



ELENA THE BRAVE

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Prologue

PLUS ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. It was a French saying, not Russian, though the old wives might well have muttered its like down the ages as *Prince* became *Tsar*, and *Tsar* became *Commisar*, and all the while the true Russian heart was that which beat in a peasant's breast. That was the way of worlds both old and new, and the crossing of oceans to make a new start did nothing to alter it.

Elena's mother had been born on a steamship on the high Atlantic seas, and so it was that Elena called Edenfall home, not St. Petersburg—Edenfall, Pennsylvania, where steel was king, and the tsar was just a character in an old tale. By now, the old wives who remembered Mother Rus had mostly passed on—all but her great-grandmother, dear Babka, who was too stubborn to die—and the old wives' children had all but forgotten the steppes and forests, the snow-banked villages and onion-domed churches of what seemed a fabled land. There was too much change afoot right there in Edenfall to dwell on distant shores.

It was 1942, and the world was at war.

Glenn Miller was on the radio, bombers plied the airspace over Hamburg and Rostock, and the newsreels bore witness to Hitler's march, even across the Russian wastes where it seemed only winter could defeat his ranks.

Yes, even on Edenfall's familiar hillside streets, Elena Ivanova Volkonsky could feel change in her bones like the distant rumble of a B-17. It was a Saturday afternoon in late April, and Elena was down in the First Ward beside the Brandywine River, skirting the barricades of the demolition zone. Piles of rubble marked what once had been tired but tidy factory houses, clapboard tenements and courtyard complexes—all razed, not by bombs, but by wrecking balls.

The Edenfall Steel Works was growing.

The expansion was funded by the government, for this war would be won with steel, or so the headlines shouted. Edenfall had never been busier. Gone were the breadlines and soup kitchens Elena could recall from her earliest years as she straggled behind her mother tending the poor, homeless, and jobless whose numbers only grew. The stock market had crashed when Elena was three. Fortunes fell, families went hungry, and those who were more fortunate opened their doors, pocketbooks, and larders to lend a hand—and none more so than Elena's mother, who had saved more than one soul from the bottle or the bridge.

But now, the Works blazed with light day and night, the hiss and clang and roar of its furnaces never ceasing so that only silence was strange. Shifts on the smelting floor were doubled, paychecks were padded, and nearly a thousand residents of the First Ward were told to sell out or lose out as plans were drawn up for a new complex, five blocks long and wide. It was exciting, in its way, but sad too, for Elena knew the families who called this tattered ward *home*, not *slum*, who had tended gardens even here in the shadow of the mill.

Streets that once rang with the cries of children playing at dusk would now know only fire and steam and molten slag.

But Elena was not one to dwell on losses. The future—that was where hope lay. In all her fifteen years, she had known only waiting and wishing—and occasionally scheming, for there was nothing to vex one like the word *no*. But now, change was in the air right alongside the B-17s that fueled her dreams, and even Mama did not have time to keep track of her comings and goings. Had the old wives' warnings on the nature of change reached her ears, she would never have believed them, less still the observation that history repeats itself, again and again, until lessons are learned and evils mastered. To the young, change is always the herald—never the crone, trailing portents like shadows and warning that what has gone before will come again. And even if she had believed them, what of it? What had life in Edenfall ever been except boring and predictable, just like her mother, Vasilisa Petrovna Volkonsky, who lived for others and had never had a day of fun in her whole life?

But then, she knew nothing of her mother's secrets.

1 * Scenic Route

“THERE YOU are,” Vasilisa said as she hurried up Front Street in a pale green blouse and pleated skirt that managed to look elegant. Her auburn hair was swept up in the simple twist she often wore. “You forgot, didn’t you.” She stopped before her daughter, a glint of mischief in her eyes. “I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt here—don’t make me regret it.”

Drat her. It would be so much easier if she would only nag Elena, like a normal mother.

“The Purdy twins!” Elena cried, slapping her forehead. “Poor little urchins. How *do* they get on with no one to wipe their snotty little noses?”

Mama’s lips were set in a small smile, but behind her eyes lurked a glimpse of despair. Elena could hardly bear it.

“But Mama, it’s *Saturday*.”

Vasilisa sighed. “Lena, they’ve lost their mother. And old Mrs. Purdy is no match for them, especially with her cataracts. Why, she can hardly *see* the twins, let alone manage their pranks.” She eyed her daughter a moment longer. “It’s only for the afternoon. They’ll be going to their uncle’s house for the rest of the week.”

