finally be given to me. Are you disappointed, Valya?”

“Disappointed?” I asked. “Why disappointed?”

“Because if it should be a girl, then she would come before you and Mirochka in the succession.”

“If you are safely delivered of a healthy girl, Sera, then I swear to you I will serve her for the rest of my life with joy in my heart. Nothing would make me happier. I would be the most devoted aunt Zem’ has

ever seen. But..."

"But nothing, Valya. I knew I could count on you."

"But what if it does not go well?" I continued stubbornly. "What then?"

"Then, Valya? Well, that is why I called you here. But I feel—I have a presentiment—that this time I will bring an heir into the world. At long last, an heir for Zem', with no question of her heritage and no chance that she would cause any divided loyalties amongst the princesses. I have decided that this is one of those flashes of our foremothers' gift of foresight, and that it will come to pass."

"But what if..." I swallowed and then plowed on, "what if it does not go well for you, Sera?"

She looked at me. "If I must die in blood and pain to bring forth this heir, then so be it, Valya, so be it." Her voice was not loud, but the conviction in it chilled me even more than anything else I had seen so far. I wondered how much she had foreseen.

"Please, Sera..." I said, not sure what I was going to ask but pleading with her anyway.

"It is decided, Valya," she said, with the voice of the Tsarina. "It is decided. What will be, will be."

"I..." I looked away, and caught sight of Vyacheslav Irinovich's face, and wished I hadn't. Whatever I felt about this wretched business, at least I was not directly involved in its conception. Vyacheslav Irinovich looked like a man who wished he could take back his entire life and do it over again, and I dare say that was accurate. But that was possible for none of us. The only way out of this for any of us was forward, little as I liked to think of what could be lying ahead for us. "As you say," I said. "What will be, will be. But oh Sera! Zem' does not deserve you!"

"Oh, whoever does?" she said with a smile. "But it has me even so. And you too, Valya, whom it deserves even less. I summoned you here for a reason, you know, even if it was not the one you expected."

"I am ready to serve, of course."

"And yet you doubt the wisdom of the service I will request, given what I have just told you. Oh Valya!" she said, on seeing my face. "How could I not guess your thoughts? I know you better than you know yourself."

“No doubt that is true, Sera. But I am ready to serve nonetheless, even if I think it is folly that you ask. Although if it is folly, I will probably argue very hard against it.”

“I’m sure that is the case, Valya. Oh, and Valya, I have not forgotten all that you wrote me of in your last letters. We must discuss it seriously, you and I together, and then with the Princess Council. But, I think, it can keep, at least for a few days. I have two requests for you, you see, or maybe more, some more trifling than others, but requiring your immediate attention.”

“Which are?”

“Let us start with the trifling one, Valya. You must get married.”

“If that is the trifling request, Sera, then I fear to think what the serious request will be!”

“Oh Valya! Not that I consider marriage a trifle—but you know what I mean. You are not a love-struck young girl, your head filled with dreams of romance, who balks at the idea of a sensible marriage. You know you must get married; in fact, you promised me last time that you would if I asked it. Well, I am asking it, Valya.”

“Very well. Do you have someone in mind?”

“Several someones, in fact, Valya. I chose several suitable young princes, in the hopes that one of them would suit you.”

“That is very kind,” I said, and meant it. Many an empress would not have been so considerate. “Do these young men know what you have intended for them?”

“I thought it best to discuss it with you first, Valya. I wanted to let you make your choice, and woo him a little, and then, if he seemed receptive, we could approach the young man and his family with an offer. But until then, let us keep it between ourselves. I see no need to fuel rumor and speculation and hard feelings by letting it be known that there is something of a competition between them.”

“Certainly,” I said. “Do these young men have names? Do I know any of them?”

“Some of them, perhaps, Valya, or at least their families.”

Something about the way she said it made me prick up my ears. “I’m not going to like your choices, am I, Sera?”

“Well, you see, the thing is, Valya...”

“They’re all black earth princes, aren’t they?” I demanded.

“How did you know?” she asked, surprised for a moment out of her embarrassed hesitancy.

“Oh, lucky guess.”

“I’m sure it was more than that, Valya. You always were sharper than a whole box of knives. I’ve always wondered if you weren’t gifted that way, even if it never seemed exactly like the gifts that usually run in our family. But if you think about it, it shares many similarities with what...”

“Yes-yes,” I interrupted her. “I see things that others don’t, just like our foremothers did, even if it’s not exactly foresight or farsight or the gift of seeing into the hearts of women, or the visions that Darya Krasnoslavovna had. I’ve had these thoughts too, Sera, and I honestly don’t know what to believe. But the issue of my possible giftedness doesn’t matter now. You want me to marry a black earth prince, don’t you?”

“Yes, Valya, I do.” She looked me straight in the eyes and said firmly, “You already bring me the steppe, Valya, so there’s no point in you marrying a boy from another steppe family, and besides, as far as I know, the steppe is peaceful—amongst itself. There is no contention amongst the steppe princesses, is there?”

“Not that I know of,” I admitted. “Everyone seems content with my mother’s rule, such as it is.”

“Your rule, you mean, Valya. Everyone knows who sits in judgment on the steppe.”

I shrugged. “I know of no discontent on the steppe,” I said.

“Not on the steppe, no, but the rift between the steppe and the rest of the country has only grown since you drove back the Rutsi and the Tanskans. Not that we are not grateful, but no one can forget that you were strong when the rest of us were weak, and standing tall when others fall breeds fear.”

“Krasnograd and the rest of the country should be down on their knees thanking us! If it weren’t for us...”

“Yes-yes, I know, I know. If it weren’t for the steppe, all of Zem’ would be the vassal of a foreign land and the slaves of the men who rule there. But reminding people of that is unlikely to endear the steppe to them. Furthermore, the steppe has always been indepen-

dent, more so than the other provinces, and that is another cause for mistrust and resentment.”

“You would be wise to let the steppe continue to remain independent, Sera,” I warned her.

“And I shall, Valya, I shall, but there is no need for you to marry a steppe prince and further your insularity. You must marry someone from elsewhere, as you very well know. This breach must be healed, and you are the only one who can do so.”

“Ye-es,” I agreed. “I know there’s no one else. But I am hardly suited to be a healer, Sera.”

“Slava is from the Breathing Sea,” she said, ignoring my words, “and there is already talk of a match between Ruslan and Princess Severnolesnaya’s heir. So the North is firmly allied with us. But the black earth princesses grow restless. They have been complaining more and more of late that too much power has been given to the outlying provinces, and that outsiders will one day sit the Wooden Throne.”

“Mirochka...” I said.

“Mirochka is *your* daughter, Valya, and no one else’s, do you understand? The rest of her parentage can hardly be acknowledged, *especially* amongst the black earth princesses. Her very existence is an insult to them; that has been made clear to me. But if you were to marry, lawfully marry, one of their sons, that would put things in a very different light. Or so I believe.”

“Very well,” I said, trying not to sound too disgruntled about it. After all, it was only the same conclusion I’d already come to on my own.

“And besides, Valya, it is not as if you have *always* shared the steppe disdain for black earth men,” she said. She smiled at me as she said it, and then laughed at the glare I gave her.

“Well, I suppose I did promise to sacrifice whatever needed to be sacrificed if you needed it,” I said gloomily. “So who are these men you have in mind for me, Sera? I suppose I should at least consider their merits before pronouncing my judgment upon them.”

“Well, I should start by saying I thought it best to choose young princes for you, Valya, which narrowed down the field somewhat—no widowers or older men for you.”

“Why?” I demanded. “Princess Malokrasnova’s older brother...”

“Is forty if he’s a day?”

“But he’s still a black earth prince, and a valuable alliance...”

“True, Valya, but do you really see yourself married to a man more than ten years your senior?”

“Why not?” I asked, feeling contrary, but also curious. “We’re doing this to forge an alliance, not provide me with a lover, and older men might be more...stable. Sensible. Easier to convince of the necessity of this alliance. Princess Malokrasnova’s older brother, for example...”

“I don’t think Princess Malokrasnova’s older brother is particularly interested in...marriage,” interjected Vyacheslav Irinovich. “At least not with you, Valeriya Dariyevna, if you will pardon me for saying so.”

I thought back on my few interactions with Princess Malokrasnova’s older brother. “Well, that certainly explains a number of things. But it doesn’t negate what I just said, and he might be glad to have the protection of a wife.”

“Really, Valya?” asked Sera, raising an eyebrow at me yet again. “You really think you’d marry a man almost half again your age, and turn a blind eye as he dallied with guards and stableboys?”

“If necessary for the alliance!” I said.

“Your devotion is admirable, Valya,” said Sera dryly. “In fact...” she turned more serious, “to be honest, I don’t think you’d be happy if you weren’t sacrificing yourself for something. You’ve always thirsted for it, you know.”

“Arranged marriage?”

“No, sacrifice. You wouldn’t be happy if there weren’t...difficulties along the way, ruts in the road, battles to be won, blood to be lost...”

“Not in love! Not in marriage!”

“Yes in love, Valya, and in marriage too. After all, it isn’t as if love or marriage turn you into a whole new person. You’re still the same person you’ve always been, just, if you are lucky, kinder, more generous, more complete—a better version of yourself. But yourself nonetheless, and *your* self, Valya, likes to leap over obstacles, strike down enemies...you know, fight. Strive. Sacrifice. So here is your chance. Your chance to be *you*—the direct descendent through the female line of Miroslava Praskovyevna, and all our other foremothers who

brought the world to its knees and bent it to their will with blood, steel, and cunning. Because the gods know that you're the only one in whom the line runs true. No, don't argue with me. The rest of us, ever since Darya Krasnoslavovna, have been nothing more than ordinary, despite all our illustrious heritage. Some dreadful taint through the male line, perhaps, but none of us have lived up to Darya Krasnoslavovna's potential, none of us have been any more than what you'd expect after she was married to some inoffensive Zapadnokrasnov in order to shore up support amongst the Western princesses. She told me once, you know. That he was a perfectly pleasant husband, but..."

"But perfectly pleasant husbands don't always give you daughters who bend the world to their will. For that you need a man with spirit."

"Well..." I hoped that my eyes were deceiving me when they told me that Sera was trying not to give Vyacheslav Irinovich a sidelong glance. "Yes. There was talk of her taking a foreigner as a husband, you know. And I think that sometimes she wished she had. That would have freshened the line nicely, and maybe things would have turned out differently for all of us."

"Maybe. But not necessarily better. You can only have so many women who bend the world to their will before it falls apart completely."

"Perhaps. But you need some. And now may be the time. Now may be the time for us—you—to bend the world to our will, and choose a man with enough spirit to father a daughter whose name and whose blood will run down through the ages." She smiled. "A mighty task, and who better than you to undertake it? I know how much I am asking of you, Valya, so I will try to make it...enough of a challenge that you will enjoy it, but not so much that you will hate me forever, or, the gods forbid, fail at it. So if you *really* think that Princess Malokrasnova's older brother is the right kind of challenge for you, then I won't stand in your way. And..." she started to smile, "some women do find that sort of thing...attractive. To watch, you know. You could make it a condition of the marriage."

"Only if the guards and stableboys were young and *very* handsome," I said. "And even so...no, I think it would be best if that...aspect of our life together were to remain a secret, even from me. Especial-

ly from me. We would have to negotiate some other kind of arrangement. But in all seriousness, Sera, if marrying him is what is needed, then that's what I'll do, and if there are...certain things that I have to overlook, then I will. After all, this won't be a love-match; I know that perfectly well. You would see that I can be...tolerant about that sort of thing. As you said, I like a challenge."

"And when he contradicted you, or disobeyed you, or refused to go along with something you considered essential?"

"Well...do you really think he would?"

"Yury Yarmilovich Malokrasnov? I'm sure of it, Valya, and given that he's almost half again your age, I've no doubt that he'd be trying to order you about like your own father in no time. Now tell me, Valya, what do you think you'd do if your own husband tried to act like that to you?"

"I'd...I'd set him aside," I admitted.

"Which we simply can't be having, Valya. Given that we are planning a marriage alliance here, it is essential that we choose someone to whom you have a reasonable chance of remaining married and not offending his family within six months of the wedding. No, Valya, I think you need someone young and biddable, who won't be arguing with you at every turn. If I know you, Valya, simply going through with the marriage will be challenge enough, whatever you might think of the matter right now. Thank the gods," she grinned at me, "that that wretched fashion for ill-tempered young men that was popular when our foremothers were courting has gone out of style, or I would have no hope whatsoever of getting you in front of a priestess. I know some women like to tame a husband who argues back at them, but in your case I fear the taming would go much too far, and lead to breaking. You need someone biddable, and we'll just leave you to do all the arguing on your own, shall we?"

"I don't argue!" I cried.

This provoked Sera to raise not one but both brows, and elicited a snort of laughter from Vyacheslav Irinovich, which he at least had the decency to choke off as hastily as he could manage.

"Well, fair enough, *I did* just contradict my own Empress," I said. "I guess I can see your point. So, young, biddable men only. What young,

biddable men did you have in mind, Tsarina?”

“It would also be best, of course, if he were known to be fertile. If you are going to get an heir off of him, we need to know that he’ll be up to the task.”

“Oh very *well*,” I said, still chagrined. “What young, biddable, *fertile* princes do you have in mind?”

“Only one is known to be fertile. I have to admit that, as much as I would like to ensure that you get another heir, Valya, I wasn’t sure about the wisdom of joining you with someone who already has other children from other women lying about the countryside. Be that as it may, the young Prince Yuzhnokrasnov, apple of his mother’s eye, is yet unmarried at five-and-twenty, perhaps because, as my sources tell me, he is known to have fathered a daughter on a serving girl in his mother’s house, and despite the best efforts of the Yuzhnokrasnovy to hush it up, word got out to the other black earth princesses, and now none of them will take him for their daughters. His mother might be so glad to make a match for him at last that she could be willing to concede us whatever concessions we might wish, and by all accounts the child is a fine, healthy girl, which is something in his favor, Valya, you must admit, unseemly as some might find it.”

“Very well,” I said. “I could overlook the daughter, I’m sure, if it came to that. Who else?”

“The Vostochnokrasnovy are, to a man, out of the question, as I’m sure you’ll agree, Valya...”

“Yes-yes,” I said hastily. “And the only one who would be eligible is barely sixteen, which seems young even by our current standards, Sera. I think I would prefer someone who has already come of age. Who else?”

“Princess Zapadnokrasnova has a son, three-and-twenty, supposedly very fine to look upon, although they say he is of a sickly constitution...”

“Well, we’ll keep him in mind, of course, but that hardly sounds promising,” I said. “Who else, Sera.”

“Well, there is always, of course, Valya, Ivan Marinovich Velikokrasnov.”

“You are JOKING!” I said, only it came out much louder than I had

intended.

“Oh, come now, Valya, we have to consider him. He’s just of marriageable age, just about to turn twenty, if I remember aright, and everyone agrees he’s a fine, handsome, fair-spoken, good-hearted, dutiful young man, if perhaps, if the rumors are right, a trifle shy. But, again if the rumors are right, there would be no question of you getting spoiled goods, Valya, no worries about some little indiscretion popping up and causing you trouble down the road. And then the Velikokrasnovy are the most powerful of the black earth princesses, so a marriage with Princess Velikokrasnova’s only son would be the best alliance we could possibly have amongst them. Of course, he himself was conceived out of wedlock, and they say his father was just some man-at-arms in his mother’s guard, or maybe worse, but a little common blood through the male line never hurt anyone. After all, you and I both bear more than our fair share of it. But the black earth princesses are a snobbish lot, so it might make it difficult for his mother to find him a good match, despite all his other fine qualities, which could strengthen our suit. There are many advantages to the match, Valya, so please consider it carefully.”

“If he’s shy and dutiful and all that, I don’t see how we could possibly expect him to agree even to consider a match with...well, me.”

“Ah, but Valya, it seems he is also known to be a trifle hot-tempered. Not so much that I would expect you to have any trouble handling him, but enough that now, when he has just come into his manhood and come to Krasnograd to be courted for the first time, he might be swayed to do something of which his mother might not approve, especially if it were a woman courting him who were doing the swaying, and especially if that woman were the infamous Valeriya Dariyevna, a steppe princess with Imperial blood, the unspoken villain of his family’s tales and yet still young, comely, and notoriously seductive.”

“You put a lot of faith in my ability to turn young men’s heads.”

“With reason, Valya, with reason,” she said with a smile, while Vyacheslav Irinovich nodded behind her, also smiling.

“Well...I suppose it can’t hurt to try.”

“Oh, try to look a little more enthusiastic about it, Valya! You’re going to be courting a prince, not cleaning a stall. Don’t make a face as

if you've just stepped in something unpleasant. I would have thought you would have relished the challenge! And if he does balk a bit, well, as we know, many believe it's more fun to bring an unwilling man to marriage, and I thought perhaps you of all people would be amongst that number."

"I don't *force* myself on people who don't want me," I said through stiff lips.

"Of course not, of course not—who said anything about *forcing*? You just...of course he might be a little shy at first, a little uncertain whether this is the right course, but you will just have to...convince him otherwise. Court him, you know, turn his head, so that he forgets all about any earlier scruples or doubts he might have had about any connection with you. You see, Valya, I think it would be best if you won him over first, before we propose the marriage itself. Let him be its biggest proponent. And if it's a hard-fought battle—well, I'm sure you'll win out in the end, and you'll relish your victory all the more."

"How much am I supposed to 'win him over'?" I asked, trying not to make another face at the prospect. "I mean...should I leave him with no option if he wants to keep his honor? Ply him with strong drink until he loses his head and then..." Now I couldn't stop myself from twisting my lips in distaste.

"That would certainly be the most direct and efficient method," said Sera, nodding. "I admire your practicality, Valya, as always. I knew I could count on you."

"Count on me to do your dirty work, you mean! Would *you* want a husband gotten that way?" I demanded. "Or would you want someone to do that to Ruslan?"

"Oh, well with Ruslan..." She rolled her eyes and smiled. "*Someone* needs to take him in hand, and no mistake."

"He's twelve years old! Of course he's annoying! But that's no excuse for, for...taking advantage of some other woman's son like this!"

"Think of it as a little well-earned revenge on Princess Velikokrasnova," suggested Sera. "After all, I'm sure you wouldn't be sorry to make her suffer."

"Well...no, but...*Ivan Marinovich* has never done anything to me. It's not his fault that his mother and I are...at odds. And I don't...I don't

like the idea of starting a marriage off that way. It's...it's not how we do things back home. The other person has to prove their willingness in order for it to work out."

"I always forget when I'm not around you how many scruples you have, Valya, much as it might surprise everyone to know it," said Sera, looking at me with delighted interest.

"Of course I have scruples! I have lots of scruples! What I've done... what happened with, with *him*...well, you know he wasn't *unwilling*. I didn't *trick* him into anything. If I had, things would have been very different. We wouldn't be having this conversation, for starters, because I would already be married to a black earth prince."

"Of course, of course. And so...do as you think best in this matter, Valya, but I agree: it seems to me that, aside from any *scruples* you might have, it would be better if he were still eager to sample the delights you have dangled in front of him, if you see what I mean, when we go to propose the match to his mother. That way he will be even more intent on making the match, and if it should all fall through—well, there will be no permanent damage done."

"I will try," I said.

"Wonderful, Valya, wonderful! And have a little faith in yourself. Mark my words, you'll have him eating out of your hand like a tame fawn before the month is out. I thought you could introduce yourself to him tomorrow night at the feast. He is here with his friends under the protection of Princess Srednekrasnova—I believe there is talk of a match between him and her younger daughter—but his mother has not yet come to Krasnograd, so it will be a most auspicious moment for courting him. Ask him to dance or something—or maybe even better, *don't* ask him to dance. Say you prefer swordplay, or something of that sort. Are you still good with a blade?"

"I hope so," I said dryly.

"Well, so is he, according to all who know him. Challenge him to a match, or something. That is almost certain to turn out well—if you beat him, he will be all in a rage to try again to prove himself, and if he beats you"—Sera had the good grace to look embarrassed when I raised my brows at this suggestion—"or if you let him *think* that he has beaten you, he will be kindly disposed to you, or at least ready to show

you how he gained his prowess. Really, Valya, it will be child's play."

"So you keep saying," I said. "We'll see how it goes when the time comes. But let us turn to the serious matter, Sera."

"Your marriage is a serious matter, Valya! I'm sorry...I shouldn't have said it was a trifle...of course it's a serious matter..."

"Oh, very serious, I'm sure. But you said you had another request of me."

"Oh, yes, that..." Her face shut down, and she twisted her hands for a moment instead of speaking, which was most unlike her.

"You've already asked me to woo the son of the woman I hate most in the world, Sera. What could possibly be worse than that? Spit it out."

She smiled painfully. "It's not that, Valya. It's not that I'm afraid you'll find it too onerous a task—in fact, I think you'll find it right up your alley, much more so than wooing Ivan Marinovich or any other prince we end up choosing for you. It's just that I'm afraid of what you'll find."

"Oh," I said. "You need me to spy for you again. You know that isn't a problem, Sera."

"Not for you, no. But as I said, Valya, I'm afraid of what you'll find."

"Whom should I be spying upon that's so terrible, then?" I asked. "Vyacheslav Irinovich's family? My own?"

"Oh no, nothing like that, Valya."

"Your own sisters back in Pristanograd?" I guessed again.

"*Our* own sisters back in Pristanograd, Valya. And no, not them either, or not directly. No, I...I don't even know exactly whom to suspect, Valya, or what to suspect of them, which is what makes it so bad. But I fear...I fear that the black earth princesses are hatching something."

"I'm sure they are," I said, laughing a little in my relief at not having to spy on my own family. "But why that should be a surprise or an embarrassment to you, I don't know. Wasn't that what you feared last time? Wasn't that why I ended up spending so much time in the company of black earth people? And see how that turned out? No conspiracy—well, no more than usual—and me with child. Admittedly, there was a *bit* of a scandal, but nothing we couldn't weather. And every time I've looked into things for you, here in Krasnograd or out on

the steppe, nothing bad has happened to me—not permanently, anyway—and the information I’ve uncovered has been useful but nothing more. Certainly nothing that threatened our realm or your rule. So why should this time be any different?”

“Because...” She looked away. “Because I’m afraid they might succeed, Valya!”

“Succeed? Succeed in what?”

“I don’t know! But bringing down my rule, certainly, perhaps even that of our whole family.”

“Surely even the black earth princesses would find bringing down the entire Zerkalitsa rule to be a little too big for their crooked, ugly teeth,” I said.

“Valya! We are speaking of your future relations!”

“They’re not my relations *yet*,” I said. “I can still notice their crooked teeth if I want to.”

Sera rolled her eyes, and so, although he did it more discreetly, did Vyacheslav Irinovich. “Oh fine,” I said. “I’ll try to rein myself in a bit. But you know what I mean. Taking on the Zerkalitsa line is an awfully big day’s work—not that any of them know what work is—even for that nest of vipers.”

“I know, Valya, I know, I feel silly even mentioning it to you, but they are certainly plotting *something*, and this time I have a feeling it is worse than the usual infighting that goes on between them. This time they seem...worrisomely united. That’s what has me concerned, Valya. There hasn’t been one contentious marriage, one attempt at assassination, in over a year, and now there is talk of a match between Ivan Marinovich and Princess Srednekrasnova’s younger daughter...the Srednekrasnova heir has already been betrothed to a Zapadnokrasnov, and... not that there’s anything unusual in the black earth families intermarrying, since you know what an insular, incestuous group they are, but there’s just something about all these alliances, something I can’t quite put my finger on but that worries me, Valya, it worries me. Which is why...which is why I am willing to risk so much for the chance to bring an heir from my own line into the world. Before... after last time...I was willing, even happy, to turn the rule over to you and Mirochka when the time came, but now...now I’m afraid, Valya,

I'm truly afraid, that that would be the spark that would set the black earth district afire, and Krasnograd along with it." Her face gave the truth of her words: she truly was afraid of whatever it was she sensed might be coming, and she was rubbing her fingers against her cheeks as she did only when she was uncontrollably agitated.

"Have you seen something?" I asked.

"No, not as such, it's just...a feeling. Less than a vision, but more than nothing. And...I do not like these rumors from the West. You know what I wrote you last. And it is getting worse and worse, if reports are to be believed. And somehow...it all makes me uneasy."

I nodded. The troubles outside our borders were well known. We generally didn't pay too much attention to the West, but there had been an empire of sorts, down on the Middle Sea, that had kept much of the West in line, or as much in line as it could be kept. But during Darya Krasnoslavovna's time the empire had first threatened the borders of Zem', and then collapsed (we liked to think the two things were related, but by all accounts it had collapsed all on its own, without any help on our part), only to be replaced by an alliance between our neighbors the Rutsi and the Tanskans, who had during the reign of Sera's mother gone so far as to march all the way to Krasnograd and even take the city for a week or two. Their hold of Krasnograd and Zem' had lasted precisely as long as it had taken the bulk of the steppe army to make its way to the Krasna, at which point they had been routed utterly, driven back beyond our borders, and their alliance smashed into smithereens. Now, a generation later, the entire West was still, if the reports were accurate, a patchwork of warring tribes, with no more notion of law than what could be found on the blade of a sword. Which made them weak and strong in equal measure.

"They make me uneasy, too," I said. "But you surely don't believe the black earth princesses have anything to do with it?"

"No, but...altogether it makes me feel as if Zem' is...is under attack, almost. Which is why I need you to look into it, Valya, as quietly as you know how. I don't want even a hint of my suspicions to reach anyone, especially the black earth princesses, before we have solid proof either of their treason, or of my own imaginings brought on by frayed nerves. Which is why I need you married to a black earth prince as soon as

may be.”

“Very well,” I said. “The looking into things is easy enough, or at least it will be easy enough to get started. You said Princess Srednekrasnova has just arrived in town with a large party?”

“Yes, her whole family, and a number of friends and companions, amongst them Ivan Marinovich.”

“Can someone watch over Mirochka?”

“Of course, Valya, of course. In fact, I was going to suggest it anyway. Let her come and take her lessons with the boys.”

“I don’t think their lessons line up very well,” I said.

“Well, let her play in the corner while they’re taking their lessons, and then they can amuse themselves together afterwards. Have her sent to them after breakfast, and they can while away the whole day together. She will be well taken care of, Valya, you have no need to worry on that score.”

“In that case I’ll start tomorrow.”

“Excellent! How?”

“You implied that this party includes a number of young men, out on the town for the first time since coming into their manhood?”

“Yes, at least three or four of them. All fast friends, as far as I know.”

“Young men like to talk, my dear Sera, and they especially like to talk while gathered in taverns, out from under the eye of their mothers and protectors. I will wager you any money you like that our princes will be making a trip to an inn just as soon as they can escape the house. There’s a place where black earth people like to congregate. I’ll start there. Perhaps it will lead me to something. If not, I’ll watch the house a bit and see what I find.”

“As long as you’re back in time for the feast tomorrow, Valya.”

“I’ll do my best,” I said.

“Give me your word, Valya!”

“Oh fine. You have my word. I will make the feast tomorrow night on pain of death, and I will refuse to dance with Ivan Marinovich, but challenge him to a sword match instead, at which I will most likely give the young pup a sound hiding, but if that seems unlikely, I’ll lose gracefully and then beseech him to teach me the tricks of his mastery. Or perhaps I’ll challenge him to a shooting match instead, and prom-

ise to teach him the secrets of steppe archery. Are you satisfied?”

She laughed, and for the first time since I'd arrived in Krasnograd, the strain on her face appeared almost gone. “Oh Valya! I knew I could count on you. Already I feel better. Now go!” She leaned over and kissed my cheek. “Collect Mirochka and go to bed. You have a big day tomorrow, and you will want to look your best for all the intrigues we have planned for you.”

“Good night, Sera,” I said, kissing her cheek in return and trying to ignore the unaccountable lump that rose up in my throat as my lips touched her face, and also the faint whiff of ill health I caught rising off her skin. “It will all turn out well for us, I promise.”

“I don't doubt it for a moment, sister,” she said, and showed me to the door.

Chapter Four

Mirochka was fractious that night about going to bed, and afraid of the new bedchamber, and kept complaining that the bed we shared was too high and too hard. And then, after she finally had slept a few hours, she impatient to be up and off playing with her new brothers. When in the end I was able to send her off to spend the day with the little tsarinoviches, I was tired and out of sorts and in no good state to be off spying on or wooing princes. I found it easier to be patient with Mirochka than with anyone else in the world, but that was only relative. I found it easy to be patient with no one.

So as I tried to ready myself for the tasks that lay ahead of me, I did so with the sinking knowledge that my stock of patience had already all been used up for the day, and that I had an aching head and dark circles under my eyes from my short night's sleep on top of my two-week journey. I had always been hale, hearty, and quick to heal, so that such things affected me less than they did other women, but I had to admit that they did affect me, and so my spirits were in very low ebb as I dressed in my traveler's garb, the better to disguise myself, and set off for the inns and taverns of Krasnograd.

At least I was doing something useful and that, under other circumstances, I would have even found fun. I *liked* spying, or whatever you wanted to call it, and I was good at it. I was quick to notice things, and despite my inability to get along with my sister princesses, I had the knack of making friends with servants, soldiers, and what these city folk would call low company. Probably because on the steppe we didn't make such a sharp distinction between high and low company, and I had served on the steppe patrols myself when I was younger. I was not the open and outgoing type, but even so, I made friends very easily. Or rather, followers. I didn't really have many friends. I had many people who would cheerfully obey my commands, or who might even consider themselves my friends, but they...they were followers. Even if I were not a princess and heir to the Tsarina, I suspected that they would still be followers, since I tended to lead any group

of people I found myself in, but as it was, there was just no one around who could ever be a real friend, if by “friend” I meant someone who could disobey me and speak her mind without fear of retribution.

Putting all that aside was part of the fun of spying. I hadn’t gotten to be someone else in far too long, and being myself was starting to chafe, as it always did. Surely being yourself shouldn’t be so irksome, but it was, it was...some days my sword felt heavy and alien in my hand, and I could barely even stand to practice my bladework.

Well, I had the cure for that now, didn’t I? I was about to go lurk about the city and eavesdrop and get people to spill their secrets to me. Which should be easy. People tended to tell me all kinds of things that I had a hard time imagining revealing to another person, let alone a near-stranger. But most people seemed to think I looked trustworthy (which was true) and kind (which was less true), and no one ever seemed to connect my face with the kremlin and the throne and the woman sitting in it.

It helped that I didn’t look much like my Zerkalitsa kin, who since the time of Darya Krasnoslavovna had all been stamped with her curly red hair, her freckles, her heart-shaped face, and her solid, even, in some of our family, voluptuous body shape. But all that had skipped right over me. No one had ever guessed my affiliation with the Zerkalitsa family just by looking at me, which was all to the good when I wanted to pass myself off as someone else. Which I often did. Aside from the call of duty, I found surrendering myself to the ever-changing movement of events and to my own inspiration to be exhilarating and yet relaxing at the same time.

I had discovered this by accident, my first summer in Krasnograd after I had come of age, when Sera had mentioned her concerns that the black earth princesses were up to something, and I had offered to befriend their daughters and see if I could find anything out. She had accepted my offer with a laugh, expecting nothing to come of it, but to both our surprise, no one had recognized me as the Tsarina’s second-sister, taking me for some steppe rider come in to sell her horses.

When we had told this to the old Captain of the Guard, already in retirement, but known to be cunning about such things, he had given me tips on spying and concealment, and had suggested ways of infil-

trating the black earth princesses' servants and other potential malcontents. I had fallen in with the serving folk and younger sons and daughters with no trouble at all, and been able to report back within a matter of days that the black earth princesses were unhappy with the influence the steppe was exerting on the rule of the country, but that they did not seem to have any immediate plans to change that, other than perhaps through a fortunate marriage alliance...and then I had met *him*, and thought that the fortunate marriage alliance was going to be made through me...more fool me...best not to think about it too much...best just to give myself over to the task at hand. Or at least the street in front of me. I stepped over a puddle of filth, and nearly collided with a mother duck and a gaggle of ducklings. There was an outburst of outraged quacking, and I only avoided crushing the ducklings by leaping over them and spinning away on one foot—which caused me to slip in the slops and almost fall full-length on them anyway, saving myself only by grabbing hold of the fence next to me and sliding around in an inelegant dance until I regained my footing.

“I apologize, little mother,” I said to the mother duck, who fixed me with a beady-eyed look of contempt, before shepherding her charges away from me and my clumsiness. A sharp pang went through me as I watched them go: I could have killed them so easily, I could have ruined things for another mother so easily and so irrevocably, and entirely without meaning to. I watched them, my head still muzzy despite the beating of my heart at my near escape, until they slipped through a fence and disappeared from my sight, and I was able to turn and start moving again.

As I walked through the still and stifling summer morning, sweating lightly despite my slow pace and wishing I were back on the steppe, which would also be stifling but less rank with the reek of privies and middens than the part of Krasnograd I was currently strolling through, I tried to buck myself up by telling myself that this first part of the day would be easy, and by the time the more challenging evening assignment rolled around, I would be prepared for it and would have thought of something clever to do and say when I encountered Ivan Marinovich. What that clever thing was, and how I was to prevent him from turning his back on me the moment we met, I still didn't know,

and despite Sera's faith in my abilities as a wooer, my own doubts were severe. True, I had had some successes in the past, but ultimately they had been short-lived and hollow victories.

The plain truth was, even if Sera was unwilling to see it, that at nine-and-twenty I had yet to bring a man to marriage, despite all the advantages that family could bring, and despite on at least one occasion my own very vigorous efforts. That kind of failure tended to leave scars. I stopped worrying for a moment and probed at the area where, I thought (fancifully), my heart had once been. For the longest time it had felt burnt out, like the husk of a house that had been caught in a fatal conflagration. I contemplated bringing another man into it, to see if that would raise some speck of warmth. Alas, no. Still nothing but cold ash. I prodded at it some more, but just as it had always been for the past nine years, to no avail. The best I could hope for if I kept poking around in there would be to bring the whole shaky structure down around my ears. Hardly the best foundation on which to build a courtship and a marriage. Sera, I thought bitterly, could not have chosen a more difficult task for me if she had tried. If fear hadn't been burnt out of me along with all the warmer emotions, I might have even felt afraid.

As it was, since I couldn't work up any actual fear, my aching head and tired body were suffused with a dull dread for what lay ahead. I tried to quell it, and quite successfully. And, I told myself, this *was* the task that Sera had chosen, and not out of spite but out of necessity, a necessity I also recognized, so I would just have to go through with it. Besides, whatever my heart might be feeling, my blood was already starting to rise for the chase, even if not for the capture. But first things first. Before I set out to conquer the heart of Ivan Marinovich Velikokrasnov, I needed to find out what his family and all their allies were up to, and for that there was nothing like gossip as a good jumping-off place, and for gossip there was nothing like a tavern.

Knowledge that I had paid a pretty high price for told me that the most likely place for young princes from the black earth district looking to escape their mothers' eyes and have a good time was an inn of middling reputation not far from the kremlin, but far enough from where all the black earth princesses had their houses that they them-

selves would be unlikely to walk there, if they fancied going to an inn. Strong and idle young men, on the other hand, found the walk to be a mere trifle, and generations of the sons and servants of the black earth princesses had made the place their spot for activities that were best done not under the eye of their mothers and mistresses.

I, of course, was not a Krasna black earth woman and had no hope of passing as one, but travelers stopped there too, hence my traveling clothes. I only hoped that the innkeeper wouldn't be out on the floor when I arrived, or wouldn't recognize me if she were. I couldn't count on my traveler's clothes to disguise me from her, since I had worn pretty much exactly the same attire when I had used to frequent the place on my ill-fated summer nine years ago. I probably could have disguised myself better, but my heart had not been in it this morning.

It was not yet noon when I got there, which was early for frequenting taverns, but I thought it best to spend a few hours sitting in a dark corner and listening to what everyone there had to say. And already I could see I was in luck, for a trio of young noblemen with the look of the Krasna about them were approaching the inn as I drew near. I stopped to let them enter before me. The first two went in and the third paused to hold the door open for me, so I stepped up to follow them in.

Instead of us all walking inside, however, we jammed up in the door, and I could hear a serving girl remonstrating with the young man in the lead.

"Irina Vlasiyevna *told* you not to come back without an escort, Aleksey Aleksandrovich," she was saying. "After the trouble you and your friends caused the last time! I can't let you in on your own, Aleksey Aleksandrovich, I can't."

"Oh please, Ksyusha, call for Irina Vlasiyevna," said the young man in the front. "I'm sure she'll see reason if you only let me talk to her."

"She's out, Aleksey Aleksandrovich, and it's more than my job's worth to let you in unescorted. Please, Aleksey Aleksandrovich, don't cause any more trouble."

I perked up at the news that Irina Vlasiyevna, the innkeeper, was out, which boded well for my anonymity on this visit.

“We’ll be as quiet as mice, Ksyusha, we promise,” Aleksey Aleksandrovich was saying in a wheedling tone that was already beginning to irritate me. I could tell without even meeting him face-to-face that he was the kind of young nobleman who was used to getting his way in everything, and to whom it never even occurred that he should not get his way, or that he might be inconveniencing other people, or that inconveniencing other people was a problem. If I had come here as myself, I would most likely have been unable to resist putting him in his place, but it would be inappropriate for a simple traveler to dare to give lessons to a prince, so I held my tongue. “...but we have to come in,” he went on. “Ivan Marinovich is here in Krasnograd for the first time and we *promised* we’d bring him to the finest tavern in town. You wouldn’t want us to send Princess Velikokrasnova’s only son away disappointed, now, would you, Ksyusha? Just for a bit, Ksyusha, and Irina Vlasiyevna need never know.”

The young man holding the door, who so far had been standing with his back to me, turned and smiled apologetically, and I saw that he was, indeed, Ivan Marinovich Velikokrasnov, the very prince I was supposed to be courting. I had seen him only a time or two, and then when he was still a child, but his even features were still recognizable.

“They’re with me,” I said, pushing my way through the trio and stepping into the tavern. “I will vouch for them, Ksyusha. I promised to show them a good time in Krasnograd, *and* I promised their mothers they would get up to no trouble. If you would let us in, Ksyusha, we would be greatly obliged.”

Ksyusha, who couldn’t have been more than sixteen, looked me up and down doubtfully. “Who are you?” she demanded.

“Nadezhda Marislavovna,” I said with a smile. Already I could feel the stories welling up inside of me. “Princess Velikokrasnova’s trusted servant.”

“You look like a steppe woman,” said Ksyusha, with annoying perspicacity.

“Princess Velikokrasnova knew that she would be best served by a steppe woman to keep her son from harm—and out of trouble. They will not step out of line while I’m with them, you have my word.”

“Oh, very well,” said Ksyusha, still radiating doubt but stepping

back slightly to allow us to pass inside the tavern. “But *no trouble*, do you understand, Aleksey Aleksandrovich? And no vodka for you, only beer.”

“Beer will be lovely on such a hot day as this,” I said. “Bring us four mugs of it, if you please, Ksyusha.” I slipped enough coin in her hand to cover at least ten mugs, even at outrageous Krasnograd prices, and she led us to a table in the far corner and withdrew to the kitchen, looking slightly less put out.

“Thanks, but you can go now,” said Aleksey Aleksandrovich.

“No I can’t,” I told him. “I need to be here with you so that Ksyusha doesn’t just throw you right back out again.”

“Oh, do you really think she’d do that?” asked Aleksey Aleksandrovich.

“Yes,” I said. “Because if you cause any trouble, I’ll help.”

“And do you really think you can throw us out, what did you say your name was? Nadezhda Marislavovna? All three of us?”

I looked him up and down. “Yes,” I said.

Aleksey Aleksandrovich flushed and opened his mouth to say something in reply, probably something unprincipled.

“Stop teasing her and behave, Alyosha,” said Ivan Marinovich. “She did us a great favor, and we *don’t* want to be kicked out, do we? Or have word of a disturbance reach your mother.” He turned to me. “Thank you again, Nadezhda Marislavovna,” he said courteously. “And you must let us pay you back for the beer.”

“It’s my pleasure,” I said. “It’s not often that I get to treat young princes newly arrived in Krasnograd.”

“You’re very fair-spoken for a serving woman, Nadezhda Marislavovna,” said Ivan Marinovich, a slight frown creasing his forehead. It was a handsome forehead, and I had to resist the urge to tell him not to risk ruining it by creasing it. While he was not shockingly beautiful the way some men are, his features were pleasant and even without being overly delicate, and his brown eyes were honest and friendly. It was not what I would have expected from Princess Velikokrasnova’s son, but there it was.

“I’m an Imperial messenger.” I tried to spare a thought for how I was going to get out of this mess when I was officially introduced to

him, which would be—oh, by all the gods!—this evening, but I decided to deal with that when the time came. Revealing myself now would shut them up for sure, and I wanted them to talk. “Many of us are of noble birth and upbringing.”

“And are you really from the steppe? I’ve never met a steppe woman.”

“I am,” I told him. “You should visit it sometime. You might like it.” Now where had that come from? It was as if I were already courting him, instead of eavesdropping for information.

“I’m sure I would, Nadezhda Marislavovna,” he said. The other two princes snickered into their beer.

“You know your mother would have fits if you ever ventured onto the steppe, Vanya,” said Aleksey Aleksandrovich. “Besides, she’s going to marry you off to a nice black earth princess, and you’ll stay with the rest of us in the bosom of the Mother Krasna.” There was some insincere and slightly off-color toasting to the bosom of the Mother Krasna.

“Are you betrothed, then, Ivan Marinovich?” I asked, when the toasting had subsided.

“No, but Alyosha—Aleksey Aleksandrovich—is, and so is Denis Praskovyevich,” said Ivan Marinovich.

“Vanya is the last of us to hold out,” said Aleksey Aleksandrovich. Judging by his speech, the half a mug of beer he had already consumed had gone to his head. I perked up even more. There was nothing like drink to loosen tongues, and the inside gossip on the betrothals of the Krasna princes was certainly something worth hearing straight from their own mouths.

“Is your intended fair to look upon?” I asked Aleksey Aleksandrovich. “I hear that black earth princesses can be wondrous fair, and so delicate too. Is it true?”

He snorted, while the other two looked caught between amusement and embarrassment. “I suppose, if a girl of twelve could be said to be fair to look upon,” he said, trying to make a brave face of it but looking rather chagrined nonetheless.

“Twelve is young for a betrothal,” I remarked.

“She was eleven when the match was made,” he told me, more and more bitterness creeping into his voice. He downed the rest of his beer,

and the other two quickly followed suit. Ksyusha was hovering nearby, probably in case we started to damage anything, and I caught her eye and nodded at the empty mugs. She made a face, but she disappeared into the kitchen to fetch more beer for us.

“On the steppe we do not wed so young,” I said. “Is it common on the Krasna?”

“Only when your mother is trying to make an alliance,” said Aleksey Aleksandrovich. “And who said anything about wedding, anyway? I said we were betrothed. The wedding won’t take place until she turns twenty and can give her own consent. We don’t have arranged marriages anymore, haven’t you heard? We just agree to our mothers’ decisions of our own free will. Which my betrothed will be sure to do, the day she comes of age.”

“At which point Alyosha will be over thirty,” said Ivan Marinovich with a smile. “An old man, practically, is that not so, Alyosha?” He said it good-naturedly, but Aleksey Aleksandrovich responded with a sullen glower, and an uncomfortable pause fell over the table, which was fortunately broken by the arrival of Ksyusha with four more mugs of beer.

“It’s better that way anyway,” said Aleksey Aleksandrovich, once Ksyusha had handed round the beer and he had taken another generous swallow. Even in the dim light of the tavern I could see the flush of his cheeks.

“...I’ll be done with everything I wanted to do by then,” Aleksey Aleksandrovich was saying. “I might as well be tied down to a marriage.”

“Svetlana Yevpraksiyevna is a nice girl,” Denis Praskovyevich told him. I could already tell that he was the peacemaker of the group, the one who tagged along but also the one who stood between Aleksey Aleksandrovich’s self-regard and Ivan Marinovich’s firm principles, which were already peeking out through his speech. I also thought that perhaps Denis, unlike the other two, was not actually a prince. He was fair-spoken but did not have the manners of someone whose every whim had been catered to from birth. Also, he took care not to spill his beer or to soil his shirt, which was fine enough, but to the observant eye showed signs that the seams had been let out and the

fabric turned. Someone who only had one good summer shirt, and was unwilling to spoil it before washday.

“Her mother wanted to take Alyosha into her household,” said Ivan Marinovich. He was still speaking with a smile, but I could start to see an edge to it. Perhaps Sera’s reports of his temper were correct after all. “To make sure he didn’t get into any mischief in the intervening nine years between their betrothal and the wedding.”

“But I put my foot down and said no!” cried Aleksey Aleksandrovich, raising his mug in the air in a sloppy salute. “Bad enough that I’ll have to live with them when the time comes. I’m not sacrificing my freedom a moment earlier than I have to!”

“Is her mother a tyrant, then?” I asked.

“Yes! After she caught me with...”

“Alyosha!” said Denis Praskovyevich.

“What, you think our little steppe woman is going to tattle on us?” He turned to focus on me, his eyes already bleary after one and a half mugs of beer. “You wouldn’t do that, would you, little steppe woman?”

“Messengers know how to keep their mouths shut,” I told him.

“And she wouldn’t believe you anyway, even if you did go tattling to her,” he said, giving me a mean look that, on the one hand, made me dislike him even more than I already did, but on the other, promised all sorts of revelations, should I have the steadiness of nerve not to give myself away. Which I did. I had forgotten how much I enjoyed this kind of thing, and how calm it made me feel.

And I was amply rewarded for my pleasure, for by the time the next round of beer had been consumed, the story of Aleksey Aleksandrovich’s betrothal to a girl still not even approaching womanhood, and the story of his liaison with her older sister, had all come pouring out. It seemed that her older sister, the heir to the richest of Princess Srednekrasnova’s noblewomen, had been married off to a much older man in her youth, and had taken to amusing herself by dallying with whatever young man currently held her fancy. For the past year that young man had been Aleksey Aleksandrovich Srednekrasnov.

Should the connection be revealed to Princess Srednekrasnova, of course, a great scandal would arise, as she would not take the sully of her son’s virtue lightly. However, the family of both Aleksey Alek-

sandrovich's lover and his intended was very wealthy and had important trade connections with the Eastern mountains, the ones that stood between Zem' and the great flat plains where the Hordes lived. Princess Srednekrasnova was very keen to gain access to that trade, and marrying her son into the Kuznetsova family seemed to her to be the simplest and most direct way of going about that. They would hardly dare refuse their sovereign princess.

She had first, at Aleksey Aleksandrovich's request, suggested that the older sister set aside her husband in favor of Aleksey Aleksandrovich, but that had proven to be impossible, since this tedious older husband was the brother of the mistress of the biggest caravan company that crossed the Eastern mountains every year. And it seemed that the older sister was in fact not so tired of her husband as she had claimed, or at least not so willing as Aleksey Aleksandrovich had expected to give him up and bind herself to Aleksey Aleksandrovich instead. So, much to Aleksey Aleksandrovich's horror, a betrothal had been arranged between him and the younger daughter, who had not yet turned twelve.

At this the other two princes commiserated with him and his unhappy status of lover to a woman who seemed only too happy to see him married to another, as long as she could have him whenever the mood struck her, which I had to admit was a harsh fate, even for someone such as Aleksey Aleksandrovich. As I ordered another round of beer, the talk turned to Denis Praskovyevich's betrothal, which had just been finalized last week, to a younger daughter of the Malokrasnova family.

"Mother's ecstatic," he said glumly. "And I suppose Alla—my intended—is pretty enough, and it's a much better match than I could have expected to make, but I don't know..."

"You deserve a princess as much as the rest of us, Denya," said Ivan Marinovich warmly. "More, in fact, since you're by far the best-spirited. Denya's family are merchants," he added, turning to me. "Silk traders, actually. Princess Srednekrasnova liked their silk so much that she took on Denya as her ward."

"That was very kind of her," I said.

"No it wasn't," Aleksey Aleksandrovich contradicted me. "She told

them she wanted to foster him in exchange for the pick of their silks every year, and of course they didn't dare refuse, even though they never got a grosh out of it. And he took his lessons with me, but he had to live in the servants' quarters until I insisted he come up and share my chambers."

"I see," I said. Well, that explained the shirt. "But soon you will be married, Denis Praskovyevich, with a household of your own."

"And I'll come live with him!" cried Aleksey Aleksandrovich. "Anything to get away from home!" This led to a great deal of talk about Princess Srednekrasnova's parsimony and highhandedness, which, even though it was coming from such questionable lips, I thought was probably on the balance accurate.

Eventually—after yet another round of beer, when the afternoon was getting well on towards evening, even though at this time of year the sun was still high in the sky—talk came round yet again to marriage alliances, and there was a good deal of drunken ribbing of Ivan Marinovich, as the only one still not betrothed.

"But that won't last long," slurred Aleksey Aleksandrovich. "My mother has her sights set on him."

"For herself?" I asked.

"By all the gods, no!" shouted Aleksey Aleksandrovich, while Denis Praskovyevich and Ivan Marinovich both shuddered violently at the thought. "For my younger sister."

"Is your younger sister to inherit Srednekrasnovskoye?" I asked.

"No, no, nothing like that. My older sister is."

"I would hold out for the heir, if I were you," I advised Ivan Marinovich.

"Oh, well...let's be frank, what chance has he of getting an heir for a wife? At least the heir to a princess. Now, if things stood differently with his paternity...But as it is, Vanya, I'm afraid it's younger daughters all the way for you, just like the rest of us."

"You might be surprised," I found myself telling him. "Do you really wish to marry the Srednekrasnova younger daughter?"

Ivan Marinovich shrugged awkwardly and gave an uncomfortable glance at Aleksey Aleksandrovich.

"That's all right, Vanya, don't worry about sparing my feelings. We

all know what she's like.”

“Mariya Aleksandrovna is an excellent young woman...” began Ivan Marinovich hesitantly.

“With a tongue like a viper and a face like curdled milk,” put in Aleksey Aleksandrovich. “Trust me, Vanya, you don't want to find yourself harnessed to something like her. But maybe you won't have to, anyway. Maybe that Eastern connection will come through, and you'll be spared.”

“Is Princess Velikokrasnova considering making an alliance with one of the mountain princesses?” I asked.

Aleksey Aleksandrovich snorted. “If you could call them princesses,” he said. “Upjumped merchants—no offense, Denya—who've scratched out holdings on the farthest edge of the empire are not *my* idea of a princess. But no, Princess Velikokrasnova has something more exciting in mind for her only son.”

“Oh?” I said, and raised a brow in my best imitation of Sera.

“I'd really rather not talk about it, Alyosha,” said Ivan Marinovich, squirming. “And we shouldn't be talking about such things anyway. And it must be late. We should return home in order to refresh ourselves for the feast.”

“Sober up, you mean?” said Aleksey Aleksandrovich, in the voice of a man who was in grave need of some sobering up. “You have a point, Vanya.” He stood up and wavered against the edge of the table. “I'm not sure I'll make it home, let alone to the feast.”

“I can escort you,” I offered, but Ivan Marinovich and Denis Praskovyevich, who, while not exactly sober, were in better shape than Aleksey Aleksandrovich, insisted that they could manage getting all three of them back to the Srednekrasnova house, and so, after I had slipped a few more coins into Ksyusha's disapproving hand, we went out onto the street and parted ways, the three men to try by whatever means they could to sober up, and me back to the kremlin to share what I had learned with Sera.

Chapter Five

When I got back to the kremlin, my first step was to check up on Mirochka in case she had become frightened after being in a strange place without me all day, but all she said was, “You smell funny, mama,” before running off to play again with Dariusz and Valery, Sera’s two youngest.

Reassured, if slightly miffed, that Mirochka was not pining for me in my absence, I sent word that I would like to speak with the Empress at her earliest convenience. The maid I spoke with seemed dubious about the propriety of even accepting such a message, but she returned almost immediately with a summons from the Tsarina to meet with her in her private chambers.

This time it really was just Sera in her chambers when I arrived, with no sign of Vyacheslav Irinovich. I was sorry not to have his calm council, but not sorry that what I was about to say would reach one fewer pair of ears.

“You reek of sweat and cheap beer, Valya,” said Sera as soon I came into the room.

“It’s not cheap when you have to pay three times the price for every mug to keep the serving girl from tossing you out. And did you know that the inn by the Northern Haymarket has doubled its prices since I was last there? It’s robbery!”

“Trade has not been flowing as smoothly as one would like of late,” Sera said. “And last year’s harvest was poor, as you must know.”

“It was fine out on the steppe.”

“What you gather out on the steppe can hardly be dignified with the name ‘harvest,’ my dear Valya. You have no cities to feed. Last summer was dry, and the frosts came early. No one is starving, but prices are high all over Zem’, and doubly so in Krasnograd. And trade, for that and other reasons, has been disrupted. If I had known it was going to cost so much, Valya, I would have given you money. Next time just ask before you set off, and you will receive as much as you need.”

“I think I can afford to stand Zem’ a few rounds of beer,” I said.

It came out more truculently than I would have liked. My head was aching, and all my limbs had suddenly been overcome with weakness, as happened when one was attacked by hunger and thirst. “If I have to lay out for something really expensive, you can be sure I’ll let you know,” I added, trying to smile and smooth over the situation. But I needn’t have bothered, because Sera only nodded and frowned without seeming to notice the state I was in.

“Well, be that as it may, judging by the odor following you about, you obviously bought plenty, and have been spending time in low, or at least masculine, company. I wish I could say it was the first time, but we both know that’s not the case. I hope it’s because you were off loosening the tongues of careless serving girls and disgruntled stable-boys?”

“Actually, it was princes,” I said. “I was off loosening the tongues of disgruntled princes.”

“Oh Valya! Not again!” She laughed a little, but I didn’t laugh along with her, so she quickly changed the subject to cover up her poor taste in jokes. “Surely that was risky?” she asked, treating me to yet another variant of her infinitely expressive arched brow.

“Rather,” I said. “Especially since one of the said princes was Ivan Marinovich. Do you have any water?”

“Ivan Marinovich! So you revealed yourself to them!?”

“No,” I said, looking around in the vain hope of finding a ewer or a cup or a horse’s watering bucket or anything that might have some water in it. “Really, Sera, don’t you have any water here? I have a splitting headache.”

“It seems to me you’ve drunk enough, Valya,” she said dryly.

“Five mugs of beer on an empty stomach, with a long hot walk before and after. And Mirochka was up half the night. If you don’t want to see me faint or spew up all that beer or both, please, Sera, bring me some water.”

“Oh, very well,” she said. She went off into the other room and came back shortly with—oh, lovely sight!—a ewer of fresh cold water, and a cup to go with it. She set it down on the little table next to me. I tried to pour myself some, but my hands were shaking and I slopped a good bit of the water onto the delicate lace tablecloth that no doubt

had taken many hours of painstaking labor to make.

“Valya! Pull yourself together! What’s wrong with you!”

“It’s thirst,” I said, drinking down all the water I had managed to get into my cup. My stomach roiled at it, but almost immediately I began to feel better. I poured myself another cup.

“Thirst! After five mugs of beer!”

“Beer makes you thirsty,” I said. “It hit me all of a sudden as I was coming up the stairs. It does that. And I’m just coming off of a two-week journey in midsummer. Really, Sera, you’re lucky I can stand at all.”

“Well, will you be ill for long?”

“I don’t think so,” I told her. “I’ll just have to drink all this water, and then, well...and then if all goes well, I should recover soon. It’s just thirst, Sera, thirst and tiredness and too much beer and not enough food. I’m from the steppe. I know what it is to be weak from those things.”

“Well...well, I hope you recover soon. Will you be able to come to the feast tonight? You must put in an appearance, you know, in order to...Ivan Marinovich! What did you tell him when you were,” she made a face, “out drinking cheap beer with him this afternoon. Really, Valya, that’s hardly how I would advise you to court him!”

“Don’t insult my cheap beer drinking when that’s what you brought me here to do. We all have our gifts, Sera, and drinking cheap beer in disreputable taverns with young princes out looking for a bad time is one of mine. And I told him and the other two with him that I was Nadezhda Marislavovna, a steppe woman and an Imperial messenger.”

“Valya! What will we do now?! How can you possibly hope to court him after that? What were you thinking?!”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” I said, pressing the deliciously cool, damp cup against my forehead. “It *was* a good idea at the time, as you will soon discover.” I drank some more water. It was helping, but what I really needed to be doing was to be sitting in a cool, dark corner somewhere and drinking down this entire ewer, and maybe a second one as well, and then spending the rest of the evening running to the privy until all the beer and the poisons that built up from thirst had been washed out of me, and then by morning I would

feel well again. As I had told Sera, every steppe woman knows what it is to get sick from thirst. Arguing with her and trying to rescue her from her own squeamishness was not going to help me recover, but I could see she was in no mood to be told to wait until I was feeling better, especially since I was the one who had asked to see her right away anyway.

“Whatever information you may have gathered from those young men could hardly be worth jeopardizing the match we are attempting to make with Ivan Marinovich!”

“I don’t think we’ve jeopardized it,” I said. I drank some more water, so much more delicious and refreshing than that horrible beer I had been swilling all afternoon. “Now he’s met me without knowing who I am, which is a decided advantage, and I think he even rather likes me—or rather, Nadezhda Marislavovna. I shall simply explain it to him in a way that will make him like me even more. I just have to come up with a story that will appeal to his young man’s sense of adventure and fun.”

“Such as?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll think of something when my head stops hurting.”

“Valya! You can barely even pour water! How are you going to think of something in time for the feast, and how are you going to come and make a good impression there! This whole expedition today was very ill-advised!”

“I’m going to sit down,” I said, suiting my actions to my words and sitting down in a soft chair by the little table where my lovely, lovely ewer of water was standing. “And then I’m going to tell you what I discovered, and then I’m going to go to the privy, and then I’m going to go make myself presentable for the feast, and somewhere along the way a brilliant explanation that I can use with Ivan Marinovich will come to me, and all will be well. This is why you brought me here, Sera, so trust me to know my business.”

“Oh Valya!” But this time she said it with rueful affection rather than annoyance. “I guess I shall just have to trust you, won’t I?”

“Someone should,” I said, drinking more water. “Especially my own sister.”

“There are others who trust you, Valya, as you know very well. But so tell me, what did you find out?”

“That the Srednekrasnovy are unpleasant, for a start.”

“That I could have told you already,” she said, biting her lips to keep from smiling. “So who else was there, other than your future intended? Aleksey Aleksandrovich?”

“The very one.”

“And how is our dear Aleksey Aleksandrovich? As charming as ever?”

“Even better,” I said. “And with a weak head for drink. I doubt we’ll be seeing him at the feast tonight. And also newly betrothed, and bitter about it.”

“Many young men are bitter about their betrothals.”

“True. But the important thing about this one is that he is marrying into a family with little noble blood, but excellent connections with the Eastern trade caravans.”

“I thought he was marrying into a Krasna family...”

“He is. One with excellent connections to the East, which in his mother’s eyes more than make up for their otherwise low position amongst her noblewomen. And his companion Denis Praskovyevich, Princess Srednekrasnova’s ward, is also recently betrothed. He, unlike Aleksey Aleksandrovich, will be marrying above his station, and he will be the one bringing Eastern connections to the match. His family are silk merchants. And then there was talk of a secret match being made for Ivan Marinovich, one that also had an Eastern connection, but, alas, I could not find out anything more about it.”

“I fail to see the significance of any of this.”

“Sera! How often do black earth princes marry Easterners?”

“They’re not marrying Easterners, Valya: they’re marrying other black earth nobles who happen to have Eastern connections. There is much trade in the black earth district, Valya, and it’s not surprising that some of the eligible young princes would be marrying into trading families, and that some of those families should have Eastern connections.”

“There’s something funny about it,” I insisted. “I *know* it. You said yourself, Sera, that trade has been disrupted of late. Why has it been

disrupted? What's happened?"

"Oh, nothing unusual. Some of the caravans haven't made it over the mountains, or haven't had as much luck trading as they expected, or sold all their goods before they arrived in Krasnograd. It's inconvenient, Valya, but it's not strange: probably one year in three is a bad year for trade."

"I still think there's something funny about it," I repeated. "You asked me to find out what the black earth princesses are up to, and so far I can say that they're marrying their children off to traders with Eastern connections. I'll keep looking, Sera, but there's something odd going on here."

"Oh, very well," she said. "I won't be able to dissuade you anyway, will I?"

"No," I told her. "Especially since you asked me to do this yourself. I'm onto something, Sera, even if I don't know what it is yet."

"Are you sure it's not just the beer talking?"

"I didn't drink *that* much beer. Five mugs is hardly enough to cloud my wits. I'm not Aleksey Aleksandrovich."

"Very well. Oh, but Valya! What about Ivan Marinovich?"

"What about him? Other than it sounds like we'll have to move fast to snatch him away from Princess Srednekrasnova or this Easterner, whoever she is."

"That's what I mean. Do you think he will be unable to attend the feast as well?"

"I doubt it. He drank much less than the rest of us."

"Well, that's something, at least. Please, Valya, I know you think you know what you're doing, but please, please, remember that this match is more important than whatever bits of gossip you might pick up in taverns. In the future, try not to do anything that will jeopardize it, do you understand? Have you thought of how you will explain yourself to him?"

"You see, this is the problem," I said. "You think I've jeopardized the match, and that I need to explain myself to him. That's no way to approach the matter. I have to start from the assumption that I've only enhanced my value in his eyes."

"Well, and have you thought of how to do that yet?"

“No, and the longer you pester me about it, the less likely I am to do so.”

“Valya! This is important!”

“Yes it is. Which is why I’m going to go wash and change and wait for a brilliant idea to hit me.” I stood up, still feeling weak but less on the verge of fainting, and went over to her and stroked her cheek. “Sera. Trust me, will you? I know what I’m doing.”

She smiled sadly. “Oh Valya! When have you ever known what you’re doing?”

“I know what I’m doing when it comes to saving you.”

“And what about saving yourself?”

“Not so much,” I admitted. “But perhaps that’s why you’re the Tsarina and I’m the Tsarina’s second-sister. I know my methods...I know pretty much everything I do is not what you would do, Sera, and I know I seem reckless to you, and by your lights I *am* reckless, but that’s how I do things. I’m a survivor and a winner, Sera, and we both have to trust in that.”

She smiled again, still sadly. “At least you still have your confidence, Valya.”

“People keep trying to chip away at it, but so far I’ve managed to beat them back. I’m good like that. It will all be all right, Sera, trust me. I’ll find out whatever those conniving black earth princesses are up to, and secure a good match with one of their sons, and Zem’ will continue to be filled with peace and plenty, and we’ll watch your daughter grow up to sit the Wooden Throne with all the grace and wisdom it deserves, and, well...I can’t think of anything else at the moment, but that seems enough, doesn’t it?”

“Oh Valya!” She sniffed and wiped her nose. “I’m sorry if I was short with you before, Valya, and that I’m being so silly now. It’s my condition, you know: it affects me like that. And I find our situation... very trying. I try not to worry, but I feel that I *must* see you married before...well, soon.”

“So don’t worry,” I told her. “Stay calm and take care of yourself and Zem’. That seems like a tall enough order for any woman, doesn’t it? Leave the scheming and the spying and the seducing to me.”

“Oh Valya!” She started to laugh through the tears that were now

running down her face. "What would I do without you?"

"The gods only know," I said. "Now wash your face and go have a lie-down so you'll be fresh for the feast. I'm going to go do the same thing, only with rather more washing. Oh, and what will the children do?"

"For the feast? Ruslan will be with me, at least at first, but a children's table has been ordered in a separate chamber for all the young princesses and princes. Children don't tend to handle grand feasts very well, you know. Mirochka can join them, if you don't object. There will be a whole battalion of maids and guards watching over them."

"Excellent," I said. "This will all go much more smoothly if I don't have her hanging onto my hems at every step."

"I'll tell the maids to send her to you in a bit, and to send someone to help her dress. I assume she has no fine gowns."

"I would say she does, but you would probably say she doesn't."

"Then I'll have someone send some suitable gowns along as well. Then she can be escorted to the children's table by a maid, and you can concentrate on the task at hand. She will be perfectly well cared for, I assure you, Valya."

"I don't doubt it," I said. "And thank you."

"Think nothing of it. It is no more than her due in any case. Now go!" She made shooing motions at me. "Go and prepare! And when we next meet, may you reek less of cheap beer! I must confess, Valya, it's almost more than my new-mother's stomach can stand."

"I'm gone, then," I said, and, still wobbling a bit but fairly confident I would make it back to my own chambers unaided, I left.

Chapter Six

Once back in my own chambers, I visited the privy, drank even more water, this time with a little bit of bread, visited the privy again—recovering from thirst was inconvenient in that regard—and washed up as best I could. I couldn't tell whether I still reeked of sweat and cheap beer. It didn't seem so to me, but I had spent all day surrounded by the smell. I told myself that it was probably just Sera's sensitive new mother's senses, and that at the feast, where the hall would be filled with the scent of food and dozens of people, no one would notice.

Two maids came in at that point, both of them bearing bundles of fine clothes and one of them with Mirochka in tow. There was a great deal of ecstatic talk about the fun she had had that day, the lessons she had learned, the games she had played, the ride she had gone on with the little tsarinoviches, and the promised festivities of the evening.

"There will be a special children's table in our own chamber, mama!" she told me rapturously. "Isn't that wonderful?"

"Indeed," I agreed, as the maids looked on with a mixture of impatience and indulgence. "We should get dressed now, Mirochka."

"Will you be there, mama?"

"At the children's table? No, my dove, it's only for children. But if you like, I can come by and look in on you."

"And then I can show you everything!" she crowed, wriggling slightly in her excitement at the prospect of being the native guide to the fabulous children's table of the Krasnograd kremlin.

"That will be lovely," I told her. "But we should get dressed now. Look, my dove, the maids have kindly brought you gowns to try on."

The sumptuousness of the gowns laid out before her filled Mirochka with trepidation that she would spoil them, but after some coaxing on the part of both me and the maids, she was convinced that she could wear them without ruining them, and that no one would scold her even if she did accidentally spill something on them or trip on the hem and tear it—she listed a number of calamities that could

happen—and soon enough she was dressed in a charming sarafan with blue and green flowers embroidered all over it, and a matching undershirt. I was pleased to see that she had chosen for herself the least ornate of the gowns on offer. Krasnograd had not spoiled her utterly, at least not yet. Perhaps by our third day here...perhaps I should have more trust in my daughter's native wit.

"Come, little princess, into the next room and I'll fix your hair," said one of the maids, once Mirochka was dressed. But at that Mirochka's face fell. From somewhere—possibly from Darya Krasnoslavovna, who was said to have had wildly curly hair—she had inherited thick, springy curls that resisted all attempts to tame them, and hurt her when they were brushed.

"Perhaps I should do it," I said. "Her hair can be difficult to manage, and her head is tender."

"Don't you worry, little princess," said the younger of the two maids. "Look: my hair is just like yours!" And indeed, curly ringlets had fallen out of her braid and all around her face. Or, I thought after giving her a second look, had been arranged to appear to have fallen free, but were in fact artfully placed to frame her round smiling face.

"Go with her, my love," I told Mirochka. "No doubt she will be able to dress your hair better than I could."

"You're my mother," Mirochka pointed out. "How could she be better at it than you are?"

"True, sweetheart, but I don't have curly hair, and I'm not a trained maid, either. I only know how to braid horses' manes, and horses don't have curly manes, now do they?"

This led to some giggling and some speculation on what curly-maned horses would look like, but soon enough I was able to lead the conversation back to the matter at hand and convince her to go off with the maid into the next room, which she did after observing that I smelled funny, like a guard at a feast. Apparently my efforts to wash off the smell of my outing today had been less successful than I'd thought.

"Do I really smell that bad?" I asked the older maid, once Mirochka and the younger maid had left. I poured myself some more water and nibbled on some bread.

“No, Valeriya Dariyevna, of course not, but a change in attire, and, if I may dare suggest it, some perfume might not go amiss. I have brought you a selection of both items, at the Tsarina’s kind suggestion.”

“Excellent. Show me.” She laid out an armful of ornate gowns and several tiny stoppered bottles, even the glass of which looked outrageously expensive. I opened the stoppers one by one and sniffed. All were sickeningly sweet. I examined the gowns. It was good to see that cloth-of-gold had not gone out of fashion since I had last been in Krasnograd. There was a nice supply of matching headdresses that made my temples throb just to look at them.

“This won’t do at all,” I announced. “Don’t mistake me, ah, I beg your pardon, but you are..?”

“Mariya, Valeriya Dariyevna, Mariya.”

“Thank you, Mariya. And it’s all lovely, but it won’t do for what I have in mind at all. We shall have to come up with something else.”

“I humbly beg your forgiveness, Valeriya Dariyevna, but the Tsarina gave me to understand that you were to be courting at the feast..”

“Yes, and so will half the women there, all of them drenched in perfume and decked out in cloth-of-gold. If I am going to go courting as heir to Stepnoye as well as a Zerkalitsa, I should look the part. Besides, I have a headache, and those headdresses will make me retch before the night is out.”

“In that case, Valeriya Dariyevna, if I may be so bold...” said Mariya hesitantly.

“By all means.”

“Have you any of your own fine things with you? Things that a steppe princess would wear, I mean, if she were...going into battle, perhaps.”

“I see you will rise high in the Tsarina’s service, Mariya.”

“Thank you, Valeriya Dariyevna, but if you will permit to say so, I already am high in the Tsarina’s service.”

“Well, let’s hope you will rise higher, then. As it happens, I *do* have some of my best battle-gear with me. You never know when you might need it, especially in Krasnograd.”

“Oh, we are not so uncivilized as all that, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said

Mariya with a slight smile.

“No, you’re civilized, which is ten times worse. Here we go. Battle silks, embroidered with the Stepnaya family’s spells of protection.”

“It is true, then, Valeriya Dariyevna, that steppe warriors do not wear armor into battle? I had heard so, but I had never believed it.”

“We wear *some* armor,” I told her. “But not enough to slow us down. The loose silks, you see, let us move freely, and entangle swords. And if we should be so unfortunate as to get hit by an arrow, the silk will go in with the point and allow us to draw it out again more easily. Or so it is claimed. Frankly, Mariya, an arrow is an arrow, and nothing allows it to be drawn out easily.”

She shuddered. “Do you speak from personal experience, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Then—forgive me for asking, Valeriya Dariyevna, but is there a scar? And if so, where is it?”

I drew up my sleeve and showed her the scar that stood out half-way down my right arm, like a star of shiny, puckered flesh. “Horde raiders,” I said. “Some of them are still foolish enough to venture into Stepnoye. Don’t worry, Mariya: it wasn’t that bad.”

She shuddered again. “If you say so, Valeriya Dariyevna. May I make a suggestion?”

“By all means.”

“Let us push up your sleeves, so that the scar is visible. We can fasten them with an elegant ribbon. It will add to your exoticness and your...air of danger.”

“No doubt you are right, Mariya.”

“And is that sword-oil, there in your pack?”

“It is.”

“If you will permit me, Valeriya Dariyevna...” She took the bottle of sword-oil, poured out a few drops into her palm, mixed it with a drop of the spiciest of the perfumes Sera had sent down for me, and dabbed the mixture around my neck. “Again, it will be exotic, Valeriya Dariyevna,” she explained. “Exotic and exciting.” She sniffed at my hair. “Up close I can tell that you do still bear a faint trace of the tavern on you, Valeriya Dariyevna, but that will be all to the good as well. It is

not enough to be objectionable, and it will be exotic and exciting too.”

In short order I was dressed in my battle silks, although with some (non-permanent) alterations that Mariya thought would reveal my figure to better advantage.

“And you have the legs to wear trousers, Valeriya Dariyevna,” she said approvingly, surveying her handiwork. “Most women don’t, but I declare, you look better in trousers than in a gown.”

“We all have our talents,” I said. I opened my weapons chest. Mariya gave a faint gasp.

“You’re not thinking of wearing a weapon to the feast, Valeriya Dariyevna!” she exclaimed.

“Only a small one,” I assured her. “Not a sword, of course. Just a little knife. To cut my food with, you know.”

She gave the knife I had chosen an unhappy look. “That’s very large for a knife, Valeriya Dariyevna. Are you sure it’s not a sword?”

“Yes,” I told her. I pulled out one of my swords. “You see the difference?”

She shuddered yet again and backed away. “I do, Valeriya Dariyevna, but I still think that the Tsarina...”

“I wore this knife to feasts the last time I was here, and the time before that as well,” I assured her. “The Tsarina won’t object. I’m her sister, after all. Besides, I might need it. Not for cutting people,” I hastened to add, seeing the look on her face. “Just for a little bout of bladework, should the occasion call for it. The prince I am courting is said to enjoy swordfighting.”

“Really, Valeriya Dariyevna, in the Hall of Feasts...”

“Which is why we might have to slip away and practice a little more privately, Mariya.”

Her face cleared. “A brilliant plan, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“Yes, well, there may not be an opportunity, but if there is, I intend to be ready. And I dare say I will be the only princess there with a real blade at her side, which will be all to the good in any case. Now, Mariya, if you would be so kind and fasten back my hair, I will be ready for battle.”

“Battle is all very well, Valeriya Dariyevna, but what about courting?”

“Battle, courting...it’s all the same. Just smooth back my hair as best you can. I hate it when it falls in my face while I’m eating. If I were really going into battle, I’d cut it off, but you see how long it’s grown. The steppe has been peaceful of late. Not that I’m not grateful, of course.”

“Of course, Valeriya Dariyevna,” she said, giving me another slight smile. “Have no fear, your hair will not trouble you as you dine. I am a trained maid, after all.”

“And very grateful I am for that, too.”

Mariya began pulling back my hair with remarkable dexterity, and it was soon fastened in some clever knot that, she swore, would not come undone unless I wanted it to.

“Does it please you, Valeriya Dariyevna?” she asked, showing me myself in the mirror.

“Very much,” I said, trying to sound as if I were speaking the truth. The fact was that looking in the mirror made me uneasy. There was always the unnerving sensation that what I was looking at was not the real me, and that somewhere, somehow, something had gone dreadfully wrong in my development. I could never put my finger on what it was, as I was the picture of a steppe princess: tall and lithe, with large gray slanted eyes, high cheekbones, skin the color of honey, strong thick hair that was neither blond nor brown...and the expression of someone with blood on her hands, of course, and few qualms about getting them even bloodier. Everything was just as it should be, just as one would expect it to be, just what others admired in me, just as I myself wanted it to be, and yet I could never contemplate myself without having to force myself not to cringe away from the image the mirror threw back at me, as if I were a cripple or a misborn freak. In fact, I had known cripples and misborn freaks—back home we often offered such people a safe place to overwinter, and I made it a point, as the future and de facto current ruler of Stepnoye, to befriend those who sought shelter with us—who looked upon their flaws with greater equanimity than I looked upon my perfections.

“You look every inch a Princess Stepnaya, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Mariya, sounding justifiably pleased with her handiwork.

I was rescued from having to admire myself more by Mirochka’s

return to the room to show me herself and what had been done with her hair, and to say goodbye before setting off for the splendors of the children's table and extract a promise that I would indeed come by and see her while she was there. The sight of me in my battle silks caused a small scene, as it did ever since I had returned from battle with an arrow in my arm. It took several rounds of questions and answers and promises before I was able to convince her that I was not about to leave her to go fight, and that I most certainly was not about to get shot again, but once that had been accomplished she set off light-heartedly in the direction of the feast. I followed, equally jaunty on the outside but rather less light-hearted on the inside.

Chapter Seven

Despite the bold face I had put on for Mariya, and my genuine faith that our plan for my appearance was the best it could possibly be, the thought of facing an entire hall full of noblewomen, many of whom would not be well disposed towards me, and even worse, going courting under their sententious gaze, was weighing heavily on me as I made my way down the corridors of the kremlin. My relations with most of the other princesses of Zem' were prickly at best, and all my attempts at courting had always ended in disaster, or at least something other than marriage. Besides, I was still feeling less than at my full strength after spending my first day off a two-week journey in summer walking around in the heat and drinking beer. No doubt I felt better than Aleksey Aleksandrovich, I consoled myself. I wondered if he would be there. Better if he weren't, but I had already done my best to incapacitate him for the day, and would have to trust to that. At least Mirochka would be in another room, and would be spared whatever scene was sure to greet me this evening.

The Hall of Feasts was more than half-full when I walked in, and buzzing with that pre-feast conversation that takes place when people are still sober and looking forward to the festivities of the night ahead. I told myself I was only imagining that a hush fell on the room when I entered. Probably most of the people here didn't even recognize me.

"Valeriya Dariyevna?" said a thin, sharp-faced woman of middle years who was standing by the door. "Is that you?"

"Yes, Tatyana Marfovna," I said. The current Princess Malolesnaya, my head told me after my tongue had already spit out her name.

"Back in Krasnograd at last, I see," she said, not sounding pleased about it.

"The Tsarina was kind enough to deign to summon me."

"I see." She gave me a sour look. "Don't you think you did enough damage the last time you were here...and the time before that?"

"I serve the Tsarina," I said.

"I know what you did last time. Vyacheslav Irinovich is my sec-

ond-brother, and I take an interest in everything that goes on in his household, you know.”

I smiled politely and told myself to suggest to Sera that she have all of Vyacheslav Irinovich’s servants dismissed, or, if she preferred, kept on for the purpose of spreading false information.

“If you hadn’t interfered last time, the Tsarina would have an heir by now!”

“If I hadn’t stepped in then, she would be dead by now.”

“And so conveniently, in order to ‘save’ her, you got rid of the only obstacle to you and your own ill-gotten daughter inheriting the throne!”

“I’m disappointed, Tatyana Marfovna,” I said. “I thought you had a better opinion of me. Surely you would expect that, were I in truth to decide to get rid of all obstacles between me and the throne, I wouldn’t have saved the life of the person currently occupying it. Had I really wanted the throne for myself, all I would have had to do would have been to stand by and do nothing. Which is what everyone else was doing. But since I see you are under a misapprehension about me and my motives, let me make myself clear. If I never set foot in Krasnograd again, it will be too soon. And if duty would permit me to disguise my daughter as a peasant and hide her away from the throne forever, I would. I...” I realized by Princess Malolesnaya’s expression that I had been speaking much too vehemently, and forced myself to stop and take a deep breath. This gave her time to mutter something to herself.

“I beg your pardon?” I asked.

“I *said*, Valeriya Dariyevna, that you can protest all you want, but until the Tsarina bears an heir, you and your disgrace-born daughter stand next in line, and nothing you *say* about your motives and intentions is going to change the way your actions appear.”

I wondered how many people knew of Sera’s current condition. Not many, it seemed. I also wondered what would happen if I called Princess Malolesnaya out and made her face me herself, blade in hand, in recompense for her words. Nothing good, I was sure.

“If you wish to accuse me of treason, Tatyana Marfovna, I suggest you do so to my sister’s face,” I said, stepping just a little bit closer to her. Like almost every other woman in the hall, she was more than a

head shorter than I was. “But I would think carefully before doing so, if I were you. Leveling such an accusation against someone of Imperial blood would also be considered treason, you know, were it to be proven false.”

“You misunderstand me, Valeriya Dariyevna,” she said, giving me a supercilious look but also backing away slightly. “As usual.”

“Oh good,” I said with a pleasant smile. “I’m glad that it is now clear to both of us that I have only the Tsarina’s best interests at heart, as I’m sure you do as well, Tatyana Marfovna. Enjoy the feast.” I turned and did my best to saunter off boldly. My evening had already started off more briskly than I would have hoped.

I walked around a bit, surveying the hall. No sign of Ivan Marinovich yet. Also no sign of any friendly faces. At least most of the people here were ignoring me. The hall was growing ever more crowded and close, and Sera had not yet made her appearance. I ducked down into a side corridor, intending to find the children’s table and check in on Mirochka, and came face-to-face with Ivan Marinovich.

“Nadezhda Marislavovna!” he exclaimed in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“Helping you collect on the bet you’ve just won,” I told him.

“Bet? What bet?” he asked

“Ivan! How do you know this person!” demanded the woman walking behind him, whom I recognized with irritation to be Princess Srednekrasnova. No sign of Aleksey Aleksandrovich or Denis Praskovyevich, at least.

“I beg your pardon, Princess Srednekrasnova. This is Nadezhda Marislavovna, whom I met while Aleksey Aleksandrovich and I were...at the market this afternoon. Nadezhda Marislavovna is an Imperial messenger.”

Princess Srednekrasnova gave me a look that made Princess Malolesnaya’s seem warm and welcoming. “Ivan! I’m ashamed of you. This is why I told you and Aleksey not to go out by yourselves. This is no messenger.”

Ivan Marinovich looked at me in confusion.

“This is Valeriya Dariyevna.”

He still looked at me in confusion.

“*Stepnaya*,” Princess Srednekrasnova clarified.

Ivan Marinovich gave me a look in which shock, confusion, and hurt were all equally mixed. I felt surprisingly bad about it.

“I believe the Tsarina has just entered the hall,” I interjected. “If you will permit me, Princess Srednekrasnova, I must introduce Ivan Marinovich to her and help him collect on his bet.”

She opened her mouth to object, but before she could get the words out, I took Ivan Marinovich by the arm and led him away. He offered no resistance, I was pleased to note.

“I never entered into a bet, Nadezh...” He fell silent, not sure what to call me.

“No, but *I* did,” I told him. “I bet the Tsarina that I could pass myself off as an Imperial messenger.”

“Then you won the bet, not I.”

“Oh, but you see, Ivan Marinovich, in payment for the small deception I have practiced upon you, I am forfeiting my reward. You may collect it in my stead.”

“What is it?” he asked, still radiating doubt and confusion with every step.

“A place at the highest table,” I told him. “The Imperial table.”

“Nad...Val...you do me too much honor. I am not fit to sit at the highest table.”

“Nonsense,” I told him. “Of course you are. You’re Princess Velikokrasnova’s son, aren’t you? And very fair-spoken besides. And call me Valya. It’s what all my friends call me.”

“I would not dare to take the liberty, ah, Valeriya Dariyevna. And...I should feel uncomfortable at the highest table. Princess Srednekrasnova and I are to have a place two tables down, which is more than enough honor for me.”

“Well, we’ll see what the Tsarina says, shall we? We can’t really argue with her. And don’t judge those of us who sit at the highest table before you meet us. We’re not all so bad, you know. Some of us are even quite pleasant.”

“As you say, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said obediently, and remained in silent confusion as we wended our way through the growing crowd, growing pinker and pinker about the ears as whispers of shock, de-

light, and horror rose up around us.

I found Sera as she was still making her way to her seat, greeting princesses and their husbands as she walked. She looked calmer than when we had parted, and even cheerful, but I didn't like the hectic flush that had already risen on her cheeks. "Tsarina," I said, neatly outflanking a minor Southern princess and surprising her guards. "I am here to collect on my debt, as promised." I gave a snappy bow.

She looked at me and at Ivan Marinovich, and for a moment I thought she was speechless with some nameless emotion, perhaps shock and admiration, but more likely annoyance. "Of course, my sister," she said faintly. "Name your reward."

"I claim it on behalf of my companion," I said. "I ask that he be allowed to join us at the highest table, as we agreed previously."

"Oh...of course, sister." She looked over at the guard to her right. "Will you...will you find a servant and see that it is taken care of?"

"And inform Princess Srednekrasnova that Ivan Marinovich will be sitting at the Imperial table tonight," I added. "Don't worry, man!" I said when the guard hesitated. "I'll take your place by the Empress's side."

"Go, Tolya," Sera told him. "It is all right. My sister will watch over me." She turned back to me, a smile already returning to her eyes. "I must congratulate you, Valya," she said. "Well done. And please, Ivan Marinovich, it will be an honor to have you join our table."

"The honor is all mine, Tsarina," he said in a strained voice, bowing down to his boot-tops and coming up even more flushed than before. I hoped the poor boy would survive the evening without having an attack of some kind.

"Will your mother be joining us in Krasnograd soon, Ivan Marinovich?" she asked. "We have not had the pleasure of her presence for at least two years, if I remember aright."

"She will, Tsarina," he said, still sounding as if he was having trouble getting the words out through numb lips. "Early next week, if the journey goes well."

"And we will all pray that it will," she said graciously. Anyone would think she was fond of Princess Velikokrasnova. "Now, if you will excuse me for a moment...we shall meet again soon at the table."

Ivan Marinovich bowed jerkily, and I took his arm and led him off in the direction of the Imperial table, where people were already beginning to take their seats.

“You see?” I told him. “We’re not so bad.”

“I wish I had known beforehand I was to meet the Empress,” he said. “Then I could have prepared myself for it. Or maybe not. Maybe it was better this way. This way I had no time to get too nervous.”

“And next time it won’t be so frightening,” I said. “You did marvelously, by the way. I could tell the Tsarina took a liking to you.”

“Really, Valeriya Dariyevna?” he asked, brightening.

“Absolutely,” I told him. Thus far I was finding myself playing a much more motherly role than I had intended with him, but perhaps that was for the best. I would just have to make sure that I did not become *too* motherly, and kill whatever spark of desire he might be harboring towards me. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. I couldn’t see any signs of that spark of desire yet, but it was still early. He was still overwhelmed by his first Imperial feast and everything that had just happened, I told myself.

Servants were already adding an extra place at the table when we arrived. Vyacheslav Irinovich and Ruslan were already seated, I was pleased to see. Ivan Marinovich and I took the places we were given, separated by only one seat from Vyacheslav Irinovich. I leaned over and greeted him.

“Will you not introduce me to your new companion, Valeriya Dariyevna?” he asked, quirking his brow just like Sera would.

I made the introductions, eliciting another raised brow and a smile, quickly hidden, from Vyacheslav Irinovich, who immediately made it his business to put Ivan Marinovich at ease. Ruslan was intrigued by the new addition to our table, and asked Ivan Marinovich a number of questions about his horses, his sword, and other things that fill the hearts of boys and young men, and the atmosphere at the table was soon cheerful and relaxed. Ivan Marinovich fell back into an awkward silence when Sera came and took her seat between me and Vyacheslav Irinovich, and remained unspeaking while the opening toast was given and the first dishes brought round.

“It’s true, then,” he said suddenly, as the servants began serving

the food.

“I beg your pardon?” I said.

“It’s true, then. That no meat is served at the Imperial table, that is.”

“Oh. Yes, it is. Sera—the Tsarina—still keeps the oath, in honor of the memory of Darya Krasnoslavovna. She was very dear to her—that is, Sera loved her very much, and by all accounts, Darya Krasnoslavovna loved Sera very much in return. And it is always best not to go back on oaths made to the gods.”

“Oh.” Ivan Marinovich contemplated that. “I see. And...I think I understand. Why Darya Krasnoslavovna did what she did. I don’t like the thought of poor dumb beasts being slaughtered, either.”

“You don’t?” I looked at him in surprise, provoking yet another blush to rise up his neck and into his cheeks and ears. “That is very commendable of you,” I added hastily, not wanting to offend him or make him even more uncomfortable than he already was.

“If you say so, Valeriya Dariyevna. Of course, it’s not something I see very often, so I don’t think about it much. When I was a boy,” he fidgeted a bit with his knife and then carried on, “I complained of it to my mother, but she was...she was not pleased with me. And once I told Aleksey Aleksandrovich, but he only mocked me.”

“Following in the footsteps of Darya Krasnoslavovna is nothing to be ashamed of,” I told him. “And I must confess...although,” I leaned in close to him, “let this be our little secret, lest my reputation for being the most dangerous princess in all of Zem’ suffer—but I must confess that I don’t like it either. And...it is embarrassing to admit, but I don’t hunt.”

Ivan Marinovich gave me a puzzled look, unsure how to respond to my confession.

“Hunting is a prized skill on the steppe,” I explained.

“Yes, I...so I have heard, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said.

“And so when I was still a girl, but after my skill with a bow had reached the point where it was judged I could reliably bring down game, I went hunting.”

“I see,” he said, looking as if he didn’t.

“And I brought down a wild antelope on my first shot,” I continued.

“That is quite a feat, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said politely.

“Yes it is...only...when I rode up to her, she was not quite dead yet. She gave me...she gave me one long look, and I knew...I knew I had done a terrible thing. Something I shouldn’t have done. It was as if she were speaking in my head, almost. As if she were telling me that I had put something precious in grave danger. And then...then she died before my eyes. I have never felt such guilt before or since—not even when I killed my first enemy in battle did I feel so badly. After all, he had been trying to kill me, too. But this...the guilt has never left me. Everyone was so pleased, offering their congratulations, saying I was a true daughter of the steppe, but I knew...I knew I could never hunt again. I knew that Darya Krasnoslavovna’s oath was reaching out for me, and that like her, I could not...I could not hunt down my own sisters, not unless my need were truly dire, and that day it had not been. And then the next day when we came home, I found my uncle and my brother in the healer’s quarters, after the largest wolf any of them had ever seen suddenly appeared out of nowhere, slashed open my uncle’s leg and my brother’s arm, and then disappeared as quickly as it had come. The wolf was never sighted again, and even his tracks led to nowhere. My mother insisted it was merely coincidence, because we had refrained from hunting wolves, but I...I think differently. I think it was a warning to me, one that left my uncle with a permanent limp and my brother with a fear of the outdoors and the animals that live in it. And so ever since I have only used my bow on my enemies.”