Elena cast a glance back at the glorious destruction that was underway not fifty yards off as the wrecking ball smashed into the Walker’s backyard henhouse. Those Purdy twins were more than a handful, even for someone like Elena who not only knew every trick but had *written* the book, for pity’s sake. She turned back to her mother with a look of pious resignation.

“I live to serve.”

Vasilisa laughed. Double drat! It was so hard to hate her, even when she plied her dastardly whip!

“Perfect. I’ll have biscuits waiting for you when you get home.”

Elena’s painted smile melted with affection.

“With marmalade?”

“Would you expect anything less, Saint Elena?” Her mother pivoted with a wave. “Don’t be home past six!”

Elena returned the wave, then slumped, thinking. Perhaps she would take the scenic route to the Purdy’s hovel on Green Street. If she went down Main, she could cut up the hill just before the old Moravian cemetery and get a peek at what was playing at the Regency.

It was a good plan, and it lightened her mood. She headed down Front as far as the old Works, then climbed the steep grade one block to Main Street where storefronts bustled with weekend shoppers. Saturday was always a lark, what with shiny Buicks honking their horns at creaky Model T’s or the occasional old-timer who had saddled up his horse, even if it meant a ticket from Officer Crupp. You had to give it to those codgers,

they had spunk, especially old Mr. McCurdy who had never been quite right in the head since they took his funeral cart away.

Speaking of which, there he was, clomping up the roadside on his old nag, Rosie, with the cars swerving around him and honking for all they were worth.

“What ho, Mr. McC,” she said, adopting the aristocratic accent that was their private joke. She grabbed Rosie by the bit and guided her up onto the curb—earning glares from a coven of tight-lipped biddies in hats and heels. “Making a statement again, are we?” she said over her shoulder as she led Rosie up the sidewalk.

Mr. McCurdy gave something between a snort and a chuckle as he drifted sideways in his saddle.

“Watch it there, Mr. McC, or you’ll be carting yourself off to Happy Havens next.”

This blasphemy had the desired effect, and Mr. McCurdy righted himself with a grunt of utter disdain.

“I’d nah be buried there if t’were the last patch of grass on God’s green earth!” he shouted, garnering a few more looks from passersby to Elena’s satisfaction. There was nothing worse than a stodgy housewife. “If the Moravians won’t have me, just plunk me in the back yard next to my Rosie!”

Elena brought the mare to a halt, stroking her neck as she gazed up into Mr. McCurdy’s ancient face. Once an undertaker, always an undertaker—though he’d hung up his hand pump long ago. Victorian embalming techniques hadn’t fared well in the era of modern refrigeration.

“You must be an honorary Moravian by now, considering how many of them you’ve buried,” Elena reasoned. This was the kind of straight talk the old man favored.

He gave a brisk nod. “’Tis so, ’tis only right. Why, in my day I could fix ’em up on the kitchen table and have it cleaned up by supptime.” He leaned forward. “Fancy another gander at the tool kit, missy?”

Mr. McCurdy’s gruesome kit was something else, full to bursting with hooks and screws, scalpels and syringes, and something called a trocar for poking holes.

“I wish I could, but I’ve got to watch the Purdy twins.” The twins would be breaking into their rubber fly stash right about now, floating them atop their poor grandma’s warm milk. Grief had done nothing to curb their genius. “Promise me you’ll stay out of the road?”

Mr. McCurdy’s eyes tried to slip away but she narrowed her gaze and held firm.

“Dagnabbit!” He snatched his old straw hat off to give Rosie a swat. But the twinkle in his eyes was worth a million bucks. “Have it your way, missy. Ye come by soon, now. And don’t take any wooden nickels!”

Elena hurried on, aware now that she was treading the line between truancy and outright desertion. She picked up her pace, grateful for the long legs that were her one good feature, if schoolyard gossip were to be credited. Personally, Elena couldn’t care less about her feminine attributes—or lack thereof. Skinny and tall, she couldn’t fill out the bodice of the latest V-cut tea dress, and her shoulder-cropped black hair was as thick and straight as a horse’s tail, but she liked it that way. She could run the 440-yard dash in just over a minute and had even nabbed a spot on the boy’s track team. And with so few suitors to occupy her time, she’d gotten through half her sophomore year at East Edenfall High with time to spare

Time better spent looking up at the sky.

Today, high clouds masked the sun, casting a glare. Not her favorite kind of sky, but not every day could dawn pillowed in rose-lit cumulous clouds. Elena was an aficionado and had mentally cataloged at least three dozen types of skies over the years, from cozy, socked-in drizzlers to dramatic cloud-bursters to run-of-the-mill picnic-under-the-noonday sunners.

Halfway up the block, a row of bulbs glowed dimly in the glare—the Regency, with its limestone facade, framed by great curved pillars like shrugging shoulders. It had opened at the height of the Depression, perhaps because that's when people had needed it most, even if they'd barely had a quarter to spare for the ticket. Elena crossed the street, dodging a bulbous-nosed Oldsmobile, then hopped up on the curb, shading her eyes to peer up at the bright red letters splashed across the marquee.

Captains of the Clouds!

The poster in the display window featured James Cagney in the cockpit of his bush plane, raising a hand in salute. Elena's heartbeat quickened. James Cagney *and* planes?

"Hey, Elena. What's buzzin', cousin?"

"Hi, Eddie." Eddie Morgan always had the latest slang on the tip of his tongue. Elena came up to the ticket window where he was slumped on his stool in a ratty cardigan. "Is today the debut?"

"Nah." Eddie flicked something from between his two front teeth with his toothpick. "Been playin' all week now. Where you been?"

Elena's mind flashed on the long hours spent outwitting two criminal masterminds who were barely waist high.

"Here and there." She pushed the thought of the Purdy twins away. It must be past four o'clock by now. They'd have moved on to the old lady's unmentionables drawer and before long would be putting on a fashion show. "Have you seen it yet?"

Eddie shrugged. "It's about some Canadian fellers. Pilots and stuff."

"And the newsreel?"

"Something about... em... the Flying Lions. No... em... the Flying Tigers, that's it."

The Flying Tigers! Only President Roosevelt's elite squadron pledged with defending the Republic of China from Japanese aggression! Not that she knew that much about it.

She peered at the clock over Eddie's shoulder. Four twenty-five.

"Starts at four thirty," Eddie said. He gave a yank with his head. "Go on, 'fore the boss comes around."

Elena glimpsed a sliver of red crushed velvet beckoning through the plate glass doors.

"Just for the newsreel." She flashed Eddie a grin that seemed to snap him out of his slouch. "Thanks, Eddie. I owe you one."

He experimented with a smile. "Em... you got it, Elena. Maybe I'll see you around."

But Elena was already gone, flashing through the double doors and into that gilded lobby with the stealth of a panther. She'd stand at the back, where the ushers would walk right by in their pillbox hats, none the wiser.

Just fifteen minutes, she promised herself. How much damage could the twins do?

2 * Flight

ELENA never made it to the twins' house.

"But Mama, how was I to know they'd get into the matches?" she asked, flushed from the long dash home, only to discover the twins had nearly burned their house down. If only she hadn't taken the scenic route! If only she'd walked away after the last frame of that thrilling newsreel urging every patriotic American to buy war bonds! But no, as the final credits rolled, Elena had made her way out into the dusk, hoping against hope that Mrs. Purdy might neglect to mention that Edenfall's worst babysitter had failed to report for duty.

But it was not to be.

"The whole wastebasket went up in flames, Elena!"

Mama always called her Lena—unless she was angry. Elena thumbed her pet rock round and round in her skirt pocket, its familiar contours reassuring. She jammed it deeper as her mind scrambled for an excuse, but none came.

"It's a miracle old Mrs. Purdy managed to put it out. Why, if that teapot hadn't been on hand, I don't know..." Mama blew out her cheeks and turned Elena around to remove her coat. She hung it, then put her hands on Elena's shoulders to look in her eyes. "It could have been bad, *very* bad." There was desperation in her mother's face. She was blaming herself! When *Elena* was the rat, plain and simple!

Obsessively, Elena smoothed the rock with her thumb. How many times had they stood, just like this—perhaps in the kitchen after Elena had finished off a plate of cookies intended for the Citizens' League, or outside the principal's office after yet another schoolyard dust-up. The moments were jumbled together in her mind like a pile of unpaid bills. Why did she do it? How could she plague a woman who was known throughout the whole of Pennsylvania for her charity and patience and real goodness?