“I see, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said, looking as if he still didn’t know how to respond to what I had just told him. I couldn’t blame him. Where had that sudden outpouring come from? I’d never told that to anyone. Even to my mother I had only given vague hints as to why I, who was so determined to be a true steppe princess, had decided to give up hunting after my very first outing. Well, perhaps this unexpected intimacy would serve me later, I told myself, turning my attention away from myself and back to Ivan Marinovich. Seeing that he was still in a state of awkward confusion, I cast about for another topic of conversation, and, striking upon a useful thought, asked him if he had had a chance to practice his bladework since arriving in Krasnograd, since he had mentioned earlier to Ruslan that his weap-

onsmaster had remained back at his mother's estate.

"Aleksey Aleksandrovich and I have sparred some, Valeriya Dariyevna," he told me, "but in truth, and although I would not tell him this, he does not provide any great challenge."

Delighted at this gift from the gods, I opened my mouth to offer my services as a sparring partner, when the princess sitting on the other side of Ivan Marinovich suddenly leaned across him and said, in a tone that boded no good for the upcoming conversation, "I hear you are not bad with a blade yourself, Valeriya Dariyevna."

"I train at every opportunity," I answered.

"And not just train, from what I hear," she said. I shuffled rapidly through my collection of faces of people who would be likely to sit at the Imperial table, and came up with the heir to Princess Primorskaya. As far as I knew, she had no reason to bear a grudge against me personally, but relations between the Primorskiye and Zerkalitsy had been strained for some time, and bearing a grudge against me seemed to be something of a hobby amongst many of the princesses, so I knew of no reason for her not to join in this general occupation.

"Blades are made to be used," I said noncommittally, and turned back to Ivan Marinovich.

"Yes—against the Hordes and people such as that," said the other woman. Aksinya, I remembered, her name was Aksinya Yevpraksiyevna. Some of those Northern princesses had no taste at all when it came to naming.

"Of course," I agreed.

"And I suppose you've had your fair share of opportunities to use them against those enemies, haven't you?"

"I have," I said. "Although it is not really fit talk for the feasting table." Truth be told, I had only killed three raiders from the Hordes, although those three still loomed large in my memory. In these peaceful times, we strove to capture them alive and send them to the mines instead. They received mercy, and we received the benefit of their labor. I had taken more than two dozen prisoners, and the thought that they were now mining the ore for our swords was comforting.

"But using them against sister Zemnians is taking it too far, if you ask me," Aksinya Yevpraksiyevna continued, her mouth drawing tight-

er and tighter and her eyes gaining a more and more triumphant glitter as she spoke. "Tell me, Valeriya Dariyevna: is it true? Did you really behead two of your own people last year?"

The rest of the table, and, I thought, the adjoining table as well, fell silent.

"My mother keeps no headswoman," I said. "And yet someone must administer justice, and keep the peace. It was no different than killing raiders from the Hordes in battle." Actually, that was a lie, but the self-righteous glares around me were annoying me, and I had no intention of letting them know how sick with horror I had been afterwards. Better that they should continue to fear me as a killer than pity me as a soft-hearted coward.

"Justice! In Zem' we do not *behead* people in the name of *justice*, Valeriya Dariyevna! That kind of *justice* was ended in the reign of your great-great grandmother, if I remember aright. *No one* keeps a headswoman anymore, Valeriya Dariyevna, because there is no need!"

"It was necessary," I said. "It was the best thing to be done with them."

"Why? What could they have possibly done that required *beheading*, Valeriya Dariyevna?"

"Something best not discussed over supper," I said. "And you do not know the whole story, Aksinya Yevpraksiyevna."

"Oh, I think I do, Valeriya Dariyevna. Everyone knows you got a taste for violence after...well, and then those excursions against the Hordes," she nodded at the scar on my arm, causing Ivan Marinovich to glance down at it too and blush yet again, "and so now, when there is nothing better for you to do, you must go bringing violence to your own people. Did you not write in last year to the Princess Council, urging us to mount a force and march East against the Hordes? Thank the gods that yours is not the only voice the Empress heeds. And then *beheading* two of your own people—not just Zemnians, but people of the steppe, even, well..."

"They were selling our children to the Hordes!" I shouted. I realized that I had leaned across Ivan Marinovich, ending up half in his lap, and grabbed Aksinya Yevpraksiyevna, who had gone rather pale, by the front of her gown. I carefully let go of her sarafan and

slid back into my seat. “They were capturing our children and selling them to the Hordes as slaves. They would beat them and starve them, even give them to the caravan guards to use as they would for sport, in order to cow them, and most of the little boys were gelded, as well. When I found their hideout I knew something had to be done with them. There was no way to ensure that they could be transported to Krasnograd for justice, and then back across the country to the mines, which is where they would surely be sent, without escaping. We only captured a small part of the gang, you see. Many of the others are still at large, and I knew they would do their best to free their companions, if only to ensure that they would not divulge any of their secrets to the Tsarina. Something had to be done with them, and so...I did it. And then I wrote to the Princess Council advising that we mount a force to destroy the slave trade and free as many Zemnians as we could, but my words were unheeded.”

“But surely they are not so great a threat as that. Surely the ones you caught could have been safely escorted back to Krasnograd for questioning. Surely that would have been the wiser thing to have done, and then we would have discovered the full extent of their operation, and could plan accordingly. Surely if you would have thought, Valeriya Dariyevna...”

“They threatened my daughter.” That, I had not told anyone, not even my parents. Funny how rage can make you blurt out all kinds of things you would otherwise have kept hidden. Tonight must be the night for blurting.

“I beg your pardon?”

“They said that there were many more of their companions, and that once they discovered I was escorting them back to Krasnograd, the rest would start taking children of noble blood in revenge. Starting with my daughter.”

“Surely you don’t believe that! Such a rag-tag band couldn’t possibly have the strength or the nerve to go after the children of noblewomen. If you had only thought...”

“You weren’t *there*, Aksinya Yevpraksiyevna! You weren’t there when we captured them and when we had to decide what to do with them, and you weren’t there to see the state of those children and the

sheer number of them, them and all the others we had found the previous year, or to see the ones who killed themselves afterwards, *after* they had been returned to their families and promised that they were safe now, because they couldn't live with what had been done to them. You weren't *there*, Aksinya Yevpraksiyevna, so kindly refrain from telling me what I should or should not have done. I wish that I had not felt it necessary to...to do what I did, I wish I had been spared that dreadful deed, but I *wasn't*. Just because something is distasteful does not mean it is unnecessary. I regret the necessity of doing what I did, but I don't regret doing it, and I would do it a hundred times over again if it meant saving even one Zemnian child from falling into the hands of slavers. And I would do it a hundred hundred times to anyone who so much as breathed such a thought about my daughter."

I stopped abruptly, realizing that the whole Imperial table and a good portion of the surrounding tables were all staring at me intently. Ivan Marinovich looked completely stricken by what he had heard, which I had to admit contradicted everything I had just told him about myself. Broken-hearted over a dead antelope, and then beheading two of my own people...Well, so much for that match. I tried to decide whether staying and trying to smooth things over with him and the rest of the company, or storming off and leaving them to their own devices, would be the better move. Neither seemed workable. I wondered if perhaps keeping my mouth shut would not have been the better response. Too late for that. Besides, I was willing to wager that no one in Krasnograd would dare cross me for the rest of the summer after this little scene, which was all to the good.

"Valeriya Dariyevna," said a serving woman who had appeared suddenly at my elbow. "I humbly beg your pardon, Valeriya Dariyevna, but your daughter is asking for you, and I promised I would come find you."

"Is she well?" I asked, alarmed.

"Perfectly well, Valeriya Dariyevna, but she wishes to speak with you most urgently."

"I will be there directly," I said, rising and thanking the gods and Mirochka's impeccably timed bout of neediness for saving me in the best possible fashion from my current awkward predicament. I bowed

generally towards the table and followed the serving woman out the hall, wondering what Mirochka could be so upset about.

I did not have to wait long to find out, for the children's table was in a small side chamber, and as soon as we entered Mirochka came flying over and threw herself at me in such a headlong manner that I only just managed to catch her and keep us both from tumbling down.

"Mama!" she cried. "You promised you'd come! Where have you *been*?!"

"The feast has only just started, my dove."

"No it hasn't! It's been dragging on and on, and I was afraid I'd have to go to bed before you came, so I sent for you."

"And you did rightly," I told her. "The grown-ups' table was boring anyway. Will you not introduce me to all your friends?"

This led to a round of introductions to the other children, many of whom were the offspring of unpleasant people, but at least at first glance appeared much more pleasant than their parents.

"Will you stay with us, mama?" Mirochka begged. "Please stay with us and finish the feast!"

"At least for a little while," I promised her.

"Oh good! Look: they're just bringing around the sweets."

It turned out that the children's feast had proceeded much more rapidly than the one taking place for their elders, and indeed, servants were already clearing away the savory dishes and bringing in sweets, so that the youngest children could be taken away to bed before they got too fractious. I solemnly arranged myself at the child-sized table as best I could between Mirochka and Valery, and ate a small portion of pie and jam dumplings off of a child-sized saucer.

Despite the cramped quarters and the fact that Valery spilled a good portion of his dumplings onto my lap, I decided I would far rather be here than in the hall with those my own age, and wondered if I could, after tonight's display, beg leave of Sera to attend all further feasts here at the children's table. I wondered what she would say to me about all of this. Nothing good, I was sure. Well, nothing I could do about that now. I scraped my saucer clean and reminded myself that licking it would set a bad example for the children. While they had had a full meal, I had barely even started on mine, and so all I had

had since breakfast were these sweets, the bread I had snatched bites of while dressing for the feast, and all the beer I had consumed in the tavern. I wondered if the kremlin kitchen was still well-disposed towards me. It had been the last time I had been here, but things change. It seemed the general mood regarding me had grown even uglier since my last visit to Krasnograd, and I could now see why Sera might think it worth a great deal of risk to provide Zem' with an heir other than me.

The children got up and, as the servants cleared away the dishes and moved the table to the wall in order to leave more space, started to play a raucous game of tag. Mirochka wanted me to join in, but I said it wouldn't be fair, and moved over to the wall by the door, trying to convince myself that I should go back to the Hall of Feasts and see what I could do to repair the damage I had surely done in Ivan Marinovich's estimation of me. I knew I should at least make the effort, but I couldn't help but think that the matter was already hopeless, and had been before he had ever laid eyes on me.

"Valeriya Dariyevna? I beg your pardon for disturbing you."

I turned, and there standing hesitatingly in the doorway was Ivan Marinovich.

"It is no trouble at all," I said. "Come, join us if you please."

"Are we playing tag, then, Valeriya Dariyevna?" He had been standing as if he had had half a mind to bolt off and flee for safety, but now he was starting to smile, and even came all the way into the chamber to stand beside me.

"The children are playing tag, Ivan Marinovich. I am merely watching over them."

"Which one is your daughter, if I may ask, Valeriya Dariyevna?"

"Over there." I pointed out Mirochka as she leaped out of reach of the boy attempting to tag her, and, with an agility that would do any mother proud, dodged past him and around a group of slower children who blocked his path, preventing him from any chance of catching her.

"I see." He surveyed her with interest.

"Does she look as you expect?" I asked after a while.

"I beg your pardon, Valeriya Dariyevna?"

“Curiosity consumes me, Ivan Marinovich, so you will pardon the indelicate nature of the question. Does she look as you expect?”

“I...I don’t know, Valeriya Dariyevna.” He looked at her again. “To be honest, no.”

“For me neither,” I said. “The gods alone know where she got her looks from.”

“But she is a handsome child nonetheless, Valeriya Dariyevna. And...I understand why you...did what you said you did, back there in the hall. If she were mine, I would have done the same.”

“You would?” I said, giving him a surprised sideways glance and making him blush. He did blush very easily. It was strangely charming. It occurred to me that if Sera got her way, he and I would be standing next to each other and watching Mirochka, and probably other children as well, children that were his as well as mine, for years to come. The thought was unsettling and yet oddly attractive at the same time. I wondered if he had any idea of our plans for him. Given the way he was fidgeting slightly, I thought he must have some vague inkling, but it had not yet formed into a conscious thought, or otherwise he would have already fled.

“Do you think...pardon me for asking, Valeriya Dariyevna, but this is the first I have heard of this...blot on Zem’s honor. I would not like to think such a thing of my own people, but you said those you... caught were our own. Do you think many who trade with the East are connected with this...vile trade?”

He looked quite unhappy as he asked it. He must have been thinking of Denis Praskovyevich’s family, and the family of Aleksey Aleksandrovich’s future bride, and possibly the Eastern connection his friends had alluded to that afternoon. I also began to wonder how connected they were with all of this. Even I found it difficult to believe that the scheming of the black earth princesses would have caused them to sink so low as to sell our own children as slaves, but on the other hand, the traders I had caught had bragged of their high connections, and someone must be behind all of this, or at least turning a blind eye to it.

“I don’t know,” I told him. “Certainly not all of them, or even perhaps most of them. But judging by what I have discovered, many people are involved, and some of them must be of high rank.”

“Especially if the Princess Council has ignored the problem after you brought it to their attention, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

I gave him an approving look. “Now that is a thought worthy of a prince. But I am still clinging to the hope that our own princesses are innocent of this crime, and I do not yet know enough to point fingers at anyone. I spent last winter scouring the steppe for accomplices, but all I found were rumors and abandoned hiding places. The last one we found, in the spring, still had many children in it. It seems their abductors had simply run off and left them when they heard I was coming. And thank the gods, too, for there had been threats that they would kill any captives they had rather than allow us to free them. But we must have closed in on them too quickly, and they chose to save their own lives rather than have their revenge, for which I am eternally grateful. We rescued nearly fifty children that day, and returned them to their families, if they had any, or found a secure place for them in my family’s service, if they had nowhere else to go.

“And thus far this summer there have been no reports of children taken on the steppe. But I sent messengers out to all the Eastern princesses, asking for reports on any children taken in their lands, or on any news of where we might be able to find those who had been taken in years past, and just before I left for Krasnograd, I received word that children have been disappearing for years from the villages in the border mountains, and that many more have been taken this summer already. It has always been common there, but as the slavers take only children of low birth, and only a few at a time, nothing has been done about it. I have sworn to myself that I will do all I can to stop this, and to return as many of those who were taken as I can, but there is only so much I can do. Without the Imperial mandate and a sizable force, I doubt much can be done, and if this trade is being supported by our own noblewomen, well...” I trailed off, wondering if I should perhaps not have revealed so much to Ivan Marinovich. This was hardly courting talk, and I could not shake the suspicion that he himself had planted that his own family and friends were involved in this.

“Will not the Empress do something about it, Valeriya Dariyevna, now that you are here to beg it of her in person?” he asked eagerly. Maybe this was better than courting talk. Maybe this was *real* talk.

“I had hopes, but now I fear she will not look upon me with favor for some time,” I said ruefully.

“Why not, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“Well, I did create something of a scene back there in the Hall of Feasts, and antagonize some of her own relatives.”

“Are they not your relatives as well, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“Yes, but I think the relevant fact here is that they are *hers*. It seems I am not well-liked here in Krasnograd.”

“Aksinya Yevpraksiyevna had it coming, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said in disgust. “She started it!”

“True, but we are princesses, not stableboys in a shoving match.”

“Well, at least you frightened her a bit, Valeriya Dariyevna!” he said with a grin. “And...is it true you’ve been in battle? And even been wounded?”

I nodded down at the scar on my right arm. “Too true, I’m afraid. Just between you and me, Ivan Marinovich, I don’t recommend it. Getting shot hurts like the Black God itself, even if it’s a flesh wound, and having the arrow removed is worse. At least I healed cleanly: our healer said she’d never seen a wound heal so well. But the cutting it out...I had them do it in the back stable, so as not to frighten Mirochka in case I screamed.”

“And...did you, Valeriya Dariyevna?” he asked with wide eyes.

“Not as much as I feared I would, although more than I would have liked. But,” I leaned over to his ear and lowered my voice, “that will also have to remain our little secret, Ivan Marinovich. If anyone should ever ask, the official story is that I smiled and chatted pleasantly the whole time, as if it were no more than a hangnail.”

“Your secret is safe with me, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said, his lips twitching. “But...” He gazed off at the wall. “I should like to have the chance to prove myself in battle someday.” He gave me a sideways glance. “Do you think that silly, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“No,” I told him. “It’s quite understandable, although those who say battle is a horrible thing are also quite right. But who thinks it’s silly?”

“My mother,” he admitted.

“She’s your mother,” I told him. “It’s her duty to keep you away

from dangerous things as much as possible, and it doesn't get much more dangerous than battle. My own mother wouldn't speak to me for a week after I came back, except to weep and lament by my sickbed. It got very tiresome, especially as the wound hardly merited an hour in bed, let alone a week. Luckily the healers said I had to drink lots of poppy-vodka—to keep back the pain, they told my mother, but really it was to keep me from distressing her by getting up—so I was only somewhat aware of what was happening anyway. But I'll tell you what, Ivan Marinovich: if the Tsarina gives me permission to mount an expedition to try to smash the slavers and recover our people, you'll be the first person I'll ask to accompany me."

Now it was his turn to look at me in surprise. "Truly, Valeriya Dariyevna?"

"Truly," I told him. "But only on one condition."

"Name it, Valeriya Dariyevna!"

"That you agree to spar with me. I've heard you're not bad with a blade, and I have no training partner here."

"Gladly, Valeriya Dariyevna! Oh, but..." his face fell, "I fear..." he looked embarrassed by the words about to come out of his mouth, but plowed on, "I fear that my mother would not approve. She...well, she does not like me to associate with...with those whom she has not chosen as my companions."

"And do you always do only what your mother approves of?" I asked.

He coughed. "Well, when you put it like that, Valeriya Dariyevna... but I fear...I fear she might not think it prudent..."

"When I was your age and on my first visit to Krasnograd as a woman grown I did many things that my mother did not consider prudent," I said. "And she was right, too. They weren't prudent. But I did them anyway. And here I am today. Although perhaps that is not the best argument to make, considering everything. Well, I will not make any demands of you, Ivan Marinovich: you must do as you think best. But the offer will remain open, should you decide to avail yourself of it."

"Oh. Well...you see, Valeriya Dariyevna, I do not have any decent training partners here either. I am afraid of growing slack, spending

the whole summer away from my weaponsmaster. So perhaps...perhaps it would be my duty to train with a worthy partner. I could...there would be no need to share too many details with everyone.” He gave me another sideways look. “That is, if you think it would not be too improper.”

“I promise you, there will be nothing improper about it at all,” I said. After all, I told myself, if we ended up married, that would be true enough.

“Then it is agreed, Valeriya Dariyevna. Oh, but I have one condition too.” He smiled a smile that suggested he might have some promise as a lover as well as a sparring partner.

“If I can fulfill it, I shall, Ivan Marinovich.”

“I will spar with you—but only if you tell me why you were in that tavern today, drinking with us and pretending to be someone else. You said it was a bet with the Tsarina—but that seems like an awfully silly thing to make a bet about, especially with a Tsarina. And she seemed so surprised when you brought me to her. She covered it up quickly, but if *I* were to make a bet, Valeriya Dariyevna, I would bet that she knew nothing about any such wager until the moment you told her of it.”

A spark that I had thought long dead flared up in my chest at those words. Perhaps Sera really did know what she was doing, after all. Or perhaps it was just lucky chance, but Ivan Marinovich was more than just a convenient alliance and his mother’s only son. Perhaps he really was someone worth winning. All of a sudden I was determined to cut out Princess Srednekrasnova’s younger daughter and this Eastern connection, whoever she was, and have this boy—or rather, young man—for myself.

“Why do you think I was there, Ivan Marinovich?” I asked him.

“It seems to me as if you were spying, Valeriya Dariyevna. I can think of no other reason for you to be passing yourself off as someone else. But why you would be doing so by drinking beer in a cheap tavern, and especially by drinking beer with us, I don’t understand. We certainly have no secrets worth stealing. But my mother...I have heard her express a suspicion that you...spied on people, from time to time.”

“The Tsarina likes me to keep an eye on things,” I told him lightly.

“She likes me to go about the city when I’m here and find out what people are thinking. Some might call it spying, but I had no evil intent. And if you must know, Ivan Marinovich, I took one look at Aleksey Aleksandrovich and knew he would be likely to talk, so I attached myself to you. I hope you are not offended?”

“Offended?” He frowned a little. “No, I don’t think so, Valeriya Dariyevna. It’s just...odd. I don’t quite know what to think about you... about it.”

“Well, come to the barracks tomorrow at midmorning, and spar with me, Ivan Marinovich. Perhaps you will have a better idea of me after that.”

He bowed. “I await it with pleasure, Valeriya Dariyevna. And now, if you will excuse me, I should return before Princess Srednekrasnova sends out hounds after me.”

“Give her my love,” I told him.

“Truly, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“No,” I laughed. “Or at least, only if you want to curdle milk with the sourness of her expression. Say you were discussing bladework with some of the other princes, or something of that nature. Until tomorrow, Ivan Marinovich.”

“Until tomorrow, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said with another bow, and left.

Chapter Eight

Shortly after Ivan Marinovich left, maids came to gather up the children and take them off to bed. I said I would take Mirochka myself, and, although she insisted that she was not tired at all and that it wasn't even late yet, she agreed to return to our chambers with me readily enough once I took her by the hand and promised, at her insistence, to tell her what the other, less interesting, feast had been like. She said farewell to the half-dozen or so new bosom friends she seemed to have made, and promised very prettily to come play with a boy who, despite both their tender years, appeared to be quite smitten with her.

I eyed her with increased respect as we left, and contemplated the thought that perhaps Sera had been right to insist on Mirochka coming to stay in Krasnograd for a time. Clearly she had a talent for making friends that had been hidden back on the steppe. Or rather, of course she had had friends back home, but it was only to be expected that the children of our servants would be friendly to her, and she would be friendly to them in turn. But here she was making friends right and left, and not just with the children of serving women. The young Kiryusha, who had pressed her so eagerly for a meeting tomorrow, was, I gathered from her innocent explanations, the son of Princess Severnolesnaya, and the dark-haired girl with whom Mirochka had made an alliance during their last game of tag was the many-times descendent of Susanna, Darya Krasnoslavovna's confidante and right-hand woman, and heir to most powerful of the Southern mountain princesses.

I wondered if Sera would greet this news with joy or reservations. The strengthening of ties between the current Zerkalitsa heir and the children of some of our family's staunchest and most powerful allies was in theory only to the good, but given the awkward nature of the Zerkalitsa succession at the moment, and the feelings harbored by some of the princesses that I might be plotting treason, Mirochka's entirely innocent and well-meant friendships could take on a com-

pletely different and sinister light in unfriendly eyes.

I resolved to tell Sera of what had transpired both at the children's table and between me and Princess Malolesnaya, but also to make no move to prevent Mirochka from meeting with her new little friends, not even if others, including Sera, wished it. Once we started suspecting the play of children of harboring treasonous motives, then we were truly lost, and besides, as much as I would like for all our sakes for Sera to bear a healthy heir, judging by past events there was very little chance of that. Always before, even after my last visit to Krasnograd, when I and all the healers had counseled Sera most earnestly to give up all hope of bearing an heir of her own body, I had always thought (stupidly) that something would happen to free me and Mirochka from that side of our family, but this time I could already feel the chains of succession settling around us, shackling us to the fate of our foremothers. Not that ruling was so very bad...but it was. Taking a seat on the Wooden Throne was not the same as governing a province. They said the wood held the memories of all the previous Tsarinas, and all the oaths they had ever sworn to the gods...and broken...someday, surely, there would be a reckoning...

“What are you thinking about, mama?” asked Mirochka.

“Look out the window,” I told her. We were currently going up the stairs to our quarters, and had reached the third floor. I lifted her up so that she could look out the window onto Krasnograd.

“Why is the window so small and high, mama, and narrower at the front than the back?” she asked. “That's not very useful for a window. It should be bigger and lower.”

“In case of attack,” I told her. “Such windows are harder to fire arrows through, and any arrows that did get through would come in very high, so people could duck under the window and be safe.”

“Arrows!” Her face grew fearful. “Are we likely to be shot here, mama?” She had taken a strong aversion to arrows ever since my own encounter with one. In fact she had, somewhat to my surprise and concern, taken a strong aversion to battle in general, and for a time had wanted to give up her practice of bladework entirely. I had started to worry that it was her father's blood coming out in her, but my mother had assured me that such a reaction was perfectly normal in a child

her age, and that like as not she would grow out of it. And she had in fact agreed to take up her lessons in swordplay again, and to make good progress in them, but she was still unnaturally (in my opinion) afraid of arrows.

“No chance at all,” I reassured her. “There’s no place in Zem’ safer than the Krasnograd kremlin. But you remember what a kremlin is, don’t you? It’s a fortress. This was originally a fortress, but now it’s become a palace. But the old parts of it still have all the original defensive features.”

“Oh, good.” She looked out the window. “Oh, mama! I can see all over Krasnograd! It’s so...enormous! I can’t even see the end of it! I feel like I’m flying! And...and when we climb up the stairs, we *are* flying, of a sort, aren’t we? Climbing higher and higher, going in circles like birds. How high are we, mama?”

“Twenty yards up, perhaps,” I told her. “But the kremlin towers are even higher: thirty yards at least. Tomorrow perhaps we can go up one. Maybe from there we could see the end of the city, although I don’t know. Krasnograd is very large, and once you get outside the gates there is Outer Krasnograd, do you remember?”

“Yes, mama, of course. I saw it only yesterday! But...thirty yards up! Is it...how did they build the towers so high, mama?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I know little of building, I’m afraid. Are you ready to come down?”

“Just one more moment, mama! Just let me look for a little bit longer!” Back home we had no buildings higher than two stories, so looking out of even a third-floor window was a new and exotic experience for Mirochka, and I didn’t have the heart to tell there that she was not as little as she had once been, and holding her this high was making my already-shaky arms ache. I shifted her onto my shoulder instead, wobbling an embarrassing amount as I did so, and she gazed rapturously out onto the city.

“Look at the sun on the roofs, mama!” she said, pointing to where the evening rays were glinting off the gilded roofs and towers of the houses of princesses and merchants who could afford to keep a place within sight of the kremlin. “When will it set, do you think? I’ve never seen the sun set in a city before!”

“Not for a while yet,” I told her. “Not till after your bedtime.”

“Oh, mama...”

“But we can go to our chambers now and look out our window there, and then next week will be Midsummer and,” I promised, hoisting her down from my shoulder, “you can stay up all night, if you like.”

“Oh mama! Really!” Never before had she been allowed to join the older children and adults in staying up all night to observe the unsetting sun of Midsummer.

“Certainly,” I told her. “I’m sure the Empress will have festivities planned for everyone, including the children. But it is very hard to stay up all night, so you will need to rest up beforehand.”

“Or maybe I should practice. You always say that repetition is the mother of learning, mama, and that no one gets good at anything without lots of practice.”

“True enough,” I conceded. “But staying up all night is something best done only rarely, and you didn’t sleep very much last night, so this night you should be sure to get a good night’s sleep, and then we can talk about Midsummer next week. Come, my dove, let us go to our chambers.”

“Very well, mama.” She took my hand and followed me willingly enough out of the stairs and into our corridor, with only a single backwards glance at the window. “Do you think the view from our chambers will be as fine, mama?”

“We’ll just have to find out,” I told her. “And we can always return to the window in the stairs tomorrow.”

“All right, then.” She took a few more steps in silent contemplation and then asked unexpectedly, although I should have known to expect such a question, “Mama, who was that man you were with?”

“What man?” I asked her.

“The one who came to see you at the children’s table. Who was he? Is he a friend of yours? How come I don’t know him?”

“He was just someone I met at the feast,” I told her lightly. “He and I were making plans to practice our bladework together tomorrow.”

“Really? Can I come and practice too, then?”

“Did you not promise to go play with your new friends tomorrow?”

“Yes, but I shouldn’t give up on my lessons, mama, you know that.

When are you meeting with him to practice?"

"In the morning," I told her.

"Well, I am only meeting with Kiryusha and Adriana in the afternoon, so I will have plenty of time to come practice with you."

"Very well," I said, after a brief hesitation. Trying to court Ivan Marinovich, or spy on him, or whatever I should be doing with him, would undoubtedly go better without the presence of Mirochka, but, I decided, she would be in little danger with us, and if he really did become my husband, it would be best if he and Mirochka got used to each other as soon as possible. If I were to go through with this scheme, I would have to think seriously about what it would mean for Mirochka, and how she would take it. When Sera and I had first discussed it, it had seemed so distant and so unlikely that I had not even bothered to consider what it would mean for my family if I were in fact to bring home a husband, but now that that potential future husband had turned from an abstraction into a living, breathing person, I was forced to think of how everyone would react to his arrival.

If I did end up marrying Ivan Marinovich, my parents would be torn between delight at my marriage and horror at the identity and the connections of my husband, of that I was certain, but what Mirochka would do I couldn't even begin to say. She had accepted the absence of her own father in her life uncomplainingly, and had only wanted to know, on the very rare occasions when he was discussed, why he didn't live with us the way most of her friends' fathers lived with their families. My (true) explanation that he had chosen not to live with us had seemed to satisfy her when it had come up last year, and she had not brought the subject up again in months. But what she would do if a stepfather were suddenly to enter her life, I didn't know. And if we were to give her little sisters and brothers...I was getting ahead of myself. First I had to secure the match, and make sure it was a match worth securing, or at least one that would not be so bad that I wouldn't find myself breaking my word to Sera and setting my husband aside, and then I could worry about dealing with Mirochka. But in the meantime, she could come and practice her bladework with me and Ivan Marinovich tomorrow, and at the very least I would have a better idea when we were done what kind of a man he was becoming,

and how he felt about this scandalous piece of his family's history suddenly coming face to face with him, blade in hand.

"What is his name, mama?" Mirochka asked.

"Ivan Marinovich," I told her. "He is Princess Velikokrasnova's son."

"Isn't she a black earth princess, mama?" she asked, wrinkling up her nose.

"Yes, but it would be best not to say anything about it tomorrow when you meet him. I have no doubt that he considers being from the black earth region a matter of pride."

"Oh." Mirochka considered this startling fact as we entered our chambers and I began to prepare her for bed. "I'll be very polite to him, mama, even if he is a black earth prince," she announced as I helped her remove her borrowed gown. "After all, the Tsarina is a black earth princess, if you think about it."

"True, and therefore so is my mother, which means you are part black earth princess too," I told her.

"But only a *small* part," she said.

"Well, not so very small," I replied. I had never told her who her father was, or that he was of the black earth district himself, and I decided, as I had so many times before, that now was not the time. "But it doesn't really matter that much anyway, Mirochka," I said instead. "After all, we're all Zemnians, which is what is really important."

"I'm still glad I'm from the steppe, though, mama," she said, yawning and struggling into her nightdress.

"Of course you are, my dove. Anyone would be. But you are enjoying Krasnograd, are you not?"

"Oh, so much, mama! But when will we be going home?"

"When my business for the Tsarina is concluded," I told her. "Perhaps by the end of the summer. You're not ready to go home already, are you?"

"No, I just want to make sure that we *will* go home," she said, getting into the bed that we were sharing. She had been offered her own bed in her own chamber, but even at home half the time she preferred to sleep with me, and here there was no chance, I was sure, of moving her out of my bed any time soon. "Aren't you going to get into bed,

mama?”

“Not yet,” I told her. “I’m going to go down to the kitchens for a bit, once you fall asleep. But don’t worry,” I added, seeing alarm rise up in her face. “There are maids in the next chamber, and guards at the door, and I’ll be back before you wake up.”

“Oh, very well, then, mama. So we’ll be going home by the end of the summer?”

“Perhaps. If all goes well.” I decided it would also be best to withhold for the moment the information that if all didn’t go well, which seemed more than likely, we wouldn’t be going home for some time, perhaps never. If...If I suddenly ended up sitting the Wooden Throne, with Mirochka as my heir, then we would be well and truly stuck here in Krasnograd, and wouldn’t be able to return to the steppe for years, perhaps never. But I certainly wasn’t going to share that with Mirochka just yet. She was aware that she was related to the Empress and in line for the Wooden Throne, but she had only the faintest conception of what that meant, and had no expectation of ruling Zem’ herself. I had deliberately raised her that way, fearing what would happen if I had raised her as a future Empress, only to have her reign snatched away from her by the arrival of a true heir for Sera. That kind of disappointment could sour a person for life, and besides, if she did end up ruling, she would be a better Empress for having been raised simply. So tonight I merely kissed her forehead and told her to go to sleep in order to be able to enjoy her time in Krasnograd more fully tomorrow, and assured her that we would be back home with our family before she knew it, and she would be able to spend many hours regaling them with her tales of life in the Imperial kremlin. She accepted that with delight, and before I had even had time to grow impatient, she had fallen asleep.

As soon as I had ascertained that she was well and truly asleep, I slipped into the maids’ room next door, and, finding the girl who had brushed out her hair so skillfully earlier, charged her with keeping an ear open in case Mirochka awoke while I was gone and became frightened. The girl assured me that she would be delighted to watch over the little princess in my absence, and, confident that Mirochka would be in the best hands she could be other than my own, I set off for the

kitchens, hoping to acquire both food and information.

During my previous visits to the kremlin I had acquainted myself pretty thoroughly with the hidden passageways that ran throughout its walls, but after briefly considering using them tonight, I rejected that in favor of taking the regular corridors. I hadn't yet found the entrance to them from my current chambers (although I thought it very likely that there was an entrance, probably through the wardrobe), and I also thought it might be best to make my reintroduction to the kitchen via the regular entrance, rather than suddenly popping out from the wall. Let the people serving there grow accustomed to me, and hopefully even fond of me, before I started surprising them like that. So I made my way through the public corridors, enduring only the occasional sideways glance from noblewomen leaving early from the festivities and servants going about their mistresses' business.

The kitchen was as hot and frantic as I remembered it, although as I came in the cooks and servers were just sitting down to their own late meal, now that the people in the Hall of Feasts had eaten their fill. The undercook nearest the door stood up as I came in with an unhappy expression on her face, but that quickly changed to smiles when she recognized me. Whenever I had been here before, I had always been generous with coin and other favors, and the kremlin serving folk were both romantic enough to find me a figure of fascination, and practical enough to want to be in the good graces of someone who could one day be their mistress.

"Valeriya Dariyevna!" she cried with a bow. "How many winters has it been! What can we do for you?"

"Too long, Alina. I come begging food. Is there any here to spare?"

"Grisha!" She snapped her fingers at a potboy lurking nearby. "Bring Valeriya Dariyevna a plate of food. We've more than enough to spare," she added to me, "and although it might not be as fine as what we just served all those fancy noblewomen and their husbands, I'll guarantee you that the taste is twice as good. We know what we're about, Valeriya Dariyevna!"

"Of that I am certain," I said, taking the place that had been made for me at the table. "Why else do you think I came down here, when there was a whole feast up there?"

“Because you have some sense in you, Valeriya Dariyevna, and maybe because you knew you’d find a warmer welcome with us than with those noblewomen upstairs?” The way she said it made me certain that my encounters with Princess Malolesnaya and Aksinya Yevpraksiyevna had been observed by the servants and retold to everyone here in the kitchen. Well, it was no more than I had expected.

“And I can see I was right,” I said. “Thank you, Grisha,” I told the boy who brought me a laden plate. He blushed and ran off without even pausing to bow. Alina started to chastise him for it, but I said to let him be, and we all turned our attentions to our plates. All of us except Alyona Vasilisovna, that is, the head cook. She surveyed me carefully and asked, in a voice that carried all through the kitchen, “Is it true, then, Valeriya Dariyevna? Slavers carrying our children off East?”

The mood in the kitchen suddenly went very dark. “It is,” I confirmed. “I’ve seen them with my own eyes.”

“And given some of them justice, or so we hear, Valeriya Dariyevna,” she said.

“Yes,” I admitted.

“And rightly so, Valeriya Dariyevna, if you’ll pardon me for saying it. Anyone who’d carry off children, Zemnian children, to sell to Easterners, well...I’d kill them myself, if I came across them.”

There was a chorus of nods from the rest of the table.

“But the princesses don’t agree, it seems, do they, Valeriya Dariyevna?” she pressed on.

“It is a grave thing, to kill someone,” I said. “Even slavers. I can see why they would not be pleased. I am not pleased about it myself, to tell the truth.”

“Even so, Valeriya Dariyevna, it was the right thing to do. And it seems none of the other princesses want to do anything about it at all, do they?”

“They do not yet seem convinced of the truth of my tale, or the gravity of the situation,” I said.

“Of course not, Valeriya Dariyevna. It’s not *their* children being taken, is it?”

“Not yet,” I said. “So far it has only been children of common birth, from the Eastern provinces, and of late from the steppe. I did not even

know of it myself until steppe children started disappearing.”

“It’s always the same, Valeriya Dariyevna: no one cares what happens to the common folk. They can steal a hundred of our children, and like as not our princesses would never even lift a finger to stop it.”

“That’s not true!” I banged my fist on the table without thinking, making everyone jump. “I don’t care whose children they are taking, I don’t care if they’re taking them from palaces or pigsties, but I *will not stand for it!* No one can be allowed to steal Zemnian children and force them into a life of slavery, *no one!* I have scoured the steppe looking for them, and by all the gods, I will scour Krasnograd and the rest of Zem’ as well, until they are *stopped*. This, this *rot* in our land must be cut out before it spreads any further and destroys us all. They must be stopped, do you hear, and I will be the one to stop them!”

“Ai-da Valeriya Dariyevna!” cried people from all over the table, as I came to a halt and realized I had just made a rather bold promise in front of witnesses. Well, it was a promise that needed to be made.

“I wouldn’t expect anything else from you, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Alyona Vasilisovna. “And...I thank you. I have family back East, and I have also heard that children have been disappearing. More than usual. So if you need anything, anything at all, that we here can give you, all you’ll have to do is whistle, Valeriya Dariyevna, and we’ll come running to your aid. But I fear you’ll have your work cut out for you with the princesses, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“I thank you,” I said. “And I fear you’re right. The princesses are always a tough nut to crack.”

“Tougher than usual, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Alyona Vasilisovna, with a shake of her head, and started on a diatribe against the perfidy of the current crop of princesses to be inhabiting the kremlin. The rest of the kitchen soon joined in, and while I ate—thank the gods! I had thought for a moment there I was going to faint, after my long day of running around, consuming nothing but too little bread and water, and far too much beer—I listened with pricked ears, filtering out all the usual complaints—demands for fancy dishes served at odd hours, broken crockery, harassment of the serving girls and boys by spoiled princes, and so on and so forth—and capturing all the news that was odd or noteworthy.

It seemed that those like Alyona Vasilisovna who had families in the Eastern provinces had all heard of disappearances, more than usual, over the past couple of years, although even the families themselves of the missing children could not be sure, most of the time, that they had not merely been lost in a blizzard, or taken by wolves (“Taken by wolves, indeed,” muttered some of the women. “Two-footed wolves, the worst kind!”), and when they had complained to the local noblewomen and even the provinces’ princesses, nothing had been done.

I mentioned that I had written to the Eastern princesses myself, demanding their watchfulness and their aid, which received approval from the table, but also the verdict, delivered in a tone of angry resignation, that nothing would be done about it unless I were to go out there and shake things up myself. Children disappeared in the Eastern provinces, it was a fact of life, and as long as it was not the children of the princesses, no steps would be taken to prevent it or to return the children who had already been lost.

It also seemed that, just as Sera had said and I had already observed, the black earth princesses were very anxious to marry off their sons and daughters, and there had been a whole flurry of betrothals and weddings up and down the Krasna and its tributaries in the past year, although the servants who related this information couldn’t fathom the choices some of the princesses had made in their sons- and daughters-in-law. People of high rank being married off to people little better than commoners, the children of sworn enemies suddenly united in marriage...one would like to think, as Alina observed, that the black earth princesses had become less proud and more forgiving of late, and had decided to heal the breaches between their families and extend alliances to those of less noble blood, but it seemed very unlikely. None of them, it was generally agreed, would ever do anything if she did not think it was to her own advantage, and the detriment of her enemies, but what advantage exactly they hoped to gain from this, no one could guess.

There was also a great deal of talk about the disruption of trade, the poor harvest, and the rising prices of everything one could want to buy. This subject, touching as it did every person in the room very deeply, raised the most indignation, but no one seemed to have any

thoughts on why it might be happening, other than bad luck and the general greediness of merchants.

By this time I had finished all the food that had been given to me, and, after a brief period of light-headedness as energy returned to my body, I was feeling much better and able to ask a number of (artful, I hoped) questions about the problems with trade this summer and whether anyone thought it was related to any of the other problems we had discussed. Despite my own suspicions to the contrary, though, no one else seemed to think that the lack of goods in the Krasnograd markets, the sudden alliances amongst the black earth princesses, and the growing slave trade in the East, could all be connected.

Satisfied that I had gotten all the information I was going to get from the kitchen that night, and that I had also fed myself enough not to collapse before breakfast the next morning and that I had renewed my old friendship with the serving folk of the kremlin, I thanked everyone warmly, promised to relay their concerns, particularly regarding the ridiculous prices of food in the markets, to the Tsarina, and returned to my chambers. Mirochka was still sleeping soundly when I entered, and soon I had changed into my own nightdress, slipped into the bed beside her, and fallen fast asleep.

Chapter Nine

At this time of year there was very little actual darkness, and when I awoke to full sunlight, it was still some time before the actual hour when most people in the kremlin rose. Back home I would have gotten up and taken a horse out for a ride, or done something useful, and then returned to rest at midday, but I knew that that was not done here in Krasnograd, and that people were expected to sleep in, even in the middle of summer, and stay up late, even in the middle of winter. So I willed myself to go back to sleep, but soon Mirochka was up as well, awakened by the sunlight, and eager to talk. I told her that it was still many hours until breakfast, and that if we got up now, we would still have to stay up all day, but, while she acknowledged the truth of my words in theory, it was so far from her own experience in practice, and she had awakened with so many things that she wanted to talk about, that she ignored all my suggestions and requests to go back to sleep, and my pointed turn away from her in the bed, and chatted on and on. I tried to pay no attention to her, but then my ears caught the words, “and Kiryusha said that my father will come to Krasnograd soon. Is that true, mama?”

“I’m sorry?” I said, turning back to face her. “Kiryusha said what?”

“He said that my father will be coming to Krasnograd soon,” she repeated impatiently. “Is it true, mama?”

“I don’t know. I have heard nothing of this.”

“How come Kiryusha knows who he is, and I don’t?”

It was lucky for Kiryusha that he was not there at the moment, because I would have been very hard pressed to refrain from giving him a good shake, or possibly something worse. “I don’t know why his mother thought it a fit subject for conversation,” I said. “It’s certainly none of her business, or anyone else’s.”

“But it’s *my* business, isn’t it, mama?”

“Well...yes,” I had to agree. “It is your business, of course, my dove, but it’s also business for grown-ups. I didn’t want to trouble you with it.”

“Well, now I want to be troubled with it! Will I meet him, mama?”

“Perhaps,” I said. “If he really is coming to Krasnograd. We may not be able to avoid him.”

“Why would we want to avoid him, mama?”

Now it was myself I wanted to shake. “When...when he chose not to come live with me, my dove, it...caused a good deal of hard feelings, both amongst our family, and amongst his.”

“Why, mama?”

“Some people thought it was very wrong that he...chose as he did, and some people thought it was very wrong that he and I...had ever had a connection.”

“Why, mama?”

To tell her or not to tell her? Lies and evasion, I knew from experience, would not get me very far with Mirochka. “Everything I tell you this morning about your father, Mirochka, must remain our secret,” I began. “You mustn’t tell anyone, not Kiryusha, not your new brothers, not anyone, do you understand?”

“But why, mama?”

“Because it might hurt people’s feelings for it to be talked about. It...it might hurt *my* feelings, my dove.”

This argument swayed her as no other would have done, I could see by her face in the morning light. “Why, mama?” she whispered solemnly. I thought that she had probably never thought about the fact that my feelings could be hurt, just like anyone else’s.

“I was...very sad when he...decided to do as he did,” I whispered back, swallowing against an annoying lump in my throat. After all these years! *Now* the long-dead embers of my burnt-out heart were flaring back to life, just when I least needed them.

“Really? Were you...” her face filled with an awful thought, “were you sad about *me*, mama? Were you sad to have me?”

“No, of course not!”

“Are you sure, mama?” she asked anxiously.

“Very sure, my dove. I was very, very happy to have you. Besides,” I added bluntly, “if I hadn’t wanted you, I wouldn’t have had you, or I would have given you up after you were born. The fact that you’re here with me means that I want you to be here, more than anything else in

the world.”

Another child probably would have been upset by those words, but Mirochka was, after all, my daughter first and foremost, and I could see that she found them comforting. “I’m happy you’re my mother too, mama,” she told me. “But why did my father not want to marry you and come live with us? Isn’t that what fathers normally do? And why did people not like your connection with him? Are we...are we not noble enough for him?”

“No,” I told her, smiling in spite of myself. I was glad that she could even have that thought. “You know that grandmother, that my mother, is the old Tsarina’s younger sister, and that the current Tsarina is my second-sister, don’t you, my dove?”

“Yes...”

“So that means that the only people in Zem’ more noble than us are grandmother and the Tsarina.”

“Really, mama?”

“Really, my dove, but I wouldn’t go around bragging of it, if I were you. Everyone already knows it, and they don’t need to be reminded of it. But neither you nor I ever need to worry about not being noble enough for a marriage alliance.”

“I see, mama,” she said thoughtfully. “So if it wasn’t that, then why?”

“He was...he was already betrothed to another woman when we met,” I said, finding it rather more difficult to admit than I would have expected.

“Mama! Really?!” Her eyes lit up with surprise, delight, and horror all in one. “He *was*? Why, then? Why did you...I mean, how...” She fell silent, unable to finish her thought. Like all children back home, where horse breeding was our lifeblood, she had been aware from an early age where foals, and by extension babies, came from, but as a child of eight, she had neither the imagination nor the vocabulary to talk about a foolish love affair. Her thoughts had always been occupied with more useful topics.

“We were both young and in Krasnograd on our own for the first time,” I said. “And...somehow it happened. I could try to explain it to you, Mirochka, but I don’t think you’d understand. You have to be old-

er to understand something like that.”

“So I’ll understand when I’m older, then, mama?”

“Maybe,” I said. “But I hope not too well, my dove. I was so happy... and then so sad...I wouldn’t want you to go through something like that. But in the end, my dove, he decided to marry the woman he was betrothed to in the first place. Many thought he did right, and perhaps he did.”

“Does he...does he have any other daughters, mama?”

“No, my dove. You are his only child, at least that I know of. Which is another reason some people are not very...happy about us. He never gave his lawful wife any children at all, but he gave me an heir.”

“Oh...well, then, mama...who is he?”

“Oh.” I swallowed. “He is Princess Vostochnokrasnova’s son, and Princess Velikokrasnova’s husband.”



Other than a mild curiosity over whether or not she looked like her father and whether she was also a black earth princess if his mother was, Mirochka seemed unfazed by the revelation of her father’s identity, and, after promising me that she would, of course, keep everything we had discussed to herself, she dozed off for a while, awakening when we heard the maids stirring in the next room and bringing in breakfast. Then she leapt up with alacrity and devoured a large and hearty meal, turning a deaf ear to my warnings not to overeat before a bout of swordplay.

I, feeling rather less bright and cheerful than her, ate a more moderate breakfast and dressed us both in our summer training outfits and dug our training blades out of our baggage. Thus prepared, we made our way through the many corridors and stairs of the kremlin to the training ground in front of the barracks. Although it was supposed to be for the guards and soldiers, Vitaly Mariyevich, Sera’s Captain of the Guard, had always been friendly towards me, and had allowed me to train there whenever I had been in Krasnograd before. I was slightly concerned that he might have been infected with the distrust of me that was so evident amongst the princesses, but when he saw me approach, he broke away from the group of guards he was training and came over with a grin and bow and a glad greeting for Mirochka,

whom he'd never seen before.

"The little steppe princess!" he cried. "Is she as sharp with a blade as her mother, Valeriya Dariyevna?"

"I believe she shows great promise, but a mother's word cannot be trusted in these matters," I told him.

"With any other mother that might be true, Valeriya Dariyevna, but in your case, I have no doubt she's a threat to her enemies already. Here to join us, Valeriya Dariyevna?"

"Actually, I have agreed to spar with a friend here, Vitaly Mariyevich, if you would be so kind as to allow us the use of your training space."

"Of course, Valeriya Dariyevna! Who is this friend? Another steppe princess?"

"Actually, no," I said. "It is Ivan Marinovich. Look, here he comes now."

Vitaly Mariyevich's gaze followed mine, and for a moment his normally unflappable mouth dropped open in surprise. He shut it with a snap and turned back to look at me with a wry smile. "Do you mean to say that you are planning to spar with *Princess Velikokrasnova's* only son, Valeriya Dariyevna?" he asked.

"I do."

"Dare I ask why, Valeriya Dariyevna?"

"I heard he was good with a blade, and I am in need of a good training partner," I said.

"Valeriya Dariyevna, you know you have only to ask, and the best blades in Krasnograd will be at your service..."

"And I am grateful for the offer, Vitaly Mariyevich, but as it happens, Ivan Marinovich's suits me best at the moment."

He pursed his lips. "Like that, is it, Valeriya Dariyevna? Ah, if I may so bold...does the Tsarina know?"

"As it happens, it was her suggestion, Vitaly Mariyevich."

"Ah. Well, in that case, my training ground is yours. And...what should I tell my lads, Valeriya Dariyevna? They are bound to gossip."

"If you hear them gossiping, Vitaly Mariyevich, tell them not to say anything they wouldn't want to have said about themselves. After all, I may very well take you up on your offer, and then it would be *them*

sparring with me.”

“As you wish, Valeriya Dariyevna.” He bowed. “Little princess. May both of you have a fine bout. If I can serve you, you have only to call.” He left just as Ivan Marinovich came somewhat hesitantly up.

“Was that...?” he asked.

“Vitaly Mariyevich, Captain of the Guard,” I told him. “Would you like to be introduced?”

“I wouldn’t want to bother him,” he said, still looking ill at ease. “Ah, good morning, Valeriya Dariyevna. And good morning, Miroslava Valeriyeвна. It is an honor to spar with your mother.”

“And with me!” Mirochka cried.

Ivan Marinovich looked at me in helpless bewilderment.

“Mirochka would take it as a favor if you would consent to spar with her a little,” I said. “As would I.”

“It would be my honor, of course,” he said, trying and failing to suppress his dislike of the idea. I could see that he was afraid of hurting her, and also afraid that I had called him out here to mock him by making him train with a girl of eight.

“Mirochka has already gained some skill with a blade, but she could always use the experience of training with more partners,” I told him. “Perhaps after you and I have sparred, you could do her this honor.”

“Of course, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said, looking around with embarrassment at the guards who had stopped their own training to watch us. He began to fumble awkwardly with his practice sword, which he had brought in a bag instead of wearing at his belt.

“Ivan Marinovich!” I said, interrupting him. “Surely you have the right to travel armed in Krasnograd! There was no need for you to carry your weapons in a sack.”

“I beg your pardon, Valeriya Dariyevna?” he said, looking up for a moment from his fumbling. I could see, clear as day, his unease about meeting me, and meeting me here, where all these strangers were watching him, and his general sense of exposure at being on his own in Krasnograd, probably for the first time. In another man it might have made me impatient, but with him I felt strangely protective.

“You are a prince, not a criminal. You have the right to wear a sword

in Krasnograd, just as I do.”

“Well, Valeriya Dariyevna...” He gave me a doubtful look, blushing.

“Vitaly Mariyevich!” I called, causing him to break away from the guards he was ostensibly drilling and come hurrying over to us.

“Vitaly Mariyevich, allow me to introduce you to Ivan Marinovich Velikokrasnov. Vitaly Mariyevich, is it not true that Ivan Marinovich has the right to wear a sword in Krasnograd?”

“Of course, Valeriya Dariyevna.” Vitaly Mariyevich bowed. “Your caution does you credit, my prince, but there can be no question of your right to bear a sword everywhere except in the presence of the Tsarina herself.”

“Thank you, Vitaly Mariyevich,” said Ivan Marinovich with an answering bow. He gave me an odd look as Vitaly Mariyevich retreated. “I...thank you, Valeriya Dariyevna, but you must know that...I mean, I suppose I am my mother’s son, but it has been made clear to me many times in the past that I should not...I mean, I mustn’t presume to...to the rights of a true prince...”

“Why not?” I demanded.

“Surely, Valeriya Dariyevna, you are aware of...”—he blushed so painfully my face hurt in sympathy—“the circumstances of my conception.”

“Oh nonsense,” I said, waving my hand dismissively. “Just because your mother never took your father in marriage doesn’t mean you aren’t a prince. Look at Mirochka: no one would deny *her* birthright.”

“Yes, but...As you say, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“And who told you not to presume?” I asked. “Not your mother, surely?”

“Well...on occasion, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“Call me Valya,” I said, in order to stop myself from gnashing my teeth at this latest example of Princess Velikokrasnova’s ungenerous behavior. “And I’ll call you Vanya, if you will permit it. After all, we’re about to spar. So who else told you not to presume?”

He gave me a look of deep dread and shook his head mutely.

“Not...your father-in-law?” I guessed.

“Yes, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said, staring at the ground.

This time I did gnash my teeth. “Well, enough of that! You heard Vitaly Mariyevich: you have the right to wear your sword just like any prince, or any law-abiding person, for that matter, which means it would be an affront to him and to the Tsarina to do otherwise. Now, shall we warm up a bit? And then a bout?”

“As you wish, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said, concentrating on folding up the sack in which he had brought his sword instead of looking at me.

“Valya,” I reminded him. “You can just leave your things over there. Mirochka! Let’s warm up together, and then Ivan Marinovich and I will spar, and then perhaps he will spar with you, if he is willing.”

“It would be my pleasure,” he said, sounding sure of something for the first time this morning. He had set aside his bag and was warming up his wrists, moving his blade this way and that. As soon as he had taken the hilt of his sword, I noted, he had become a different person: not a diffident little boy, but a young man sure of his own skill.

He continued to warm up as Mirochka and I sparred lightly, although after a time he stopped to watch us, and even clapped when Mirochka came close to touching me with the edge of her blade. “I see you will be a worthy opponent, little princess,” he called to her. “I look forward to our bout.”

“Thank you! Don’t hurt him, mama,” Mirochka added anxiously. “I don’t want him to get hurt before we spar.”

“Of course, my dove,” I promised her. I was still feeling lead-en-armed after yesterday’s adventures and my half-sleepless night, but no one else seemed to notice. I looked over at him, and, meeting his rather skeptical look, said, “You have my word that I won’t hurt you.” I wanted to call him by his name, but I’d already said I wasn’t going to call him Ivan Marinovich any more, and now that we were standing face-to-face, about to spar, Vanya still seemed too...intimate, as if we hadn’t earned it yet, so I settled for saying nothing at all.

“I am glad to hear it,” he said, sounding as if he were not too concerned about the possibility. Apparently I had not impressed him with my warmup the way he had impressed me.

“Are you ready, then?” I asked him.

“Of course, Valeriya Dariyevna. Are you not going to change your

sword?”

“Why would I change it?”

“You are using such a slender blade, Valeriya Dariyevna. I assumed it was in order to train with Miroslava Valeriyevna. I would not like to run the risk of snapping it.”

I looked at my training sword. It was long but slender, rather like me. “It’s a woman’s blade,” I told him. “Have you never sparred with a woman, then?”

“No, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said, swallowing a little.

“Well.” I resisted the urge to make any of the half-dozen ribald comments that leapt to mind. “Don’t worry about my blade. It’s slenderer than yours, but supple, and no less likely to snap. And if it does get broken, well, that happens sometimes in training. I’ll just get a new one. Are you ready?”

“I am at your service, Valeriya Dariyevna.” He stretched his arms up overhead one final time. This caused his shirt to rise up and expose a handspan of bare stomach between the bottom of his shirt and the top of his trousers. The sight was rather distracting, and I had to be careful not to stare, partly for his sake but mainly for Mirochka’s. I did, however, manage to notice that his stomach was flat and enticing, with a line of light brown hair leading down from his navel. Perhaps Sera had chosen very well for me, after all...

“Valeriya Dariyevna? Are you ready?”

“When you are,” I said, and brought up my sword.

He hung back at first, clearly uncomfortable sparring with a woman and a princess, so I made a few feints and lunges, trying to draw him out. I only provoked a reaction, though, when I rapped him smartly on the wrist, causing him to jerk back and nearly drop his sword.

“That *hurt*,” he said, shaking his hand and looking at me in surprise.

“I could have made it hurt a lot worse,” I told him. “And I will, if you don’t start engaging with me properly.”

He stopped shaking out his wrist and gave me an appraising look. His gaze narrowed, and I could tell that he was seeing me through different eyes. “As you will, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said. He brought up his sword and, faster than I would have expected had I not already

been warned of his abilities, struck at me. I parried and retreated, feeling the leadenness of my limbs slow me down. He attacked again, frowning in concentration, and I parried and retreated again, wishing I were at my best, but still, I could see, almost fast enough to spar easily with him. We kept this up for a while, me retreating in circles while he pressed forward, until he was smiling, really smiling, and then I suddenly stepped to the side as he attacked and kicked his foot out from under him, making go down heavily on one knee. Vitaly Mariyevich and the watching guards burst out clapping.

“You did well,” I told him, stretching out a hand to help him up. “Very well. I see the Tsarina told me the truth about you.”

“Valeriya Dariyevna?” He looked up from where he was still kneeling, his expression a mixture of puzzlement and chagrin. Suddenly the memory of another partner looking up at me with that same expression rose up in my mind. Only that expression had been on blue eyes, not brown...and had so quickly changed to something else...*Like that, is it, princess?* the voice in my head said. *Is that how we're going to do it?*

“The Tsarina told me you would be a worthy sparring partner,” I told him, shaking my head to clear it of the memory and grabbing him by the shoulder of his shirt and hauling him upright. “Is your knee all right?”

“Fine, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said, flexing each knee in turn experimentally. “I didn’t know we were allowed to do that,” he added.

“Well, if we were fighting in truth, we could do whatever we wanted. Would you like another go?”

In response he attacked again, but I ducked under his sword and ended up behind him. I brought up my sword to give him a firm tap on the back as punishment, but he whipped around somehow and parried me.

“Very good!” The words came out on their own. I tried to tell myself that it was only my tiredness that had kept me from striking him, but in truth I thought I would have had a hard time getting past his guard even on a good day. I could see the hours of daily practice behind his moves, the only comfort for a lonely boy with a scornful, domineering mother and a fearful step-father anxious to assert his dominance by

constantly reminding his new son not to get above his station, not to claim his birthright...it was not like me to woolgather like this while sparring. Normally all I saw was my opponent right here, right now, not all their past and future spilling out around them, as, it was said, my foremothers saw...my distraction allowed him a moment of respite to gather himself and attack again. When I parried that, rather more slowly and clumsily than was my wont, he retreated half a step and considered me.

“Anything goes, Valeriya Dariyevna?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said. “As long as no one’s seriously hurt.”

He started to move to the left. The guards had formed up around us, hemming us in on all sides, and were watching in bright-eyed anticipation. Mirochka was also standing in the circle, watching unhappily. I took my eyes off him for a moment in order to grin at her reassuringly, but was then forced to turn my attention back to the matter at hand, as he took advantage of the opportunity to rush at me. I jumped out of the way, bouncing lightly off a guard, and ran to the other side of our small circle. No heaviness in my limbs now, but I could tell that was only temporary. He rushed at me again, and I jumped out of the way again. We could go on like this for a while, and judging by the freshness of his step, I was going to tire long before he did. I sidled to my right, ending up in a small corner with guards on both sides of me. Grinning, he stepped forward to attack. The guards retreated slightly but not enough for me to get past him to open ground. I parried his strikes once, twice, but on the third one he caught the edge of my blade awkwardly, half-knocking it from my hand. Smiling exultantly, he moved to disarm me—and ended up on the ground when I kicked him in the chest.

“Ai-da Valeriya Dariyevna!” cried the guards, clapping and cheering wildly. Mirochka ran forward.

“Are you all right, mama?” she asked. “And did you hurt him?”

I knelt down beside him. He was lying with his eyes closed, breathing shallowly. “Are you all right?” I asked.

“No,” he said, his eyes still closed. “My pride has been fatally wounded, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“Don’t worry, young prince: it only feels like a mortal wound,” said

Vitaly Mariyevich, kneeling down on the other side of him. "I can tell you from personal experience that you'll recover in no time."

Ivan opened his eyes. "Did she do the same thing to you?" he asked.

"More than once, young prince." Vitaly Mariyevich gave me a rueful glance across Ivan's prostrate body. "It's some steppe trick, or so she says."

"I've offered to teach you," I told him mildly.

"True enough, Valeriya Dariyevna, but my legs don't reach up to my ears like yours do."

"They would if you trained like a steppe fighter," I pointed out.

Ivan pushed himself up to his elbows. "Was it all a trick?" he asked. "Getting boxed in like that, letting me disarm you...was it all a trick?"

I grinned. An expression of hurt and anger crossed his face, making me regret it. I should have let him win. Young men's feelings were so easily bruised, and this one was as skittish as a wild cat, and with good reason. Stupid, stupid, stupid...

"She wouldn't have done it if she hadn't thought you were a worthy opponent, young prince," said Vitaly Mariyevich consolingly.

Ivan sat all the way up. "Really?" he asked.

"Really," Vitaly Mariyevich and I said together.

"In fact, I think I'm the only one I've seen her use that trick on before today," Vitaly Mariyevich continued.

Ivan's face started to clear. With our help, he got to his feet, eliciting another round of applause from the watching guards.

"Are you sure you're all right?" I asked.

"I think I will be, Valeriya Dariyevna," he said, "...but only on one condition."

"Which is?"

"Teach me how to do that."

"Ai-da Ivan Marinovich!" cried the guards in delight.

"With pleasure," I said with a bow.

"Really?"

"Really," I told him. "I've never gotten a black earth boy to agree to learn about steppe fighting before. I congratulate you on being the first."

"Really?" His face brightened even more, and then was overcome

with another blush that was apparent even on top of the flush from his exertions.

“Really,” I said. “But I’m sure you will be an apt pupil.”

“He can practice with me, mama!” said Mirochka, tired of being ignored and eager to contribute. “We can practice together!”

“Indeed,” I said. “You could even start now, if you wished.”

Ivan flexed his neck and shoulders, shaking out the stiffness of his fall. “I’m game if you are, little princess,” he said to Mirochka.

“Hurray!” she cried, clapping her hands. “Can we, mama? Can we train together?”

“If Ivan Marinovich is willing, of course,” I said. “Here, I’ll show you on him, and then you can practice together.” I turned back to him. “I’ll do it without knocking you down,” I told him. “At least for now.”

He grimaced. “You have my thanks, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“No promises for tomorrow, though,” I told him. “Now, the key is to catch your opponent when they’re off guard or off balance. Legs are longer and stronger than arms, so once you develop your reach with them, you can surprise your enemy—unless they know steppe fighting, of course. Or they’re an Easterner. But even so it’s a good technique. Watch how I do it...”

For the rest of the morning, I instructed Ivan, Mirochka, and several of the bolder of Vitaly Mariyevich’s guards in the basics of the first tactic in steppe fighting, knocking your opponent down with your feet. Mirochka, of course, already knew this, but was happy to practice along. The men, for whom it was unfamiliar, and who had very little suppleness in their legs, found it much more difficult, and by the end of the morning the guards had all declared that they were never going to be able to kick someone in the chest, and given up. Ivan was also daunted by the difficulty of the task, but expressed a willingness to keep trying.

“At the very least it will be a surprise for Alyosha,” he said as we walked away from the training grounds. “He’ll be green with envy when he hears about this. But I don’t know if I’ll ever get it, Valeriya Dariyevna. I don’t know if any man could ever get his legs up in the air like that.”

“Nonsense,” I told him. “Steppe fighters do it all the time. You just

have to train. A lot. Tomorrow, then?”

“If it pleases you, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“It will be a pleasure,” I assured him. “And...” I called as we separated, making him turn back to look at me.

“Yes, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“How many times do I have to tell you to call me Valya?”

He grinned. “Many more, I think, Valeriya Dariyevna. I guess I’ll have to train. A lot. Repetition is the mother of learning, you know.”

I laughed. “As you will...Vanya. Until tomorrow.” And highly pleased with myself, perhaps even more so than the morning warranted, I, suddenly alarmingly weak-legged after my exercise, led Mirochka back into the kremlin.



There was food and water waiting for us in our chambers, to my great delight, and Mirochka fell upon it like a dog as soon as she saw it. As she was wolfing down her third pie, and I was finishing off the pitcher of water, not wanting to chance solid food until I had taken in some liquid, a serving girl came and announced that the tsarinoviches would be honored if Miroslava Valeriyevna would share their afternoon’s amusements with them, and that the Tsarina requested my immediate presence.

“Tell her I’ll be up as soon as we’ve changed,” I said.

“I believe, Valeriya Dariyevna, that it would be better...” the girl gulped miserably, “...if you went as you are. The Tsarina instructed me to escort you personally to her as soon as I found you.”

“Where are the tsarinoviches?” I asked. “Someone must take Mirochka to them. And...”—I turned to look at Mirochka—“you were supposed to meet with Kiryusha and Adriana, weren’t you?”

“Can’t we ask them to come play with us too, mama?”

I looked at the maid, who shuffled nervously but agreed that Kirill Tatyánovich and Adriana Gulisovna could be summoned to join the tsarinoviches and Mirochka, and that we could stop by the Imperial children’s chambers on the way.

Which was how Mirochka and I ended up walking to the Imperial chambers in sweat-soaked training clothes, with Mirochka still gulping down another roll. As we walked I darkly wished Sera much joy of

my presence. Perhaps the scent of the sweat drying on my body would sicken her new-mother's sensitive nose...not that I wanted that. In truth, I was surprised it had taken her this long to send me a preemptory summons, after the scene from last night. Which was concerning. It could very well mean that she had spent the morning feeling too unwell to rise, which had always been her pattern when she was with child...everything about it had always been such a miserable experience for her. A lot of my anger at her redirected itself at the gods or whatever had made it so that she would have to suffer so much.

We dropped Mirochka off with her brothers, who were delighted to see her and wildly impressed that she had spent the morning sparring with me and the guards down on the barracks training ground. I was only able to escape them by promising that they, too, could join us in our training, if their mother gave her permission. At this rate, I thought to myself as the maid and I made our way from the children's chambers to the Empress's rooms, I would have all of Krasnograd watching my courtship of Ivan. Well, at least I would be able to observe how he handled himself around children, and no one could claim that I was pursuing him in secret.

Sera was not in her front room when I arrived, but lying on her bed in the rear chamber of her apartments, propped up on pillows and looking torn between extreme fatigue and righteous wrath. Vyacheslav Irinovich was sitting by the bed, and gave me a miserable look as I entered.

"Has a healer been summoned?" I demanded as soon as I walked in the room.

"No need," said Sera, waving her hand limply. "It's just...the usual."

I walked over and took the hand she was trying to dismiss my fears with. It was clammy, and seemed puffier than when I had last seen it.

"Summon a healer *this instant*," I ordered the maid.

She froze, her head swiveling back and forth between me and Sera, who tried to wave her hand dismissively again, but was unable to twitch even a finger out of my grasp.

"If I do not see a healer coming in through that door the next time I turn around, then by all the gods, everyone in this room is going to regret it," I said. "Shut up, Sera!" I added before she could say any-

thing. I turned back to the maid hovering on the threshold. “*Now*,” I ordered. She gulped and fled.

“You order my maids about very freely, Valya,” said Sera, smiling weakly. “Are you already preparing to take over my rule?”

“*No*, you insufferable halfwit, I’m doing my best to avoid taking over your rule entirely,” I said, stroking her hand. “How long have you been like this?”

“Oh Valya! It’s nothing. You know how it is...”

“I most certainly do *not*. I may have puked a time or twelve when I was carrying Mirochka, but I never found myself lying around in bed in the middle of the day, especially when I had hot-headed younger relatives to chastise.”

This brought a smile to Sera’s face, but I could see that even smiling cost her more strength than she could spare. “How long?” I asked Vyacheslav Irinovich, turning to him without releasing my grip on Sera’s hand, as if I could channel some of my own strength into her simply through the contact of my skin on hers.

“She awoke feeling unwell, Valeriya Dariyevna, and was...quite sick when the maids brought in breakfast. Since then she has been unable to rise.”

“And no healer was called?”

“I suggested it, Valeriya Dariyevna, but she was adamantly opposed.”

“Next time she’s unable to rise, call a healer even if she directly orders you not to,” I said.

“Yes, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Vyacheslav Irinovich soberly. “I had already decided to summon one now, in fact, but I thought...”

“He would get less grief if you did the summoning,” Sera finished for him. I turned my attention back to her. Her voice sounded a little stronger, I thought, hoping I wasn’t deceiving myself, but I didn’t like the color of her lips, not at all.

“Well, it will be my fault if you are angry now,” I said.

“As...” she gasped a little, “...usual, Valya. I haven’t...” she gasped again, “...forgotten last night.”

“I thought you wouldn’t,” I said. “But don’t worry yourself about it! No harm was done. Well, except to the love the other princesses bore

me, but that was already a hopeless case.”

“Oh Valya!” Tears started to leak out of her eyes. For all her mercurial nature, she very rarely cried, and now she had already cried twice in the two days I had been in Krasnograd. I tried to tell myself that people in her condition cried very easily, but that did nothing to ease the cold knot that had formed in the pit of my stomach. I stroked her hands with my thumbs and tried to will some of the courage, the resolution, and the good health that had always been mine into her body.

“Ivan Marinovich came to spar with me this morning,” I told her, hoping to distract her. “I think things are well in hand there.”

“Did you let him win, then?”

“Well, no,” I admitted. “I knocked him down twice in front of the guards.”

“Oh Valya!”

“But now he’s *determined* to beat me, and in pursuit of that aim has asked me to train him every day.”

“Oh Valya!” This time there was more joy and less despair in her breathless exclamation.

“And by the way, your sons have also asked me to train them. How I’m going to get any courting done is beyond me, now that I’ll have a whole herd of children following my every move.”

“Oh Valya.” She closed her eyes. “You don’t have to, you know.”

“Perhaps I’ll hold two training sessions every day,” I said. “One for the children, and one for Ivan Marinovich. It will be good for me to get to know my nephews, and for Mirochka to train with her brothers. We’ll just have to hope that no rumors start that I’m trying to steal them away from you, or some such thing.”

“Oh Valya.” She smiled faintly, her eyes still closed. “Only you...” She started to laugh, but that must have been too much for her, and her laughter changed to a cry of “The basin, Slava, the basin!” She heaved herself just upright enough to retch a little bile into the basin that Vyacheslav Irinovich had pulled out from under his chair and held under her mouth, and then collapsed back onto the pillows, even clammier and weaker than before.

“Would you like some water?” I asked, stroking her forehead.

“No...couldn’t face it.”

“Close your eyes, then. Think of your breath.”

“Why...”

“So you don’t think of...your stomach,” I said, not wanting to mention puking in front of her just then. “Think of your breath, Sera. All you have to do is breathe, and the healer will be here shortly.”

She breathed shallowly, her eyes still closed. Vyacheslav Irinovich and I exchanged a grim glance.

“I’m going to go see what’s taking the healer so long,” I said.

“No...stay with me, Valya. I feel better when you’re with me. It must be...those Stepnaya...healing hands.” She tried to clutch my hand, but her own was so feeble she did little more than scrabble at me.

“Very well, but only if you promise to lie perfectly still and not speak,” I told her. “No speaking!” I added sharply when she opened her mouth to respond. She smiled faintly and lay there. Her breath, I noted with relief, began to be less shallow after a moment.

After far too long, although I knew it had not really been long at all, the healer arrived. She was a calm, soft-moving woman of middle years, and I could feel all of us in the room, including myself, unclench a little as she came over to stand by the bed. In my experience, that was always a good sign in a healer, although I was more accustomed to dealing with the healers of horses than of women. But healing was healing, and I’d certainly witnessed enough of it in my sisters as well as my horses; attending to sick and injured guests to our house was one of the family duties I’d taken upon myself. If I’d trust her with a horse or one of my own people, that probably meant I could trust her with Sera.

She looked over Sera carefully, and spent a long time with her ear pressed up against her chest and stomach. When she was done, she told Sera that her biggest problem was hunger and thirst, and recommended that she try to sip a weak chamomile tea, and see if that helped her.

“With your permission, Tsarina, I will give the serving girl instructions for preparing it,” she said, and, bowing, left the room. I followed her into the servant’s room and waited until she had instructed the maid on the best way to steep the tea to the right strength, and the maid had left for the kitchens.

“We must speak,” I said as soon as we were alone.

She gave me a long calm glance. “I believe you are right, Valeriya Dariyevna. Can we go to your chambers? Or someplace private, at least.”

“My chambers will be the most private,” I told her.

“Then I will meet you there in a little while, once I am convinced that the Tsarina is improving.”

“The Tsarina wishes me to stay with her,” I told her.

“Yes...perhaps that would not be best, Valeriya Dariyevna, begging your pardon.”

“She seems to improve when I’m with her,” I said.

“Yes, but...I’m afraid you might upset her when what she needs more than anything is rest.”

Sera really had seemed to improve when I had held her hand, but as I didn’t want to start a quarrel with her healer as well as her princesses, I merely said, “I await our meeting eagerly,” and went back with the healer into Sera’s bedroom.

“Your maids should be bringing the tea shortly, Tsarina,” said the healer. “And I shall sit with you for a bit, until your stomach settles and you can take some liquid.”

“I already feel a bit better,” said Sera. She gave me a faint smile. “Valya must have healed me.”

“Your stomach is empty, Tsarina, so there is nothing for it to rebel against,” said the healer briskly, with an expression that said she didn’t believe in my healing abilities for an instant. “We must reintroduce it to food and drink slowly, starting with this soothing infusion. Once you have taken that, we can consider starting you on a gentle broth. And you must spend the rest of the day in bed, resting. On no account must you try to stand while you are in this weakened condition.”

“As you say,” said Sera, alarming me even further with her acquiescence to an order she normally would not even have bothered to contradict before flouting.

“I will let you rest,” I told her. “But I’ll be back later in the day, once you’re feeling better. Perhaps we should just agree to assume that you’ve already chastised me for what happened last night, and I’m suitably repentant, so there’s no need to waste our breath on going

over it again?”

Her too-pale lips twitched in a half-smile. I tried to convince myself there wasn't a bluish tinge to them. "When have you ever been suitably repentant, Valya?" she asked.

"I often repent of my actions," I told her. "Just not as much as others would like me too. But I think things will turn out well from what happened last night, so there's no need to worry about it. Just...rest, and try to drink something. If you need me, you know you only need send for me, and I will be here directly."

"I know. Now go. We can talk later." She had opened her eyes to speak to me, but now she closed them again, so I sketched a half-bow to Vyacheslav Irinovich and the healer, and left.



I spent the time waiting for the healer changing into less sweaty clothes and scavenging for lunch from the remains of the meal that had been brought to me and Mirochka earlier. Since Mirochka had devoured most of it, I had to content myself with a few crusts of bread, but it was a far sight better than nothing, and I was feeling almost my usual self when the healer arrived.

"Thank you for speaking with me, Valeriya Dariyevna," she said as she entered.

"Since I'm the one who summoned you, I should be the one who's grateful," I told her. "I'd offer you refreshments, but my daughter already ate all the good stuff, and I just finished off the last crusts of bread. But if I had any refreshments to offer you, I would."

"I thank you for the thought, Valeriya Dariyevna," she said, giving me a sidelong look.

"I'm sure you do. How fares the Empress?"

"She has managed to consume a little of the tea I gave her, and seems to be rallying slightly."

"Good. What's wrong with her?"

The healer sat down at the small table by the unlit hearth, so I found myself sitting down across from her. She was not at all like me—in fact, I could already tell that if we ever had to work together, we would probably argue three times a day—but she did have a very calming presence. As someone who had quite the opposite effect on

people, I couldn't help but respect it, but right now I half-wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her, just to make sure that she was treating the matter as seriously as it deserved and doing all she could to save Sera.

"Right now, her worst problem is the sickness common to women in her condition, Valeriya Dariyevna. Sometimes it takes them like that, and if they can't eat or drink, just when they need their strength the most...well, it can cause extreme weakness. Normally they get over it."

"I've seen women with child before. I've *been* with child before myself. I know about the sickness. But you can't tell me that's the cause of her other symptoms. Her color, the puffiness of her hands...that is not a good sign."

"That is true, Valeriya Dariyevna. It is not a good sign."

"So what does it mean?" I demanded, when it appeared that the healer was not going to speak any further without prompting.

She gave me another measuring glance. "As I understand it, Valeriya Dariyevna, you are next in line for the rule of Zem', should something befall the Tsarina," she said.

"Yes, the Black God take it. So what can be done to prevent anything befalling her?"

The healer sat there for a while in silence, mulling something over in her mind. "This is strictly in confidence, Valeriya Dariyevna," she said, squaring her shoulders with the decision she had just come to.

"Of course."

"The Tsarina's heart is not strong," she said reluctantly. "It is a flaw... her father's mother had the same flaw, and died young because of it. In the normal course of things it does not seem to affect the Empress, but when she is with child the strain is too much for her. And then she has an unfortunate tendency to suffer from bleeding and miscarriage. It is only through the greatest of good fortune that she survived the birth of her sons, and this latest pregnancy is most ill-advised."

"Can it be ended?"

"Unfortunately, Valeriya Dariyevna, at this point that would be just as dangerous as not ending it. The risk of bleeding, you see...If she had only come to me the moment she first suspected...but she says

she had no thought of being with child, and ignored the signs when they first appeared, thinking it was just the beginning of the change of life every woman goes through. It was early, but...that is what she said, and it is not unheard of for women to go through it at her age. Anyway, that is not important. What is important is that she waited until it was too late to remedy the problem safely and easily. Perhaps on purpose. I believe she is determined to provide Zem' with an heir, even at the cost of her own life."

"Yes," I said. "Will it cost her her life?"

The healer shrugged. "I have seen women worse off than she is survive and bring healthy children into the world, Valeriya Dariyevna...and I have seen healthier women die before they could even be brought to childbed. My sisters and I will do all we can for her, but it is in the hands of the gods now. But if I were you, Valeriya Dariyevna, I would prepare myself to become Empress before the year is out."

"I see," I said, more stiffly than I had intended. "I...I thank you for your honesty. Please do not let me detain you any further."

"As you wish, Valeriya Dariyevna," she said, rising and bowing. "I am sorry," she added, looking down on me. "I am very sorry."

"So am I." I walked her out the door and, once I was alone, went over to the window that looked out onto the stables. The sun glinted off the roof and refracted in the tears standing in my eyes, dazzling me. I dashed away the tears, but more came to take their place. I would feel better if I could just pull myself together or burst into sobbing outright, but my chest was too tight to allow the tears to flow freely.

"The Black God take all you gods," I said after a while. "Do you really want me to become Empress? You do not! If you take Sera from me, I will make you rue the day you put me in her place!"

I waited for a while, but the gods didn't answer. They never did.

Chapter Ten

No summons came from Sera that afternoon, so after a while I gave up on waiting and went out. I dropped in on Mirochka, but she and the tsarinoviches and their friends were absorbed in some complicated game and showed little interest in me, so I left their chambers and headed down to the stables. There I found our horses resting in their stalls and looking as if they were recovering nicely from their two-week journey. I received a promise from the stable mistress that they would be turned out later, once the heat of the day had passed, and allowed to stretch their legs for the evening, and we spent some time discussing the best way to rest them after their recent exertions and bring them back to full fitness in time for the journey home, which I said would take place at the end of summer, as if everything were going well and I were just here for a summer visit to my sister. As I was preparing to leave, Arina Svetlanovna, my traveling mistress of horse and the head of the few servants I had brought with me to Krasnograd, came into the stables.

“Ah, Valeriya Dariyevna,” she said. “I knew I’d find you here sooner or later. Are you happy with the state of the horses?”

“They seem well cared for, and are recovering nicely. Zaichik still has a bit of heat in his near fore, though.”

“That’s why I’m here, Valeriya Dariyevna,” she said. “We’ve been poulticing it twice a day. I think in a week or two he’ll be as right as rain.”

I reached over and scratched Zaichik’s forehead, much to his delight. These days he was a steady packhorse, but in his wild youth he had strained his near fore, and after long journeys the old injury flared up sometimes. “Have you thought of bandaging it?” I asked.

“We did, Valeriya Dariyevna, but in this heat we thought it might do more harm than good. Rest is what he needs, rest and a nice cooling mud poultice. Which I’ve brought for him.”

I stayed and helped apply the mud poultice and then, after assurances that she would return to supervise the turning out of our hors-

es in the evening, Arina Svetlanovna and I strolled back towards the kremlin.

“Will you come and join us for a cup of tea, Valeriya Dariyevna?” she asked.

“Hot tea doesn’t really appeal in this weather,” I said, trying to fan myself with my hand but having little success cooling myself off.

“Well, cold tea then, or watered wine, if you please, Valeriya Dariyevna. I’m afraid this black earth stuff is no good compared to what we have back home, but we make do. I’ve been trying to brew some good stuff, and if turns out well, I’ll send some up to you.”

“That would be nice, and I’d be happy to join you now, even if it’s just flat cold tea,” I said. “How is everyone settling in?”

As we made our way to the servants’ quarters where Arina Svetlanovna and the three others I had brought with me were housed, she filled me in on the adventures that Misha and Maks, the two guards/stable boys we had brought, had already encountered in Krasnograd, and on the fact that Alya, our cook and general errand-runner, was pining desperately for home, or rather, for the young man she had left there.

“Shall I speak with her?” I asked.

“Maybe later, Valeriya Dariyevna. At present it looks like they’ve all gone out. There’s not a lot for them to do here—the kremlin servants are so efficient, we’ve been left sitting on our hands.”

“I’m sure we can find things for you to do if you’re bored,” I said.

“As it pleases you, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“But if everyone just wants to have a good time and enjoy the pleasures of Krasnograd, I have no objection as long as the horses are cared for.”

“I’m sure the others would welcome the chance to explore Krasnograd, Valeriya Dariyevna, and you need not fear for the horses.” We entered the rooms my people had been given, which were dark but pleasantly cool. “Are you pleased with your accommodations?” I asked.

“They are everything we could want, Valeriya Dariyevna. Cool tea?”

“Cool tea would be good,” I said. I looked around the room, which

was a central chamber with bedchambers leading off from the sides. It was bare and poorly lit, but clean. No doubt in the winter it was chilly and dank, but right now it was cooler and more pleasant than my own chambers. I could see Arina Svetlanovna's hand in the strict arrangement of all the gear and furniture in the room. Like any good stable mistress, she could not abide messiness, or anything that might leave potentially dangerous items lying around, waiting for her precious charges to injure themselves on. She showed me the vessel where she was attempting to brew our own steppe drink of sour fizzy tea, and then poured us two mugs of ordinary cold tea. As she did so, I noticed the lines between her eyes and the set of her mouth, and asked, "Is your head bothering you again?"

"A bit, Valeriya Dariyevna. You know how it is, especially in the heat, and being in these stuffy buildings."

I nodded in understanding. Arina Svetlanovna had always been prone to headaches, especially since a nasty fall a few years back, and of late they had been so bad that sometimes she couldn't even ride. I reached over and smoothed out the lines between her eyes and stroked her temples, and after a moment, her face eased and she said with a smile, "No one has the knack for that like you do, Valeriya Dariyevna. No one else can take away the pain like you do."

"You just have to not be afraid to stick your hands into other people's pain," I told her. "Everyone else is probably just afraid to press down hard enough. But if it bothers you again, come get me right away, do you hear? I can't have you lying on your bed in a darkened room when our horses need you."

"As you will, Valeriya Dariyevna." She handed me my tea. After a moment, she went on, "And how are you finding Krasnograd, if I may ask?"

"Well enough," I said.

"And the little princess?"

"Rather better than I. It looks like she will have befriended the whole kremlin, and maybe the rest of the city as well, by the time we leave."

Arina Svetlanovna smiled and shook her head. "I can't say I'm surprised, Valeriya Dariyevna. She always has had a way with people."

“I suppose.” There was a pause while we sipped our cool tea, which, despite being flat poor stuff compared with our own steppe brew, was deliciously refreshing.

“I heard the Empress has taken ill, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Arina Svetlanovna cautiously, breaking the silence.

“A passing indisposition. No doubt brought on by the heat.”

“Is that so, Valeriya Dariyevna?” She gave me a sharp look.

“It’s what the kremlin and Krasnograd need to hear,” I said.

“Ah.” Arina Svetlanovna sipped her tea in silence for a little while longer. “And I heard about your training session this morning, Valeriya Dariyevna,” she said suddenly.

“I see.” I sipped my tea in silence too.

“Valeriya Dariyevna.” She put down her cup. “Let me to speak freely.”

“I don’t see how I can stop you,” I said.

She smiled a little at that. “I’m glad your temper hasn’t deserted you, Valeriya Dariyevna! But you know..you know you are like a daughter to me, Valeriya Dariyevna, so let me to show a mother’s concern for you, since your own mother is so far away.”

“As you will,” I said, shrugging stiffly.

“Valeriya Dariyevna, I heard about last night, and this morning too. So I must ask you plainly, my daughter: what are you thinking? What are you doing? Why would you...Why would you let yourself go down this bad path again, Valeriya Dariyevna? Was there not enough pain for you the first time? Afterwards, you went around...you were like a woman who had been burned so badly she no longer had any feeling left. And I’m not sure that you ever really recovered from it. Do you really want to revisit this old sorrow, reopen these old wounds? Do you have no care for yourself at all? And if not, could you not be persuaded to have at least a little care for those who care about you? I could not stand it, Valeriya Dariyevna, I could not stand to see you suffer again like that.” She stopped as abruptly as she had started, and picked up her cup again with jerky fingers.

“Arina Svetlanovna...” I had to swallow and start again. “The Tsarina wishes it,” I said. “What happened this morning...the Tsarina wishes it. But not a word to anyone else on this matter!”

“Could she not find some more suitable partner for you, Valeriya Dariyevna? Why would she ask you to spend time with...of all people, Valeriya Dariyevna! It is unkind, it is unbearably unkind!”

“Her need is great,” I said. “And I could not refuse her.”

Arina Svetlanovna’s gaze softened. “I see, Valeriya Dariyevna. And does it have anything to do with her...passing indisposition of today?”

“Perhaps,” I said. “But not a word about that either!”

“Of course, Valeriya Dariyevna. But I beg of you to have at least a little caution on your own behalf, while you are spending yourself on hers.”

“I’ll try, Arina Svetlanovna,” I said. “But you know how I am. I’ve always been one for jumping into the fire before I even checked to see if it was hot.”

“I know, Valeriya Dariyevna.” She gave a sad smile. “But you can only do that so much before you get burned away. Have a care, Valeriya Dariyevna, for all our sakes. For the sake of the steppe, if nothing else. And if there is anything you need of me...”

“I know, Arina Svetlanovna, and I thank you.” I looked out of the narrow window that let in only a few of the late-afternoon rays. “I am afraid our stay in Krasnograd may not be very pleasant, and may last much longer than we had hoped. And things may get worse, much worse, before they get better. I may have to...I may have to step forward and...take my place here. And if that happens, or if there is even a rumor that it might happen, there are many who will be very unhappy about it. And so I beg of *you*, Arina Svetlanovna, to watch out for yourselves and the others. There are those who would probably stoop to attacking my servants, if they thought they couldn’t get to me.”

“Is it really likely to get that bad, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But just in case, it would set my mind at ease if I knew you were watching out for yourselves.”

“Then we will, Valeriya Dariyevna, never fear. No Velikokrasnovy are going to get past us.”

“It may not be just the Velikokrasnovy,” I warned her. “You should watch out for all the black earth princesses, and anyone who seems friendly with them.”

“I see, Valeriya Dariyevna. Just like old times, then, is it?” She

smiled, and I found myself smiling reluctantly in return. "It's not that bad...yet," I told her. "I'm not quite ready to flee the city in the dead of night to escape the wrath of outraged wives and mothers. And this time...I don't think I can flee, even if I want to. But...if it starts to look really bad, Arina Svetlanovna, you should be prepared to smuggle Mirochka out of the city and back home."

"Do you really think it will come to that, Valeriya Dariyevna?"

"I don't. But if...it seems I am not well-loved here in Krasnograd, and if I should, the gods forbid, suddenly have to take the throne, there could be...unrest, shall we say. And Mirochka would be next in line, and there are those who would find it easier to remove a child from their path than a grown woman. So if, the gods forbid, that should come to pass, it would probably be best for everyone if she were to be taken out of the city before anyone could think to stop her passage. No doubt that will cause trouble of its own, but at least she will be safer than if she were to remain here."

"Then it shall be done, Valeriya Dariyevna, if and when you deem it necessary."

"Thank you." I took a deep breath. "That is a great weight off my mind, Arina Svetlanovna. I have always known I could trust in you."

"Of course, Valeriya Dariyevna. And...one question more, if I may?"

"Ask away," I said, finishing off the tea, that seemed even more deliciously cool after the hot subject matter of our conversation. Just thinking about the need to take the throne while Mirochka was being smuggled out of the city and taken away from me made my palms and the back of my neck sweat.

"This young Velikokrasnov, Valeriya Dariyevna, Ivan Marinovich. What are your intentions regarding him?"

"The Tsarina wants an alliance."

"So marriage, then."

"Marriage," I confirmed. "If at all possible."

"And do you really think...do you really think, Valeriya Dariyevna, that he will make a good husband?"

"I'm sure he'll make someone a good husband, Arina Svetlanovna; the question is whether I would make him or anyone else a good wife. But the Tsarina asked it of me, and I cannot refuse her, in this or any-

thing else.”

“As you say, Valeriya Dariyevna. But please...I beg of you, if you think it will be a bad match, then please, Valeriya Dariyevna, persuade the Tsarina to choose you another partner.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You have great faith in my powers of persuasion, Arina Svetlanovna.”

“No, I have great faith in your stubbornness and hot temper, Valeriya Dariyevna. Forgive me for saying this, for you know I love you like the daughter I never had, but I’ve often thought that if you were to combine all the worst traits of a prize racehorse and an ill-tempered mule, you’d end up with someone rather like yourself.”

That made me laugh for the first time that afternoon, and I clapped her on the shoulder and said no doubt she was right, and that it was the nicest thing anyone had said of me for a while, and having extracted from her once again a promise to watch out for herself and the others, and to be ready to whisk Mirochka out of the city at a moment’s notice, I thanked her for the tea, and left.

Chapter Eleven

The next morning I received in answer to my inquiry the information that the Tsarina was greatly recovered from her indisposition of the previous day, but intended to spend the morning resting, and that she hoped I would continue the swordwork I had begun so auspiciously the day before. There was no response to my question as to whether or not the tsarinoviches had permission to be trained in steppe fighting, which I decided to take as consent. Accordingly, I suggested to Mirochka that she and her brothers train together with me in the afternoon.

“But what about him?” she demanded.

“Which ‘him’?” I asked.

“What’s his name—Ivan? The one we trained with yesterday. What about him?”

“He can train separately.”

“Won’t he feel left out?”

“Perhaps, but I doubt he will be very offended, and he might prefer to train with someone his own size—as might you.”

“I can train with grown-ups!”

“Yes, but it will be more helpful for you to practice with someone your own size, and if you and the tsarinoviches train together, there will be four of you, which will be very convenient.”

“Ruslan’s much bigger than me, and Valery’s much smaller!”

“Yes, but they’re still closer in size to you than Ivan Marinovich. If it doesn’t work out, we can always include him later. And you can continue to take lessons with your brothers.”

Mirochka was still doubtful of the wisdom of this course of action, but after a little more persuasion I was able to convince her that it was at least worth trying for one day, and so I dropped her off with the tsarinoviches for their morning lessons, and headed down to the training ground alone.

The sun was already high and noticeably hot as I made my way to the kremlin barracks, even though it was not yet mid-morning, with

the premonition of a stifling heat later in the day. I almost regretted agreeing to take Mirochka and the tsarinoviches out for training in the afternoon, but in truth high summer was my favorite time of year, despite the heat. I supposed it was because I had been born then, or perhaps it was just my hot-blooded nature, but I felt the heat less than most, and I loved the sunsetless days, whose length and brightness seemed to promise an infinity of possibilities. I was not immune to the charms of spring and autumn, the seasons most Zemnians preferred, and I could, like any Zemnian, tolerate our long winters—but in my case it was a very close thing, and after the third or fourth month of snow I always began to pace around the house restlessly, snapping at anyone who crossed me and longing for summer like a love-sick boy for his sweetheart. It was unfortunate that at that point there were normally a good two more months of snow to live through, and I was never sure how I was going to survive them, but thus far I always had. If I had a husband, perhaps he could keep me occupied during the winter months...the cold was always best shared with a lover, or so people generally held...I was at the barracks training ground, and I needed to concentrate on that, not how I could in the future best pass the most boring part of the year.

Ivan had already arrived when I got there, and was warming up with a couple of the guards. They broke off from their sparring when I came over to them, and the guards, after bowing to me, scattered.

“Is Miroslava Valeriyevna not joining us, Valeriya Dariyevna?” Ivan asked, smiling. He seemed in better humor this morning than yesterday, probably because of the welcome the guards had given him.

“The tsarinoviches wished to train with her, so I told them I would work with them all together in the afternoon,” I said. “I thought it would be easier if we didn’t have four very imperious children demanding our attention as we sparred.”

“No doubt you’re right, Valeriya Dariyevna, although the little princess was certainly a spirited partner. I can’t say,” he smiled ruefully, “I’ll miss being put in my place by a girl of eight, though.”

“Imagine if her brothers joined us, then,” I said, which made him laugh. He asked if I needed to warm up, but I said that I would warm up as I demonstrated some of the finer points of steppe fighting, and

then we could spar together a little, if that suited him.

“As you wish, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said, smiling cheerfully, and paid close attention as I showed him some of the feints I had used on him yesterday, and practiced with a frown of concentration on his face, which did nothing to dampen the good mood he was in. I wondered if it was because he was more at ease with me and the situation today, or if it was due to Mirochka’s absence, or if it had nothing to do with me at all. I wondered if he would be this cheerful all the time, if I brought him back to the steppe, or if he would pine, as so many did. Well, nothing I could do about that now.

After we had practiced enough to work up a fine sweat, I proposed that we spar in earnest, which he enthusiastically accepted. I could see that he thought he had learned from his mistakes yesterday and my lessons, and that this time he stood a much better chance of defeating me.

We circled around each other a few times, and he made some very creditable feints and attacks, and defended himself very well against my strikes and counter-strikes, and was feeling more and more pleased with himself, until I knocked his blade right out of his hand. He looked in surprise at it down on the ground, and then sighed and went to pick it up. We did the same thing a couple more times, until he managed not to lose his sword completely when I tried to disarm him, but only retreat in order to regain his grip, at which point I called a halt to the sparring.

“Were you going easy on me yesterday, Valeriya Dariyevna?” he asked when we were done, looking at me out of the corner of his eye.

“Why?”

“It just seemed like you were pressing me a lot harder today, that was all.”

“Yesterday I was tired and distracted, and today I’m not,” I told him.

“Oh...I heard the Tsarina was indisposed yesterday. You must have been worried for her.”

“Oh, yes,” I said, trying not to see either with my mind’s eye or my real eyes the true cause of much of my distraction yesterday, which had been the gap between the bottom of his shirt and the top of his trousers. I wondered if I should ask him to wear longer shirts. No, defi-

nately not. It would only embarrass both of us, and if I couldn't keep my mind off a few inches of bare skin, I deserved to be soundly beaten by a green boy.

"I hope she is feeling better now," he said.

"Sorry? Oh, yes, of course. She is, or so I have heard."

"She seemed very kind. I was surprised. I wasn't expecting an Empress to be kind."

"She can be kind when it suits her," I said. "Once you get to know her better, you'll see what a generous nature she has."

He smiled disbelievingly. "Get to know her better! When would I get to know the Tsarina better, Valeriya Dariyevna?!"

"Oh, you never know," I said. "Same time again tomorrow?"

"If it pleases you, Valeriya Dariyevna."

"It does if it pleases you," I said, which seemed to fluster him in a very promising fashion.



My first action when I arrived back at my chambers was to send for word of Sera, and to be told that she was continuing to improve and would be glad to have me join her for a light supper that evening, if I were not otherwise engaged. Extremely heartened by this news, I sent back the message that I would be delighted to join her, and, after taking some lunch (despite the heat I was famished after my session with Ivan, which seemed like an omen of good things to come) I went to gather up Mirochka and the tsarinoviches for their promised training.

The training went less badly than I had feared, although I was glad I had decided not to include Ivan in it. The tsarinoviches were all familiar with the concept of swords, but showed little knowledge and less aptitude for their use. Ruslan, despite at twelve being the oldest, and also having a certain fondness for the *idea* of swords, was obviously the worst, something of which he was acutely aware and which did nothing to improve his temper. Not that he was a surly lad, exactly, but he was one of those serious types who want to understand everything and have everything make sense, and who fare so poorly in skills that require hours of painful practice and embarrassing fumbling. I tried to jolly him through it as best I could, but it was apparent that he was never going to make an expert swordsman, mainly because he kept

stopping to ask questions or argue with me—in the most polite, respectful, and rational fashion, of course—instead of actually practicing.

Although it was probably wrong of me to think this about my own nephew, I could already see the earnest, argumentative, unsatisfactory lover he was going to be in a few years. No doubt he would spend half the time trying to convince his partner that her requests made no sense, while insisting on getting his own way in everything, even if she had twice the experience he did. Dariusz—Sera had been determined to keep the name “Darya” going in the family line, and had made what I considered the ill-advised choice to give her second son this inelegant male version, used only on the very Western edge of Zem’. I wondered if, should she have the good fortune to have a daughter, she would name this latest child Darya, and then could have slapped myself for drawing down ill luck on the possibility of a child by thinking of a name before it was born—Dariusz showed slightly more ability, mainly because he was a cheerful, willing child who was happy to practice rather than argue, but he was also happy to wander off to watch the guards, butterflies, dancing dust motes, and whatever else caught his attention. Only Valery showed any real talent for the subject, and he and Mirochka finished off the session by engaging in an actual sparring match, which he lost, of course, but with honor, something I made sure to tell him.

“Thank you,” he said, glowing with pride. I could see that as the youngest, he was not used to shining more brightly than his brothers. “Are you our aunt, Valeriya Dariyevna?” he continued.

“Yes, of course,” I told him. “Your mother and I are sisters, which means that I am your aunt and Mirochka is your sister.”

“You’re much nicer than our other aunts,” he confided in me. “The Northern ones. Sometimes they can be very mean.”

“That’s too bad,” I said, trying not to narrow my eyes too much at this information.

“Are you the one who will take the throne if mama dies?” he asked. The other boys fixed their attention on me, too, and I could see that this was a painfully important question for them.

“I am your mother’s sister,” I said gently. “So yes, I am her heir. But

why are you worried about that?”

“She was sick yesterday. And many times before that, too. And papa is very worried, I can tell.”

“People don’t die just because they’ve been a bit ill from time to time,” I said, trying to ignore the cold gripping my heart. If a boy of seven could see it...

“But if she *does*...Valeriya Dariyevna, aunty, what will happen to us and to papa? Will you...will you send us away? Or...” He gulped and fell silent.

“Sometimes new Empresses kill off all the old Empress’s kin,” put in Ruslan, looking half-horrified at the thought and half-delighted at the fearful reaction it provoked in Valery.

“Well, I wouldn’t!” I snapped. But that only frightened Valery more, so I made myself calm down and tell him soothingly, “If...let’s say, your mother decided to retire to a sanctuary, which some Tsarinas do, and I had to step in for her and take her place on the throne, then I promise you, all three of you, that nothing bad will happen to you, all right? You and your father can stay here in Krasnograd if you wish, or return to your father’s home in the North, or...even go out to the steppe and live with my family, if you wished. Any family of Sera’s is family of mine, and I would never allow anyone to hurt my family, I promise. Does that make you feel better?”

“You promise, aunty?” asked Valery.

“Of course,” I told him. “Besides, you and I have the same name. How could I let anything bad happen to you?”

“We do, aunty?”

“Yes, of course. I’m Valeriya Dariyevna, and you’re Valery and your brother is Dariusz. You were both named after me.”

“Really, aunty?” he asked, cheering up.

“Indeed. Ruslan was named after your mother’s father, and you two were both named after me. I told you, our family is very important to us. I would take care of you like you were my own sons, and your mother would take care of Mirochka as if she were her own daughter.”

“Maybe she should adopt her, then,” put in Dariusz. “Since she doesn’t have any daughters of her own. That’s why you’re her heir, isn’t it? Because she doesn’t have any daughters, just us.”

“Yes,” I said. “But she doesn’t need to adopt Mirochka, because Mirochka is next in line after me anyway. And Mirochka would take care of you and your father too, wouldn’t you, Mirochka?”

“Of course, mama! But they’d have to stay here with me, so I could keep an eye on them and have my brothers close to me.”

“So you see,” I told them, “nothing to worry about.”

“It would be much easier if boys could inherit too,” said Ruslan, getting the same sullen look I’d seen cross his face during training, when he’d made a mistake.

“Maybe it seems so right now,” I said. “But there would be a lot of problems that came with that, too. You don’t want to inherit the throne, Ruslan, trust me.”

“Do you, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“Not really,” I admitted. “But it’s my duty. Count yourself lucky it passed you by.”

“It’s still unfair,” he said. “Taking the throne away from the Empress’s own children, and passing it on to someone else farther down the line.”

“Life is unfair,” I told him.

“That’s not a good answer. Life *shouldn’t* be unfair.”

“I agree,” I said, trying to stifle a sigh. If I were Ruslan, I would be angry too. And in truth, if I thought it would be a good idea for Sera to try to break the many hundreds of years of Zemnian tradition and pass the rule of Zem’ to one of her sons, I would (for mainly selfish reasons) have renounced every claim to the throne without a second thought, but looking at Ruslan, I could see it would be a disaster if she did so. Succession was, as everyone knew, too tricky an issue to trust to the male line, although exceptions were made often enough—witness my own expected inheritance of Stepnoye from my father. And it had to be said that my father was at least as good a ruler as my mother, faint praise as that might be.

But succession through the male line was one thing, especially, as in my case, when the mother was a person of even greater rank than the father, and outright rule by a man was entirely another. Although there were clever men, and good men, and even men who were good and clever rulers, men, as everyone knew, matured late and died early,

leaving them little time to rule with wisdom. And places where the rule of men was common, such as the mines and the road crews and the barracks, were too dreadful for anyone of sense to look on the idea with favor. Perhaps if men renounced rape and castration as a means of rule, just as our foremothers had renounced slavery and torture, then perhaps...but it had not happened in a thousand years of history, and perhaps never would until we women demanded that it be so.

And if we did, our chances of success were slim, for I knew that the greatest beneficiaries of such a purge—the men who suffered daily at their brothers' hands—would probably be its most vigorous and vociferous opponents. One only had to look at how men dealt with each other to know this to be true. For example, although castration had fallen out of favor amongst our queens and noblewomen as being cruel and wasteful before Zem' had even become one unified land, when unrestrained by their wives and mothers, our men practiced it on each other at every opportunity. One might argue (I argued with myself) that the problem lay not in men, but in the mines, the road crews, and the barracks as breeding grounds of base behavior, and to a certain extent, one would be right. But that was still no guarantee that handing over provinces to men would work out; indeed, there was every guarantee that for a time at least it would be a dismal failure. One does not recover so quickly from a bad upbringing and bad influences, even with every other advantage it is possible to have. Zem' would have to be in a strong position, a very strong position indeed, to withstand the upheaval that the influx of untutored, self-serving minds into positions of power would cause, not to mention the threat to our fertility that having so many castrating, child-abandoning rapists running about promised.

Perhaps (I told myself) I was overly pessimistic, but even cursory studies of the Hordes and the Western lands, where men kept eunuchs and sold their mothers and sisters into slavery without a second thought, suggested I was not, and we were still only in the early stages of extracting ourselves from the quagmire of cruelty in which we had wallowed as recently as the time of our great-grandmothers. Such a thing would have to be managed very, very carefully. And besides, Ruslan was not at all the right kind of boy to become the first

man ever to rule Zem'. Such a person would need to have the gift of being popular with the princesses and the common folk alike; more importantly, such a person would have to be able to give Zem' a dream to dream together, such as the dream of a land where no one, not even men, raised their hand in cruelty against their sisters and brothers, and lead us into it, because that was what leaders did. It was Sera who had told me that, when she had told me I was to be her heir. Anyone who ruled Zem' would have to be able to rule over a dream. She said she'd learned that from Darya Krasnoslavovna. I wasn't sure that if the time came, I could do it, but I *was* sure that stubborn, argumentative, clever, fearful, people-blind Ruslan would never have that gift. Not like Mirochka...I shied away from that thought. But it was obvious that the only person who could possibly be less popular with the princesses than me would be him. "Life is unfair, though, unfortunately," I told him. "But if you could do anything, Ruslan, what would it be?"

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Would you want to become a warrior, or a singer, or marry a great princess, or, I don't know..."

"I'd want to be a scholar," he said. "I'd want to join a sanctuary and study ancient scrolls and learn things."

"Well, perhaps you will have that chance—but you wouldn't if you were to take the throne."

"You just said that Empresses retire to sanctuaries all the time!"

"Yes, but only after their health has been worn down by years of exhausting service to the land. Would you really want that?"

"I guess not," he said, not looking convinced.

"Not many would," I told him, and Dariusz piped in and said *he* certainly wouldn't want to become Empress, and Valery and Mirochka agreed, which only sort of pleased me, but the troublesome moment was past and the children said they wanted to go play together some more, but inside, where it was cooler, so I escorted them back to their chambers and returned to my own.

Chapter Twelve

When I got to my chambers I found a vaguely familiar-looking travel-worn woman dressed in silks and mountain wool leaning against the wall outside my door.

“Do you bring word from the Eastern princesses?” I asked.

“Valeriya Dariyevna?” she asked in reply.

“The very one.” I pointed at the scroll in her hand, with the seal of Princess Velikogornaya on it. “I assume she has sent me word of something important?”

“May we speak in private, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“Of course. Come in.” I went into my chambers and checked for maids. “We are unobserved,” I said. “Please, sit down. Shall I call for some tea?”

“It is not necessary, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“Then have some water. You must be thirsty after your long ride in the heat. Would you care for some food?”

“Maybe later, Valeriya Dariyevna. Water is fine for the present.”

“Very well.” I poured two cups of water and set one in front of each of us. “You’re Princess Velikogornaya’s second-sister,” I told her. “I remember you from when you’ve been to Steпноy Dom before on your sister’s business. But I don’t...” I snapped my fingers. “I do! Aksinya Olgovna, right?”

“You are correct, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“The Tsarina will be delighted to welcome you to Krasnograd,” I said.

“I would be honored, of course, but I fear I will need to set off for home immediately, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“I see. What did you wish to tell me in private, Aksinya Olgovna?”

“My sister was both gladdened and distressed to receive your message this spring, Valeriya Dariyevna. Gladdened because it meant other princesses might be able to come to our aid, and distressed because it meant the problem has grown more serious.”

“More children have gone missing in your province, then?”

“It was quiet over the winter. Most likely, Valeriya Dariyevna, when you killed those two that you killed, you cut at least one of the heads off the snake, but it’s grown another one, the Black God take it. As soon as the passes cleared, more children started disappearing, and in even greater numbers than before. At my sister’s command, I led a party to investigate. I discovered little of use except one unpleasant fact.”

“What was the unpleasant fact?” I asked.

“That some of the missing children were not stolen, but rather sold by their parents to the slavers.”

“By all the gods!” I exclaimed in horror.

“Indeed, Valeriya Dariyevna. Those we found guilty we sentenced to hard labor, and my sister dispatched me to inform you of this fact, and to beg further help from you. But by the time I arrived on the steppe, you had already set off for Krasnograd, so I set off after you myself, and here I am, to inform you of what we in Velikogornoye have found, and to beg for your help.”

“You should tell the Empress,” I said.

Aksinya Olgovna twitched her shoulders in a way that said she would rather not encounter the Empress. “We were hoping you would plead our case to her yourself, Valeriya Dariyevna. Surely your voice will speak much more loudly in her ear than ours.”

“Yes, but it is still only one voice. I know you want to return home, Aksinya Olgovna, but you should stay and tell the Empress and the Princess Council what you have learned.”

“Do you really think it will help, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“Well, it won’t hurt,” I said. “Please, let me arrange for a chamber for you—I am sure the Tsarina will be glad to have you stay in the kremlin—and let me ask her to hear you out, and to call a session of the Princess Council to hear what you have to say. If we both speak, our message will be twice as loud.”

“I suppose there is wisdom in what you say, Valeriya Dariyevna,” she agreed reluctantly. “Although I’ve already been gone longer than expected. I hate to leave my sister like this, not knowing where I am and without my aid. No doubt more of our people are being taken even as we speak.”

“No doubt,” I said. “So we will have to speak loudly and clearly,

and make the Empress and the Princess Council act, and quickly. As you said, Aksinya Olgovna, we are fighting a many-headed snake, and I don't think we'll defeat it without the full backing of Krasnograd and the rest of Zem', and for that we need our sister princesses."

"I suppose I can stay another day or two, Valeriya Dariyevna."

"You'll need the rest anyway, before you start back," I told her. "It's a long ride to the mountains."

"We mountain folk are tough, Valeriya Dariyevna."

"Well, so are we from the steppe, but I almost collapsed my first day here after running around like a fool instead of resting after my journey," I told her sharply. "You will make better time, and we can find you a better horse, if you wait a day or two, and now that you're here you really might as well plead your case to more people than just me."

I went out into the corridor and, hunting down a maid, told her that Princess Velikogornaya's second-sister had just arrived with important information, and that I thought it would be best if she were given a chamber here in the kremlin. The maid seemed a bit nervous about agreeing to something like that on just my say-so, but I must have looked very irritated when she hesitated, for after a moment she agreed that yes, she could at least speak to the mistress of chambers about finding a spare room for Aksinya Olgovna, of course she could.

"Good," I told her. "If there's any trouble, have whoever causes it come speak to *me*. Is that clear?"

The girl gulped and said yes, it was clear, and in short order Aksinya Olgovna had been led off to the baths and to the chamber being prepared for her, while I was left alone to mull over what she had told me.

Of course, as she had said, the information she had brought was only of limited value, since the only people they had caught in Velikogornoye were the families of those who had been taken, not the actual traders themselves. But surely those people knew to whom they had sold their children, and that could lead us somewhere. I wondered whether Princess Velikogornaya had questioned them about that, and whether she had gained any sort of useful information. I wondered how difficult it would be to find those people, in the mines or the

road crews or wherever they had been sent to do their hard labor, and how willing they would be to provide the information that I needed. I didn't really see why they would refuse to give that information, but perhaps they had been threatened, and people could be funny about that kind of thing anyway. I wondered what I would do if I ended up finding someone, one of these people who had sold their children into slavery, who knew something I needed to know but refused to tell me. I grimaced at the very thought. Facing someone in battle didn't bother me, if it was a fight that needed fighting, but ever since Krasnoslava the Kind had banned it many years ago, torture was something that only happened amongst the Hordes or the barbaric Westerners. The only thing I could think of that was worse than torturing someone would be, well, selling my own child into slavery. I had done a number of things that my foremother Krasnoslava, were she to hear of them, would, I had always assumed, disapprove of mightily, and normally that did not bother me too much. I knew that Sera lived in the shadow of our foremothers Krasnoslava and Darya Krasnoslavovna, always wondering if she were living up to the standard they had set...now there were two women who had given Zem' a dream worth having, not that we were doing a very good job of realizing it, but still...I could understand why Sera would want to emulate them, but I rarely worried about it. Torturing prisoners, though...if I were to do that, the other princesses would be within their rights to shun and despise me as much as they wished, and how would I ever be able to face Mirochka again? Her finding out about it was too awful to contemplate...it must be the Krasnograd air, I told myself, snapping out of my moment of melancholy. At home these moods rarely came upon me, but every time I came to Krasnograd, I found myself forced into introspection, contemplating things that I would rather not contemplate.

"I'll just have to be smarter than them, that's all," I said out loud. And with that encouraging thought, I went to seek an audience with Sera.



"I thought I told you to join me for supper," she said when I was let into her chambers. "It's only midafternoon. Is this the hour for supper on the steppe, or something?"

“I see you’re feeling better.” She was sitting up in bed, looking peevish and bored, always a good sign.

“Yes, but the healers still say I should remain in my chambers until tomorrow, the Black God take them and all morning sickness.”

“Morning sickness is clearly the work of the Black God, of that there can be no question,” I said. “But the healers are right. You were too weak yesterday to be ready to do anything until tomorrow at the earliest. You know that, Sera, you know that.”

“It’s just...” she fretted with her sleeve for a moment, “I don’t know... there’s just so much to get done, and I don’t know...”

“You’ll get everything done that you need to get done,” I said before she could finish saying what she was thinking, which I knew was that she didn’t know how much time she had left, but she suspected it was not much. “And right now resting is most definitely the thing you need to get done the most. It was silly of me to seek you out. I’ll go, and come back this evening for a nice quiet supper, and then perhaps we can talk tomorrow, if you continue to improve.”

“Oh no you don’t. I want you here with me. You make me feel better, you know, even if the healers doubt me. They think you’re a bad influence, for some reason, and you’ll over-excite me.”

“How surprising,” I said, and when she laughed, I smiled and said, “And they’re right, I see.”

“Oh, Valya! Laughing does me good. Please stay: it does me good to have you with me. You know, when you held my hands yesterday, it really did feel like your strength was pouring into me, or something. Even Slava and the healers don’t have such a good effect on me. I suppose it’s because you’re my sister. So please stay. And besides, you must have had a very good reason to come to me now, and I’ll never be able to rest for wondering about what it was if you don’t tell me now. So tell me now.”

“Very well, but only if you agree ahead of time to remain calm, and to let me handle everything.”

She made a face. “That bad, is it? Well, I’ll do my best, I guess. Spit it out, Valya.”

“Aksinya Olgovna, Princess Velikogornaya’s second-sister, just arrived here in Krasnograd, seeking me out,” I told her.

“Why would Princess Velikogornaya’s second-sister come all the way to Krasnograd to seek you out?”

“Because earlier this year I sent word to all the mountain princesses about my concerns regarding the trading of Zemnian children, and asking them to send me word of any such incidents, so that I might better fight it. Aksinya Olgovna came all the way from Velikogornoye to tell me what they have found out there.”

“And what have they found out?”

“Unfortunately not as much as I might like, but still something. Aksinya Olgovna said that things were quiet for a while after I killed those two”—Sera’s face darkened at that, but I gave her a stern look to remind her to remain calm and quiet, and carried on—“but recently children have started disappearing again, and it seems that at least some of them are being sold off by their own families. Aksinya Olgovna rounded up all those she could, and Princess Velikogornaya has sentenced them to hard labor. That is all the information she has given me so far. She wanted to set back off for Velikogornoye immediately, but I convinced her to stay and inform the Princess Council of what she knows. I’ve arranged for her to stay here in the kremlin, and I want to call a meeting of the Princess Council as soon possible to discuss this. Tomorrow is probably too soon, but maybe we could do it by the day after tomorrow.”

“I see you feel very comfortable giving orders in my kremlin,” she said, pouting a little.

“Sera, I am your sister and your heir. You are currently indisposed. Someone has to give orders and make arrangements until you recover, and you know as well I do that that person has to be me. And this is important and must be dealt with soon. Pretty much immediately, in fact. I know it is unpleasant to face the fact that our own children are being sold into slavery, sometimes by their own parents, but face it we must. Telling yourself that those noises you hear isn’t thunder doesn’t mean you won’t get wet—or struck by lightning.” I realized I was speaking much too forcefully for someone in Sera’s delicate condition, and tried to soften my voice as I continued, but, I could tell by her face, with only limited success. “I know that calling a session of the Princess Council is not your favorite activity—or anyone’s, for that

matter—and given your current state and the topic I intend to address, I'm sure no one will blame you or think it odd if you decide to stay in your chambers and hand the running of the session over to me. Not even I will, although I have to admit the thought does make me feel ill. But it must be done, Sera, you know that as well as I do, and if you cannot do it, then I will.”

She sat there for a moment in silence. I could see the desire to make a childish and ill-humored retort, couched as playfulness, was warring with the equally strong desire to give the matter the serious attention it deserved, and an almost equally strong third desire to lie back down and pretend that none of this was happening, and that I needed to say something more in order to steer our conversation into the direction it needed to go in.

“Sera,” I said slowly. “You must know that nothing—*nothing*—is more important to me right now than to see you return to good health. And if you could safely deliver a healthy heir—well, I think I might have to join a sanctuary in order to spend the rest of my days thanking the gods for their kindness to you and to me both. But I see very little I can do here to ensure that outcome. What I can do, though, is try to wipe this blot, this stain, this pestilence off of Zem’, while trying to spare you as much of the trial and the trouble that it will cause as possible. Right now this seems to me like the simplest and most effective means to do so. If you have other thoughts, you know you have only to ask, and I will do everything I can for you.”

“Oh, Valya!” she said, as she so often did when dealing with me. She smiled playfully, but now it was with genuine playfulness, not the peevish travesty of it she inflicted on me—and, I suspected, Vyacheslav Irinovich—when she was sulking or in a bad temper. “Two outbursts of passion in three days! I see it is most definitely high time we got you a husband.”

“A husband is unlikely to cool my ardor!” I snapped back. She raised a brow. “You know what I mean! I am not the type of person to forget to attend to something important just because I happen to have a man around. Sera, this is *serious!*”

“And so is marriage,” she said. “But never mind that now. I’m sorry, Valya, and I’ll try to stop making jokes at your expense—there, does

that make you feel better? Although you really should develop a sense of humor, Valya, if I say so myself.”

“I have an excellent sense of humor, thank you very much, just *not when it comes to slavers stealing our children!!*”

“I know, Valya, and I’m sorry,” she said, finally arranging her face into something resembling an appropriate expression for the topic at hand. “You, and the mountain princesses, are having to live with something that to those of us here on the Krasna seems little more than an absurd rumor, and we should not make light of it. Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Valya. Now, if you don’t mind, I will think on it. I agree that we must take this up before the Princess Council, and sooner rather than later, but we must decide how best to present it to them. Let me think on it this afternoon, Valya, and perhaps by supertime I will have thought up a good plan.”

“You are a good Empress,” I told her, bending over to kiss her brow.

“Really, Valya?” she asked.

“Of course,” I told her. “You probably don’t hear that enough, but you are. You don’t just do your duty; you’re clever about it as well. I’m sure between the two of us we’ll have the Princess Council and the slavers and all our other problems sorted out in no time.”

“As you say, Valya.” I stroked her hair and told her to be sure to get some rest as well as thinking, and that I would be back for supper, and she said she was looking forward to it. She brightened as I held her, but I tried not to notice the expression of tired sorrow tinged with fear that had already slipped back onto her face before I had left the room.

Chapter Thirteen

I arranged for Mirochka to have supper with the tsarinoviches, and then, having freed myself from caring for her for the rest of the evening, I called upon Aksinya Olgovna. I found her sitting in nothing but a light shirt, pink-cheeked and attempting to fan herself with her hands.

“The servants were kind enough to let me use the kremlin bathhouse,” she explained. “It was good to get the road dirt off of me, but now I’m about to faint from the heat. It’s so much hotter down here in the lowlands than back home.”

“There may be a proper fan somewhere in the room,” I said. “If not, we can ask someone to bring you one. It will help.” I rummaged through the wardrobe in the corner of her room, which was mostly empty—Aksinya Olgovna was not overly burdened with things—and found a small birchbark fan in one corner.

“Here,” I said. “Use this.”

Aksinya Olgovna took the fan with gratitude and began using it vigorously to raise a breeze on her face. After a few moments some of the flush faded from her thin cheeks.

“At least you’re not fat,” I told her. “Imagine how hot you’d be then.”

She smiled. “Thank the gods for that, then, Valeriya Dariyevna. What did you want to speak with me about? I assume that you haven’t come here just to show me where to find my fan.”

“I just spoke with the Empress about the situation in Velikogor-noye, and I will again this evening,” I told her. “I’ve asked her to call a session of the Princess Council within the next few days to discuss the issue. It seems to me that we should send someone, probably a whole party of someones, to the mountains to look into this. And I was wondering, Aksinya Olgovna, if you happened to have asked any of the people you captured—the ones you said had sold their children themselves to the slavers—if they knew who the slavers were, and how to find them. They must have some knowledge of who these people are, or else they wouldn’t have been able to,” I made a face, “do busi-

ness with them.”

Aksinya Olgovna stopped fanning herself for a moment. “I did, Valeriya Dariyevna, my sister and I both did. We questioned them pretty closely, as you might imagine. But we got very little useful information out of them. They could describe the people they...to whom they sold their children,” she also made a face, “by sight, and they knew their names, or at least what they called themselves, and more or less when they could be expected to come through the village, but there was little there that would allow us to track them down until they come back through the village, if they’re so foolish as to do that with us looking for them.”

“Did they say *why* they had done what they’d done?” I asked.

Aksinya Olgovna sighed. “Desperation, of course, Valeriya Dariyevna. Some thought it was the best way to keep the slavers from stealing more children—give them a few so that they don’t take a lot and don’t raid the village by force—and some were in danger of starving to death. Famines are not uncommon in the mountains, and some of our villages were hit very hard this year with a late frost. So some thought it would be better to sell their children to people who might at least feed them, and to use the money to go buy grain and food from other villages. I can’t say I agree with what they did, but I can understand it.”

“Did they not have any other option?” I demanded. “Surely, for the ones that were hit by famine, there were stores of grain elsewhere—does Velikogornoye not have reserves of grain for famine years?”

“We do, Valeriya Dariyevna, of course we do, but this is the second famine year in a row, and our stores are low, and not all the common folk believe that they would be fairly treated, or even given enough to survive on.”

“The Imperial stores...” I said.

“Are also low, Valeriya Dariyevna, or so the Empress informed us this winter when we began to suspect we had another famine year on our hands, and asked about them. Not that she would begrudge us what she had, but there is scarcity even here in the black earth district, and it might not be enough for the whole country. But I doubt our villagers knew that. No, Valeriya Dariyevna, I imagine they just thought of this as the quickest, simplest, safest solution to their problems. Not

everyone values their children more than money, or is willing to suffer hardship on their behalf, and perhaps to them slavery did not seem so bad as it would to you or me.”

“That my own people would think that!” I said.

Aksinya Olgovna shrugged. “Freedom is the luxury of princesses, Valeriya Dariyevna. Not everyone is so free as you. Many would be happy merely to have a mistress that could give them food when they were hungry.”

“But to sell them to the Hordes!”

“Who else would buy them, Valeriya Dariyevna? It’s not as if they could sell them to anyone here in Zem’, and we have blocked off the slave trade to the West. It’s only East that our people flow freely.”

“Or not so freely,” I said sourly. “Well, I thank you for what you have told me, Aksinya Olgovna, and I’ll tell the Empress when I speak with her again this evening. Oh, and one more thing: would it be possible to find the people who have been sentenced? If I wanted to question them again, for instance?”

She shrugged. “Probably, Valeriya Dariyevna. We know where we sent them, so it would just be a matter of tracking them down from there—if they are still alive, of course.”

“Of course,” I said. A good half the people sent to hard labor did not survive the sentence, some dying of disease and overwork, and many more dying at the hands of other laborers. We no longer executed people in Zem’, but many still died every year from our merciful justice, and thus far we hadn’t managed to find a solution, since we still had to do something with murderers, rapists, and those who would sell their own children into slavery, and hard labor was what we had. At least that way they were doing something of use for their country, we told ourselves. I realized I was planning to go to a mine or a road crew. Well, what must be done, must be done. If I could sentence people to serve in them for the sake of justice and the good of Zem’, I could stand to look at them for the sake of freedom and the good of Zem’, and see what the justice I took such pride in when executing it looked like.

“I won’t take up any more of your time,” I said. “I’ll let you know as things progress. Let’s hope that soon we can at least say that an Impe-

rial delegation has been sent to look into this matter. You can ask the servants to bring you something when you want supper, or go to an inn in the city. Until tomorrow, Aksinya Olgovna.”

“Until tomorrow,” she said, and went back to fanning herself as I went out the door.



When I arrived at back at Sera’s chambers for supper, the food was already laid out, the maids had left, and Vyacheslav Irinovich was nowhere to be found.

“I thought we should talk in private tonight, Valya,” Sera explained. “Sister to sister.”

I wanted to say something flippant, but the look on her face made me change my mind and say instead, very seriously, “Of course, Sera.”

“Whenever anyone else is around, even if it is only Slava, I must always *be* someone else,” she said. “Empress, first and foremost, but also a wife, a mother...someone who must support and protect others. But with you...even though you are so much younger than me, Valya, I don’t feel as if I have to support and protect you, or even make decisions for you. Perhaps it’s because you’re so wild. But I generally feel as if there’s no point in even trying to make decisions for you, since you’re going to do whatever you’re going to do anyway, and I know I should find it...annoying, or something, but really I find it restful. And you never seem to need my support, either. You probably need my protection, but I’ve never been able to make you accept it. So what I’m trying to say is that I find your company...restful.”

“I’m glad,” I said, not sure how else to respond to that.

“I know we didn’t spend as much time together when we were growing up as we should have,” she went on. “The foolish enmity between our mothers...promise me, Valya, *promise* me, that our children will not have that same problem. They will grow up together as true sisters and brothers, as we should have.”

“I made them that very same promise, just this afternoon,” I told her.

“Really?” Her face started to flush, and I could tell that tears were not far off. “Oh Valya! I’m so glad! But what prompted it?”

“The tsarinoviches were worried,” I said. “About what would hap-

pen to them should Mirochka or I inherit. They were afraid they and Vyacheslav Irinovich would be killed or exiled.”

“Oh! Oh Valya! I had no idea...where do you think they got such dreadful ideas?”

“Probably their history lessons. It’s not as if it hasn’t happened before. But Mirochka and I both promised that that wouldn’t happen. I think they are worried about you, Sera,” I added after a moment. “They know something is wrong with you, even if they don’t know what.”

“Of course they do.” The threatened tears were now standing out in her eyes. “They’re not stupid, and no doubt they can see that I’ve been unwell. And Ruslan is old enough to remember...the last time. He, at least, will figure it out soon enough.”

“You will have to tell them,” I said.

“I know, but...not yet! I don’t want to tell anyone yet!”

“I know,” I said. “But it’s not as if you’ll be able to hide it forever. And many will rejoice for you, Sera.”

“You think so?”

“Of course. For you and for Zem’. In just a few short months, you and Zem’ could have an heir. By the way—how many months, do you know?”

“The healer says probably another five. Which is what,” she pulled herself together, “I wanted to speak with you about, Valya.”

“How so?”

“Let’s...” She made an uncharacteristically nervous motion towards the food laid out on the small table. “While we talk. I’m sure you’re hungry. You always are.”

“What about you?” I asked. “Have you regained your appetite yet?”

“We’ll see,” she said, making a tight motion with her head that meant she was nervous and upset about the subject of our upcoming conversation.

“If it would make you feel better not to eat, or for me not to eat in front of you...”

“No-no, it will do me good to try something, and to see you eat as well. Have some cucumber salad: it’s delightfully cool and refreshing. And here’s a little cold sauerkraut soup, too. They’ve put the dill

separately, in this dish over here, to keep it fresh and because...well, they probably know that sometimes I can't face dill when I'm feeling unwell. But there's lots, so do take some. And a nice cold bean stew. Here's some cold plum compote, or some cool kvas if you prefer. You see I ordered everything cold. And a little bread. We have both rye and wheat. I hope you don't mind that it's such plain fare. I like this kind of food, you know, even though I know most of my princesses prefer fancier dishes. But I've always liked plain fare. You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not," I said. "You know I like plain fare too. And I think it's noble of you, that you still keep the oath of Darya Krasnoslavovna to do no harm to any living thing, and that you eat as your people do. You don't have to fuss over me, Sera: whatever has been set out is fine, you know that, and I can serve myself perfectly well."

"Ah, but you see, I hardly ever get to do the serving," she said with a hint of one of her better playful smiles. Just a hint, and then it was gone. I had a bad feeling about our discussion tonight. "Indulge me, Valya," she added.

"Of course. Won't you take anything other than a piece of white bread?"

"I'll just try this, and see how it goes down first before I try anything else. I know I need to be building my strength, but..."

"I remember how it was myself. Don't worry: you have plenty of strength."

"Do I, Valya?" she asked, and looked up at me, her eyes once again full of unshed tears.

"You have all the strength you need for this," I told her, with rather more conviction than I actually felt. I couldn't help but notice the bruises under her eyes, and the way her face was both puffy and thin... *Don't think of it!* I ordered myself sharply. *She'll be able to tell what you're thinking!*

"You've delivered three healthy children already," I said instead. "That has to count for something!"

"Thank you, Valya," she said after a pause. "You're right, and thank you. But...we must face facts, and that is why I called you here tonight. We have to...we have to talk about what we will do, in the eventuality that I don't...have a lot of time left. I may...I may only have another five

months, Valya, at the most.” Her lips quivered as she said it, but she said it bravely nonetheless.

“Sera.” I took her hand. “None of us know how much time we have left. You may only have another five months, or five days, or five decades, and the same is true for me. Let us not go borrowing trouble if we don’t have to, but you are right: we should discuss our plans for the future, in the case of...various eventualities. For example, what if I step in a puddle of slops tomorrow, slip and fall on my head, and leave Mirochka without a mother? What will happen to her then?”

“I would take her as my own,” said Sera without hesitating. For a moment her whole face glowed at the thought of taking Mirochka as her daughter. I suddenly wondered if I should have offered it years ago. But could I turn Mirochka over to be raised by another woman? No, no I most certainly could not.

“My mother might have something to say about that,” I said instead.

“I’m sure she would, but you must understand, Valya: if...Mirochka became my only heir, I would have no choice but to foster her myself and prepare her for the duties she would be destined to assume. Is destined to assume, in fact. You should leave her here to be fostered with me this winter.”

“What!” I cried.

“I apologize: I hadn’t meant to break that upon you so suddenly, out of nowhere, but you know I’m right, Valya. She should spend at least one year here in Krasnograd as a child, and more as she grows to womanhood. You could stay here with her, of course; indeed, I would welcome your company at least as much as hers.”

“I couldn’t leave Stepnoye for a whole year or more,” I objected.

“Why not? Your parents are still both alive and healthy, and it is their province, not yours. Let them rule it while you and Mirochka stay here in Krasnograd, preparing for your eventual role as its ruler.”

“My parents...” I said. “Yes, Stepnoye is their province, but I am not sure I could leave it to their rule...”

“I know they are not so...effective as you, Valya, not so decisive, not so...gifted at ruling, but they are unlikely to mess things up that badly, and Stepnoye is just one province. All of Zem’ may need you, Valya,

and you will have to put that before Stepnoye, much as you may love your homeland. I know you think of yourself as of the steppe, Valya, and the steppe as your home, but this is your home too. Krasnograd, and the black earth district, and the taiga, and the mountains...all of it is your home, Valya, and all of it is your responsibility, or one day may be."

"I know," I said. "I just...let's take one thing at a time, shall we? Let's discuss this again in the fall. I haven't even been here a week yet."

"Very well: in the fall then. When you come back."

"Come back from where?" I asked. "I thought you wanted me to stay here in Krasnograd."

"Oh, I do, Valya, I do, and I think you will have to this winter, what with...one thing and another. But I have been thinking of what you told me about what is happening in the mountains. Someone must go to look into this."

"Yes?" I said, starting to feel a flicker of hope that something positive would be done about the situation.

"I will call a session of the Princess Council in two days to discuss this, Valya, and I am going to propose that we send a delegation East immediately to investigate the matter, and I am going to propose that you be the delegation's head. Ride out, with as much speed as possible, to Velikogornoye, find out what you can, decide what must be done about the situation, do it, and come back. Mirochka can stay here and begin her fostership. You've left her before, you know," she added quickly, forestalling the objections I was about to make. "The last time you were here, you left her in your mother's care for at least two months, and she was only five at the time. She will survive a few more months of your absence, and more importantly, so will you. I know you don't want to leave her, but someone must head this delegation, and that someone should be you, and you cannot take a girl of eight on this mission, surely you must see that. And you will not be gone that long."

"Why not?" I asked. "It could take all winter or more to sort something like this out, if we even manage to do it at all."

"You have five months," she told me. "Four, to be on the safe side. I want you back...you must be back before I...before I deliver. You will

have at the most five months to sort all this out. If...if this is the last deed that I do as Empress, then I want it to be a good deed, done well, and I want it finished and you back at my side at...at the crucial moment.”

“I don’t want to leave you,” I said stupidly. “I don’t want to leave you like this, at a time like this.”

“And I don’t want you to leave me, but you have done your work too well, Valya. You have convinced me that we must stop this vile trade in Zemnian children, and stop it immediately. I...I may not have any more of my own children, Valya, but all those children who have been taken—they are my children too, you know. Or you may not know now, but you may...you may find this out for yourself before the year is out. You have five months.”

“And if the Princess Council doesn’t agree?”

“The Princess Council will agree,” she said, in a tone that suggested the Princess Council would agree if it knew what was good for it, and also if it didn’t.

“Very well. I will...I don’t want to leave you or Mirochka, but you are right: it must be done. I will go.”

“I knew you would,” she said, smiling and looking a little tearful once again. “I knew I could count on you, Valya. Don’t speak of this yet to anyone, not until the Princess Council has given its official approval, but start thinking of whom you would like to bring on the delegation. I want you to leave before the week is out.”

“It shall be done,” I told her, which prompted the tears to flow from her eyes, and she embraced me and said she wished I could stay with her all through this trying time, but even though she had no true gift for it she would try to follow me on my journey with her mind, and she was sure I’d be back before we both knew it, and all would turn out well, and we would have a wonderful winter together in Krasnograd, enjoying the winter festivities and doting on her children.

“I’m sure you’re right,” I said.

Chapter Fourteen

The next day dawned even hotter than before. Only, I thought as I lay in the bright light of what really was still night, four more days until Midsummer, which was when the real heat began. Which was when I would be riding back across the steppe and into the mountains on my mission to find out who was behind the trade in Zemnian children, and, the gods willing, put a stop to it, preferably in a very permanent fashion. I tried to decide which was worse: traveling in midsummer or midwinter.

"It's so *hot* here, mama," Mirochka complained from beside me. "Why is it so *hot* here?"

"The air is damper from the river," I told her. "And all the buildings trap heat." I thought about the last time I had ridden across the steppe in midwinter. Traveling in the summer *definitely* won, although it was still not a pleasant prospect. *But it will be fall on the way back*, I told myself. *Traveling in fall is the best. You will have a good journey back.*

"What did you say, mama?" asked Mirochka. "Where are you going?"

"I didn't say anything."

"I *heard* you," she insisted. "Something about a journey. Are we going home already? I thought we were staying until fall."

"How did you hear me?" I asked.

"I don't *know*, mama, I just did. I was lying here asleep, and then I had a dream about you riding towards home and past it, and it was very cold and then very hot, and then I heard the word 'journey,' and I was awake."

"I see," I said.

"So are we going home already? I don't want to go home!"

"No, my dove," I told her. "Actually, there is something I must speak to you about. We may be staying here for a while. All winter, in fact. But I will have to go away for a bit first."

"So you *are* going on a journey!"

"It is likely," I told her. "For the Tsarina. But you will have to stay

here. You can stay with your brothers and the Empress and Vyacheslav Irinovich, and then I will come back and we will stay the winter here, in Krasnograd.”

Mirochka spent a moment considering that. “I want to go with you,” she said eventually.

“I know you do, my dove, but it is a long journey.”

“I can go on a long journey! I just *went* on a long journey!”

“I know you did. Which is why you need to stay here. You’ve learned lots of things about riding, and tracking, and fighting, and many other useful skills, but you also need to learn how to be a princess, and the best place for you to do that is here, in Krasnograd.”

“You said I still have lots to learn!”

“Oh, you do, you do, but you have plenty of time to learn all that you need to know, and the Tsarina needs me to go do this thing now, and she needs you to stay here and learn to be a princess.”

“Oh.” Mirochka spent a little while longer digesting this piece of news, breaking the silence by asking anxiously, “Who will train me when you’re gone, mama?”

“The tsarinoviches’ tutors, no doubt.”

“No, I mean, who will train me in fighting, mama? I don’t want to fall behind, but there’s no one here in Krasnograd who can do the steppe fighting, is there?”

“I’ll see if I can find someone,” I promised her. “But if not, you can train in other styles of fighting until I get back.”

“But I’ll fall behind!”

“You’ll catch up quick enough,” I told her. “And it’s always good to have new teachers and learn new tricks. Maybe you can teach *me* something when I get back.”

This idea pleased her immensely, and she stopped arguing against my leaving, and spent a while detailing what she would do when I was gone and how she would prepare for my return, before suddenly falling back asleep and sleeping until breakfast was brought in, at which point she bounced up, ate heartily, and, after giving a promise not to tell anyone that I might be leaving in a way that gave me doubts about her ability to keep it, set off for another day of fun with her new brothers.



Ivan was grim-faced and distracted during our session that morning, and I was little better. After I knocked his sword from his hand and then nearly tripped and fell over my own feet in the process, I called a halt to our training and said we should go somewhere for a drink.

“A drink, Valeriya Dariyevna?” he said in surprise at my proposal. “What kind of a drink?”

“Well, I’ll be having beer,” I told him. “But they’ll probably have wine, kvas, kumys, and kefir as well. Come on. The tavern is this way.”

“Did I displease you, Valeriya Dariyevna?” he asked, following behind me as I set off in the direction of the tavern just outside the barracks. Normally I would never go there, as its offerings, aimed at the kremlin guards, were distinguished mainly by their cheapness, not their quality, while I had the run of the kremlin kitchens, but I didn’t want to bring Ivan back to my chambers or into the kitchen and excite a lot of talk, most of it salacious, and I didn’t feel like trekking to the other side of the city either.

“No, of course not,” I assured him. “But it’s hot and we’re both distracted, so our time could be better spent by drinking than by training. We can try again later, if you like.”

“As it pleases you, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said uncertainly.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to. Come with me, that is. I just thought you looked like you could use a drink and a friendly ear.”

“Oh.” He made no response to this, but followed behind me into the tavern, and allowed me to order two beers. When his came, he looked down at it in consternation for a moment, then picked it up and took an experimental sip, which caused him to make a face.

“It’s not very good, I’m afraid,” I said. “But bad beer is better than no beer, sometimes. So what’s troubling you?”

“How can you tell...How did you know, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“You’re wearing a different shirt than the past two days, one less suited for training, which suggests that either something is up at home, or that you forgot to change this morning before coming here. You’re distracted and not trying. You look tired. And you haven’t argued with me about coming here, even though you know it’s a bad idea.”

“Oh.” He took another sip of beer, made a face again, contemplated his mug, and then took a large swallow. “My mother is arriving tomorrow,” he said. “My mother and my stepfather. I got word last night that they were almost here. They should be here by tomorrow midday.”

“And you don’t want them to be here?”

He looked like he wanted to deny it, but then shrugged and took another swallow of beer. “Would it be very wrong of me to say yes, Valeriya Dariyevna?” he asked.

“No. I can understand why you wouldn’t want them around.”

“Really, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“I know them both. Rather well, in fact.”

“Oh.” He smiled involuntarily at that, and then smoothed out his face hastily and said seriously, “Of course, Valeriya Dariyevna, I had forgotten. I’m sorry...”

“Don’t be,” I said. “It’s not your fault, and I asked you what the problem was. So why don’t you want them to be here?”

“Well, Valeriya Dariyevna...” He looked down at the table for a while.

“Anything you say is unlikely to shock me,” I said, making him look back up in surprise.

“When I was your age, I took another woman’s betrothed for a lover, got with child off of him, and was thrown over and pretty much chased out of Krasnograd over the resulting scandal,” I said with a smile. “What have you done?”

He blushed so deeply I could see it even in the half-light of the back corner where we were sitting. “Nothing...nothing like that, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said. “Nothing at all, except...”

“Meet with me,” I finished for him.

“Yes, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said, looking supremely uncomfortable.

“Your mother will not be pleased.”

“No, Valeriya Dariyevna. In fact, I am sure she will demand that I... stop training with you.”

“I’m sure she will,” I said. “Are you going to?”

“I beg your pardon, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“Are you going to stop training with me?” I asked.

“How could I...I mean, if she tells me directly to stop...”

“True,” I said. “But aside from the fact that you are a man grown now, or will be as soon as Midsummer arrives, what if the Tsarina tells you directly to keep going?”

“Why would she do that, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“Oh, she has her reasons. Let’s say she would like to see more people trained in steppe fighting. Let’s say she would like to heal the enmity between me and your family.”

“I...I see, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said, looking as if he didn’t see but was beginning to suspect that something was up. He drank some more beer and stared at the table for a while.

“My mother will be arranging my marriage soon, I’m sure of it,” he said suddenly, blushing yet again. “Probably as soon as she arrives. She told me so in her letter. I’m to marry that Easterner, not the princess’s daughter I was promised.”

“And you’re not pleased about that?”

“I...I don’t know the woman she has in mind, Valeriya Dariyevna. Not at all. I mean, I’ve never met her. Neither has my mother, as far as I know. It was one thing when it was someone I’d met before, but a complete stranger...and it’s so soon...and...well, when I look at my stepfather...what if,” he looked up at me, his eyes wide and anxious, “I end up like him, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“That won’t happen,” I said.

“Why not, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“Because I know him, and you’re not like him. You’re not going to end up like him.”

“Oh.” He looked down at the table some more, and then, prompted by curiosity, blurted out, “How am I not like him, Valeriya Dariyevna? If you don’t mind me asking,” he added hastily. “I just...even though I’ve known him for years, he’s always been a bit of a mystery to me.”

“You’re brave,” I said. He snorted in laughter before he could stop himself, and then looked very contrite.

“You’re hot-blooded,” I went on. “You like to act. He likes to think, and he lets his thoughts rule him.”

“How do you...What makes you think I’m,” he blushed so painfully my face ached in sympathy, “hot-blooded?”

“Other than the blush currently covering your face?” I asked, and then, seeing his hurt expression, regretted my jest. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make fun of you. But in answer to your question, you got mad when I beat you. And instead of running off to cry, you decided to stay and try to beat me in turn. And you’re here now, aren’t you?”

“Yes, although...forgive me, Valeriya Dariyevna, but surely he must have...come to visit you too, and more than I have.”

“True enough,” I agreed. “But it was different. He was different. He was a very serious, studious boy, born to be a scholar, not a fighter, and when he met me...well, he said he didn’t know what he was doing, or what had happened to him, and that was obviously true. It was like he went mad for a little while. But then he got over it.”

“Oh.”

“It was like we were discovering whole new worlds in each other. I was a wild fighter, a steppe princess, and he lived in his head. And whenever we were together...it was intoxicating, like strong drink. Only now I don’t know how much of that was we ourselves, and how much was our situation. Now I wonder how much was because he thought I was exotic, and I thought I could win.”

“Win, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“I knew he was betrothed to...to another woman, and not only did I not care, I thought I could take him away from her. I was so sure of it...pretty much everything I’d ever done had been a struggle, but I’d always won that struggle in the end, I’d always been victorious in everything, and I was the heir to Stepnoye and all of Zem’ as well. How could I lose? And he was mad for me, so mad for me that he even...well. I was sure I would win, win him away from her, until the day he told me she had agreed to take him back, and he had agreed to go.

“At first I couldn’t believe it. Actually, the whole time the scandal was raging, and when Sera—when the Empress was trying to explain to me why it would be better for everyone if I just went back to the steppe for a little while, and the other princesses were spitting in my face, and the whole long ride back to the steppe, and the long months when I was carrying Mirochka...I just couldn’t believe I had lost. Maybe I never have been able to believe it.” I stopped. I had never said any of that to anyone, not even my mother, not even Sera. I was surprised

at how easily it had come out with him. Like a long-infected splinter finally coming out in a gush of pus. Probably I didn't need to share that image with him. It wasn't exactly conducive to courting. But I felt better now, much as I would after having a nasty splinter removed. Everything was still hollow and burnt out inside, but it had survived that confession without crashing down around me, and it no longer felt as if it might collapse at any moment. Perhaps one day the grass and flowers would come rising through the ashes, and then one day later something could be built there in its place.

"I'm sorry, Valeriya Dariyevna," he said after a pause.

"So am I, but it's not your fault, and there's nothing either one of us can do about it," I said. "So who's this woman your mother has in mind for you?"

"Oh..." He had been looking at me with intent sympathy, but now he looked away. "Some Easterner."

"So you said. From the mountains? There are some good families out there, although it will be far away from home for you."

"No." He stopped for a moment, and then blurted out, "She's not Zemnian at all."

"Not Zemnian?" I asked. "Then who is she?"

"I believe," he said, speaking slowly and reluctantly, "I believe that she is...well, apparently she is part Zemnian, or her father is Zemnian anyway, but her mother...I believe that her mother is from the Hordes. A Khan's sister, or so my mother says. She is...my mother says she is a trader, a great trader, and richer and more powerful than any Zemnian princess, or at least any Zemnian princess who would be willing to take me into her family."

"Is that so," I said.

"I know you told me I should consider myself a prince, a real prince, Valeriya Dariyevna, but in some things I can't," he said defensively. "The circumstances of my birth..."

"To Princess Velikokrasnova," I said. "I'm not sure what other birthright you need."

"Yes, but my father..."

"Was a peasant?" I suggested. "There's no shame in that. Lots of noblewomen take common-born lovers to get a child and bring in a

little fresh blood. My family has a long history of it on both sides.”

“I don’t know, Valeriya Dariyevna. And...” he looked away for a while, and then, taking a deep breath, turned back to me and finished in a rush, “neither does my mother.”

I raised my brows. “The father of her only child is not normally the kind of thing that slips a person’s mind,” I said. “I speak from experience.”

“Yes, but...” He gave me a look of artless pleading that would have softened a much harder heart than mine. I could even feel something trying to stir to life in the ashes. “Are we speaking in confidence, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“Of”—I had to cough and clear my throat—“course,” I said.

“She doesn’t like to talk of it. I don’t know how many people she’s told, but not many, I think. And I don’t even know if what she told me was the truth. But what she said, after I plagued her and plagued her about it a few years back, was that she was at a feast, a midwinter celebration.”

“Ah,” I said. “I believe I am familiar with these kinds of celebrations.”

“Really, Valeriya Dariyevna?” He looked startled at that, and also a little frightened, as if it had never occurred to him that someone he knew might participate in something that, for him, was monumental and terrifying. Then—I could tell—he realized how naïve that made him appear, and he added, somewhat sheepishly, “My mother would never hold such celebrations in her household, or allow me to go to them.”

“I can understand that. And you haven’t missed much, anyway.”

“Oh. Well, what she told me was that she was overwintering in Krasnograd, and she went to a midwinter celebration at some princess’s house—she wouldn’t tell me which one—and there was...revelry, which included masks, and vodka, and...and...”

“I get the picture,” I said when it became apparent he was unable to continue. “Revelry, masks, vodka...and the next day she didn’t remember what had happened, but a couple of months later it was obvious that you were on the way. She wouldn’t be the first to have that happen. I still don’t see what’s shameful about it. I know more than

one woman who's gotten a good child that way."

"Well, you see, Valeriya Dariyevna..." he lowered his voice and leaned closer to me, "not only is she not sure whether he was a commoner or a nobleman, but there was...there was a delegation of Westerners in Krasnograd that winter, and some were at that feast."

"Ah."

"So she thinks...she thinks it is possible that my father was not Zemnian at all, but a Westerner, and maybe not even a nobly born one. He could have been one of the guards serving the delegation."

"I see." I hoped I had been able to suppress the shudder of distaste that had almost gone through me at that revelation. Scratch a steppe-lander, they said, and they'll bleed Tribal blood from the Hordes. Interbreeding with our foes from the East had always been a common occurrence, and I bore the proof of that on my own cheekbones. But a Westerner...the Hordes were foreigners, and our long-standing enemies, but they were also kin, of a sort. Westerners were another thing entirely.

"From Seumi?" I asked hopefully. Seumi was the Western land closest to us. They were practically kin too, at least with the coastal families.

"You mean my father?"

I nodded.

"I don't think they send delegations, do they?"

"Not normally," I agreed. "They don't have the money." The Seumi mainly hunted and fished and farmed their own land, and left Zem' alone as much as possible. It was generally understood that Zem' could roll across Seumi and claim it as our own any time we wanted, but what would be the point? They were happy to sell us whatever they had that was worth selling at fair prices, and as it was they guarded our North-Western border without any effort on our part.

"So was he Rutsi, then?" I asked. "Or Tanskan?" The Rutsi and the Tanskans were from farther West than Seumi, holding little provinces and clans scattered up and down much of our Western border. They were fierce warriors and shrewd traders, yes, but ever since the steppe army had driven them back from Krasnograd and smashed all their pretensions to empire into a thousand shattered pieces, they were

even more disorganized and fragmented than the Hordes. Some of the stronger clans did send us delegations from time to time, though.

Ivan shrugged, looking supremely uncomfortable. “He must have been, don’t you think? Rutsi or Tanskan. Unless it was someone from the Middle Sea...”

I looked him over as carefully as possible in the dim tavern light. Perhaps there were some Western features to his face, but that was the case with many people from the black earth district, who had rounder eyes and less prominent cheekbones—or maybe it was just that the black earth people had less Tribal blood in them, unlike those of us from farther East. Ivan’s face was square and even, his eyes were light brown or maybe hazel, his hair was thick and an unremarkable Zemnian light brown, and his skin was no paler or darker than any other black earth boy’s. There was nothing immediately striking about any one feature, but the overall impression was one of pleasing harmony combined with open-hearted honesty. A person could look on such a face for a long time without tiring of it, but also without finding any sign of foreignness. Certainly there was nothing there of the Middle Sea. I simply couldn’t tell if what Princess Velikokrasnova feared were true.

“So you see, Valeriya Dariyevna, she just can’t offer me on the marriage market...”

“Do you want to marry this Easterner?” I interrupted him.

“No, but I don’t know what else I can do, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“What if you had another offer?”

“Another offer, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“What if someone else offered you a match, a good match? What would you do then?”

“I suppose it would depend on who offered it, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said, still sounding doubtful at the very possibility. “But what makes you think that that would happen?”

“I have my sources. So what would you do?”

“I suppose I would consider the offer, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said, not sounding overly thrilled about it.

“Do you not want to get married at all, then?” I asked.

“I don’t want to be sold off to some stranger in order to seal an alli-

ance that will only make my mother richer,” he snapped out, and then looked ashamed.

“Understandable,” I said. “But what do you want?”

“What do I want, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“Yes, what do *you* want? If you could choose to do anything.”

“I...I don’t know, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“Would you want to be a scholar? Or a brother in a sanctuary?”

“Oh no, certainly not!”

“A guard?”

“Maybe...” He thought about it for a moment. “It would depend. I think...I think...” he looked away from me, as if ashamed of admitting to such a deep desire, “I think I want adventure, Valeriya Dariyevna. I want to...to be a hero.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “Do you think your Eastern bride will give it to you?”

“I suppose...I would have to go East, which might be interesting... but I think I would just be yet another piece of goods in her mother’s caravan. I don’t think that’s the adventure I want, and I think there’d be little chance of heroism.”

“Well, maybe if you get another offer, you can arrange for something more pleasant to come of it,” I said.

“Why are you so sure there will be another offer?” he demanded, the temper that I knew was there flashing out for a moment, and then, softening his tone, added, “Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“Because,” I said, “I’m supposed to make it.”

Chapter Fifteen

He stared at me for a while in bewilderment. Then he suddenly understood the meaning behind my words, and blushed so deeply I thought his hair might turn red. I wondered how much of his body his blushes covered. Well, if things turned out the way Sera wanted, one day soon I would find out.

“Don’t look so surprised,” I said. “Did you think you wouldn’t be courted as soon as you came to Krasnograd? Despite what your mother may think, you’re a good match.”

“But...” he said, and trailed off.

“She must be an idiot. You’re worth more than some Eastern trader’s daughter, no matter how rich she is. No one cares if your father might have been some low-born Westerner. You’re Princess Velikokrasnova’s only child! And you have other good points as well.”

“Thank you, Valeriya Dariyevna, but...” The words came out as a painful croak, and soon died away completely.

“Come now,” I said. “Buck up. You’re a handsome man of marriageable age and noble birth. You’re certain to get attention, and probably offers. So let’s talk about this one.”

He swallowed. His face firmed. I could see the man that would one day soon emerge from what were still a boy’s features. “Why, Valeriya Dariyevna?” he asked bluntly.

“Why what?” I returned, as playfully as Sera herself.

“Why would you make me an offer?” he demanded. “After everything that has gone between our families...do you think this is a way to win back,” he made a face, “*him*?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t think it would work, and even if it did, I don’t think I’d want it to. I don’t want *him* back anymore, or anyway, I don’t think it would be a good idea. This has nothing to do with *him*.”

“You hardly know me, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he pointed out.

“True,” I agreed. “I’m afraid that this has little to do with your personal qualities, although they were a part of it. The Empress wishes me to make a match, an alliance that will help her and our family. You

happen to be a good alliance, and she thought that...well, it's not very flattering to me, but she thought that there were few out there whom I would not set aside at the first opportunity, and you were one of those few."

"Why?" he asked.

"Well, I am hardly a model of patience..."

"No, I mean, why are you telling me this, Valeriya Dariyevna? Do you expect me just to...agree on the spot?" His voice was firm, and I was pleased to note the displeased expression on his face as he voiced that thought.

"I guess I thought you should know," I said. "Impulsiveness is another one of my flaws, even worse than impatience. And no, I don't expect you to agree on the spot. I just...didn't like you being in the dark about this, and I thought you might like the chance to think it over. Weigh your options."

"So you're saying I'm free to choose, is that it, Valeriya Dariyevna?"

"No," I told him soberly. "Neither of us is. You have to understand, Vanya: I do as the Empress commands. And right now she has commanded me to make a marriage alliance. If she had commanded me to make it with some, some stringy old goat who preferred the company of men, then that's whom I would marry, but for a multitude of reasons, her choice has fallen on you. By the way, you don't prefer the company of men, do you?"

He stared at me as if I'd grown a second head.

"You probably don't know, do you? You've never tried?"

He continued to stare at me, looking more and more shocked, and also more and more stubbornly determined not to reveal something like that about himself, before finally giving his head a tiny shake.

"Well, anyway. They say it's best to make sure of that sort of thing *before* you get married, rather than afterwards, so if you wanted to... experiment, I wouldn't hold it against you and neither would any sensible bride."

At this statement Ivan gave me a look as if one of us had taken leave of our senses, although he wasn't sure which one of us it was. And now that I thought of the kind of cruelty that often passed between men in the name of, or in lieu of, affection, I realized that the crazy person was

probably me, and that I probably *would* mind very much if he decided to experiment in that direction. An unspoilt virgin was still the best choice, when you considered the alternatives. But it was too late to take it back, so I didn't. Instead, I decided to leave off that line of conversation and return to the possibility of a match between him and a woman; that is, me. "But all that is neither here nor there," I said. "The Tsarina's choice has fallen on you, Ivan Marinovich, and so I must do everything I can to bring this match about. And you...the Tsarina's word weighs a little less heavily for you than it does for me, but it still weighs heavily. And your mother's word weighs more heavily still. Unless you get up from this table and flee to a sanctuary this instant, I can guarantee, my head for beheading, you'll end up married before the year is out. So neither of us is free, Ivan Marinovich, but I thought you should know that you have more choices than one."

"And if I say no?" he asked.

"To my offer?"

"Yes. What if I say no?"

"If you say no today, that still won't stop me," I said. "I'll have to try again."

"Because of the Empress, or because you like to win?"

"Because of both," I said. "Among other reasons. And also..." I held his gaze firmly in my own, "because I *want* to." I paused to let that sink in. He had stopped looking stubborn and gone back to looking flustered, but also rather flattered. "So telling me no today isn't going to make me quit this," I continued. "But..." I released his gaze from mine and let us both look back down at the table, "I let *him* go, in the end. When he told me he wouldn't come with me, I let him go. I would do the same with you."

"That's hardly comforting."

"It might be more comfort than your Eastern bride can offer. If you really, really don't want this match, then I won't force it upon you, and I won't let the Empress force it upon you either. But I'm not just going to drop it before I've even begun."

"I see," he said slowly. He stared at the table for a while in silence.

"Vanya," I said, after I'd had enough of it. He looked up.

"It's not the end of the world. I haven't even officially made the

offer yet. I just wanted you to know. You can think about it. But if you do accept...if you do accept, you'll be a prince, a real prince, of a great province, and maybe even...you know I am the Tsarina's heir?"

"Yes," he said in a small voice.

"Well, it could happen, although I dearly hope it doesn't, but it could happen that I could end up on the Wooden Throne, and then you would be my consort. But even if it didn't, and I pray to the gods every day that it doesn't, you would still be a prince of Stepnoye, and your children would inherit the province. You would never want for anything, your entire life."

He gave me a look of distaste. "Are you seeking to buy me, Valeriya Dariyevna?"

"No. I'll leave that to your mother's merchant bride. But you should know that you would not have to suffer for this alliance. Both the Tsarina and I would see to that. And you could live wherever you want. If you wanted to live in Krasnograd, you could, or if you wanted to live with my family on the steppe, you could do that too."

He gave me a puzzled look. "Why would I want to do that, Valeriya Dariyevna?"

"Oh, I don't know. Some men...it is possible for a man to be settled too close to his mother, after he is married. Some men prefer to make their households elsewhere, when they have the chance."

"But then I would just be...a hanger-on in your parents' house, rather than my own!"

"No," I said. "If you married me, Ivan Marinovich, you would no longer be a hanger-on, Princess Velikokrasnova's ill-advised love-child. You would be Prince Stepnoy, and the head of the Stepnoye household in your own right."

"I believe your father is Prince Stepnoy, Valeriya Dariyevna, and would be the head of the household."

I grinned again at this show of spirit. "My father may be the current Prince Stepnoy, but *I* rule the steppe, as everyone knows. And my husband would be at my side. Think on it, Ivan Marinovich. As I said, you are likely to get other offers. But you are unlikely to get any other offers that would allow you this much freedom. On the steppe we go with the wind, Ivan Marinovich, the men as well as the women,

and rule with a light hand. No one is kept cloistered up in towers and bowers and barracks. You would be a ruler in your own right, Ivan Marinovich, but the ruler of a free people who would ask little of you in return other than that you defend their freedom.”

Something flared in his eyes then, and I knew that, although he was likely to resist for a good while longer, I might very well have just won his hand. It gave me a queer feeling. I suspected it was excitement. By the look in his eyes, the same queer feeling was fluttering in his belly, coursing through his veins, but he knew even less what to do with it than I did.

He stood up. “May I go, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“Of course,” I said, standing up as well. “Are you very angry, then, Ivan Marinovich?”

He shook his head, but as if to clear it, not to deny my words. “I...I don’t know, Valeriya Dariyevna. I honestly don’t know what to think. I want...I have to think on this.”

“Then think on it,” I said. “And if you have questions, ask them.”

“I don’t have any questions.”

“Well, you might by tomorrow,” I said. “Meet me again tomorrow morning, and you can ask them then.”

“You expect me...you expect me just to come and train with you, as if nothing has happened?”

“Sure,” I said. “No point in losing a good training partner. And you might have questions. And you might want to get to know me better.”

He looked startled at this thought, but after a moment said that he would come, unless his mother arrived early and prevented it. I said I would be waiting for him, and then I watched him walk out of the tavern and leave. I thought he was walking differently than when he had come in, as if the mere fact of my proposal had made him more of a man than he had been before. Once he was out of sight, I left a few coins on the table as a reward for the serving girl who had so assiduously kept herself and everyone else away from us, and left.



When I returned to my chambers I found a serving girl waiting for me with word that the Empress wished to speak with me, which saved me the trouble of requesting an audience myself, so as soon as I had

washed off a bit and changed into a clean shirt, I set off in the direction of Sera's chambers. I found her pacing her front room, looking much better than she had since I had arrived.

"The Princess Council is tomorrow," she said. "We must prepare. Where have you been?"

"With Ivan Marinovich."

She stopped pacing and raised an eyebrow. "Oh? And have you made any progress there?"

"Maybe. And I have three things to tell you."

"Well, spit it out then." She made an impatient motion with her hand. "But quickly. We need to decide what we're going to do about the Princess Council."

"Very well," I said. "The first is that Ivan Marinovich knows what we're up to." Her face darkened at that, so I proceeded hastily before she could express her displeasure. "The second is that I think his mother is up to something—something to do with the slave trade, perhaps." Her face darkened even further, so I pressed on. "And the third is that I think Mirochka might be gifted."

At that her face cleared, although I could tell that she would return to the first two items in short order. "Gifted?" she asked. "What makes you think that? Has she ever shown any signs before?"

"No. Not that I had noticed. But this morning she had a dream about what I had been thinking. I had been thinking about my upcoming journey while she slept, and she suddenly woke up and asked me about my journey, and told me several things she had seen in her dream that matched what I had been thinking about. I can't believe it was just coincidence."

"I see," said Sera after a moment. She thought for a bit more. "It doesn't sound exactly like any manifestation of our family's gifts that I've heard of before."

"I know. But when they show themselves, they do so differently for each person. Some could foresee, and some could farsee, and some could see into the hearts of women, but as I understand it, it was different for each one. This seems close enough, does it not?"

"I suppose," she said. "Although just one instance...we shall have to see if it happens again to be sure."

“I suppose none of the boys have shown any signs?”

She shook her head. “No, unfortunately not, although that’s not surprising—it hardly ever shows itself in the male line. I keep hoping, though...My mother never showed any signs of being gifted, and my own gift is so weak it hardly even deserves the name, which I always found so strange. You would think that direct descendents of Krasnoslava and Darya Krasnoslavovna would be sure to have at least some gift...But the only person who has ever shown any traces of it is you.”

“Not this again!”

She picked a scroll off the small table by the stove. “What can you tell me about the person who wrote this scroll?”

I looked it over. “Nobility from the coast. I can’t remember her name right now, but probably Princess Primorskaya’s third-sister once removed, the one who’s out of favor with her family right now. Writing to you in haste in response to your request for information, but she can’t tell you much, and what she did tell you is puzzling, not useful.”

Sera took it back from me and looked it over too. “How did you know? There’s not even anything about the Primorskaya family on the seal. And as for the rest...”

“The seal was made at a waystation somewhere along the Breathing Sea. All the coastal waystations use that symbol of a ship for their seals; I’ve seen it before. But the directions on the outside just say ‘To the Empress,’ and are written in the hand of someone who writes a lot, but is not a scribe. An actual waystation mistress would most likely write with a coarse hand, if she wrote at all, and for something like this she’d probably hire a scribe. So someone who is trained in writing, who writes frequently, and who directs her own letters. A noblewoman, then, but one without scribes and serving women taking care of this kind of thing for her. A commoner or a scribe would also give you a much longer title. Only a family member or one of your closest councilors would address you so briefly, but it seems unlikely that a close councilor would be sending you letters from a seaside waystation. Princess Primorskaya’s third-sister once removed, however, is family and was even fostered here for a time. She fell out of favor with her close kin when she asked to be allowed to remain here in Krasnograd and serve you rather than return home and make an arranged

match. But then, if I remember correctly, she *did* return home, but she didn't make the arranged match, nor has she been living with the Princess. So I have to assume that she is serving you in some way up there, probably gathering information.

"And here she has sent you information, but the scroll is slender, so it can't be much. The paper is the same paper you have there on your desk, so my guess is that this is part of the scroll you sent her first—she's just reusing the paper from your original message. Judging by the staining and the wear, as well as the waystation seal, the scroll was sent by regular caravan, not special courier. Someone like our third-sister wouldn't have easy access to an Imperial messenger, so if it were really urgent, she'd bring the message herself, but she didn't. So it can't be a matter of life or death, or at least neither of you thinks so. But it is something that's weighing on your mind, because you have it sitting out here and it was the first thing you reached for when you wanted to test me. You don't know what to think of it, and you're hoping I'll shed some light on it somehow."

Sera stared at me in silence for a little while. "And you claim not to be gifted," she said eventually.

"That's not a gift, that's just observation."

"I believe Krasnoslava Tsarina said the same thing about her gift."

"It doesn't *feel* like a gift," I argued. "It doesn't *feel* like anything magical. It just feels like...I'm seeing what's there."

"I believe that is the essence of our family's gift," Sera told me, quirking her mouth. "The mirror that reflects only reality. I understand why you think there is nothing magical about this, but to *me* it looks awfully like a gift from the gods, not just the sharp eyes of a mortal woman. You *could* have guessed any number of things from those signs that you observed, but you didn't. You guessed the truth. *That* is the part that is a gift. It is uncannily close to what Darya Krasnoslavovna could do."

"But..." I began. She held up her hand to stop me. "It is a gift, or close enough," she said. "Does it even matter whether it is magic or not? Let us continue to observe your Mirochka, and if she shows more signs of being gifted, let me know. If necessary, we can arrange for a sorceress and a priestess to tutor her in magic and the will of the gods."

In fact, she should probably be schooled in those things in any case.” She stopped and looked down for a moment at her belly. “I wonder...” she said softly.

“We will find out soon enough,” I cut in before she could develop that thought any further. At the sight of her daydreaming over the possibility of bringing forth a gifted daughter, my heart had given a terrible squeeze. I told myself that it didn’t mean anything other than it was bad luck to speculate about things like that, especially this early.

“Yes, of course,” she said, looking back at me. “Well, I am glad that Mirochka may be manifesting signs of our family’s gifts, and we will just have to see if they continue to develop. But back to other things. How does Ivan Marinovich know of our plans? Did he guess?”

“No,” I admitted. “I told him.”

“You *told* him?”

“It seemed like the right thing to do at the time.”

“It always seems like the right thing to do at the time to you, Valya! Will you ever start thinking before you act?!”

“Probably not. And it seemed like the right thing to do at the time because it *was* the right thing to do at the time. His mother will be arriving tomorrow, determined to marry him off to some Eastern woman, some non-Zemnian from beyond the mountains. He does not look with favor upon the match, but he’ll go through with it for his mother’s sake unless we move fast to prevent it. I wanted to make sure he knew there were other options, and to get him to start thinking along the lines of accepting our proposal. He will need time to think it over.”

“Why will he need time? He wouldn’t need time if you managed to turn his head properly!”

“I don’t think his head will be that easily turned. He’s incredibly innocent, and also dutiful, and stubborn as well. The three combined make a bad combination for seduction. Besides, he thinks he’s a bad match and the only offer he’ll get is the one his mother has arranged for him.”

“Whyever would he think he’s a bad match?”

“Probably because his mother and his stepfather have done their best to convince him that he’s a poor marriage prospect and not a real prince,” I said, my lip curling in involuntary distaste.

“Why would they do that!”

I shrugged. “Perhaps to make him more malleable to their will? Or perhaps because they are arrogant and fearful? Or perhaps both? I’m afraid it is not for the likes of us to understand the workings of their minds, Sera. But whatever their reasons, Ivan Marinovich has no thoughts of courtship, is heading into this alliance with glum resignation, and does not consider himself a real prince. But if we act fast, I believe we stand a good chance of winning him over.”

“If *you* act fast, you mean.”

“Yes,” I said. “If I act fast. So I did. He’s unsure of me, Sera, but I think he finds me fascinating, and he wants to break free from his mother’s grip, even if he doesn’t know it yet. So there is a good chance that your plan will succeed.”

“And what about you, Valya? Do you want it to succeed? Is he an acceptable choice for a husband? Or should we find you another one?”

“No,” I said. “He will do just fine.”

Sera smiled a knowing smile. “I believe you are *taken* with him, Valya.”

I shrugged again. “Possibly.”

“He is quite handsome, isn’t he? In a very wholesome, boyish way.”

“Perhaps, but that’s not why...” I began, and stopped as Sera’s eyes lit up. “No?” she said. “Then what is why, if I may ask?”

“He blushes so easily,” I said, blushing a little myself at the memory. “And...he seems so quiet and biddable on the surface, but you can tell, there’s a temper there underneath it all, just waiting to burst free.”

“I see,” said Sera, grinning. “Hidden fire, just waiting to be tamed or unleashed or whatever, and all that sort of thing, is it?”

“I suppose,” I said reluctantly.

Sera grinned even more broadly. “Why am I not surprised that you find it irresistible, Valya? You’ve always gone from one flame to the next, ever since, well...anyway, I *knew* this would be too much of a challenge for you to pass up. Well, I’ll leave how to proceed to your best judgment, but if you need, say, the word of the Empress that this is her express desire, let me know.”

“I will,” I told her. “But let’s see if we can do it without that just yet, shall we? I think it would go much more smoothly if it appeared to be

his genuine desire—if it actually *were* his genuine desire—rather than a command from the Tsarina being forced down his family’s throat.”

“Genuine desire, is that what you’re looking for, then?” said Sera with a flick of her eyebrows, but on seeing the expression that crossed my face, she backtracked and said, “Of course you’re right, Valya, and I shouldn’t make fun at your expense, especially when you’re doing what I asked you to. I’m sorry; it’s just that I’m feeling much better today and it’s making me act silly. Carry on as you think best, and if you need anything, ask immediately. But what was the third thing? About Princess Velikokrasnova’s trading partner?”

“Ivan Marinovich said that the Eastern woman his mother wants him to marry is the daughter of a Zemnian man—and a trader from the Hordes. According to him, his mother says she is richer and more powerful than any princess in Zem’, or at least any that will take him.” I paused for a moment to let both of us wrinkle our noses at that thought. “Can you think of anyone who would fit that description?” I asked when we had brought our distaste back under control. “I can’t, but I don’t deal directly with many traders.”

“Neither do I, but I know who some of the most important traders from the East are, and I can’t think of any with a Zemnian husband and a half-breed daughter of marriageable age,” said Sera. “But that doesn’t mean she doesn’t exist. Of course, Princess Velikokrasnova could have exaggerated her importance to Ivan Marinovich, or he could have exaggerated her importance to you.”

“True enough. But doesn’t it strike you as suspicious?”

“How so?” asked Sera.

“That Princess Velikokrasnova would want to marry her only son off to a ‘half-breed girl,’ as you called her, the daughter of an Eastern trader? And don’t you think there has been a lot of...something... surrounding trade with the East? Trade is disrupted this summer, the black earth princesses are marrying off their children into trading families, we are about to hold a session of the Princess Council to discuss the slave trade in Zemnian children...it wouldn’t surprise me at all if that message from your informant on the coast was about something strange with the trade situation, maybe something odd from the North or from Seumi.”

Sera's mouth rounded open in surprise. "You read it," she said. "You read the scroll."

"What? No, of course not. Don't be ridiculous. How could I have done that? I've been standing right here in front of you the whole time. It was just a lucky guess. But it proves my point: something is up with trade."

"I am a fool," she said. "Here I've been lamenting the lack of gifts in our family all these years, worrying that they might be dying out—and my own sister's gifts have been right under my very nose! We are fools, Valya, fools!"

"Well, yes, but not because of that. I told you: I don't think it's a gift."

"Our foremothers said the same thing. They claimed they were just seeing the world naturally, as it was meant to be seen, and that anyone could do it. But the fact remains that no one could do it but them. Face it, Valya: you're gifted."

"Now you've made me nervous," I complained. "Every time I go to think about something, I'll be wondering if I'm really seeing it properly, or if I'm manifesting some special talent."

"Valya! This is serious! We should announce it to the Princess Council tomorrow."

"Because *that* will go down so well," I said. "*That* will make the princesses love me for sure."

"It will at least give you a little more legitimacy in their eyes!"

"Sera, Miroslava Praskovyevna herself could appear before them and declare me her chosen heir, and they would still argue and find fault. They're princesses. It's what they do."

"They should be told," said Sera stubbornly. "They should know that at least one Zerkalitsa of this generation has been gifted."

"Perhaps, but if we tell them tomorrow, when we're already trying to convince them to go along with this investigation into the slave trade, which is not going to be popular, I doubt they'll believe us. After all, *I* don't believe us, and it's my gift we're talking about. We should... break it to them gently."

"How, Valya? How are we going to break it to them gently?"

"I don't know! We should...allow the gift to manifest itself in some

obvious way. So that even I am convinced.”

“You just don’t want to believe in your birthright, Valya! You never have!” Sera snapped her mouth shut, her cheeks flushed, and looked almost as surprised as I was at her outburst.

“That’s not true,” I said, as mildly as I was capable of doing, which admittedly was not very mildly. “If it were true, I wouldn’t be here.”

“I’m sorry, Valya,” she said after a pause. “I didn’t mean to shout at you like that. But it *is* true. You’ve always taken more pride on the steppe side of the family than in ours. For some reason you’ve always aligned yourself more closely with your father’s line than with your mother’s.”

“That’s not true. Krasnoslava Tsarina was also of steppe descent.”

“Through the male line. I don’t know why you feel this way, Valya, why you keep turning away from your mother’s line, but you do. You’ve chosen to spend as much of your life as you can far away from Krasnograd and from me, hidden on the steppe, pretending to be a simple steppe warrior and taking pride in, in your tracking skills and your prowess at arms. I would even be glad of it—so many in your position would be seeking to take my throne away from me at every opportunity—but soon you, you, you may have to face up to your birth and take up your birthright, Valya, and I want you to be ready. You must be ready. You must not crumple and fall under this burden, or run away from it and leave it in clumsier hands, guided by weaker minds. Zem’ may need you, Valya, and when it does, you must be ready to answer its call.”

There was a silence in the room. I could hear a fly droning against the window, and maids moving around down the corridor. Sera stared at me, her cheeks still flushed and her chest heaving.

“I know,” I said. “But you see, I always...I never wanted to give even the slightest appearance that I was trying to get in your way, claim for myself what was rightfully yours. I was content to be a Stepnaya, and I didn’t want to give anyone any ideas about wanting anything more. I am sorry if you thought I would fail you. If the call comes, I will be ready. But...”

“Good.” She cut me off. “Because like it or not, Valya, you are a direct descendent of Miroslava Praskovyevna through the female

line, you bear her gifts, *and* you have already borne a daughter.” She smiled. “Who would have thought that the scandal that rocked Krasnograd nine years ago would turn out, perhaps, to be its salvation? I was so angry with you back then, Valya, so angry with you for being thoughtless and impulsive and selfish like you always are, or rather like I always thought you to be, for ruining a good man’s reputation and turning the black earth princesses against us, but it turns out you were acting for the good all along.”

“No I wasn’t,” I said. “I was being thoughtless and impulsive and selfish, ruining a good man’s reputation and turning the black earth princesses against us because I could, because I thought I would *win* and that it would make me happy, but that wasn’t so. Any good that came of it was just dumb luck.”

“Like the dumb luck that allowed you to guess the provenance and contents of that scroll, you mean? No, Valya, you were right when you told me to trust you. I don’t know what it is you see, but what looks like foolishness to others always seems to turn out well for you. It must be another manifestation of your gift.” A thoughtful expression crossed her face.

“*Don’t* try and use that argument to convince the princesses,” I said. “Telling them that my...indiscretion was a manifestation of our family’s gifts will probably just drive them straight to treason.”

“I suppose you’re right,” she admitted. “But you have to admit, it’s an enticing thought, isn’t it?”

“Their treason?”

“*No*, Valya, that what seemed like a colossal error in judgment was actually...you discerning the will of the gods and working towards the greater good of Zem’.”

“I don’t care whether it was a colossal error in judgment or the will of the gods. It got me Mirochka. It was worth it just for that. Even if it turns out that it wasn’t actually for the greater good of Zem’, I don’t care. Mirochka is worth everything to me.”

“I know, Valya,” she said soberly. “But you see, right now she’s worth everything to *me*, too, and to the rest of Zem’. And you can’t forget that, no matter how much you might wish to.”

“I know. But...perhaps it won’t come to that. Perhaps it won’t mat-

ter at all whether she or I are gifted, or that we're both direct descendants of Miroslava Praskovyevna through the female line. Perhaps things will take a different turn. Perhaps what *I* thought was a colossal error in judgment on your part will turn out to be the will of the gods, working for the greater good of Zem'."

"Why thank you, Valya," she said with a rueful smile. "We can only hope, can't we?"

"Yes, we can," I said, with an answering smile. "But in the meantime we have the Princess Council and this situation with our traders going on. What exactly was in the scroll?"

"You're not going to guess?" she asked, her smile changing from rueful to arch.

"I'd rather skip that step and hear it straight from you," I said. "I take it it's something that confirms my suspicions?"

"Yes...although I'm not really sure what your suspicions are."

"Neither am I. Other than that something is up. So what is going on along the coast?"

She shrugged uneasily. "I don't know exactly, and neither does Yevgeniya Arinovna—that's Princess Primorskaya's third-sister, who, as you guess, has been spending her time lurking in various taverns and waystations and reporting back to me what she hears. Our relationship with the Primorskiye and the Pristanogradskiy is...contentious right now, even though they're our close kin."

"Close kin can be funny like that sometimes," I said.

"Well...yes." Her smile changed back to rueful. "So I have been using Yevgeniya Arinovna to keep informed on what is actually going on in the coastal provinces, since I know better than to trust what Princess Primorskaya and Princess Pristanogradskaya tell me. According to Princess Primorskaya, trade from the black earth district and from the East has dried up or is being ruthlessly strangled by the other princesses' greed, and according to Princess Pristanogradskaya, not only is trade from the West poor as well, but raiders from Seumi have been sailing across the Breathing Sea and stealing our goods, our flocks, and even our people. When she last wrote me, it was to seek permission to launch counter-raids against them."

"But?" I prompted.

“But I wrote to Yevgeniya Arinovna to ask what she knew of the situation, and she replied—the scroll you just saw—that while yes, little is coming from the black earth district and from the East, she has heard nothing of any raids against our people by the Seumi, that in fact the taverns and waystations of Pristanogradskoye and Primorskoye are filled with Seumi traders who have been denied permission to trade there or who have had their goods seized, and that there are rumors rising that children from Seumi villages have started to disappear.”

“And?” I asked.

“And rumor has it—only the faintest whisper, but still some are whispering—that the people seizing those children are Zemnian.”



The fly droned. And droned. I knew I should say something. I should be shouting out angry denials or something. But instead I was silent.

“Don’t look so shocked, Valya,” Sera said eventually. “You already heard how Zemnians were selling their own children, and you were about to accuse Princess Velikokrasnova of being part of the trade, I could tell. This is merely the logical continuation of that pattern.”

“How reliable are the reports?” I managed to ask.

She shrugged. “They are nothing but rumors, rumors being spread by disgruntled Seumi traders, but Yevgeniya Arinovna has heard them from several different sources. That was why she thought it worthwhile to inform me of them.”

“And...do we know what happens to the children, after they are taken?”

She shrugged again. “They rumors say they go East, but they are very vague on that score. It is the logical conclusion, though. After all, we know the East buys slave-children, while I have not seen any Seumi children, enslaved or otherwise, on the streets of Krasnograd. Have you seen or heard of any on the steppe?”