Why couldn't she be more like her mother?

And why, when this is what she wanted to say, did she say instead: "Those little monsters should be arrested. Isn't arson a crime?"

"*Elena.*" The word trembled strangely. For the first time in Elena's life, she wondered if she'd gone too far. Mama might be gentle, but she was *strong*. Wasn't she? "Elena," Vasilisa tried again, "you know your papka is shipping out next week. He isn't going to be here to—" and that's when the horrible thing happened. Mama choked up so completely that she couldn't speak, just turned and walked out of the entryway and down the hall, turning left into the parlor and out of sight.

Elena stood for a few moments as shadows lengthened in the hall. She took out her rock to gaze at its ebony sheen. She'd found it in Papka's old pack when she was barely seven and had kept it as her pet rock ever since, though that term seemed too ordinary, silly even, when this rock was special and seemed to inspire all manner of strange visions. Gazing down now, she waited for the change—but nothing came, no warmth, and

certainly no pictures such as those she sometimes saw, so fleetingly that she took them to be figments of her imagination.

Papka. Was he really going away in less than two weeks' time? And into the Airforce! Or at least the Air Service Command, which was almost as good. He'd been taking her to the airfield for as long as she could remember—just a couple of sod runways in a grass field beside a hanger with the words *Sterling Star Airfield, Langston* painted on the roof. He'd fly some crop duster that a local farmer had loaned him for the season, some two-seater with a name like *Trixie* or *Gone with the Wind* scrolled on the side. Nothing much, but to Elena, these little biplanes were magical creatures—*dragons*, like the ones in Babka's old Russian ballads, roaring through the heavens and breathing fire. And when he'd finally taken her up, on her tenth birthday, and they'd run low across the fields like a dragon seeking prey, she'd known right then and there that nothing else mattered.

But then Hitler had begun his awful, goose-step march across the old continent, through Poland and France, Denmark and Norway, had marched deep into Russia trailing death like bloody footsteps in the snow. And suddenly, cheerful Papka, who always had a twinkle in his light blue eyes, would sit for hours reading the paper by the fireside or talking with Mama's father, whom Elena called Deda in the old Russian style. Deda had always hated war, ever since he'd fled the Russian Revolution for American shores, and he begged Papka not to enlist. They'd been working side by side for years, Deda with his union organizing and Papka, the esteemed Ivan Volkonsky, as the best labor lawyer in all of Pennsylvania.

And now, he was leaving all that behind, reporting at Middletown where he'd be trained to manage an air depot and then shipped overseas. Imagine! All those B-29s and B-17s, and best of all the Spitfires that could run low and fast, just like Papka's old crop dusters. She'd felt nothing but excitement at the prospect, and yet... now, with the shadows deepening and her mother in tears, the truth of it all hit her like a sucker punch.

Things really *were* changing. Her papka was going *away*.

The door burst open behind her with a gust of evening breeze that smelled of green buds and cherry blossoms.

"Hello, Sunshine."

Elena turned and threw her arms around Papka as he fumbled his fedora onto the hat rack.

"Hey, what's this?" he said with a laugh, squeezing his daughter in a hug that lifted her off her feet. "I should come home late more often."

Elena pulled back with an attempt at a smile, but what he saw in her face must have sobered him. He held her at arms' length, leaning down to investigate and rubbing one thumb under her eye.

"Okay, start at the beginning."

It was a good five minutes before she could get the jumble of words that followed into something like an account of her recent misdemeanors. Understanding dawned in Ivan's clear, blue eyes. He ruffled the black hair that was the image of his own with one hand, then stopped, smoothing it down thoughtfully instead.

“You’re not a child anymore, Sunshine.” He said it wistfully, and the lump in her throat thickened. “I mean, just look at you.” He held her back by the shoulders, “You’re older now than your mother was when she—”

He broke off, eying her pensively.

“*What, Papka?*”

He straightened up, that familiar twinkle reminding her of all the adventures they had shared, then zipped his lips, theatrically. “Not my story to tell. Let’s just say that you’re older than she was when I met her. And you’re more alike than you know.”

Mama and her—*alike?* They couldn’t be more opposite!

“Papka, for pity’s sake, what on earth do you—”

But he had already shouldered out of his coat and thrown an arm around her, squeezing her as they headed into the hall.