I shook my head. “No.” I cleared my throat. “Only...all the children we rescued last year, they were Zemnians. But...the steppe is huge. It would be easy enough I suppose, with the right kind of caravan, to avoid the main trade route and still make it to the mountains.”

“So, two trade routes, then, at least?”

“At least,” I agreed. “If what we hear is true.”

“If what we hear is true,” she repeated. “Do you really think it is? For that would mean that Princess Primorskaya and Princess Pristanogradskaya could be involved.”

“And Princess Velikokrasnova,” I pointed out. “If it is true, then the trade route would go right through Velikokrasnovskoye as well as Pristanogradskoye. Which would explain a lot.”

“If it’s true,” she said again. “I for one...I know you have little love for Princess Velikokrasnova, and frankly speaking I don’t care for her either, nor for Princess Pristanogradskaya, and I don’t even particularly care for Princess Primorskaya, who is our own kin and third-sister to Vyacheslav Irinovich as well, but to think that they could be involved in something like this...”

“It is hard to believe,” I agreed. “We will need proof.”

“Proof, and it will have to be gathered quietly. We certainly can’t accuse them of it in the Princess Council tomorrow.”

“Will the coastal princesses be there?” I asked.

“No, but their representatives will be, and they’re hardly any better—in fact, they might be even worse. And the youngest Pristanogradskaya is in town and may be there as well. And not only that, but according to you, Princess Velikokrasnova is expected to arrive tomorrow morning. Some princesses would claim the fatigues of the journey and not attend the session in that situation, but we can be certain that Princess Velikokrasnova, if she arrives in time and is still able to stand, will be there. So we *mustn’t*—I can’t stress this enough, Valya—we mustn’t do anything to anger them or even suggest that we suspect them of having anything to do with this. After all, we could be wrong and they could be innocent of everything. And even if they’re not, even if they’re up to their ears in it, they’re sure to deny it vociferously and use it against us any way they can.”

“I know,” I said. “I’ll keep my suspicions to myself, and content myself with watching them closely.”

“Good,” said Sera. “And try not to antagonize them or anyone else at the Council either, will you? I know they can be trying at times—” I snorted, and she smiled wryly “—but we need this to go smoothly. All

we need is for them to agree to our proposal, and if they do that, who cares what they say?”

“Sure,” I said. “What is our proposal, anyway?”

“That you go to the mountains with a small group of hand-picked companions to investigate these reports of Zemnian children being taken. We present them with Akinsya Olgovna’s report—she’s still here, isn’t she?—and then we make our proposal, we say whatever we need to say to get them to agree to it without any fuss, and then, oh, shall we say, the day after Midsummer you set off East with, oh, a party of ten? Will that suit you?”

“Admirably. Hand-picked, you say? So I get to choose them?”

“Within reason, of course, but yes. Does that sound like a good strategy?”

“Certainly. I will be quiet and unobtrusive tomorrow, and it will all go as smoothly as if we were on oil.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” said Sera with a sigh and a raised brow. “Like on oil, without a doubt. Well, perhaps you should go speak with Aksinya Olgovna now, if you don’t mind, to prepare her for this. Oh, and Valya—I just remembered.”

“Yes?” I asked.

“I know it’s early yet—but if time is as pressing as you claim it is in the matter of Ivan Marinovich’s marriage, do you think...what do you think the chances are of you securing him before you set off?”

“You mean, before I set off the day after Midsummer? In four days’ time?”

“Yes. I know it’s quick, but if his mother is determined to move as quickly as you say she is, we must move even quicker, and you could be gone for months on this expedition. So what do you think the chances are of getting him to accept your proposal before you leave?”

“I suppose if we brought some pressure to bear...” I said, wrinkling my nose at the thought.

“I know you don’t like the idea, Valya, but we must do what we must do.”

“But it might not come to that,” I continued. “You see, I promised him that if I were to go off on an expedition such as this one, I would invite him to come with me.”

“You—what? Really?”

“Really,” I confirmed. “He seemed very keen to go, too.”

“Well, that would be most convenient...although perhaps a little irregular...and how we will get his mother to agree, I don’t know..”

“Say we need a representative from the black earth district,” I suggested. “Maybe from her family.”

“A good idea. But why would we need him instead of any other representative of her family, or of the black earth district?”

“Let me think on it. I’m the one choosing the members of the party, am I not? So let me think of a good reason for him to be on it, and I’ll try to come up with suggestions for the other members while I’m at it.”

“Very well. The session will begin at the second hour after noon tomorrow. Oh, and Valya?”

“Yes?” I said.

“Maybe you should wear a gown for once? At least a nice sarafan. So that you look like someone who should be on the Princess Council, not standing outside the door guarding it?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I said. “But no promises.”

Chapter Sixteen

I spent the rest of the afternoon explaining the good/bad news—that the Empress had decided to do something about the situation in the mountains, but that she would have to make an appearance before the Princess Council—to Aksinya Olgovna, and coaching her on what she should say and do. I was the last person who should be giving advice on how to smooth-talk my sister princesses, but at least what I was saying to Aksinya Olgovna *sounded* good, and probably wouldn't hurt.

Once I had prepared her as best I could for that, and gotten her reluctant promise to remain in Krasnograd for four more days, so that she could be part of my party when I set off, I was kept busy for the rest of the evening by dining with Mirochka and the tsarinoviches, who were very lively company and prevented me from dwelling on any of the unpleasant things awaiting me the next day—the Princess Council first and foremost, but of even more concern to me personally, the arrival of Princess Velikokrasnova.

As much as I tried to convince myself that the imminent presence of Princess Velikokrasnova and *him* in Krasnograd did not upset me, that it was all of the past and the pain it had caused was long behind me, that I had more important things to think about, that I had a new bright future awaiting me, that I was simply too good to be fretting over something that had happened almost nine years ago, and so on and so forth, none of the comforting things I told myself were actually true, and even the high spirits of Mirochka and the boys could not entirely distract me from my gloomy thoughts. It was embarrassing, but it was so. When the nurse-maids came and said it was time for the tsarinoviches to go to bed, I gathered Mirochka up with a mixture of apprehension and relief—apprehension of the sleepless night I expected ahead of me, but relief that I would no longer have to put on a cheerful faces for the tsarinoviches, who were too observant for their own good.

“Don't worry, mama: I'm sure you'll sleep well tonight,” Mirochka told me as we walked down the stairs to our chambers.

“How did you...what makes you think that?” I demanded, more brusquely than I should have. “I mean—what makes you think that I’m worrying about that?”

Mirochka shrugged. “I can just tell, that’s all. But don’t worry: it won’t be a problem.”

“Is that so?” I summoned up a smile. “What are you going to do about it, then—bore me to sleep with a very, very long, booooring story?”

“No, of course not, mama: you’re the one who’s supposed to tell *me* stories,” she said, with the long-suffering air of a girl cursed with the world’s most foolish mother. “But once *you* put *me* to sleep, I’ll make sure that you sleep too.”

“Agreed,” I said, as we entered our chambers. “So what story should I tell *you* to put *you* to sleep?”

Mirochka contemplated this important question while we undressed for bed, and then announced, once we were lying down, that I should make up a story instead.

“What about?” I asked.

“It’s *your* story, mama.”

“Shall I make it about rats, then?” I wriggled my nose like a rat.

“No, mama!”

“Weasels?” I darted my head this way and that like a hunting weasel.

“Mama!”

“Rats *and* weasels?” I wriggled my nose and darted my head simultaneously, which resulted in me making a face that caused Mirochka to giggle uncontrollably for some time.

Once she had sobered up, she demanded a story about a pony going on a journey, so I obliged as best I could, until she fell asleep with her head resting on my shoulder. I stroked her hair, too softly to wake her up. How was I going to leave her? I knew that Sera was right and that I should go on this mission and that it was no place for a child and that Mirochka should stay behind in Krasnograd and learn how to behave not just like a child of the steppe but like a Zerkalitsa, and that she would be as safe and as well cared for as she could possibly be here in my absence, certainly much safer and better cared for than

she would be if I took her with me, but it would mean being without her for four or more months. Sometimes the demands of watching over her weighed heavily on me, but I had never resented all that she took of me as I knew so many mothers did, and those four (or more!) months without her would mean four (or more!) months in which she would never once fall asleep with her head on my shoulder, as she was doing less and less these days. For the moment she was still a child, but soon she would be a young woman, and I was seized with the sudden fear of missing even an instant of her precious, fleeting childhood.

“Don’t worry, mama,” she murmured sleepily. “I’m right here. Go to sleep.”

“I thought you were sleeping,” I whispered.

“I was. Go to sleep, mama; you’re waking me up with your thoughts.”

I arranged us both as best I could without waking her even more, and, in what I was sure was a futile effort, closed my eyes.



Someone was stroking my hair and crooning a lullaby in the semi-darkness. It was semi-dark, I realized after a moment, because my eyes were closed against the bright light of morning. I opened them. Mirochka was stroking my hair and singing the lullaby I had sung to her when she was small.

“See, I told you, mama. You didn’t need to worry. You got lots of sleep.”

“So I see,” I said groggily. “How late is it?”

“It’s not yet breakfast time, but it will be soon. I thought you would want to wake up now. Did you have nice dreams?”

“Very,” I answered automatically.

“Did you like the birds? I like dreaming about birds, so I sent some to you as well.”

Faintly, as you do after a heavy sleep, I recalled fragments of a dream about friendly birds.

“The birds were lovely,” I said. “How did you do that?”

“I decided to, of course.”

“That was it? All you had to do was decide to send me a dream about birds?”

“Yes. I wasn’t sure at first I could do it, but then I did. *And* I made

you sleep. Did you like it?"

"It was lovely," I said, sitting up slowly. "But now I need to wake up."

"Oh, of course!" She looked sharply into my eyes, and suddenly I felt much more awake.

"How did you do that?" I asked, trying to sound level and noncommittal, and not at all shocked.

"I *told* you, mama: I just decided to!"

"Can you teach me how to do it?" I asked. She looked puzzled at that thought. "Like I showed you how to use a sword. Can you show me how to do what you did, with the birds and the waking up?"

She thought about it for a moment. "All you have to do is decide to do it, and make a picture in your mind of what you want to do, or maybe an idea, and then send the picture or the idea into the other person's mind," she explained. "It's very easy. Can't you do it?"

"I don't know," I said. "I've never tried."

"Why not?" she asked, sounding surprised.

"It's not something many people can do. Most of us never even think of trying."

"Really?" She sounded even more surprised than before, and had to spend while staring at me in order to collect her thoughts.

"Did someone show you how to do it?" I continued.

She shook her head.

"How did you figure it out, then? When did you figure it out?"

She gave me an apprehensive look. "Am I in trouble, mama?" she asked fearfully. "Did I do a bad thing? I didn't mean to!"

"No-no, everything's fine," I assured you. "You're not in trouble, and you didn't do a bad thing. You did a very good thing. I was just curious how you figured it out all on your own."

She frowned. "I remember having lots of dreams about strange things when I was little. When you and I used to sleep together, mama. But when I got my own room, they stopped and I started dreaming about other things instead, things that I recognized. The dreams I used to dream weren't my dreams. I think they were yours, mama."

"Oh?" I said, trying to repress a shudder of horror and embarrassment at the thought of my dreams being shared with a girl of three

or four. Even *I* found my dreams shocking at times, and I was the one dreaming them. “Why do you think that, my dove?”

“I didn’t used to, not until we came here. But when we came here, I remembered those old dreams because I recognized things from them. I recognized the Tsarina, and the kremlin, and parts of Krasnograd. Only it’s much less sad and frightening than I remember it from the dreams. In the dreams it’s always too dark or too bright, and I’m always shouting at people who won’t listen, or hiding from people who are hunting me, or chasing people I can never catch. There were lots of dreams about a thin man with long brown hair and sad eyes. Who is he, mama?”

I got out of the bed and went over to the mirror by the wardrobe. “Come here,” I said.

“Why, mama?”

“I want to show you something in the mirror. Come here.”

She got out of bed and came to me. I lifted her up so that she could look at her face in the mirror. “Did his nose have a tiny bump on it near the top?” I asked. “Like this?” I traced my finger down her own long thin nose, with a tiny hump on it just below her eyes. She nodded, wide-eyed.

“Did his chin have a hollow in it?” I asked. “Like this?” I stroked her own chin, which, unlike mine and everyone else in my family’s, had a slight cleft.

She nodded again, even more wide-eyed than before.

“It was your father,” I told her. “You were seeing your father in your dreams. My dreams, I guess.”

“Oh, mama!” She turned away from the mirror to wrap her arms around me and bury her head in my neck. “Those dreams were so sad! Sometimes I would wake up crying, do you remember?”

“I remember that you used to wake up crying from sad dreams. I didn’t know they were mine. I’m sorry, my dove. If I’d have known, I would have done something about it. I didn’t mean to give you my bad dreams.”

“Do you still dream such sad dreams about him, mama?” she asked, still clinging to my neck.

“Not so much any more,” I told her. “I have other dreams now.”

“But are you still sad about him? You told me you were very sad about him!”

“I was. But sadness goes away in time, at least somewhat. And I have other things to think about, other things to be glad about. Like you!”

“Is it...” She let go of my neck and looked into my eyes. “Does it hurt you to see parts of him in me?”

“You have his eyes,” I said softly. “I never noticed before. I always thought your eyes were just like mine. And they are, on the outside. You have my slanted steppe eyes. But from this close I can see that on the inside they’re just like his. The same color, and the same expression. The same sadness.”

“Oh, mama!”

“It doesn’t hurt me at all,” I lied. “Because they’re yours, now. So they make me glad!”

“Will I...will I ever get to meet him, mama?”

“Do you want to?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I’m...I’m afraid. But I’m curious, too.”

“Well, you might get to meet him very soon,” I told her. “He might be arriving in Krasnograd this morning.

“Oh, mama! What will we do!”

“Nothing,” I said. “We’ll do nothing, and worry about nothing. But...”

“Yes, mama?”

“If you *do* meet him, you might...wait a bit to tell him who you are, or speak to him, or have anything to do with him. Let me decide when to introduce you.”

“Why, mama?”

“Because he has another family, and it might...cause him and them trouble for you to appear suddenly and lay claim to him.”

“I thought you said he doesn’t have any other children!”

“He doesn’t. But he has a wife, and a stepson, and other people. Just...let me decide how best to introduce you, all right? If you want to meet him, I will make it happen, and even if you don’t, perhaps we *should* make it happen, if you’re both going to be in Krasnograd anyway, but we don’t want to just throw you on him unawares. It wouldn’t

be...kind.”

“But he *hurt* you, mama!”

“Well, I hurt him as well,” I said. “Maybe more than he hurt me. After all, I got you out of this, while all he got was...he didn’t get anything nearly so pleasant out of it.”

“Oh.” She frowned.

“So let’s not make it any worse for him than it already is,” I said firmly. “Agreed?”

“Agreed,” she answered, although her face was still full of confusion and doubt. I would just have to do my best to make sure that he didn’t encounter her unexpectedly, since the gods only knew what she would do or say if she came across him unawares. Being that she was my daughter as well as his, probably something that would have the whole kremlin and the rest of Krasnograd buzzing with rumors and recriminations.

“Here, hop down,” I told her. “We need to get dressed. I think I hear them bringing us breakfast.”

We ate breakfast, speaking no more of either her abilities or her father, and then, in what was now our morning routine, I dropped her off with the tsarinoviches and went down to the training yard by the barracks. I wasn’t sure, what with one thing and another, whether Ivan would show up, but I thought I’d put in an appearance just in case.

I was just warming up when he arrived at my side. “Good morning, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said guardedly.

“Good morning,” I said, as cheerfully and meaninglessly as possible, in order not to spook him any more than he was already spooked. “Are you ready to train?”

“In a moment, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said, not quite looking at me as he pulled out his training sword and began to limber up. I tried to return the favor by only looking at him out of the corner of my eye.

“You know, you’ll only have to change your shirt again before your mother comes anyway,” I said, unable to hold myself and my curiosity back any longer, as we turned to face each other.

“How did you know..?” he asked, looking rather more astonished than the remark warranted.

“This isn’t your training shirt. This one is much...” I was going to

say *more modest*, but stopped myself in time. “Nicer,” I finished, instead. “Do you expect to go greet her straight from the training yard?”

“No,” he said shortly. “I’m afraid I’ll encounter her on the street on my way back. Of course if I have time, I’ll change shirts again, but I might not have that time.”

“I see. Do we need to cut our session short, then?”

“No,” he said again, even more curtly than before. “I want to do this, Valeriya Dariyevna. Now can we please fight?”

“With pleasure,” I said, and brought up my sword.

When we had sparred before I had either been testing him or training him, but I could sense by the set of his mouth that neither of those things were what he needed today, so instead of circling around him cautiously, I immediately launched myself at him with an impulsive attack. He barely brought up his sword in time to repel me, but once he had, he began parrying furiously and, after a time, began pressing his own attack, hammering at me with wild strength until I let my sword fall to the ground.

“Enough,” I said.

“You let me win,” he accused me.

I shrugged. “You did a good job,” I told him. “And I didn’t think getting your ass kicked yet again in front of all these loitering guards was what you needed.”

He glanced over at the guards in surprise. Clearly he had been so focused on me that he hadn’t even noticed their presence. “I don’t need your charity!” he cried.

“It wasn’t charity,” I told him patiently. “Like I said, you did a good job. The only way I could have beaten you would have been to hurt you, and I didn’t want to do that. And I wanted to see what you would do when you had the upper hand.”

“Why?” Now his face was wary, as if I must have some sinister motive for everything I did. I supposed he was used to living amongst people who *did* have some sinister motive for everything they did, and he had no reason to believe I was any different. And of course, in some respects I wasn’t.

“Can we speak in confidence?” I asked, lowering my voice.

He looked like he wanted to make a withering, or at least angry,

retort to that, but a lifetime of being polite, especially to women of higher rank, took over, and he only stared at me with mute irritation.

I took a step closer to him and put my hand on his arm. His skin rippled under my hand, like a nervous horse's. "The Empress has asked me to lead a mission East, to the mountains," I said. "To look into the matter of the missing children and the slave trade. We are going to hold a session of the Princess Council on it this afternoon, but between us it has already been decided—which is why I need to keep it in confidence. And she has asked me to choose the members of my party. I would like to choose you."

"Wh...why?" he asked, clearing his throat and shaking his head. I couldn't tell if it was the request, or my hand on his arm, that was unnerving him so. Probably both. Good. It was good for him to be unnerved. It would turn the little boy he still was into the man he was meant to be.

"Lots of reasons," I said. "But the main one is that you're a good fighter. You have it in you to be good at this kind of thing. I'd like you by my side on this mission, and I think you would benefit from it too."

"Why?" he demanded.

The guards were trying to loiter ever-closer without drawing my attention. I leaned in towards him and lowered my voice even more. "Because, Vanya, if you forgive me for speaking so bluntly, it will make a man of you. You've spent your whole life in your mother's shadow, which is only natural for a child, but you're not a child any more, you're a man grown, or will be by next week. You need to leave your mother's side and set off somewhere without her. And I'm giving you the opportunity."

Hunger flared in his eyes and then was deliberately quenched. "You're just...trying to convince me for your own ends, so I'll end up in your shadow instead," he said. "Besides, she'll never let me go."

"Some of my reasons may be...for my own ends," I admitted. "But if all you want from me is to go on this mission, and nothing more, I will leave it at that, you have my word. As for what your mother will or will not permit—I intend to ask the black earth princesses, and her in particular, as the chief amongst them, to send a representative, preferably one of their own blood, and then I will suggest you personally.

And if she balks because she fears for your...safety, let her send an escort along as well, someone she trusts to watch over you.”

“So once again I’ll be in her shadow,” he said glumly.

“Many princes, and princesses too, travel with an escort. But you would still get to travel across Zem’, and be part of an Imperial mission, and experience many other things that you have never experienced before. It would be a great adventure, Vanya, and I think you will truly be of use to us on it too. Otherwise I would not have asked you, no matter...what other things might lie between us.”

“I see,” he said guardedly.

“You can think on it, of course,” I told him. “But I must warn you that I will make the request this afternoon, and we will be setting off the day after Midsummer, so you will not be able to think for long.”

“I see,” he said again. He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. “But there is no need for me to think on it any longer, Valeriya Dariyevna. I would like to go. I would be honored.”

“Really?” I broke out into a smile without meaning to. “That’s wonderful, Vanya!”

“Really?” he asked, breaking out into a shy smile as well.

“Yes, it is! Your first journey! I will make sure it will be a memorable one.”

“I’m sure it will be, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said, now smiling wider and wider, as if unable to contain himself.

“The Tsarina will be delighted, too,” I told him. “She would like... she deeply regrets the trouble between our families, Vanya, and this will be a welcome first step to soothing the discord.”

“A first step made on our backs, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“Well, since a lot of the trouble was my doing, I suppose I should have to pay to clear it up,” I said. “I’ll do what I can to see that you don’t suffer too much because of it.”

“I’m sure you will, Valeriya Dariyevna.” His voice dropped as he said it, and something flared in his eyes again.

“Come, we should...” I let go of his arm, which I had been holding all this time, “...we should return to our respective quarters, to prepare for the day ahead. The gods know we both have some daunting hours ahead of us.”

“Very well, Valeriya Dariyevna.” He stepped back from me and sheathed his sword. We both turned to go, but then he turned back. “Valeriya Dariyevna?” he said. “One final question.”

“Yes?”

“Why do you...call me Vanya?”

“Do you dislike it?” I asked.

“No...it’s just very...”

“Forward?” I suggested. “Bold? Almost inappropriate? *Actually* inappropriate?”

He grinned in, I could tell, spite of himself. “I suppose, now that you put it that way,” he said. “But I guess I was going to say...unfair. After all, I don’t call you...Valya.”

“You should. After all, I told you to.”

“I know, it just seemed...”

“Yes, I know,” I said, when it became obvious that he wasn’t going to be able to put into words what it seemed. “But that was several days ago. Surely by now you can bring yourself to do so, especially since I’ve requested it twice.”

“Perhaps...Valya.” He wrinkled his nose. “It...tastes funny when I say it. I think I’ll only be able to say it when no one else is around, at least at first.”

Once again I was forced to bite down on the half-dozen ribald comments that his words had invited. Perhaps later... “Agreed,” I said solemnly, as if he were Mirochka. “And now, I fear, we really should go. We’re both sweating like warhorses; we’ll have to get cleaned up before the ordeals that await us. Will I see you here tomorrow?”

“Oh...” He frowned. “I hope so, Valeriya...Valya, but...”

“I understand,” I said. “If something happens, or...or if there’s something you must tell me, just send word for me at the kremlin.”

“Oh.” He frowned again. “Ah...I feel like a fool, Valeri...Valya, but how?”

“Have one of your servants bring word to the servants at the kremlin. The kitchens are normally a good place to start. Any of the kremlin servants will be able to find me and bring me a message.”

“And if...forgive me, I...” he blushed painfully, “but you must understand, V...Valya, it could be that the servants...”

“If you can’t get any of your own servants to do it, then there is no shortage of street urchins who will happily carry a message for a grosh, or even a lump of sugar,” I said. “And if you can’t get out of the house, then think up some pretext for sending a message to the kremlin that has nothing to do with me, and send me a secret message. Say that...that you have made a new friend who is being quartered in the kremlin, or that the tsarinoviches wished to make your acquaintance, or something like that.”

“I see that you’re good at this.”

“Practice,” I said. “And it’s stood me in good stead more than once. Are we agreed?”

“Agreed,” he said, and, with only a couple of backward glances, he left.

Chapter Seventeen

As I had promised Sera I would, after I had washed off the sweat from the morning's training session and taken some refreshment, I attempted to put on a gown for the Princess Council, but after rooting through my (meager) supply of clothing and looking at myself in the mirror half a dozen times, I gave up any thought of gown-wearing and dressed myself in the same silks I had worn to the feast. At least it would create an impression. Probably a bad impression, but at any rate I would look like someone who was capable of riding all the way across the country and dealing with evildoers.

I was smoothing back my hair and trying to convince myself that I wasn't nervous, when a maid came in and offered to help me dress. I thanked her and, ignoring the sideways looks she was giving my outfit, sent her away, and then, after a couple more deep breaths, I set off for the Hall of Council.

I was one of the first to arrive, which gave me the chance to go claim a spot near the throne dais, but off to the side. My plan was to be inconspicuous, but available when Sera would call on me. Aksinya Olgovna came sidling nervously through the main doors, and I waved her over. She joined me near the wall and looked around.

"Is this it?" she asked. "I thought there would be more."

"There will be," I said. "We're early. Most of the princesses haven't arrived yet, and the Tsarina won't make her entrance until everyone else is here."

"How will she know?" asked Aksinya Olgovna.

I nodded at a door that was barely visible in the wall behind the dais. "She and her guards will be waiting there. You can see into the room through the door. Once the guards have told her it's time, she'll come out."

"Oh." Aksinya Olgovna gave the door an apprehensive look, and then gave the throne an even more apprehensive look. I followed her gaze. It was really just a high-backed wooden chair, with arms, sitting on a dais less than a foot off the ground. Flowers and birds were carved

into the wood. Supposedly they were spells for health and wisdom. For the seat of the most powerful ruler in the Known World, it wasn't that impressive. Except that it was. For centuries the most powerful person in the Known World had ruled from it. And the next person to sit in it could be me. I tried not to carry on with that thought.

More princesses were filing in, and the hum of hushed conversation was filling the hall. I could feel more and more pairs of eyes being turned on me. A considerable amount of words being spoken in half-whispers were speculating on my presence here—or perhaps bemoaning it. There was a sudden silence as Princess Velikokrasnova entered the room.

She was a tall woman, as tall as I was, and she walked with a straight back, her head held high, and the expression of someone who had just bitten a wasp. Her face was sharper than was common amongst the black earth princesses, and I had always fancied—not that it brought me any joy—that I could see a touch of the steppe in her high cheekbones. She was wearing a cloth-of-gold gown and an elaborate gold headdress to match, but none of that could mask the fact that she had already left her youth behind, and meanness and discontent were carving cruel lines in her face, revealing (I thought meanly and discontentedly) the true nature that had earlier been hidden behind her even features. Her eyes found mine. I looked back. The room stayed silent, waiting to see who would look away first...

“Valeriya Dariyevna,” whispered Aksinya Olgovna. “Valeriya Dariyevna!”

I turned to her, and the whole room relaxed in a collective sigh. “What?” I asked.

“When the Tsarina calls on me, what should I do?”

“Go stand beside the dais, bow to her and to the hall, and recount your story as we rehearsed.”

“No, but I mean...where should I go? Where beside the dais? Should I speak to the Empress or to the hall?”

“Go to the front of the dais, but on this side of the throne. Bow to her first, and then to the princesses. There aren't many people on this side of the hall, and frankly, since I'm here, there aren't likely to be many, so you may be able to stand at an angle and address both

the Tsarina and the hall. If not, start by addressing her, and see if she commands you—which she probably will—to turn to face the hall instead. It won't be that complicated; you just have to stay calm."

"Thank you, Valeriya Dariyevna," said Aksinya Olgovna, looking anything but calm. "And...who was that woman? The one who just walked in?"

"Princess Velikokrasnova."

"And...why, if I may presume to ask, is she staring at you so hatefully?"

I looked at Aksinya Olgovna in surprise. "You mean you don't know?"

She shook her head. Well, at least the scandal had not reached the mountains. Until now, that is. "Her husband is the father of my daughter," I told her.

"Valeriya Dariyevna!" The sight of a weathered woman who had probably crossed Zem' more times than many of her sister noblewomen had crossed their estates staring in gape-mouthed astonishment was almost funny.

"He wasn't her husband at the time. In fact, I intended for him to be *my* husband. But he, and she, and all our families, had different ideas. But you can see why she bears me no good will."

"Yes, I see, Valeriya Dariyevna," said Aksinya Olgovna faintly. She gave me a sideways look. "And I'm sorry," she added.

"Thank you," I told her, and then we could speak no more of it, because the door behind the throne opened and Sera and all her guards came out.

We all bowed as Sera appeared, and waited until she had taken her seat to straighten up. I tried to look her over without making it clear that I was doing so. From where I was standing, she didn't look so bad—no obvious tremors or faintness that I could see. But I noted that Vitaly Mariyevich was hovering unusually close to her elbow.

She thanked us all for assembling on such short notice, and then launched into the matter at hand, explaining briefly that reports had reached her of Zemnian children being taken into slavery, and that we must look into it. Then she called Aksinya Olgovna forward.

Aksinya Olgovna, giving me a backwards glance full of trepidation,

went to stand at the spot by the dais I'd pointed out to her, and bowed as I'd instructed her, and then, with some throat-clearing and hesitation, began to tell the story of how children had always disappeared from the mountains, but this year more of them were disappearing than usual, and how she had indeed confirmed that they were being sold into slavery to the East, sometimes after being kidnapped, and sometimes voluntarily by their own parents.

I scanned the crowd. Some of the princesses looked angry, some disbelieving. Most of the ones who looked angry looked that way because they didn't want to believe what they were hearing and were angry at being forced to stand in a stifling hall on a hot summer afternoon over something they would give almost anything to have not be true. My gaze found Princess Velikokrasnova. She was still standing with a very straight back and her head held high, looking dismissive, as if all this were beneath her. She felt my eyes on her skin and looked my way, but I had already turned my gaze back to the throne.

Sera questioned Aksinya Olgovna over a couple of points, and then dismissed her. Aksinya Olgovna bowed and retreated gratefully to my side, which she seemed to think (erroneously) was a safer and more protected place than in front of the dais.

"You did well," I whispered to her. "You laid it all out very clearly. No thinking woman could have any doubts about the truth of your story."

"Thank you, Valeriya Dariyevna," she whispered back, and then we fell silent as Sera began speaking.

"In light of the word brought to us by our esteemed Aksinya Olgovna, and...other reports of a similar nature I have received, I have decided it would be best to send a delegation out to the Eastern mountains to investigate this matter," she was saying. "What do you say, my sisters?"

There was a lot of muttering. "I suppose it must be looked into, gracious Tsarina," said the youngest daughter of Princess Severnole-snaya, who was in Krasnograd as her mother's representative.

"You suppose correctly," said Sera. "Are we all agreed?"

There was some more muttering, but after further pressure from Sera everyone nodded their agreement that yes, a delegation must be

sent East to look into the matter.

“I am pleased we have reached such a wise agreement,” said Sera. “I have decided the delegation should have representatives from the great families of Zem’, so that we all may be witnesses to what is happening within our own borders. I name my sister Valeriya Dariyevna as head.”

The whole crowd sucked in air at once. Sera turned to me, seemingly unruffled, and said, “Valeriya Dariyevna, dear sister, step forward and tell us: whom else shall we name for this mission?”

I stepped forward. Princess Velikokrasnova, I could tell, was trying not to look at me, but her eyes were burning holes in the space six inches to my left. “We should have representatives from the great families of Zem’,” I said. “I will represent the steppe as well as Krasnograd. Aksinya Olgovna should join us, for she represents the mountain folk, and she is also the one most familiar with the situation. Now we have only to select those who will represent the North, the coast, and the Southern mountains, for I have already chosen Ivan Marinovich Velikokrasnov to represent the black earth district. The rest of the party can be taken up with whatever guards and scouts we choose to bring with us.”

A great clamor arose, that was only quelled when Sera had Vitaly Mariyevich and his guards make threatening motions as if they were about to move on the crowd. As soon as silence had been regained, Princess Velikokrasnova stepped forward and bowed.

“Tsarina,” she said, and despite all her efforts her voice was shaking. “I demand...how is this...I forbid it!”

“I will consider your request,” said Sera. “But first I must hear my sister’s reasons for her choice.”

I bowed briefly. “With pleasure, Tsarina. As you must know, the journey is likely to be arduous. We will have to travel quickly and far, and it is possible that our mission will take us into remote villages or even beyond the mountains. We will need people prepared to face hardship and able to exert themselves. We will also need people who will be able to defend themselves and others if necessary. And yet they must be members of the great families of Zem’. Ivan Marinovich is currently the only direct descendent of the Velikokrasnova line. He is

also young and vigorous, and an able swordsman. And he has already consented.”

“No!” shouted Princess Velikokrasnova.

Sera gave her a stern look. “I beg your pardon, Tsarina,” Princess Velikokrasnova continued, her voice still trembling, with rage or fear I couldn’t tell, “but how could he have given his consent? *I* am his mother. *I* must give *my* consent!”

“This is his twentieth summer, is it not?” inquired Sera mildly.

“Ye-es,” answered Princess Velikokrasnova, sensing a trap.

“Then he is of age, is he not? His consent it his own to give? May I remind my sister princesses that one of the changes my own gracious mother made was to give princes the right to speak for themselves upon coming of age, and dispose of their personal fate and fortunes as they see fit.”

There was some muttering about this, as there always was. The law forbidding those under age from entering into marriage and other contracts, but giving them freedom to dispose of themselves and their own property once they had come of age, had originally been made by our foremother Krasnoslava, as a way of preventing princesses from marrying off their daughters too young and against their will, and originally only been meant for noblewomen. Of course, as witnessed by the betrothal of Aleksey Aleskandrovich to his twelve-year-old bride, there were ways of wiggling around the law, but no marriage could actually be made till both parties were of age, and gave their free consent. The law had been extended to women of all classes during the reign of Darya Krasnoslavovna, and had only recently come to encompass men as well. After setting aside her first husband, Sera’s father, Sera’s mother had made the change in order to facilitate her marriage to a much younger man whose mother, perhaps wisely, considering Sera’s mother’s personal qualities, opposed the match. The general feeling amongst the princesses was that this new law not only undermined the authority of mothers, to which the older princesses were to a woman vehemently opposed, but it also encouraged young men to take foolish, perhaps irrevocably harmful, steps at a time in their lives when they were most in need of a mother’s guidance, and left them prey to selfish schemers such as the former Tsarina (or my-

self). There was hope that Sera, as the mother of three sons, would see the folly in this law and undo her mother's thoughtless decision, but thus far she had shown no inclination to do so, and I could see the alarm that spread amongst all the princesses in the hall at this sign that Sera intended to use this unpopular law to her own advantage.

Princess Velikokrasnova, who was even more shocked than the rest of them, stared at Sera in horror for a moment before rallying and crying out, "He...he was born in Autumnmoon, Tsarina! He has not yet come of age!"

"But he will on Midsummer," said Sera. "Such is our law. If necessary, he can give his consent again then, should he still wish to give it."

"Tsarina! You do not mean to...!"

"My sister is head of this mission. She has full rein to choose her companions, and indeed, I approve of her choice and her reasons for it. Since he is of age, or shortly will be, and is yet unmarried, this is a matter between Ivan Marinovich and her. As his mother, you may, of course, attempt to oppose it, even though in a few days' time you will have no standing under Zemnian law to do so. But if you do try to oppose it, you will be going against the Imperial will."

Princess Velikokrasnova, too angry to reply, bowed stiffly and stepped back, looking as if she might have a fit and collapse at any moment. I thought I would have enjoyed seeing her set down like that in front of the Princess Council, but in fact it made me feel...bad, I would have said, if that hadn't seemed so unlikely. Sera appeared much less upset by the confrontation than I would have expected. But then, she had been Empress for a number of years, and had had to get used to this sort of thing.

I scanned the other princesses. Seeing Princess Velikokrasnova outflanked like that had shocked and frightened them. Some appeared to approve, but many looked upset and resentful. The other black earth princesses, in particular, were already gathering around her and shooting me (they didn't dare aim their ire at Sera) venomous looks. I hoped we hadn't just won the battle but lost the war to tame them and regain their loyalty.

As I had expected, the rest of the session disintegrated into arguments with little purpose and less sense, and after listening silently to

various princesses put forth their unreasonable reasons for why this person or that person should or should not be chosen for the mission, and why we should not go on this mission at all, I suggested to Sera that perhaps the Severnolesniye, Pristanogradskiye, and Iridivadze should present their choices for their representatives tomorrow to me in private. She agreed, and called an end to the session.

Many of the princesses seemed taken aback by this outcome, and loitered in the Hall of Council for a while afterwards, as if that might change things. Sera was escorted away by her guards, and Aksinya Olgovna and I were making our way out of the hall ourselves, when Princess Velikokrasnova, who had disappeared into a knot of other black earth princesses, suddenly reappeared in front of us, blocking our path.

“How dare you!” she shrieked. Such an imposing woman should not have produced such a shrill cry. Once again, I felt...almost bad for her. I could suddenly imagine how I might feel, and I might react, if I were to find out that Ivan Marinovich were courting Mirochka and making plans to steal her away behind my back.

“It has been too long, Marina Yekaterinovna,” I said, bowing.

“You...one wasn’t enough? You weren’t satisfied with...with what you’d already done? Is this...is this some kind of cruel jest? Some mean-spirited joke on the part of you and the Empress at my expense? I can see no other reason for it!”

I would have expected myself to brush her off, or say something cutting, or perhaps strike her down right there in the Hall of Council, but much to my surprise, I found myself saying to her gently, “I realize that it must seem like that to you, Marina Yekaterinovna. But it is not the case. I swear to you, Marina Yekaterinovna, that no ill will is meant towards you or your family, and that the Tsarina and I are acting only for the good of Zem’.”

“You...I heard word of what has been going on as soon as I arrived, servants came and told me that my son had been in your company, not once, but many times, and when I confronted him about it, he didn’t even have the grace to be ashamed of it! He even dared to try to defy me! Well, I assure you, I put a stop to that, I gave him such a dressing-down...and I have ordered that he not be allowed to stir from his

chamber, but now this! You actually think that I will allow him to go off with you on this...mad adventure! I would not consent to it under any circumstances, but to think that he would be allowed to go anywhere with *you*, do anything with *you*, let alone travel unsupervised for months at a time, is...!!” She choked, apparently unable even to put what it was into words.

“Of course he could be accompanied by a trusted guard, if it would set your mind at ease,” I said.

“And he even had the gall to say that you seemed...*nice!*” she burst out, having found her voice again. “Decent! Even trustworthy! I...I have half a mind to have him whipped for sheer stupidity!”

“That is unlikely to endear you to him or to further your cause,” I said before I could stop myself. Princess Velikokrasnova’s face turned almost purple with rage, so that I began to feel genuinely alarmed for her health.

“Well, I shall certainly...I shall certainly keep him locked up here for the rest of the summer! He won’t set foot out of his chamber until...” She suddenly fell silent.

“Come, Marina Yekaterinovna,” I said, as gently as I could. “There is much we should discuss in private. Come, let us retire to a quiet chamber, and order some refreshment. You must be tired after your journey.”

“Much we must...*in private??* What have you done to him?!?”

“Nothing,” I said. “But there is still much...”

“You’ve ruined him!” she cried out in despair. “I knew...I knew... somehow already...”

“Marina Yekaterinovna!” I said sharply. “I am willing to be patient with you, for I know this must be difficult for you, but I will not let you insult me, nor, in fact, *your own son* in front of the assembled princesses of Zem’.”

“It isn’t an insult if it’s true!”

“You have nothing to fear on that score, Marina Yekaterinovna,” I told her. “You have my word on it.”

“And why should I believe you? Why should I trust you now, when you couldn’t be trusted before?”

“Because I am a mother now too!” I shouted. My voice rang out un-

expectedly loudly in the Hall of Council, and I realized that everyone else had fallen silent, and was listening to us intently.

Her hand rose up and swung towards my face. I caught it and held it in midair, despite her struggles to free it. Her face was convulsing as if she were about to have a fit, or cry.

“Marina Yekaterinovna,” I said. “I am a direct descendent of Miroslava Praskovyevna, and second in line for the throne. My sister may be a woman of mercy, and so, in some ways, am I, but you must know that even so, to strike me would bring exile or a life in the mines. Even to attempt it could bring you to the Hall of Judgment. Please, Marina Yekaterinovna, if you value your life and the life of those in your family even a little bit, do not do such a thing again. I am sorry for the pain I have caused you, but other things are more important right now. Please, Marina Yekaterinovna, if you are not in a fit state to speak with me now, then do me the honor of speaking to me later, perhaps tomorrow, when you have had the chance to collect your thoughts.”

I loosened my grip on her wrist, and she wrenched it out of my hand, breathing fast.

“And one more thing, Marina Yekaterinovna.”

“Yes?” she said bitterly.

“If I hear that you have mistreated Ivan Marinovich,” I leaned in closer to her, “I shall make sure you rue the day you ever caused him to suffer. Do I make myself clear?”

She blinked and opened and closed her mouth, but could not seem to find any words to respond. Princesses Yuzhnokrasnova and Malokrasnova, normally sworn enemies, both stepped forward then, and, giving me looks that seemed equal parts rage and...apprehension? Incomprehension? Respect?...they took Princess Velikokrasnova by the elbows and led her away.

Chapter Eighteen

I went to the training ground the next morning, where I found Vitaly Mariyevich but no Ivan.

“Spar with me?” I requested. “I think my training partner may have deserted me.”

“Of his own free will, do you think, Valeriya Dariyevna?” asked Vitaly Mariyevich. He brought up his training sword.

“I’m not sure that someone in his situation can be said to have free will. But on this particular morning I suspect that he has been locked in his chamber, if not worse.” I brought up my sword too, and we began to attack and parry slowly, more as a way to hide our conversation than to train our muscles.

“Worse, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“His mother spoke yesterday of having him whipped as well.”

Vitaly Mariyevich’s face darkened. “I’ve trained a lot of men, Valeriya Dariyevna, if you’ll permit me to say it, and there are some that can’t stand the taste of the lash, just as there are some horses that can’t stand the taste of the whip. Use it, and you’ll ruin them. And I could see straight off that young Ivan Marinovich is one of those men, my head for beheading.”

“I know,” I said.

“Do you have a plan, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“First I was going to come here and wait a little while to see if he showed up. If that didn’t work, I was going to move on to phase two.”

“And what’s that, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“I haven’t gotten that far. I suppose I need to see him, to make sure he isn’t being mistreated.”

“And to see if he still wants to go East with you, Valeriya Dariyevna. Don’t forget about that. It is the Tsarina’s will, after all.”

“I know,” I said. “But for both things I need to be able to speak with him, and I doubt very much that Princess Velikokrasnova is just going to let me walk into her palace and meet with her son.”

“That is if he’s even still there, Valeriya Dariyevna. I haven’t heard

any reports from my guards of him leaving, but the easiest way for Princess Velikokrasnova to solve her problem would be to send him home.”

“I know,” I said. “But I don’t think she’s going to do that.”

“Oh? Why not, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“Yesterday, after you had escorted the Tsarina out of the Hall of Council, we had a little...encounter. And she talked about having him punished, and having him locked up for the rest of the summer, but nothing about sending him home. So either she was being very clever and casting false trails for me to follow, or she has no intention of sending him home because she needs him here in Krasnograd all summer.”

“Oh? Why would that be, do you think, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

I wondered how privy Vitaly Mariyevich was to Sera’s plans and concerns. He would have to know at least a little bit, as the Captain of her Guard, but how much she had told him of her suspicions regarding the black earth princesses, and her strategies to counter them, I didn’t know. “I don’t know,” I said cautiously, “but if I were to guess, I would say she has marriage plans for him.”

“I see, Valeriya Dariyevna.” A couple of guards wandered within earshot of us, and Vitaly Mariyevich suddenly pressed the attack, so that neither of us were able to speak until I had pushed him back, and he disengaged and called for a rest. The two guards, catching his eye, suddenly remembered urgent business elsewhere and took themselves off to the barracks. “And those marriage plans do not coincide with those of the Tsarina, I take it?”

“Well...no.”

“I see, Valeriya Dariyevna.” He looked thoughtful. “What are you going to do now, Valeriya Dariyevna? It’s well past the time he should have been here, and he still hasn’t arrived.”

“I’m going to go back to the kremlin and see if a message has come for me,” I said. “Then I’ll proceed from there.”

“And if a message has not come, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“I guess I’ll go to the Velikokrasnova palace and see what I can see. I might even call on Princess Velikokrasnova. After all, I told her yesterday that I would.”

Vitaly Mariyevich grinned. "Should I send in guards after you if you aren't back by suppertime, Valeriya Dariyevna? Since you are the current heir to the throne, lightly as you seem to take it. Guarding you is my responsibility."

"Hopefully it won't come to that," I said, grinning back. "But maybe you should be prepared to send word to the Tsarina, just in case."

"That I certainly will, Valeriya Dariyevna. And take comfort in the fact that he *is* almost of age. She can only hold him for a few more days."

"In theory," I said. "But in practice, who's going to go against a mother's will in a case such as this? I'm afraid we can't really expect the other princesses to storm the palace and demand freedom for a young man who's been locked up for consorting with shady characters and hatching plans to go off on ill-advised adventures."

"You're not a shady character, and your journey is not an ill-advised adventure, Valeriya Dariyevna. You are the Tsarina's second-sister and heir, and acting on her behalf."

"I know," I said. "But that's not how some see it." I bowed. "Thank you for sparring with me, Vitaly Mariyevich, and even more for talking with me. And if you don't hear word of my return to the kremlin by suppertime, I suppose it wouldn't hurt to investigate my whereabouts."

"You can count on it, Valeriya Dariyevna," he said, and, giving me the look a concerned father might bestow on a daughter about to set off on a perilous quest, bowed and took his leave.

My hopes were low as I set off back to my chambers, but in fact as I was passing outside the kitchens I heard a childish voice whisper, "That's her," and a girl and a boy, both a little older than Mirochka, popped out from a side alley.

"V-V-Valeriya D-D-D-Dariyevna?" stammered the boy.

I stopped. "That's right. Do you have a message for me?"

"H-h-h-how did you...?"

"I told you," whispered the girl. "I told you she knows things!"

"I'm expecting a message," I said mildly. "It seemed likely that you might be bearing it. So do you have a message for me?"

"Y-y-y-yes, Valeriya Dariyevna..." He gulped and, falling silent, gave a clumsy bow.

“Is it written down, or do you need to tell it to me?” I asked, when it became apparent that he wasn’t going to volunteer any more information on his own.

“W-w-written down, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“Can I see it, then?” I asked, as patiently as possible.

“Oh! H-h-here it is.” He fished a scrap of paper out of a dirty pocket, and handed it over. I unfolded it. It was half the size of my palm, and said only, in a clear but blocky hand, *Locked in my room. I.M.V.* The free corner of the piece of paper had a small and simple but surprisingly well-drawn picture of a sad face on it.

“Is there anything more to the message?” I asked.

The boy shook his head.

“How did you come by it?” I asked.

He gave me a fearful look. “I only want to know about the state of my friend,” I told him. “I am sure you came by it honestly.”

He gulped. “S-s-s-sister’s a s-s-s-scellery maid, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

I nodded encouragingly.

“W-w-w-with Princess Velikokrasnova.”

I nodded even more encouragingly.

“Sh-sh-she gave it to me, and s-s-s-said there’d be a grosh in it for me if I got it to you.”

“So I pointed you out to him, Valeriya Dariyevna!” said the girl, much more boldly. “I work in the kitchens here and I’ve seen you before.”

“You both did very well,” I told them, and reached into my pocket. “Here’s a grosh for each of you, and there will be more if there are any more messages for me, do you understand? And...if someone else should try to offer you money for my messages, I will offer you more. Are we understood?”

Both the children nodded vigorously and ran off. I examined the scrap of paper again. It had been torn in haste from a larger piece that had been used for something else, I could tell by the edges of letters along the jagged edges of the message. I examined the letter fragments carefully. It was hard to tell, but they seemed to be from the words *All my best, I.M.* So, the bottom of a letter Ivan Marinovich had written to

someone else, and then torn the corner from to compose this message to me. I wondered why he had done that. The most likely reason was that his mother had decided to stop him from sending out any letters and take away all his writing materials, but he had somehow managed to tear off a corner from a letter he'd already written and hide it away until he could write this message with—I looked at the lettering, and then sniffed at it—soot from the fireplace. I looked at the sad face he'd drawn in the corner. It made me smile in spite of myself. It was a remarkable piece of drawing for something done in haste and secrecy with nothing but soot for ink. I told myself I would have to ask him about his talent for drawing someday soon. But first I would have to free him.

I went back to my chambers, changed into the clothes I had worn yesterday to the Princess Council, which were the only good and also comfortable clothes that I had, and sent word that I would be calling on the Empress soon. I left my chambers without waiting for a reply, and went to the tsarinoviches' chambers, up on the Imperial family's floor. As I had expected, Mirochka and the boys were at their lessons, but they (and their tutor) broke off eagerly when I came in.

"Mama!" cried Mirochka ecstatically. "We're studying history!"

"Good for you. And what have you learned?"

"We are studying the history of the wars with the Hordes, Valeriya Dariyevna," said Ruslan with a serious little bow.

"An excellent subject," I said. "I won't disturb your studies for long. I just wanted to call on you for a moment on my way to the Tsarina."

"Will we spar today, mama?" demanded Mirochka. "If we do, Kiryusha wants to join us."

"Perhaps not, my dove, or if we do, not until evening."

"But we have to train every single day, mama!" she protested.

"Yes, and we will this evening, but first I have matters I must attend to. Perhaps you can go riding instead? Surely your pony needs attention, and it is a trifle cooler today than it has been. I think a storm might be coming in, so you would be wise to go riding while you can."

"Will you go riding with us, then, mama?" she asked.

"I'm afraid my business will prevent it. Perhaps tomorrow."

She started to pout. I gave her a look. She gave me a look back. "But

mama..." she began.

"I am afraid that duty calls, my dove."

She started to screw up her face in preparation for an outburst. "And when duty calls me, it calls you as well," I added firmly. "You must behave like a princess, my love, even if it is difficult."

"You're gone *all the time*, mama," she complained accusingly.

"Such is the press of my duties right now," I said, even more firmly. "And you have a duty too. After all, *someone* must escort your brothers out riding, and I can't do it right now."

"All *right*," she said with a huge sigh. "But tomorrow you have to spend *all day* with me, like you do when you're at home."

"Well shall see," I said. I bowed to the tutor and the tsarinoviches, and turned to go.

"You're going to go storm the palace now, aren't you, mama?" she said suddenly.

I stopped and turned back to her. "I beg your pardon?" It came out more abruptly than I intended. Another child probably would have been driven to tears, but Mirochka said, unfazed, "Last night you were thinking about storming a palace, and now you're going to go do it, aren't you? That's why you can't train with us this afternoon, isn't it?"

The tutor and the tsarinoviches were staring at us round-eyed. "In a manner of speaking," I said.

"What do you mean, 'in a manner of speaking'?"

"I have to go deal with some unpleasant people. I suppose you could say it's sort of like storming a palace."

"But"—her face creased in a frown—"there won't be any *arrows*, will there?"

"Probably not," I assured her. "But I don't know how long it will take, so I might not be back until evening."

"Oh, all right. And then can we train?"

"As soon as I get back," I promised.

This appeared to satisfy her, and so, after bowing to everyone again, I left and headed for Sera's chambers.

I found her pacing around restlessly and giving longing looks out the window. "Feeling better?" I asked.

"Much! Too much, in fact. I can't stand to spend another day

cooped up inside here!”

“You weren’t tired out by the Princess Council, then?”

“A little,” she admitted reluctantly, but then added, “But I feel completely recovered already! I feel so much better this time than I ever did with any of the boys! Let’s go for a ride, Valya!”

I looked at her more closely. She certainly looked better than she had since I’d arrived, but I still didn’t like her skin tone and texture. Something was still wrong with her blood and her heart, I could tell, even if she did not currently seem in imminent danger of collapse.

“What do the healers say about riding?” I asked.

“Oh...” She waved her hand dismissively, which told me all I needed to know.

“Perhaps a stroll in the park this evening, once it grows cooler,” I suggested. “We could take Mirochka and the boys. I’m sure they would all enjoy it.”

“Oh...very well, but I don’t know if I can wait until evening! I’m as restless as a young horse in springtime!” She gazed out of the window for a moment onto the stable roof, and then turned away abruptly and said, “Are you here to talk about the members of your party, then?”

“Well...sort of. It seems that Ivan Marinovich has been locked up. I’m here to let you know that I’m going to go over there and see if I can speak with him and maybe free him.”

“By ‘over there’ you mean to Princess Velikokrasnova’s palace?”

“Yes,” I confirmed.

“And are you planning to storm the palace by stealth or force?”

“Well...” I said, “What makes you think I’m going to storm it at all?”

“You have that look, Valya. I realize I’ve never actually seen you go into battle, but you have that battle look.”

“Since you’re the second person who’s asked me that question, I guess I must. Mirochka said I dreamed of it last night.”

“Her abilities continue to develop, then?” asked Sera, temporarily diverted from the matter at hand by something much more pleasant and interesting.

“Perhaps, or perhaps she’s only started telling me about it more.”

“Or perhaps the two go hand in hand,” said Sera. “I shall watch her with great interest this fall, to see how her gifts grow and strengthen.”

“Yes,” I said. “Yet another thing that I will miss.”

A complicated look crossed Sera’s face: guilt and sorrow at the thought of me missing a whole season of my daughter’s growth, and at this most significant time, but also a hunger for something I couldn’t name but that sent a little shiver down my back. I wondered how much Sera’s current condition was affecting her mind. Or maybe it was her desperation for a daughter at any cost. The look disappeared; repressed, I was sure, rather than dismissed. “I’m sorry, Valya,” she said. “I know this is a great sacrifice for you to make. Believe me, if I could have chosen anyone else...”

“I know,” I said. “But I also know it must be done, and that I am the best woman to do it. While Mirochka sits here safe behind the kremlin walls, other women’s daughters are being wrenched from their families, dragged from their homeland, and sold into the most vile servitude imaginable. If I had to leave Mirochka for a year, I still would not be able to stop myself from going. But that doesn’t mean I don’t regret what I will miss; it only means that what I will miss will make my passion for justice burn even brighter.”

“I know, Valya.” For a moment Sera looked sad, but she shook it off and said, “And so, Ivan Marinovich? What are you planning to do about it? For I agree, we can’t allow him to be locked up against his and our will, but freeing him could be a ticklish business.”

“I know. Which is why I thought I’d start with a surprise attack, and go make a civil call on Princess Velikokrasnova. I figure no one will be expecting that. But I wanted to let you know before I went, in case things go...badly.”

Sera raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean by ‘badly’?” she asked.

“Well, I’d like to think that Princess Velikokrasnova wouldn’t set her guards on me, but to be honest, I wouldn’t put it past her...so if I’m not back by, say, late afternoon, send guards after me. Say that I promised you and the tsarinoviches an evening stroll, and you are impatient at being kept waiting. You could demand Ivan Marinovich’s presence as well, while you’re at it.”

“You know, Valya, that Princess Velikokrasnova has brought her whole household with her,” said Sera cautiously.

“I know.”

“There may be...unpleasant encounters.”

“There may,” I admitted. “I’m not saying this will be a pleasure call. But it seems like the best thing to do at the moment.”

“I suppose you’re right,” she said with a sigh, and then suddenly grinned. “You know what you’re doing, Valya?”

“What?”

“You’re *kidnapping* him! Actually kidnapping him! Right out from under his mother’s nose!”

“Ah...I suppose,” I said.

“Oh, Valya, you are! And you said he sent you a note about it, asking you to do it?”

“Ah, well, sort of.”

“Even better! Oh, Valya, if you succeed, if you actually succeed, that means you’re practically as good as betrothed, doesn’t it? If you kidnap him from his family with his help?”

“Well...back home, yes,” I said. “But I don’t think it’s seen in quite the same way here on the black earth of Mother Krasna.”

“Oh, well...I mean, yes, spouse-stealing fell out of fashion here generations ago, now that we’re all peaceful and families want to make good alliances and hold tight control over the lines of inheritance, instead of producing daring warriors. They say it encourages disobedience and recklessness, especially amongst young men, and we know how prone they are to those traits anyway! But I know they still do it in the Southern mountains, and I thought you still did it on the steppe too.”

“We do,” I said.

“Oh, Valya, how much fun!” cried Sera, looking flushed and giddy, as if she were about lead a raid to steal a lover herself.

“Well...yes,” I agreed. “Normally the couple has to take turns kidnapping each other, with the help of their friends and family, to show they’re serious about it and that they’re brave and cunning enough to be worth marrying. Only normally the kidnapping is in name only. Your target has to agree to it and even help you out, once they realize what’s happening, if the match is to go through, and normally their friends and family only pretend to resist you, if they see that your target is going along willingly. It’s more of a game than anything else.”

“But it doesn’t have to be a game, does it?”

“No,” I admitted. “Even if the family resists, if the person you kidnap goes along willingly, then it’s considered a binding declaration of intent. And then they have to reciprocate and kidnap you as well, to show they want the match as much as you do.”

“Oh Valya!” Sera exclaimed, clapping her hands with glee, her eyes sparkling now. At least she was enjoying this. “Have you led many kidnapping raids before, then?”

“Well, the person who wants to make the match leads the raid, so no,” I said. “But I’ve helped out on many, of course.” Something in my face must have given away the fact that my own experiences with spouse-stealing had been bittersweet at best, for Sera asked, speaking quietly now, “Did you...did you try to kidnap *him*, then, while you were here?”

“Not at first,” I answered after a pause. “At first I tried to court him like a black earth princess would. But then in the end, when I was desperate—yes. Only obviously he didn’t want to come along willingly. But that’s the only time I’ve ever seen that happen.”

“And in this case we have good reason to think it won’t,” said Sera consolingly.

“In that case I had good reason to think it wouldn’t either,” I pointed out sharply. “But these black earth princes are a fickle, teasing lot.”

“Many men are fickle and teasing, and some from the black earth district are steadfast and true!” said Sera, suddenly nettled at my insult of her people. “By all the gods, Valya, you’re half black earth yourself, and Mirochka...”

“Steppe blood runs pretty thick in Zerkalitsa veins,” I interrupted her. “But that’s neither here nor there. Yes, I suppose I *am* kidnapping Ivan, but I can’t expect him to think of it that way. Even if he comes along willingly with me, we can’t assume he’s agreed to the match, or that he even understands what his actions would mean, in some other part of the country where he’s never set foot his entire life.”

“But you’re still going to do it, aren’t you?”

“I’m still going to do it,” I confirmed. “Which I would in any case, if there were some young man being held against his will, and I had the means to do something about it. But if we want to be sure that he

intends to agree to the match, we'll just have to—to wait and see if he kidnaps me back.”

“I suppose you're right, Valya.” She grinned again. “So...I take it no one has ever tried to kidnap *you*, then?”

“That,” I couldn't help but grin too, at the memory, “is *my* business, not yours, Sera.”

“Valya! But...I suppose you must have refused him...how sad...”

“On the steppe,” I told her, “we kidnap lovers as well as spouses. And,” I raised an eyebrow at her, “who said it was a *him*?”

“Valya!” She gave me a sideways look. “You're joking, aren't you? You're trying to shock me!”

I only grinned in response, causing a very peculiar look to cross her face, as if she had suddenly become consumed with embarrassment, curiosity, and the realization that there were things about me of which she had never even dreamed.

“Well...be that as it may...” she said, recovering herself. “At least you've had experience in the matter. And...you said friends and family could help out? With the raid, I mean?”

“Ye-es...”

“Should I send some guards to escort you, then? I mean, I suppose you'll need them anyway, but...if I send them, it wouldn't make it *not* a proper kidnapping, would it?”

“No,” I said. “It would be fine. In fact, it's better if friends and family help out—it makes it more official.” I thought about it for a moment. “Send a pair,” I said. “That conveys a message without making it a threat.”

“Very well. I suppose you're going right now?”

“I don't see any point in hanging about.”

“No doubt you're right.” She went to the door, stuck her head out into the corridor (much to the surprise of her guards), and said, “Sasha! Tima! You are to accompany Valeriya Dariyevna on her errand.”

“When, Tsarina?” asked one of the guards apprehensively.

“Immediately.”

There was some shuffling. “Far be it for me to gainsay you, Tsarina...” said the one who had spoken before, “but...”

“Lyova and Vasya are no doubt calling upon the maids down the

hall,” said Sera crisply. “Have them take your place, and then escort Valeriya Dariyevna wherever she wishes to go. You will be under her command for the rest of the day, is that understood?”

“Yes, Tsarina,” said the guard, sounding uncertain. I heard him leave, and then return shortly, accompanied by two more pairs of boots. Once Lyova and Vasya had been installed at the door, Sera called Sasha (who turned out to be the one who had been speaking) and Tima into the room and impressed on them once again that they were under my command until I saw fit to release them. Sasha, who was older and looked as if he were feeling the heat, did not seem exhilarated by this prospect, but Tima, who looked barely old enough to have left his mother’s side, perked up at the prospect of spending the afternoon out and about instead of standing in a stifling corridor.

“I will inform you of the results of my mission as soon as I return,” I told Sera as I took my leave. “And if I don’t return by a reasonable hour, send more guards in after me.”

“I think it most likely that you’ll be returning earlier rather than later, and with nothing to show for it because Princess Velikokrasnova will refuse you admittance, and you’ll have to come up with something a bit more...*exciting* than just showing up at the door,” said Sera, while Sasha grimaced and straightened himself up with the resigned air of a man determined to do his duty, even it was turning out to be much more burdensome than he had expected when he had donned his armor that morning.

“Well, I have to try,” I said, and, flanked by Sasha and Tima, left Sera’s chambers and headed downstairs, out of the kremlin.



“To Princess Velikokrasnova’s, then, Valeriya Dariyevna?” asked Sasha, once we were out of the kremlin.

“Yes,” I confirmed. “And I don’t expect any trouble—well, not of the kind that would require guards to get me out of it—but things might go a little more smoothly with you two by my side. So don’t leave me unless I specifically order it, and,” I turned my attention to Tima, “if we *are* admitted, which is not a sure thing, don’t rise to any insults given to us, no matter how provoking our hosts become. We are doing this to win, not to bandy pointless words about. So unless they actual-

ly try to drag me away by force, you are to do nothing. Are we agreed?”

“Agreed, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Sasha, while Tima looked at me with wide-eyed excitement mixed with trepidation.

The air was cooler outside than it had been in days, but breathless. I looked up and saw nothing but clear blue sky, but as we turned a corner I caught a glimpse of a storm cloud in the distance. A chill dank wind brushed against my face, and then we turned another corner and it was clear and stifling again. We wound this way and that, around all the stables and barracks and servants’ quarters that served the kremlin, and past the shops and taverns and other establishments that served the people who served the kremlin, and through the Haymarket, where merchants were selling the summer’s first cutting of hay at—I cocked my ear and listened—exorbitant prices, and then we were back on the streets, but they were much wider now, and the houses were much grander, and soon they were proper palaces, with gilt-edged roofs and stables and barracks and servants’ quarters of their own.

We turned onto Black Earth Street, so called because all the black earth princesses had their palaces there. The one at the corner was the Vostochnokrasnova palace. I tried not to look at it, or to notice that it was closed up. Ever since certain events nine summers ago, the Vostochnokrasnovy had preferred to visit Krasnograd only in winter.

We passed it as if it were just another building and came to a particularly ornate and imposing palace halfway down the street, with gilded wooden fretwork all around the eaves and windows and two guards at the door. They stiffened as we approached, and stared at us with unconcealed dismay when I informed them that I was here to call upon Princess Velikokrasnova.

“The princess...Valeriya Dariyevna...she may not be accepting visitors...” said one of them, while they both looked back and forth between me, Sasha, and Tima as if we were a trio of snakes who’d suddenly slithered up to them and asked admittance to their bedchamber.

“Please be so kind as to inform the princess that I am here on a matter of urgent Imperial business,” I said, with what I hoped was a disarming smile.

And it must have had some effect, for the guards, after looking

back and forth between themselves a few times in doubt and uncertainty, said they would send word, if we would be so kind as to wait out on the street until we received permission to enter.

Accordingly, we stood out on the street, me (I hoped) benignly, Sasha stolidly, and Tima impatiently, while the guards summoned a serving girl and charged her with our message, and then while we waited for her to return, which she did, eventually, with the reply that Princess Velikokrasnova was indisposed and would not be receiving visitors for the foreseeable future.

“I am very sorry to hear that,” I said. Something cold hit my cheek, and I slapped at it. It was a single raindrop, blown down unexpectedly from the still-clear sky. “In that case, I will speak with Ivan Marinovich.”

This caused a great deal more consternation. I smiled, still as benignly as possible, and said in response to their suggestions that no, I could not call back again in a few days, and no, I could not simply leave a message, as I was on urgent Imperial business that could not be denied or delayed. After a few rounds of this the serving girl agreed, with great reluctance, to go relay my request.

She returned much more promptly this time, with the message that Ivan Marinovich was also indisposed and that his mother did not approve of him having uninvited female callers besides.

“In that case,” I said smoothly, “I would speak with Nikita Marislavovich.”

This time even Sasha jumped a little, and the Velikokrasnova servants turned positively green with horror. I smiled even more benignly than before, and said that the Tsarina was awaiting word of my return with eager interest, and was no doubt growing ever more impatient at my absence. The two guards both clutched at their spears, and the serving girl looked as if she wished she could faint away and escape this situation. Two more raindrops hit my cheek, along with a cold gust of wind, and when I looked up I saw that a black cloud was just edging into view.

“The weather is turning, I see,” I said, my smile growing a little sharper. “I fear we are in danger of getting wet.”

“Perhaps you should return to the kremlin, then, Valeriya Dari-

yevna, before the weather breaks,” said the bolder of the two guards hopefully.

“I fear I cannot return until I have spoken with someone from this household,” I said. “The Tsarina would be most displeased to hear of my failure.”

There was a slight commotion on the other side of the door, and I could hear a man’s voice saying, “What in the name of all the gods is going on here? I hear we have guests waiting outside the door. Why have we not let them in?”

A serving girl attempted to reply, but her voice was too muffled for me to make out the words, and before she could finish, the door was opened abruptly from the inside, and a tall slender man with long bound hair and clever sad eyes peered out.

“Hello, Nika,” I said. “Will you not invite us in?”



The serving girl on the far side of the door screamed a little, while the one outside with us whimpered, and the two guards swore. To his credit, Nikita did none of those things, perhaps because he had lost the power of speech. He stared at me for several long moments, shock, joy, and horror chasing each other across his face, before saying tightly, “Why are you disturbing us?”

“Ur”—I had to clear my throat unexpectedly—“urgent Imperial business. Will you not invite us in?”

“Val...”—he looked at the servants, and then up and down the street, before lowering his voice and saying, “you know I can’t do that, Valya!”

It was funny. There was a time when I’d wanted to save him, and then there was a time when I’d wanted to hurt him so much, to cause him some tiny fraction of the pain he’d caused me, but now that he was standing here before me, all that was gone as if it had been blown away by the same wind that was whipping my hair around my face, and I would have given a great deal to be able, not only not to cause him any pain, but to take away the pain I saw etched across his brow and around his eyes, and allow him to have a peaceful life far away from both of the women who had brought him so much sorrow. Because, I suddenly saw, while he had of course been wrong to go back to

Princess Velikokrasnova, he had perhaps been right to leave me. I had for years cursed that miserable lack of vision that had caused him not to see the bright future I had seen for us, and wondered how he could have possibly have been so blind, and how I could have ever loved someone so fundamentally lacking in sight, something I possessed in such abundance, and, and, and...but now I couldn't help but wonder whether his sight had been clearer than mine all along. Perhaps I had seen nothing but my dreams and fancies, while he had seen the truth.

"Nika," I said gently, "I've left you in peace for nine years. I would that I could leave you in peace for another nine, or even ninety-nine, but I really am here on urgent business on the Tsarina's behalf. I wouldn't ask you if it weren't more important than...well, many other things."

"You know I can't," he repeated, looking even more glad and more stricken. "Valya, I *can't*."

"Then deliver the Tsarina's request to Ivan Marinovich," I said.

"So..." he seemed taken aback, "you really are here on urgent Imperial business?"

"Nothing else would bring me to this door," I said, and then regretted it when he flinched at my words. But maybe they needed to be said anyway. "Tell him...and the princess...tell them both that the Tsarina commands his presence this evening, by the sixth hour. He may bring whatever escort he deems fit, if he wishes, but my two guards and I will return for him then, and bring him before the Tsarina ourselves, so even if he chooses to come alone, he will not lack for guard or for honor."

"Valya..." Nika looked at the guards and serving girls around us, and lowered his voice uncomfortably. "What are you playing at?"

"Whatever the Tsarina commands," I said.

"Valya, listen." He took a step towards me. "Just...please, go back to the steppe. Take...take your people and go back to the steppe. Don't get mixed up in this."

"What exactly am I getting mixed up in?" I asked, also taking a step closer and leaning in towards him so that he could still hear me when the others couldn't.

"Just..." He took a step back. "Go back to the steppe. This is Krasna

business. You don't belong here, and you'll only make things worse if you stay."

A dozen rejoinders, most of them angry, rose up inside of me. "By the sixth hour," I said instead.

The sound of furious footsteps came suddenly from the hall, and before we could do more than brace ourselves, Princess Velikokrasnova burst out through the door. "You!" she cried, pointing at me. There were bright red spots on both her cheeks.

Another cold raindrop hit my own cheek, and then half a dozen more. "By the sixth hour," I said for the third time. "The Empress awaits. I and my guards will call back for Ivan Marinovich then." I bowed to Nikita and the princess, turned, and left.



By the time we had reached the next street, the rain had started in earnest, so I led Sasha and Tima at a brisk scurry to the nearest tavern, where we ducked inside and, after pushing our way through all the other people who had also come in to get out of the rain and securing the last free table, ordered a round of beer.

"Do you reckon they'll let him out, Valeriya Dariyevna?" asked Sasha once the serving girl had brought our beer and left.

I looked around. Most of the other people were pressing around the counter, laughing and talking about the storm and the fresh weather it would bring with high good spirits. No one seemed to be paying any attention to us.

"Maybe," I said. "It didn't seem like they were going to let us in without a fight, and the idea came to me while we were standing there, so it seemed worth a try."

"So what do we do now, Valeriya Dariyevna?" he asked.

"We wait here until the storm blows over, and then at the sixth hour we go back and see if they'll let him out."

"And if they won't?"

"I'll think of something," I said. "But let's hope it won't come to that, because whatever I think of is bound to make people unhappy."

Sasha nodded and returned to his beer, while Tima stared at me wide-eyed. In order to distract him, I asked him about himself, and we spent the rest of the time until the storm blew over talking about his

large and colorful family, which filled at least half the afternoon.

When we stepped back out onto the street—considerably heavier in beer and lighter in coin—a cool sun was coming out from behind the rapidly disappearing clouds. “It’s only the third hour,” I said. “Let’s go back to the kremlin. I’ll meet you by the barracks shortly after the fifth hour, and then we’ll return to the Velikokrasnova palace and see what happens there. And let’s try to sober up before then, shall we?”

Sasha and Tima agreed to try, and we made our way—weaving only slightly—back to the kremlin, where they peeled off into the barracks and I went—now walking much straighter—back to the children’s quarters, where I found Mirochka and the boys bouncing with impatience to go outside.

“Can we spar, mama? Can we spar, mama? Right now, mama?” Mirochka demanded as soon as I appeared at the door. “We’re all ready to go!”

“What about Kiryusha?” I asked.

“Oh, he can come some other time! So can we spar now?”

“Sure,” I said. “If the tutors say you can, that is.”

“Oh, we finished our lessons ages ago, mama. So can we go?”

“For a little while,” I said. “I’ll have to leave and go out again later. But then we can go walking in the park this evening with the Tsarina.”

“I want to go riding!”

“Perhaps *you* can go riding, if you agree to ride slowly,” I said.

“Oh, very well.” She wrinkled up her nose. “Why do you smell like beer, mama?”

“Because I’ve been drinking it,” I told her.

“Why?”

“Because I had to wait out the storm in a tavern.”

“Why?”

“Because I was out in the town when it started to rain,” I told her.

“Why?”

“Because there were things I had to do today.”

“Like the palace? Did you storm the palace?”

“Sort of,” I said.

“Well, did you win?”

“Sort of,” I said again. “Let’s go. If we don’t go spar now we won’t

have time, because I have to go back soon.”

There was a scramble for sparring clothes, and then all four children, plus their guards, were following me down to the square by the barracks, where we did indeed spar, or at least play at sparring, amongst the puddles until Sasha and Tima came out, at which point I said I had to go, but that I would be back soon and we could all go out together after supper.

“Why are you taking guards, mama?” Mirochka demanded, looking less than pleased at this arrangement.

“So I won’t be alone,” I said. “Now go! You’ll need to wash off before supper.”

“You’re going to miss supper if you go now, mama!”

“I’m sure they’ll save some for me,” I told her.

“I want you to have supper with us, mama!”

“Perhaps tomorrow,” I said. “But right now I have to go.”

Mirochka started to pout. I opened my mouth to say something sharp to her about it, but before I could get the words out, she suddenly closed her eyes and grabbed my hand. “Don’t be so sad, mama,” she whispered. “And don’t be afraid of the palace.”

I bent down towards her. “Did you see something?” I asked softly.

She nodded.

“What did you see?”

“The palace makes you sad, mama,” she whispered. “Why does it make you sad?”

“It just does.”

“And afraid,” she said. “But you don’t have to be scared of it.”

“What did you see?” I asked again.

She shook her head. “I don’t know, mama. I don’t. But there’s nothing to be scared of there. The dragon isn’t looking at you.”

“There’s a dragon there?” I asked.

She nodded. “But it doesn’t see you properly. It’s looking at you but not seeing you.”

“Well, that’s good to know,” I said.

“But you have to hurry, mama! It’s going to open its eyes soon!”

“I will,” I promised. “I’ll hurry right back and then we’ll all have fun together this evening, are we agreed? Now go and wash up with

your brothers, and I'll be back before you're done with supper."

"Here, mama." She took something out of her pocket and slipped it into my hand. It was a small smooth stone.

"Will it protect me from the dragon?" I asked.

She nodded seriously. "I found it when we were traveling here, and I had a dream that night that it would protect you from a dragon. I had been really scared before that, because I knew that something might be waiting for us here, but then I found this stone and I knew everything would be all right."

"Then I'll keep it with me always," I said. "Now go!"

She and the tsarinoviches left, escorted by the guards.

"Are you ready?" I asked Sasha and Tima, trying to ignore the lump in my throat. It was just a stone. But one that Mirochka had given me in order to protect me. I wondered if the dream she'd had about the dragon had been a true dream. She had always been such a fanciful child...but maybe what I had taken to be fancies were actually visions. I rubbed the stone in my pocket. It was pleasantly smooth, and sliding my fingers over it did make me feel calmer.

"Whenever you are, Valeriya Dariyevna," said Sasha, and we set off back to the Velikokrasnova palace.

Chapter Nineteen

When we arrived there shortly before the sixth hour the same two guards were there waiting for us, looking apprehensive. “Please send word that I have returned, and await Ivan Marinovich at his convenience,” I said.

They exchanged glances and then, having apparently gained strength from whatever they saw in each other’s eyes, nodded and called in through the little window in the door that I had returned. The same serving girl we had seen before called back a reply that I could barely make out, but that seemed to say that Ivan Marinovich would be right down. I resisted the urge to look significantly at Sasha and see if he had heard the same thing I had. Would it really be that easy?

“Ivan Marinovich and his escort will be down directly, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said one of the guards.

I stopped myself from asking what they were playing at. Maybe it really *would* be that easy. After all, Princess Velikokrasnova was, among other things, shrewd. She was unlikely to risk an open breach with the Tsarina if she could help it. And she could easily have decided to change tactics and, through her apparent compliance, play some other deep game. Or...there was considerable bustle in the hall on the other side of the door, more than I would have expected for just Ivan Marinovich. And then the door was flung open and two guards came out, followed by Princess Velikokrasnova, Nika, Ivan, and two more guards.

“Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Princess Velikokrasnova. Her nostrils flared as she spoke.

I bowed.

“I told you we were indisposed and not receiving visitors today, but since you chose to ignore that, I have decided to humor you. Is it really true that the Empress wishes to see my son?”

“It is,” I said. “She awaits the pleasure eagerly.”

Princess Velikokrasnova’s nostrils flared again, probably because

she had been hoping to catch me out in a lie. “And he can have any escort I name?”

“Of course,” I said. “The Tsarina would not want him to be unsafe, or not to be escorted as befits his station.”

“In that case, I name these four guards here—and myself and my husband.”

I bowed again. “It will be an honor.”

She gave me a sour look and turned to the guard standing beside her. “Is the kibitka being brought round?” she asked.

“Here it is, Marina Yekaterinovna.” And indeed, a small kibitka, just big enough for three to ride inside and four to ride outside and stand guard was coming up to us.

Princess Velikokrasnova turned back to me. “I fear there is room only for my own party, Valeriya Dariyevna. We will await you at the kremlin.”

“Of course,” I said, and stepped back so that the kibitka could pull up to them and they could all get in. Nika gave me a brief but miserable look as he went by me, and Ivan hurried past with flushed cheeks and downcast eyes. I waited until they were all in the kibitka and it had started down the street, before turning back to Sasha and Tima.

“That kibitka doesn’t look like it’s going very fast,” I said.

“And they won’t be able to pick up the pace any between here and the kremlin, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Sasha. “They’ve only got two horses for all that load, and they’ll have to go through the Haymarket on a market day.”

“I feel strangely like a run,” I said. “But you lads don’t have to follow me.”

“Tima is pretty light of foot, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“Good. Tima, do you feel like a run?”

“Of course, Valeriya Dariyevna!” he answered, his face glowing with excitement.

“Then run back to the barracks and find Vitaly Mariyevich and tell him what’s happening. Sasha...”

“My running days are long over, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“And I need you to stay behind anyway. How do you feel about a spot of information gathering?”

“That I can do, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“Then go to any of the likely-looking taverns around here and see if you can fall in with any of the Velikokrasnova household and find out what happened there today—and what they think might happen there tomorrow.”

“As you wish, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“Good. I’m off, then.” I clapped them both on the shoulder and took off down the street, in the opposite direction from the kibitka.

I was hoping I still knew the back ways (learned in that fatal summer, when I spent a fair amount of time at the beginning sneaking in and out of the Vostochnokrasnova palace, and a certain amount of shameful and best-forgotten time at the end spying on Princess Velikokrasnova instead of the people Sera had wanted me to watch) between the kremlin and Black Earth Street, and as my feet flew along, it seemed that they still remembered how to slip down back alleys and past stables and servants’ houses, so that I found myself back at the kremlin drenched with sweat and panting for breath, but long before Princess Velikokrasnova and the others could be expected. I dashed through the kremlin and up into my chambers, washed off and changed into fresh clothes, and made my way, now walking at what I hoped was a nonchalant and leisurely pace, to the children’s chambers, where I found Mirochka, the tsarinoviches, Vyacheslav Iri-novich, and Sera all gathering together for our promised outing.

“Ah, Valya,” said Sera. “We were wondering where you were and whether you would be able to join us. Are you ready?”

“Indeed,” I said, trying to breathe normally as I spoke. “And we will have more companions as well.”

“Why have you been running, mama?” asked Mirochka, coming forward and examining me with a motherly air.

“I had to race a kibitka back to the kremlin.”

“A kibitka!” said Sera, at the same time as Mirochka asked anxiously, “And did you win, mama?”

“I think so,” I said. “When I came through the stables I saw no sign of them, although they’ve probably arrived by now. Princess Velikokrasnova’s kibitka,” I added, turning back to Sera.

“You mean to say you *ran* all the way back from the Velikokrasnova

palace?” asked Sera. “Faster than horses?”

“Faster than walking horses, yes,” I told her with a grin. “I wanted to make sure to be able to welcome our visitors properly.”

“Is that so?” she asked, now smiling and arching a brow. “Will Ivan Marinovich really be joining us, then?”

“Along with his mother and stepfather,” I said.

Vyacheslav Irinovich stared at me in dismay, and Sera’s face was torn between a laugh and a groan. “Is that wise?” she asked.

“Princess Velikokrasnova seemed to think so,” I told her. “It was entirely her idea. Just as it was her idea to get in a kibitka and leave me standing in the street.”

“Well,” said Sera. “May she get much joy out of it, then.” She leaned close to me and whispered, winking, “As much joy as I get out of seeing you with pink cheeks once again, Valya. It’s been too long.”

“I’ll be glad to run every day if it will make you happy,” I said.

“I’d be even more happy if you had other, better, reasons to make your face glow, Valya—and you soon will, if I have anything to do with it.” She winked again, clearly in high good humor.

“What are you talking about?” demanded Mirochka, sounding alarmed and left out.

“Nothing,” I said, “and don’t interrupt the Empress, my dove,” while Sera patted her on the head and said, “Oh, only some plans I have to make your mother happy. You want her to be happy, don’t you?”

“Of course, Tsarina,” said Mirochka, with an earnest little bow.

“Wonderful. Then let’s go make that happen. Shall we go down?”

“Whenever you’re ready,” I said, and, after the last-minute confusion that always accompanies the movement of children, not to mention large parties, we were all trooping down the corridor and the stairs towards the stables. Sera, nearly bouncing with good spirits and excitement, chatted with great enthusiasm about our walk with Vyacheslav Irinovich and the children. Watching her as I walked in the back, I was struck by the alarming thought that at least some of her good humor was due to the thought that she was helping me, that she was doing something to make me happy, and that she expected me to be...happy, like she was right now. Well, that was manifestly im-

possible. I had never been prone to Sera's bouts of cheerfulness. But of course I *could* be happy in my own way, even if it bore little outward similarity to hers. I tried to think about the possibility that we were right now walking towards the source of my future happiness, which would be found, as Sera seemed to think it would be, in a union with Ivan Marinovich. I tried to imagine burdening a man, and such a young man at that, with such a heavy task, but my head knew that that was out of the question, and my heart shied away from thoughts of happiness in general, and the thought that my happiness could be riding on the outcome of tonight's encounter especially. The very idea of striving for something with the specific goal of happiness was too...I would have said frightening, except that I couldn't work up enough passion even to feel frightened about it. Everything inside me simply wheeled about and galloped off in the opposite direction at the first sign of such thoughts, so that it was as if I didn't have them at all.

I was fortunately interrupted in my non-thoughts and non-feelings by our exit into the stable yard, where we found Princess Velikokrasnova's kibitka and its occupants waiting for us.

"Dearest Marina Yekaterinovna," said Sera, hurrying over to them. "What an unexpected honor! I confess I had no idea when I invited your son that you would favor us not only with his presence, but with that of yourself and your husband as well, but I am delighted to have you all grace our stroll through the park. Such a fine evening, is it not? I confess I adore walking in the evening after summer rainstorms. I hope you are well? Your recent journey has not discomposed you? I am so glad to hear it! Please, if you would be so kind, walk with me, for we have much to discuss..." And Sera, pouring forth a torrent of civilities, forced Princess Velikokrasnova out of the kibitka and marched her off in the direction of the park without allowing her to object or even get a word in edgewise. Vyacheslav Irinovich did the same thing to Nika, who managed to give me one despairing look, and glance for an instant at Mirochka before jerking his eyes away as if burned by the sight of her.

And so it naturally fell out that I ended up escorting Ivan, while the children frolicked around us with all the abandon of a group of children who had been penned up inside on a long summer after-

noon, thus providing us with one more layer of distraction and concealment. If there had been a bit more of a breeze, enough to blow away the mosquitoes that were whining anxiously around us, it would have been a perfect family outing.

“I got your note,” I said to Ivan as soon as I judged the others to be out of earshot. “That was clever of you. And I didn’t know you had a knack for drawing.”

“Oh...” He blushed. “They took away all my things for writing, but I managed to tear off a corner of a letter I’d been meaning to send to Denis but hadn’t gotten around to. And some of the serving girls are... kindly disposed towards me, so...”

“I understand. I hope you weren’t mistreated?”

“Only locked up,” he said with a rueful smile. “So far, at least. There may be some revenge for this little outing, though.”

I looked at Princess Velikokrasnova’s unpleasantly rigid back ahead of us. It certainly had a vengeful look to me. “You think it likely she’ll take this out on you later, then?” I asked.

He shrugged in a way that said it was too distasteful to talk about. I eyed Princess Velikokrasnova’s back with even more disfavor. Was she truly the kind of person who would have her own child beaten out of spite? I looked at Ivan again. By the way he was holding himself, I had to guess yes. I looked up at Nika and wondered if she extended that kind of treatment to her husband as well. To my surprise, my heart squeezed painfully at that thought. Despite all the ill I had wished him over the years, all the times I had wished I could make him suffer, suffer horribly (perhaps by setting him on fire or tearing all the flesh from his face, since I myself was far from immune to vindictive and violent impulses), when I actually thought of the very real suffering he might have undergone, and might still undergo, I found as I watched his hunched (I couldn’t help but think) shoulders walk in front of me that I didn’t like the thought of his unhappiness one bit, and I wished I could spare him all of it.

“And I’m sure she’ll rope him into it somehow too,” said Ivan bitterly, following my gaze.

“Do you think it will involve...violence?” I asked cautiously, not wanting to frighten him into silence with questions that were too di-

rect. It was not the kind of thing that people tended to talk about.

He shrugged and looked away. I could feel the muscles of my jaw begin to jump in time with my pulse. And to think that this was something Nika had become complicit in...

"No," I said out loud. "No she won't."

"No one seems to be able to stop her," he said tiredly.

Ruslan ran past us, chasing his brothers. I grabbed him by the shoulder. "Ruslan," I said. "Soon you will be a man grown. It's high time you had a companion, a young man of noble birth to be your friend and confidant. Let Ivan Marinovich here be that man."

Ruslan looked at me with equal parts confusion and suspicion. I gave him a little shake. "You need someone other than your brothers, someone who can guide you into manhood. It is common for tsarinoviches and tsarinovnas to have such companions. Ivan Marinovich will be yours."

"But I don't know him, Valeriya Dariyevna," he objected, frowning his sullen frown.

"Well, you will soon," I said. "We'll tell your mother at the end of our stroll, agreed?"

He tried to squirm free, but I gave him another little shake and held him until he said, reluctantly, that he agreed.

"You'll start tonight," I told Ivan. "I'm sure your mother will be delighted at the honor done to you and her family."

Something like a smile was trying to tug at the corners of his mouth. "And my proposed journey with you East?" he asked.

I waved my hand. "The tsarinovich's companion may be called upon to serve the realm in myriad ways. And he should gain some knowledge of the world in order to better serve his young charge."

Now he was truly smiling. "And will the Tsarina go along with this, do you think, Valeriya Dariyevna?"

"Chances are high. She often does go along with my mad schemes."

"Nikita Marislavovich said..." began Ivan, and then stopped.

"Yes?" I prompted.

"There was a lot of commotion this afternoon after you came by the first time," he said. "And disagreement. More than usual. My mother said...my mother said that it was just another one of your ploys, that

there was no way that the Tsarina was behind all of this, that you were just bluffing and you should be called on it and reported to the Empress and sent packing, but Nikita Marislavovich said...he said that,” he swallowed and then rushed on, “that you were headstrong and proud and would ride roughshod over other people’s lives—except for the Tsarina’s. He said that the other princesses, the ones who thought you were self-serving, were wrong, and that you would do anything for her and that everything you did was ultimately for her, and if you said you were there at her orders, it was because you were there at her orders and that we would do well not to cross you in this.

“And then my mother stormed off—we were in my chamber—and he stayed and he asked me about...about what you and I had done, and what I thought your...your intentions were, and so I...I told him. There’s little love lost between us, but he’s the only person I can confide in, I can ask for advice about such a matter. And he said that,” he swallowed again and looked away with even greater embarrassment than before, “he said that any man in your life, or anyone at all for that matter, would have to understand that he came second. He said that... that as far as he could tell, there are really only two things you love in the world: serving your sister and having your own way. And he said that...that the entire time you were...together, the entire time you were telling him that he was what you...wanted the most, it was still clear as daylight that your heart really lay at the foot of the Wooden Throne, and when...when it went bad, it was the Empress who helped you, and the Empress you listened to. And he said that he was sure it was even more the case now, and any man who married you would have to understand that first of all he would always be a prize that you had won, and second of all that he came second in your life, after the Empress. But if he understood that, he said, he would probably have a good life and be fairly treated. And then he said...he said that for many men, coming in second on the list of things you loved was probably better than coming in first on the list of things that other people hated, and that...I needed to face the fact that I was always going to be a prize for other people to win, no matter what I thought of the matter, and that it was time for me to start thinking for myself and making my own decisions, because despite all that, the only person who could live my

life was me, not my mother or my wife or anyone else.”

“I see,” I said softly into the silence. I paused for a moment, but Ivan continued to look down and away from me. “Thank you,” I told him.

“Dearest sister!” called Sera from in front of us. “Ivan Marinovich! Favor us with your company for a moment, if you will.”

We both hurried forward to where the others were walking, breaking off our conversation at what for me had been a keenly interesting moment, but what for Ivan, I could tell, had been a keenly painful moment and one he had been glad to leave behind.

“Dearest sister,” said Sera, once we had drawn level with the others. Princess Velikokrasnova gave me a look that would have curdled stone, and Nika kept his eyes studiously fixed on the ground. “Marina Yekaterinovna here has, with a mother’s proper concern, expressed some reservations about the possibility of Ivan Marinovich accompanying you on your mission East. I have explained to her why I wish to have him there to represent her family, but perhaps you can lay some of her apprehensions as to his safety to rest.”

“With pleasure,” I said with a little bow. I turned to Princess Velikokrasnova and began speaking as earnestly and mildly as if she were awaiting my words with smiling interest, not glaring daggers at me. I would have thought the daggers would have hurt more than they did, but in fact I hardly felt them at all. I didn’t know whether that was because I had stopped being able to feel anything other than a distant rage regarding her, or because I was looking towards the future and better things in it. “We will travel with all speed, of course, as our errand is urgent and we will need to go there and return before winter sets in, but I anticipate little actual danger. We are merely going to gather information, and I cannot see anyone being so bold or so unwise as to attack a party carrying the Imperial flag. And of course Ivan Marinovich could have a trustworthy escort as befits his station as the son of the Velikokrasnova line and as the tsarinovich’s confidant and companion.”

“I *beg* your pardon?” cried Princess Velikokrasnova in involuntary dismay, while Nika shot one hot glance at me before returning to studying the ground at his feet.

“It is high time Ruslan Tsarinovich had a proper companion of high birth and good character,” I said. “He has chosen to favor Ivan Marinovich with the office. Ivan will thus be a representative of Krasnograd as well as the black earth district, and of course will have Imperial guards at his side day and night, as well as whatever chaperone you choose to provide him.”

“I don’t see how he can be companion to the tsarinovich while gallivanting about the countryside in search of...phantoms and shadows!” said Princess Velikokrasnova, relaxing slightly back into her natural arrogance, now that she thought she had spotted a flaw in my plan.

“It will be of great benefit to Ruslan Tsarinovich to have a companion who has proven his trustworthiness and gained experience with the world through travel,” I said. “A most ideal solution, I would say.”

“Indeed,” agreed Sera gravely. She sent me an amused glance, her eyes sparkling, and then went on, still speaking seriously, “And I am delighted that Ivan Marinovich has done us the honor of accepting our proposal, although knowing his noble heart, along with the long history of service rendered by his family, I am not surprised.”

Princess Velikokrasnova looked back and forth between us. It was plain that she knew something was up, that there was something funny about Ivan’s sudden invitation to become Ruslan’s companion, and that there was more to our insistence that Ivan go East with me than we were letting on, but she couldn’t figure out how to argue against it. I once again found myself feeling sorry for her. Watching her move her head from me to Sera and back to me again was like looking at a bull that had been cornered between two assailants, and then didn’t know which one to attack first or how to extricate himself from a situation he had always thought himself too big and strong to fall into.

“The honor you do us is immense, Tsarina, even if the way it has been sprung upon us is a little abrupt for my taste,” she said tightly, snapping her head away from me and back to Sera. “Of course we will be delighted to accept. But I fear that, regarding this proposed...*expedition*, it is out of the question for Ivan Marinovich to leave Krasnograd just now. You see, next week I expect to begin marriage negotiations

on his behalf.”

“Of course you do,” said Sera agreeably. “Who could expect anything less from such a caring mother as yourself? Who is the young lady in question, if I may be so bold to ask? I hope you have found someone suitably amiable and noble, for I am sure that your son deserves no less.”

“The matter is too delicate to be discussed publicly as of yet,” said Princess Velikokrasnova, shaking her head irritably, like a bull shaking off gnats.

“I understand,” said Sera, nodding. “I only hope that when the time comes, I will show the same care and discretion for my sons! But you see, dearest Marina Yekaterinovna, I fear that I really must insist that Ivan Marinovich go on this expedition. Ruslan has such a longing to hear about the East, you see, and he’s quite wild for his companion to bring back enough first-hand stories on the subject to fill an entire winter’s worth of boredom...”

“I understand, of course, Tsarina, I do, but *you* must understand that I cannot just agree to this sudden proposal without considering it properly. And so many arrangements have already been made...it will be such an inconvenience to put off the betrothal and marriage...”

“Of course,” interjected Sera smoothly. “But if the young lady is truly set on him, then no doubt she will be happy to wait.”

“But you see, Tsarina,” said Princess Velikokrasnova, raising her voice and speaking more quickly in an attempt to drown Sera out, “I am afraid that her family might not look upon this journey with favor. To go out, an unmarried man, with women out of the family, some of whom,” she gave me another sour look, “may not have the best reputations...”

“I am sure that whatever chaperone you provide will make sure that nothing happens to jeopardize the match,” put in Sera before Princess Velikokrasnova could finish.

“Yes, of course, Tsarina, of course, but it is not just the danger of actual impropriety that concerns me so much as the appearance of it. You must admit...”

“I must?” asked Sera, raising her brows at Princess Velikokrasnova. “I *must* admit? What must I admit, Marina Yekaterinovna? Do you

have something to say against any of my agents—or my kin?”

“No, Tsarina, no, but...”

“I’ll hear no more buts, thank you very much, Marina Yekaterinovna,” said Sera. “I believe the matter is now closed for discussion. If you care to revisit it later, you may do so in the Hall of Council along with all the other petitioners.” She turned to her guards and to Vyacheslav Irinovich. “I feel I have walked enough this evening,” she announced. “Let us return to the kremlin. Gather up the children, if you would be so kind.”

“Very well,” said Princess Velikokrasnova. “I will bring it before you tomorrow, Tsarina, if it pleases you. Ivan!” she called sharply, making as if to stride away from us in anger. “We’re leaving!”

“The tsarinovich hasn’t given me permission,” said Ivan in a low voice.

Princess Velikokrasnova stopped in the middle of an impetuous stride. “What?” she demanded.

“The tsarinovich hasn’t given me permission to go,” said Ivan, straightening his shoulders and speaking more firmly. “And neither has the Tsarina. Since I am under their command now, until they do, I can’t go anywhere.”

“Of all the...” said Princess Velikokrasnova, while Sera said simultaneously, “I see you will be all we hoped and more, Ivan Marinovich! If you would do us the honor, we would greatly desire to bring you back to the kremlin with us this evening.”

“It will be an honor and a pleasure, Tsarina,” said Ivan with a bow.

“Such manners!” cried Sera, her face glowing with what, I thought, was genuine joy. “It will do Ruslan such good to spend time with you! Ruslan! I am delighted beyond words by your choice of companion. Come, Ivan Marinovich, walk with me and the tsarinovich.”

Ivan gave his mother, and then more briefly me, an uncertain look, and then went to follow Sera, leaving the both of us behind to stare at each other, which Princess Velikokrasnova did with rather more venom than I did. I still couldn’t help myself from feeling sorry for her. After all, one day it could be me standing there, watching as my own child chose to leave me for someone I neither liked nor approved of.

“He will be well taken care of,” I said suddenly.

Princess Velikokrasnova's face pursed in even deeper dislike.

"I know you don't like me or trust me, and with good reason," I said. "But you have my word as a Zerkalitsa and a Stepnaya that I will do everything I can to make sure that no harm comes to him. Including the harm that you have most reason to fear that I might cause."

"Why?" she cried, sounding almost in despair. "Why are you doing this?"

"We need the loyalty of the black earth district."

"And you think you can gain it by these...cheap tricks and underhanded maneuvers?!"

"No," I said. "We think we can gain it by firming up our alliances with our old allies."

"You...you mean..." She trailed off as a sickening comprehension spread over her face.

I bowed. "Anything is possible, Marina Yekaterinovna," I told her. "But I swear to you, by anything you wish me to swear by, that your son will come to no harm by my hand, and that I will do everything I can to keep any harm from befalling him."

"Because your word is so good!" she cried scornfully.

"Marina," said Nika softly, stepping up beside her. She gave him a look that would have shattered glass, but he—in a surprising display of courage—pressed on. "In this it is."

"I cannot believe it!"

"Will you swear, Valya?" asked Nika. "Swear before the gods that you will do all you can to keep him from harm?"

"Of course," I said. "Let us go right now."

"You won't get me to agree that easily!" Princess Velikokrasnova snapped out.

"You don't have to agree to anything for me to do this," I told her. "I demand nothing in return. Come, let us go now."

If I had thought that would soothe her suspicions and ease her animosity—which I hadn't—I would have been sorely disappointed, since it obviously only made her distrust me more, but I set off before she could refuse me, turning down a narrow side path that led to one of the park's smaller and less visited prayer trees. At first I was alone, but after a moment I heard two sets of footsteps coming behind me,

and the hissing of Princess Velikokrasnova's angry whispers, which blended in with the wind in the trees until I could not make out the individual words.

The tree was as I had remembered it, a small fir in a thicket of firs, hidden from the main path. There were only a few faded ribbons on it, left from other people's prayers. Except for one that—I walked over to it and looked at it without touching it—was my own. I had tied it there the day I had first suspected I was carrying Mirochka. It was now worn and tattered, and the bright red blood I had drenched it with was no more than a few brown streaks.

"But it worked," I said softly. "I prayed for her to be healthy and happy, and so far she has been. It worked." I stepped back. Should I put my new ribbon next to it? Sure, why not. It might seem barbaric to these black earth princesses—but it *had* worked. I pulled my knife from my belt, and cut off part of my sleeve. Behind me, I heard Princess Velikokrasnova gasp in surprise, and then gasp even louder when I used the knife to cut the vein in the crook of my left arm.

"What are you..." she cried.

"They still believe in blood, on the steppe," Nika told her quietly. I had told him that myself, after...after he had been so shocked by the bloody aftermath of our first tryst. He had almost cried or been sick or both, but I had laughed and told him that on the steppe we still believed in marking all the really important things in blood. I wondered if he were remembering the same thing just now. Probably. Probably best not to think about it. I pressed the strip I had cut from my sleeve against the blood flowing from my arm.

"What are you..." said Princess Velikokrasnova again, but Nika hushed her. I held the strip of cloth against my arm until it was well soaked with blood, and then walked back over to what I thought of as my side of the tree, and knelt down in front of it.

I will never harm him, I thought. And if others try to harm him, I will prevent it, and if I fail, then I will bring them to justice or vengeance.

A breeze lifted the branches and brushed the fir needles against my face. The ribbon I had hung there nine summers ago fluttered against my eyelashes. I ripped the bloody cloth in two and tied one of the pieces next to its sister on the branch. Then I got back up and

walked over to Princess Velikokrasnova.

“I will never harm him,” I said, pressing the bloody piece of cloth into her hands. “As the gods are my witness. And if others try to harm him, I will prevent it, and if I fail, then I will bring them to justice or vengeance.”

Princess Velikokrasnova looked down at the cloth I had given her, which was now staining her hand with blood, and then back up at me. I had seen her give me many looks before. She had (like many older women) disliked the free-spirited child I had been almost as much as she hated the impetuous young woman I had become, who had seduced and gotten a child off of her future husband, and every look she had ever given me had held some mixture of annoyance, hatred, and contempt, but this was the first time I had ever seen her look upon me with fear.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” she demanded, holding up the bloody cloth between her thumb and forefinger as if she were gripping a dead rat by the tail.

“Keep it,” I said. “As witness to my vow.”

“I don’t...” she shook her head in distaste and confusion, “I don’t believe in this kind of thing.”

“But I do,” I said. I tore off another strip of cloth from my sleeve and used it to bind my arm.

“And you expect me to...to just go along with whatever mad scheme you propose, after this little display?”

“No,” I said. “You can do whatever you like. I didn’t do it for you. I did it for me. And for Ivan Marinovich. Because,” I leaned in a little closer to her face, “if *anyone* should cause him harm, including *anyone* from his own family, I meant what I said. I *will* bring them to justice... or vengeance.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” she demanded.

“Exactly what I just said,” I told her. “Come, let us return to the others.” I set off back towards the main path, pressing my hand against the cut on my arm to stop the bleeding. Princess Velikokrasnova trailed uncertainly behind.

“I still don’t understand what you want,” she said after a little while. “What do you hope to gain from all this? Has the Tsarina,” suspicion

rose in her voice, “has the Tsarina promised you *Velikokrasnovskoye*? Is that how she bought you off?”

“Bought me off? Bought me off from what?”

“From attempting to take the throne,” she said impatiently. “Is that what this is all about? The promise of *Velikokrasnovskoye* in exchange for your loyalty? You can’t have it, you know! I’ll disinherit him rather than see the province pass to *you!*”

“The Tsarina doesn’t have to offer me anything for my loyalty,” I said, surprised at how peaceable my voice sounded. Perhaps it was the blood loss making me calm. “That she always has for free, despite what so many of you seem to think. And we never even spoke of who would gain *Velikokrasnovskoye*. I am a Zerkalitsa and the heir to *Stepnoye*. I have no need for more land. But what we *do* need, Marina Yekaterinovna, is *your* loyalty and *your* good will, and for that we are willing to pay quite a lot.”

“What?” she asked, sounding almost interested in spite of herself. “What are you willing to pay?”

“Why, me, of course, Marina Yekaterinovna,” I said, turning to look at her. “We are willing to pay you with an alliance with the Zerkalitsa family, made through me. One day your grandchildren could be members of the Imperial family, Marina Yekaterinovna. I know you have other alliances in mind, but think of the advantages this one could bring. Who else in all the Known World could make you that offer?”

“And *Velikokrasnovskoye*...”

“Would be yours to dispose of as you will,” I assured her. “Pass it on to your grandchildren, or your third-sister, or to whomever you wish. We only want your loyalty, not your land, and we only want what is already ours by rights anyway. There is no catch in this for you, Marina Yekaterinovna. I know you have little cause to love me, but in this you have no cause to mistrust me.”

She shook her head and looked at me through narrowed eyes. I glanced away and inadvertently caught Nika’s gaze. He gave me a tiny shrug, as if to say he was powerless here, but (I fancied) he might try to convince her later.

“Believe what you will,” I told her. “Think of me what you will.

Hate me as much as you like. But the Tsarina and I are both serious in our intentions, and we intend to do you no harm—as long as you remain loyal to our family.”

We came out onto the main path before she could reply. The others had stopped in a glade a little ways ahead, and the children were playing tag. Ivan was playing with them. I smiled. Princess Velikokrasnova gave me an even sourer look than before. I doubted I had won her over. I doubted I could ever win her over. Some women do not forgive and forget, not even after sincere repentance and long years. Funny. I had always thought I was one of those women. But already I was forgiving her, and Nika, and everyone else whom I had blamed for my sorrow, and without any effort at all. It was just happening.

“Mama, mama!” Mirochka cried, evading Ruslan’s grasping fingers and running over to me. “Where were you? We’re playing tag! What did you do to your arm?”

“It’s nothing,” I told her. “Should I join you?”

“Not till the bleeding’s stopped, silly!” she said, examining the cut. She looked over at Princess Velikokrasnova and Nika. “Hello,” she said, with a careless bow. “I’m Mirochka.”

Princess Velikokrasnova looked as if a viper had suddenly reared up on the path in front of her, and Nika took an involuntary step backwards and looked away, as if searching for a hiding place.

“Aren’t you going to introduce yourselves?” asked Mirochka in puzzlement.

“In my family, children are trained to have better manners,” said Princess Velikokrasnova viciously.

“In my family, children are trained to rule,” I said before Mirochka could blurt out something in justifiable but ill-timed anger. “After all, one day she may command us all. She must become accustomed to it now rather than later. This is Marina Yekaterinovna,” I added to Mirochka, “and this is Nikita Marislavovich. Marina Yekaterinovna is Ivan Marinovich’s mother.”

“It’s an honor,” said Mirochka, bobbing with another little bow but eyeing Princess Velikokrasnova with something bordering on contempt. She gave the bloody cloth in Princess Velikokrasnova’s hand a long look, obviously full of curiosity, but then decided not to bother

asking her about, and turned back to me and said, “Has the bleeding stopped now, mama? I think it has! Would you like to play with us?”

“Of course,” I said. “Let’s go.” We began to walk over to where the boys were still running around the glade after each other. Mirochka waited until we were out of whisper-shot, and then said quietly, “They’re not very polite, are they, mama?”

“No,” I whispered back. “But let’s not make a fuss about it, shall we? They don’t like us very much, but that’s their problem, not ours.”

“I see,” she said. She looked at my ripped sleeve and the binding on my arm, and asked, “Why did you cut yourself and give Marina Yekaterinovna part of the bandage, mama?”

“It was an oath. Remember I told you that’s how to make oaths?”

“But you said it was only for very serious ones, mama.”

“And it is. But this was a very serious oath.”

“Oh. What was it about?”

“I promised to watch over Ivan Marinovich and make sure nothing happens to him,” I told her. “And I gave part of the cloth to Marina Yekaterinovna because she’s his mother and now she keeps part of the oath.”

“Oh, I see. Why did you promise to watch over him?” Her face lit up at a sudden thought. “Is he going to become another brother to me?”

“Perhaps something like that,” I said. “You know Ruslan has taken him as his companion now, and he is to go with me when I go on my journey East. So it is like he is part of the family now, almost.”

“I’m glad! I like him,” she confided, and then, seeing that the boys were all three of them trying and almost succeeding in wrestling Ivan to the ground and holding him there, she dashed off to defend him.

Princess Velikokrasnova, still holding the bloody cloth between her thumb and forefinger as if it were a dead rat she had by the tail, went over to Sera and began an angry discussion with her, waving her finger in Sera’s face and shaking the cloth for emphasis. I wondered how many other princesses would dare to speak that way to their Empress. I wondered if part of our problem were not that Sera and I were younger than so many of the princesses, including Marina Yekaterinovna. Sera was older than me, but she was still not yet forty, while

Princess Velikokrasnova was five-and-forty if she was a day, and most of the other princesses on the Princess Council were even older. Just our bad luck that to them, we were still light-minded girls or naïve young women. I wondered what I could do to change that. I wondered what I would have to do to change that. Bringing back a band of slave traders in chains might be a good start, I thought, watching Princess Velikokrasnova make another angry and dismissive gesture before turning away and marching off, her back stiff with outrage. Nika scurried behind her, shoulders slumped. I wondered if he would have developed that same submissive stoop and downtrodden expression if he'd married me instead. I hoped not, because it made me want to go over and kick him. The worry that preyed all too frequently on my mind that Mirochka might turn out to be more like him than like me rose up forcefully, and I worried about it as Princess Velikokrasnova, shadowed by Nika, went over to Ivan and began haranguing him. At first he hung his head just as Nika had, but as she continued, his head rose and his spine stiffened almost as straight as hers. He said something angry to her. Quick as a snake, her hand flashed out and slapped his face.

"You stop that!" Mirochka's angry shout carried across the glade and over the sound of my running. She had jumped in front of him and was facing Princess Velikokrasnova with her hands on her hips and a look of outrage on her face. Definitely more like me than like Nika, I thought with relief, even as I ran faster in order to snatch her out of harm's way.

Princess Velikokrasnova's hand drew back again. I wasn't going to be able to reach her in time to stop her. Rage at the thought of someone, and especially *her*, striking my child, was almost overpowered by the exultation of the thought that if she did that, if she hit Mirochka, I could demand almost any punishment of her I could desire, and Sera would be hard pressed to refuse me.

Ivan's hand shot out and caught her wrist before the blow could fall. I slowed to a walking pace, curious to see how the matter would unfold.

"How dare you!" she shrieked. "Raise your hand against your own mother!"

“Mirochka!” I called. “Mirochka, come here!”

“I’m not leaving him, mama!” she called back, giving Princess Velikokrasnova a furious glare.

Ivan let go of his mother’s arm, only to have her draw back her hand and slap him again. Mirochka kicked her in the shins. Unquestionably my daughter, I thought, sparing a glance for Nika. He was watching in horrified despair, but made no move to intervene. Sera and Vyacheslav Irinovich had turned to watch the spectacle unfold, and the guards, who had been standing around the edge of the glade overseeing the children’s game, were closing in on us from all sides. Judging by their faces, they intended to overpower Princess Velikokrasnova, and Nika, and Ivan as well.

“STOP!” I shouted.

Everyone froze.

“I fear there has been some misunderstanding,” I said loudly. “Something to bring about this little tiff. Marina Yekaterinovna, please accept my deepest apologies for my daughter’s behavior.” I stepped up and pulled Mirochka (despite her vehement protests) behind me, while angling myself to stand between Princess Velikokrasnova and Ivan. “She is a high-spirited and fair-minded girl, and she has already taken to Ivan Marinovich as to a brother. I’m sure you can understand her actions. Now, perhaps we should all retire for the night. Morning is wiser than evening, and I’m sure this will all seem like nothing by tomorrow.”

“My sister is right,” said Sera, coming over to join us. The guards all hovered around her, waiting for a command to grab Princess Velikokrasnova, or let her go. “As a mother of three sons myself, I understand how feelings can become strained sometimes. Come, let us all retire. I’m sure my men will be happy to escort you back to your carriage, Marina Yekaterinovna.”

Princess Velikokrasnova gave all of us, and especially Ivan, a malevolent glare, and then whirled around and strode off back in the direction of the stables, Nika and two guards hurrying after her.

“Thank you,” I said to Ivan.

“For what?” he asked. He looked dazed. There were two bright red overlapping handprints on his left cheek.

“For stopping her from hitting Mirochka. Next time, though, you should stop her before she strikes you, too.”

“Valeriya Dariyevna, I...” He stopped and shook his head. I wondered what kind of thoughts went through the head of a person who was hit by their mother on a regular basis. My mother had only ever struck me once. It had not gone so well for her, and she had never dared try it again. But it seemed that Ivan would just stand there and take it...perhaps it was because he was a man. Men seemed to crave that kind of thing more. But still...

“Come, let us go back to the kremlin,” said Sera, and we all formed up and began walking down the path out of the glade. Princess Velikokrasnova, I judged, should, unless she deliberately tarried, stay just out of sight of us all the way back.

I arranged for Ivan to end up walking with me at the back of the group once again. “Why did you do it, Valeriya Dariyevna?” he asked in a low voice, once the others were no longer paying attention to us.

“Do what?”

“Why did you...save her? You could have just let the guards take her, throw her in prison even, but you...I saw. You thought about something, and then you...you gave her a way out. Why did you do it? I know you have no love for her, and you were...a moment before you were ready to kill her, I saw it in your eyes. But then you changed your mind.”

“Having her dragged into prison by the guards would serve no one,” I said. “But letting her walk free might win us some kind of favor in the future. Besides...I almost...feel sorry for her.”

“You do?” He almost smiled. The handprints were already fading from his face. “That’s unexpected.”

I shrugged. “I am surprised as you are,” I told him. “What can I say? Half the time even I don’t know which way I’m going to jump until after I do it.”

“That must lead to a lot of falls,” he said, almost-smiling a little bit more.

“Strangely, no. My feet seem to know where to go better than the rest of me does, so I just follow them.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said, now actually smiling. The memo-

ry of being struck in the face twice seemed to be fading from his mind as fast as the handprints were fading from his skin. Probably because it had been such a common occurrence in his life that by now one blow just blended in with all the others. I wondered if—no, when—he would turn vicious, like a beaten dog. There had been just a hint of it tonight when he had grabbed his mother’s wrist, but that had been such a mild response compared to what *some* people (such as myself) would have done that it could hardly be called a sign of a hot temper. And, I couldn’t help but think, perhaps it was good that his life with his mother was not a congenial one. It was well known, and well lamented, that too many men preferred their mothers above all other women, and even when they married and became men in their own right, they longed for nothing more than to return to the time of their boyhood and their childhood home. More than one marriage had been spoilt because of the husband’s desperate wish to still be a little boy and to flee back to his mother. But in Ivan’s case perhaps that would not be a problem. Perhaps he could do what so many of his brothers failed at, and leave his mother’s home and become a man in truth. If only I could be sure of that, and also that he would he would develop the backbone he required, without the wanton viciousness that so often went with it.

“Can I ask you something?” I said.

“Of course, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“What would it take to make you really angry?”

“I’m sorry?” he said, laughing.

“What would it take to make you really, truly angry?” I repeated.

“The one time my mother slapped my face, I broke my plate over her head and told her she was no longer my mother.”

“Oh,” said Ivan, looking halfway between impressed and appalled.

“Ah...how old were you then?”

“About twelve.”

“And that was the first time your mother hit you?”

“And the last,” I confirmed.

“You must have really deserved it, then,” he said, looking at me sideways.

I gave him a look back. “I don’t recognize the right of other people

to decide what I do or don't deserve, or to demand things of me. Either I give it freely, or not at all."

"Oh. But what if it's something you don't want to give?"

"I'm not afraid of pain," I said. "If I think it's something that needs to be done, I'll do it, even if I don't want to. But if someone wants me to do something I think is a bad idea, then I won't do it, even if it's my mother asking."

"And if it's the Empress?"

"Let's hope she never puts it to the test," I said lightly. "But in all seriousness, someone needs to break a plate over your mother's head, or *something*. There were no further problems with my mother after that little incident. Maybe you should try it."

"Perhaps..." He shook his head. "I don't think so, Valeriya Dariyevna. You see...you see, my first memory of my mother...my first memory of my mother is of her screaming and hitting me over and over again, while some serving woman held me down. I was probably about three or four. Most of my later memories of my mother are of something similar, to be honest. It's just how she is. And besides," the smile he was smiling now held a much darker edge, "I just lived to see her humiliated by the Empress, and kicked in the shins by a girl of eight, which for her is a hundred times worse than me breaking plates and disavowing her. Now if she could just lose most of her fortune and be shunned by her fellow princesses, my life would be complete." The dark smile slipped away, to be replaced by his normal bright and bashful expression. "I'm sorry," he said contritely. "I shouldn't have said that..."

"Oh no," I said. "It makes me think much better of you. I'll have to see what I can do about that. And in the meantime, you returning with us to the kremlin is sure to sour her stomach."

"True," he said, gloating and regret chasing each other across his face. "And...I'm certain, Valeriya Dariyevna. Even more certain than before. I want to go with you East. I want to go with you on this mission. I want to serve the Tsarina and Zem', and...if there's any chance that we can do anything for any of those children who were taken, then I want to be part of it. I...I've never done *anything*, Valeriya Dariyevna. Anything worthwhile, I mean, anything I could be proud of.

I don't...I'm sick of being someone everyone bows to, but no one respects. If...if I go with you on this journey and come back, then...then my mother will never dare slap my face again. She won't dare because I won't let her!"

"Of course," I said softly. "Of course you have to come with us. For that, and many other reasons. By law you will be of age at Midsummer, and can decide for yourself whether to come or stay. We set off the day after. Do you have a horse? Or horses? Traveling clothes and gear? All that kind of stuff?"

"Some," he said doubtfully. "But whether my mother will let me...I don't want to leave my horse behind if I can help it, though. The gods alone know what she'll do to him..."

"We'll send for him," I promised. "And for the rest of your things. And then we'll find whatever else you need. We'll have a whole kremlin's worth of goods at our disposal, so by tomorrow night you'll be fitted out like a prince—which you are. And then in two more days' time we'll be on the road, and all this will be left behind."

"Does it really work like that, Valeriya Dariyevna?" he asked. "Can you just leave...troubles and such behind?"

"Not really," I admitted. "But it *feels* like it when you first set out. And sometimes they go away on their own if you ignore them for long enough."

"I will be inconveniencing my mother if I leave. The betrothal..."

"Vanya!" I said sharply. He stopped and looked at me.

"You owe your mother *nothing*. You just told me that your first memory of her is of her holding you down and *beating* you. And now she wants to marry you off to some, some woman of dubious origin whom you don't even know? If leaving like this will inconvenience her, then *let* her be inconvenienced. Let her know what it's like to be slapped in the face in front of the most powerful people in Krasnograd. And if she attempts to take revenge on you and yours, if she disavows you and cuts you off without a grosh and takes away the Velikokrasnova name, well, let her feel the shame of seeing others take her only son into their families. No matter what happens, Vanya, no matter what you decide regarding our proposal, I swear to you, Sera—the Tsarina—will find a place for you here in Krasnograd, or if she can't or you

don't want to stay here, then I will find one for you in Stepnoye. The Zerkalitsy don't cast off those who have claim to us, and neither do the Stepniye. If your own family turns their back on you because you choose to become the tsarinovich's companion and go on this mission, then you can rest assured that the Zerkalitsy, and the Stepniye, and the Severnolesniye will all be clamoring to take you in."

"The Severnolesniye?" he asked in confusion.

"The tsarinovich's father is a Severnolesny by birth. No doubt they would take you in, if you preferred to make your home in the North."

"I see," he said slowly. "And if...pardon me for saying this, Valeriya Dariyevna, but if...if my mother disavows me, and I am no longer a Velikokrasnov, then what value will I have to all these great families? Will..." he blushed painfully, "will your proposal still stand? I would think that the Tsarina will want you to make an alliance with someone who still *has* a family."

"I don't know what she will do," I said. "But *my* offer will still stand. I wouldn't...I don't go back on my word, not on that kind of thing."

"Even if," he gave me an awfully shrewd look for a young man of twenty, "the Tsarina commanded you otherwise?"

"That would be unfortunate," I said. "Let us hope it doesn't come to that. I would hate to put her love of me to the test like that."

"I see." The corner of his mouth quirked, and he looked...pleased, I thought, and flattered, and maybe even a little bit in love. Sometimes there was nothing like telling a man you were set on him to bring him to you. My heart made a queer jump. Had I just made a declaration of passion to Ivan Marinovich Velikokrasnov? My heart made another queer jump, like a fish trying to fight its way out of deep mud. Such an elegant image to describe its return to life after all these years.

Chapter Twenty

We joined up with the others back at the kremlin. Princess Velikokrasnova and her kibitka were nowhere to be seen. According to the stable hands, she had already left, although not before screaming at the stableboys for bringing the kibitka around too slowly, and then screaming and striking one of her horses in the face for looking at her as she walked by. My dislike for her rose sharply, eclipsing all the pity I had felt before and reaching new, as yet unexplored, heights of hatred. There were many things I found difficult to forgive, and striking a horse in the face out of sheer bad temper was right at the top of the list. I had listened to Ivan's description of her mistreatment of him with rage but a certain amount of acceptance; after all, I knew that many mothers did that kind of thing, deplorable as I found it. But striking a good horse for no reason...was one of the worst things one could do back on the steppe. I was pleased to hear that Taisya Natalyevna, the mistress of horse, had witnessed the incident and had taken Princess Velikokrasnova to task so severely that, according to one of the stable hands who had seen it all, it was a wonder she hadn't been burnt to a crisp on the spot.

"Does she often take out her ill humor on her horses as well as her men?" I asked Ivan.

He shrugged. "Horses, men, serving girls...Valeriya Dariyevna, if you're not careful, I'm afraid your head will catch fire."

"My sister has a soft spot for horses," interjected Sera, who was watching us with amusement. "Although in many ways it is not immediately apparent, she *is* a direct descendent of Darya Krasnoslavovna. And of course she is a Stepnaya as well. Her love of horses rather outweighs her love of humans most of the time."

"That's because horses actually *deserve* it!" I said. "Unlike..." I decided not to say anything more about my opinion of Princess Velikokrasnova and her ilk in front of Ivan. I walked into the stable and found Taisya Natalyevna. "Ivan Marinovich will be relocating to the kremlin," I told her. "He wishes to have his horse brought here too.

And I'd say we should do so sooner rather than later, since he fears his mother will do something to the horse in retaliation."

Taisya Natalyevna, who shared my opinion about the proper treatment of good horses, narrowed her eyes and said that she and some of her sturdier lads would set off immediately to fetch the horse, and after getting a description of him from Ivan, she and three hulking lads did indeed head out in the direction of Black Earth Street. I tried to imagine Princess Velikokrasnova's response to their arrival. It was very heartening. Then I thought about Nika, and felt less heartened. I wondered if there was anything I could do there. No, not really.

"You're plotting revenge, aren't you, Valya?" said Sera, slipping over to stand beside me and whisper in my ear.

"As always," I told her with a smile.

"Oh good. And...dare I ask..." She raised a brow in the direction of Ivan, who was playing with Mirochka and the tsarinoviches again.

"Well, he hasn't accepted our proposal yet. But I think unless something goes terribly wrong, it's only a matter of time."

"Good," she said, with a satisfied little smile. "The sooner the better. When you fell behind us there I was almost hoping you'd...managed to convince him to...but there will be plenty of time to get him alone when you're journeying together."

Now it was my turn to raise a brow at *her*. "Get him alone? Whatever for?"

She sighed. "What with one thing and another, Valya, I've decided that I want you married and with child, or at least with child, before the summer is out."

"Before the summer is out! Whatever for! I could still be in the mountains then!"

"And when you come back, be sure that it's obvious to everyone that Zem' has another heir on the way. If it comes with an alliance, so much the better, but the child is the main thing."

I looked at her closely. Despite the hectic flush of her cheeks, her lips were almost blue. "Have the midwives..." I began.

"Oh, you know midwives, Valya. If you listen to them while you're carrying, you'll think that childbearing is a pleasure and every woman rises from childbed stronger than when she lies down. But they shake

their heads and purse their lips whenever they look at me. So please, *please*, Valya, *please*—be with child when you come back. If he,” she nodded to where Ivan was chasing the tsarinoviches around in circles, while Mirochka laughed herself breathless against the stable wall and Vyacheslav Irinovich looked on indulgently, “if he doesn’t please you, then find another, some guard or plowman or stable lad who looks fertile. But,” she smiled at me from the side of her mouth, “I think he pleases you well enough, doesn’t he?”

“And if his mother disavows him?” I asked. “What will happen to our alliance with the black earth district then? What if I get a child off of him, and then you decide it would be better for me to marry some other black earth princess’s son?”

“You already got a child off of Princess Vostochnokrasnova’s son without marrying him. Getting another one off of Princess Velikokrasnova’s son will hardly make things worse—and it may make things better. After all, there are many women who would be happy to see their granddaughter on the Wooden Throne, even if their son never sits beside her.”

“No, I meant: what about Ivan? What will happen to *him* then? Will we just discard him as spoilt goods?”

“No, of course not, Valya.” She tried to smile again, but suddenly she looked too tired to lift even the corners of her mouth, let alone shoulder my concerns. “Even if...even if you end up taking some other man as your husband, I promise that Ivan Marinovich will be well cared for. He’s the tsarinovich’s companion now. By the way, that was a stroke of brilliance on your part, so thank you. Had you been planning it long?”

“No,” I said. “It just came to me all of a sudden while we were walking through the park.”

“I see.” She took my arm. “Take me back to my chambers, Valya. I need to lie down.”

I started walking her across the stable yard. She hung heavy on my arm. “Will you make it?” I asked, trying not to let her see how much her sudden weakness alarmed me.

“Just...don’t let me fall.”

“Of course not. But should we call for a litter or something?”

“No. I don’t want to wait. Let’s just keep going.” She clutched harder at my arm.

“Of course.” I caught Vyacheslav Irinovich’s eye, and he came hurrying over.

“Sera and I are going back to her chambers,” I told him, as we continued to walk slowly across the yard. “Can you see that the children are escorted back to their own chambers, and that a place is provided for Ivan Marinovich?”

“Of course, Valeriya Dariyevna. My dear, should I take your other arm?”

Sera shook her head. “Just...see to the children, will you, and then come find me. Valya will bring me back safely, I’m sure.” We continued to walk slowly towards the kremlin door. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ivan break off his game with the children and go over to ask Vyacheslav Irinovich something, and then the two of them began herding the children towards the door after us, with loud protests from Mirochka and the two younger boys. I gave Mirochka a stern look, which quelled her complaints, at least until I was through the door and out of her sight.

“I hate this,” said Sera, once we were inside. “What were the gods thinking, eh? Surely they could have made things so that producing offspring was a little less awful, don’t you think?”

“I don’t think the gods had much of a plan for us, or thought things through very carefully. If they had, things would be very different.”

“No doubt you’re right,” she said tiredly, and then fell silent. We dragged our way up to her chambers, where I found her maids waiting for her with refreshments and clean nightclothes. They were taken aback by her weakness, but quickly rallied and began undressing her and preparing her for bed.

“I’ll be back shortly,” I told her, once I was sure that the maids would be watching over her in my absence.

“You don’t have to come back, Valya.” She gave me a faint smile. “Go have supper, go to bed, or go do whatever it is you would be doing if you weren’t watching over me. I have my maids, and Slava will be here soon. I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll be back shortly,” I repeated, and left before she could argue

with me any more.

The kremlin had several healers who lived in the servants' quarters. However, being healers, they were often off healing people, so when I showed up in the rooms where they in theory resided, no one was there. I snagged a passing serving girl, who told me that Nadezhda Dariyevna, the one who had spoken with me before, was off visiting her family, Olga Nastasyevna and Vasilisa Arinovna were in the barracks treating the results of a friendly brawl that had gotten out of hand (both of us rolled our eyes at that, and I resolved to have some harsh words with the guards if Sera were to suffer because her healers were off taking care of the self-inflicted injuries of a bunch of thoughtless snot-nosed little boys), and Snezhana Tatyánovna was in the kitchens taking care of a serving girl who had spilled hot soup on herself.

The kitchens were closest, so I headed down there to find Snezhana Tatyánovna and have her examine Sera. Her current weakness concerned me, and her sudden insistence that I get with child before the summer was out concerned me even more. Had she had some kind of presentiment? Her gift was faint, so faint it hardly deserved the name, but it still spoke to her sometimes, and now would be the time for it to speak.

The kitchen, while never entirely still, not even at midnight (as I had discovered during my summer of sneaking around), was currently in a lull period when I entered, and aside from a few people making stock, setting bread to rise, or watching Snezhana Tatyánovna apply salve to the injured girl's burns, empty. Alyona Vasilisovna was supervising all the activities with her usual sharp-eyed gaze, which turned to me as soon as I came through the door.

"Hungry after your run, Valeriya Dariyevna?" she asked. She nodded at an idle serving girl, who leaped up from her seat at the big table in the middle of the room and began gathering things on a platter.

"I see word has gotten out already," I said, taking the serving girl's place at the table. Snezhana Tatyánovna gave me a single look, which seemed to guess why I had come down, and then turned back to the burned girl and began swiftly bandaging the areas to which she had just applied the salve. The girl whimpered. Alyona Vasilisovna glared

at her, and Snezhana Tatyánovna said something soothing to her in a low voice.

“Your arrival back at the kremlin, with Princess Velikokrasnova hot on your heels, caused quite a stir, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Alyona Vasilisovna. “Although not as much as her departure without her son did. Three stablehands and two guards came running in to tell us all about it. They made our Raisochka spill the stock she’d been boiling all over herself, they did.”

“Is it serious?” I asked.

“It will heal,” said Snezhana Tatyánovna. “In a few weeks she’ll be right as rain.”

“I’m sorry about the pain,” I told Raisochka. “Burns hurt something awful.”

Raisochka looked at me round-eyed and bit back another whimper.

“I take it you want me to tend to the Empress, Valeriya Dariyevna?” asked Snezhana Tatyánovna.

“We all heard about how you had to walk her back into the palace all of a sudden, too,” interjected Alyona Vasilisovna. “Poor thing.” She shook her head. “It always takes her like this.”

I looked around the kitchen. The others had retreated from the table back to the stoves, leaving only me, Snezhana Tatyánovna, and Raisochka as witnesses to Alyona Vasilisovna’s statement, thank the gods. I leaned closer to Alyona Vasilisovna and asked, speaking low enough that only she could hear me, “Is it all over the kremlin already, then?”

Alyona Vasilisovna shook her head. “No one’s breathed a word of it to us, Valeriya Dariyevna, but it’s not hard to guess what’s going on. I’ve seen her through all the times she brought a baby into the world—and all the times she didn’t, too, which have been a far sight more. Poor thing. Every time she suffered enough to make you want to turn your back on the gods forever. I don’t know why she’s doing it again.”

“She wants an heir,” I said, still speaking low.

“She has an heir,” said Alyona Vasilisovna, also speaking low, but emphasizing every word. “She has you, Valeriya Dariyevna, and your

little daughter. After bringing three sons into the world, and losing so many others, you'd think she'd have learnt her lesson, begging your pardon, and stopped by now. Sometimes you're just not meant to have daughters. If I were her, I'd be telling *you*, Valeriya Dariyevna, to find a man of good strong stock and start bringing some more heirs for Krasnograd into the world, not killing herself trying to do something it's plain the gods haven't meant for her to do."

"Well..." I said. "She is in fact *also* thinking along those lines. But she wants an heir, and the healers say—this must not pass beyond you, Alyona Vasilisovna—the healers say that ending it is just as risky as going through with it, so she's going through with it. You know how she is."

"That I do, Valeriya Dariyevna," said Alyona Vasilisovna. "That I do. She's an Empress Zem' can be proud of, and no mistake. But if I were you, Valeriya Dariyevna, I'd get with child just as soon as I could. Don't worry about the courting and the matchmaking and all that ceremony. That can come later. Just get with child."

"Funnily enough, that's what the Tsarina said too."

Snezhana Tatyánovna finished bandaging Raisochka, told her to go rest and to call her if the burns started weeping too much, and then came over to me.

"Let me see your arm, Valeriya Dariyevna," she said.

"My arm? Oh, right." I had forgotten about the cut on my arm, but as soon as she mentioned it, the pain returned. Not crippling, but annoying. I rather wished she hadn't brought it up, but since she had, I allowed her to remove the strip of sleeve I'd bound it in—which she did with a stern frown—wash the wound with vodka, which awakened considerably more pain and also started the blood flowing again, and rebind it with clean bandages.

"How in the name of all the gods did you do this, anyway, Valeriya Dariyevna," she said in exasperation as she added another layer of bandaging to stop the blood. "Getting cut right on the vein. It was almost as if you were trying to draw as much blood as possible."

"I was."

"Why in the name of the gods..."

"Blood oath," said Alyona Vasilisovna, nodding sagely. "Am I right,

Valeriya Dariyevna?"

"You're right," I agreed. "I thought it might win over Princess Velikokrasnova—no, actually, I didn't think that. I just wanted to shock her a bit. And it made me feel better to swear it, even if it meant nothing to her."

"Well, don't do it again, Valeriya Dariyevna," said Snezhana Tatyánovna with an impatient shake of her head. "A cut like this, right on the vein...you're lucky you've bled as little as you have. And if you were to get blood poisoning over a foolish trifle...that's the last thing we need."

"I know." When she put it like that, it *did* seem like a silly thing to do. But... "But I had to," I told her.

"You always do, Valeriya Dariyevna, you always do," said Alyona Vasilisovna, while Snezhana Tatyánovna sighed and tied off the bandage. "Is it too tight?" she asked.

"Not so far. If it gets too tight in the night, I'll just take it off."

"If it gets too tight in the night, Valeriya Dariyevna, you will come get *me* and *I* will take it off and replace it with a fresh one."

"It's just a small cut," I objected. "It's hardly the worst wound I've suffered. Surely it's nothing worth getting you up in the middle of the night for."

"Blood poisoning is nothing to play around with, Valeriya Dariyevna," she said, with that stern tone of voice that healers perfect before they take their first case. "*Especially* in the heir to the throne, and doubly especially when the Tsarina is in poor health. Or did I mistake the reason you came down to seek me out?"

"You didn't mistake it," I told her. "And I'll try to be careful, Snezhana Tatyánovna, but I'm afraid it's my business to take care of the things that are too dangerous for the Tsarina herself to do."

"Well, when you put it like that, child...I suppose you're right. Just don't *try* to do risky things, will you?"

"I'll see what I can do. But don't get your hopes up too high, Snezhana Tatyánovna."

"With you, child?" She patted my bandage. "Never. Well, I'm off to see to your sister."

I started to get up to join her, but both she and Alyona Vasilisovna

waved me back down, Snezhana Tatyonovna telling me that I should stay sitting down and eat something in order to regain my strength, and also that she could examine the Tsarina better in privacy, and Alyona Vasilisovna telling me that my food was just about ready and it would be a shame for me to run off and leave her after we hadn't hardly seen each other for three breaths after all these years. So I sat back down and let the girl who had gone to gather food for me serve me some cool beer, sliced cucumbers in oil, salt, and vinegar, and a couple of cold mushroom pies. As often happened after strenuous exertion, I hadn't felt hungry until the food was before me, when I became suddenly ravenous. I wolfed down one of the pies without pausing to draw breath while Alyona Vasilisovna looked on approvingly.

"This is delicious, as usual," I told her, starting on the cucumbers.

"The Tsarina always likes it too," she said, nodding.

I stopped eating for a moment and looked at the food. Cucumbers...mushroom pies...but no meat.

"You gave me the food you'd serve the Tsarina," I said slowly. "You never used to do that. You always just fed me whatever you were feeding the serving girls."

"Right you are, Valeriya Dariyevna," said Alyona Vasilisovna, nodding again. "Right you are. I thought you'd best get used to it. I know you don't feel about Darya Krasnoslavovna the way our Empress does, or keep her ways like she does, but I figured you'd better get used to it before the time came."

"Oh," I said. I took a bite out of the second pie, but my stomach turned at the taste that, just a moment ago, had been so delicious, and I set it down. "I...I suppose I *should* be keeping to Darya Krasnoslavovna's oath, just as Sera does. I'm just weaker than she is. It's so much easier, even for me, to do whatever the person sitting next to me is doing. And my mother...she gave up on that just as she tried to give up on everything else that reminded her of Krasnograd. But I *should* be keeping to the oath, I *know* I should."

"No time like the present to start, Valeriya Dariyevna," said Alyona Vasilisovna. "The Tsarina is the only one from the family to keep it now, isn't she?"

I nodded, feeling ashamed even though there was no judgment in

Alyona Vasilisovna's words. "The gods..." I said. "And all the leshiye, and the animals that are supposed to protect us..."

"Haven't appeared to your family since your great-grandmother's time, have they?"

"Not that I know of," I admitted. "Maybe if we had been more vigilant about keeping the oath..."

"Maybe so, Valeriya Dariyevna, maybe so," said Alyona Vasilisovna. "Like I said, no time like the present to get started. It wouldn't hurt to have the gods and whatever else is out there watching over you right now. And soon enough it may be only up to you anyway."

"I guess," I said. I swallowed hard. "But...Alyona Vasilisovna, do you really think...do you really think it will be so soon?"

Alyona Vasilisovna gave me a sharp look, but she also reached over and patted my hand. I must have sounded even more plaintive to her than I had to myself. "It's a hard thing, child, I know," she said. "My mother died bringing my sister into the world, and my sister died bringing my niece into the world, and my niece died because, well, not all little girls are fated to grow into women. It's a hard thing. Did I ever tell you who my family is?"

"No," I said stupidly. I tried to conjure up even the slightest scrap of knowledge about Alyona Vasilisovna's family, but came up with a complete blank. She'd been the head cook at the kremlin ever since I could remember, ever since I'd run into the kitchens as a little girl on my first visit to Krasnograd, and she of all the servants had taken a liking to me. She'd said I reminded her of her family, but that was all I could ever remember her saying on the subject. "Are they from the steppe?" I asked. It seemed unlikely—she didn't have the look, and why would a steppe woman be working in a Krasnograd kitchen—but I supposed it was possible.

"No, child," she said with a smile. "They are from Krasnograd, born and bred. Do you know who Konstantin Tsarinovich was?"

I cast my mind back to my long-ago lessons on my family's history. Why would Alyona Vasilisovna be bringing that up now... "He ran off!" I cried. "It was, oh, at least five or six generations back. He was the youngest of the tsarinoviches, and he ran off with a woman of common birth, a serving woman..." I trailed off. Alyona Vasilisov-

na's sharp-eyed gaze met my own. "That's your family," I stated. "The descendants of Konstantin Tsarinovich and...what was the woman's name?"

"Lyubov," said Alyona Vasilisovna with a smile. "And just like the Tsarina Lyubov the Kind, she was said to be the sweetest girl you could imagine. A very gentle soul, they said. There wasn't a lot of that in the kremlin Konstantin Tsarinovich grew up in, so they say. Krasnograd was a very different place between the reigns of Lyubov the Kind and Krasnoslava Tsarina, or so they say. Not the civilized place it is now. So Lyubov and Konstantin ran off together and hid in a sanctuary and worked as healers, so as to keep out of sight of his mother. It sounds like she never much cared what happened to him, as long as he wasn't there to shame her. And later their descendants lived in a village just outside of the city, and one day Darya Krasnoslavovna found out who they were, and she wanted to bring them back to Krasnograd with all ceremony. That was my grandmother that she found.

"But by that time the Zerkalitsa blood had run pretty thin in them, and my grandmother and her folks had only ever known the life of a commoner, and they didn't want anything else. Your fine princesses don't know it, but if you've got a roof over your head, clothes on your back, and food on the table, sometimes it's better to be no one. No one will bother you, and you can get on with living your life as you see best. So my grandmother, who was also an Alyona, said she didn't want to be made a princess, she just wanted to stay in her home and tend to her garden, and Darya Krasnoslavovna couldn't convince her otherwise.

"But the time came that her eldest daughter, my mother Vasilisa, got a hankering to see Krasnograd, so she came here and came before the Tsarina then, your grandmother, Valeriya Dariyevna. But your grandmother..." Alyona Vasilisovna shrugged expressively. "Her foremothers' blood ran pretty thin in her, too, I'd say. Sometimes it happens. She didn't want to acknowledge my mother at all, but my mother badgered and bothered her—my mother was a great one for that—until at last she said my mother could have a place in the kitchens here. So here I am, and I've never wanted anything more. I don't doubt that your sister would give me more if I asked for it, Valeriya

Dariyevna, but I don't want it. I worked my way up from scullery maid to mistress of this kitchen with my own two hands, Valeriya Dariyevna, and that's enough for me. I doubt all those fine princesses I cook for sleep as sound at night as I do, or know the satisfaction of making something with your own two hands and watching others enjoy it. There's little that can beat it, Valeriya Dariyevna, and I don't want honor or fine clothes or fancy titles. I dare say the Zerkalitsa blood runs pretty thin in me too, Valeriya Dariyevna. But," she nodded sharply again for emphasis, "there still must be a drop or two in my veins, because ever since I was a girl I've been able to see true. Not all the time, mind, and not about the kinds of things that great princesses and Empresses care about, but I've always known when something big, whether bad or good, was going to happen to my own. My sister died long ago, Valeriya Dariyevna, and my niece followed her soon after, so these days you and your sister are about as close to being my own as anyone, if you'll pardon me for saying it. And I know," she clenched her fist, "I *know*, Valeriya Dariyevna, that your sister is with child, but it isn't going to end well."

"How?" I whispered. "Will she...?"

"I don't know, Valeriya Dariyevna, I truly don't. Sometimes I see things so clearly it's like they've already happened, and sometimes it's nothing more than a feeling. When it's that way often as not it's because it's not quite set yet, something could still be done to change it, or so it's always seemed to me. This time it's like that."

"How?" I asked. I realized I'd grabbed her arm without either of us noticing, but I didn't let go. "How can we change it?"

She shook her head. "I don't know, Valeriya Dariyevna. You said the healers said it's too dangerous to end it?"

I nodded. "She almost died last time," I whispered. "Trying again... she never should have gotten with child!"

Alyona Vasilisovna shook her head again, not in disagreement but in thought. She was no longer looking at me, but at whatever it was she saw in her head. "Then...all I can say, Valeriya Dariyevna, is you should get with child. I don't know why, but it seems like it helps, somehow."

"Very well." I sat back and released her arm. "I'll see what I can

do.”

“Good girl,” she said, and patted my hand again. “Now finish your food. You’ll need your strength for...things.” She smiled, and I couldn’t help but smile back at her. I finished off the food, which, while not as mouthwateringly delicious as it had been when I’d first bitten into it, no longer turned my stomach, and then, thanking Alyona Vasilisovna again for her help and her council, I left the kitchen and went back to the Imperial chambers.



Snezhana Tatyantovna was just leaving as I arrived, so I cornered her in the corridor and demanded to know what she had found.

“Everything is much the same as before, Valeriya Dariyevna,” she said with a shrug.

“Meaning?”

“The child continues to grow inside her, Valeriya Dariyevna, and while that happens, there is still hope. But her heart is weak, and the blood is not circulating through her body as it should. Sometimes it is too strong, and sometimes too weak. Sometimes the blood just doesn’t flow as it should when a woman is with child, Valeriya Dariyevna: you must know this. And in those cases there is little we can do. I would say to end it, but after last time I fear the bleeding that might cause, and I fear even more that her heart wouldn’t be able to take it. Besides, the time for that is almost past. It would be dangerous even for a woman in good health.”

“So what can we do?” I must have spoken more intensely than I had intended, for Snezhana Tatyantovna took a step backwards from the vehemence of my words. “What can we do?” I repeated when she failed to answer me.

“They say your family is closer to the gods than others, Valeriya Dariyevna,” she said after a moment.

“So they say,” I agreed.

“Then I would pray, Valeriya Dariyevna. If I were you, I would pray very hard.”

For a moment I wanted to lash out at her for mocking me, but then I saw that she was sincere, her eyes watching me with sorrow. “Thank you,” I said. “I will, then.”

“Good for you, Valeriya Dariyevna.” She pressed my arm gently—I must have looked particularly distraught, what with the way everyone was patting me like a despondent puppy—and with a last look of quiet compassion, left.

When I entered the chambers, I found Sera lying in her bed and Vyacheslav Irinovich sitting on a chair beside it and holding her hand. “You had to do it, Valya,” she said as soon as she saw me, but her voice held no rancor. “You had to go summon a healer, even though I hadn’t asked you to.”

“Someone needed to.” I sat down on the edge of the bed. “How are you feeling?”

“Better,” she said, and she sounded stronger than she had in the yard, but the hand she placed on top of mine was so puffy that the flesh was swollen all out around her rings, and dark circles stood out starkly against the whiteness of her face. “I feel better, Valya, and Snezhana Tatyánovna really did help me, so thank you for calling her for me. I suppose I shouldn’t be so stubborn, should I?”

“No,” I told her. “You should leave the stubbornness to me. I’ve got more than enough for the both of us.” On the other side of the bed Vyacheslav Irinovich suppressed what was either a snort or a sob. Probably the former. Although he was much too polite to admit it, I had always suspected that he secretly found me very amusing.

“Sera,” I said, placing my other hand on top of hers where it was resting on mine, “why did you do it?”

“Do what, Valya?” she asked, as if she didn’t already know.

“Get with child again. Tell me truthfully, Sera: why did you do it? You don’t need an heir, not really. Oh, I know the black earth princesses would kick and scream if Mirochka or I were to succeed you, but betroth the boys to their daughters and they’d come around quick enough. So why did you do it?”

“Oh...” She took a deep breath. “Have you ever seen a leshaya, Valya? Spoken with one of the servants of the gods? Heard the voices of the gods themselves?”

I shook my head.

“I thought not. Neither have I—since childhood. Since Darya Krasnoslavovna was still alive. When I was a very little girl she would

still walk in the park behind the kremlin, the very one we walked in this evening, and all the prayer trees would turn and look at her as she walked past, and animals would come and speak to her, and the wind would carry the voices of the gods themselves. She was born because of them, you know. She was her mother's gift to the gods, and theirs to her. And she bound herself to that world with other oaths too, you know, oaths that I am now the only one to keep."

"I'll keep it too!" I cried. "Sera...when I was in the kitchen...Alyona Vasilisovna said...anyway, I'll keep it now too."

"I'm glad," she said, and squeezed my hand. "I knew you would, when the time came. But you see, Valya, when Darya Krasnoslavovna left the world of women, so did the link she had forged with the gods. Our grandmother tried...but she always said she could never...never make that crossing and place one foot in that world because when the time came, she failed the test the gods had set her. She believed—and so do I—that Krasnoslava and Darya Krasnoslavovna were able to touch the gods and their servants, become part of that world just as they were part of our world, because the gods had tested them, and not found them wanting. Or because they had given up so much for what they were given. But our grandmother...it's not that she wouldn't have if she'd been asked, of that I'm sure, but she was never asked. She did her best, she tried to be an Empress that would do her foremothers proud, and leave Zem' better off after her rule than it was before, and in that she succeeded...but she always had both feet firmly planted in the world of women. I think she was sorry of that, I think she would have been glad to...to follow in her mother and grandmother's footsteps, but she was never given the chance, and in the end she became bitter because of it. And then my own mother..." Sera shrugged, "she...I think she knew that she would forever be judged against the measure, not only of her mother, but of Krasnoslava and Darya Krasnoslavovna, and she couldn't stand up to the strain. To be a Zerkalitsa is a great thing, Valya, but when so many great women have gone before you, how can you be anything other than less? So when the time came, when the enemy was at our gates, my mother failed the test the gods had set her, became less, and so, if you'll forgive me for saying it, did yours, even if not to quite the same degree."

“I know,” I said. “You don’t have to apologize.”

“So now”—she drew in another deep breath, as if, I thought in alarm, her lungs were already struggling to take in enough air, and the child was barely even showing yet—“So now it is up to you and me, Valya, to, to bring back what we once had, what our family once had. Especially me. I am the Tsarina. It is up to me. I must be tested and not found wanting, Valya, I must be willing to give up everything! Our foremothers did it, and now I must do it too! Oh Valya! I must not be found wanting!”

“You won’t be,” I told her, squeezing her hand in both of mine. “You won’t be, Sera, you won’t be. Only...are you sure that this is the test?”

“What do you mean?”

“Producing an heir. Are you sure that this is the test? Perhaps it’s the other way around. Perhaps that’s what you’re supposed to give up.”

“You’re just saying that to dissuade me!” she cried.

“No,” I told her. “No. It seems you must go through with this, Sera, for better or for worse, and you know I will do whatever it is you ask of me to help you do that. But perhaps...just perhaps the test isn’t what you think it is, the sacrifice isn’t what you think it is. Many women can produce daughters. After all”—I grinned at her—“I’ve done it myself. But only *you*, Sera, can rule Zem’ right now. Right now only *you* are the Tsarina, and a Tsarina is what Zem’ needs.” I squeezed her hand again. “There is often more than one test,” I told her. “And I am sure you will pass all of them.” I bent down and kissed her brow. “Get some rest,” I said. “Tomorrow...tomorrow I will go out into the prayer wood, and I will renew Darya Krasnoslavovna’s oath. And then the next day will be Midsummer, and the day after that I will set off for the East. And before you know it, fall will be upon us and I’ll return triumphantly, having smashed the slave trade that is devouring our children, and we’ll pass the merriest winter you can possibly imagine here in Krasnograd. Only I’m afraid that you’ll disown the both of us after you’ve spent a winter in the company of Mirochka and me. We don’t handle being cooped up very well.”

She laughed softly. “Very well, Valya. I knew I could count on you—for a laugh if nothing else. Go to bed, and we’ll talk of our grand

plans again tomorrow.”

I squeezed her hand once more, got up, and left. As I turned to go out the door I caught sight of her again out of the corner of my eye. She was leaning back against the pillows, her eyes closed as if exhausted, but with a pleased smile on her face. Vyacheslav Irinovich was still holding her hand, but his shoulders had slumped down so that he looked as if he had no chest at all. He shuddered, and this time I was sure it was a sob that was shaking him.



Mirochka was waiting for me back in our chambers when I arrived, and launched herself straight into my arms as soon as I came through the door, causing me to take a step back and remind her to watch out for my cut arm.

“Does it hurt?” she asked, round-eyed.

“A little. The main thing is not to restart the bleeding.”

“How did you...” she wriggled her shoulders uncomfortably, and then blurted out, “I don’t think I could do it, mama! I think I’d be too afraid!”

“Do you want me to teach you?”

“Teach me?” she repeated, her eyes going even rounder.

“Of course. I have to go down to the prayer wood and make another oath tomorrow at a prayer tree. We could go and do it together, and I could teach you how to make a blood oath.” Seeing the alarm that filled her face at that thought, I added, “Or you could just watch me do it, if you like.” I had meant to go down and make the oath alone, but it would be better if Mirochka were there. After all, one day this would be her oath too.

“Oh.” She considered it. “Why do you have to make another oath, mama?”

I sat us both down on the bed. “Do you remember how I told you about the oath Darya Krasnoslavovna made?” I asked. “The one with the animal spirits? How the Empress of Zem’ would not eat the flesh of their sisters and brothers, nor harm any living thing, and in return they would watch over her and her family?”

Mirochka nodded solemnly. I had told her the story last year, and she had accepted it with many questions and arguments. Like most

children, she was alternately devastated and callous about the deaths of others, particularly those who fed her. She had seen the sense in Darya Krasnoslavovna's deal, and approved of the idea of never killing others, not even to feed off their flesh—and she had eaten sausage unquestioningly at the next meal. Of course, so had I.

“Well, I've decided to join in that oath,” I told her. “I'm not the Empress, but I *am* her sister. I think...it might help, and it can't hurt. You can join me in it too, if you want to.”

“Do I have to cut myself?” she asked fearfully.

“Not if you don't want to,” I assured her. “You can just tie a ribbon to the prayer tree.”

“Does it have to be a nice ribbon?” she asked.

“It works better if it is,” I told her. “You have to give up something dear to you; that's part of the prayer.”

“Oh.” And, still contemplating that, she went to bed.

Chapter Twenty-One

The next morning I received a message with breakfast that Ivan Marinovich most humbly begged my pardon, but to his great regret, his duties as the tsarinovich's new companion would prevent him from training with me this morning. In the afternoon, however, he would be entirely at my service. I sent back a message expressing my own regrets, but adding that I had pressing business myself this morning, and that I would call for him when I returned in order to discuss our upcoming journey. I really needed, I reflected, to finalize the members of my party and begin the preparations in earnest, since we were supposed to leave in two days' time. In the afternoon, I promised myself, I would take care of all of that without fail. I had had good reason for my delays.

After breakfast Mirochka and I spent an unnecessarily long time on what to her was the deadly serious business of choosing a piece of cloth for her to tie to the prayer tree, with me insisting that it had to be something that had value to her, and her ruling out one possibility after another as too dear to sacrifice. We finally settled on an old hair ribbon in a color she didn't like, and I hustled her out of the room before she could decide that, little as she had always cared for an old bit of cloth that had faded to a shade of yellow unpleasantly similar to what you might see if you brought up the contents of your stomach when there was nothing in there but bile, the ribbon had now become the most precious thing in her possession and the thought of leaving it forever to the elements was unbearable. Luckily for both of us, though, she was distracted from her imminent loss by all the guards and serving girls who bowed as they walked past us in the hall, and we made it out of the palace and onto the stable yard without any fits of panic or temper.

I stopped in the stable, where we checked upon our own mounts, who appeared to be in the pink of health, and I ascertained that yes, Ivan's horse had been successfully retrieved yesterday, that he had suffered no harm in the process (although, according to the stable boys

who had helped with the retrieval, the curses Princess Velikokrasnova had hurled at them had very nearly burnt their ears right off), and that he was fit and sound enough for Ivan to take him with us on the journey. Then I picked up some clean bandages and a bottle of strong vodka.

“What are those for, mama?” asked Mirochka in consternation.

“To clean and bind the cut after we make the oath,” I told her.

Her eyes grew very big.

“You don’t have to do it if you don’t want to,” I reassured her.

“But you’re going to do it, mama?”

“I am,” I confirmed.

“Aren’t you...aren’t you afraid, mama?”

“No. I’ve done it before. If you do it right, it only hurts a little bit and it isn’t dangerous at all.” Well, other than the risk of blood poisoning, but I quickly shied away from that thought.

“Oh.” She thought about that as we left the stable and began walking through the wood behind it. Once the trees had closed in around us, and it became difficult to tell that we were in fact in the middle of the largest city in Zem’, she asked, “What is the oath again, mama? Not to eat flesh?”

“Yes,” I told her. “Well, sort of. It’s not to cause needless harm to any living thing, including any of our sisters and brothers of the land, air, and water. Which means we can’t eat their flesh either.”

“But what if a wolf attacks me, mama?”

“That would probably be considered needful harm.”

“Oh.” She thought for a few more strides, and then burst out, “But I *like* sausage, mama! And shashlyk!”

“You don’t *have* to take the oath,” I told her yet again.

“But you’re going to take it?”

“Yes.”

“And do you *have* to, mama?”

“No,” I said. “But someday I may, and so may you. And it...it won’t hurt us, and it might help. In Darya Krasnoslavovna’s day, animal spirits and other servants of the gods walked this wood in broad daylight, and watched over her and over Zem’. But now...I have never seen them, and neither has Sera. Perhaps this will help bring them back.”

“Oh.” She thought about that for some time, and then, just as we were approaching the prayer tree that I thought of as my own, said, with a firmness of voice one wouldn’t expect to hear in a girl of eight, “Then I’ll take it too, mama.”

“You’re sure?” I asked.

She nodded, her jaw set in determination.

“You know that this means that even if you want sausage, or shashlyk, or anything else like that, you’ll have to turn away. Even if your friends, or people from back home, tell you to eat it, you’ll have to turn away. Do you think you can do that?”

She nodded again, her face very serious.

“Some people might not be very nice about it,” I warned her.

“Some people aren’t very nice about *anything!*” she exclaimed, and squared her thin little shoulders. “Besides, if I do this I’ll be *better* than them, won’t I?”

“Which is why they might not be very nice about it,” I said. “But—Mirochka, my dove, if...if things continue on as they are, then one day you will be Tsarina, and you will have to face many not very nice people.”

“I know, mama,” she said. “Like Princess Velikokrasnova?”

“*Just* like Princess Velikokrasnova,” I agreed. “So do you think you can do this?”

“I *know* I can do it, mama,” she said, and her voice was...her voice was the voice of a future Tsarina. I suddenly wondered what Sera’s heir, if she should have the very unlikely good fortune to be born, would be like. Would she be...would she be as fit for the rule of Zem’ as I suspected Mirochka was turning out to be? Would Zem’ be better off with Mirochka on the Wooden Throne than with any child of Sera’s? I needed to make myself stop thinking those thoughts. No good would come of them.

“And I’ll take the oath properly, mama,” said Mirochka, interrupting my semi-treasonous musings. “With blood.”

“Very well,” I said. We arrived at the prayer tree. My blood-soaked strip of sleeve fluttered merrily at me.

“What do we do now, mama?” whispered Mirochka.

“Here, let’s kneel down.” We knelt down side-by-side in front of the

tree, and took out our ribbons—Mirochka's faded one and my bright new one, that I had gotten for this summer in Krasnograd but never even worn. This seemed like a far better use for it anyway.

"When you make an oath, you don't have to say anything out loud; you can just think the words if you want to," I told her. "But for this one, let's say them together." I set down the bandages and vodka in front of us, and laid my knife on top of them.

"All right, mama," said Mirochka, her voice shaking a little now that the knife was lying there directly in front of her, the blade glinting in the morning sun.

"I'll say it first, and you can follow me," I said. She nodded, her face tight with apprehension. I wondered if it was from fear of the cut, or if she sensed something solemn and significant in the way the ribbons fluttered in the tree, and then suddenly went still.

"I swear to uphold the oath of my foremother, Darya Krasnoslavovna, to the creatures of the forest and all the servants of the gods," I said, and waited until Mirochka had repeated the words after me before continuing. "I swear never to bring harm to any living thing, not by eating their flesh, nor by hunting or capturing them for sport, nor by despoiling their land, their air, and their water. For we are of one kin." I let Mirochka finish, and then I picked up the knife and said, "Let this blood serve as witness. We are of one kin. One blood. Sisters." I turned to Mirochka and asked, "Do you want to go first? Or do you want me to go first?"

"You go first, mama," she said, looking faint. I wondered where this squeamishness about drawing blood was from. Her father, no doubt.

"I'll show you how, then," I told her. Using my left hand, which made the business more awkward, I nicked the vein in the crook of my right arm. The blood immediately began to well up out of it, and I held my ribbon to it until it was thoroughly soaked, before dowsing the cut in vodka—which stung, but for Mirochka's sake I refused to flinch—and wrapping it in a bandage.

"You see?" I said. "It's very easy." Just to set my mind at ease about the possibility of blood poisoning, I poured some vodka on the knife blade and washed away the small amount of blood that was on the tip.

"How much did it hurt, mama?" she asked in a small voice.

“It stings a little, but only a little,” I told her. “You’ve had many worse cuts. Do you want to do it, or shall I do it for you?”

“I...I can try, mama.”

“Good girl. But hold the knife in your right hand and cut your left arm; it will be easier for you.”

She took the knife from me and brought it close to the crook of her arm.

“Just use the tip,” I told her encouragingly. “You just need to make a tiny cut, and it’s easier to control that way.”

She had to make several tries before she could finally bring herself to cut the skin, but when she did, she didn’t cry out. I took the knife back from her and handed over her ribbon, which she pressed against the wound and watched, wide-eyed, as the blood ran into it. The cut she’d made was so tiny that the blood dried up long before the ribbon was soaked through, but I said that it was good enough, and helped her wash the wound with vodka—which did make her shriek—and bind it with a soft clean bandage, and then, as I always did when she was injured, I held my hands over the wound until it stopped hurting. Then we went and chose a branch for our ribbons and tied them up next to each other, which she did with fierce concentration.

“Is that it, mama?” she asked when we were done.

“That’s it,” I told her.

“Did I...did I do a good job, mama?”

I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her in tight against me. “You did a *wonderful* job,” I told her. “You were so brave. Both making the oath, and drawing the blood—those were both such brave things to do.”

“Oh good,” she said, her face pressed against my stomach. “I try so hard to be brave, mama! But it’s so hard. I’ll never be as brave as you!”

“Sure you will,” I told her. “Braver, even.”

She lifted up her face to look at me. “Really, mama?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “One day you’ll be twice as brave as me. ‘Mi-rochka the Brave,’ that’s what they’ll call you.”

“I’ll try, mama,” she said, pressing her face back against me. “I try so hard, but I’m always afraid...why is it so hard to be brave, mama?”

“Because that’s what being brave is,” I said. “Doing the things that

are hard. Like you just did. Are you ready to go back now?"

She nodded, and we began to walk back towards the kremlin. "Do you think that's what it's like for them?" she asked suddenly.

"For whom?"

"For...for the animals that we kill. Do you think it hurts them like that knife hurt us? Do you think it's as scary for them as it was for us? Is that what it's like for them?"

"Sort of, but much worse," I told her. "Much, much worse. I've seen it, and it's...worse."

"Oh. Then..." she asked, her voice rising with horror, "why do people do it?"

"Lots of people don't even think about it, just like you never did until today. They don't see it, so for them it's as if it doesn't happen. Even for me. I've kept the Empress's oath on and off my whole life, and whenever I do keep to it, I feel glad, but...it's so easy to turn away from it, to forget. People offer you food, or tell you have to eat something, and you do. Even I do, and I," I grinned at her, "am not very easily persuaded. But it's just...easier, and I guess I'm weaker and lazier than Darya Krasnoslavovna. But in any case, imagine how easy it is for other people, people who don't have her blood in their veins, people who've never had to be and never will have to be the one who has to stand in front and lead the way, just to go along with whatever everyone else is doing."

"But *now* you've taken the oath and sealed it with blood, haven't you, mama? So there's no going back."

"There's no going back," I confirmed. "I feel good about it. Do you?"

She thought it about for a moment, then nodded. "Really good, mama. I know it'll be hard, but," she put on a brave face, "I'm ready! I know I'm ready! Oh look!" She pointed at something disappearing into the trees.

"What was it?"

"I think it was a hare, mama. I thought...I thought it was watching us. But it ran away so fast!"

"They do that," I agreed. "You have to be..." *very fast in order to shoot them*, I almost said, but quickly revised that to "very fast in order to catch sight of them."

“And shoot them, right, mama?”

“Yes...” I admitted reluctantly. “But we don’t have to worry about that any more.”

“No, but...” she looked down at the bandage on the crook of her arm, and the spot of blood that had come through it, “not everyone can forget about it. I mean, about the killing. Because someone has to do it, don’t they mama? And *they* can’t pretend it doesn’t happen.”

“The people who see it and do it every day get used to it,” I told her.

“How can they get used to it!?”

“People can get used to the most horrible things.”

“Like what?”

“Well...” I knew I needed to answer her question, but I didn’t want to horrify her too much. “Like killing,” I told her. “Like killing innocent animals. For butchers and hunters and trappers, that’s their job and they’re dead to the death that they deal out. Or soldiers killing their fellow soldiers. Or headswomen, back when we had them. They get used to it, and they lose their horror of it, and then they’re like...a cripple. Someone who’s lost her arm. Who can still do many things, but that part of her that made her a whole person is gone.”

“Oh.” Mirochka walked for a little bit, thinking about this seriously, and then said, in a half-whisper, “Mama, the tutor said...and the boys said it was true...they said that when Miroslava Praskovyevna took Krasnograd, she, she killed lots of people, including...including little children. That she chopped off their heads with her own two hands.”

“It’s true,” I said.

“Do you think she was...missing part of herself? That she wasn’t a whole person after that?”

“I think she wasn’t a whole person before that,” I said. “That’s why she was able to do it. But afterwards...afterwards there must have been only a tiny piece of her left.”

“Then...then why did you name me after her, mama?” demanded Mirochka, aghast.

“Because it was time for our family to have another Miroslava.”

“I’m not going to chop off little children’s heads! I’m not going to chop off anyone’s head!”

“Good,” I told her. “Because if you did what Miroslava Praskovyev-

na did, there wouldn't be very much left of *you* at all, my dove. But maybe there are other heads that need chopping. Not actual heads, but...bad things that we need to get rid of."

"Oh. Like what, mama?"

"Like...bad things. Like people hurting those around them when they don't need to."

"Oh. And...mama?"

"Yes, my dove?"

"They say..." she swallowed and started again, "They say...they say that...that you..."

"Yes, my dove?" I repeated, not liking where this was going.

"That you *killed* someone. Two someones. Is it...it's not true, is it? It can't be!"

"It is," I said.

She came to an abrupt halt and turned to face me, her body poised to run, but her mind unable to decide whether to run towards me or away from me. "Mama! Oh mama! Why! Oh mama! Is there...is there part of you missing, now?"

"Maybe," I told her. "Probably. But it was worth it, my dove. You see, those people...they were bad people. They were hurting people. Little children. Hurting them so badly that they wanted to die, and sometimes they even killed themselves, even after they were free and had gone home. And they said...they threatened to kill *you*."

"Oh mama!"

"So I killed them," I told her. "And yes, I think that now...I think that that killed some part of me as well. I don't know if I'll ever be whole again after that. But it doesn't matter. I couldn't let them live after that, and whatever I had to give up to keep you safe, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. I'd do it a thousand times over, and be nothing but an empty husk, a broken shell, and it wouldn't matter."

"Oh mama!" Now she did break into a run, throwing herself right into my arms. "Oh mama! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"For what, my dove?" I asked, stroking her hair.

"It's my fault! If it weren't for me, you wouldn't have had to kill them! You'd still be whole!"

"I might have had to anyway, my dove," I told her. "To keep all the

other children safe. But it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. You being safe is more important to me than...than anything about me."

"But that's not fair, mama! It's not fair! I can't protect you like that! It's not fair!"

"It doesn't matter," I told her yet again. "I don't care, I don't care about that at all. And someday you may get to protect me. Someday you may have your chance. Like that stone you gave me. Maybe that was your chance to protect me."

"Really, mama?" she asked, her tear-stained face turned up towards mine.

"Really," I promised her, still stroking her hair. "Really. Shall we go back now?"

"All right." We started walking again. I watched her out of the corner of my eye as we walked. It had been a long and difficult morning for Mirochka, full of frightening revelations, and the sun had only barely cleared the treetops. I had always tried to be truthful with her, and not to shield her too much from the things that anyone, and particularly a princess and possibly a future Tsarina, should know and see, but I was afraid that today's lesson had overloaded her, and that she might break under the strain. No doubt, I thought glumly, I was in for a night of nightmares. But maybe the future Empress of Zem' needed to know what nightmares were, for how else could she fight against them? I waited for the next uncomfortable question.

"Look!" cried Mirochka, pointing upwards. "A squirrel!" And sure enough, a little red squirrel, smaller than my hand, chattered at us from a tree branch.

"Do you think we could catch some and take them back with us to the steppe, mama?" she asked wistfully.

"No, my dove," I told her. "We don't have enough trees for them. And I think that would count as needless harm."

"Oh. But they might like it out there, mama!"

"No, they wouldn't," I said. "They need trees, I'm afraid; the kind of big trees they have here, not the little twisted ones we have on the steppe. But they're very lovely, aren't they? Much lovelier than the ground squirrels we have back home."

"Yes, I wish I could have one...oh mama!" A young doe had stepped

out onto the path. Instead of bolting at the sight of us, she froze. Mirochka drew in her breath. The doe slowly turned her head towards us and gave us a long, long look through her large, bright eyes. Then, with a snort and a toss of her head, she stepped gracefully off the path again and disappeared into the woods.

“Oh mama!” cried Mirochka rapturously. “She was so beautiful, wasn’t she? And did you see? She looked at me! She was trying to speak to me!”

“Do you think so, my dove?” I asked.

“Oh, I know it, mama, I know it!”

“Did you understand any of what she was trying to tell you?”

“No...only that she and I are friends now. We’re friends now, mama!”

“Very good,” I said. “She was very beautiful too, wasn’t she, my dove?”

“Oh yes, mama, yes, but how do you think she got here? She had to have come all the way through the city!” And as we walked we speculated on how she could have gotten into the center of Krasnograd, with Mirochka stoutly insisting that she had come here for a reason, and that reason was to say hello to her, Mirochka. I nodded in agreement—and in truth I thought Mirochka might be right. The park was lovely, but there were not many animals in it, at least not compared with the deep woods. It had not escaped my notice that as soon as we had taken the oath, we had been greeted by a hare, a squirrel, and a deer. Krasnoslava and Darya’s animals...perhaps its consequences were even stronger than I had dared to hope, and were already taking effect...

By the time we arrived back at the kremlin palace, servants were already bringing food up to the Imperial apartments for the midday meal, so I left Mirochka with the boys and stopped by Sera’s chambers, to see if I could join her. I was glad to see that when I was let in, she was sitting at the table in the front room, and looking bright and cheerful, with little trace of the weakness of the night before.

“Valya!” she cried as I came in. “Just in time! Where have you been? I sent for you earlier, but I was told you’d gone out. It can’t have been to ‘train’ with Ivan Marinovich, for I know he has been shadowing

Ruslan all morning.”

“I know,” I said, taking a seat across from her. Vyacheslav Irinovich was hovering by the door to the bedchamber, but when Sera waved at him to come join us, he bowed and said that he would go lunch with the children in order to leave us to do our planning in peace.

“Yes, we really must finalize the members of your party, Valya,” said Sera. “You’re supposed to be ready to leave in two days’ time! Do you think you’ll actually *be* ready? You’ve been occupied with other things when you should have been preparing for the journey.”

“I’ll be ready,” I told her. “I’ll have the whole kremlin at my disposal for my preparations.”

“Oh good—only everyone will be very busy, what with the Mid-summer celebrations...”

“We’ll see what happens,” I said. “I’m not concerned. Who has been put forward as members?”

“Well, there’s you, Aksinya Olgovna, and Ivan Marinovich, of course. Princess Iridivadze has asked that her oldest son, Amiran, be included, and I’ve said I would pass on her request to you.”

“Have you met him?”

“Yes, his mother brings him to Krasnograd every summer, along with her youngest daughter, Adriana. I think she is hoping that I will either name him as Ruslan’s companion, or his sister as Ruslan’s bride. And truth be told, he would have been my first choice for the post.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t know.”

She shrugged. “Your actions were a stroke of brilliance last night, so I can’t complain. But now I think we really must include Amiran in the party unless you have a very compelling reason to keep him out of it. The Iridivadze family has maintained close ties with ours for generations, and they’re the reason we’ve been able to keep our hold on the Southern mountains. Amiran is two-and-twenty and, to the best of my knowledge, a trustworthy and honorable young man, if a trifle hot-tempered. To be honest, if there had not been such a pressing need to tie the black earth princesses to us, I would have chosen him as your husband, not Ivan Marinovich. I suspect you might find him... very congenial. But right now we need the Krasna princesses more, and so the task will probably fall on Ruslan to strengthen our alliance

with the Iridivadze.” She frowned. “I fear that Adriana Gulisovna will not find my son nearly so to her taste as I suspect you will find her brother.”

“Well, perhaps she would prefer Dariusz,” I suggested.

“Perhaps...although they set a great store on the eldest son in the South,” said Sera. “Boys like Amiran are raised almost as a daughter. Perhaps that’s why they say that Southern men are so full of charm, in their own way.”

“Perhaps,” I said, thinking that Sera had chosen the exact opposite of a Southern man in Vyacheslav Irinovich, and had always seemed to find his silent presence charming enough. “And in any case, Ruslan has a rather woman-like stubbornness of his own. Maybe Adriana will take to that.”

“But he’s absolutely hopeless at any of the things you’d expect a man to be able to do, or at least you would if you were a noblewoman from the Southern mountains. Of course it’s not expected that any of my sons could hunt, but they should at least be able to handle weapons, and horses, and...all those sorts of things. But you’ve seen him, Valya: I think he takes delight in failing in his lessons on purpose, just to vex me.”

“Very likely.” Sera’s energy was rapidly changing from the strength of health to the fretfulness of ill health. “He is a boy of twelve, after all,” I said, trying to distract her.

“And one day he’ll be a man of twenty, and in need of a wife. And how, pray tell, will he be able to get one without any skills other than sulking? My influence can buy many things, but even I, I fear, cannot induce the most powerful of my princesses to take on someone like that as a son-in-law, or at least, not to love him. And, and...” She trailed off, and by the look on her face I could tell it was because she was thinking that she might not be there when Ruslan turned twenty, and that he would no longer be the son of the Tsarina, but the son of the Tsarina’s dead sister.

“Well, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” I said. “I’m sure between the two of us we can figure something out for him. And we’re certainly not going to let him starve, are we? We’ll find a suitable situation for him, my head for beheading. So,” I continued briskly before

she could begin to weep, as she seemed in danger of doing, “Amiran Gulisovich Iridivadze, then? Let’s count him in for the time being. I’ll want to meet everyone before I make my final decision, of course.”

“Of course. So...we have the steppe, the black earth district, and both sets of mountains. Now we just need...what happened to your arm?”

“My arm?”

“Yes, I...I noticed it when you first came in, and I haven’t been able to concentrate because of it, wondering what you had...Valya! You took the oath, didn’t you?”

“Mirochka and I both did it,” I told her.

“Valya!” She seemed dumbfounded for a moment, but then jumped up and threw her arms around my neck. “Valya! You and Mirochka both! Oh, I’m so happy! I wasn’t sure you would actually go through with it! So what made you do it?” She sat back down as she asked, and before I could answer I could see that she had come to the conclusion that we had done it because we expected to take her place soon.

“It seemed like the right thing to do,” I told her.

“But...why now?” she asked.

“Because...how often have you had leshiyе, or animals, or anyone else in service to the gods come up and talk to you, Sera? Because I never have. But maybe...maybe it’s something that we need. These days it’s only you. And Vyacheslav Irinovich and the boys, of course, but they hardly count. So I thought...maybe it would help if I made the oath, if I promised to follow in Darya Krasnoslavovna’s footsteps and pledge myself to...to our allies. Our other allies. I don’t know. It just...seemed like the right thing to do. And then Mirochka said she wanted to do it too, so this morning we went out and did it.”

“Oh.” She reached over and took my hand. “And you sealed it with blood, too. Did Mirochka?”

“Yes,” I said. “She was afraid at first, but at the end she went through with it.” I grinned. “Now she’ll probably be insufferable until the wound heals over and the scar disappears. So for the next week or two, that is. I was afraid she would cut herself too deeply, like I did my first time, but she barely nicked herself. Which is probably just as

well. So we both took the oath. And...you may need to support her in it, while I'm gone. It can be a hard oath to keep. You know, I tried, on and off, back home, but others always managed to talk me out of it."

"You!" she said, quirking a corner of her mouth into almost a smile. "I find that very hard to believe, Valya."

"I'm sure you do, but on occasion—frequently, even—I listen to the voice of reason, or what passes for reason, and everyone always had such reasonable arguments for why I should break it. Of course there was teasing too, but that was easier to resist—at least for me. I don't know how well Mirochka will stand up to it—she's less...well, less like me in some ways, more, much as it pains me to admit it, like her father. Not that she's easy to influence, but I'd say that she listens to others more than I do, and she cares more about what other people think. But anyway. People always had such good reasons for why I shouldn't keep your oath, the oath of our family, and...I always wanted to show I was a steppewoman, not some soft Krasnograder. That I was a Stepnaya, not a Zerkalitsa. Only now I think that I was the soft one, that I was taking the easy way out, and that their reasons were not very reasonable at all. So I took the oath again, but this time for real, this time with blood, so that I couldn't lose heart and back out. And I won't. But I don't know how firm Mirochka's convictions are. She's just a child still, and she's...she's stubborn but she's not me. So please, while I'm gone, please watch over her and make sure she doesn't break her oath."

"Of course, Valya," said Sera. "But I must ask: what is your worry here? That she'll...I don't know, jeopardize our family's...agreement with the spirits who supposedly watch over us? Of course she should learn to keep her word, but frankly, Valya, I doubt that the leshiyе and all the animals with whom Darya Krasnoslavovna made her bargain will care that much about what a girl of eight does, even if she is a Zerkalitsa and heir to the Wooden Throne. From what Darya Krasnoslavovna said of them, they were merciful, in their own way. I wouldn't think that one little slip on her part would cause any great harm to us."

"No...but she would be breaking a blood oath. And I couldn't...I don't know what would happen to her if she did, and I couldn't...I couldn't stand to find out!"

“Even if it were nothing, Valya?” asked Sera, smiling, but giving my hand a squeeze at the same time.

“That would hardly be comforting!”

“No, I suppose not, not for you,” she agreed, giving my hand another squeeze. “And *of course* I’ll—we’ll—watch over her while you’re gone, Valya, and of course we’ll all help her keep her oath. She’ll live with us and spend all her time with us, so it won’t be hard at all for her. And,” she stroked my hand and then let go of it, “it’s not her you should be worried about, Valya. It’s *you*. After all, you’re the one going on a long journey with the intention of catching slavers.”

“I’m mostly worried about me for her sake,” I said.

“I know you are, which is why,” she gave me a bright smile, “we should make sure that you make it back, which is why we should make sure that you have the very best companions you possibly could have, which is why we should choose the rest of your party.”

“Oh very well,” I said, smiling back at her as if our conversation had never been anything but light and cheery. “If you insist.”

“I do, Valya, I do. So, we have the steppe, the black earth district, and both sets of mountains. Four of you in total.”

“Plus whatever guards and servants we bring with us.”

“Yes, of course. I don’t think Aksinya Olgovna has anyone with her or will want to take anyone back with her. As for you, Valya...”

“We need a mistress of horse,” I said.

“Of course you do. So, a mistress of horse, and I imagine that Ivan Marinovich and Amiran will need guards and chaperones and people like that.”

“Very likely,” I said. “And we still need someone to represent the North. Are any of Vyacheslav Irinovich’s kin in town? I know they might not be able to spare any daughters, but his brothers Makary and Mstislav are capable men...”

“I think we already have enough men in the party, Valya,” Sera cut in. “We need some actual princesses, or at least one more other than you, if the group is to have the legitimacy it needs in the eyes of the mountain folk. And besides, Makary has just been betrothed, and Mstislav is about to become a father. It’s hardly a good time for either of them to be gallivanting about the countryside. No, I was thinking...”

she gave me a sidelong glance, and then plunged on, "I was thinking of young Alzhbetka Arinovna."

"Princess Pristanogradskaya's youngest?" I asked. "But she's..."

"Arrogant? Demanding? Not a trustworthy supporter of our family?"

"Well, yes, all of those, I suppose," I said. "But mostly I was thinking of how she seems to have no great fondness for me. I remember the last time I was here, and it was her first time in Krasnograd...I thought she wanted to be friends, so I offered to show her around, but...I was mistaken. I'm sure I will have no trouble keeping everyone else in line, but Alzhbetka..."

"Alzhbetka is a very promising young woman who needs to learn a little humility," said Sera. "I can hardly think of a better person to teach it to her than you, Valya."

"I live to serve," I said with a bow.

"I know you do, Valya, I know. And how convenient that your natural talents will be able to serve such a useful cause! Although..."—she gave me a wicked smile—"despite what you just said, I have a suspicion that Alzhbetka admires you very much, in her own way, and she is a very fine-looking young woman, again, in her own way, so...you might come to find her as congenial as you do Amiran. Just remember that the ultimate goal is for us to strengthen our ties with all these families, not sever them. If you *do* find yourself engaging in a dalliance, do so with discretion."

"I don't *dally*," I said, more murderously than I had intended.

Sera gave me a look of surprise, that turned to compassion. "I suppose you don't," she said. "It's always life or death every time for you, isn't it?"

I tried to say something witty, but was only able to clench my jaw in reply, although I hoped expressively. I hadn't thought even Sera would dare joke with me about that...although of course she would...if I hadn't wanted to be teased about it, I shouldn't have told her about it...now she was never going to give me any peace on that subject.

"Which is why you need to get married, Valya," she said, still compassionately. "It's time for you to have someone who will give you the constancy that you demand...and deserve. So just leave Alzhbetka to

her own problems, all right? The rumors say...but rumors say many things, and she'll need to find a man she can tolerate and get with child at some point anyway, so just leave her to it, and do what you can to make her like you."

"If the rumors say about Alzhbetka what I think you're implying, they're wrong," I said. "Unless something has changed greatly in the past three years."

This made Sera raise both brows. "Is that so? Do you...ah, have first-hand knowledge of this fact?"

"No!"

"Is that it, then? You tried to gain first-hand knowledge, and failed?" Her lips quirked as she said it.

"No! There was no...there was absolutely nothing of that sort between us! It never even...it never even occurred to me! She's not my..." *type*, I almost said, but shut my mouth before it could come out.

"Well, perhaps it occurred to Alzhbetka," suggested Sera, smiling more broadly, as if she had guessed what I had been thinking. "Perhaps that's the problem. Perhaps you broke her heart without even meaning to."

"No! It wasn't like that...if you must know," I said, annoyed, "she, ah, she wanted to know if it were true that out on the steppe women, well, you know"—why was I so embarrassed about this? No one had a problem discussing it at home, any more than we would anything else about love. But in front of Sera's laughing, judging eyes I felt my cheeks flush—"and I told her yes, sometimes, and then, well...she didn't want to have anything to do with me."