“You won’t miss me much,” he said lightly. “Not with all the letters I’ll be sending. And how about some sketches?”

“Oh, would you?” Tarmacs and runways, bombers and carriers, grizzled fighter pilots ready for the skies—the images were already right there in her mind’s eye. It was almost enough to make her forget that pang that rankled her heart.

Papka cast her a sidelong glance as they neared the parlor.

“Do you want—”

Elena shook her head. “Maybe *you* should talk to her.”

He gave her another squeeze around the shoulders. “Leave it to Lieutenant Volkonsky,” he said with a wink.

Elena watched him disappear through the arched entry and lingered, unsure which way to go. The stale popcorn she’d scored from Eddie had done nothing to curb her appetite. She hurried past the archway, then down the hall, turning right into the kitchen. Shelves rose along one wall, cluttered with china and cookware, and a rack of well-used pans hung over the long counter. They had finally traded in the wood-fired monstrosity that once loomed at the rear of the kitchen for a Peerless gas range. It gleamed now, just beyond the breakfast table, spotless beside the refrigerator.

Elena had started for the refrigerator, thinking of cold chicken and a glass of milk, when her eye chanced on the plate of biscuits set upon the table beside a jar of marmalade.

I’ll have biscuits waiting for you, Mama had said. Elena’s favorite. These were the small kindnesses that delighted Mama—noticing just what you needed, as if with every jar of ointment or vase of favorite blooms she was letting you know you were seen and known. You, and only you. Mama had a knack for making people feel special. The lingering taste of popcorn soured in Elena’s mouth, and she turned, suddenly desperate to be out of the kitchen, *Mama’s* kitchen, a shrine to everything Elena was not.

Drat it all! Why should she feel guilty just because she wasn't a saint? She exited into the hall and headed for the stairs that would take her to her room, then drew up short. Too early for that. Outside, perhaps? She could roam a bit around the streets and watch the moonrise. Tempting, but no, she knew exactly what she needed.

A tale from Babka.

Nothing soothed the soul like one of the *byliny*, the old Russian ballads Elena so loved. Babka's sitting room was just off the parlor, which was no-man's-land for at least the next half hour. Victorian houses were a veritable warren of rooms, strung together all higgledy-piggledy so that you were always stumbling into other people's business on your way from here to there. But Elena had her ways.

She crept once more past the parlor where muted conversation reached her ears, then froze as the patter formed itself into words.

"I just can't seem to get through to her," Mama was saying. "If only I could make her understand."

Elena's heart thudded in her ears. She wanted to bolt, but her legs would not move.

"Then *tell* her," Papka said. "Yes, tell her *that*. All of it. Tell her about *us*, Vasilisa, of everything we've seen and known—or let me do it. Who knows what she sees in that rock of hers? Perhaps she already knows more than we realize. Does *your* rock show you strange scenes of Old—"

"No, nothing. No pictures, no warmth, none of the things she's talked about. Oh, Ivan, it could just be her imagination. You know how she devours Babka's ballads! And my mama used to fault *me* for imagining things! If only she knew half the things Elena says."

"All the more reason to tell her everything. You can't protect her from—"

"Yes, we can. We can wait until she's ready. We can wait until she has... has... *judgment*, Ivan. Why, when I was younger than her, I'd already been taking care of my mama for years, living without Papa, worried he was dead somewhere on the battlefields of Flanders. And you!" Her voice thickened. "Completely on your own! Not even a father or mother to care for you. We had no choice but to grow up and face the world. But Elena, she just..."

The strangeness of the conversation was forgotten as Elena's cheeks blazed, waiting on Mama's next words. When they came, they were almost too soft to hear.

"It's my own fault. I've sheltered her, and that's only made things worse. But—oh, Ivan, she's just so *marvelous*, isn't she? So smart! And so brave! Do you know that she socked that scoundrel Buddy Mason right on his nose when he tried to extort a nickel out of little Jimmy Schmidt?" She gave a laugh garbled with tears. "The principal said he'd never seen anything like it, a skinny thing like Elena taking on a varsity linebacker! And I told him he never would again. Our Elena's one of a kind."

Elena's eyes were suspiciously moist for the second time that day. Bugger! She gave them a swipe with the back of her hand. How sure she'd been that Mama had only said those things to Principal Hamm in order to protect her wayward daughter from the folly of her own rash acts. But no, she'd meant them! That was pride

in Mama's voice, clear as a skylark's call, and for the first time, Elena wondered if maybe she'd gotten it all wrong—until she heard what followed.