Sera laughed heartily. "I knew it!" she said. "You broke her heart!"

"Think what you will. But you're wrong. And I don't want those kinds of problems on this journey. It will be hard enough as it is. Isn't there someone other than Alzhbetka we could choose?"

"No, there isn't," said Sera, turning sober. "Because it's time the Pristanogradskiye stopped going against us at every turn, and began acting like our sisters again. The Zerkalitsy came from Pristanograd, after all, which the Pristanogradskiye can never seem to accept as they should. Anyway. It is time to bring them back into the fold, Valya, and it's time for Alzhbetka Arinovna to stop acting like her mother's

spoiled youngest child and start acting like a princess. Naming her for this mission can accomplish both those aims, if we play our cards right.”

“And if we don’t?” I asked.

“Well, short of them declaring war on us, things could hardly be worse between our families than they already are, so I doubt we have much to lose. And besides...”

“The children,” I said. “The children that they say are coming through Zem’ from Seumi. If it’s true, they have to be coming through Pristanograd.”

“More than likely, Valya,” agreed Sera.

“And you think Alzhbetka...what, is part of this scheme?”

Sera shook her head. “I don’t know, Valya, I truly don’t, but if I had to guess...I would say no. Alzhbetka has many flaws, and I know you two have never been friends, but I have known her since she was a babe in arms, and I would say that whatever else she might do, she would never be part of something like this. She’s too...too gods-cursedly arrogant and self-regarding to sell children into slavery. Kind of like,” Sera raised a brow at me, “someone else here in this chamber.”

“I guess I can’t really argue with that. So what: you think she...I don’t know: knows something?”

Sera shrugged. “Maybe. But if she does, I doubt that she knows that she knows it, at least to admit it to herself. But if our suspicions are correct and the Pristanogradskiye and Velikokrasnovy are involved in this vile business, then...I want Alzhbetka and Ivan to see it with their own eyes. I want to make sure that they can’t deny it, no matter how much they might wish to. Because,” she leaned forward and took, not my hand, but my arm in a firm grip, “if what we fear is true, if our own princesses are selling children into slavery, then we will *make them pay*, Valya. Do you hear me? We will make them sorry they’d ever so much as dreamed of their unspeakable schemes, and we will make it so that no one else will ever dare try it again.”

“Of course we will,” I said. “Alzhbetka Arinovna it is, then.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Messages were sent to Aksinya Olgovna, Amiran Iridivadze, Alzhbetka, and Ivan to wait upon us the third hour after noon in the Receiving Room, a small chamber off the Hall of Council where the Tsarina could hold more intimate audiences.

Ivan and Aksinya Olgovna showed up looking diffident but not particularly apprehensive; after all, they knew why they had been summoned. Amiran entered the room with the eager gait of a young man whom fate had favored and who never doubted that a summons by the Empress could only mean good news. I eyed him closely as he came in, curious to see whether Sera's assessment of him was correct. He was, I had to agree, quite handsome in a Southern way, with curly black hair and flashing dark eyes. Which was common enough amongst Southerners, although I fancied I could see traces of his great-grandfather, the foreigner from far, far across the Middle Sea that Susanna Gulisovna (they must have a fondness for that name in the family) Iridivadze had married, in the tightness of his curls and the swarthy skin. It was lucky that Southerners did not hold men's virtue so highly as, say, the black earth people did, as anyone could see that his had been long lost, and no wonder, as handsome as he was.

He went over and stood next to Ivan, the two men making a little group slightly off to the side, and I could see that he was taller than Ivan, but more slender, like a fine blade. Despite his curly hair everything about him seemed a little sharp, and even from across the room I could tell that he was clever. Next to him Ivan seemed...plain, almost, or pallid. *Or solid*, some part of my mind whispered to me. *Look at the set of those shoulders: he might surprise you. And his face is the face of a faithful man, even if he doesn't know that about himself yet. Don't cast him aside just yet, because he won't cast you aside.* Suddenly I knew, as all the bits and pieces that I had come to know in the past few days formed themselves into a new whole, that Ivan was the kind of person who, even when he seemed quiet and untroubled on the outside, felt

deeply on the inside, and that if I were ever to win his heart in truth, I would have to be very careful not to bruise it, as it would not recover quickly from harsh usage. Of course, given that I had spent nearly a third of my life pining over a single summer romance, the same could be said about me—but that was nobody’s problem but mine. It was up to me to look out for my own heart, and the only way I would find the strength to do so would be if I were looking out for somebody else’s heart as well. I was so busy contemplating this sudden realization that I was startled by the entrance of Alzhbetka Arinovna.

She arrived just in time to avoid any actual accusations of lateness, but was still most definitely the last to enter the room, something she seemed well aware of, and which made her raise her chin even higher than its natural angle, which, because she was not a tall woman, was pretty high already. Her father, if I remembered rightly, was from the Brnsko region, which was right on the edge of Zem’, practically in the West, and it could be seen not only in Alzhbetka’s funny name, but in her flaxen-blonde hair, her pale, pale, skin, and her fine features. Compared with the rest of us she looked fragile, like she might snap in two, but I knew that was not the case. Through the female line she was a Pristanogradskaya, and the Pristanogradskiye were made of stern stuff indeed. They had to be, to have held onto Pristanogradskoye after the Zerkalitsy left it for Krasnograd. She cut me a single glance and then pointedly looked away. I resisted the urge to sigh, or possibly go over and give her a good slap. Another person, a nondescript woman of middle years, slipped in through the door and took up a position by the wall where she could see all of us.

“Your caution does you credit, Alzhbetka Arinovna, but I assure you, you have no need for a bodyguard here,” I said.

The bodyguard focused all her attention on me and made a movement as if surreptitiously reaching for whatever weapon she had hidden away. Alzhbetka gave me a look of such disdain and dislike that only the very young can produce.

“I know how your mother cares for your safety, Alzhbetka,” interjected Sera, before Alzhbetka could say anything unwise. “Valeriya Dariyevna is right; there is nothing to threaten your safety here, but I wouldn’t dream of sending away such a devoted servant. Please, be at

ease, and,” she turned to address the others as well, “I thank you all for answering my summons.”

There was a flurry of bowing and assurances that everyone was delighted to serve the Tsarina in any way they could, which Sera calmed with a gentle movement of her hand. Alzhbetka’s bodyguard continued to watch me, but Alzhbetka’s attention had been claimed by Ivan and Amiran, who were standing across the room from her.

Good to know, I thought, and told myself I would have to keep an eye on that situation. I had expected that Alzhbetka would cause me problems because of her family’s relationship with mine, and her own attitude towards me, but I hadn’t thought of the problems that could arise from the mixture of a young woman of noble birth still in the first flowering of her desire, and two handsome young men in need of making a marriage match. I wondered if I could persuade Alzhbetka’s bodyguard to help me keep control of the situation. The last thing we needed was for Alzhbetka to seduce one of the men and then abandon them, or worse yet, demand marriage...*unless it is Amiran. Perhaps that could be a useful alliance.*

“As you know,” Sera said, once everyone was ready to start listening to her, “there have been reports that children, Zemnian children, are being taken and sold as slaves to the Hordes. My dear sister, Valeriya Dariyevna, who has been instrumental in bringing these reports back to Krasnograd”—I bowed—“has graciously deigned to lead a party East to look into these reports and, we may hope, end this vile practice, should the rumors prove to be true. Aksinya Olgovna, who is sister to Princess Velikogornaya, and Ivan Marinovich, only son to Princess Velikokrasnova, have also graciously agreed to join her party. And now we would like to invite you, dear Amiran Gulisovich and esteemed Alzhbetka Arinovna, in light of the position of your mothers’ families and your own excellent qualities, to make up the last members of this expedition.”

Amiran grinned and cried out, “With pleasure, Tsarina!” Alzhbetka gave both of us a sharp look. “Have you already spoken with our mothers about this, then, Tsarina?” she asked.

“There has not, unfortunately, been time to contact them, but I am sure, given the long ties between our families, and the fealty they owe

Krasnograd, that they would not hesitate in giving their assent," said Sera smoothly. "Besides, you are both of age and can choose as you will in this matter."

"I can, perhaps, gracious Tsarina, but Amiran..."

"Is also of age," interjected Sera. "As of two summers ago, is that not correct, Amiran?"

"It is, gracious Tsarina," he said, bowing. "And," he flashed Alzhbetka a grin, "in the South even our sons do not need to beg a mother's permission to go off on a worthy cause."

Alzhbetka stiffened and flared her nostrils. I thought the body-guard almost smiled to herself, off against the wall. Clearly Amiran and Alzhbetka would be good for each other.

"So you are resolved to go, then?" Sera asked Amiran. "We are delighted."

"It will be an honor, gracious Tsarina, and esteemed Valeriya Dariyevna," he said, bowing at both of us. "In the South we have also had our troubles with this vile trade, and we would welcome any chance to smash it."

"I see," said Sera, looking at him thoughtfully. "We should speak of this more later, dear Amiran."

"I am at your service, gracious Tsarina," he said with another bow, and then added, seriously, like someone who had been raised to rule, "Indeed, Tsarina, we in the Southern mountains would welcome Krasnograd's interest in this matter."

"And you shall have it," Sera promised him. "As shall the rest of our land. It seems this...rot has spread farther than any of us had ever dreamed. Everywhere I turn, I find another stain of corruption."

"Indeed, Tsarina," said Amiran soberly.

"And what of the coast?" Sera asked Alzhbetka. "Do you also come bearing such rumors, Alzhbetka Arinovna?"

"It will be an honor to serve in this matter, gracious Tsarina," said Alzhbetka stiffly. "But this taint...this injustice—I have heard nothing of it infecting the coastal provinces."

"I see," said Sera. Alzhbetka bristled at the skepticism in her words, but had the good sense not to argue.

"So you are all resolved to join us?" I asked, speaking up before

things got too awkward.

Everyone nodded with greater or lesser degrees of enthusiasm.

“Excellent,” I said briskly. “This means the steppe, both sets of mountains, the black earth district, and the coast will all be represented when we discover...whatever it is we will discover. It is currently high summer. The Tsarina has tasked me to be back before winter. I intend to set off the day after Midsummer; that is, the day after tomorrow. Does anyone have any objections?”

“So soon!” cried Alzhbetka. “How are we possibly to be ready?!”

“This is Krasnograd, my dear,” said Sera. “We are always ready to mount an expedition or a fighting force, should it be necessary.”

Alzhbetka’s pale face darkened. “While our gracious Tsarina is indeed correct, Alzhbetka Arinovna has raised a valid point,” I said quickly. I could see that Sera had already taken a dislike to Alzhbetka, even though she had been the one to suggest her, and that it would fall on me, amusingly enough, to act as peacemaker. And while Alzhbetka had earned Sera’s condescending reply, I knew that young women like her had a very limited tolerance for that sort of thing, and I would need to stand between her and the teasing she was certain to bring upon herself. Besides, I was starting to develop a perverse liking for her. Probably because she reminded me of myself at that age. Or my current age. We arrogant women needed to stick together, since we were sure to drive everyone else away.

“Due to the urgent nature of our task, and the need to accomplish as much as we can before winter sets in, our time for preparation is much less than ideal,” I went on. “But as the Tsarina pointed out, we can still do it.” Something made me glance in Sera’s direction. She had suddenly started to droop on the throne. I doubted anyone else had noticed it, but to me it was a clear signal that she was spent for the day.

“Perhaps, if the Tsarina will permit it, we can continue our discussion elsewhere,” I said. “I am sure we have no need to bother her with the details of our preparations.”

“As you wish, sister,” said Sera. She smiled at me tiredly, and I knew that she had guessed the reason for my suggestion, which ordinarily would have offended her, but at the moment she was too weak to feel anything but gratitude. “Oh, but one more thing,” she said, straight-

ening herself up against the back of her seat. "I believe you said you would need a mistress of horse? Have you chosen anyone?"

"With your permission, Tsarina, I would like to bring Kseniya Avdotyevna."

"The under-mistress of my stables?"

"The very one," I said with a bow. "With your permission, of course, Tsarina. At first I thought of bringing one of my own people, but then I thought it would be better if they stayed behind to watch over...my family's interests here. Taking your own mistress of horse is clearly impossible. But then Kseniya Avdotyevna came to mind. She is an experienced horsewoman, but still young enough not to find the ardors of the journey too taxing. And frankly..."

"Yes, Valya?" asked Sera. I must have piqued her curiosity, for she even found the strength to cock an eyebrow at me.

"Frankly I think she's bored," I said. "Bored with Krasnograd and the thought of spending all her days here. A good journey will be just what she needs, and the memory of it might keep her from leaving your service in a few years' time. Let her slake her wanderlust now, and not when you will need her to step forward and assume command of the stables."

"Wise council," said Sera. "Very well, if she agrees to it. And so," she looked around at all the others, "I thank you again for the services to Zem' you have all agreed to render. Should you need of anything to facilitate your preparations or your journey, you have only to ask. And now I leave you in my sister's capable hands."

Everyone bowed and insisted once again that it was an honor to serve, and then I led them out of the room before they could see how Sera had to be helped out of her seat by her guards.



"Come on," I said as soon as we were out in the corridor. "Let's go back to my chambers."

Aksinya Olgovna nodded in understanding, but the younger members of the party all looked taken aback at the suggestion.

"I don't have anything improper planned," I told them impatiently. "I just need a...quieter location for our discussion. And you and your reputations are going to have to get accustomed to being alone in

my company anyway. But if it helps, think of Aksinya Olgovna as your chaperone.”

Aksinya Olgovna permitted herself a small smile at the thought of three people of age needing a chaperone, and herself performing that duty. Alzhbetka saw it and bridled, Ivan saw it and looked uncertain, and Amiran saw it and nodded briskly.

“Of course, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said. “And of course”—he gave Ivan and Alzhbetka a meaningful look—“we trust your honor with our own. Lead the way.”

I set off down the corridor with Aksinya Olgovna beside me and the youthful trio—already I was thinking of them that way—a few paces behind us. To an outside observer it probably looked like they were merely showing us the deference that our age and rank deserved, but by the occasional whispered word I was able to catch (my hearing had always been *excellent*), I deduced that Alzhbetka had deliberately slowed their pace in order to hiss a stream of warnings and invectives against my character to the boys. I repressed a sigh and the strong urge to go give her a good slapping.

Once we got to my chambers, though, I had to admit that I began to wonder whether Alzhbetka hadn't been right and I shouldn't have brought them there. Although Mirochka was out and the maids had already come through and cleaned, with the five of us all in the front room it suddenly seemed rather cramped and bare and yet also—I hastily pulled closed the curtain that separated the bedchamber from the front room—painfully intimate. Maybe because it *was* so cramped and bare; now they all knew that this was how I lived. I imagined that Alzhbetka, Amiran, and Ivan were all used to much finer accommodations. Well, soon we would all be sleeping out on the ground together anyway, so they might as well get used to a life lacking in finery.

“Your daughter is not here, then, Valeriya Dariyevna?” asked Amiran politely.

“She is with her brothers,” I said. “We will not be disturbed.”

“I had hoped to make her acquaintance, Valeriya Dariyevna. I have heard she is a very fine girl, and one of great high spirits. As,” Amiran gave Ivan a meaningful look, “Ivan Marinovich has cause to know and be grateful.”

“Is that story already circulating through the kremlin?” I asked.

“The story of how the heir to the Wooden Throne has already shown her greatness of heart by defending the honor of one of her princes?” Amiran grinned, while Ivan blushed a particularly painful blush even for him. “It must be halfway to the mountains by now, Valeriya Dariyevna. Soon hearts will be melting the length and breadth of Zem’ over your daughter’s deeds.”

“Well...good,” I said. “And perhaps you can meet her tomorrow, at the Midsummer festivities. But first, our party. Will you be bringing guards? Chaperones? I want to travel light and swift, but I’m sure your mothers would want you to have guards and chaperones with you. Alzhbetka already has her own guard. What about you, Amiran and Ivan?”

“I think my mother has washed my hands of me,” said Ivan. “I think whatever guards and chaperones you deign to provide me, Valeriya Dariyevna, will be the guards and chaperones I’ll have.”

“Do you *want* a chaperone?” I asked him. “Because the Tsarina and I have already resolved to provide you with one, if you mother refuses. We would not wish you to feel...dishonored, no matter what your mother might have done.”

He shook his head, blushing scarlet. “I’m sure...I’m sure our company will be enough, Valeriya Dariyevna. I trust you all with...everything. I’m sure I’ll be safe with you.”

“Very well,” I said. “And Amiran?”

He grinned. “In the South we are our own guards and chaperones, Valeriya Dariyevna. I would be happy to provide more people for our party if we need them, but for myself, I am enough.”

“Good,” I said. “It will just be us, then. No need in weighing ourselves down. Now, about our horses...”

“What’s wrong with the Tsarina?” demanded Alzhbetka.

I froze. Only for a moment, and in other company I could have covered it up, but with that crew even a momentary lapse was telling, and by the time I said, “What makes you think there’s anything wrong with her?” it was, I could tell by their faces, far too late for dissemblance. I told myself I should be glad to have such sharp companions on my journey.

“A child of three could see that she was unwell just now,” said Alzhbetka with the disgust of the very clever at having to explain something that to them was ridiculously simple, and giving me a thoroughly deserved unpleasant look for having tried to deceive her. “And she hasn’t been out as much as she normally is, and the other day she was suddenly taken ill and spent a good part of the day in bed. It’s all over the kremlin, and probably Krasnograd as well. So what’s wrong with her?” she repeated, reddening as she realized how impertinent that sounded. “I mean, if we’re going to be journeying all the way to the Eastern mountains on a special Imperial mission, we have a right to know,” she continued, looking me in the eyes and holding her ground despite the censorious looks the men were giving her for prying into the Empress’s affairs. “We have a right to know!”

“So you do,” I agreed. “But only if you can make me believe that you can keep a confidence and not go spreading what I’m about to tell you all over the kremlin. It’s the Tsarina’s private business, and it’s her decision when to share it with her subjects.”

“Of course, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Amiran, while the rest gave tight little nods. Despite their—well, Alzhbetka’s—flaws, I thought that they most likely were trustworthy in this matter, and they did deserve to know.

“The Tsarina is with child,” I said.

Everyone looked confused at my grave face.

“But...surely this is good news?” said Amiran.

“Do you not...” I stopped and looked at them. “You don’t know,” I said.

“Know what?” demanded Alzhbetka.

“The Tsarina...” I had to pause to clear my throat. “I thought it was widespread knowledge, but perhaps not. Perhaps there are some things too painful even for princesses to gossip about. But anyway. The Tsarina is...she has always had difficulty bearing children. With each son she brought into the world, she suffered more than the last, and in between there have been...misfortunes. So the healers told her never again. She must give up all hope of producing an heir; it was too dangerous for her.”

“Was that why she fell ill, the last time I was here?” asked Alzhbet-

ka, now looking sickened.

“Yes,” I said. “She...she got with child, despite the warnings, but... but began to bleed. To stop it, they had to...they decided to try moldy rye. They said it was the only thing that would save her. She said no, but I...I said yes. And it did save her, but she lost all hope of that child and the healers said absolutely never again, it was too risky. But nonetheless, here she is, with child again...and they say it would be just as dangerous to end it as to go on with it, so of course she’s decided to try again, not to do anything that might save her.”

“What possessed her to do such a rash thing, Valeriya Dariyevna, if you’ll pardon my asking?” said Aksinya Olgovna.

“She’s desperate for an heir.”

“She should have been content with the heir she had, if you’ll pardon my saying so,” said Aksinya Olgovna, shaking her head. “But some women are never satisfied unless...” She lapsed into silence, still shaking her head.

“I agree,” I said. “But there is nothing she will let me do about it. So yes, she is unwell. Very unwell, and likely to get worse. But not a word, *not a word* to anyone about this, not even your sisters or your mothers, do you understand?”

“We understand, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Alzhbetka soberly, and the others all nodded their agreement.

“Is that why we have to get back by midwinter, Valeriya Dariyevna?” asked Aksinya Olgovna.

“Or preferably sooner,” I said. “The healers say midwinter is... when it is expected. The Tsarina wants this to be taken care of, and for me to be back by her side, by the time...well, you understand. So we must travel swiftly and resolve the matter with as much haste as possible. She wants me back...and she wants this not to be hanging over her head as...well, at such a momentous...moment.”

“We understand, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Aksinya Olgovna. She reached out and pressed my arm. “And we will all pray to the gods for the Tsarinovna’s safe delivery.”

“I thank you,” I said. “Although the gods are not known for their kindness.”

“Sometimes they act in our favor anyway, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said

Aksinya Olgovna. “Sometimes they do. And in the meantime, we’ll do all we can to wipe this stain of slavery from our land and get you back home in time.” She released my arm and stepped back. “Starting with planning a speedy journey to the mountains. So,” she smiled and turned to the three younger members of the party, “what about your horses?”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Midsummer's Day dawned bright and hot. Mirochka, not at all to my surprise, leapt out of bed long before the maids brought in breakfast, and, wriggling around the room like a young puppy, tried to convince me to go out to the stables to visit the horses, or go out to the park to visit the trees, or in general go out somewhere and do something that would allow her to spend some of her wealth of energy.

"If you want to stay up all night tonight, you should sleep in this morning," I told her.

"I *can't*, mama, I *can't*," she said, jumping up and down to try and look out the window, but failing to get enough height to see enough to satisfy her. "It's Midsummer! We should do something to celebrate!"

"We will," I told her. "There will be festivities all evening and probably all through the night."

"That's so far away! Let's go out, mama!"

"If we do that we'll disturb others who are trying to sleep," I told her. "We should wait at least until the maids come in with breakfast before we go anywhere. Come back to bed."

But that proved to be utterly ineffective, as did turning my face into the pillow and ignoring her, and so I was forced to admit defeat and, rising reluctantly from the bed, take her down to the one place I was sure we would find a welcome, the kitchen.

Despite the early hour, the kitchen was swarming, with a small army of serving girls and boys washing, chopping, kneading, frying, and boiling, and Alyona Vasilisovna standing by the big table and directing seventeen things at once.

"Perhaps we should come back later," I told Mirochka. "We shouldn't bother them when they're working."

"But mama..." she said, and started to make her way into the kitchen. I grabbed her by the shoulder to drag her back, but Alyona Vasilisovna had already caught sight of us.

"Valeriya Dariyevna!" she called over the clouds of steam, smoke, and flying flour. "And this must be your little princess."

“I’m sorry; we weren’t thinking. We’ll leave you to your work.”

“Nonsense,” she said, abandoning the boys making pastry to come over to us. “Come on in. It will do the little princess good to see what we do down here.”

“Mirochka, this is Alyona Vasilisovna, the head cook,” I said. “You should bow to her.”

Mirochka bobbed up and down and stared at Alyona Vasilisovna in fascination. “I think I’ve seen you somewhere before, aunty,” she said.

“Alyona Vasilisovna,” I corrected her. The gods knew I was not a stickler for politeness, and there was hardly anyone back on the steppe that Mirochka could call by name and matronymic anyway, but somehow I felt that in this case it was appropriate.

“Aunty’s fine,” said Alyona Vasilisovna. “After all, it’s practically true, and I’ve already taken a liking to your little princess. So where do you think you’ve seen me before, my daughter?”

“In a dream,” said Mirochka decisively. “I was out walking around, and I ran into you.”

“Out walking around in your dream, were you? What did you see? The park? Your steppe?”

“No, I mean I was out walking around in dreams,” explained Mirochka, giving Alyona Vasilisovna a look expressing her surprise at someone not being able to understand such elementary things. “Sometimes at night I go walking around in everyone’s dreams, and one night I walked into yours. Only it was a long time ago, before I came here to Krasnograd. I just remembered when I saw you. I thought it was an ordinary dream until I came in here and I saw you, but now I know it wasn’t. You were dreaming about a little girl who looked like me, and you thought I was her, and you were sad when I wasn’t.”

Alyona Vasilisovna stared at Mirochka, opened her mouth to say something, closed it, cleared her throat, and looked at me helplessly. I looked just as helplessly back at her.

“This is the first I’ve heard of it,” I told her.

“Was it in the spring, my dove?” asked Alyona Vasilisovna. “This past spring, just after the start of Oakmoon?”

“Yes,” said Mirochka. “Are there oaks here, Alyona Vasilisovna?”

Do they really leaf out during Oakmoon? We don't have them on the steppe."

"There are and they do, my dove," said Alyona Vasilisovna. She looked down at Mirochka with something between laughter and tears chasing itself across her face. "I remember that dream, my dove. I was dreaming of my little niece. I dreamed that she came to speak to me, and then she turned into someone else who was like enough to be her sister. I thought about that dream for a long time, wondering what it might mean."

"Where is she now, aunty?" asked Mirochka. "Your little niece? She must be a woman long grown."

"She never did grow into a woman, my dove," said Alyona Vasilisovna. "It's not given for all little girls to grow into women." She reached down and stroked Mirochka's shoulder. "But in your case I think it is."

"Well, of course," said Mirochka. "So what will be at the feast tonight? Will you be staying up all night for the celebrations? Mama said I could stay up all night tonight. It will be my first time staying up all night. Have you done it before?"

"Many times, my dove," said Alyona Vasilisovna. "Many, many times. Enough that I think I might go to bed early, if I can. But you stay up as late as you wish. Would you like to see what we're making down here for you?"

"Oh yes!" said Mirochka, and, taking Alyona Vasilisovna's hand, followed her over to the ovens to inspect the pastries.

I thought Mirochka would weary of the kitchens soon enough, but, enticed by the activity and the samples of the evening's delicacies that were constantly being pressed on her, she happily passed the better part of the morning there, while I sat at a table and listened in to the conversations between the serving folk. Their primary concerns, of course, were the handsome men and pretty women who had caught their eyes but did not seem ready to return their suit with equal interest, and I heard enough advice on the topic to fill volumes. Sometimes I even thought about adding to the stream of speculation and advice flowing around me, but then I remembered my own spectacular lack of success in this area, and kept my mouth firmly shut. Until

one young woman, who hitherto had been kneading dough silently in a corner, her eyes downcast, admitted under heavy pressure from the others that yes, a certain Andrey had indeed returned to his home village to marry the woman of his mother's choice.

"And good riddance to bad rubbish!" exclaimed Kirochka, an under-cook who appeared to be the particular friend of the downcast young woman kneading dough. "You're too good to be running after an inconstant man, Valenka. You'll find ten times as good by next week, my head for beheading."

"I'm sure," said Valenka, her lips quivering. "It's just...I don't want ten times as good. I just want him."

"We'll find someone to drive him out of your head quick enough," said Kirochka, slapping her on the shoulder. "Just you see. Now, don't go crying into the Tsarina's bread! Hand that over before you ruin it, you silly girl." She snatched the dough out of Valenka's hands and bustled off to the ovens with it.

"As one Valeriya to another," I found myself saying in a low voice to Valenka, while privately thinking that that particular version of our name, which bore such a strong resemblance to the name of the felt boots black earth peasants wore in winter, boded no good for its bearer, "I can assure you that you don't need ten times as good. You don't even need one half as good, if you don't want him. What you really need is something else entirely."

Valenka raised her tear-stained face to look into mine, and the dreadfully familiar pain I saw there made my heart turn over. Could I really be risking that again? More fool me.

"What do I need, noblewoman?" she asked dutifully.

"Something else to care about," I told her. "Something else to make life worth living. There are more things in the world than men, you know; sometimes we just need to be reminded of that fact. Especially after...something like what happened to you."

Valenka gave me a look filled with tearful doubt, but before she could fail to argue with me (because she obviously disagreed, but would never even consider arguing with someone as important as myself, even though I could tell that she didn't recognize me personally), Kirochka came bustling back and said, "Our Valenechka isn't bother-

ing you with her foolishness, is she, Valeriya Dariyevna?"

"Not at all," I said. "We were just commiserating, that's all. And I was trying to convince her that the best thing right now is to have something else to think about."

"Well, you'd know, wouldn't you, Valeriya Dariyevna," said Kirochka without thinking, and then clapped her hands over her mouth. "I beg your pardon," she said, looking mortified. "I didn't mean...I mean, what I meant was..."

"I know what you meant," I told her. "And I take no offense. And yet," I turned to Valenka, "here I am, alive and well, as unlikely as such an outcome seemed to me at the time."

Valenka gave me a puzzled look, and I realized that back when my name had been on the lips of everyone in Krasnograd, she had been a young girl in some distant village, and that it was entirely possible she had no idea who I was or what I had done.

"Something similar happened to me when I was your age," I told her kindly. "It was quite a scandal."

"And...what happened then, noblewoman?" asked Valenka tremulously. "Did you...what happened to him?"

"He married his mother's choice, and I fled back to *my* mother in disgrace," I told her, more jauntily than I felt.

"*You* were disgraced, noblewoman?" she said, surprised. "Why should *you* be disgraced? Surely *he* was the one whose reputation..."

"Oh, I dare say his reputation suffered a great deal. But not enough to stop the marriage from going through. But that's neither here nor there. The *point* is that I survived, and you probably will too, even if right now it doesn't seem like it. The pain is all out of proportion to the injury."

"If you say so, noblewoman," said Valenka dully, displaying (I thought again privately) all the backbone of the felt boots that were her namesake.

"She does, Valenka, and you should listen to her," Kirochka told her, putting her hands on her hips and fixing her friend with a stern glare. "And if you ask me, you're both better off without them. From what I've heard, neither of them have a faithful bone in their bodies, and who wants that in a husband?"

“What have you heard?” I demanded. “What have you heard about...*him*?” I realized that I had jumped to my feet, and Kirochka was cowering back from me. I forced myself to take a step back. “I apologize,” I told her. I glanced over to Mirochka, afraid that she had seen what had taken place, but she was off on the other side of the kitchen, engrossed in the preparation of a platter of intricate pastries. “I did not mean to startle you,” I continued. “But...I have to know. What have you heard?”

Kirochka edged a little deeper into the corner, and Valenka and I followed her. “Begging your pardon, Valeriya Dariyevna,” she said. “I thought...well, I thought you knew.”

“Knew what?”

She took a deep breath. “Well, I’ll start off by saying you’re better off without him, Valeriya Dariyevna, like I already said. He did a foolish thing when he turned you down and no mistake, but it saved you a deal of trouble.”

“This is news to me,” I told her. “The general wisdom seems to be quite the opposite.”

“Maybe in your set, Valeriya Dariyevna, begging your pardon, but in *ours*...You know that he was running around with the daughter of his mother’s mistress of horse when he took up with you?”

“Impossible!” I cried. Kirochka and Valenka both looked at me in surprise. “I mean...” I could feel a blush that would have done Ivan credit spreading over my cheeks. At least this corner of the kitchen was dark. “I thought...his knowledge of women was so little...”

“Or maybe that’s what he wanted you to think, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Kirochka. “It’s easy enough for men to hide their pasts. I was still a child then, but my father worked in all the stables over on Black Earth Street, whenever they needed an extra hand, and he used to take me with him, and I saw them together more than once. Even when he was running around with you in the evenings, he was still meeting with her in the mornings. And then he went and married a third woman.”

“And...now?” I asked, my voice hissing through a throat that suddenly couldn’t take in enough air.

“They say there’s some under-gardener who’s taken his fancy, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Kirochka. “Mind, I don’t think it’s any-

thing...I think he just falls in with women too easily, and before he knows it, there he is.”

“Does...does Princess Velikokrasnova know?” I asked.

Kirochka shrugged. “If you ask me, she turns a blind eye to it, Valeriya Dariyevna. He’s discreet enough, but she must suspect. My third-sister works in their house, though, and she says she doesn’t think she cares. She never had any great liking for him, you know: she just wanted the alliance and a husband—and then to take something from the steppe, when things turned out as they did and the chance came up. And she’d never want a good husband anyway: she’d rather have someone she could despise, someone she could torment, just as he’d never want a wife he’d have to be faithful to. They’d both rather be miserable, just like our Valenka’s Andrey.”

“I can’t speak for Valenka’s Andrey,” I said. “But that does...well, it doesn’t matter. I can’t say I’m glad to hear this, Kirochka, but I thank you for telling me. It...it explains many things.”

“It most surely does, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Kirochka. “It surely explains a lot of things. Come on, Valenka, we’ve got more bread to bake.” And she led Valenka off to the rising pans, leaving me to my own thoughts.

Much as I despised myself for it, I found myself going over memories that had once filled my every waking moment, but that I had since learned to suppress with an iron fist. Had he really known other women before me, and even run around with them while he was with me? He had never mentioned any other women that I could recall, but I could also not recall any instances in which he had claimed the purity I had assumed. He had seemed so tentative, so shy when we were together...but perhaps he had been feigning his inexperience, just as Kirochka had said, or maybe—mortifying thought!—what I had taken to be the reticence of sheltered innocence and prudent virtue, which I had overcome with the assurances of my own faithful affection, had in fact been the ambivalence of lukewarm feeling, which I had overcome through my own blind desperation to gain my point and fix him as mine forever. Of course the whole affair had been of my own instigation, but that was only natural; aside from the chaste behavior that was generally expected of a young man of noble blood, I had never

had any interest in men who chased me. Certainly *he* had been the one to catch *my* eye at that feast Sera had held to celebrate my first summer in Krasnograd as a woman grown, and certainly *I* had been the one to suggest all the public meetings and hidden trysts that we had had, but there was nothing odd about that, nor about his initial appearance of reserve and indifference.

Although...it *was* very strange that he had not owned up to his betrothal to Princess Velikokrasnova from the first, but rather allowed me to find out only after several weeks, and only through the warnings of Sera, but I had put it all down to his overwhelming passion for me. That he was by nature unfaithful had never even crossed my mind, but now, as I tried to revive the memories of events that had taken place nine summers in the past, I found that the only thing I could really remember was my own overwhelming passion, my own conviction of its being returned, my own disregard of every caution, every contrary circumstance, and my own crushing, debilitating pain and sorrow once everything had come crashing down around me. That he had felt at least somewhat differently I had been forced to admit by his actions, as no former engagement, no call to duty or propriety could have turned me from my course then, but that he had also felt deeply for me, that he had also suffered on my account, I had never doubted. Until now. For a moment the humiliation and self-loathing this provoked was so severe that I wanted to bite down on something in order to restrain the scream that was welling up inside of me.

“Look, mama!” cried Mirochka, running over to me. “I made a pie all by myself!” She shoved misshapen, half-cooked, half-burnt pastry in my face.

“Well done!” I told her. “I see they’ll make a cook out of you yet!”

“Eat it, mama, eat it: you haven’t had any breakfast yet.” Her face, in which I could suddenly see so many traces of Nika’s own features, was screwed up in affectionate concern.

I took a bite. Even Mirochka’s untrained efforts could not completely ruin the ingredients, which were the best that money and influence could buy, and the pride she took in her work, and her desire for me to like it, made it taste delicious. I swallowed, and most of the tears of pain and hurt-filled screams of rage that had been threatening

to come bursting out went down with it.

“It’s wonderful,” I told her. “Shall we split it?”

“It’s all for you, mama! I already had two! I wanted to make sure that you got one too. And look! Alyona Vasilisovna gave me some bits of apple and carrot for the horses! Can we go see them now?”

“Let’s,” I said. “Have you thanked Alyona Vasilisovna and the others for letting you spend time with them?”

“Yes, but let’s go say goodbye to them before we go to the stables, shall we?” She grabbed my arm and pulled me after her to where Alyona Vasilisovna and Kirochka were standing and talking, or rather, where Alyona Vasilisovna was shaking her finger in Kirochka’s face.

“Thank you for the trouble you took for us this morning,” I told them both. “And...there is no need to...Kirochka has done me a great service this morning.”

Alyona Vasilisovna gave me a sharp look. “I don’t hold with my girls running their mouths off about things that are none of their business and that they only know third-hand anyway, Valeriya Dariyevna,” she said.

“I know. But it is better that my eyes should be opened.”

“Opened about what, mama?” asked Mirochka.

“Nothing of importance,” I told her. “Some things about people you don’t know. Are you ready to go to the stable, my love?”

Alyona Vasilisovna gave me another sharp look, one that encompassed Mirochka as well, and then relaxed and nodded her head. “As long as no harm has been done where it matters, Valeriya Dariyevna,” she said, making a tiny nod in Mirochka’s direction.

“Nothing ever could,” I said. “Thank you for your care of us, Alyona Vasilisovna, and may your preparations continue smoothly today.”

“And have a joyous Midsummer!” cried Mirochka.

“To you too, little princess,” said Alyona Vasilisovna, smiling fondly. “Although it looks like you’re off to a good start, aren’t you? Say hello to the horses for me.”

Mirochka promised to do so, and after another round of thanks, we left the kitchen in quest of more adventures.



I had blithely assumed, when the initial shock had passed there in

the kitchen, that Kirochka's revelations would not have any great effect on me, and that I would go about my day with all my accustomed energy, but when we stepped out into the bright sunlight, something seemed wrong with my eyes, and I almost staggered from the wave of dizziness that hit me. After a moment I got a hold of myself and we proceeded to the stables without Mirochka noticing anything wrong, but as we walked across the yard and then into the stable and down the rows of stalls, I felt as if I had somehow become separated from my body, or as if I were wading through deep water, so that every step was an effort, and everything was strange and far away. The part of me that could still care about things ground its teeth in annoyance. I had felt the same way for many weeks *after*, but I had thought I had left all this behind long ago. Obviously not. I hoped I would be able to come back to myself soon.

Mirochka fed our horses, who were all looking well, with the apple and carrot scraps she had been given, and I ran my hands down my Zlata's legs while she lipped curiously at my hair, as was her wont. Everything felt firm and cool, just as it should, and Zlata herself seemed restless to quit the stall and the regime of rest she had been under since we had arrived in Krasnograd, so I judged she was as ready as she could be to set off on our next journey. This encouraging thought, and Zlata's gentle solicitude, made my head feel a bit clearer, and my heart feel a bit better about life in general, and I spoke quite boldly and sensibly with Kseniya Avdotyevna about the preparations for setting off tomorrow. We had made the principle arrangements the evening before, and now Kseniya Avdotyevna, who as I had predicted had been delighted to join in on our venture, was supervising the packing and repairs she considered necessary with the calm competence of a born stable mistress, with only the occasional grin or glint in her eye to betray how excited she really was. She stopped by Zlata's stall when she saw me looking her over.

"Don't you worry, Valeriya Dariyevna, she's as sound as any horse in Krasnograd, and fit enough to gallop from here to the mountains without drawing breath," she told me cheerfully. "I've been keeping a special eye on her ever since she came in. She's a fine creature, she is. I'd heard that steppe horses were something special, and in her case I

see that it's true."

"There are many fine horses on the steppe," I said. "But Zlata is a prize even amongst her sisters."

"Of course she is, Valeriya Dariyevna. Look at those legs! So light, and still so sturdy! You can tell she's not likely to break or bow something. She's neither heavy like our draft horses, nor delicate like our racehorses. Have you bred her?"

"She dropped her first foal last year," I said. "A beautiful little filly, as golden as her mother. We named her Solnyshka, because she shines like the sun. Zlata weaned her off this spring, and I had half a mind to bring her with me, I prize her that much, but this was no journey for a yearling, so I left her behind for my mistress of horse to continue her training. We'll back her next spring, when her bones are ready for my weight. I'll show her to you when we pass through the steppe."

"I'd dearly love to see that, Valeriya Dariyevna," said Kseniya Avdotyevna, surveying Zlata with gleaming eyes. "And will you breed her again?"

"Perhaps next year," I said. "We give them at least a year between foals, you know, and Zlata's too fine a saddle horse for me to want to lose her too often. Although we certainly have plenty of fine horses back home. Perhaps if there's time we can bring back a stud and a couple of mares on our way back."

"I'd count in an honor and no mistake, Valeriya Dariyevna," said Kseniya Avdotyevna, her eyes gleaming even more brightly at the thought. "Horses are the family business, and I've been around them my entire life, but I don't know that I've ever seen one I liked so well as yours here."

"We'll have to find you your own steppe mare, then," I told her. "We don't give them to just anybody, you know, but we always have a mount for a born horsewoman."

"Even a black earth woman, Valeriya Dariyevna?" asked Kseniya Avdotyevna with a laugh.

"We could overlook it if you prove yourself," I told her. "Are all your family stablehands, then?"

"Well, not my mother, Valeriya Dariyevna—she's a seamstress. But all my aunts and uncles are. I was glad to hear that Ivan Marinovich

will be accompanying us, and to see his horse in our stable—the rest of my family works at the Velikokrasnova and Vostochnokrasnova stables, and I've known him since he was a lad.”

“Is that so,” I said. My dizziness came back. “Was one of your aunts the mistress of horse for Princess Vostochnokrasnova, then?”

“And still is, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Kseniya Avdotyevna cheerily. “Although she’s getting on in years, and we’re all expecting her daughter, my second-sister, to take her place soon. Now there was a surprise: we all thought our Alya would never show an interest in the business, or in anything other than chasing men, but she’s settled down now that she’s married.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” I said. “Young women can be so flighty sometimes.”

“Isn’t that the truth, Valeriya Dariyevna. They say she even...” Kseniya Avdotyevna suddenly became very confused, “well, it doesn’t signify at all. Here I am standing around talking to you, when we both have the work of three women to do. Joyous Midsummer, Valeriya Dariyevna, and I’ll see you tomorrow morning, if not before.”

She rushed off, leaving me with the unpleasant conclusion that her second-sister had been the very woman Kirochka had said had been running around with Nika the same summer that I had. I ran my hands indecisively through Zlata’s mane. It was highly likely that this second-sister was at the Vostochnokrasnova stable on Black Earth Street, and that if I wanted to, I could go find her and confront her right now. The desire to do so was strong. On the other hand, what was to be gained by doing so? Absolutely nothing. All it would do would be to stir up old sorrows and poison whatever there had been of good in that sorry affair. And Kseniya Avdotyevna was right: I had plenty to do as it was. There was absolutely no need.

“Look, mama, it’s the tsarinoviches!” cried Mirochka, who had come out of the neighboring stall and was lounging in the aisle, waiting for me to finish with my woolgathering. She knew better than to run in a stable, but she walked with all permissible alacrity over to her brothers, where it was soon discovered that they were there in order to collect their ponies and go for a ride.

“Can I go, mama, can I go?” begged Mirochka.

“Who is escorting you?” I asked.

“Ivan Marinovich,” said Ruslan with a nod towards the stable door, where Ivan Marinovich had just appeared. “And Yura and Sanya, of course.” He nodded to the two guards flanking him.

Ivan Marinovich came over and joined us. I thought he flushed a little on seeing me, but he bowed and greeted me composedly enough, and even said, “Would you care to join us, Valeriya Dariyevna? The tsarinoviches wish to go riding, and I thought I’d take my Svetlyak out for a little outing to stretch his legs before tomorrow.”

I thought about accepting his invitation, and even about telling him that responsibility had, as it so often did for modest and retiring spirits, made him grow bold, but instead I said, “It sounds delightful, but I have some errands I must run, and we will have more than enough chances to ride together starting tomorrow. Will you be so good as to take Mirochka with you in my stead, and watch over her?”

“Of course, Valeriya Dariyevna.” I thought he gave me a puzzled look, as if there had been something odd in my manner, but I decided to hope that I hadn’t and wouldn’t antagonize him by my refusal, and, thanking him for his care and telling Mirochka to be good, I left.



I had every intention of going back to my chambers and packing up my things for the journey tomorrow, but instead, too sick at heart to concentrate on anything and disgusted with myself for being like that over something so stupid and so long ago, I wandered into the park behind the kremlin. Because it was a holiday, many others had also made their way there, and I spent a while walking listlessly from grove to grove, interrupting trysting couples. Which only made me feel worse. Memories of my own trysts with Nika kept rising up, and I kept seeing the image of the greedy, desperate look on his face and the furtive hunch of his shoulders that would come over him whenever he would take my nipple in his mouth, like a little child, only without a child’s purity of understanding and purpose, replaced instead with the feeling that he was doing something wrong, that he was stealing something he shouldn’t, but couldn’t or wouldn’t stop himself from doing so...I had always pushed down the revulsion it had provoked, had always told myself it was the result of his passion for me, his over-

whelming love for me, but right now I felt nothing but disgust, disgust for myself for letting him do that to me, disgust for myself for going along, even encouraging, what I now saw as nothing more than selfish, fearful greed. For a moment I thought I might retch.

A few strong swallows brought my stomach under control, but gave me no more peace of mind, or any idea where I should go. I thought about going to “my” prayer tree, but couldn’t face all the memories it would bring up, and so I kept wandering until I was somewhere in the middle of the park, which even the most ardent lovers considered to be haunted, or near enough, and consequently avoided, and sat down on a rotting log beside a small bog.

Mosquitoes whined around me, but I could hardly find the resolution to slap them. I stared down at the small pool of black water in front of me, and wondered how deep it was. Deep enough to drown in? Probably not. Not that I really wanted to anyway, but for a moment I felt so tired that I thought I might just fall face-first into the water and lack the strength to get back up. The fact that I was spending Midsummer, and the day before a long journey, idling by a bog, instead of preparing for my travels or spending time with my family, made me angry, but the anger was so far away it had no effect on my actions. Then I thought about how I sitting around moping over someone who would go out of his way to avoid me now, and who may never have cared two grosh about me, when I could be with people who would gladly spend time with me whenever I gave them the chance, and whose loyalty and friendship had been proven time and time again, and I became even angrier, but it was still as if the anger were separated from me by thick wavy glass or deep running water. My eyes ached, and I knew that I wanted to cry, and that crying would help, it would release whatever poison was inside of me after all these years, but no tears would come.

Something caught my eye. A beetle had fallen onto its back near my foot and was struggling to right itself in the moss. I bent down and gently flipped it back over, and watched as it scuttled off.

“Thank you, sister,” said a voice behind me, and a hard hand closed around my shoulder.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I lurched forward in an attempt to jump to my feet and whirl around, but between the soft ground and the hand gripping my shoulder, all I did was stumble and almost fall before coming to a rest, half-suspended by whomever was holding me up.

“Easy, sister,” said the voice.

“You’re a leshaya,” I said. “You can put me down. I won’t do anything to you.”

“That is true, sister,” said the voice, sounding amused. “But I thank you for your intent not to harm me, anyway.”

The hard branch-like hand holding my left shoulder slowly released me. I was glad that I only staggered a little as I regained my footing and turned around to face her.

“Am I what you expect, sister?” asked the leshaya, blinking her large green eyes from behind the many fir boughs, some of which resembled hands, on her trunk.

“Close enough. Did you come here to save me from myself, or ask something of me?”

“You’re much more direct than your foremothers, little Dariyevna,” said the leshaya, still sounding amused. She poked my shoulder with a branch. “Firmer, too. Stronger, at least in body. It is good to be strong. I hope you are equally strong in mind.”

“You knew them, then. My foremothers.”

The leshaya’s wind-like voice made a sound that could have been a laugh or a sigh. “I did, little Dariyevna, I did. I had that honor.”

“I may not be them. But I will do what I can for you.”

“I see you’ve already answered your question, then, little Dariyevna,” observed the leshaya.

“If you’d come to save me from myself, you wouldn’t have let go of me so quickly.”

“I did not judge the danger that great,” agreed the leshaya. “Besides, the water there is no deeper than your knees, and it is very difficult for a strong healthy woman such as yourself to drown in knee-

deep water, even if she wants to. Your lungs would force you back up into the air in spite of yourself.”

“I know. It was nothing but an idle thought anyway.”

“Such thoughts run in your family, though, little Dariyevna, and they are not always idle. Some of your foremothers have wondered if they are cursed, if your family is cursed.”

“Are we?”

“Cursed? I do not know. Or rather, there have been many curses cast against you, over the years. But whether this sickness of the mind is a result of those curses, or has arisen of its own accord, I cannot say.”

“It’s not a sickness!”

The leshaya had no mouth, but I thought she smiled anyway. “I am glad you think so, little Dariyevna,” she said. “Let us call it a strength then. But strength can be as dangerous as sickness, for those who let it overcome them. These thoughts you are having: you are well to be on your guard against them, at least until the time comes.”

“What time?”

“The time when you may have need of them,” explained the leshaya patiently.

“Have you seen something?” I asked, with more curiosity and less anger than I would have expected. “Will such a time come for me, then?”

“The time of sacrifice comes for every woman, little Dariyevna,” said the leshaya. “What form that sacrifice takes differs, but afterwards you will not be the same woman you were before. Every sacrifice is a kind of death: that is why it is a sacrifice. And in the end true death comes for us all.”

“So I won’t actually have to kill myself, then.”

The leshaya shrugged, or at least moved her branches in a way that I took to be a shrug. “I cannot see the future, little Dariyevna, at least not so clearly. And that is not why I am here, in any case. I hardly would have left my groves just to solve your petty troubles.”

“Fair enough. So what are planning to ask of me, then?”

“You renewed Darya Krasnoslavovna’s oath,” said the leshaya. “And sealed it with blood before a prayer tree, as did your daughter.”

“We did,” I agreed.

“We thought you should be rewarded for that,” said the leshaya. “We thought you should be assured that we still exist, even if we are little seen of late, and that we are still watching over you.”

“I am honored.”

“You stand next in line for the rule of Zem’, do you not, sister? And your daughter after you?”

“Yes,” I said, while something clutched at my heart.

“Is that why you were in despair, sister?” asked the leshaya. “Fear of the burden that may soon be laid upon you?”

“Have you seen something?!” I cried. “Something about Sera...?”

“No, sister, no. Not as such. But do you fear this burden that much?”

“I fear losing my sister,” I said. “And I fear that I would make a poor ruler. But that is unlikely to drive me to despair. No, it was...well, it doesn’t matter. Nothing worth mentioning.”

The leshaya surveyed me with her solemn green eyes. “They say that women suffer much from affairs of the heart, sister,” she said eventually. “Is that what troubles you?”

“Yes,” I said, embarrassed to find myself whispering and looking away from the shame of my confession.

“They say it is a pain that some find almost unbearable, sister,” said the leshaya, and her voice was gentle. “I would not know, of course, no more than I would know the pain of bringing a human child into the world, but they say that our human sisters suffer greatly for this privilege, both in body and in spirit.”

“Yes. But my current suffering is stupid, not even worth mentioning.”

“Do you think it likely it will drive you to despair again, sister?” asked the leshaya, still speaking gently, more gently than anyone had spoken with me in a while, perhaps forever. I did not tend to inspire gentleness in those around me.

“I hope not,” I said. “But I can make no promises. My heart is so foolish...I should be stronger than this, but I am not.”

“Strength is good,” said the leshaya for the second time. “But we do not always have it at the time and in the quantities that we need it. I believe your human sisters would try to comfort you here. I do not know how to comfort a human. But you wanted to know what we were

planning to ask of you. First and foremost, we will ask you to live a little longer. After all, what is your hurry? You have the rest of your life to take it. There are always other pools of water, other snowdrifts, other knives, other vials of poison, other coils of rope. Or if you prefer, there is always strong drink, that method that so many of your sisters have taken. Its action is slower than the others, but nearly as sure, and the pain is less. Or so they say. But it will always be there if you need it.”

“That is more soothing than it should be. It seems you *do* know how to comfort humans.”

The leshaya made that movement than in a human would have been a shrug again. “I have spent much time with your family, little sister,” she said. “They are all peculiar. I do not think that would have worked on many other women.”

“Well, be that as it may. You don’t want me to kill myself immediately. That I can do. To be honest, I don’t think there’s much danger of it while Mirochka and Sera are depending on me.”

“I know, little sister. We also have another request.”

“I will do what I can.”

“We would like you to give us your daughter.” Seeing my expression, the leshaya hurried on, “for a little while, that is. And it does not have to be now. You are going on a journey, are you not?”

“I am. Tomorrow.”

“Very well. When you return, then, and only for a little while. But we would like to have the chance to teach her about us, about this other strain in her blood, before she becomes Empress.”

Something squeezed in my heart again. “You think she will become Empress?” I asked.

“We have seen it, sister,” said the leshaya.

“And...Sera?”

The leshaya made another shrug-like motion. “We do not know,” she said. “But one day your daughter will sit the Wooden Throne. How that will come about is up to you.”

“How so?”

“We do not know, sister.” The leshaya poked me again with one of her hand-like branches. “Many things are possible, but all of them lead to your daughter ruling our country. But it is promising that she

has already sworn to uphold your family's oaths to us. And so we ask that you send her to us before she comes of age." She must have seen hesitation on my face, for she continued more forcefully, "It is no more than what your foremother Krasnoslava did for her daughter. Darya Krasnoslavovna traveled all over Zem', and beyond its borders too, and spent much time with spirits, and received much good from it. Let it be the same for your daughter."

"What else have you seen of her fate?" I asked.

Now it was the leshaya's turn to hesitate, which made my heart squeeze again. "Nothing that a mother need fear, sister," she said finally. "In truth, we have seen very little. Both of you have open roads before you, and what you will pass through before you arrive at your final destination is unknown. All we can say is that the destination is the throne in Krasnograd."

"For me as well?" I asked.

"Perhaps, perhaps not, sister. It is up to you."

"Very well," I said. "Mirochka will spend time with you before she comes of age. I agree that it is her birthright, and will do her good. Perhaps next summer."

"Perhaps, sister," said the leshaya. "I am glad we are agreed. It gives me joy to think that the close ties we once had with our human sisters will be renewed. And sister?"

"Yes?"

The leshaya stepped up and folded me into her branches. "I am sorry for your sorrow," she said. "I wish I could say that you will soon be released from it, but your path is so wide-open that I cannot be sure. Perhaps it is the steppe in you."

"It doesn't matter," I told her. "It's a stupid sorrow anyway."

"There is no such thing as a stupid sorrow, sister," said the leshaya. "Even if the cause seems foolish, sorrow itself is always a source of strength. Whether that strength will crush you down or raise you up is up to you."

"I suppose that *is* comforting," I said.

"I am glad, sister. And sister?" The leshaya held me out at branches' length. "I have just seen something as I held you close. It *is* the steppe in you. You will find at least some of what you are looking for

when you return there.”

“Did you see how?” I asked. “Or what?”

“Just that you will find it, sister,” said the leshaya. “And with that thought, I will leave you.”

“Thank you,” I told her. “Thank you for showing yourself to me.”

She stroked my cheek with one twig. “Your family always gives me joy, sister. I feel that we will meet again. Go in peace and plenty, sister.”

“You too,” I said. The leshaya blinked a long slow blink at me, and then, before I could realize what had happened, she had faded back into the trees. I strained my eyes, trying to make her out, but I could not even see her movement, and after a few breaths the sound of her passage had disappeared as well, leaving me standing by the pool as if she had never been there. I looked down. Well, not quite as if she had never been there. There were strange tracks in front of where I was standing. I followed them for a couple of paces, but then they, too, disappeared.

“I wonder how many leshiye are hidden in this park,” I said out loud. I half-expected to hear an answer on the wind that was ruffling the tops of the trees, but no voice other than that of the woods could be heard. I turned around and surveyed my little clearing, but received no further clues on what action to take next, so after standing there for another moment, I set off back to the kremlin.



Walking made my head whirl again, but as there was nowhere to sit down and I didn't think I was any danger of collapsing—how often had I suffered these symptoms at the end of that fatal summer, miserably unhappy and with child as I was!—so I kept going. Within very few paces I was back on one of the many well-trodden paths running through the park, and shortly after that I heard the sound of a party on horseback, and when I came around the corner, I found Mirochka, Ivan, the tsarinoviches, and their guards all riding to meet me.

“Mama!” cried Mirochka. “What are you doing here? Were you looking for me?”

“I was just walking through the park,” I told her. “But I'm glad I came across you. How is your ride?”

“Fine, except that even in the shade it's too hot,” she complained.

“Well, that is what you get for going riding at midday on Midsummer. Let us walk back to the stables together.” Accordingly the riding party all turned around, and we began strolling slowly back the way they had come.

“Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Ivan suddenly, riding up to join me and Mirochka. “Let me offer you my mount.”

“What?” I said. “Of course not. I mean, I thank you, but I don’t mind walking at all.”

“You must be tired from your earlier exertions, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he continued stubbornly. “You must have walked halfway cross the park already.”

“I suppose,” I said distractedly. “But that’s unlikely to tire me out.”

“But still...You seem tired, Valeriya Dariyevna, if you will permit the observation.”

“Observe away. But there’s no need for you to get off your horse.” I would have said more, but it was slowly starting to reach me that my behavior to him was off somehow, or at least different from what it had always been before, and he was puzzled and uneasy by it. “I have much on my mind right now,” I told him, trying to summon up an apologetic smile. “Walking will do me good. Ride on with the tsarinoviches, and if you get ahead of me, I will meet you back at the stable.”

“As you wish, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said, still looking puzzled and even, I thought, a little hurt, but before I could come up with a way to smooth over what had just happened, he rode on ahead of us. I watched him go. He cut a very fine figure on horseback. If only I could care about that sort of thing. The sensation that I was drowning in water or encased in glass had returned, and even the sight of a handsome man whom I was supposed to be pursuing could only reach me from a distance. All I could think about when I saw him—although that, too, came to me from a distance—was how easily he might succumb to another woman’s charms, which suppressed his own charms almost entirely. Probably best not to think of it.

“I have great news,” I said suddenly to Mirochka, now that all the boys had ridden on ahead.

“What, mama? What is it? Am I going on the journey with you?” she asked in a sudden inspiration of hope.

“No. Not this time. Your family needs you to stay here.”

“*You’re* my family, mama. Well, and grandmamma and grandpapa and uncle, but they’re back home on the steppe. If they need me, I should travel back with you. You’ll have to go back through the steppe on your way to the mountains, won’t you?”

“Yes,” I said. “But that’s not your only family. The Tsarina and Vyacheslav Irinovich and your brothers are all your family too, and they need you here while I’m gone.”

“What for, mama?”

“To keep them company, and to learn how to be proper noblewoman,” I told her, trying to sound as if I supported the project.

“*You’re* a noblewoman, mama! I should learn from you!”

“True enough,” I agreed. “But there is more than one way of being a noblewoman, and you should learn from models other than me.”

“I don’t *want* to, mama! I don’t want to be like these silly helpless black earth people! They...they have nothing but black earth for brains!”

“These black earth women are also your people, my dear,” I said, getting sucked despite myself into an argument that had little to do with my original purpose.

“Just because my father is a black earth prince doesn’t mean I am! You said so yourself, mama!”

“So I did,” I said, trying to extract myself from the situation before it devolved into a ridiculous disagreement between myself and a girl of eight. “But that’s not what I meant, my dove. I meant that one day you could find yourself ruling Zem’, all of Zem’, including the black earth district, and the North, and the Southern mountains, and...well, all of it. So it would be best if you learned what all these people are like.”

“They’re all Zemnians like us, mama!” cried Mirochka, who was clearly in the mood to argue.

“Yes, but there are different kinds of Zemnians, you know, my dove, and in the Southern mountains they’re not even Zemnians like the rest of us—they have a different language than we do, and different gods.”

“All the Southerners I know speak Zemnian,” said Mirochka skept-

tically.

“Yes, the nobles speak it when they are with us,” I explained. “But in general people there speak a different language.”

“So I should learn their language then, mama!”

“That’s not a bad idea,” I agreed. “Perhaps you can start while I’m gone, and when I come back you can greet me in a language I don’t know.”

This thought diverted Mirochka from her argumentativeness, and I had to wait for her mirth at the thought of speaking to me in a language I didn’t understand to subside before I could return to my original purpose.

“There is also something else you could learn,” I told her, once she had finished making up words with which she could greet me upon my return. “A journey that you could go on, perhaps as soon as next year.”

“Where, mama?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Perhaps no farther than this park. But you could have the opportunity to learn many interesting things. You see, I have been asked...you have been invited...I saw a leshaya today.”

“Mama! Where? When?”

“Just here, just now. I was in a grove back in the middle of the park, where no one ever goes, and it suddenly appeared and spoke with me.”

“Mama!!!!” She dropped her reins and hugged me, squealing with excitement.

“Don’t frighten your pony, my heart,” I told her, retrieving her reins and handing them back to her.

“Oh mama! You know Yablochko never shies at anything!”

“There’s always a first time. A true horsewoman is always attentive to her horse.”

“Mama! Don’t be so tiresome! A leshaya! How did it happen? Tell me everything!”

“I was sitting in a clearing in the middle of the park...”

“What were you doing there, mama?”

“Sitting, my love, just as I told you.”

“But why? I thought you had things to do today, preparations. Why were you by yourself in the park? Why didn’t you come with us if you

wanted to go walking in the park?”

“It just happened,” I said. “I suddenly wanted to, that’s all.”

“Do you think,” her eyes got very round, “do you think you were *called* out into the park, mama?”

“Perhaps,” I said, thinking that perhaps that was true, although more than likely it was just my own foolishness that had driven me out there. But Mirochka certainly didn’t need to know that.

“And so then what happened, mama?”

“I was sitting there, when all of a sudden something grabbed my shoulder from behind.”

“Mama! Were you scared?”

“I was surprised, but I realized almost immediately what it was.”

“So were you scared *then*? I think”—her eyes grew even rounder—“I think I might be scared if a leshaya came up on me all of a sudden! How big was it, mama?”

“The size of a small tree,” I told her. “It looked like a small fir tree, about twice my size, except that there were two big green eyes in the trunk, and some of the branches were more like hands.”

“And it could walk, of course.”

“And it could walk,” I agreed.

“So then what happened, mama?”

“We talked for a bit.”

“About what, mama, about what?”

“About our family, my dove, and about you. It asked me to allow you to come spend time with them and be taught by them sometime in the future, perhaps next year.”

“Mama!!!! Really????!?” I grabbed Yablochko’s reins just in case even her calm temperament was overwhelmed by Mirochka’s piercing shrieks. The rest of the party, who were all many lengths ahead of us, turned around and came trotting swiftly back.

“Is everything all right, Valeriya Dariyevna?” asked Ivan.

“It’s fine,” I told them all. “Mirochka’s just excited, that’s all.”

“Tell them why, mama, tell them why!!!”

“I will, my dear, but first I must speak with the Tsarina about this.” I smiled apologetically at the rest of the group. “There is no cause for concern,” I assured them. “But my daughter and I have important

news for the Tsarina, and of course she must be the first to receive it. Once she decides to have it made public, you will be the first to know.”

“Of course, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Ivan, giving me another uncertain look. “Let us continue directly back to the kremlin, then. Valeriya Dariyevna—if there is any rush, I once again offer you my horse. I will be happy to return home on foot, if necessary.”

“Will he carry two?” I asked.

“Alyosha—Aleksy Aleksandrovich—and I have ridden double many times, Valeriya Dariyevna, but...”

“Give me a hand up, then,” I said, before he could get out all his objections.

He gave me a doubtful look.

“You did offer,” I said. “Come, give me a hand up.” When he continued to stand there, looking as if he didn’t know what to do, I told him, not entirely managing to conceal my impatience, “In that case, just ride by me.”

“Ah...why, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“So I can vault on. It will be easier if you’re moving quickly.”

He looked as if he had many more objections to make, but started walking slowly in my direction anyway. I eyed his horse. He seemed like a calm, sensible sort of beast. I ran the half-dozen paces between us and vaulted up behind Ivan before he could get a hand out to help lift me. The tsarinoviches and the guards broke into involuntary applause, making Mirochka smile with a mixture of pride and confusion; what I had done was so common out on the steppe that no one would have thought it worth remarking on, let alone applauding, and she had seen me do it hundreds of times.

“I thought he wouldn’t shy,” I said with satisfaction, speaking into Ivan’s ear. “That’s a good horse you’ve got here, and I can see you spoke the truth: he’s used to being ridden double.”

“Yes, Valeriya Dariyevna,” Ivan agreed faintly. I was suddenly hit with a burst of memories of riding double with someone else...blonde hair flying all around us...best not to think of it.

“It’s hot but I reckon they can all handle a little canter,” I said. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Are you sure you won’t...” began Ivan.

“Fall off?” I finished for him. “I guess it’s a chance I’ll have to take.”

His neck flushed a brilliant red, whether from embarrassment at his silly question, or the sensation of my breath on his skin, I didn’t know. Probably both. I certainly remembered what it had felt like to have someone breathe on my neck like that... “I’ll just hold on to you,” I told him, putting an arm around him. And I certainly remembered what it was like to have someone slip their arm around me as we were riding...and what it had led to...hands cupping my breasts, making me cry out in surprise the first time it had happened...*I hope you’re ready to cry out a lot more, princess...*and I had, I had, once I had gotten over my confusion at what was happening...*Didn’t anyone ever teach you anything, princess? Or am I the first? The first to treat you like the princess you are? Lucky me. That’s it. You’re doing so well, princess. Just lie back and let me do this for you. That’s it, just open your legs a little more...you’ll like it, I promise.* And I had. And I needed to stop thinking about those memories right now, or my heart would break for certain—either that, or I would take Ivan right here in the park. As if reading my mind, he flushed even redder, but luckily for him the children had already taken off with the guards after them, and so we had to set off as well before he could become even more confused.

His horse had a smooth, gentle canter, so even in my dizzy state there was no need for me to hold onto Ivan, but since I had confused him by my brusqueness, and I needed to do something to turn things between us back in the right direction, I kept my arm around his waist, and tried to come up with something to say to him. Unfortunately, all I could think of was how I could be chasing after someone who didn’t actually want me, or at least not any more than he wanted any other woman, and how I probably didn’t want anyone who could be turned against me by a moment or two of inattention on my side—true constancy would overlook it, and true passion would only be further inflamed—but, I reminded myself, I wasn’t doing this for me. My sorrows were not only stupid and should have been long forgotten, but they had no bearing on the present matter, because I was acting not on my own behalf, but for the good Zem’ and at the request of Sera, so I needed to quell all my disappointments and doubts and do something to make sure that this match went forward.

“Are your preparations for departure well in hand?” was the only thing I could come up with, however.

“I believe so, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Ivan, his voice sounding tight. Apparently having me this close to him was having the desired effect, whether I followed it up with charming banter or not.

“That is well,” I said. We came to a fork in the road and turned down the left-hand path, causing me to grip his waist a little harder for a moment. His stomach felt firm under my arm, with all the muscles working in concert with the movement of the horse. I suddenly remembered the sight I had had of the gap between the bottom of his shirt and the top of his trousers, the first time we had trained together, and could feel myself flushing too. His neck was right in front of my eyes. There was a dark spot on the back of it that he himself had probably never seen. I wondered if anyone had ever pointed it out to him. The urge to lean down and kiss it was very strong. I wondered if we had already come to that moment between us. The thought that we might never come to that moment was suddenly unbearable, despite all my protestations about not sullyng his virtue, letting him go if that was what he desired, and so on. I must have been crazy. Although not perhaps as crazy as I was now, as I found myself wanting to bite down on his shoulder and mark him as mine...he could only be mine, mine and nobody else’s...madness, madness, but if Sera had appeared and said that we had to be married on the spot, I would have seconded her with quick-breathed eagerness.

“Are you ready, Valeriya Dariyevna?” he asked.

“Ready?” I repeated, wondering how he had guessed my thoughts. My breasts felt hot and tight, in a way they had not for many years, and the dizziness was worse. Prior to my own unhappy adventure, I had always laughed when women said that their lovers made their heads spin, but then I had experienced it myself...only to lose it. But now it had come back. I wondered if his head was also spinning. Was that what he was asking about?

“For the journey tomorrow,” he said.

“Oh!” I would have laughed at myself if he hadn’t been there, although if he hadn’t been there, then we wouldn’t have been in this situation. “Not as much as I should be,” I confessed. “I’ve been diverted

by unexpected circumstances.”

“Such as?” he asked.

“Ah...nothing important.” I should have said more, but it was a struggle to keep my voice light. As soon as I said it, I could have kicked myself if I hadn’t been on a horse, because he said “I see” in a voice that sounded either affronted or rejected, or maybe both.

“Mirochka wanted to go down to the kitchens, and we ended up spending half the morning there talking with the cooks and kitchen-maids,” I said, telling myself that his hurt was a good sign. “And now we’re here. So I really haven’t done anything all day, and it’s almost noon.”

We slowed to a walk as we came out of the park and onto the road that led from it to the stables. I should have let go of him, but I didn’t. I could almost see myself clutching him to me more tightly, sliding my hands under his shirt and down the front of his trousers...by all the gods, there were other people around. Including my own daughter.

“I certainly won’t detain you any further, then, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said, still sounding a bit hurt.

I cleared my throat and tried to think of something else, like how I could salvage the moment, since while I had been fantasizing about the feel of his skin against mine, he apparently had gotten the impression that I had grown cold towards him. Hah. If I grew any warmer, I might melt on the spot. “Any delay I’ve experienced today is entirely my own fault,” I told him, coughing slightly in order to be able to talk. The cough made our bodies press together more tightly for a moment, and then separate so that just the tips of my breasts were brushing against his back. “And I am glad we got to ride together like this. Now I know I can trust you and your horse to carry me if I ever need you to while we’re on the road.”

“I’m glad, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said uncertainly, and then we were back at the stables and I slid down from his horse, my legs only buckling slightly. I said I must be off to take care of my much-delayed preparations and, my left arm and the whole front of my body feeling warm and slightly tingly, I set off back to my chambers. I tried to say something more to him in parting, but I found I had to bite my lips to keep from groaning out loud or launching myself on him, so I only

noded to him curtly and disappeared without a backwards glance. It was entirely the wrong thing to do in order to further my aims, but another moment and I might have jumped upon him right there in the stable yard.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Once I was back in my chambers, I sat down and tried to compose myself, but soon found myself leaping up, despite my still-spinning head, and pacing around the room in a state of overheated lust. Who would have thought, who would have thought...the day had begun so poorly for love, but this was not love I was currently experiencing, this was the physical desire to possess, and perhaps the earlier revelations about Nika's possible unfaithfulness had made me eager to jump into the arms of another man...this was a fever, a mad fever that would surely make me do something unwise even by my standards. I should condemn it, but I couldn't help but rejoice at being able to experience it again. Passion was a sickness, but it was not sensible women who moved the world...Many women of my acquaintance had said that love and passion had driven them to feats of heroism they never would have thought themselves capable of until the moment they had arisen, making bold women restrain themselves and timid women approach their beloveds and even confess their love, terrifying a thought as that had always been to them. I couldn't think of any examples of that on my own part, either now or in the past, so this was no doubt not true love. Not yet, anyway. Of course, courting Ivan *was* a feat of valor I would have thought beyond me until a few days ago, but it was done out of love for...what? My duty? My sister? My country? All of those things, and probably my pride as well. But as for Ivan himself, I was only at the stage of feeling foolishly shy about the fire that was suddenly running through my veins, and I could not yet tell whether it would grow to more.

After a considerable amount of pacing around the room and rejoicing in the sudden revival of my capacity for lust, I was able to remind myself that I would have easy access to Ivan for many weeks and that what had been started today could very well be finished before the moon was out, which made me calm enough to think of doing something actually useful in the remnants of the afternoon.

Accordingly, I sent word that I wished to speak with Sera at her

earliest convenience, and by the time I had received a reply inviting me to come see her as soon as I could, I had already packed up all the things I intended to take with me. I didn't have much gear with me to begin with, and I was intending to travel light, so, excluding my swords and my bow and arrows, it all fit into one saddlebag. My blood was quite cool by this time, but, alas, my lightheadedness was back, and I followed the maid to the Imperial chambers feeling as if I were floating half a foot off the floor. I hoped I hadn't taken an actual fever... surely not. After all, as I kept reminding myself, I had been through all of this before.

"Valya!" cried Sera as soon as I entered her chambers. "Joyous Midsummer!"

"And the same to you. You are looking well," I added.

"I feel well too, finally," she said. "Let us hope that the worst of the sickness is over."

"Let us hope so," I agreed, looking at her more narrowly. She did seem livelier and stronger than she had since I had arrived, but I still didn't like her color, and there was still a hint of puffiness in her fingers and around her eyes. Staying would change nothing, I told myself. I was not a healer, so the only thing I could heal for her was her country, not her body.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"I've packed up all my personal things. I was going to leave the rest in my chambers. If you need the room for someone else, please pack them away somewhere. And I was thinking that it might be best to put Mirochka somewhere else, somewhere where she won't be alone."

"Of course, of course! I was also thinking of moving her elsewhere, with your permission. In fact, I was thinking of putting her in the children's apartments. There's an empty chamber there now that she can have. It's not large, but it's comfortable and she'd be able to run over to her brothers' chambers during the day, and then retire to her own place at night. It's next to the nursemaids' room so she'll have a serving woman nearby in the night, if she gets scared."

"Are you planning to give the serving woman battle pay?" I asked, and grinned at Sera's startled look. "Raising a steppe princess is a whole different prospect from bringing up tsarinoviches, even your

tsarinoviches," I told her. "I hope you—and your serving women—are ready."

"Oh nonsense, Valya, Mirochka is a perfectly delightful little girl."

"She is," I agreed. "She's a perfectly delightful little girl who is *my* daughter, and is accordingly just as delightful as I was."

Sera's smile slipped a little.

"And has been brought up to rule," I continued. "You may have instilled obedience in your boys—"

"Not nearly enough," muttered Sera.

"—But no one has ever even tried with Mirochka, other than the minimum necessary to keep her safe when she was still in swaddling clothes. And *nor should they*. Mirochka is a sweet girl; too sweet, I might even say, and, I fear, too easily trained to agree. That knack she shows for making friends and getting along with all and sundry may prove to be her undoing. One day she will at the very least rule the steppe, and for that she will need the habits of freedom and command. She may learn to respect others, but she must also learn to be first in every gathering, to command every group, and never to show blind obedience to anyone."

"She will not be first when she is with the Empress," said Sera, half-playfully, half angrily. "She should at least learn to obey *me*."

I gave her a look.

"Oh come now, Valya, you have to admit that at least! Princess Stepnaya was the first to swear allegiance to Miroslava Praskovyevna!"

"The allegiance of the steppe is only ever freely given, never demanded," I said. "Krasnograd would do well to remember that."

"And if you, or Mirochka, were suddenly to *become* Krasnograd? What then? Will you," she smiled, but I could see that she was still half-angry, "be constantly fomenting trouble against yourself?"

"We will have no need. The Stepniye know how to rule with a light hand."

"And if you have to rule the others?" asked Sera, now looking serious. "Those like the black earth district who are accustomed to a heavy hand on their backs?"

"We can do that as well," I promised. "But we will not accept it from others, and Mirochka must not learn to. So if the maids, or tu-

tors, or you yourself, find her too difficult to deal with, you can send her back to the steppe, but you cannot under any circumstances try to break her spirit and turn her into just another Krasna sheep. Firstly because like as not you'll fail, and secondly because any ill-treatment of Mirochka, and everything between us is over."

"Valya! I am your sister! As if I would ever mistreat your daughter!"

"I'm sure you wouldn't intentionally, but many women find it very hard to remain patient with her when she, for example, kicks a sister princess in the shins."

Sera smiled in spite of herself. "Well, in that case we can hardly blame her," she said. "Princess Velikokrasnova deserved to be kicked in something much worse than the shins."

"Yes, but if I hadn't been there, what would you have done? And even if your treatment of her is blameless, can you vouch for that of your serving women? How many servants will ill-treat their mistress's children whenever they can get away with it?"

"Yes...but not *my* serving woman, Valya. Not the serving women of the Krasnograd kremlin, who have been specially charged with watching over the ts...over Mirochka."

"Do you mean to name her officially as Tsarinovna, then?" I asked.

"No...that is, not yet...all will be decided...in a few months' time."

"Very well. And"—I decided some sign of concession was necessary—"I'm sure you will watch over Mirochka as well as anyone possibly could, and probably better than I would myself. But she mustn't be *smothered*, Sera, and she most certainly mustn't be ordered about like...like a boy. You told me when I discovered I was expecting her that if I gave birth to a girl, I should name her Miroslava, because our family had gone too long without a real Miroslava, and I did. She is our next Miroslava. But she must be allowed to develop accordingly. Which reminds me of my news."

"News, Valya?" If she had been a horse, Sera would have pricked her ears and fixed me with a sideways stare. "What news?"

"I was in the park just now instead of preparing for my journey, and I...I encountered a leshaya."

"Valya!!! In the *park*?!?"

"In the park," I confirmed. "I suppose we shouldn't be surprised. If

the stories are true, our foremothers used to encounter leshiye in the park all the time.”

“True...I had just assumed that since I had never seen any, they must have left long ago.”

“Who knows what they’ve been doing with themselves. But at least one was there this morning, and she spoke with me.”

“Valya! What did she say?”

“She said...” I decided to skip over the promise that Mirochka would one day rule Zem’. There was nothing in that news that boded well for Sera, and nothing had been said that would enable me to figure out how to prevent whatever tragedy was awaiting us. “She requested that I allow Mirochka to go foster with her and her sisters for a time, to be taught by them of their ways and, I guess, the ways of all the spirits.”

“Valya!!! Just like Darya Krasnoslavovna!”

“Sort of.”

“So what did you say?”

“I agreed, of course,” I said. “There wasn’t much else I could do. And I think it may be the right thing to do.”

“When? When do they want her?”

“Not right away. It was more of a general agreement than a specific plan. Next year at the soonest, and maybe later.”

“Oh Valya!” Sera came over and hugged me to her tightly. I couldn’t help but think that her embrace lacked strength, and that her skin gave off an unhealthy odor. “This is such wonderful, wonderful news!” She held me out at arms’ length in order to look at my face and let me see her broad smile. “The leshiye have decided to renew their old ties with us! Oh Valya, it must be because you renewed the oath, it must be!”

“So they said,” I agreed.

“Oh Valya! This is such a marvelous sign!” She hugged me again. “This means that good things are coming our way, I just know it!”

“I hope you are right,” I said, hugging her back and hoping that it would never occur to her that the leshiye’s interest in me and Mirochka was a bad sign for her and her line. If I could have concealed it from her...but that would not be practical, not in the long run, and she

had the right to know anyway. "It is wonderful," I told her. "I'm so glad you're happy. I thought you'd be delighted."

"It's the best news I've gotten all year!"

"I'm very glad," I repeated, and made my excuses and hurried out before she could think any more on that statement or what all of this meant for her and her children.



After my discussion with Sera my head was floating and spinning worse than ever, so I took a light meal, hoping that it would help bring me back to ground. It did less than I'd hoped but more than I'd feared, and so, assured that I was not about to faint, I went in search of Aksinya Olgovna, whom I found in the stables in the company of Kseniya Avdotyevna, and spent the rest of the afternoon going over our plans for the journey and the route we would take on it. It should have been a simple thing, but like any journey preparations, it took up all the time we were willing to give it, and then some.

We were joined after a while by Alzhbetka's guard, a short, taciturn woman who gave her name as Yitka and then stood in silence as we debated the relative merits of a Southern versus a Northern crossing of the steppe. I wanted to cross to the South, so as to pass through my own family's holdings, where we could easily resupply, change horses, and hear the latest news of the steppe, but (as I readily conceded) that would involve taking us out of our way, if our goal was Princess Velikogornaya's kremlin, which is where Aksinya Olgovna thought we should go first, in order to hear the latest news in the mountains. The most direct route to Groznogorny was across the Northern steppe, at the very edge of the Stepnoye province, but there was nothing there, since most travelers and merchants turned either South to stop at the holdings of the Stepniye, or North to visit the various Lesniye families.

If we traveled light and swift and met with no misfortunes, Aksinya Olgovna said, we could be in Groznogorny in two weeks. However, if we wanted to go directly to the mines where those who had sold their children into slavery were most likely serving out their sentences, if they were still alive, then the most direct route would be to the South, right past my family's home and straight to the prison mines at the Southern end of the Eastern mountains. Both routes had much

to recommend them, and in the end the only decision we could come to was to defer our final decision until we came to the crossroads, five days out from Krasnograd, and had to turn either North or South.

“Because after all,” I said, “who knows what news we may meet on the road. The final decision will never be made until we are actually at the crossroads anyway.”

Aksinya Olgovna and Kseniya Avdotyevna agreed to the wisdom of that, and even Yitka nodded. As we went to leave, she pulled me aside and said, in the longest speech she had given since the beginning of our acquaintance, that she would like to speak with me.

“Of course,” I said. “Let’s go back to my chambers, if that suits you.” She responded with a slight twitch of her head, which I took to mean that it did suit her, and we walked through the preparations for the evening’s festivities, which were now at the height of bustle and trouble, back to my rooms. Mirochka was still absent. I hoped she wasn’t driving the others mad with her high spirits, although probably the tsarinoviches were pretty wild by this time too.

“Are you finding Krasnograd to your liking?” I asked Yitka, once we were alone and could hear each other speak.

She shrugged.

“Well, what else can you say about it. It’s a big noisy city. I assume things are quieter where you’re from.”

Yitka nodded slightly. I tried to offer her some refreshment, but she turned down the water and bread that I had on hand with another silent shake of her head.

“Please, tell me what is on your mind,” I invited her. “What is it you wished to speak to me about?”

“Alzhbetka...” said Yitka slowly. She had the accent characteristic of the far Southwest, and I wondered if perhaps some of her taciturnity was due to a difficulty in speaking in a way the rest of us could understand. People in that part of Zem’ spoke their own dialect, some so strongly that those of us from the East and North could barely make out their meaning. She also was no noblewoman, and she might be feeling uncertain of her standing amongst all the princesses she had suddenly found herself surrounded by.

“Is something the matter with her?” I asked, trying to speak as pa-

tiently as possible.

“No...well, Valeriya Dariyevna, the thing is this.” Having made up her mind to speak, Yitka began to let her words come pouring out. Most of them I could make out. “The thing is,” she said, “she’s...she’s my mistress’s daughter, you know, but she’s the youngest and she’s young, younger maybe in her mind even than in years.”

I nodded encouragingly. Anyone who had ever met Alzhbetka could certainly testify to that.

“She doesn’t know much about the world, but she doesn’t know that. She thinks she knows everything she needs to know.”

“She would hardly be the first young woman to be overly confident in her own knowledge.”

“Yes, Valeriya Dariyevna, so...I would...I am asking...it would be a great favor if you could be patient with her.”

“I’ll be as patient as I know how,” I promised.

Yitka did not look very comforted, but nodded in thanks and went on, “And...there’re two handsome young men accompanying us.”

“True,” I agreed.

“She is...she is already betrothed, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“My congratulations,” I said. “When will the wedding take place?”

“It is...uncertain as yet, Valeriya Dariyevna. In fact...it is more an agreement between the two mothers than an open betrothal. Alzhbetka is...as the youngest, she has been shielded from many of the responsibilities of rule, and so...we trust her, of course, but she is not privy to...to all her mother’s plans and actions.”

“You’d think she *would* be privy to plans for her own marriage, though. And I don’t believe we permit mothers to arrange marriages without the consent of the interested parties.”

“Yes, but, Valeriya Dariyevna, a mother’s influence is so strong...you see, we expect Alzhbetka to consent to it, once all the advantages of the match are made clear.”

“You do, do you? Well, that is all very nice, but I don’t see how it affects *me*.”

“I would ask...it would also be a great favor, Valeriya Dariyevna, if you kept her from dallying with either of the young men accompanying us. She might come to think that she’s in love with one of them. In

truth,” Yitka’s lip curled up in distaste, “bringing men along on a party such as this normally leads to trouble. If it was up to me, I’d leave them behind.”

“Well, it’s not up to you,” I told her. I had liked her a lot better when she hadn’t said anything. “And everyone’s of age here, and everyone’s joining us of their own free will, including, as far as I can tell, Alzhbetka. I’ll watch over and try to avoid humiliating her to the best of my ability, just as I will with all the members of my party, but self-willed, inexperienced people *do* have a tendency to embarrass themselves and get into scrapes. And as far as the young men are concerned, I will do my best to prevent anything really bad from happening to anyone, but Amiran is from a family in which sons have almost as much freedom as daughters, and so even if I could stop them from forming a relationship, which is unlikely, I wouldn’t. Ivan...” The idea of Ivan taking up with Alzhbetka was extremely distasteful, but I couldn’t let that show. “Ivan has lived less in the world than the others, and requires the most care, but if...” I swallowed, and hoped my thoughts weren’t too obvious, “if they should form an attachment, I wouldn’t stand in the way. Alzhbetka can dispose of her hand as she sees fit, and if she sees fit to offer it to the son of one of her mother’s vassals, all well and good, but if she decides to favor someone else, I will not stand in her way.”

“Her mother doesn’t need marriage to make sure of her vassals,” said Yitka. “It’s the son of a merchant that she wants for Alzhbetka. We might even run across them on our journey.”

“Is that so,” I said. “Well, in either case, I will do my best to ensure that your charge comes to no harm, but she is a woman grown and I will treat her as such. And why by all the gods is Princess Pristanogradskaya marrying off her daughter to the son of a merchant?”

“The ties between the two families are longstanding.”

“So why the need for marriage? The only reason I could see for marrying into a family not of noble blood would be to cement *new* ties. Are the Pristanogradskiye that desperate for money?”

“Certainly not,” said Yitka stiffly.

“Does the family trade with the East or the West?”

Yitka looked like she didn’t want to answer, either out of fear of giving away too much, or out of sheer contrariness, but after giving me

a displeased look, she said reluctantly, "Both. They have been bringing goods from the East for generations, and recently they've started trading with the West as well."

"How nice for them. Have you had much to do with this industrious family?"

"A little, Valeriya Dariyevna."

"And are they—I assume they're Zemnian?"

Yitka hesitated again. "In part, Valeriya Dariyevna," she said reluctantly.

"How much of a part?" I demanded.

"The grandmother of Alzhbetka's intended is from Naberezhnoye, Valeriya Dariyevna."

"So, not of noble birth at all, then?"

"No, Valeriya Dariyevna," Yitka admitted.

"And the rest of the family?"

"I beg your pardon, Valeriya Dariyevna?"

"Where is the rest of the family from?" I clarified.

"Ah...the head of the family married a man from the East."

"From the Hordes," I stated.

"Ah...yes, Valeriya Dariyevna. And their daughter married a man from Seumi."

"Well, their son must at least be very singular-looking," I said. "Perhaps it will make up for his complete and total lack of noble blood. Not that there's anything wrong with freshening the line, but I didn't think the coastal princesses were so broad in their tastes."

"I'm sure I couldn't say, Valeriya Dariyevna."

"Do you at least think they are worthy of your mistress's daughter?"

"It is not for me to say, Valeriya Dariyevna."

"Well, have you seen this young man?"

Yitka shook her head.

"And you haven't tried? You don't think it's strange that you haven't seen him? You aren't curious to meet the future intended of your charge?"

Yitka shook her head again, although I thought something flickered in her eyes at my words.

“Well, if you ask me, it’s strange. I won’t stand in the way of the match for the moment, but if Alzhbetka should decide that she prefers another, especially since the betrothal has not even been acknowledged by her, I won’t stand in the way of that either. She will have to make her own choices as she makes her way in the world, just like the rest of us.”

This reply obviously did not satisfy Yitka, but after a few more attempts at wheedling me, she gave up and left, her face even more closed-up than before. I mulled over her revelations. Another young Zemnian of noble blood being married off to merchants! I had never had anything against merchants prior to this—in fact, I had always enjoyed their company, whenever they came through the steppe, and often rather more than I enjoyed the company of my sister princesses—but all this intermarrying *was* very strange, and while I thought I probably valued blood less than many other noblewomen in Zem’, I found it alarming that so many *very* self-important princesses were willing to marry their sons, and even more alarmingly, their daughters, into families with no claim to nobility at all. It was one thing to take a man of peasant birth as a lover and get a child off him, but entirely another to form an alliance through marriage with such families, and it was unheard of for a mother from one of the great families to arrange a marriage between her daughter, even the youngest daughter, and the son of a merchant, and one with only a trace of Zemnian blood at that. All my suspicions that had arisen when Sera had told me of her fears came back with redoubled force. Well, by tomorrow I would be on the road and, if my luck held, running across merchants right and left, so I would just have to keep my eyes and ears open and see what I could find out. And maybe see what else I could extract from Yitka after plying her with strong drink. It was a low tactic, but an effective one, and had served me well on many previous occasions.

By the time Yitka had left, the evening was upon us, although being Midsummer it was a bright sunny evening that differed only by the length of its shadows from midday. Mirochka came bursting into our chambers, demanding to know if I was ready to go join the festivities.

“Almost, my dove,” I told her. “Let me just put on my festive clothes, and you can change into yours.”

Although not happy about anything that detained her from the festivities in the Hall of Celebration, Mirochka was excited enough about wearing her fine clothes that she put them on with reasonably good grace and even allowed me to adjust them for her so that they looked less rumped. Then she fidgeted around and tried to hurry me as I put on my own good clothes, which were the same ones I had worn to the previous feast. It was probably a bad idea to wear something so provocative to the other princesses, but I didn't have anything else I considered acceptable and so I put them on, even though my heart most certainly was not in playing the kinds of games for which I had worn them the first time.

I had been distracted from my original sorrows by all the events of the afternoon, but now that the only thing left to do for the journey was get up the next morning and set off, not even my annoyance with Yitka and my curiosity about what Princess Pristanogradskaya was up to could completely take my mind off the question of whether Nika had ever been—well, I could never claim that he had ever been faithful to me at all, since throughout our relationship he had been engaged to another woman—but whether I had ever come first for him, or if he had merely been going along with my proposals from a lack of anything better to do. Would he be there for the celebrations? Surely the family would have to make at least a token appearance.