“But she's so headstrong, Ivan, so impulsive. Don't you see? Always charging ahead without thinking of the consequences. Only thinking of her own desires. Look at all the trouble she gets up to now. And just think—if she *knew!* She'd be heading down to Leshy's Lair any chance she got! And then? Can you imagine? Can you imagine if she actually got *through?* If we can only wait a few years, until she's older, a little better able to take care of herself...”

They had moved out of earshot, but Elena didn't want to hear any more anyway. Better able to take care of herself! Is that what Mama thought? The taste of salt in the corner of her mouth reminded her that she was officially done with tears, and she smeared the rest of them away, heading for the front door. She let herself quietly outside, then stepped down from the broad painted porch to the walk. Dusk had nearly faded into night, and the cherry tree in the front yard breathed petals on the breeze. The edge of the moon, big and yellow, swelled over the rooftops down the hill, like bread rising in the oven. Tonight's sky was bound to be a real spring dazzler, and she was tempted to make a dash for the water tower for a good dose of stargazing. Besides, the water tower was the perfect place for pondering. The strange import of the conversation was returning to her in full, and her mind swirled with questions. *Mama's* rock? Like her own? What was this “everything” Papka was urging Mama to tell her? And what did Leshy's Lair have to do with anything? After all, it was just an old grove in Dawson's woodlot where she liked to picnic.

Elena had never cared much for riddles, and just now, they deepened her sense of unease. None of it made a stitch of sense. And to have them talking about her behind her back! Perhaps she should go to the water tower, after all—even though she'd promised not to do so at night. But then she flashed on her mother's words—*headstrong, impulsive*—and nixed the idea at once. She wouldn't give them the satisfaction!

She took a few deep breaths to calm herself as the stillness of evening settled into her bones. A door slammed somewhere nearby, voices drifted up the dark street, then sank back into silence, and all the while, that moon just kept rising, imperceptibly until—suddenly—it had crested the silhouetted rooftops and chimneys.

“To the sea, to the blue sea,” she murmured absentmindedly, “to the blue and cold sea and the Alatyrl stone strolled a daring good youth, by name the old Cossack Ilya Muromets...”

It was one of her favorite *byliny*, sung in a haunting, chanting tone that brought goosebumps to her arms. She liked the *byliny* even better than the old tales—Babka's stories of the old witch Baba Yaga, tales of river maidens and sprites and grumpy peasants who sent their children off into the forest to die. Deliciously gruesome! She'd committed all the old tales to memory by the age of six and would finish Babka's sentences each time, until one day, the old lady said, *No more, little weasel! No more Baba Yaga for you!* And only after much pestering did she relent and murmur, with a flash of inspiration, *A bylina, of course, that will fix you!* And she was

right! For how could you beat the *byliny* with their *bogatyr* warriors, epic quests, and best of all, *dragons*? If only she could travel back to those golden days of yore when Prince Vladimir ruled Old Rus from his palace in Kiev!

But the *byliny* would have to do. Forget Mama! Forget Papka too, for that matter, and all their little secrets!

Roused to her task, she hurried across the lawn, skirting the bay window, where the drapes were drawn over whatever scene unfolded in the parlor. Safely past, she stepped lightly among the peonies, standing on tiptoe to peer into Babka's sitting room. The yellow curtains were parted just enough for her to glimpse Babka in her rocking chair, a length of scarf dangling from her lightning-quick needles.

Tap, tap.

Babka stopped rocking, her keen gaze snapping up to the window. Setting her knitting aside, she grasped the arms of the chair and hoisted herself to stand, shuffling across the room without her walking stick.

"Coming, little weasel," she said, pausing with a hand to her back, then soldiering on. She leaned on the sill a moment, then wedged her palms up under the rail to give it a shove.

"Thanks, Babka." Elena slid her fingers into the slit and gave another heave. It was an old window, like everything in this ramshackle house that Mama was always fixing, when they could have had a brand-new mansion up on Mason's Hill, what with Papka's inheritance. But Elena loved it all the better for its aches and pains, just like her dear, weathered great-grandmother. "Here I come!" she warned, though she needn't have, for Babka was already shuffling back to her rocker, leaving plenty of room for Elena to spill unceremoniously through the window and onto the floor.