I couldn't decide whether I wanted to see him or not. I knew that I was better off *not* seeing him, and I also told myself very stoutly that all this was of the past and had no bearing on anything I thought or did or felt *now*, and that if I did see him, I would just use my vaunted powers of observation to see if I could detect any current sign of infidelity or attachment to another woman, merely to set my mind at rest. Embarrassingly, part (a large part, if I were honest) of the pain I was currently experiencing was from the thought that I might have been wrong. I had never thought that I valued my own abilities as an observer as much as others did, but now the humiliation I was feeling at the thought that I might have been mistaken was severe. Not as severe as the unhappiness caused by the knowledge that Nika might never have cared about me at all, but taken together the two were causing me a very irritating level of distress, that none of my attempts to rea-

son away could reduce. Well, worse things had happened to me before and would probably happen to me again, I told myself, and taking Mirochka by the arm in order to prevent her from running down to the Hall of Celebration in a headlong dash, I marched us both to the festivities.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The Hall of Celebration had been decorated with wreathes of flowers and grains, and the tables were being loaded with a truly staggering amount of food. I would have found the excess repulsive—in fact, I *did* find it repulsive—but I was somewhat reconciled to it because I knew that Sera had sent out equal amounts of food to the poorest districts of Outer Krasnograd, where people lived in huts barely deserving of the name of house, if they didn't live directly on the street. On the steppe we did not suffer that kind of indigence, but, as Sera had pointed out to me when I had complained about it, on the steppe we didn't have very many people, either, and the ones we did have were all poor by comparison with the black earth district. Our horse herders and warriors had no more than the shirts on their backs and their horses, while even the poorest people in Outer Krasnograd had more than that. I had thought that an extremely weak argument—firstly because our horses were worth a great deal, and secondly because surely more inhabitants and more luxuries meant more people and more money to help each other out—but Sera had said that was not the case, and I had thought it not worth arguing about further.

But—guilty thought!—if Mirochka or I were to become Tsarina, it would have to be our next order of business after rooting out the vile trade in our own people. I doubted that I was more tenderhearted than Sera—quite the reverse, probably—but my steppe pride could not stand the thought of my own people living in filthy back alleys and begging for their food, and my habit of command could not stand the thought of all the crime and shiftlessness that poverty brought about. My family always opened our own home to anyone who needed it every winter, and so every winter we were entertained by the presence of horse herders, traveling guards and petty merchants, and those who had simply had the misfortune to lose their homes to fire or tornados. Every able-bodied person spent the winter fixing horse harness and human armor, sewing clothes, working in the stables and kitchens, or tending the herds, and for those who weren't able-bodied, there was

always a warm corner and a bit of bread, in exchange for a spindle, a needle, or a well-told story. No Princess Stepnaya would ever be able to hold her head up if that were not the case. If there wasn't enough room in our own house, we set up yurts by the stables.

I wondered if yurts would do something towards solving the problems of the indigent in Outer Krasnograd. Certainly they were easy to make, and there was space outside the city...And the roads there were in terrible disrepair; no doubt there were those who would be happy to work on them in exchange for a comfortable bed and a decent meal... although when I had said that to Sera once before, as part of the same argument, she had told me that I would probably find the black earth people more suspicious of my intentions and less eager to work in exchange for food and shelter than my sisters from the steppe, and also that many of them probably knew no useful trade and so it would be much more difficult to put them to work than it would be back home, where I could safely assume that anyone could at least take care of a few horses, and probably mend a bridle or knit a saddlecloth as well. Black earth people were so shiftless in comparison...but that avenue of thought was not productive.

Part of me did question whether black earth people, especially Krasnograders, would consider a yurt a comfortable bed (that I had never discussed with Sera, but I could imagine her answer), but surely it was better than the street. And Sera *had* said they were used to being ruled with an iron fist, so I could always simply impose my will upon them...in fact, no doubt, I would have to no matter what I wanted to do with them...but I was getting ahead of myself. I had no right making plans for what I would do if the rule of Zem' were to come to me, no matter how likely that was. Even thinking about for a moment seemed like it would put Sera in even greater danger. I resolved to think of it no more. Unfortunately, that caused me to return to dwelling on my own unhappiness. My displeasure with myself at that moment was strong enough that if I could have just left and disappeared into the steppe forever with no ill consequences to my family, I might very well have.

"Will there be dancing, mama?" asked Mirochka, looking around at the decorations with much simpler and more laudable emotions than mine. "Will we get to dance?"

“Very likely,” I told her. “See where the musicians are setting up over there? But first there will be feasting and entertainments.”

“The boys said there would be acrobats, mama!”

“There probably will be. There normally are.”

“When will we get to see them? I can’t wait!”

“Not till after we have sat down,” I told her. This did not please her, nor did the news that she would have to sit at the Imperial table and behave herself for the better part of the evening. She became partially reconciled to it after I told her that we would have the best view of the acrobats and jugglers, and followed me with only a small amount of arguing as we made our way to our seats.

Sera was not there yet, but Vyacheslav Irinovich, Ivan Marinovich, and the boys were already at their places, and said that we were to sit with them. Although he didn’t say it, I could see that our position between Vyacheslav Irinovich and the boys showed that we were unquestionably a part of the family, while also preventing anyone else from speaking with us. So much the better. Although I was sure I would tire of him very quickly if I were actually to marry him, Vyacheslav Irinovich was a perfectly pleasant companion for an evening, and was unlikely to do anything untoward or—more importantly—provoke me into a display of temper. I would rather have been seated next to Ivan Marinovich, who was on the far side of the group from me, next to Ruslan...no, I wouldn’t. I was still too confused in my mind over the revelations about Nika, about my own desire for Ivan, and so many other things, that it was probably for the best that we had been seated apart for the evening. In my present state, I doubted I would be able to advance my cause with him any further today, and a little mystery, a small retreat, was sometimes good in these matters. Or so they said; I had never actually tried it, such things not being my style. Perhaps it was time for me to try it. Accordingly, I nodded politely at Ivan and then turned my attention to Vyacheslav Irinovich and the children.

Mirochka and the two younger boys immediately began giggling over something foolish and inconsequential. I thought about calling them to task on it and reminding them of their Imperial status and the decorum that went with it, but decided against it, both because I thought they might as well have fun, and because I doubted it would

do any good. Ruslan was maintaining all his twelve-year-old dignity with strict composure, but the three younger children were in such a fever pitch of high spirits that I could only hope that they wouldn't be sick on the table before the night was over.

"I'm afraid you must forgive them, Valeriya Dariyevna," said Vyacheslav Irinovich. "This is the first time Dariusz and Valery have been allowed to stay up all night."

"Mirochka too," I told him. "I doubt we'll get a word of sense out of them all night."

"What sense is there to be had at that age?" he said with a fond smile.

"Precious little. As long as they don't upset the table or set the hall on fire, I'll consider it a successful evening."

"Wise words, Valeriya Dariyevna. And I can't tell you," he turned serious, "how glad I am that Miroslava Valeriyevna and the boys have become such fast friends, and that she will be staying with us for the next several months. Be assured that she will be the daughter that... we will treat her as our own daughter. And while I know that my own words carry little weight next to the Tsarina's, allow me to second her invitation to overwinter with us. Our families spend far too little time together, and your presence will be most welcome when...during the winter."

"I know that Mirochka will be well cared-for while I'm away; I have no fears on that score. And it is very likely that we will overwinter in Krasnograd, as much as it pains me to be absent from the steppe for that long."

"You miss it, then, Valeriya Dariyevna?"

"I'm not a woman of the city," I said. "But I also...it is my homeland, my charge, and I feel guilty leaving it for so long."

"Surely your esteemed parents are more than capable of ruling it in your absence, Valeriya Dariyevna. I know them less well than I would like, but your mother is known to be a woman of solid good sense, and your father is not lacking in intellect himself."

"It takes more than good sense and intellect to rule," I said. "But no doubt you're right: Steпноye will survive the winter without me. After all, it had survived many, many winters before I came of age. My

own intellect tells me that Mirochka should spend more time with her brothers and should be instructed in the ways of Krasnograd, and my instinct tells me that my place is here this winter. With things so unsettled in Zem' right now...this vile trade in our own children..."

"Yes," agreed Vyacheslav Irinovich gravely. "I pray every day that you will be able to cleanse this stain from Zem' this summer, but in truth, Valeriya Dariyevna," lowering his voice, even though there was no one around other than the children, who were too engrossed in their own games to pay attention to us, "I fear that the evil goes too deep for it to be uprooted so easily. These trade networks must be of very long standing, and if—I hope you will not mind that the Tsarina shared this information with me as well, Valeriya Dariyevna—if the rumors are true and children are also being taken from Seumi and transported the entire length of Zem' to be sold to the Hordes, which seems fantastic to me, when they could just be sold to their neighbors to the West—"

"Yes, that *is* very odd," I agreed.

"Although I hear that Seumi slaves are of low value, Valeriya Dariyevna, being almost as independent-minded as Zemnians, which is why they will only take children of either race—teaching either of us the ways of a slave as adults is too much trouble. Which is some small comfort, I suppose. But what I was saying was that if children are being taken from Seumi and sold in the East, then the trade network must be broad and deep and will not be easily destroyed."

"I'm afraid you're right," I said. "But we have to start somewhere."

"We do, Valeriya Dariyevna, unquestionably we do, but...the gloomy thought haunts me that even if and when we *do* rid Zem' of this blight, it will still be with us, like poison spreading from a festering wound even after the affected limb has been removed."

"I wouldn't be surprised if that doesn't turn out to be the case. But I am still determined to amputate the limb and hope for the best. Doing nothing certainly won't avail us."

"True enough, Valeriya Dariyevna, and at least we will have the joy of your company this winter. And..." he looked over at the boys, who were laughing uproariously—even Ruslan—at a funny face Mirochka was making, "I wanted to express my gratitude for what you said—"

what you promised our boys.”

“And you,” I told him. “You are included in that promise. And Mirochka swore as well. If either of us should ever...well, you understand. But you and the boys never need fear for your futures.”

“And we are very grateful, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said soberly.

“Well, let’s hope it won’t come to that, and certainly not anytime soon,” I said. “Oh look, the jugglers have arrived.”

Conversation after that became impossible, as all the children in the hall were squealing so loudly with delight as jugglers strolled from table to table and performed tricks. The leader of the troupe came over to our table and thrilled Mirochka and the boys to their very marrow by juggling nine balls at once before catching them all down her sleeve and then whisking them out of the children’s ears through some dexterous slight of hand. Mirochka asked if she could keep the ball; I intervened and said she couldn’t take the woman’s tools of her trade, but the juggler, with the gracious smile of a professional entertainer performing at the Imperial table, said *of course* the tsarinovna could have the ball, at which point the boys started clamoring for some too. The juggler then waved her arms and at least a dozen balls came flying out onto the table, some of them bursting into bloom or exploding into a shower of rose petals.

“You are too good,” I told the juggler, but she only bowed and said it was her pleasure, before going off to delight the next table, where the most important princesses were seated. I followed her with my eyes, but then jerked them away when I saw that Princess Velikokrasnova and Nika—and, by all the gods, Nika’s mother, the one woman who hated me even more than Princess Velikokrasnova, if such a thing were possible, and looking even more like a vulture than she had the last time I had seen her, nine years ago, I didn’t know how such an unpleasant-featured woman had birthed Nika, who whatever other flaws he might have, was not an ill-looking man—had come in and taken their seats there and were—the two women at least—giving me sideways looks of distaste and enmity

“Considering what we paid for this, they can afford to give the children a few trinkets,” said Vyacheslav Irinovich dryly, jerking me from my thoughts, which were guaranteed to make me as vulture-faced as

Nika's mother if I kept indulging in them.

"Well, the evening has been a success then, and it hasn't even started yet," I said. "What is Princess Vostochnokrasnova doing here? I thought," I swallowed, "I thought she rarely comes to Krasnograd in the summer."

Vyacheslav Irinovich followed my gaze. "That is true, Valeriya Dariyevna," he said compassionately. "But I heard that Princess Velikokrasnova called her in to help with...with Ivan Marinovich's betrothal."

"Is that so." My personal problems suddenly became much less interesting to me. "What else have you heard about this subject?"

"Not much, Valeriya Dariyevna, but I would be happy to share my information with you. Perhaps it would be best to speak of it later in the evening, though, once everyone is distracted by the food and entertainments. Right now everyone's eyes are turned to our table, waiting for the Tsarina's arrival; even if they cannot hear us, I would rather not discuss sensitive issues when they are watching us."

I had to admit the sense of his proposal, and in truth, I was beginning to grow impatient for Sera's appearance, and worried that she had suddenly fallen ill again, but just as the juggling troupe had finished making the rounds of all the tables, she was announced and we all rose and bowed as she came and took her place. She looked a little tired and pale, but not as if she were in any immediate danger of collapse. Vyacheslav Irinovich and I caught each other both examining her, and exchanged a meaningful glance, declaring that we would both watch over her all evening.

Sera gave a short speech welcoming everyone to the festivities and wishing them a joyous Midsummer, and probably only Vyacheslav Irinovich and I found anything not to like in its brevity—everyone else in the hall appeared more than happy to turn to the feasting and merrymaking. The servants brought out even more food and began serving it, and once everyone had begun eating (and, more importantly, drinking), the jugglers came back, accompanied by a troupe of acrobats who turned flips and twisted themselves into impossible poses, to everyone's great delight. The chief acrobat had a hoop that she could throw into the air and then leap through or catch with various parts

of her body in the most astonishing fashion, bending and flexing as if she had no bones at all, and making Mirochka ask, her eyes shining, if she could be trained in acrobatics and become a performer.

“Of course you can train,” I told her. “But not one woman in a hundred could twist her body like that, and you’re not going to become a performer, anyway. Princesses don’t become jugglers and acrobats.”

“Why *not*, mama?”

“Because they have to rule, my dove. You can’t do both things at once.”

“That’s not *fair*!”

“It’s not,” I agreed with a sigh. “But we only have so much time for training.”

Just then servants came through and poured everyone mead, distracting her from the conversation. Mirochka and the boys were given mead along with all the other children, and their spirits were soon intolerably high, so that Vyacheslav Irinovich and I spent the next part of the feast attempting to restrain them from making a spectacle of themselves.

“Next time we must order the servants to hold off on the mead until *after* they’ve had some food,” I said to Vyacheslav Irinovich through gritted teeth, as I stopped Mirochka for the third time from climbing up onto the table.

“Perhaps, Valeriya Dariyevna, but it will soon wear off,” he said patiently, fishing Valery out from under the table, where he was crawling around pretending to be a dog snapping at our ankles. “And in the general gaiety, I doubt anyone is noticing.”

This was true enough, as the noise in the hall had risen to a level that no sober person could find pleasant. Both beer and vodka had been poured for me, but I only sipped at the beer and ignored the vodka completely. Drowning my sorrows in them, and drowning out the din around me, was an attractive thought, but I would regret it when it came time to set off the next morning.

There was a brief break in the noise when the next troupe of acrobats appeared, but the squealing of the children and the shouts of the adults soon became even louder than before. And then once the acrobats had finished performing, the musicians came out and began

to play, and soon half the hall was dancing wildly. On the far side from me, but it was still a very raucous spectacle, and my head was beginning to ache fiercely.

“Can we go dance, mama? Can we?” demanded Mirochka.

“Why don’t you take your sister to dance, boys,” suggested Vyacheslav Irinovich to the tsarinoviches. “Ivan Marinovich can escort you.”

All the children other than Ruslan were delighted with this plan, and even Ruslan was won over after a few entreaties from Mirochka. Ivan said he would be happy to escort them; whether this was true or not was debatable, but Vyacheslav Irinovich was ready to accept it as true enough, and sent off all the young people to that end of the hall.

“Let us go take some air, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he proposed.

“And Sera?” I asked.

Vyacheslav Irinovich looked over in her direction. “She will stay here a little longer, but we are not needed,” he said, after she and he had exchanged a series of nods that only they could understand. “And I think now is the time for us to slip out and speak unnoticed.”

We rose and began making our way to the door at the back of the hall. Despite Vyacheslav Irinovich’s belief that no one would pay us any attention, Princess Velikokrasnova and Princess Vostochnokrasnova, who were still sitting at their table and still relatively sober, both followed us with their eyes out of the room, half-spiteful, half-puzzled expressions on their faces.

“We had best be prepared for some malicious gossip tomorrow,” I told Vyacheslav Irinovich as soon as we were in the corridor behind the Hall of Celebration.

He turned in the direction of the balcony that overlooked the main square. “Why is that, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“My two greatest admirers were observing us with deep suspicion as we left together,” I told him. “Your reputation...”

“Is of little concern, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said firmly. “After all”—he grinned in the half-light of the corridor in a most un-Vyacheslav Irinovich-like way—“I’ve already made a good match for myself, and what else do I need a spotless reputation for?”

“Sera might be made uncomfortable.”

“I flatter myself that her faith in me and her hold over the princesses...” He reached to open the door to the balcony, but it suddenly opened and disgorged two figures, who stumbled into us, apologized hurriedly, and rushed off down the corridor before we could detain them.

“Where are the guards for this door?” demanded Vyacheslav Irinovich, sounding displeased. We looked up and down the corridor, but saw nothing but the retreating backs of the embarrassed couple. I went out onto the balcony, Vyacheslav Irinovich right behind me, but in the twilight of midnight it looked empty.

“Where are the guards?” he repeated, sounding even less pleased. “This door is always guarded!”

A movement in the corner of the balcony caught my eye, and I went over to the shadows there and found what turned out to be one of the guards, in a state of insensibility.

“He’s dead drunk,” said Vyacheslav Irinovich, prodding him in disgust. “Where’s his partner?”

There was groan from below, and I looked over the balcony railing. The other guard was lying on the ground.

“He’s gone over somehow,” I said, and climbed over the railing myself and jumped down to join him. It was only a single story drop, but the knee I had wrenched jumping over a fence the summer I had been running around after Nika, and that, unlike all my other injuries, had never healed properly, twinged from it anyway.

“Old age is not a pleasure,” I muttered to myself, and bent over to examine the guard. It flashed through my mind that this could be a trap and he could be feigning drunkenness, but when I prodded him, he only groaned in response.

“Valeriya Dariyevna?” called Vyacheslav Irinovich, who was leaning anxiously over the railing. “Is all in order?”

“It is for me,” I told him. “But this poor fellow looks to have hit his head and sprained his wrist, as well as drinking himself into a stupor.”

“He’s lucky it’s not worse,” said Vyacheslav Irinovich, sounding not at all compassionate. “He’s lucky he didn’t break his head entirely, going over the railing and landing on the flagged ground. *You’re* lucky *you* didn’t break your head either, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“Jumping down from this height? I should hope not! Wait, I think he’s coming round. Can you hear me?” I asked the guard, who was groaning and moving more and more vigorously.

He muttered some nonsense syllables, which after a few tries resolved themselves into the question, “Where is she?”

“Where’s who?”

“The woman...mead...”

“She brought you mead?” I guessed.

“Strange...”

“What was strange?” I asked.

“Taste...”

“She brought you strange-tasting mead?”

“Hmm-mmm.”

“How much did you drink?”

“Sip...she said...beer.”

“She told you it was beer?”

The guard made a sound that was probably affirmative.

“Was it the beer you were expecting the servants to bring you at the end of your shift?”

The guard made another affirmative sound.

“I’ll send for a healer,” I told him, and, calling the information up to Vyacheslav Irinovich that I suspected the guards had been slipped a potion, and that I was going for a healer, I ran off in the direction of the kitchens.

The former frenzy had deserted the kitchens when I arrived, and now there were only a few of the older cooks and servants sitting there and eating the remains of the feast in the Hall of Celebration.

“A healer!” I cried as soon as I burst through the doors.

A sensible-looking woman rose from the far side of the table, and I explained the matter to her. Within moments she had sent one of the serving women to find another healer, and was setting off herself to tend to the fallen guards.

“Be sure to take down *everything* they tell you,” I commanded her, and then rushed off in the other direction before anyone could detain me with further questions or offers of hospitality. I wanted to see if I could find out the identity of the woman who had come in from the

balcony just as Vyacheslav Irinovich and I had been about to go out onto it. Although I was certain I'd never seen her before in my life, I had a good chance of finding her companion, since the man with her had been Nika.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

As I ran along the corridors I also ran over the possible places I might find him. It all depended on whether or not he was currently involved in an intimate tryst with the unknown woman. I would have liked to think better of him than that he would dally with a strange woman while his wife and his mother were in the same building, but I was fairly certain that we had conceived Mirochka in this very building, just two rooms down from where his mother and his wife-to-be had been celebrating his upcoming nuptials, so I had the most positive proof that he *could* be unfaithful under such unpromising circumstances. What I really wanted to think was that I had been special and he had only done it with me, but that was looking less and likely...I darted into a small private chamber a little ways down the corridor from the servants' entrance into the Hall of Celebration. We had made use of this room more than once. It was unlit except for a single guttering candle, and for a moment I thought it was empty, but then I caught sight of a masculine figure slumped against the wall.

"Nika!" I cried, rushing over to him. "Where is she? What has she done to you?"

"Valya?" asked Nika thickly. "What are *you* doing here?"

I knelt down in front of him and gave his shoulder a good shake. "Where is she?" I demanded again. "*Who* is she?"

"That hurt!" protested Nika, trying to escape my grip.

"Did she give you something? Mead, perhaps?"

Nika tried to focus on me in the flickering darkness. "How'd you know?" He squinted at me. "You've still got that trick, I see."

"I saw the guards, that's how! There's no trick to it at all!"

"What guards?"

"The guards on the balcony who were drugged!"

"Drugged..." he repeated in bewilderment. "They weren't drugged..."

"Then what happened to them? What happened to *you*?"

"Mead..."

“You never had much of a head for drink, Nika, but I refuse to believe that a little mead could bring you to this state,” I said in exasperation. “*Who is she?!?*”

Instead of answering, he threw up onto my shirt.

“Do you feel better now?” I asked.

“A little, yes,” he said, sounding surprised and wretched but also clearer than he had before.

“Good. Get up.”

With one hand on the wall and one hand on my shoulder, he managed to drag himself upright. He wavered for a moment, but then let go of me and stood there solidly enough.

“You’re covered with vomit,” he pointed out.

“I’ll hardly be the only one by the time the night is over,” I said, stripping off my shirt. I had an undershirt on beneath it, but Nika still averted his eyes, which annoyed me more than anything else he had done this evening.

“You were running around with a strange woman who has been drugging people,” I told him sharply. “I hardly think the sight of me in my undershirt is going to sully your virtue any more than it’s already been sullied.”

He gave me such a woebegone, boyish look that I had to turn away in order to keep myself from kicking him in the shins. When I turned back around, he was still looking pathetic, but I had reminded myself very severely that I only cared about the mystery woman, and that he could stand there looking like a hungry baby and a kitten in a rain-storm as much as he liked, because it was nothing to me. His lack of backbone and all the other qualities one would want in a man had already been abundantly proven, and it was no longer my problem.

“Who is she?” I repeated, wadding my sick-soaked shirt up into a ball in order to busy my hands and stop them from giving him a good slap.

He looked down and muttered a number of unintelligible things, but after some pressing I gathered that the mystery woman was the daughter of his mother’s head steward.

“And what were you doing with her?” I demanded, unable to stop myself. Shame-faced silence was the only answer I got, and was no

more than I deserved.

“What was *she* doing?” I went on.

He came out of his sullen shame-filled silence long enough to give me a puzzled glance and say, “What do you mean?”

“I can’t believe she went to all this trouble just to...” I gestured at him. “What else was she doing?”

“I don’t know,” he said stubbornly. I resisted the urge to give him another good shaking; although his posture and his voice told me that he wouldn’t tell me even if he did know, it seemed that he did not, in fact, know.

“Well, where is she now?” I demanded.

He shrugged.

“Does your mother know about her? Does your *wife* know?”

He gave me a hurt look.

“They *do* know,” I stated.

His shoulders slumped in admission that yes, they knew.

Screams of rage started to build up somewhere in my chest. I bit them back and asked, “Do you need to be escorted somewhere? Do you need a healer?”

He shook his head, looking even more woebegone than before, and before I could launch myself at him and throttle him within an inch of his life, I strode out of the room and slammed the door behind me.



My rage carried me all the way into the Hall of Celebration and over to the table where Princess Velikokrasnova and Princess Vostochnokrasnova had been sitting. They were no longer there, so I marched off to the chamber where older princesses often liked to retire to conduct some quiet business while the younger folk entertained themselves in the Hall of Celebration. Sure enough, Princess Velikokrasnova, Princess Vostochnokrasnova, Princess Yuzhnokrasnova, Princess Malokrasnova, Princess Severnokrasnova, and some more minor black earth nobility were all gathered there.

“Where is your steward’s daughter!” I shouted in Princess Vostochnokrasnova’s face.

She remained almost impassive, but a twitch of her eyes gave her

away, and several of the other princesses gasped.

“What is it to you?” she asked, raising her chin.

“I admire your spirit. I hope my sister admires it as much when she comes to question you. Now, *where is your steward’s daughter?* Because the last I saw of her, she had just been slipping something to a couple of Imperial guards—and your own son. They were barely sensible of their surroundings.”

“Men drink a lot at these celebrations,” observed Princess Vostochnokrasnova coolly. “No doubt it was just too much vodka.”

“That was the *wrong answer!*” I shouted. “You *should* have said: ‘Oh, by all the gods, where is he? I hope he has taken no harm! Marina, my daughter, go summon a healer directly and attend to your beloved husband.’”

“Ah, Valeriya Dariyevna, child,” said Princess Vostochnokrasnova. Something like a smile quirked her wrinkled mouth. Everyone else appeared completely unmoved. And I was the one who was supposed to mistreat men. “Sometimes I really do regret not making you my daughter. No offense to you, Marina,” she added to Princess Velikokrasnova.

“None taken,” said Princess Velikokrasnova, although judging by the set of her own mouth, not entirely truthfully.

“So you *did* know!” I cried. “I didn’t want to believe it, but...how... how many...how many...” Tears, I realized with extreme horror, were building up behind my eye, threatening to burst free and choke me.

“Come, my child,” said Princess Vostochnokrasnova, patting the space beside her on the soft bench she was sitting on. “Have a seat.” When I didn’t obey, she reached over and tugged on my undershirt with a surprisingly strong hand. I allowed my knees to buckle, and plopped gracelessly onto the bench, still swallowing back the tears clogging my throat, and, I discovered with even more horror, sniffing like a child.

“Here.” She handed me a kerchief. “This is a little nicer than that stinking shirt you’ve got in your hand. And don’t take it so hard, my child,” she added, with something almost like compassion in her voice. “Did you only realize...just today?”

I nodded.

She sighed and gave Princess Velikokrasnova a meaningful glance.

“Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Princess Velikokrasnova stiffly. “I...I know you have no cause to love me. I know you think I did you a great injury, and *him* as well. But...I always knew. What he was. I knew about you all along, you know, and about...the one before you, and the one after. I knew about all that, and I...took him anyway.”

“So are you claiming that you loved him more?” I said angrily. The lump in my throat was gone, melted away by old hurt and new rage.

She gave me a contemptuous look and pursed her mouth, and it was Princess Vostochnokrasnova who said, still speaking more gently than she had ever spoken to me before, “You really did him love him very much, then, my dear. As much as it is possible to love a man one has only known for two months, that is.”

“*Three* months. And I can’t exactly claim it was a pure and elevating passion, but I never thought of any other man even for a moment the whole time, and my intention was certainly an honorable marriage.”

Princess Vostochnokrasnova sighed heavily again. “And if you had found out about...the others?”

I made a face, and she gave a short laugh. “As I thought. He’d be lucky if all you did was turn him out on the steppe in the middle of a howling blizzard, with nothing but the shirt on his back.”

“I wouldn’t!”

“No, my dear, you’d cut off his head, snick-snick, just like you did with the last people who made you really angry.”

I opened my mouth to protest that, but then shut it, since that would certainly be what I would *want* to do.

“And what mother could wish that for her son? No, my dear, he’s much better off where he is, and you’ll be much better off with Marina’s little boy, who’s grown up into such a fine young man, and against all the odds, too. Because that’s what’s being planned, is it not? I must confess, when I first heard of this mad scheme of your sister’s—well, and your own, I assume—to take him off with you to the East, I thought, ‘oh, there go those Zerkalitsy again,’ but”—she looked over at her sister princesses—“I am beginning to see the wisdom of it, at least if marriage between you and Marina’s Vanya is the goal.”

Everyone looked at me, and after a moment, I nodded.

“There, you see,” said Princess Vostochnokrasnova, sounding pleased. “The Tsarina is planning to honor us with a special show of esteem. Whose idea was it, by the way, my dear—yours or hers?”

After another moment of deliberation, I said, “Hers.”

“All of it, my child?”

“All of it.”

“Including the choice of husband?”

“Yes. The plan was hers. Well, the execution has been mostly mine, so if I’ve ruffled any feathers, don’t blame her for it. I’m happy to face any woman who thinks she’s been offended myself.” The boldness of my declaration was somewhat undercut by my voice cracking as more tears suddenly threatened to break loose. I would have been very angry and embarrassed about them, except that everyone in the room, who had to a woman always disliked me my entire life, had visibly softened towards me upon seeing them, so I had to admit that they had been a brilliant tactical stroke, even if an unintentional one. Crying might have gained me more with my sister’s ill-wishers than ten years of careful plans and cunning strategy.

“Of course you’d be happy to fight any of us, my dear, but that won’t be necessary,” said Princess Vostochnokrasnova, patting my hand. “No one is offended, and an alliance, a proper marriage alliance, between Krasnograd and the black earth district would be a very welcome thing, would it not, my sisters?”

The other princesses didn’t look as convinced of that, but no one dared say anything in dissent.

“It would only be cementing in name what we already know to be true in fact,” she continued.

Princess Velikokrasnova made a very sour face at that, but Princess Vostochnokrasnova only laughed and said that she’d have a word with her steward and see what her daughter had been up to, but ten to one it was the high spirits of a woman who was chasing after a man she shouldn’t have, and since she didn’t have all the resources of money, servants, the strength of a warrior, and a sister on the Wooden Throne that I had had, she was resorting to tricks and potions instead.

I looked her and the other princesses over narrowly as she was speaking, but while I could see that they were concealing something

from me, and that there was division between them over what to do, I could also see that further questioning at the moment was going to be useless, so I said I would disturb them no more for the evening, and rose to leave. Princess Vostochnokrasnova rose with me and walked me out the door.

“Your plan is a good one, my dear,” she said once we were alone in the corridor.

“Is that so,” I said. I started walking, and she walked with me.

“It is, my dear. A marriage alliance with the black earth district was always a good idea; the only problem was in your original choice of husband, although I suppose you could be forgiven there: he was handsome, clever, and of age, and you were very young. You still *are* very young, my dear, if you’ll forgive me for saying so. The fact that you care so much about...him, and all of this, proves it. Not that I hold it against you. Or anything else, for that matter. You said your intentions were never anything but an honorable marriage, and I believe you. I believed you then, too; I just knew that such an establishment was not in my son’s best interests, much as I regretted that fact. I tried to convince myself that it would be, and that I should allow him to break off the betrothal I had arranged for him and accept *your* proposals, but sober judgment told me I could never allow it.”

“So he *did* want to, then,” I exclaimed, rather bitterly. “At least a little.”

“Even a lot, my dear, but not enough.”

“How can you be so sure! He might have changed!”

Princess Vostochnokrasnova laughed. “And once again, my dear, you show yourself to be a very young woman, and one who has never had a husband or a son.”

“I have a brother!”

“And have you ever changed him?”

“Well...no. He said he wanted to go to a sanctuary, so we sent him to a sanctuary. We never could be bothered to try anything else.”

“So you see I’m right, my dear.”

I glared at her, and she laughed again until I smiled a little and said I had to concede her point. “But he was very young too,” I added. “He really might have changed. Fatherhood changes some men, even

if marriage doesn't."

"Some men, my dear, that is true, but allow me to observe again that you had only known him for two months—or was it three? Well, no matter—while I had known him his entire life. A proud, hotheaded, steppe woman! It would never do for him!" She stroked my arm. "I won't say you were wrong, my dear, but don't regret him. It won't do either of you any good."

"Very well. But," I took her arm and turned her to face me, "why are you telling me this?"

"Oh, my dear!" She laughed again. "With you looking at me like that, I can see what my son saw in you! Such hot blood deserves an answer! If only I were a bit younger...now I think I understand your steppe ways. If I were a bit younger, would I have any hope?"

I tried not to roll my eyes. Why did these Western princesses seem to care so much about this? My head for beheading, but they thought about it twice as much as we did in the mountains and the steppe, where it was commonly done. Probably because they wanted it too, but they couldn't have it, which made them want it twice as much. I gave Princess Vostochnokrasnova a look, but she only laughed some more and said, "Like that, is it? Well, I'll let you have your secrets. And as for why I'm telling you all this...well, first of all, I *do* think this plan of your sister's to marry you to Marina's Vanya is a good one for all of us. And second of all—I like you."

"You never showed much sign of it before."

"Well, when I say I *like* you, my dear, what I meant is that I admire your spirit. And then...you gave me my only granddaughter thus far, who is also in line for the rule of Zem'. These are significant claims in your favor."

"I always thought you resented Mirochka's very existence," I said. "Certainly no one from her father's family has ever shown so much as a jot of interest in her."

"As if you would ever let us get close to her, my dear!"

I gave her another look. "As if you ever gave me any reason to think you wanted to, or could be trusted to have anything to do with her."

She had the good grace to look ashamed.

"I'm glad to hear you say that you 'admired my spirit' now, and that

you are so good as to approve of the plan of your own Empress,” I said. “But Mirochka was your only granddaughter, and in line for the rule of Zem’, back when she was born, and yet all the black earth district has been avoiding me, or if they can’t avoid me, insulting me, for the past nine years. Frankly, I was astonished when it began, since I thought that those very considerations you have just mentioned would make it politic for you and the rest of the black earth princesses to try to stay on my good side, no matter how much you may have been offended by the circumstances of Mirochka’s conception, but it seemed that not even basic self-interest had any sway over your actions. Which makes me question what you are doing now. What has brought about this sudden desire for a reconciliation, after such a spectacular break in our relations? And don’t feed me any more of that nonsense about how your care as a mother was the only thing standing between me and your son. I may have been...deceived as to the fidelity of his feelings, and I certainly would have been very upset by any sign of unfaithfulness, but I doubt I would have actually *killed* him over it, and I can’t believe that the possibility of marital disharmony would stop you from marrying your son to the Tsarina’s only second-sister.”

Some drunken revelers passing by gave her a moment to gather her thoughts, and when we were alone again and she began speaking, she no longer looked ashamed, although she was more serious and—what? Honest?—than I had ever seen her before.

“You are right, my dear,” she began. “We, especially I, should never have turned our backs on you and on Miroslava Valeriyevna like that. It was a grave error in judgment as well as an unpardonable insult to you and your family.”

She paused as if she expected me to say something, but I only waited impatiently for her to carry on, and after a moment, she did.

“As for why, there were many reasons. I did seriously consider letting you make the match, although the reservations I have mentioned about your ability to live in harmony, or at all, with my son were valid and deep. But you are right: a son married to the Tsarina’s only second-sister! It was not a match to be thrown away lightly, and would be worth a fair amount of suffering on his part, and even antagonizing the other black earth princesses by breaking off the betrothal between

him and Marina and giving him to a Stepnaya. I don't have to tell you that there is little love—well, present company excluded, I suppose—lost between our families; no doubt you steppelanders spend your winter evenings telling tales of the perfidy of black earth women. And unfortunately Nika is not the man to make such prejudiced observers think better of his family.”

“He made *me* think better of him and his origins,” I said, impelled by some impulse of contrariness to defend the man who was, after all, the father of my only daughter. “I was certainly no admirer of the black earth district, but *I* was able to overcome that.”

“For a time, my dear, but now..? I admit that he's clever and not ill-looking, but he has no backbone. He's always happy to do whatever the woman currently standing next to him tells him to. I don't think that would go over very well on the steppe.”

“Fair enough,” I conceded.

“It was a thorny problem,” she continued. “I passed more than one sleepless night over it. So in the end I went to the Tsarina and asked her what she advised.”

“So it was her,” I said. “*She* was the one who broke it off. And she didn't tell me!”

“Perhaps she was afraid that it would cause an irreconcilable breach between you, my dear. The reasons she gave for her decision were not very flattering to either of you.”

“I doubt that was it,” I said. “She's never been afraid of telling me what to do, or what she thinks of me. She *is* the Tsarina, after all. But do tell, what *were* the unflattering reasons she gave?”

“She also thought that the two of you were ultimately...incompatible, and that Nika would provoke you into doing something that would undo all the good of a marriage alliance, and set the steppe and the black earth district against each other, possibly in open conflict.”

“*I wouldn't!*” I cried, but that only made Princess Vostochnokrasnova give me a look that was even more withering than the looks I had given her.

“One of these days people are going to realize that I can be a woman of sense, at least on occasion,” I said.

“We'll believe it when we see it, my dear,” said Princess Vostochnokrasnova.

nokrasnova. “Although if you will permit me to observe, good sense is not where your strength lies. But,” she patted my arm again, “don’t let that bother you. The world is full of sensible women, but there are very few who will, for example, go tearing across all of Zem’ in order to bring people who may or may not exist to justice.”

“So you don’t think the slave traders exist?”

“I have never seen them, my dear, or heard any reports that would support their existence, but I know very little of what goes on in the world.”

I laughed in disbelief at that, even as I noted how firmly—too firmly!—she held my gaze, but she refused to be drawn into further discussion of what was clearly a *very* interesting issue, so after a bit I said, “That wasn’t my sister’s only reason, was it?”

“No, my dear,” said Princess Vostochnokrasnova. Did she look relieved to have the talk turn away from the slave trade? Not that she had seemed nervous before, but something about the lines around her eyes and mouth had told me that she knew more than she had let on about it, and that she wasn’t sure what she thought of the knowledge that she had. “She said that she didn’t want to throw away your hand so early, that she wanted to hold it in reserve in case she needed to make some more important alliance later. And she didn’t want to antagonize the black earth princesses. Frankly, my dear, I think that even at the time she was planning a marriage for you with either a Southerner or a Velikokrasnov. A Vostochnokrasnov was certainly not important enough. No doubt as far as she was concerned, Nika’s betrothal with Marina was a blessing, since it saved her from having to forbid the match herself. So she said to go ahead with the marriage between Nika and Marina, and that you could take care of yourself. Of course, we didn’t know about...your situation then.”

“Would it have changed anything?” I demanded.

“Probably not,” admitted Princess Vostochnokrasnova. “And once I found out...I should have come to you, Valeriya Dariyevna, I should have recognized Miroslava Valeriyevna as my granddaughter, but...things were volatile in the black earth district just then, and I thought...I thought I would have more granddaughters, and everyone still had hopes that the Tsarina would produce an heir, so leaving you

to raise your daughter in peace on the steppe seemed like the most prudent course of action. People are often not very good at predicting the future and guessing what they should do to reap the most from the coming days.”

“And what now? Are you going to...recognize Mirochka as one of your own? Because I’m not sure I feel like giving my consent to that.”

“I believe it is for the Empress to give her consent,” said Princess Vostochnokrasnova. “But I think it would be best to wait for a few months anyway. Let things settle down. Let us see how your scheme to marry Marina’s Ivan goes. Does he seem amenable to the idea?”

I shrugged.

“Most likely that means he does,” said Princess Vostochnokrasnova. “Not that I can blame him. He’s a good boy, though, Valeriya Dariyevna, so don’t do anything to hurt him.”

“Midsummer has passed. He’s a good man, now, and can answer for his own future.”

“Well, I’ll give you one thing, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Princess Vostochnokrasnova. “If you ever *do* become Tsarina, you’ll certainly have the backbone for it. And if you catch any of those slavers you’re so sure are out there, they won’t know what’s hit them.” She gave my arm yet another pat. “I should let you go now, to get what rest you can before you set off, but let’s come to an agreement, shall we? Let’s say that I will only watch Miroslava Valeriyevna from afar for the time being, and then when you come back and things have been settled about your marriage, you can introduce her to me and I’ll acknowledge her as my granddaughter. My daughter has only had sons, and Marina appears unlikely to have any more children, alas, but your Miroslava looks like she might be enough for any woman to take pride in. Have a good journey, Valeriya Dariyevna, and I hope that you are successful, and that your success does not tear Zem’ apart.” And with that less-than-encouraging encouragement, she left.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

By this time it was well after midnight, which meant that in just a few short hours I would need to be setting off on my journey, but I decided it was necessary to speak to Sera before collecting Mirochka and going to bed, especially since I was now not sure that I should leave Krasnograd when things were getting so interesting here.

I first went to the balcony where I had left Vyacheslav Irinovich and the unconscious guards, but they were gone. The new guards who were on duty told me that healers had come and taken them all away, and that they thought that Vyacheslav Irinovich had been escorted back to the Tsarina's chambers, so I crossed the kremlin and, after a brief detour to drop off my sick-stained shirt, which I had been carrying around with me all this time, climbed up to Sera's rooms.

There was a little fuss with the guards and maids about getting admitted, but I heard Sera calling, "Is that my sister? Let her in!" and the guards stepped aside and the maids opened the door, telling me impressively that the Tsarina had announced her intention to go to bed very soon.

"I'm sure if she wants me to leave, she can just kick me out," I told them, and went in, ignoring their displeasure. No doubt they were not happy to be up at such a late hour and working when they could be celebrating, but that was just part and parcel of being the Tsarina's maid. They had warm beds and warm meals and were probably paid in cloth-of-gold or something like that, which was more than most of their sisters in, for example, Outer Krasnograd could say.

Sera and Vyacheslav Irinovich were both in her bedchamber when I came in. Vyacheslav Irinovich was already dressed in his night-clothes and sitting on the bed, but Sera was still in her holiday finery, which was, of course, extremely fine, and was looking longingly out the window at the midnight glow over the city roofs.

"Really, I'm not tired at all," she was saying. "Don't you want to go out into the park and celebrate Midsummer properly, my love? That's what they do in sanctuaries, you know: they spend Midsummer with

the trees or the fields or whatever nature is around them. Our human celebrations are so petty and small compared with the magnificence of that midnight sun! Or—the peasants float wreaths and jump over bonfires; doesn't that sound like fun?"

"I'm sure, my dear, but you are tired, even if you don't feel it now. If you still want to spend the night outside, we can do it tomorrow," said Vyacheslav Irinovich patiently.

"Oh, Valya, there you are! I was wondering when you'd show up, after what Slava told me about your adventures on the balcony. Look at that light! I love these white nights, don't you? Don't you just want to spend all night outside in this light?"

"It's even better on the steppe," I told her. "No trees, no buildings, nothing but tall grass and open sky all around you. At home we ride out until we're out of sight of our settlement, build a bonfire, and have our celebrations out where there is nothing between us and the gods."

"And do they come?"

"No, but their presence is close, or so it always seemed to me. But Vyacheslav Irinovich is right: you must be tired, even if you don't feel it now, and tomorrow night will be another white night, if you want to stay out in it."

"I suppose you're right," said Sera, turning reluctantly away from the window. "And most likely by tomorrow I'll have changed my mind anyway. I always *think* I want to spend the night outside, but I'm sure the reality is very different. The ground is probably damp and hard and cold, and the mosquitoes are probably terrible."

"There are ways to make the ground more comfortable and the mosquitoes less troublesome, but it is true that people who aren't accustomed to it find it less pleasant than they had hoped."

"And starting tomorrow—or rather today—you'll be sleeping out on the ground, Valya. I wonder how the others will take it? How do you think Alzhbetka will adjust to it?"

"Perhaps she's more forbearing about that sort of thing than we suspect," I said. "But that's what I came to talk to you about. I'm not sure I should leave tomorrow as planned."

"Oh Valya! Why not?"

"After what happened this evening..."

“You mean the excitement on the balcony?”

“Yes. If what those guards were saying is true, someone slipped them drugged mead, and it seems that the black earth princesses are behind it.”

“Why would anyone slip them drugged mead, and why do you think the black earth princesses are behind it?” Sera asked, sounding now like the acute questioner she was.

“In answer to your second question, because as I’m sure Vyacheslav Irinovich told you, we encountered two people coming from the balcony as we were going to it. I recognized one of them as...as Nika. So after I left Vyacheslav Irinovich and the guards and summoned a healer to go to them, I found him and confronted him about it. He was also a bit drugged, but he said the woman who had been with him was the daughter of his mother’s steward. *What* they were doing I couldn’t get out of him, not that I couldn’t guess, so I went and found a whole collection of black earth princesses, including his mother and wife, and confronted *them*. I didn’t get much out of them either, but it looked to me like they were up to something and they knew about the drugged mead. What they were planning to do I don’t know. It also seemed as if there was a division between them over what to do, with Princess Vostochnokrasnova on one side and the others on the other. Princess Vostochnokrasnova was going along with whatever they were doing, but she seemed better disposed towards us and our family than the other princesses. And she knows our plans regarding Ivan, and approves of them, or so she said, and told the other princesses there she thought it was a good idea and that they should go along with it.”

“Very interesting,” said Sera thoughtfully. “So you didn’t get *why* they were doing all this from them?”

“The situation was not conducive for close questioning. Which is why I think perhaps I should not leave tomorrow. Let us put the journey on hold for a few days, while we question the black earth princesses and get to the bottom of this...whatever was happening out on the balcony.”

Sera considered that for a while. “No,” she said eventually.

“What! Why not? How can I leave now??!”

“We have made this mission of yours too public for you to back out

of it now.”

“I wouldn’t be backing out of it! I’d just be delaying it for a few days. I can’t leave you alone when things are so unsettled. And we might gain useful information.”

“You never worried about leaving me alone before, Valya,” said Sera sharply.

“Well, let’s say I’ve grown into my responsibilities as your sister,” I said, trying not to snap back at her. She was tired, and had many cares. Not that that made her behavior any less annoying. “And you specifically asked me for my help in this case, and things are more uncertain than they’ve ever been before.”

“Oh Valya!” She smiled in a rather superior manner. She was just tired and unhappy, I reminded myself, just tired and unhappy. “Things are *always* this uncertain in Krasnograd! You’ve just never had to deal with the vagaries and worries of rule before.”

“Things are different this time,” I repeated stubbornly. “The fact that you asked me to help you proves that.”

“Or maybe I’m just allowing you to help now that you’ve grown into your responsibilities?” she suggested.

“Stop doing this! You always do this when you’re unhappy!”

“Do what?”

“Try to change the subject and argue about stupid things! You always try to twist my words simply for your own amusement! You know it’s a pointless waste of time and yet you do it anyway!”

Sera looked like she wanted to argue with that, probably by twisting my words into something I hadn’t meant to say, but then she caught Vyacheslav Irinovich’s eye and smiled ruefully instead.

“You’re right, of course, Valya,” she admitted. “It’s a foolish habit of mine. I just like to explore all the possibilities, you know that, and you’re the only person I can have a good argument with. No one else will stand up to me enough to make it worthwhile.”

“What kind of a person *enjoys* arguing,” I said sourly.

She gave me a look, and after a moment we both laughed. I thought Vyacheslav Irinovich was also laughing at us from the bed, but he had the decency to keep it quiet enough that we were able to ignore it.

“Anyway,” I said. “Things are unsettled now, and I don’t like the

idea of leaving you alone when the situation is so delicate, and we really could uncover something of use for my mission.”

“And I appreciate that, Valya, but I still think you should leave tomorrow just as you had planned. I won’t be alone here, you know: I’ll still have Slava and all my guards and councilors and everyone else I’ve always had, except for you, and, while I don’t mean to downplay your importance to me, you really have spent most of your life out of Krasnograd, so I think you will better serve us by doing what you do best, and lead your party on this journey. The possibility that we will be able to find out something of use from the black earth princesses and their servants is a better reason for you to stay, but I still don’t think the chance of discovering something important is worth the risk of you delaying your journey, and, worse yet, making talk in the kremlin and all over Krasnograd. As I said, your mission is already too public for it to be postponed without raising considerable speculation all over the city. I’d rather not give cause to that speculation, and I most particularly don’t want to draw attention to...the little adventure of this evening. The last thing I need is for rumors to go flying all over the city about how assassins under the hire of the black earth princesses attempted to come sneaking into the kremlin during the Midsummer celebrations.”

“We don’t know they were assassins,” I said. “In fact, given how quickly the woman with Nika fled, it seems very likely that she or they weren’t assassins at all.”

“Yes, Valya, but that’s not what the rumors will say. The rumors will say that an entire band of armed assassins, hired by a nefarious group of black earth princesses and, I don’t know, their accomplices in the Hordes, came pouring into the kremlin, and that I’m currently hiding in my chambers, in fear for my life, and my steppe warrior sister is guarding the door with a drawn sword, or, even better, questioning everyone she can get her hands on and killing those who fail to answer her questions to her satisfaction, and the entire steppe army is on its way to Krasnograd, and...”

“Very well; you’ve made your point,” I interrupted her. “You think that me staying will make things even worse than leaving would.”

“Rumor is a powerful weapon, Valya, and suspicious as I am of the

black earth princesses, the last thing I need is for my suspicions to be shared with the rest of Krasnograd, and anything that suggests that the steppe might rise and try to seize power must be avoided entirely. I'm not sure if you are aware how much the rest of Zem' fears the steppe and its army."

"As they should," I said. "Although I don't see why: we haven't done anything to *them* in hundreds of years."

"Memories are long, Valya, and the steppe queens' reign was a time of terror for all their neighbors, prior to the coming of Miroslava Praskovyevna to Krasnograd. After the last steppe queen swore allegiance to her and became the first Princess Stepnaya, it was her army that united the rest of the country, as I'm sure you know."

"It was also the steppe army that drove back the Hordes—and the Western invasion that came all the way to the gates of Krasnograd."

"Thus proving itself to be even more fearsome," said Sera. "People fear the steppe here, and with good reason. Let us not do anything that might wake that fear from its slumber."

"I don't like leaving you," I repeated. "And I *really* don't like leaving Mirochka here by herself while there's something going on."

"Do you really think that if there is something going on—which I admit does seem more and more likely—that they would be targeting Mirochka?"

"Everyone knows she is in line for the rule of Zem'. If anyone had designs on the throne, she would be an obvious target."

Sera frowned. "I don't want to...fill your head with worries, Valya, especially at this moment, but let's say that...something happened. Let's say—the gods forbid—but let's say she was assassinated. What would your family do? What would the steppe do?"

"If the youngest Stepnaya was murdered in Krasnograd? I don't even like to think. The one and only time a Stepnaya was murdered, the family responsible was destroyed and their lands were taken. It's one of the reasons the province is so big. If something were to happen to Mirochka...even if I did nothing, which is unlikely, but even if I were out of the picture and it were left to my mother to decide, I believe the army would demand action. They'd probably march on Krasnograd and demand that either my mother or I took over the rule of the

country.” Seeing Sera’s unhappy face at that thought, I added, “It’s not that the steppe is disloyal, you know that. But they wouldn’t see it as disloyalty. They’d see it as putting the rightful ruler on the throne and redressing their grievances, and any attempt to oppose them would be seen as a sign that their opponents lacked in loyalty themselves. And I dare say that if anyone tried to go against them, it would all end in a bloodbath.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Sera. “As would any woman of sense.”

“How do we know that we’re working against women of sense, though?”

She almost laughed. “Ah, Valya! So true. Some might even say that the very fact of their plotting against the throne, if that’s what they’re doing, shows them not to be women of sense. But if they *are* from the black earth district, then Mirochka must seem like a gift from the gods to them. A young girl, a Zerkalitsa through the female line, and also a Stepnaya, but still a princess of the black earth district! They could be confident that the steppe would not go against them, should they try to put her on the throne. No, Valya, I think it most likely that you and I have the most to fear. *We* are the ones in the way of any black earth plot, but Mirochka would be guarded like the apple of their eye.”

“If they are in fact women of sense, and all our other conjectures are correct,” I said, while a dozen new and unpleasant possibilities went rushing through my mind. Sera’s situation...no one who knew the state of her health would be at all surprised if she didn’t survive the winter...even I would just put it down to ill luck...and if I were to be thrown from my horse, or meet with an arrow on some empty field, well, that would be no more than what was expected either...accidents happened even to the best riders, and after going after the slavers so publicly as I had, and making it known that they had threatened my life and that of my family, I had made myself a very easy and obvious target...a cunning woman could use that to her advantage, and get rid of me and use it as an excuse to get rid of her other enemies as well, by blaming them for my death and destroying them in justifiable vengeance...or if they *were* plotting against Mirochka...but no, Sera was right, eliminating Mirochka would cause more problems than it would solve, as there were no clear heirs after her and the steppe

would most certainly rise in retaliation...but if *I* were eliminated and Mirochka were kept alive, that would be a different matter entirely...especially if Sera were gone as well...that's certainly what I would do, if I were plotting against us...and now was certainly the time, with Sera in such a fragile state...

"Do you trust your healers?" I asked abruptly.

Sera gave me a surprised look, and then comprehension dawned. "You think they could be the ones to do it," she stated.

"I don't know. I've never had any reason to mistrust them, but if I were planning to assassinate you, that would be the route I would go, especially now."

"My condition has not yet been made public, Valya."

"But your healers know of it. And everyone knows you have been suffering from an indisposition recently. Perhaps your current condition is *because* they've been turned against you."

"Oh no, Valya, I'm afraid that is entirely my own foolish hopefulness," she admitted ruefully. "I rejected the mixtures they gave me, and ignored what they and my own common sense told me about... timing. I told myself that my time for conceiving another child was past, but I knew that was not so, I just...did it anyway. So I fear we cannot lay that at their door."

"Well, even so," I said. "This could be the perfect opportunity for anyone who was using them to get to you. So do you trust them?"

"I've never had any reason not to, Valya."

"Of course not; otherwise they wouldn't be your healers. But do you think any of them could be turned?"

She stared for a while at her own doubts, and then said thoughtfully, "I wouldn't think so...but I can't be absolutely certain. You never can, in matters of treason."

"True enough. I would get new healers if I were you, just to be on the safe side."

"But then I could be dismissing those who are trustworthy, and replacing them with those who are actually working against me."

"It's a risk...don't bring in anyone from Krasnograd or the black earth district."

"From the North, then? Northern healers are renowned through-

out the land; no one would question my decision if I brought in some from Severnolesnoye.”

“No. I’m sorry to cast any doubt on your family, Vyacheslav Irinovich,” I added, turning to him. “But if the coastal princesses are mixed up in this in any way, then the Severnolesniye could be as well, and I don’t trust any of them on principle.”

“I understand, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said. “And while I have no cause to suspect anyone in my own family, the only person for whom I can swear with absolute certainty is myself.”

“Your family...” began Sera.

“Is only partially trustworthy,” I put in before she could finish. She pursed her mouth in disagreement, and I said, “There are factions amongst the Severnolesniye as well, Sera, as you very well know. All those sisters...all it would take is for one of them to turn against you. No, you’re best off bringing in healers from the steppe.”

“From the steppe! That would not be a popular move! The other princesses already think the Stepniye have far too much influence, for obvious reasons.”

“I don’t see why, given how little time I’ve spent in Krasnograd,” I said sharply. “And it’s high time they became reconciled to the fact that I am your sister, anyway. I’ve been avoiding Krasnograd all these years, and keeping Mirochka away from it, but now I see you’re right, and we must take up our proper place here.”

“You’re only just now seeing that, Valya?” asked Sera with a smile. “It’s only just now coming to you?”

“No, I’m only just now annoyed enough to actually go through with it.”

“It’s good to know that I can always count on your hot temper,” she told me, while Vyacheslav Irinovich laughed to himself on the bed.

“Some things are always constant. At least let me supply you with another healer, to keep watch over the ones you already have. It will take a while to bring some in from the steppe, but I will have my mother send the best ones we have to you. Arina Verovna delivered both me and Mirochka; I’d trust her with my life and I already have. I’ll send her to you as soon as possible, and in the meantime I’ll have my people here find you a decent steppe healer already in Krasnograd. There

should be some in the stables.”

“I think I would prefer one who was used to working with women, not horses,” Sera objected.

“Nonsense. Our horses are worth more than most women, and we heal them accordingly. This is the condition of my leaving, Sera, and I won’t set a foot outside of the kremlin until you agree. Although I’m now of even less of a mind to leave. If the plot really is as deep as we fear, and if anything should happen to you or Mirochka in my absence, I would never forgive myself, and would probably have to burn down Krasnograd or something in retaliation. If...”

“If, if, if...in the end, it’s all in the hands of the gods, Valya.” Sera straightened up and gave me her best Imperial look. “By all I can see, the best thing for Mirochka and for Zem’ will be if you leave her here and set off on your journey tomorrow as planned. I promise she will be watched over with all the care possible, and rather more than you could give her if she were to go with you.”

“No doubt you’re right.”

“I *know* I’m right, Valya. Or as right as it is ever given for any of us to be.” She came over and kissed my forehead. “I know this must be an anxious moment for you, but it will be for the best.” She embraced me. “I will care for her as if for my own daughter, as I’ve already promised and as you must know. She will want for nothing except your company, and she’ll have that again soon enough. You know this is the right thing to do.” She released me. “So go and take what rest you can before your departure. I’ll come and see you off.”

“Oh, very well,” I said. “You’re probably right. Just be sure to track down and question the Vostochnokrasnova steward’s daughter as soon as you can, and keep an eye on all of them. And take care of yourself, and...” I turned to Vyacheslav Irinovich, “you keep an eye on her, and take care of her, and if everything and everyone is not in perfect health and condition upon my return, I shall be very displeased and will make a scene.”

Sera and Vyacheslav Irinovich both laughed at that, and on that cheery note I took my leave and went off in search of Mirochka.



I found her, the tsarinoviches, and Ivan all gamely still celebrating

with a number of other children in a small hall down the corridor from the Hall of Celebration.

“How has it been?” I asked Ivan, who was standing by the wall and watching the children who were still awake—some of them had gone to sleep in the corner—play a rather tired game of tag.

“The children have enjoyed themselves immensely, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he replied stoutly.

“And you?”

“It has been an honor and a pleasure to fulfill my duties as the tsarinovich’s companion, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“Oh, come now,” I said, and leaned in closer to him. Despite the late hour after a long day, I could feel the desire between us flare like heat lightning, and, judging by the way he fidgeted and stepped back, so could he, although perhaps he did not realize what it was that made him flush like that.

“The party may have been a bit young for my tastes, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he admitted, looking both flustered and knowing. “But they are good children, and I am always pleased to do my duty.”

“I’m pleased to hear that, but I hope you won’t mind that I’m about to release you,” I told him. “You and I have an early start tomorrow, which means that we should retire for at least a few hours’ rest, which means that the children should too. We may have promised them they could stay up all night, but they’re clearly in no state to do so. I’m taking Mirochka to bed, and I’ll send the tsarinoviches to bed too.”

“I think Valery has already gone to bed, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Ivan, and went over and gathered up Valery from where he was sleeping in a corner with the other tired children. I went over and caught Mirochka, who was still running around with the most energetic of the children, and told her and Ruslan and Dariusz it was time to retire. Ruslan appeared only too ready to go to bed, but Dariusz and Mirochka protested vigorously, their outrage at being taken from their friends further fueled by their fatigue.

“Ivan Marinovich and I have to depart tomorrow morning, and the Tsarina must see us off,” I told them firmly. “That means we all have to rest first, which means so do you.”

This convinced Dariusz, but Mirochka took some more persuad-

ing, and it was only when I half-offered, half-threatened to carry her away on my shoulder that she agreed, albeit with poor grace.

“I would like to set off as early as possible in the morning, but I’m afraid that won’t be very early,” I told Ivan once we had gathered up all the children. Valery, who was no small child, was sitting on his hip with his arms around him, not quite asleep but refusing to wake up enough to walk on his own back to his rooms. It was a charming sight, and made me think that one day it could be my child that he would be carrying. In my own tired state it suddenly occurred to me that I had never seriously envisioned what Nika would be like as a father when we were together. I had never been able, or even tried, to imagine the two of us raising children together. But with Ivan it was easy, even though he was barely more than a child himself.

“Do you need help with them?” I asked. My words came out more gently than they normally did. Perhaps that was why Ivan gave me a swift look of surprise and delight before saying, “I’ve got them, Valeriya Dariyevna. I don’t have any brothers of my own, but I’ve been helping with our steward’s children since I was hardly any old than Valery. She practically raised me, you know—our steward, that is. I was like her eldest son, and all her own little boys were like my brothers. There were five of them, so a mere three should be nothing. And they’re ready to go to bed, aren’t you, boys?”

“I’ve been ready for ages,” said Ruslan with a moan, while Dariusz claimed that he was not ready at all, and Valery dug his face more firmly into Ivan’s chest.

“I’ll leave them to you, then,” I told him. “And let’s try to be under-way by midmorning.”

“Good night, then, Valeriya Dariyevna. And...” he suddenly sounded very shy, “Joyous Midsummer.”

“Joyous Midsummer to you as well,” I said, smiling more than I would have thought possible earlier in the day. “Come on, Mirochka, let’s go.”

Mirochka moaned and complained all the way back to our chambers, and was only slightly mollified when I lifted her up to look out the window in the corridor onto the sun rising over the city. “You see mama, it’s already morning,” she argued. “There’s no point in going to

bed: we'll just have get up again shortly."

"As you very well know, my dear, I have a long journey ahead of me, and I need at least a little rest before I set off. And *you* will need your rest in order to look fresh and cheerful when you see me off, and to apply yourself to your lessons once I'm gone."

"Why do I need to look fresh and cheerful when I see you off, mama?"

"Because lots of people will be watching, my dove."

"Why, mama? Why would they care?"

"Because I am the Tsarina's sister, my dove, and my mission has become a very public matter, so people will be curious. And they will be curious to see you as well, because you are my daughter and heir and one day could be their ruler."

"Oh." Mirochka stopped whining for a moment to consider that, and I hustled her into our chambers. "What if I *can't* be fresh and cheerful tomorrow, mama?" she asked once we were inside. "What would they think of me if I cried? I'm afraid I might cry, mama!"

"Some might think less of you, my dear, but I wouldn't worry about them. Many would probably like you more for it. A girl should feel affection for her mother, and if you cry they'll probably just think that you're more gentle-hearted and less troublesome than I am, which will be all for the good."

"So should I *try* to cry, then, mama?" she asked anxiously.

"Don't *try* to do anything other than not make trouble," I told her. "Lots of people here want to like you, my dove, and you've already started winning them over. Just try not to get into trouble while I'm gone."

"Do I often get into trouble, mama?" she asked, even more anxiously.

I laughed. "No, my heart. If you did you'd know it, believe me. But you see, *I* got into trouble all the time and I still do, so it would be best if you left the troublemaking to me, or at least waited till I return. Then we can get into trouble together."

"How will I know how not to get into trouble, since I don't do it very often, mama? How will I know if I'm doing something that might get me into trouble?"

“Just...try not to hurt people, and if Sera or Vyacheslav Irinovich or your teachers tell you to do something, try to do it.”

“What if they tell me to do a bad thing, though?”

“Like what, my dove?”

“Like...break my oath.”

“That they most certainly won’t do,” I assured her. “They keep it themselves. And as for anything else...it seems very unlikely that they would tell you to do something really bad. I wouldn’t worry about it too much. Don’t worry about anything too much, my dove, and before you know it, I’ll be back.”

“And I can always ask you, mama!” she exclaimed, brightening at the thought.

“Yes, of course, when I return.”

“No, I mean, I can come to you in your dreams and ask you then!” she said, sounding very relieved.

“Of course, my dear,” I told her, trying not to seem too taken aback. “I’ll keep a watch out for you, shall I?”

“Of course, mama! And that way you won’t be gone at all! I’ll be able to stay here in Krasnograd *and* travel with you at the same time! It will be the best of both things!”

“That is an excellent plan, my dove,” I told her. “I’ll be watching out for you all the time I’m asleep.”

“How can you watch out for me when you’re asleep, mama?” she asked with a giggle. “I’ll sneak in and surprise you!”

“Oh you will, will you? I think you’ll find it’s not that easy to catch me by surprise!”

“Here, I’m going to show you!”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The sun streaming in through the window and directly into my eyes awoke me. I was lying on top of the covers, still in my clothes from the night before. I sat up. The angle of the sun told me it was still early, and that I could have only slept a few hours, but I felt refreshed, with neither the dull fatigue of not enough sleep, or the grogginess of a sleep that was too deep. I looked around. Mirochka was lying beside me, apparently asleep herself. Someone—probably her—had pulled off my boots and left them lying haphazardly on the floor by the bed. I had no memory of doing it myself, and a maid would have cleaned them and put them away.

“You’re a terrifying child, you know that,” I said.

Mirochka opened her eyes. “Did I hurt you?” she asked anxiously. “I didn’t mean to scare you, mama, I really didn’t! I didn’t know you’d go out so fast, but I caught you and put you on the bed and took off your boots. I would have put on your nightclothes, but once I got you in bed I was too tired and you were too heavy for me to move you.”

“I thought you were still asleep,” I told her. “I didn’t really mean it. I’m not scared of you. I just didn’t know you were so strong. And I’m very impressed that you could catch me and put me to bed! All that training is doing you good. How did you do it, though? How did you put me to sleep so fast?”

“I don’t know, mama! I didn’t know it would work so well. I wanted you to sleep, and you just...went out, like you’d been hit on the head or something. I had to jump to catch you, and at first I was really scared! I thought,” her voice trembled, “something bad had happened to you. I even thought of calling for a healer. But then I checked your pulse and your breathing, just like you showed me for a person who’s been knocked out, and there was nothing wrong, so I decided I’d check in your dreams, and I slipped in, but you were just asleep, so I lay down next to you to keep you company. Your dreams were so...strange, mama! Some of them were making you so unhappy, so I took them away. I don’t think you’ll remember them at all now.”

"I see," I said lightly. "Do you remember what they were about?"

"I think they were about my father, mama. I recognized him, but he was ignoring us and chasing after some other woman, and you were so sad! So I took that away, but then you started dreaming about some woman. I don't know her, but she was a steppe woman, like us. She came up and kissed you and asked you not to go, but you ran away, and that made both of you so sad. Who was she, mama?"

"A friend I had when you were very small."

"She seemed very nice, mama. Have I met her?"

"A few times. Do you remember the woman with blonde hair who came by last year? The one in the army."

"I think so," said Mirochka doubtfully.

"She had a big chestnut stallion. She only stopped by for a moment."

"The one named Plamya, that was so high-tempered?"

"That's the one."

"Isn't he the brother of Iskra and Zvezda?"

"He is."

"So how'd *she* end up with him, then? That's our bloodline!"

"I gave him to her. As a gift."

"She must have been a *very* good friend," said Mirochka. "Why doesn't she come around more often, then?"

"She has duties. Duties that keep her away."

"Well, I wish she would come visit more," said Mirochka. "You don't have very many friends, mama." And before I could react to that, she continued, "And *I* liked her very much, what I saw of her. And now I remember: I think I've seen her in dreams before. They must have been your dreams. I wish I could meet her, mama. Do you think I could find her in *her* dreams?"

"I think it would be best if you stayed out of them, my dove. I don't think it would be very nice for you to go into other people's dreams without their permission, especially if they don't know you very well."

"Really?" said Mirochka, sounding surprised. "No one's every complained about it before."

"That's probably because they didn't realize what was happening. It isn't a very common thing for people to do. If they had known, many

of them probably wouldn't have been very happy about it. I think you should only do it with people who've given you permission."

"But no one's given me permission, mama!" she objected.

"You can practice with me," I told her, even though I knew it was probably a bad idea and I was going to regret it. "But only if you promise that if you see strange things or things you don't understand, you'll go away and leave them alone."

"Fine, mama, but I see lots of strange things in dreams all the time."

"I'm sure you do. But most people don't like to share the strange things they see in their sleep with others. Those things are supposed to be private."

"Really?" she said again, sounding even more surprised, as if the inviolate privacy of dreams had never occurred to her before. Which, since for her it didn't exist, it probably hadn't.

"Really," I told her. "And I think you probably shouldn't do this making-people-fall-asleep thing either. Do it only with me."

"But you'll be gone, mama!"

"Well, you'll have to wait until I come back then, my dove."

"I wonder if I can make it happen from far away," said Mirochka speculatively, a gleam of curiosity coming into her eyes.

"We can try, my dear, but *only if we've agreed about it beforehand*. Otherwise, if it works, you could make me fall asleep when I'm riding, or...fighting, or something like that, and it could be very dangerous."

"But how will we agree about it if you're so far away, mama?"

"You'll have to figure it out," I said, tapping her lightly on the nose. "If you can really reach into my dreams from so far away, maybe you can reach into my waking mind too, and talk to me. Otherwise *no falling asleep*, are we agreed?"

"I suppose so, mama. Can I practice on my brothers? I'll need someone else to practice on, you know."

I hesitated. "Only if the Tsarina gives you her permission to ask them, and they give you their permission to do it," I said after thinking it over. "Otherwise, absolutely not. Do we have a deal?"

"I suppose," she said, pouting a little.

"Good, because I have to be up and on my way," I said, sliding out of bed. "And thanks to your excellent sleep, I'm all bright and refreshed,

even though I was up half the night. I hope you *can* make it work when I'm far away, my dove, because it's a wonderful gift."

Breakfasting and gathering our things and saddling the horses took longer than it should, but we were still ready to leave well before mid-morning. We had decided to set off without too much fanfare, but Sera came to see us off, flanked by Vyacheslav Irinovich and the tsarinoviches, and with several princesses and half the kremlin staff hovering around on the edges. Mirochka threatened to make a scene at the last minute, but I was able to deflect it by reminding her that she had to be brave for her brothers and that I would be back soon and she would be enjoying herself so much she wouldn't miss me anyway. That was hard to say, but I said it cheerfully enough, and only Sera seemed to guess how much it pained me. She embraced me and said, "She will be well cared for, Valya, I swear it."

"I know," I said, and then added, only lying a little, "I have no fears on that score."

"I wish you success, Valya. But no matter what the outcome of your mission, come back by fall. I want you here by my side when...as soon as I can return to us."

"I will," I promised. "We will return by the time the snow starts to stick, if not sooner, and I have every hope we'll have reason to celebrate when we do." I stepped out of her embrace. "But for that to happen, we must be off." I waved at everyone with much more jauntiness than I felt, vaulted onto Zlata's back, and set off briskly before anyone could start to cry or do anything inauspicious like that.

In truth, I was probably the only one in danger of crying, as everyone else seemed in tremendously high spirits as we rode under the bright sun through the streets of Krasnograd. Even I started to cheer up, once we were a few streets away from the kremlin and I could think less about leaving Mirochka behind, and more about setting off on a journey. I loved setting off on a journey, especially one where I didn't know what the end would be. So many of my foremothers had loved journeying, too, and here I was, heading out once again on the road just like them. The people on the streets waved and gave us good wishes as we went by, passing them on their slower, shorter journeys. We were all every one of us on a journey, whether we ever left our

towns and farms and villages or not. Things kept circling around and around...my thoughts were distracted by our arrival at the East Gate.

Once we passed through the East Gate and entered Outer Krasnograd, people no longer waved at us and wished us well, but watched us with a mixture of fear and dull despair. Unlike the South Gate, the East Gate opened onto a dirty shantytown of unpaved, wandering streets, disreputable huts, the reek of middens and privies, and humans, dogs, and other creatures living lives of filthy degradation.

What a nice journey you're on. And theirs is even nicer. The stories said that when Krasnoslava Tsarina had fled Krasnograd to go raise her army, she had slipped out through the East Gate on foot, with only a single companion for a guard. So I really shouldn't whine. But she had come through here on her journey, and here I was riding through on my fine horse with my noble companions on *my* journey, and the only difference for the people of Outer Krasnograd was that their own journeys through life were even more miserable than their foremothers' had been.

Things keep circling around and around. Can I break free? Or—I rode past a filthy woman screaming at her filthy child for losing their only coin—is freedom the wrong thing to aim for? After all, in a certain light, these people here are about as free as a person can be. I threw a coin at the woman, and thought about all the other women who were just as desperate, but who didn't have the good fortune to be desperate just at the moment when I was riding past and could shower them with a tiny bit of the largess that the gods had gifted to me. I ground my teeth and kept my gaze trained straight ahead, wondering how many of them had sold or would sell their children into slavery in order to keep them all from starving. The coals of rage that I always kept banked pretty high flared every time a dirty face refused to look at me, and for a moment I almost turned around in order to ride back to the kremlin and start haranguing Sera and the other princesses about this gross injustice happening right under their noses.

But that would do little good, so instead I kept riding forward as briskly as I could, until we drew near the abattoir that had been placed near the East Road on the edge of Outer Krasnograd, the better for herders from all the Eastern provinces to bring their stock to slaugh-

ter. I tried not to look, and then I forced myself not to look away. Krasnoslava, it was said, had thought that all of Krasnograd was founded upon the evil of the dungeons under the kremlin, and had had them emptied out. But now the dungeons were fuller than ever, and Krasnograd stood with one foot resting on them and the other on something even worse, because this stinking abattoir *was* Krasnograd, even if all the princesses in their fine palaces would never admit it. The pens of cattle, sheep, and goats lowed and bleated pitifully, causing Zlata to slow her pace and sidle away from them as we drew close, and once we were past them and passing the abattoir itself, the scent of blood and the screams of the animals being killed caused her to stop dead and then, at my insistent urging, bolt forward, the other horses racing pell-mell after her until we had left Outer Krasnograd behind entirely and were riding between cultivated fields, the city receding behind us.

“We should have ridden through the South Gate,” said Alzhbetka. “Or at least the North Gate. It’s not so good as the South Gate, but it’s not like that. No one takes the East Gate.”

“Yes they do,” I said sharply. “People take the East Gate all the time. For example, when they deliver the products of the abattoir to your table.”

“Well, I don’t want to see it,” said Alzhbetka angrily. “Why should I force myself to look at something like that? Something so...distasteful.”

“Because you can flee it, but the people living in squalor there cannot, and neither can the animals being killed or the people killing them at the abattoir. Don’t call it distasteful and then happily consume what it gives you, reveling in the taste.” I realized I was speaking too angrily to do any good, and, forcing myself to speak more calmly, added, “I wanted us to see that. To remind us what kind of a mission we are on here. We are not on this for our own pleasure, but to confront the worst aspects of ourselves and our people. If you can’t stomach Outer Krasnograd, you won’t be able to face what we may find if we come across an actual slave caravan.”

“Why do you think *you* will be able to face it any better than the rest of us?” Alzhbetka demanded. “You can’t even stomach the *products* you say I shouldn’t enjoy!”

“I’m hoping my rage will carry me through,” I said, more lightly than I felt. “After all, the last time I encountered a slave caravan, I beheaded its leaders. Don’t confuse principle with weakness, Alzhbetka.”

Alzhbetka looked angry, Amiran looked surprised, and Ivan looked thoughtful, but no one argued any more, and we rode for several more versts in silence while I wrestled with my temper and the sudden surge of rage at Sera for letting things be so bad that had suddenly flared up in me. I knew that no ruler could solve all her realm’s problems, but it seemed as if every time I came to Krasnograd, Outer Krasnograd was bigger, poorer, and more disgusting and desperate. As soon as I returned, I resolved, I would do something about it, and Sera and the other princesses could go to the Black God if they disagreed. But then I thought of what might be happening with Sera upon my return, and felt ashamed of my anger and of any thoughts of attempting to change things or overrule her. Besides, while I thought she was wrong about the inevitability of Outer Krasnograd’s squalor and misery, I knew she was right that it was not a problem that would be easily solved. So by the time we were a dozen versts down the road, I had calmed down enough to put the matter somewhere in the back of my mind, where it could age and grow as we traveled, perhaps bursting forth with some surprising solution when I was least expecting it.



We stopped at my orders early at a pleasant waystation, where I used the extra evening hours to buy the stationmistress and her servers a few rounds of their beer and chat with them about what was happening in Zem’. The high prices were foremost on everyone’s tongue, with much scorn being directed to merchant caravans and even traders in farm goods that had suddenly stopped coming through as they always had before, leaving the waystations and the towns that they served bereft of half their ordinary sources of supplies and income. I asked as artfully, and then as directly, as I could, what was behind this disappearance, but no one seemed to know, so eventually I gave it up and ordered everyone in my party to bed.

The next several days followed the same pattern. Although we were charged with working as speedily as possible, we had decided

to keep our own horses instead of changing them at every waystation, which made our progress through the black earth district at least twice as slow as it could have been, but meant that we would be guaranteed to be on good, familiar horses on our journey across the steppe, where there were no waystations. I also insisted on stopping earlier rather than later every day so that I could ask friendly questions of the waystation mistresses and minor noblewomen with whom we lodged every night.

Everyone agreed that prices were high and trade was scarce this year, but for the first several nights, no one had any substantive theories as to why this might be the case. The only thing I accomplished was to make a number of new friends amongst the inn-keeping class, and confuse and annoy the younger members of my party. Alzhbetka thought we should be moving faster and not indulging in drinking with people she considered beneath her, and Amiran, although he was too polite to say so, obviously agreed with her. Ivan, who had experienced my information-gathering methods firsthand, understood what I was about, at least, but I could see that this was not the grand adventure he thought he had signed up for, and also that he found my continued coolness towards him puzzling and a bit hurtful. If I had planned it, I couldn't have inflamed his ardor better, but in fact my temporary hold on my pursuit of him was entirely due to my own preoccupation with the task at hand, plus a certain reluctance to do anything too bold while the party was still becoming comfortable with one another. I didn't want to make things any more awkward for anyone, especially me, than I had to, and I judged that simply acting as if there were nothing between us for a few days would do no harm to my eventual goal, and perhaps a great deal of good. If only I had gotten any useful information from my other activities, I would have counted myself entirely successful on all fronts, but at first it seemed that it was not to be.

A week out of Krasnograd, though, our luck changed. I had at first thought to spend the night at the large and busy waystation I knew to be located at a convenient stopping-point, but a sudden rainstorm made me decide to take shelter with a very minor noblewoman whose land we were riding through as the clouds broke. Her estate was so

small that finding room for all of us and our horses strained her home and stables to bursting, but when I suggested that we ride on to the waystation as soon as the skies cleared, she nervously but vehemently disagreed, assuring me that it was an honor to put us up and that we would pass the night with every comfort.

“I have no doubt,” I said smoothly to that. “But I do not want to inconvenience you, and besides, I seek not only lodging, but information.”

“What sort of information, Valeriya Dariyevna?” she asked. Our hostess was a woman of middle years, small and colorless, clinging to nobility with the barest toehold, and it seemed unlikely that she would have been out enough in the world to have any information worth sharing with us. Which only goes to show that the gods love to humble arrogance and blindness.

“We are seeking reports,” I began delicately. “Reports of...unusual trade activities.”

She went very still, and my attention sharpened. “What sort of unusual trade activities, Valeriya Dariyevna?” she asked softly.

“Of missing children, or of trade in human flesh,” I said, just as softly. “I am sorry to bring up such distasteful subjects in your home, Olesya Annovna, but such is the mission with which the Tsarina herself has charged us.”

“Truly?” she asked, an expression like hope beginning to dawn on her face.

“Truly,” I said. “Any news, any thoughts on this subject you might have will be more than welcome, Olesya Annovna.”

“If”—she made a diffident move with her head, and then said more firmly—“If you will come with me, Valeriya Dariyevna, I have something you may find of interest.”

“Please,” I said, and she led me through her home, which was little more than a large and well-made peasant’s hut, to one of the chambers in the back, which proved to be a bedchamber that appeared to have been unused for some time.

“I would have given you this room anyway, Valeriya Dariyevna, as it’s my best, but now I think it’s even fitter,” she said. “It was my daughter’s.”

“I see,” I said, and by the tone of her voice, I did, or at least that something terrible had happened to her daughter.

“She was always ambitious, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Olesya Annovna softly. “She wanted to be more than the heir to some village in the middle of a not very interesting province. And I wanted what was best for her, and for her to be happy, so when she said she wanted to join a trade caravan, and start trading herself, I gave her my blessing. And at first she *was* happy, and every time she came back through here, she had more money and more fine things, which she shared with me. You can see all the fine things she kept in here.”

I looked around, taking in the embroidered curtains and hangings on the bed. “Did she travel to Seumi?” I asked, fingering some of the needlework.

“You have a good eye, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Olesya Annovna, nodding at the bedclothes. “All that’s from Seumi, and she even went all the way beyond the Eastern mountains and traded with the Hordes as well—look,” she opened a wardrobe and began pulling out things, “real Eastern silk.”

“Very fine.”

“Yes,” agreed Olesya Annovna dully. “If I could sell it all and get my daughter back, I would, but I can’t.”

“I am sorry.”

“Thank you, Valeriya Dariyevna. But there’s nothing...well, I don’t know. I’ll tell you my story, and let you be the judge. She traveled all over Zem’, and many times to Seumi, as you guessed, and all the way across the mountains, like I said, and grew richer and richer, and the richer she grew, the less she was like my daughter, the little girl I’d raised to love me and love our people. There was something...coarse in her. I know we must seem coarse to you as it is, Valeriya Dariyevna, we’re not fine Krasnograd ladies like what you’re used to”—“Nonsense,” I interjected, “those Krasnograd ladies are not very fine at all,” which made her smile the ghost of a smile—“but we’ve never been greedy here, and she got...greedy, and as if she didn’t care for others. And then one day...” Olesya Annovna’s voice caught, “one day...one day she didn’t come back, Valeriya Dariyevna! She didn’t come back!”

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “So sorry. Did you ever discover what hap-

pened to her?”

Olesya Annovna shook her head. “No, Valeriya Dariyevna, or rather, I was told that her caravan had been set upon by bandits, but I didn’t...the man who told me, I couldn’t help but think...there was something of the lie in what he was saying. I just wasn’t sure what. But I made him give me her things, even though he didn’t want to, and I think he didn’t give me everything, but it was enough. You see, there was a packet of letters and notes in with everything else.”

“I see.”

“And in those letters, those notes, those records from her trading journeys, I found...I can’t be sure, Valeriya Dariyevna, I’m not a very lettered woman, not wise like I should be, like you are, but there were things there about how she made all the money she’d gotten, and I think...I think it was by trading children. Children from Seumi and Tansko and Rutsi and even our own children, taken beyond the mountains and sold to the Hordes. Here.” She thrust a packet into my hands. “You’d be the better person to puzzle this out, Valeriya Dariyevna, but to my eyes that’s what it hints at. And I think...I think that must have been why she was killed. If she was killed. I never could get a clear answer about what happened to her from that man. Maybe...” she gulped, “maybe she was just captured, and traded for money like those poor children I think she was selling. Maybe the gods’ justice is harsh but true.”

“Maybe,” I said. “With your permission, Olesya Annovna, I will spend the evening going over what is in this packet. If there is any information about what I seek in there—then you will have done me and the Empress a great service. And if I glean anything about the fate of your daughter, I will tell you directly.”

“Thank you, Valeriya Dariyevna.” Tears were standing out in her eyes. “It’s terrible to think that you’ve lost your only daughter due to her own folly, and that others have suffered from it as well.”

“I am sorry,” I said for a third time. “But even if that is true, perhaps your daughter’s folly will prove to help many others.”

“I will pray for it to be true, Valeriya Dariyevna,” she said, and, saying that she would send the servants with supper and candles, left me to peruse her daughter’s trade records with a mixture of curiosity and

trepidation. As much as I wanted to find the clues I sought, I was afraid to find evil and unpleasantness and the revelation of things that others, especially her mother, would be better off not knowing. But since the sun was still shining brightly through the window and the light would never be better for reading, I opened the packet and began.

Chapter Thirty

Anastasiya Olesyevna, as Olesya Annovna's daughter was named, may have been involved in questionable trading practices, but she kept her records in good order, and I was able to follow the outlines of her story from her notes and ledgers fairly easily. She had first left on her ventures six years ago, had joined a small side-caravan of one Aleftina Vasilisovna, and spent the first year in small journeys around Zem', engaging in what, judging by her ledgers, were perfectly legal transactions.

Five years ago in the spring, however, she had joined with Aleftina Vasilisovna's main caravan and headed out to Seumi. Anastasiya Olesyevna gave no indication what she thought of that, but it was, I knew, remarkable in and of itself: Seumi was said to be peaceful, beautiful, and rich in little other than snow, lakes, and trees, all of which we already had in abundance here in Zem'. Trade with them tended to be sporadic and confined to the towns and villages on our North-western border. Sending a large trading caravan from the black earth district there was not common. But Aleftina Vasilisovna herself, along with her second-in-command Anastasiya Olesyevna, had ventured out there as soon as the roads became passable after the spring muds. Seumi had no cities of the likes of Krasnograd, but they had stopped at many small towns along the coast, buying up embroidery and small craftworks, and also something that Anastasiya Olesyevna did not name specifically, but merely marked as "1" or "2" at some of their stopping-places. By the time they left Seumi, they had fifteen units of the unnamed trade goods, which they brought back to Srednerechye and sold at a high profit.

I didn't like this at all, or rather, part of me did, but part of me didn't want to have my worst suspicions confirmed. Srednerechye was the main town in the black earth district, and a great center for trade, second only to Krasnograd. I eyed the rest of the packet of notes with distaste, and was all too glad to be interrupted by a steady-faced serving woman, bearing the promised food and candles.

“Thank you,...” I said.

“Dunya, noblewoman,” said the serving woman.

“Dunya is a girl’s nickname,” I told her with a smile. “Not the name of a grown woman of sense, as I see you are.”

“Avdotya Raisovna, then, if it pleases you, noblewoman,” said the serving woman stolidly.

“Have you been in this household for a while, Avdotya Raisovna?” I asked, smiling what I judged would be the best kind of smile to win over a solid, sensible serving woman.

“Since I was a girl, noblewoman,” answered Avdotya Raisovna. She still wasn’t smiling, but she seemed to be warming to me slightly.

“You must have known Anastasiya Olesyevna, then.”

“Since she could walk, noblewoman,” said Avdotya Raisovna, her face closing up.

“You must have been pained to lose her.”

“Of course, noblewoman.”

“Or not,” I said, looking at her face. “Avdotya Raisovna, you have no need to fear telling me the truth. It’s what I am searching for. I will be grateful for anything you can tell me, and I will not hold any...low opinion you might have of your mistress against you. Nor will I report anything you say to Olesya Annovna.”

“They say you’re from the Tsarina, noblewoman,” said Avdotya Raisovna.

“It’s true.”

“They say you’re...that you’re her sister, noblewoman.”

“Also true,” I told her. “Valeriya Dariyevna, the Tsarina’s one and only second-sister, at your service.”

“What are you doing here, then, noble—Valeriya Dariyevna?” asked Avdotya Raisovna bluntly.

“Searching for slave traders,” I answered just as bluntly.

“Oh.” She drew in a great shuddering breath. “In truth?”

“In truth,” I told her soberly. “I have been commissioned by my sister, the Tsarina herself, to discover what I can of this vile trade and take steps to wipe this shame from our land.”

“Oh.” Avdotya Raisovna drew in another shuddering breath. “In that case...you had best speak with my daughter, noblewoman.”

“Gladly.”

“But not now. Not till after the household has gone to bed. Can you stay up for that, noblewoman?”

“If there is a chance it will help me in my mission? Of course. Can your daughter come to me here, or should I go to her?”

“She can come to you here, noblewoman, but it will be late, as I said.”

“Let her come. I will stay up for her, and if I fall asleep, have her wake me.”

“As you will, noblewoman,” said Avdotya Raisovna, and, answering the rest of my questions with a tight-lipped shake of her head, set out the food and candles and left me to return to Anastasiya Olesyevna’s ledgers and notes.

After selling off the fifteen unnamed units in Srednerechye, Anastasiya Olesyevna had set off, this time without Aleftina Vasilisovna, to the steppe, where—my fists clenched—she had picked up a load of steppe bows and five of the unnamed units, and brought them back to Aleftina Vasilisovna’s main caravan, at which point they set off for the Eastern mountains, where they picked up another twenty units and brought all twenty-five of their units and the rest of their goods across the mountains and sold them all to a tribe of the Hordes in exchange for massive quantities of silks and spices from the East.

Well, I thought, if these unnamed units were in fact children being sold as slaves, at least they were commanding a high price. I could not have sold Zlata for more. It was nice to think that Zemnian children were valued as highly as the best steppe battle horses and breeding stock, except that it would make stamping out the trade ten times as difficult. A horse like Zlata was the result of years of careful selection and delicate training; if instead of that all one had to do to fetch that kind of a price was to steal a few peasant children, I could understand how that would appeal to someone who wanted to get rich quickly and felt no pain at the sight of the suffering of children. Presumably a good part of the high price was because of the difficulty and danger in transporting the children through Zem’, but that was only small comfort. By making it so hard to move slaves through our land, we had made their value so high it was worth doing. Somehow I doubted that

making it easier would solve the problem, though.

And I could even see why people would sell their own children to the slavers: for the price of one child, they could support the rest of the family for years. And if the child they sold was likely to live a life of misery and poverty no matter what, if she was doomed to pain no matter what, why not let her suffering buy the others out of theirs? It was an argument that I knew, every fiber in my body knew, was flawed to its core, but I couldn't quite put why I knew that into words.

"This is why logic is such a poor tool for making decisions," I said out loud, and, unable to come up with a better answer to my own misgivings, went back to reading Anastasiya Olesyevna's notes.

The next year she had gone back to Seumi and collected twenty units, but instead of delivering them to Srednerechye, it appeared she had carried on with them to the steppe, where she had—my hands curled so tightly into fists I thought my nails were going to cut right through the skin of my palms—picked up another ten units before joining up with Aleftina Vasilisovna, who had—I nearly ripped the paper in two—already gathered fifteen units from the steppe herself. They then set off together to the mountains, where they gathered *another* fifteen units on their way to the trading site on the Eastern side of the mountains. They sold all sixty units for an obscene profit and returned to Zem' for the winter.

And so it continued. Last year had started the same way, with a trip to Seumi to pick up fifteen units, followed by a journey out to the steppe, where Anastasiya Olesyevna had met up with Aleftina Vasilisovna, but before they could continue, they must have had their fatal falling-out or bandit encounter, because the notes ended abruptly.

I went back through them, hoping for clues about the locations of where they had taken the children or—even better—where they had sold them, but came up with little. Anastasiya Olesyevna had kept note of the villages they passed through in Seumi on her first trip, but after that, the only indication she gave of where she had been were brief headings such as "steppe" and "mountains," probably because—I flipped through the packet again in order to confirm my suspicions—the steppe children, if that's what they were, went for the highest price, with the Seumi children after that and the mountain

children as the cheapest.

Well, at least I could take pride that my own people made the most sought-after slaves, as well as horses. Of course, this could all *be* an undercover horse-trading venture, but I couldn't see the sense in that. I had only a hazy notion of how much silk and spices and furs and timber and all those other things traded for, but I had a very clear notion of how much horses cost, and the prices Anastasiya Olesyevna had quoted would only have been for the most prized of prize battle-mounts and broodmares. And such horses could only be sold with the express permission of the Stepnaya family, and I was certain that I had never given any such permission to Aleftina Vasilisovna, whoever she was. And if she had been stealing such horses, I would have known about it, and besides, a stolen horse was an unpedigreed horse, and was unlikely to go for the fantastic sums in Anastasiya Olesyevna's ledgers. And they didn't have horses like that in Seumi, anyway. No, this was human flesh they were trading, or I very much missed my guess.

I was sitting there in the midnight twilight contemplating the thought processes that would lead a person to hurt children for money, and how this was yet more proof that people were not very good at thinking things through and often got confused by their own thoughts, when I was distracted by a knock on the door. I let in a young woman who introduced herself as Sasha, Avdotya Raisovna's daughter.

"I'm sorry to disturb you so late, noblewoman," she said, wringing her hands nervously.

"Nonsense. I specifically asked to be disturbed. I'm sorry to be keeping *you* up so late, but your mother said you might have information that would help me, and my mission is of such seriousness that I judged it worth the inconvenience. I hope you will forgive me."

"Of course, noblewoman," said Sasha, not quite daring to give me a puzzled look.

"Come, have a seat," I invited her, which led to some protestations and denials, but I eventually got her seated and even forced her to accept some tea. She was quite young, no more than twenty, I guessed, and was as nondescript as her mother, but a good deal less stolid in her manner. In fact, she rather reminded me of a high-strung horse

who had been handled roughly.

“Did you mother tell you what I am doing?” I asked her gently.

She nodded hesitantly.

“She seemed to think you would be able to help me,” I told her, still speaking as gently as possible. “You may speak to me without fear or reserve, Aleksandra Avdotyevna. I will treat your words with utmost seriousness, and keep them in confidence to the best of my ability.”

“Of course, noblewoman,” she said faintly, as if she didn’t believe me at all.

“Did you know Anastasiya Olesyevna well?”

She nodded tremulously, but volunteered no words.

“Were you childhood friends?” I thought I already knew the answer to that, but she might be more likely to speak if setting straight my mistakes than responding to guesses that were right.

“No, noblewoman,” she said, looking surprised. “She was older than me, and the heir as well. I just served her.” She looked as if she was speaking the truth, but she also blushed deeply as she said it.

“I see,” I said sympathetically. “I do not wish to pain you, Aleksandra Avdotyevna”—she shuddered as I used her proper name, probably unused to being addressed with respect—“but I hope you will forgive me if I ask whether your service was of a very...intimate nature.”

She nodded, blushing even more deeply and looking even more miserable. “Please don’t tell my mother, noblewoman, although I’m sure she’s guessed.”

“Of course not, but there is nothing for you to be ashamed of. Many women offer their mistresses such companionship, and rightly take pride in it. I know it is less spoken of here in the black earth district, but I am a Stepnaya, and on the steppe it is acknowledged freely.”

For a moment Sasha looked less miserable, and, cocking her head curiously, she blurted out, “Have you, noblewoman...” before falling into ashamed silence once again.

“Yes,” I said softly into the silence. “I once had such a companion too, Aleksandra Avdotyevna. And,” I found myself speaking more strongly, “I will forever be grateful to her, and honor her memory, so you may speak freely to me, with the assurance that I will listen with compassion and respect. Did you love her?”

She shook her head strongly. "I...I admired her, noblewoman," she confessed. "As a young girl will admire a woman grown. And she was my mistress's daughter, too, and it turned my head when she said she wanted me to serve her. At first I didn't know what she meant, but then she explained it to me, and laughed at my shock. But if it had only been that, it wouldn't have been so bad."

"What else was there?"

"She said I was too plain and not...ardent, that was the word she used, ardent enough to please her myself, but she liked to watch...she liked to watch..."

"With men?" I asked gently, much more gently than I felt.

Sasha covered her face with her hands and nodded.

"Well she's dead now, and good riddance." Sasha jumped at the harshness of my voice, and looked as if she wanted to argue against my words, but she also looked as if part of her had been grateful to hear them.

"It started after she went away the first time, noblewoman," she said. "While she was gone I took to courting one of the guards here—well, not really courting, running after, really, I was still so young and foolish—and when she came back she found out about it, and said she wanted to watch us...and he thought it was a great lark, especially when she offered him money for it, and I...I didn't want to, I spoke against it, but I was afraid to go against them both, and she liked it so much she started bringing other men back with her whenever she returned, so that they could..." Sasha shuddered all over, not spelling out what depravities had been committed, which was probably for the best, as I was afraid that any more and my head would explode.

"I'm sorry," I said. "But she's gone now. Does anyone else trouble you?"

She shook her head. "No, noblewoman, thank the gods. No one else would...we are a good household, a kind household, but she was always...there was always something a bit...sharp about her, and once she started traveling, she became...she was no longer the high-spirited mistress we remembered. Something was rotten in her after that. You know, she really was...before she left, she was...high-spirited, like I said, a bit...sharp, but not cruel. I was shocked by her, but I could

have...I really did admire her, noblewoman, and I could have taken pride in our connection, as you said. She never would have forced me into anything like...what she did later, not before...it was like something had broken in her, and the more she traveled, the worse it got.”

“Did she talk of what she did on her travels?”

Sasha nodded. “A bit, especially later. At first she only dropped hints, hints that she was trading in something that...she shouldn’t, but the last time...the last time she came back with two men, both foreigners, and she made me...” Sasha gave a great sob before continuing, “and then she said...she said, ‘they say that there is no demand for grown women, that only children are biddable enough, but that’s because they’ve never seen *you*, Sashenka. You’d do anything you’re told, wouldn’t you?’ And then...and then the three of them discussed whether it would be worth selling me, and what price I would fetch. Only...only they decided it wasn’t worth it, because I was too plain, and my hands had already grown coarse from work.”

“And thank the gods for that!” I burst out. “Aleksandra Avdotyevna—Sasha—did you realize what they were speaking of?”

“I think...I think they were trading in slaves, noblewoman, and they almost traded me as well,” she whispered.

“Yes,” I said. “So *don’t worry about anything they said of you*, do you understand? What is the good of beauty, if it leads you to be sold as a slave to serve the pleasure of some vile mistress? What is the good of cleverness, if it leads you to sell those depending on you into the most degrading servitude? What...” I could have continued for some time, but I stopped myself and asked instead, “those men—you said they were foreigners. Do you know who they were? Or where they were from?”

She shrugged. “One was from Seumi, noblewoman, and one was from the Hordes. Sometimes they—all three of them—spoke to each other in some foreign tongue. But from what they said in Zemnian, I guessed that they were all working together, gathering up goods—slaves, I think—and selling them beyond the mountains.”

“Do you know any more of them?” I asked, but Sasha shook her head, and no matter how much I tried to help her unearth more information out of her memory, the only thing she could say was that An-

astasiya Olesyevna and the men had met somewhere on her travels, and that they were partners in trade, although Anastasiya Olesyevna seemed to be charge, and that they seemed to be trading in human lives.

“The man who brought the news of her death,” I asked. “Was he one of them?”

She shook her head. “He hadn’t been part of...that. And he was Zemnian.”

“From where?”

She shrugged again in reply, but this time my questions were more helpful, and I was able to ascertain that, by his dress and his speech, he was more than likely from the black earth district. More than that Sasha could not say, but I thought that perhaps Olesya Annovna might know more, so I thanked Sasha profusely, forced her to accept a handful of coins, told her that the Tsarina would know of her courage and loyalty, and sent her off so that I could rage at what I had learned in private.

The results of my rage were mainly the worrisome conclusion that by all accounts, Anastasiya Olesyevna and I had a lot in common as far as character was concerned. I lay in bed and worried over that, and over what Mirochka would do, in a similar situation. She had some of my fire, yes, but did she have enough? Or was she too sweet and bid-dable, too easily convinced to please those around her, even if it meant hurting others...

Hello, mama!

For a moment I thought I had gone mad, and then I realized that Mirochka must have found a way to reach me, and, slamming shut all those thoughts I had been having about her and also everything about Sasha’s disturbing revelations, which I most certainly wanted to hide from Mirochka, cowardly as that was, I very carefully thought, *Hello, my dove.*

You heard me, mama!

I did.

Are you asleep?

No, I don’t think so. Are you?

I think I’m in a dream, mama! I’ve been trying and trying to reach you

every night, but this is the first time you've answered back.

It's the first time I've heard you. Are you well?

Oh yes, mama, we've been having so much fun! Where are you?

On the road.

What, in the middle of the night?!?

No, I mean, we're continuing our travels and making good progress. We've stopped for the night with Olesya Annovna, a minor noblewoman on the edge of the black earth district.

It must be late. Is it late?

Very late, my dove: past midnight for sure.

So why aren't you sleeping?!?

I had things I needed to do, my dove.

In the middle of the night!?!

I had to talk to people who could only speak to me after the household had gone to bed.

But are you done now, mama?

Yes.

You must be very tired. Are you traveling tomorrow?

That's the plan.

You need your rest, mama!

Yes, I'm sure you're right, my dove, I replied, trying not to laugh at her chiding tone that came through clearly, even though I could neither see her face nor hear her actual voice.

I'll watch over you, then. Go to sleep, mama.

Chapter Thirty-One

I awoke the next morning lying fully dressed on top of the bedclothes, but feeling rested and refreshed, with no memory of falling asleep.

“I wonder if this ability could be used as a weapon,” I said to myself, and then wondered if I should be ashamed of having that as my first thought about my daughter’s gift. I swung off the bed, and after straightening my clothes, smoothing my hair, and cleaning my mouth and face as best I could, went to open the door to set off in search of our hostess. However, the door swung open just as I was reaching for it, and I found myself face-to-face with a very surprised serving girl.

“Oh...you’re up, noblewoman,” she said with a nervous bow. “My mistress wanted to know if you wished to have breakfast brought to you, or wanted to eat with her.”

“I would be delighted to have breakfast with her, if she is willing. Is she ready, or should I come later?”

“She’s...she’d ready now, noblewoman,” said the serving girl with another nervous jerky bow.

“Lead me to her then, if you please.” This courtesy seemed to overwhelm the girl, but I got her to thaw out a bit by asking her if she’d been in Olesya Annovna’s service long, and if she had any friends amongst the other serving girls. This brought me the information that she had been in Olesya Annovna’s service for four years, and that her best friend was Sasha, which I had guessed by their similar ages might be the case.

“And were you close with your mistress’s daughter?” I asked. “I heard that she and Sasha were close.”

My guide wrinkled her nose and shook her head, before saying in a half-whisper, “No one was very close with Anastasiya Olesyevna, I’m afraid, noblewoman.”

“How come?”

“She wasn’t...she wasn’t the friendly type, noblewoman,” said my guide, but before I could try to extract any more useful information out of her, we came into the room where Olesya Annovna and the

breakfast things were waiting for me.

“I hope you weren’t disturbed, Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Olesya Annovna. “It’s early yet—I don’t think anyone else from your party is up—but I thought you might want to...I thought we might speak together.”

“A wise thought. I was not disturbed at all, and I’m glad you sent for me, Olesya Annovna.”

“Well then...” Olesya Annovna indicated the food set out on the table, and, avoiding the sausages, I took some porridge and salad. It was that time of year when vegetables were in their richest abundance, and were served at every meal. One could grow tired of it, but by mid-winter we would all be craving fresh food, so we all always reveled in the excess every summer. Olesya Annovna also filled her plate, and for a little while we sat in a silence that was part hunger and part awkwardness, until I said, “I must thank you again for allowing me to read your daughter’s records.”

“So...so they were of use, then, Valeriya Dariyevna?” she said, sounding both glad and sad.

I nodded. “Very much so. My good fortune must have led me here, rather than to the waystation. But...if you don’t mind, I have some questions.”

“I thought you might, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“I know she went to Seumi and to Srednerechye,” I said, trying to speak as lightly as possible. “But do you know where else she went on her journeys?”

Olesya Annovna shook her head, and I thought she was probably telling the truth, inasmuch as she seemed determined to know as little of her daughter’s actions as possible, for which I couldn’t blame her.

“And her companions...what do you know of them?”

Olesya Annovna shook her head again, and said, “Only what I told you of the man who brought me the news of her...of her death, Valeriya Dariyevna.”

“Do you know his name? I spoke with...some of the people I spoke with seemed to believe he was of the black earth district.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Olesya Annovna nodded. “I think so too, Valeriya Dariyevna. He had the look and the speech of a black

earth man. But other than that..."

"What did you call him? You must have called him something."

"I...I don't remember, Valeriya Dariyevna."

"Had you ever seen him before?"

She shook her head.

"So, he arrived, a complete stranger to you...what happened when he arrived? How did he convince you to speak with him?"

She frowned. "I...he came riding in at dusk, in haste, saying he must speak with me, with me and no other. It was clear that he was upset."

"And then what?"

"And then...I came running...I knew, I knew as soon as I heard that it was something about Nastya, that something had happened to my Nastya, so I came running down, and then he told me he was a companion of hers, and he told me what had happened, and then...I don't remember...I was in too much distress..."

"How long did he stay?"

"He...he set off the next morning."

"On his own horse or one of yours?"

"On...I think on his own horse. I don't remember us missing any or any being returned after that, but..."

"Of course," I said. "Do you know where he went?"

She shook her head.

"Who would have taken care of him while he was here? Someone must have found a bed for him, and brought him food, and cared for his horse."

"Yes, of course...I suppose...ask Dunya. Dunya would know."

"Thank you," I told her. "And...one last question, Olesya Annovna. Did you ever meet any of your daughter's other companions?"

"No...well, one time she brought two men...but they weren't ours, they were foreign."

"Do you know their names? Where they were from? How your daughter became acquainted with them?"

She shook her head again. "You must...you must think me a terrible wool-head, Valeriya Dariyevna, but I'm afraid...I'm afraid it's all a blur to me now. I remember...I remember when Nastya was my little

girl, but what she became afterwards, and what happened to her...it's all just chips and splinters to me, like it's all been smashed and I can't put it back together."

"That's to be expected," I said gently. "I thank you for your help, Olesya Annovna, and I am sorry, so sorry, for your loss. Where might I find Dunya right now?"

"In the kitchens," she said faintly, so I set down my plate and, following her pointing finger, when in search of the kitchens and Dunya.



I did indeed find Dunya in the kitchens, where she was directing the other servants on the distribution of breakfast to our large company.

"Avdotya Raisovna," I said, once she had sent the others off with their trays of food. "May I trouble you for a moment?"

"Of course...I hope Sasha was of use to you last night, noblewoman."

"She was extremely helpful," I assured her. "But now I have a few questions for you, if you will."

"Of course, noblewoman," she said, but her face and her voice were guarded.

"The man who brought the news of Anastasiya Olesyevna's death—do you remember him?"

"Of course, noblewoman," she said, sounding surprised and relieved.

"Do you know who he was? What his name was, where he was from?"

She frowned. "He was from the black earth district, noblewoman, of that I'm sure."

"Yes, everyone seems to be in agreement about that. But who was he, exactly?"

She frowned some more. "I know it sounds silly, noblewoman, but we were all in such a state over the news of Anastasiya Olesyevna's death...we weren't as attentive as we ought to have been, and it's as if everything that happened then was in a fog..."

"I'm sure. But surely he gave his name to someone."

"Yes, of course...Ruslan...I think his name was Ruslan, noblewoman."

an.”

“And his matronymic?”

“Mariyevich...no, Marusyevich...no...Marislavovich. Ruslan Marislavovich, noblewoman. I’m sure of it.”

“Do you think that was his real name, Avdotya Raisovna?”

She shrugged. “That I can’t say, noblewoman, but I remember now that when I pressed him for his name, he introduced himself as Ruslan Marislavovich. I remember because that’s my third-brother’s name.”

“And his family? Did he say anything about his family?”

“Not that I remember, noblewoman, except...” she paused, screwed up her face in concentration, and then continued, “we asked him if he needed to borrow a horse for his ride home, and he said no, he didn’t have far to go, he would be home by the next day. So he must make his home somewhere within two days’ ride from here.”

“What’s two days’ ride from here?”

“No big towns, noblewoman. The only big town nearby is Srednerechye, and that’s at least three or four days’ ride from here, more if you’re in a cart, not on horseback. But two days’ ride on one horse—Malorucheyevo, Sredrucheyevo, Maloroshchevo...and others, no doubt, noblewoman. We’ve no shortage of little villages around here, noblewoman.”

“Very well,” I said. “How many are we likely to encounter if we carry on down the Eastern road?”

“Several, noblewoman. Sredrucheyevo and Maloroshchevo for sure, and all the other little roadside settlements.”

“Well, we’ll just have to stop and ask and hope for a stroke of luck,” I said. “Is there anything else you can tell me about him or about Anastasiya Olesyevna?”

But Avdotya Raisovna shook her head, and I had to content myself with what she had already given me, which, while it raised more questions than it answered, was still considerably more knowledge than I had had this time yesterday, so I told her to make sure the others were ready to leave soon, and went off to the stables to check on our horses.



The horses all seemed fine, so I groomed and saddled Zlata and ordered the others to be readied for departure, and then went to find

the rest of my party. They were all up and fed, and so I told them to meet me in the stables shortly, and went off in search of Olesya Annovna.

I found her in the room in which I had spent the night, contemplating the packet of her daughter's ledgers as if it contained poison, which from her perspective, it did.

"I'm glad I found you," I said, startling her and making her jump away from the desk with the packet. "I'm planning to set off soon, but I wanted to ask you a favor first."

"Of course, Valeriya Dariyevna," she said in a subdued voice.

"I would like to take the packet with me." She opened her mouth as if to object, so I raised my hand to silence her and carried on quickly, "I know it is probably the last thing you received from her, and for that reason it is precious to you, but...do you understand what she wrote in it?"

"I..." She swallowed. "I'm not sure, Valeriya Dariyevna."

"It's probably best. If what I have guessed is true...Olesya Annovna, I know these things hold value to you as mementos of your daughter, but they hold memories of her you would be best off not having. Choose something else, something from when she was innocent and beloved, and let me take this away from you, as if it had never been." Seeing that she was still hesitant, I added, "There is nothing in there that can hurt her worse than she has already been hurt, and there may be information that will lead me and the Tsarina's justice to those who were responsible for her death, and everything that took her...down that dark path that led her to it."

"Truly, Valeriya Dariyevna? You think so?"

"I do," I said, with all the conviction I could muster. "Olesya Annovna—your daughter was a young woman who wanted to make her way in the world, and she got caught up in something much bigger and more dreadful than she could have guessed. However she may have been...however she may have been complicit in it, I am convinced that she was also the victim of people much more ruthless than she, people who have no qualms about tearing a daughter from her mother and ruining both their lives. But these records...they might lead me to these people, and perhaps help me stop them. And if that happens,

then you will have helped avenge your daughter's death, and stopped other mothers from suffering what you have suffered."

"I want..." She looked away. "Justice seems a feeble thing, when you've lost a child, Valeriya Dariyevna. I want vengeance. Our laws... our laws have grown gentle of late. How can I be sure..." she looked up at me, her eyes fixed on mine, "how can I be sure that even if these people are caught, I will have vengeance?"

"Because, Olesya Annovna, the last time I caught such people, I beheaded two of them with my own hands."

"Really!?" Shock filled her face, followed by respect. The sight of it made me feel slightly sick. "You did?"

"They threatened my daughter," I told her, pushing down the sickness and saying what I knew she needed to hear. "And I thought that they meant it. So...I made sure their threats had no weight. I made sure it wouldn't happen. I make no promises that I will do the same again, Olesya Annovna—the Tsarina wants the perpetrators of this vile trade brought before her for judgment, and I want them thoroughly questioned, to make sure that every strand of it is rooted out. But you have my word that I will do everything in my power, and everything that the Imperial name has the power to command, to put a stop to this. I know that may be cold comfort to you, but it will be everything to the mothers of those who in the future will not be taken, not be killed, not be sold into degrading servitude to foreigners, because of what we do now. What *you* do now, Olesya Annovna."

"Oh..." she said, and then snatched up the packet off the table and shoved it into my hands. "Take it. I never want to see it again anyway. Take it, and use it to find my daughter's...to find the people who took my daughter from me and made her no longer mine, long before she was killed. Take it and bring them to justice, or if that won't serve, promise me, Valeriya Dariyevna, promise me that you will bring them to vengeance!"

"I promise," I told her. "They will rue the day they decided to use your daughter for their own ends, Olesya Annovna, of that I swear. And when they are found and sentenced, I will send word to you of it myself."

"May the gods be with you, Valeriya Dariyevna," said Olesya An-

novna, and then rushed off, probably to hide the tears that were standing out in her eyes.



I had been half-tempted to turn back or split us up in order to search all the settlements in all directions for this Ruslan Marislavovich, but in the end I decided to keep us together and keep heading East, towards the steppe and the mountains. We still had a good chance of finding Ruslan Marislavovich's home village that way, and if we didn't and we still needed him, we could always search on the way back, after we'd exhausted our other options. His trail was unlikely to grow any colder over the next couple of months than it already had. So we all rode off down the Eastern road, with no one else any the wiser that they had almost been sent off in completely the other direction.

I did, however, tell them that we would be stopping at every settlement and asking about him and about Aleftina Vasilisovna. Everyone pricked up their ears at this, and Aksinya Olgovna asked, "New information, then, Valeriya Dariyevna?"

"Yes," I told them. "It seems our hostess's daughter may have been involved with the people we are looking for."

Everyone stared at me in shock, and several of them swore.

"Where's she now, then, Valeriya Dariyevna?" asked Aksinya Olgovna. "Not too far away, I hope."

"Dead. Which is why her mother was willing to help us. She gave me information, including her daughter's notes. It seems very likely they were taking children in Seumi and here in Zem', and selling them beyond the mountains, just as we thought. And it looks as if the black earth district and the coast are up to their necks in it."

"Pristanogradskoye would never..!" cried Alzhbetka indignantly, while Ivan looked sick. They both had been standing very close to each other, I couldn't help but notice, and glanced hastily at each other at the news, as if wanting to ascertain each other's opinion of my story. They'd been sitting together at meals too, and often been riding together...I hadn't done anything about it, since I had been riding half the time with Aksinya Olgovna in order to discuss our plans, and Ivan had to ride *somewhere*, and anyway I had deliberately *not* ridden with him even when I had the chance, sensing that he would find

it embarrassing to be publicly linked with me like that, but perhaps that had been a grave tactical error on my part. He had been puzzled and even a little hurt by my withdrawal, I had known that ever since we had set off, and yet I hadn't done anything about it, so caught up had I been in finding and following the slavers' trail, and I had also arrogantly thought that avoiding him might inflame his ardor for me more, especially after our ride together in Krasnograd...and it had, I was sure of that, at least at first, but perhaps I had taken it too far in my thoughtlessness and distraction...I tried not to stare at Alzhbetka as I thought of what a good match she would be for Ivan...Princess Velikokrasnova would probably have no objections to *her*; in fact, if Pristanogradskoye were part of the same plot as the black earth district, Princess Velikokrasnova and Princess Pristanogradskoye would probably be delighted to forge an alliance and keep their two obstreperous offspring under control...although such a plan could just as easily go against them; Alzhbetka, for all her faults, was unlikely to go along with anything she considered underhanded, and Ivan was proving surprisingly unmalleable as well...perhaps this would be the best possible outcome, and I should just get out of their way and let them get on with it...I thought of Alzhbetka, who at this moment seemed to me to be cold, priggish, haughty, and childishly inexperienced, initiating Ivan into the pleasures of love, and my scalp prickled with rage...*I really need to stop letting myself get carried away by my imagination. By all the gods, they were just standing next to each other. By that token, you should be expecting Kseniya and Aksinya Olgovna to be making their wedding vows any day now—or, given the amount of time you spend in her company, Aksinya Olgovna and YOU. Pull yourself together!*

“If children are being taken from Seumi, then *someone* in Pristanogradskoye has to know about it,” I said, hoping that I had not been suspiciously silent for too long. No one seemed to be looking at me strangely, so, deciding that my woolgathering had probably gone unnoticed, I continued, “And trade is definitely happening in Srednerechye. But the worst of it seems to be on the steppe and the mountains, so that's where we're going. But ask everyone you meet as we stop about Aleftina Vasilisovna and Ruslan Marislavovich, and perhaps we'll get lucky.”

“What if we find them, Valeriya Dariyevna?” asked Amiran soberly. “Do we carry on, or bring them back to Krasnograd?”

“That depends on what we find with them. If it’s enough...we go back to Krasnograd. If it seems better to go on, then...we deal with them and go on.”

Everyone looked at me with a kind of mute horror when I said that, and I realized that they were all wondering whether by “deal with them” I meant “kill them,” as I had done last time I had been in that situation. I wondered that myself. I was practically sick with anger at the thought that slave traders were traveling across my land, stealing my children or—worse yet—buying them from their parents, who were my people too, and Olesya Annovna’s calls for vengeance were still ringing in my ears. My blood called for it, and my mind said that wiping the stain of these people from the very earth on which they stood was right, was necessary, but even so something was whispering to me that this was not the path I needed to take. I remembered the burning light in Olesya Annovna’s eyes, and, even as my own eyes lit with the same fire, I couldn’t help but shrink away from it. They deserved to suffer and die, they *deserved* it, and the world would be better off without them, and yet...and yet it had been so repulsive to hear my own thoughts voiced by Olesya Annovna’s mouth, and I couldn’t help but argue against them, now that someone else had spoken them. I couldn’t help but feel, a faint feeling against the roaring of rage that was always there, waiting to be summoned, but a true feeling, unquenchable, telling me in its insistent little wordless voice that my sword was not going to solve my problems this time, and that unsheathing it would only make things worse, no matter how much everything was shouting to the contrary. But I didn’t say that to anyone. Let them be afraid of me and of what might happen to those whom we captured: it might serve me and allow me to be merciful, if that’s what I ended up being called to do.

We covered little distance that day, stopping as we did at every tiny settlement we encountered, but no one was able to tell us anything about Ruslan Marislavovich. Aleftina Vasilisovna’s name did draw a number of nods of recognition, but all anyone could say about her was that she came through once or twice a year, and would sometimes

deign to stop and trade with the locals, although most of what she carried was too fine for anyone to purchase, and she had little interest in their modest crafts and goods.

“Were there many people in her party?” I would ask, and people would shrug and say that there were as many people as could be expected for a large trading caravan like hers.

“And children?” I would ask. “Were there lots of children? Or foreigners? Or foreign children?” But that question also elicited only shrugs and the response that of course there were foreigners, there were often foreigners traveling with trading caravans, and sometimes they had children with them, but there was nothing unusual about that.

By the time we had stopped for the night, the only thing I could say for certain was that if Aleftina Vasilisovna or anyone else was taking stolen children across the country, they were probably doing so by some other route. Which was only sensible, as even these stolid black earth peasants would be unlikely to stand by while someone brazenly paraded enslaved children, Zemnian children, past their noses. There must be some other route, a hidden route, between Srednerechye and the steppe.

With that in mind, I called Ivan and Kseniya to me and asked them, but Ivan had no idea, and Kseniya said that if there were, she was unlikely to know of its existence, although of course there were lots of little roads from village to village, and if one were willing to stick to the walking pace that they demanded, and better yet, travel by night, it would of course be possible to slip across the black earth district unnoticed.

“But with dozens of children...probably tied up, injured...” I said.

“Tied up!” Kseniya exclaimed. “Injured!”

“They don’t always come quietly. And the boys are often gelded.”

Kseniya stared at me in horror for a moment before saying that in that case, the best bet would probably to travel from Srednerechye through the Northern black earth district, which was much more sparsely populated than the fertile South. There was, according to her, a decent road that ran East-West.

“But it leads to Severnolesnoye,” she said. “Not to the steppe.”

“Show me,” I said, and pulled out my map. She pointed out the road, which did indeed run in an Easterly direction from Srednerechye to Lesnograd.

“It passes *near* the Northern steppe, though,” I said. “Just here, where it bends to the North. If they left the road there, they could be on the steppe in a couple days, if they pushed themselves.”

“And then they’d be on the trackless steppe,” Kseniya pointed out.

“Yes, but...hardly anyone lives there, and as long as the weather’s good, travel on the steppe is not difficult, at least compared to the forest. And if they’ve been doing this for years, they’ll have had years to make roads, set up stopping points, and so on. It’s as good a theory as any other, and I’ll send out a patrol to investigate as soon as I’m home.”

Kseniya agreed that that was probably the best thing to do, and left. Ivan stood before me awkwardly for a moment, before bursting out, “Srednerechye! Are you certain, Valeriya Dariyevna?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” It was the first time I had been alone with him for days, and I wondered if I should try to press my feeble advantage somehow, say something to assure him that I was interested in pursuing more than slave traders.

“But that’s...that’s in Velikokrasnovskoye...it’s only a day’s ride from home.” Apparently he was still only thinking of our primary mission, even if I was not. A pity.

“I know,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“And do you think...my mother?”

I shrugged, and then wished I hadn’t. It was such a cold, uncaring gesture. I should have smiled kindly and reached out and touched his face or something, but instead I found myself saying, “It seems likely, but...this has also been happening on the steppe, and I am not complicit in it. Has your mother never spoken of it, then?”

He shook his head.

Say something say something say something useful... “So you don’t think she’s done anything to combat it?” *What kind of a fool am I? Courting a man by accusing his mother to his face...*

“If she has, she never spoke of it in front of me,” he said miserably.

“I will jump to no conclusions,” I told him, while mentally kicking myself over and over again for squandering my opportunity to com-

fort him and instead making him feel even worse than he already was about this. "I will make no accusations without firm proof. But *someone* in Velikokrasnovskoye must be involved. Can you think of anyone else?" *By all the gods, no WONDER Nika ran off into the arms of another woman...if I fail Sera and spend the rest of my life alone, it will be no more than I deserve...and to think I thought I could do this...I even had the arrogance, the temerity to insist to Sera that we do things my way, not hers... what an abysmal fool I am...*

He shook his head again, looking so miserable that I stopped being angry at myself and started being angry at all the people back in Velikokrasnovskoye, whoever they were, who were responsible for this. "I can't believe...sometimes I thought that everyone there was... not as good as they could be, but selling children..."

"I am sorry," I repeated. Rage, my faithful companion, was rising in me and speaking through me, so that I found myself jumping to my feet and saying, "But I promise that I will do everything I can to make sure that no innocents are accused."

"Thank you, Valeriya Dariyevna. And..." He swallowed and fell silent.

"And?" I asked, the rage making me speak more forcefully than I should have, but it didn't seem to frighten him, for he asked, looking at me with me worried but trusting eyes, "And...what if she *is* guilty, Valeriya Dariyevna? What will happen then? To her, and...all the others."

"I don't know," I admitted. "We have not punished criminals by torture or death since the time of Krasnoslava Tsarina, but this...this is a very great crime, and once people are convinced of its perpetrators' guilt, they are likely to cry out for blood very loudly, in part to silence the voice of their own guilt for pretending for so long that it wasn't happening. But," I added, seeing the stricken look on his face, "I will beg for clemency, to the best of my ability."

"You will?" he said, looking astonished.

"I will."

"But...why? You...you killed those people before!"

"I know. And in the same situation...I would probably do the same thing again. But nonetheless, I will beg for clemency, if it is in my pow-

er.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I just think that I will. I will ask for...exile, or something like that.”

“Well...thank you, Valeriya Dariyevna,” he said, and left, looking almost as puzzled by my declaration as I was. I couldn’t be sure, but I thought I had just, and entirely through good luck and not any sort of cunning, made up for whatever ground I had lost over our journey and won him over even more thoroughly than he had already been won over. My chest grew warm at the thought, with a warmth that for once had nothing to do with rage. For a moment I even found myself wanting to run out of the room after him, but I stopped myself. If I was right, we had the rest of our lives for that.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The next day we had more luck. We reached Maloroshchevo early in the afternoon, and found all the village was out in the fields haying. They had just stopped for a break as we came riding up, and I went over and greeted the village headwoman and asked her if there was a Ruslan Marislavovich present.

“Why do you ask, noblewoman?” she asked suspiciously.

“I bring greetings from a friend,” I said peaceably. “I was hoping to find him here to pass them on.”

“Well, he’s not. He’s off, and we’d best get back to the hay before it spoils in the wet.”

I looked up at the cloudless blue sky, and down at the dusty road, and then back at the villagers gathered around me. “Are any of you kin to Ruslan Marislavovich?” I asked.

The headwoman made a hushing motion with her hand, but two men stepped forward anyway. She pursed her lips, and they looked at her nervously, but I smiled as encouragingly as possible and, dismounting, walked them away from the others.

“Has anything happened to Slanik?” asked the younger of the two men anxiously.

“Are you his brother?”

He nodded.

“And you must be his father,” I said to the other man.

“That’s right, noblewoman. So...has anything happened to Slanik?” His face showed less apprehension and more resignation than his son’s.

“To be honest...I don’t know. I don’t actually know him. I’m just looking for him, and I was told he might be here, or be from here. Does he work for the trader Aleftina Vasilisovna?”

“That’s right, noblewoman,” said the father, looking more and more resigned to something dreadful. I examined him closely, which he bore with the same expression of resignation. He was a stocky man of middle years, with graying hair, a respectable beard, and the eyes of

someone who has known trouble in his life, and expects more to keep coming. I couldn't imagine him selling Zemnian children into slavery.

"Is your wife gone?" I asked sympathetically.

"These two years, noblewoman. The cough took her, and as soon as she was gone, the road took Slanik."

"I am sorry. Have you heard from him since he left?"

"Sometimes he comes through, noblewoman."

"Once or twice a year," added the brother helpfully. He looked to be no older than Ivan, and had the same guileless expression to his eyes, although his were blue, not brown, and his hair was the color of straw, not wheat. And if he were selling Zemnian children into slavery, I would eat my boots.

"Do you know what he does for Aleftina Vasilisovna?" I asked, trying to smile kindly.

"Guards for her, I suppose, noblewoman," answered the father. "What's this about?"

"I'm trying to find Aleftina Vasilisovna. And I heard that Ruslan Marislavovich might know something about her, and that he might be here."

"If you find the one, you'll probably find the other, noblewoman," said the father. "What...what's your interest in Aleftina Vasilisovna, if you don't me asking? What's your interest in Slanik? Are you...are you from Krasnograd?"

"I am." His face sank. "But I mean Ruslan Marislavovich no harm, I swear to you." That was uncomfortably close to a lie, but I pressed on boldly, telling myself that if I ever *did* find Ruslan Marislavovich, and he turned out to be guilty, as I strongly suspected would be the case, I would plead for clemency for him too. The list of people for whom I was planning to plead for clemency was growing ridiculously long. Anyone would think I was a priestess on a mission of charity, not a representative of the Tsarina in the pursuit of lawbreakers and evildoers.

"What's...what's Aleftina Vasilisovna done, noblewoman?" asked the father in a hollow voice, while his son glanced at me fearfully and then stared down at the ground.

I looked deeply into Ruslan Marislavovich's father's tired eyes.

The truth, I thought. I will risk the truth: it might work better than anything else. “We think she’s taking children,” I said quietly. “Taking children to sell East. Have you heard anything of this?”

The father shook his head wordlessly. His son made a choked, sobbing noise.

“What do you know?” I demanded, looking straight at him.

“I...I...”

“Arkasha!” said his father. “You might as well tell her. It will come out in the end, no doubt, anyway.”

“Do *you* know anything?” I asked him.

“No, noblewoman, nothing at all, but brothers will talk. Slanik may have told him something he wouldn’t have told me.”

“What did he tell you, Arkasha?” I asked gently. “No harm will come to you or your father from what you tell me, and you may be able to help your brother as well. Anything he has done, was done at the orders of his mistress, I have no doubt. And the Empress has no interest in punishing minor misdeeds. She wants to put a stop to this trade, not harm honest Zemnians.”

“The Empress! The Empress has taken an interest in this!”

“Yes,” I told them. “But I told you: neither she nor I have any interest in bringing harm to honest Zemnians, or even petty wrongdoers. We want to put a stop to this trade in our children, and anything you know that can help us do that will be well rewarded.”

Both men looked back and forth at each other in silence, and for a moment I thought I wasn’t going to get anything out of them, but then the son blurted out, “Aleftina Vasilisovna never came through here, noblewoman, but Slanik always said she had a stopping place in the woods.”

“Where in the woods?” I asked, trying to sound interested but not too interested.

“I don’t...I don’t know exactly, noblewoman, but I think it’s in the woods to the East. If you keep riding down the road to the East you’ll come to a band of woods about a day from here. I’ve only been there once, when Slanik and I went there to trade with Lesgranichnoe and then went into the woods to hunt for mushrooms. I never actually saw the place, but Slanik told me about it when we were there. He said

that's how he knew about the mushrooms, and they were very fine, I'd never seen such big ones, noblewoman, but they won't be in season yet."

"Never mind that," I said. "Do you have any idea where it is in the woods? Did Slanik tell you how to find it?"

"Only that it's not easy to find, noblewoman, not near any other settlements, but he said it was a snug stopping place. We got caught in the rain, you see, and he said he wished we could go there, but it was too far away and Aleftina Vasilisovna would have his hide if he brought anyone there without her permission."

"Is that so," I said. "Where were you in the woods when Slanik told you it was too far away?"

"Right near the edge, noblewoman, the edge near Lesgranichnoe. I think it must be deeper in, somewhere in the middle."

"How wide is the band of woods?"

"Slanik said it would take the better part of two days to ride through, noblewoman. Lesgranichnoe is on the edge on this side, and he said there's another village on the other side, and a traveler's cabin in the middle, but nothing else."

"Did he happen to tell you how *he* could find it?"

But both the father and the son shook their heads, and despite my best efforts I could get nothing more out of them, and the headwoman was hovering closer and closer and making louder and louder remarks about how it was time to start mowing the hay again and not stand around talking, even if fine noblewomen from the city didn't know it, so I thanked both men and, ignoring their protests, forced a handful of coins into their hands before mounting up and setting off down the road again.



We rode on and spent the night at the waystation in Lesgranichnoe, where I asked everyone there I could corner about Ruslan Marislavovich, Aleftina Vasilisovna, and the possibility of there being a shelter in the woods for travelers other than the wayside cabin that everyone knew about. Everyone agreed that Aleftina Vasilisovna occasionally came through, but Lesgranichnoe was simply not big enough to tempt her to stop often or do much trading.

Everyone also professed ignorance of another stopping place in the woods, one big enough for an entire caravan to shelter in, but there, I thought, they were lying. Which was annoying, but plying them with drink and smiling and laughing with them and asking them about their exploits in the woods got me nowhere, so eventually I gave up and went to bed, telling myself that I was an accomplished tracker myself and I could find this secret shelter as well as anyone else. Which was no doubt true, but we were not making the speed I had hoped to make, and that I had promised Sera we would make, and searching for this shelter would slow us down even more. But it seemed like too good a lead to pass up, and if I could smash the slave trade right here in the black earth district, well...that would be all to the good. We could send a separate expedition East later, if necessary, to look into the matter on the steppe and the mountains, and even cross the mountains and try to find as many of our people as we could and bring them back.

I knew that that was a largely vain hope, and that most of them, no matter how much I might decry the fact, were lost forever and searching for them would be a wasted effort, but I couldn't help but think that we owed it to them and their families to at least try. Maybe I could commandeer part of the steppe army for that...they wouldn't be much use in the mountains, but they said that the other side of the mountains was just another steppe, even vaster than ours, and who better to search it than our steppe warriors? And they commanded respect there as well, or so it was said...maybe I should lead them myself...part of me, a large part of me, itched to do so, to rescue those children and wipe away at least a little of the stain that all this had made on Zem's honor...but that would mean leaving not only Sera, but Mirochka as well...it would mean missing a whole year, most likely, of Mirochka's girlhood...but if someone didn't go after those children, then their parents would miss much more than a mere year of their childhoods... but did it really have to be me who did it...of course no one would do it better than I, no one would be as capable...but surely there were others who were capable enough, and Mirochka needed me...even if she ended up staying in Krasnograd as the heir, she would need me... probably even more in that case than in any other...

Hello, mama!

“Mirochka!” I realized I had cried out her name in surprise, and put my hand over my mouth to prevent any further exclamations. *You found me!*

I know, mama! I've been trying and trying to reach you, and suddenly I could!

I see.

Yes, I've been trying to reach you during the day and at night, but I can't...were you asleep, mama?”

No, just drowsing. And thinking of you. Maybe I have to be half-asleep and thinking of you for you to find me.

Probably! I'll have to try with my brothers, see what happens with them! Are they helping you, then?

Oh yes! It's been so interesting.

Does the Tsarina know about what you're doing? I asked sternly.

Of course, mama, and she's so happy about it!

Good. How is she doing?

Fine, mama, fine. She seems tired, but she says it's nothing to worry about.

Very well, I said, trying to hide my own worry at this information. And...have your lessons been going well? Have you been going out riding?

Oh yes, mama, we've been having so much fun! We—my brothers and I, and Kiryusha, and some others—we all train together in the mornings—swordfighting, you know; Vitaly Mariyevich is training us, he said you wouldn't mind, and then we practice steppe fighting as well—and then we have lessons during the day, and in the evenings, when it's cooled down again, we go riding in the park! I wish you were here, though, to help us with the training and the riding.

Well, I'll be back soon, I said lightly.

Where are you now, mama?

Lesgranichnoe. You could tell the Tsarina. She might be interested. And you could tell her that we've found out some interesting things.

Like what, mama?

For a moment I hesitated, and then I reasoned that Mirochka would make a perfectly good messenger, and she could be trusted with the information, and there was no need to protect her from it,

especially as there was nothing particularly upsetting on the surface in what I wanted to pass on to Sera.

Tell her that we're searching for the caravan of Aleftina Vasilisovna.

Is she a trader, mama?

She is.

Does she...even without an actual voice, it sounded as if Mirochka gulped, Does she steal children to sell them, mama?

It looks like she might. Can you tell the Tsarina about it tomorrow when you see her?

Of course, mama, said Mirochka, sounding uncharacteristically solemn. Are you going to go in search of her?

Yes, tomorrow. But I don't know where she is, so that's why I need you to tell the Tsarina about it, so she can start a search in Krasnograd as well.

Be careful, mama!

Of course, my dove.

And it's late! You need your sleep!



My eyes flew open the next morning at exactly the moment when I would have wanted to wake up. I wondered if Mirochka was waking me up herself, or if this was all part of the magical sleep she was able to command. I got up, feeling both rested and alert, and, even though it was early yet, roused everyone else. They were not so rested and alert as I was, but they got up without too much complaining, and as soon as the horses had been fed, groomed, and saddled, we took the first batch of pies to come out of the waystation's ovens, and set off, juggling the hot pies in our hands as we ate in the saddle.

Once we were out of sight of the inn, I explained to everyone that I wanted to set off so early in order to give us as much time as possible to search for the hidden stopping place. I had to assume that it itself was not very close to the road, but there might be a path leading to it from the road. Aleftina Vasilisovna would not want to risk stopping at waystations with her forbidden cargo, but she would probably have to risk the road wherever she could, and especially in the woods. It was simply not possible to move an entire caravan of carts through the deep woods. Of course, they could all be taking the Northern road Kseniya had told me about, but that was many versts from here, and

going back and forth between it and the villages would be much too slow...they never would have been able to cover the distances implied by Anastasiya Olesyevna's ledgers if they had been riding back and forth over half the depth of the black earth district every time they wanted to stop at one of these Southern villages. Or they could be traveling on foot, but again I guessed that they had to be traveling faster than that, and in any case they would have to get in and out of towns somehow, and covered carts would attract less attention than a whole group of children, some of them foreign, all on foot, and the children would most likely need to be drugged or restrained somehow...I remembered the ones I had found before, and ground my teeth...there was someone standing by the side of the road.

I rode up to her cautiously. Places like Lesgranichnoe had people who made their living gathering mushrooms, berries, firewood, and small game in the woods, and bringing it all back to the surrounding villages and selling it, and once I could make out her face, I recognized her as one of those such woodswomen who had been in the inn last night. My heart leaped in hope.

"Good morning," I told her, reining in Zlata and standing in front of her. "Are you looking for us?"

"I am, noblewoman." She was probably about my age, but she looked older, worn before her time by a lifetime of hard work and poverty.

"Are you here to help us?"

She hesitated. "I'm here to show you the place you're looking for, noblewoman," she said after a pause.

"The caravan stopping place in the woods?"

She nodded. "If you like. But there's no one there right now, noblewoman."

"Well, no mind. I'd still like to see it. Do you have a horse?"

She shook her head. "Better without one, in the woods."

"You can ride behind me, if you like," I offered.

"I track better on foot, noblewoman. You'll have to keep down to my pace, though—an' keep up with me, once we get into the trees."

"Gladly, if you can take us to this campsite."

"Follow me, then," she said, and set off down the road, with me at

her side and the others behind us.

As we walked along I tried to find out more about her, but all she would say was that her name was Masha and she was a woodswoman here. We followed the road till close to midday, when she suddenly slowed her pace and began casting about, before holding up her hand and indicating what looked like a deer track leading off into the woods.

“How did they bring carts and people down this track?” I asked, as we set off down it single file. It was barely wide enough for our horses.

“There’s another trail, a wider one,” said Masha. “One for the carts. A whole second road. This is just for people joining ‘em.”

“Have you been there before?” I asked her.

“Yes, noblewoman,” she said, but refused to say anything else about it.

We followed the narrow track for what must have been another hour at least, until Masha suddenly told us she would have to scout ahead, and to wait for her there. Accordingly we waited, still mounted, since, while I thought Masha seemed reasonably trustworthy, I couldn’t help but think that this would be a fine spot for an ambush, hemmed in as we were by the trees all around us.

But when Masha returned, she was still by herself, and she told us that the campsite, which was just ahead, was indeed deserted, just as she had thought. So we rode on, coming suddenly out from amongst a thick stand of firs into a clearing with crude huts and the signs of frequent habitation.

“Fifty people could stay here,” said Aksinya Olgovna, sounding impressed. “And look: there’s the road she was talking about.”

We went over to investigate, and indeed, there was a broad track leading in on one side of the clearing and out of the other.

“It goes all the way through the forest,” Masha told us. “But only... certain caravans use it.”

“Why doesn’t everyone use it?” I asked. “A good road like that...”

“It don’t lead nowhere, noblewoman. Not to any nearby settlements, that is.”

“Do you know where it *does* lead?” I asked.

She shook her head. “East, noblewoman, that’s all I know.”

“Well, that’s telling enough,” I said, and ordered everyone to dis-

mount and feed and water the horses while I looked around.

I went first to the stable, which was crude but functional. It had not been cleaned after its last inhabitants had left, and the manure in the stalls was several weeks old at least. I went up into the hayloft and found a small supply of last year's hay, still in good shape, so, reasoning that if anyone returned, they would have to bring with them a load of this year's hay, and I was probably stealing from slavers anyway, I tossed most of it down into the paddock where our horses were drinking. I nosed around the hayloft and the tackroom for a while, but found nothing there that I wouldn't expect to find in any ordinary stable, so I left and went into the largest of the huts.

This must be where Aleftina Vasilisovna stayed while she was here, since as well as a kitchen—and there were supplies in the cupboards, suggesting that the inhabitants were expected to return—and a bedroom that, while not luxurious, was as well-appointed as what one would expect to find in a travelers' cabin or one of the less-nice waystations, there was also a study with a writing desk and a shelf full of ledgers. I rifled through the ink-stained desk, but found only a few bits of paper and a couple of old quills, before seizing the ledgers eagerly and flipping through them.

They resembled Anastasiya Olesyevna's, even describing the same trading journeys, which was unsurprising. Like Anastasiya Olesyevna's, there was a mixture of legal trade goods, which were listed by name—silks, embroideries, spices, and so on—and unnamed units, which sold for fabulous sums. I did some hasty calculations in my head, and concluded that Aleftina Vasilisovna's wealth was at least equal to my own. The thought of stripping her of that wealth was extremely satisfying, and for a moment I indulged in fantasies of watching her grovel in poverty like the meanest denizen of Outer Krasnograd, before my attention was returned to the ledger I had in my hand, and I noticed that there was also a list of losses as well.

I dropped the ledger and, hardly knowing what I was doing, rushed out to the back of site, right on the edge of the clearing, where I found a large patch of earth that had been dug up in an orderly fashion.

"Is that a garden?" asked Ivan, who, followed by the others, had come to join me. "There's nothing planted in it."

“It’s not a *garden*,” I said. “The only thing they plant here...it’s not a *garden*.” My voice was rising higher and higher. “And yet look how organized it is, everything in rows! Everything in plots, and look, they’ve marked out the next row! They expect to add to it! They expect...they *plan* for this, they *know*, they *know* what will happen, they *know* they’ll be adding to it, and yet...and yet...” I was shouting now, my voice shaking with rage.

“Valeriya Dariyevna,” said Ivan, speaking gently even though his face showed that I had frightened him, him and all the others. “Valeriya Dariyevna, what *is* it?”

“It’s a graveyard,” I said. “A children’s graveyard.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Everyone stood there in mute horror for a moment after I spoke, and then Alzhbetka said, “But there’re no markers. No gravestones.”

“In the ledgers,” I said. “In the *losses* column. That’s where the gravestones are.”

Alzhbetka looked like she might be sick, which made me like her a lot more than I ever had before. Still, she kept trying to argue against it, which also, perversely, made me like her even more. “How can we know for sure?” she asked. “With no markers...maybe it *isn’t* graves, children’s graves. After all, you said yourself that there was nothing written down for certain—unless these ledgers are different from the ones you’ve already seen?”

“No,” I said. “There’s nothing written down for certain in them, but...well, it should be easy enough to prove. There must be a shovel somewhere, probably in the stable.”

No one moved, but only looked at me with expressions of even deeper horror, which, to be honest, I shared, although it didn’t seem to be written on my face as it was on everyone else’s. Alzhbetka was giving me a look of deepest disgust and Ivan was staring at me as if he’d never seen me before, while Kseniya looked like she was about to bring up her midday pies. Not that I could blame any of them. The thought of digging up a grave, a child’s grave, let alone many of them, made me think *I* might be sick as well, but it would be proof, much better proof than these ledgers, which had been written so carefully so as not to say anything directly that could show the guilt of those who kept them. It would be worth it if it would help us catch them and sentence them to the justice they deserved, I could look at the rotting corpses of children if it would help bring down the ones who had done this...

Masha had wandered off to the edge of the woods and was standing by one of the graves. I went over to her. Tears were running down her weathered cheeks, cheeks that should not have been so weathered, from eyes that should not have been filled with so much sorrow...

“Is that your sister there,” I asked, “or your brother?”

“Both,” she answered, her voice barely above a whisper. “Twins. Much younger than me. My mother thought she were goin’ through the change, she never thought she could be carryin’ again, after failin’ so many times afore, but she was, an’ it were twins...an’ then she died when they was still babies, she never recovered from bearin’ ‘em, an’ my father followed soon after, an’ it were just the three of us, an’ then... an’ then...” She gave a great sob, and I found myself putting my arms around her.

“I had to leave ‘em,” she said into my shoulder, her own wiry shoulders shaking with her sobs. “I had to leave ‘em all the time, in order to go huntin’...they was too little to come with me, an’ otherwise we’d’ve starved. An’ then...an’ then...I knew Aleftina Vasilisovna came through here, I knew about this place, but I didn’t let myself know what it were really for, I kept that thought hidden from myself, an’ I would bring her things, sell her things...it were the only way we made it through the winter, some years, an’ then...Ivanushka were sick, he got so sick, an’ I went into the village to look for an herbwoman, an’ when I came back... when we came back...they was gone!”

“Were they taken?” I asked softly.

“They must’ve been. She...she knew about ‘em, she’d offered before...but I’d never really understood what she were offerin’, I’d always kept myself from understandin’, but I’d turned her down afore, she’d offered to take ‘em off my hands, but I’d always said no, I liked havin’ ‘em around, an’ they was the only family I had, but she...she knew where our cabin were, she used to stop by sometimes, if they needed food or anythin’, an’ she must’ve stopped by while I were gone, an’ when I came back...I guessed, I guessed right away, I could see by the tracks that someone had come an’ taken ‘em, an’ I followed the tracks here, an’ I saw...it were the full caravan here, an’ all the huts was full, an’ I went from hut to hut in the dark, lookin’ through the windows, an’ I saw...I saw...they was all full of children, some of ‘em was tied up...an’ then...I found ‘em!”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Ivanushka’d been sick afore they took him, but Alyonushka...she must’ve fought back, she were like that...an’ they must have beaten her

for it...the doors was barred, but they was barred from the outside, I were able to get in, an' there was children...it must've been the hut for sick children, 'cause they was all sick or injured, an' Ivanushka were burnin' up with fever, an' Alyonushka...Alyonushka...they must've hit her in the ribs, children have such frail ribs...it must've broken somethin' inside, pierced somethin' inside...they was both dead by mornin'." she finished.

"I'm sorry," I said again.

"I was with 'em to the end, though, I held their hands to the end, an' then...I wanted to take 'em, but...while I were thinkin' about how to do that, how to carry 'em both back, she came, she an' some of her people, an' I crept away an' hid, and they *took* 'em, they *took* 'em, an' buried 'em, an' then..." She trailed off.

"I'll catch her," I murmured into Masha's ear. "*I'll catch her*, do you understand? And when I do—are you willing to tell others what you've just told me, to stand up before the Tsarina and tell her what you've just told me?"

"Anythin'!"

"Then...you will see justice done, at least," I promised. "And you will be instrumental in bringing it about." I let go of her and, looking up at the sky, called out, "Mirochka! Mirochka!" Everyone looked at me strangely, and there was no response. She must not have been looking for me just then, or maybe I was too awake. I'd have to try again later.

"Come on," I said to the others. "Let's go look at the other cabins."

As Masha had said, the other cabins all had bars on the outside of their doors, like a stable. That was an uncomfortable thought, but I put it in my own ledger to consider later, and carried on with my examination of the buildings. They were even cruder than the main cabin, and filthy, which surprised me: I would have thought that the value of their inhabitants would have meant that they would have been kept in cleaner conditions. Surely they would be worth more clean and healthy—but perhaps they were worth so much already, it didn't matter. It also made me feel better about myself: I would never let a stable get to anything approaching this state. I thought back to the uncleaned stalls in the stable here, and decided it was all of a piece: no

doubt when so much flesh passed through your fingers, after a while it ceased to have any value, whether horse or human.

“The beds are so small,” said Alzhbetka beside me in dismay, while Ivan and Amiran hung back by the door, unable to bring themselves even to come all the way into the room. “They must have been no more than ten—no one older than that could fit in them.” Her eyes were very large, and she seemed on the verge of tears. “And what are... there are chains on the beds...what are those for...”

“To keep them from running, no doubt,” I said. “Look: they probably fit the children with collars, and then attach the chains to them when they need to.”

“How can you...” now tears really were spilling out of her eyes, which were gazing at me reproachfully, “How can you be so *calm* about it?” Ivan and Amiran’s faces seemed to echo the sentiment from the doorway.

“Because,” I said, “I am going to do everything in my power to destroy these people and everyone else like them. Mirochka!” For a moment I thought I felt her thoughts brush up against mine, and I tried as hard as I could to show her what I was seeing, and tell her to pass it all on to Sera, but I couldn’t tell whether or not I had succeeded.

“Why...” Alzhbetka was looking at me in bewilderment now, and the others were looking alarmed, as if I might have suddenly gone crazy, “Why do you keep calling your daughter’s name?”

“Because I think she might be able to hear me.”

Alzhbetka stared at me in even greater bewilderment, and the others with even greater alarm.

“It seems that is how our family’s gifts are manifesting themselves in her,” I said. “But she doesn’t know quite how it works yet. But it’s worth a try. *Mirochka!!!*”

This time I definitely connected, but only long enough to say, *Tell the Tsarina* and show her what I had seen, before our connection broke, probably because of her confusion and shock at what I had shown her.

“I’ll have to try again later,” I said to Alzhbetka. “But with any luck, she’ll have understood enough to tell the Tsarina about what we’ve found. Come: there are still more buildings to go through.”

Alzhbetka, Ivan, and Amiran followed me willingly out of the cabin, but rather less willingly into the next cabin, and soon even Aksinya Olgovna's shoulders were hunched in a way that said she was sorry she had ever come here, and I could feel the others' glances on me when they thought I wasn't looking, glances that said they found my energy, my determination, my ability to go through room after room and look unflinchingly at revolting scene after revolting scene to be distasteful, even immoral. As if my ability to look upon the work of slave traders without breaking down were a sign that I was the same as them on some level. Which was probably true. Which was why Sera had sent *me*. She had sent *me* to catch these people, because *I* was the one who had been willing to get blood on my hands in my pursuit of them, because I *could* look at this kind of thing without flinching, because when I saw dirty child-sized beds and rusty child-sized chains, and—at this point Amiran and Ivan had to leave us, I thought to go throw up—knives that I said looked to be used for gelding (and the guilt I had felt on seeing the bars on the outside of the doors was nothing compared to the guilt I had when I thought about how I knew to recognize the tools used for gelding)—because when I saw all that, I *didn't* have to leave to go throw up, I just felt my strength growing and growing, so that I felt as if I could have searched through an entire city of horrors, if that's what it would take to find these people and bring them to justice.

By the time we had gone through all the buildings in the clearing, it was late afternoon and my head was pounding with suppressed rage. I considered spending the night there, but when I suggested it to the others, they all looked so stricken that I quickly abandoned that idea, and with a great deal of relief. The little beds with their chains, and the graveyard with its unmarked graves, were all weighing down on us more and more, and besides, the stable was unfit for our horses to stay in without serious cleaning and repair. It was the state of the stable that, more than anything else, made me realize what kind of people we were dealing with. Stealing children, and keeping them chained up, and then selling them on to be used in degrading servitude, was so entirely out of my understanding of how one could behave, that I had a certain difficulty even grasping it, even when the evidence was

staring me so starkly in the face. But someone who took poor care of their horses was very much a known quantity, and one I despised. I passed back through and looked over the stalls again just to convince myself, and found myself making a face of distaste at what I saw. The sheer pettiness of the stupidity and evil brought it home to me in a way the graveyard and the chains on the beds could not, horrifying as I found them.

The next difficulty was to decide whether we should return to the main road or continue down the traders' road and see what we could discover. At first I was very much in favor of the latter, but a little thought made me decide that it would be best to return to the main road and our mission, and send a whole armed patrol to investigate the secret road. If we *did* happen to fall upon a caravan, and they happened to be heavily guarded, as I had to imagine they were likely to be, we would be hard pressed to take them, and stood a good chance of sustaining losses ourselves in the attempt. So I announced that we would return to the main road and make for the travelers' cabin, which everyone agreed, looking even more relieved than before, was the best choice. I still had my doubts, but it was certainly the sensible choice, and, I told myself, the time for recklessness would come.

Before we left I made one more sweep through the main cabin, trying to decide what to take for evidence. After a certain amount of deliberation, I took a couple of Aleftina Vasilisovna's ledgers, and left the rest. I considered leaving them all, especially as I certainly couldn't carry the whole set, and I was afraid that if she came back before I could return and found the missing ledgers, she would know that someone had been here, and abandon the place, but I needed proof, and they were the best proof I had, so I took the ones that matched Anastasiya Olesyevna's, and tumbled the others onto the desk, hoping that at first glance it would look like it had been done by the wind, or some animal. Of course, if anyone came back soon, it would be obvious that we had been there anyway, but I had to try, and hope for the best.

I asked Masha if she would like to come with us to the traveler's cabin on the main road, but she said no, she was going to return to her own cabin, so, with some reluctance, I let her go after getting detailed

directions on how to find her, and giving her detailed instructions in turn on how to find me. This involved telling her who I was, which came as quite a shock.

“The Tsarina’s second-sister?” she asked, staring at me incredulously. “Truly?”

“Truly,” I told her. “Why not?”

“But...I knew you was a very great noblewoman right away by the way you talked an’ the way you looked at everyone an’ ordered everyone about, but...”

“*Someone* has to be the Tsarina’s second-sister,” I told her. “It might as well be me.”

“But...”

“And so,” I continued over her feeble objections, “when I promised to you that I would do everything in my power to find these people, the ones who did this to your sister and brother, I was promising not only for myself, but in the Tsarina’s name, and when I told you that you might need to come to Krasnograd and tell the Tsarina herself about what happened to them, I told you true. Which is why, if no one comes for you in two months, Masha, I need you to promise, promise on their memory, that you will come to Krasnograd yourself and tell the Tsarina everything that you told me, and offer to show her people the way to this place.”

“The Tsarina!” she exclaimed faintly. “Tell the Tsarina!”

“Yes. Here.” We were standing in Alefina Vasilisovna’s study, so I took a scrap of paper and scribbled a note on it, which I gave to Masha. “She should be able to recognize my hand. Really,” I added, seeing Masha’s frightened face, “she’s not that terrible, I swear, and she’ll want to hear what you have to say. You should have no trouble getting an audience with her, if you tell the guards why you’re there, and she’ll listen to you with sympathy.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“You know...”—she looked at me thoughtfully—“I never would’ve believed it afore, but lookin’ at you...now I do. Since she’s your sister an’ all. If anyone’d ever told me that the Tsarina’s own sister would be like you, I’d have never believed ‘em, but now...”

“Believe it,” I told her. “I mean to catch these people and bring them to justice, and the Tsarina stands behind me.”

“In that case...” said Masha. “You know, just talkin’ to you...I feel better...ever since we stood together at the graveyard an’ I told you what’d happened, I’ve felt better, stronger, more like my own self. It were like you was pourin’ strength into me or somethin’, healin’ me, even though there were nothin’ wrong with me, not really.”

“Of course there was,” I said, more tartly than I should have. “You lost your sister and brother. That’s a terrible wound for anyone to bear.”

“I s’ppose you’re right, noblewoman, an’ now it’s like...like the hole in my heart has started to knit back together again.” And with that she promised she would come to Krasnograd and try to speak with the Empress if no one came for her in the next two months. I would have liked her to set off for Krasnograd immediately, but she said she needed gather her stores as best she could now and she couldn’t go running off to Krasnograd before she’d set what she needed by for the winter, otherwise she’d starve to death once the snow came on, so I had to content myself with that, and let her set off towards her own cabin, while we saddled up the horses, and, with a sense of grim relief at what we had found and on leaving it behind us, we set off too.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Returning to the road on the narrow track through the trees seemed even slower than it had coming the other way, probably because we were anxious to leave and had no one to guide us, and by the time we made it to the main road, the midsummer nighttime twilight had already settled over us. I knew that out on the steppe, it was still bright and sunny, but here in the woods the shadows were long and dark and the sky seemed far away. The air was still, and mosquitoes attacked us mercilessly, causing the horses to swish their tails and snap at themselves, and the humans to slap themselves again and again.

The irritating whine of the mosquitoes and the fidgeting of my party matched the anxiety of my thoughts. I fretted over whether or not I had made the right decision to leave the cabins and the road, and to take some of the ledgers and leave the others, and not to dig up the graveyard...Ivan and Alzhbetka were riding together again. Not that there was anything wrong with that, I told myself. Their horses got along well, and that was important when riding so close together...but after the way that Ivan had looked at me over and over again today, I couldn't help but think he must be thanking the gods he hadn't agreed to my proposal before we set off, and making plans to marry anyone other than me...the thought made me bite the inside of my cheek, but there was nothing I could do about it at the moment, so I told myself I would just have to get through it, just like I had with the search of the cabins, and keep going, no matter how bad it felt.

We were able to bunch up and pick up a slow trot once we were on the road. I—a little afraid for some reason that my intentions would be obvious to the others, but doing it anyway—maneuvered myself to be right behind Ivan, Amiran, and Alzhbetka, who were riding three abreast, with Alzhbetka in the middle. Alzhbetka was asking the two boys—men, I reminded myself; she might treat them as boys, but they had come of age and were grown men, not little boys—Alzhbetka was asking them how they were, if they had recovered from the horrors of the afternoon, and saying with more sympathy than I ever would

have given her credit for possessing that it must have been particularly hard for them, given how much more, it seemed, the boys at that place suffered. I tried to resist the urge to grind my teeth, but failed. Now I looked like even *more* of a monster, while Alzhbetka—oh irony of ironies!—was coming across as the kind and caring one. I should just give up now...

“It was unpleasant, but it was good that we saw it,” said Ivan, interrupting my musings of despair.

“How can it be *good* to see something like that!” cried Alzhbetka, suddenly sounding a lot less caring and a lot more like her ordinary arrogant self.

“If it happens, if other people have to live through it—or not live through it, but be buried in that graveyard—then I can look on it. I *must* look on it,” said Ivan. “I should—we all should—know what is taking place in our own land. Especially if our own people are complicit in it.”

Alzhbetka made a few feeble arguments against that, but it was evident that it was her distaste talking, nothing more, and I found myself remarkably cheered by Ivan’s words. Which was good, because it took us till well past suppertime to find the travelers’ cabin, and everyone was tired, hungry, and short-tempered as we rode the last few versts, including the horses, who were making it very difficult with their antics for me to remain cheerful and calm as I was determined to do. They finally settled down and began trotting briskly when they sensed the cabin, and then we smelled its smoke coming through the trees, but even so, I was stupidly surprised to see its windows lit and smoke coming out of its chimney, and realize that it was already occupied. As we rode closer, I saw that the gate to the stockade fence around it was closed.

“The Black God take it!” I swore, and then regretted it, because everyone looked very apprehensive, especially the young ones.

“What will we do now?” asked Alzhbetka, her face drawn like she was struggling not to cry. I could hardly blame her: after everything that had happened today, I felt like crying myself.

“We’ll find room, never worry,” I said with all the cheer and confidence I could muster, and, riding over to where the fence stood closest

to a window, shouted, "Hello! Who's there? Can you hear us?"

But I could hear the sounds of lively conversation and cookery and even snatches of song coming from inside the cabin, and no one seemed to notice my call. I looked around. The ground was inconveniently free of rocks or pebbles. Then I spotted a fir tree with large, inviting cones, rode over and plucked one, and came back and threw one through the window and into the kitchen. The conversation inside came to a sudden halt, and then, after a moment, a broad, friendly face looked out the window.

"Hello, travelers!" she called. "Looking for a place to stay?"

"Yes," I said. "How much room is there?"

"A bit in here, and plenty more in the hayloft, I'll warrant!" she answered cheerfully.

"And for our horses?"

"Enough, if you put some of them in the paddock." She eyed our party, and added, "Or we could move ours there. Yours like a good deal finer, noblewoman."

"There's no need," I said. "The weather's clear, and ours will do perfectly well in the paddock. Some are steppe horses, and used to being outside."

"Well, come in, then, come in! I'll send Alyosha 'round to open the gate." She withdrew her head from the window and shouted into the cabin, "Alyosha! Alyosha! We've got visitors! Go open the gate!"

We rode around to the gate, which was held open for us by a merry-faced young man, clearly the son of the woman I'd spoken to. "How many of you are there?" I asked as I came in.

"Just the four of us, noblewoman," he answered cheerfully. "Mother, father, Ksyusha, and me." He looked over our horses with appreciation, especially Zlata.

"From the steppe?" he asked, stepping aside to let us through. "I've always wanted a steppe horse. Mother says if our next venture goes well, then we'll be able to afford one. Where'd you get this one, noblewoman?"

"From my herd," I told him. "Are the paddocks...Oh, I see them."

"You're sure you don't want us to move our horses out of the stable, noblewoman?" he asked, closing the gate and running to rejoin me as

I rode over to the paddocks. "For a horse like that it wouldn't be any trouble at all!"

"I thank you, but they'll be fine outside," I told him, dismounting. He rushed over to open the paddock gate for me, and followed me in.

"I'll untack her and rub her down for you if you like, noblewoman," he offered, gazing at Zlata with lover-like admiration. "I'm good with horses, I am, everyone says so."

"I'm sure you are. But I like to take care of her myself."

"And right you are, noblewoman! If I had a horse like that...from your own herd, you said? Are you from the steppe then?"

"I am. But we're currently riding from Krasnograd. And you?" And by the time I had untacked Zlata, rubbed her down, and supervised the feeding of all our horses—a process that required close attention, since, as was common with high-blooded horses, not all of them got on very well with each other, so they all had to be divided into groups of mutually tolerable members in the two paddocks, and then given their food in carefully spaced locations, and watched while they ate their grain, to make sure no fights broke out, something I thought might diminish Alyosha's enthusiasm for high-blooded horses, but, in a sign that he truly was horse-mad, only increased it—I had discovered that Alyosha's family handled most of the trading for their village, and they were all traveling to Srednerechye to trade their village's first crops.

"You should go to the steppe to the fall horse fair, if you're looking for steppe horses," I advised him. "There's a good fair right on the edge, by the main road, at the equinox. The finest horses will have already been sold in the spring, but there are still plenty of good horses available, and that's when prices are often best." As I said it the image of the cabins we had found with the bars on the outside of the doors rose in my mind, and I felt very uncomfortable, but Alyosha didn't seem to notice it at all.

"And they say that prices are high this summer in the towns, noblewoman!" he exclaimed jubilantly as we walked from the paddocks over to the cabin, where Aksinya Olgovna had already led the others with the promise of starting supper for us.

"They are," I confirmed. "Everyone says trade has been disrupted

this year, and prices are very high because of it.”

“Well, all the better for us, eh, noblewoman!” he said, opening the door and ushering me into the cabin. He dropped the topic for a moment to introduce me to his family, who consisted of mother, father, older sister, and a huge reddish-brown dog who stood practically as high as my waist and who, as soon as we came in, was sent out to guard the paddocks.

“So it’s true, then, noblewoman?” asked Marusya, his mother, as soon as she could get a word in edgewise over Alyosha exuberant chattering flow. “Prices are high in town?”

“At least double in Krasnograd,” I said. “I came from the steppe myself, and we’d no troubles there, at least not when I left, but everything is outrageously expensive in Krasnograd right now, and they say that trade has been disrupted and goods aren’t coming in as they should be.”

“Oh, well...that’s odd...nothing’s bothered us...although it’s true that none of the big caravans have come through like you’d expect...I guess it’s just us small traders bringing goods in...that might explain it...”

“So the big caravans aren’t coming through...whose caravans normally come through?” I asked, with the best appearance of casual interest I could muster.

“Oh let me see, noblewoman...Yevgeniya Taisyevna’s, sometimes, and Marya Vladislavovna’s...and of course Aleftina Vasilisovna’s; she always came through, every year and sometimes two or three times, but these year so far we’ve seen neither hide nor hair of her, and it’s long past time...”

“How strange,” I said sympathetically. “That must be a great hardship for your village, not to have the regular caravans come through.”

“Oh, we make do, noblewoman, we can shift for ourselves pretty well...but there’s no arguing that we’re all hankering for their things by now...everyone’s just about out of spices, and we’ve all gotten a taste for those Eastern flavors...and tea, of course, tea’s the main thing... and some of us wouldn’t say no to some nice fabrics, like what you get from the city or from the East, and some of those city devices, metal things, you know...I’ve never seen a year when *no one* came through

our village; they don't always come every year but there's always at least one or two...I wonder what's keeping them...well, it's good what you told us about the prices in Krasnograd; maybe it will be the same in Srednerechye: we've got a fine selection of new potatoes; we weren't sure whether they were worth bringing all that way, but now it sounds like people might be glad of them...maybe we can sell them for a lot, buy some things...of course, if prices are high, everything we want will probably be dear too, but we'll just have to see..." And she went on in that vein for a while, discussing strategies with her husband and children and answering my further questions about the mysterious non-appearance of the usual caravans in her village with a friendly but distracted "I'm sure I can't say, noblewoman." It was only after we had all finished our supper, which had been produced as a joint effort, using joint stores, by Aksinya Olgovna and Ksyusha, Marusya's daughter, that Marusya thought to ask us what we were doing on the road and where we were going.

"We're investigating the disappearance of children," I told her. "Particularly children in villages, children from poor families...have you heard of anything of the sort?"

"Oh, noblewoman, oh, it's too terrible! We have, we have! Last year, you know...well, it was shortly after a caravan came through, funnily enough...anyway, the children took the animals out to graze, as they do, you know, every day, only this time...not all of them came back. The animals all came back; well, all except the little dog that used to go out with the children, the ones who disappeared, you know, you know how the children all bring dogs out with them, to help them with the guarding and the herding, and these children—three from the same family, the sweetest little things you could imagine; their poor mother died a couple of years back and now it's just them and their father—well, now just the father, of course, it's too sad—well, they didn't have much before their mother passed, and once she did, they had hardly anything, but they were all so sweet and so beautiful—the most beautiful children in the village, everyone agreed, and the oldest girl was so clever at everything she did, such quick neat little hands, you could see she'd run a good house as soon as she came of age—so we all did what we could to help them out, and their father was always willing to

lend a hand if anyone needed help with anything, always had a smile for everyone, although he wasn't the brightest, poor man, wasn't much of a worker, but wit isn't everything, no it isn't—well anyway, they just had a small little dog, it was all they could afford to feed, poor things, and they went out with their two cows in the morning, and in the evening they didn't come back. Well, the cows did, eventually, lowing and looking lost, but the children and the dog didn't. So we all went out and searched for them, and we found...it was too terrible...the little dog's body, but the children were gone, just gone, noblewoman.”

“What had happened to the dog?”

“Oh! It's the strangest thing, you know. We thought it must have been wolves, although we'd never been much troubled by wolves... well, no one normally is, I suppose, they say it's because Darya Krasnoslavovna made a deal with them, back in her day...is that true, do you suppose?”

“It's true.”

“Well, isn't that just the most amazing thing! I wonder how...they say she had great gifts, Darya Krasnoslavovna, and had been chosen by the gods to be born and always had their ear...but that was all a long time ago...so anyway, we found the little dog's body, and we knew something terrible must have happened, because that little dog was so devoted to the oldest girl, little Many, he never left her side, he must have died trying to defend her...and we thought it must have been wolves, but it was so strange, there was no blood...the little dog hadn't been bitten, it looked like he had had his head stove in, and nothing had been eating him, and we couldn't find any other blood, or any sign of the children's bodies, it was the strangest thing...we went into the forest and searched and searched, but we never found anything... we killed all the wolves we could find, of course, but since then they've just been coming closer and closer...they haven't killed anyone yet, but the children see them all the time now when they're out grazing the animals, even though we never used to see them from one month to the next, and at night...at night they come padding through the village now...” She trailed off, her eyes wide in her suddenly frightened face.

“I see,” I said. “Do you happen to remember whose caravan had just come through, when the children disappeared?”

“As it happens, I do, noblewoman. Aleftina Vasilisovna had just come through. We asked her about it, when she came back through in the fall, in case she’d seen something, but she hadn’t. And we told her about the wolves, and she said she’d been having problems with them too, they’d taken to stalking her caravan, and it seemed like the more they killed, the more as came, but we haven’t...none of us have figured out a way to drive them off. You’d think they’d take fright and leave us alone, or that they’d run out of young ones after a while, the numbers that have been killed, but they just keep coming and coming... we were that scared, coming through here, and I’ll say that we were right glad to see you when you showed up. We got Ryzhenka—our dog, you know—to help, and she’s been a comfort, but there’s only one of her. Still, they didn’t bother us on our journey today, not really, but they showed themselves a few times, and we were sure they’d be prowling around the cabin tonight, but now that you’re here...I just hope they don’t bother the horses tonight. Ryzhenka will tell us if they come close, but still...”

“They’d have a job coming through the fence,” I said. “And by that time, I’m sure Ryzhenka and the horses would have let us know, and some of us will be sleeping up in the hayloft and can go to the horses right way, if need be, and anyway I doubt with eleven of us we’ve much to fear from them.”

“I’m sure you’re right, noblewoman...I’m not so worried about tonight, not any more, but I wish I knew what to do about them back home.”

“Have you tried prayers?” I asked. “Have you tried asking for forgiveness for the ones you’ve killed?”

“Why would we do that, noblewoman?” she asked, startled.

“Darya Krasnoslavovna made a pact,” I reminded her. “You broke it. Perhaps if you went into the woods and made sacrifices and took an oath not to harm any more wolves, they would leave you alone.”

“You think so, noblewoman?” she asked doubtfully.

I shrugged. “It’s what *I* would do. And it might work better than what you’ve been doing.”

“We had to, noblewoman, we had to! After what they did to our children...”

“Darya Krasnoslavovna made a pact, and you broke it. Besides, you said it didn’t look like it was wolves, anyway.”

“But what else could it have been, noblewoman, what else could it have been?” she demanded, growing more and more agitated and defensive.

“Humans?” I suggested. “People have been stealing children all along the trade routes, it seems.”

“Oh no, noblewoman, no no no—who would do a thing like that? And we know all the traders who come through, like I told you. It *must* have been wolves, only now they won’t leave us alone, the bloodthirsty beasts, I suppose they’ve gotten a taste for human flesh and now they keep coming back for it, hoping to get some more...”

“Has anyone been killed?” I asked.

“Not since those two poor children, noblewoman, not since them...”

“I think if they wanted to kill more of you, they would have,” I told her. “I think they’re trying to warn you, as peaceably as they can, but you’re not listening. Go into the woods and make prayers and sacrifices, and beg their forgiveness for what you have done.”

“Well, true enough, I suppose it’s worth a try, noblewoman,” she said, although with doubt still written across her face.

“Do you always take this road when you travel to Srednerechye?” I asked, changing the subject before I could say more of what I thought about the village’s actions.

“And what other road would we take, noblewoman?”

“They say there’s another road, a bit North of this one, that also runs through the woods”

“Oh, that.” She made a face. “Yes, so they say, and our folk do come across it from time to time when they’re out in the woods, noblewoman, but no one will travel on it.”

“Why not?” I asked curiously.

“They say it’s cursed, noblewoman,” she said with perfect seriousness.

“Cursed! Why would they say it’s cursed? Who says it’s cursed?”

“The traders, noblewoman, the traders.”

“What, all of them?”

“All of them, noblewoman, all of them. They’ve all warned us a dozen times not to travel on it, they say bad things happen to those who travel on it, it’s for...it’s not for us, noblewoman, and no one should set foot on it. Maybe that’s...maybe that’s what happened to those poor children, noblewoman. Manya, the oldest, she was an adventurous one, you see, and she’d heard of the road—it’s only a few versts away from our village, over at our end of the woods, you see—and she wanted to go see it. Everyone warned her not to, again and again we warned her, but you know how children are...perhaps that’s where she went... the little dog was found in the pasture nearest the road, you know, so... so perhaps it wasn’t wolves at all, perhaps it was...spirits or something. Leshiye, maybe.”

“I’ve never heard of leshiye stealing children,” I said.

“Who knows what they do, noblewoman,” she said with a shudder.

“Are there many of them in the woods, then?”

“I’ve never seen any myself, noblewoman, but the woods do have them, and that’s a fact. The road is proof enough that *something* is out there, something uncanny. I wouldn’t put it past them to do it...”

“It was most likely humans that took the children, not wolves or wood-spirits,” I said, but this provoked such a violent denial that I was forced to change the subject in order to keep the peace. I turned the talk to our sleeping arrangements instead, provoking almost equally violent astonishment when I declared I would be one of the ones sleeping in the hayloft, but I insisted on it, saying that after everything I’d heard about the wolves, I wanted to be on hand in case they *did* try to come in. It was therefore agreed that Ivan and Amiran would share a bed with Alyosha; Alzhbetka and Yitka would share another with Ksyusha; and Kseniya, Aksinya Olgovna, and I, as the most experienced horse handlers and fighters amongst us, would sleep in the hayloft.

“And,” I told them once we were alone in the hayloft, “let’s keep watch.”

“Do you really think there’s a threat, Valeriya Dariyevna?” asked Aksinya Olgovna.

I shrugged. “I don’t know, but I don’t like what I heard from Marusya *at all*. The wolves concern me a bit, but this talk of the cursed road...if

what she's saying is true, then *all* the caravans that come through this way know about the road, even if they're not using it. And of course we did just discover Aleftina Vasilisovna's secret compound, where she keeps her children when she stops here...all of this bothers me, so let's just keep a watch tonight, shall we?"

"Right enough, Valeriya Dariyevna," said Aksinya Olgovna, and it was decided that she would take first watch, Kseniya would take second watch, and I would take third watch. I promised them that they would be able to catch up on their sleep when we came to a village or a waystation, and then, rolling myself up in a light blanket to protect myself from the prickling of the hay, I went to sleep.



Mama! Mama! Mirochka's voice sounded, not cheerful and slightly smug, as it had before when she came to me in my sleep, but worried, almost frantic. *Where have you been? You came to me in the middle of the day, you sounded so upset! And you showed me...and you **shouted** at me—it was clear that this still rankled—and then you disappeared for hours and hours, and I couldn't find you!*

Did you pass on my message to the Tsarina?

I tried, but I didn't really understand it! What happened, mama, what happened?

We found a place where illegal caravans are staying. They have their own stopping-place and their own road. If I show it to you on a map in my mind, can you find it?

Show me, mama!

I tried to picture a map as clearly as I could, and focus on the area where I believed the hidden compound to be, and after a moment Mirochka said, *I see it, mama, I see it—I'll show it to the Tsarina when she wakes up tomorrow.*

Thank you, my heart. How is she?

She's very tired, mama—is she sick? Why is she sick?

Just an indisposition that she's always been prone to, my dove.

Is it catching?

No, it's not that kind of indisposition. It runs in her line.

*Does it run in **our** line, mama?*

No, my dove, it doesn't. You have nothing to worry about. And don't wor-

ry too much about the Tsarina, or tell her that you're worrying about her: it will only make her feel worse. Just try to help her out as much as possible, and do what she asks you.

I do, mama, I do! My brothers and I are trying to be very good and helpful!

Good for you, my sunshine. I knew I could count on you.

Are you still in the cabin? she asked anxiously, returning to an issue that was obviously dwelling on her mind. *The hidden one? What if someone comes back?*

We left, I assured her. We're back on the main road, staying in one of the travelers' cabins there. I'm sleeping in the hayloft, I added, knowing that it would please her.

In the hayloft! I love sleeping in the hayloft! Do you think my brothers and I could sleep in the hayloft some night?

Well...I don't know what the Tsarina would think about that...

I'll ask her, she said with determination, and I judged it best not to argue against the matter. Like as not Sera would deny the request, and Mirochka would probably accept her decision with better grace than I would have at that age. Or Sera might surprise us all and allow it, which would be good for everyone concerned.

Should you be sleeping now, mama?

Yes, my dove. We've set a watch, and I need to rise early to take the last shift.

Why did you set a watch, mama? Are you worried about the traders?

It just seemed prudent, I answered evasively, but that must have satisfied Mirochka, for suddenly everything inside my head went black and that was the last thing I remembered.



I was awakened in the rapidly lightening hayloft by Kseniya gently shaking my shoulder. She reported in a whisper that everything had been calm all night, before wrapping herself in her bedroll and disappearing into the hay. Grabbing my sword and bow and taking my blanket with me to ward off the nighttime chill, I pulled myself to the edge of the hayloft and looked out the big doors that were open for the summer onto the paddock. Everything was, as Kseniya said, absolutely quiet. The horses were asleep, their heads hanging down and

their ears relaxed, and even Ryzhenka was dozing by the gate. Light was coming in through the treetops and the birds were starting to sing, but it would still be another three hours until true morning, I judged.

I went and sat on the edge of the loft floor, dangling my feet over the edge and trying to guess what these unfamiliar forest birds were by their song as I, for lack of anything better to do, strung my bow and then idly started sharpening my sword. Some kind of little warblers, I thought; they were flitting around in the tree branches just beyond the edge of my vision and I couldn't make out their colors in the summer-night twilight. The sound of my whetstone made a soothing counterpart to their song. A couple of birds came flying over my head out of the loft and went off into the trees, presumably in search of breakfast. They were making such a racket now I wondered how Kseniya and Aksinya Olgovna could sleep, or how I had slept through it myself. An owl suddenly passed in front of me, returning to her nest before the night got any brighter. I looked up at the clear space above me and watched as the sunrise faded out of the sky...the birds went silent.

I jumped to my feet, noting as I did so that Ryzhenka had also risen and was taking in the air in great sniffs, her head raised high. The horses began to stir, their heads coming up and their ears flicking.

Ryzhenka began making her way over to the other edge of the compound, to the far side from the road. The horses were also all pointing their ears in that direction. I peered as best I could into the woods. After a moment, I thought I could hear heavy footsteps moving our way.

Probably an elk, I thought, and watched in the direction of the footsteps with interest. We did not have elk on the steppe, and I had rarely had the chance to see them.

Ryzhenka took up a position by the stockade fence and began to growl, her hackles up. I wondered if that was her normal reaction to elk. It seemed odd, but they *were* very large; perhaps she saw them as a threat...the horses were shifting and stamping their feet nervously. I rose up on my toes, the better to see whatever was drawing near. Ryzhenka uttered a sharp warning bark, and stood up on her hind paws, resting her front paws on the fence and issuing a low, continuous growl, all the hair along her back standing on end.

Maybe it's a bear. I looked this way and that, trying to make out the shape of the bear through the trees. We also did not have bears on the steppe, and I had seen even fewer of them than I had elk. I knew that woodsdwellers feared bears above all else, even more than wolves, but I thought we were safe enough behind the stockade fence. Bears were said to be good climbers, but I thought it unlikely anything other than a bird would be able to make it over the fence, which was higher than my head and made of solid tree trunks, each sharpened to a point at the top and planted so close together a mouse couldn't have slipped through. Although they said that the big brown bears were taller than a grown man when they stood on their hind paws—but I still thought even one of the big brown bears would find it very difficult to get over the fence, and like as not he would run from us if he saw us.

Expecting a bear, I was looking too high and only caught the first figure to slip into view from between the trees out of the corner of my eye. Two more quickly joined it, and I realized they were wolves. Ryzhenka was now barking and growling frantically and throwing herself against the fence. I thought that would have driven the wolves off, but they continued to approach, walking steadily towards the compound and joined by more and more of their pack, till there were—I counted hastily—ten of them.

“What is it? What is it?” Aksinya Olgovna and Kseniya had both shaken themselves out of the hay and come to join me at the edge of the loft.

“Wolves, look.” I pointed at the oncoming pack.

“By all the gods!” Aksinya Olgovna swore, while Kseniya seemed to be choking back a shriek of fear.

“I don't think we have much to worry about,” I said. “They'll have a job coming through the fence, and there are eleven of us, after all.” Buckling on my swordbelt just in case, I went over to the far end of the hayloft opening, which put me standing right above the top of the fence, only a couple of feet away. One of the wolves stood up on his hind paws against the fence and stared straight at me, his head barely more than an arm's length from my feet.

“Get back, get back!” hissed Aksinya Olgovna, while Kseniya whimpered a little in fear. “He might jump!”

Ryzhenka had come running over to where the wolf was standing and was throwing herself against the fence in a frenzy. The wolf, though, ignored her and kept his eyes fixed on me, and I found myself staring back at him, unable to tear my gaze away.

Shouts were coming from behind us as everyone inside the cabin came running outside, demanding to know what was happening.

"It's wolves!" I called over to them, shaking off the strange fascination that had come over me. "A whole pack of wolves! They've come up to the fence."

"By all the gods!" cried Marusya. "Shoot them, shoot them!"

"NO!" I shouted.

"We have to shoot them, we have to shoot them, get your bow and arrows, get your bow and arrows..." Marusya was shrieking heedlessly.

"NO!" I shouted again. I picked up my own bow and nocked an arrow against the string, but pointed it, not at the wolves, but at the inside of the compound. "There will be no shooting!"

"What...what..." Everyone was staring at me.

"There's been enough killing of wolves," I announced. "That's the problem, don't you see? It has to stop now."

"Very good, princess," said a voice behind me. I whirled around and looked out over the fence again. Standing right by it was a tree I hadn't noticed before. As I was trying to comprehend its sudden appearance where I was sure no tree had been just a few heartbeats ago, two large eyes suddenly opened in its trunk and peered straight into mine.

End of Part I

*Dear Reader! If you enjoying **The Dreaming Land I**, please consider leaving a review! Reviews are to authors what hay is to horses, and we are always extremely grateful.*

About the Author

When she is not teaching Russian, E.P. Clark is probably playing with her pets or reading a wide variety of literature from around the world. She loves to hear from her readers and can be reached at elenapedigo@yahoo.com, or on her website at <https://epclarkauthor.net/>, Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/epclarkauthor/>, and Twitter at <https://twitter.com/Andreyev7>. You can also sign up for her mailing list in order to get regular updates and special offers at <http://eepurl.com/c5ul55>.

Other Works

The Midnight Land I: The Flight

The Midnight Land II: The Gift

The Breathing Sea I: Burning

The Breathing Sea II: Drowning