"And what brings little weasels to my window this time of night?" Babka said with a wry glance as she turned to plunk down into her chair, resuming her knitting without missing a beat.

"As if you didn't know," Elena said, not bothering to rise. She crossed the floor on her knees, snagging a round pillow from the rose-colored chair on her way past and settling beside Babka before the old lady had finished *knit, purl, knit*. She knew this because her great-grandma's lips moved soundlessly as she worked, and her rocking kept time to the rhythm of her stitches.

Elena tucked her legs under her and sat expectantly. The strange, atonal verses of the *byliny* would often arise spontaneously, as if woven from strands of Babka's yarn. There was no need to spell things out with Babka, no need for words, and what seemed to others to be oddly abbreviated exchanges were to them perfectly complete. Babka always knew what Elena meant, even when Elena did not. But as the silence lengthened and the old lady continued to ignore her, Elena shifted on her cushion, uneasy.

"Tell me, Elena, what is the meaning of this word, *chutkost*?" Babka said finally, without looking up from her work.

Elena's uneasiness deepened to suspicion. Babka had used her given name, instead of calling her little weasel. Always a bad sign.

"*Chutkost* means consideration," she answered dryly, offering the briefest of definitions. Babka's quizzes on the nature of the Russian soul were generally followed by a lecture, and that meant Elena wouldn't be hearing

about Dobrynya and his blood brothers for some time yet. Come to think of it, best to get it over with. “But not in the limited English sense of the word,” she continued, flourishing with one hand, “which is confined to mental attitudes. For the Russian, *chutkost* signifies a flair for grasping the mood of others, an exceptional kind of tact and sensitivity, an instinctive capacity for diplomacy that resembles the meeting of souls. A quintessentially Russian characteristic,” she finished grandly and with as little irony as she could manage.

“Hmph!” the old lady grunted. Elena suspected her plan had backfired. “It is strange that one so versed in the Russian character should exhibit so little of it.” Babka shot her a stern look over her clicking needles. “Perhaps my little weasel has come to resemble her endearment too proudly, eh?”

At least Babka was using her nickname again.

“Not you too!” Elena sighed and stretched her long legs out in front of her, jiggling them on the floor to get the circulation going. “Babka, I’ve been at the Purdy’s house every day this week. Doesn’t that count for anything?” She was surprised to hear genuine frustration in her own voice. “Don’t I ever get to be a kid?”

Babka’s needles collapsed into her lap.

“Pah!” she cried, derisively. “She doesn’t get to be the kid, she says. Always working, she says, always doing the things for others,” Babka mimicked, getting rather too into the spirit of things in Elena’s humble opinion. “Pah!” she said again, throwing up one hand in disgust.

Elena eyed the old lady as she huffed and puffed. “Is this the part where you tell me about long walks across the snowy steppe wearing only your long underwear?” She watched a moment longer as the wrinkly corners of Babka’s mouth began to twitch.

“Pah!” Babka tried again, but this time it came out with a chuckle that morphed straight into a belly laugh. Even her shoulders were getting into it, shrugging up and down until tears started streaming out of those rheumy eyes. Elena grinned, feeling the warmth, deep inside, that always filled her when Babka laughed.

When the old lady had wiped her eyes, she regarded her great-granddaughter sternly once more, and this time Elena didn’t shrink from her gaze. She knew Babka was right, and she let her own eyes say so. Elena *was* thoughtless—and heedless and impulsive—and those she loved suffered for it. And what did she have to complain about? Mama was right. By her age, Papka was orphaned, and Mama was trying to keep her family from the poor house. Elena’s own grumbles could never compare to what her elders had endured.

Babka’s grimace eased as she registered Elena’s gaze, and she took up her knitting once more.

“We will not speak of it more. Now, which tale.”

For the third time that day, Elena wanted, unaccountably, to cry. Babka was perfect. There was no one else with whom she could be so honest, and all without saying a word. Even Papka, who indulged her pranks, could not bring her to *own* them. It was a relief, and as she turned her mind to the question of which *bylina* she should choose, she felt her stomach ease.

“Dobrynya and the Dragon,” she said decisively. She slid off the cushion, then laid back and wedged it under her head, crossing her legs at the ankle and digging into her pocket for her pet rock.

“Dobrynya Nikitich it must be,” the old woman said, slowing the rhythm of her rocking chair.

“Speaks Dobrynya’s mother, the worthy Ofimya,
Speaks the mother of Dobrynya Nikitich,
Instructing him,
‘Hail my darling Dobrynya, Nikita’s son!
Don’t you ride to the Sorochinsk Mountains!
Hearken to my words, you who are Nikita’s son!
Do not go trampling baby dragons there...”

Babka’s melodies were simple and familiar; indeed, she only had about three variations for the multitude of tales she sung, be they of Dobrynya the dragon slayer, Churilo the dandy, Ilya the old Cossack, Alyosha the fox, or any number of their fellow *bogatyri* whose epic feats were legendary. The tune would mold itself to the informal cadence of her words so that it seemed Babka *spoke* the song, and the ancient arrangement of the notes struck wonder deep in Elena’s heart, even now, at fifteen when she could be listening to Spike Jones or Bing Crosby on the wireless.

Elena held the black rock in her hand, smoothing it with her thumb as her eyes glazed over—and her inner eye opened on the vistas and fields, the villages and dining halls of Old Rus as it was when Kiev was its beating heart, high on a green hill overlooking the River Dnepr. Sure enough, the rock began to warm, the ebony surface to grow first dull, then deep, as if some membrane had fallen away, as if some answering eye had opened...

“Fire blazed high and red from the first current,
Smoke coiled and rose from the second current,
Sparks came showering down,
Showering on Dobrynya there in the River Puchai...”

The dragon was just about to emerge from the boiling river where Dobrynya should never bathe; the great dragon Zmeya Gorynych, who both loved and hated the *bogatyry*, and whom in the end Dobrynya would be forced to slay. It was one of Elena’s favorite scenes, one her treasured rock had never failed to depict—or perhaps her own imagination, projected on the rock—and Elena felt the familiar sense of falling into the scene, falling, but never landing. And yet, it was not the River Puchai she saw, nor the dragon Zmeya, nor Dobrynya himself, but rather a boy not much older than herself with amber eyes and dark golden hair. He sat at Prince Vladimir’s high table as a guest, an unusual honor for one so young. In his deft movements and sharp gaze that seemed to miss nothing, Elena felt a kindred bond, a quickening of her pulse as the young man took the measure of his elders and listened to the minstrel sing a tale...

3 * Mitya

DMITRY Dobrynyich Nikitich sat beside his mother in the garlanded banquet hall, three chairs to the left of Prince Vladimir himself, as befitted the son of the honored *bogatyr*. The import was not lost on him, and he sat a little taller, for Mitya, as he was called, never shrank from duty.

Dobrynya—dragon friend, dragon slayer—was seated next to the prince, and so Mitya had to satisfy himself with glimpses of his father’s stony profile. He would have liked to study that face at length, having known its stern contours for less than a year. What a riddle Father was, the vigor of his prime tempered by a world-weary sadness that made him seem old beyond his years. He was bold yet measured in all his dealings, both warrior and poet, and strong as an aurochs, the golden ox whose enchanted form he once had taken—or so the ballads sang. And yet, to Mitya he seemed strangely fragile. It was not what Mitya had expected after sixteen years of pining for a father who ruled not only his own boyhood dreams, but the songs and hearts of all Rus.

“Brothers, join me in salute!” the prince said now, raising his golden cup. “To Dobrynya, loyal servant, fearless champion! May the Lord hear his praises!”

Even Mitya could remember a time when such a toast would have invoked the old gods by name—Perun and Mokosh, Dazhbog and Striborg, and in certain circles old Veles himself—but like the others who sat at the long tables, he raised his cup now to the *one* who had replaced the *many*. What did it matter? The festivals around which the year revolved had not changed, the hearth fires were still tended, and village *kolduns* saw steady business at their doorstep from those seeking protection or revenge.

“Minstrel! Play!” Vladimir roared out, in high spirits after too many cups of green wine.

The *skomorokh* laid the *gusli* across his lap and gave the strings an experimental strum.

“What tale shall the good prince have?” he called back, matching Vladimir’s mirth with his own, for this *skomorokh* was a master entertainer, expert at judging the mood of the crowd.

“What tale do you think, dullard?” the prince cried, his good humor stretched thin over something darker, something which made Mitya uneasy, though he did not know why. “Our worthy Dobrynya sits beside me, honored this night! You must sing the death of old Zmeyya so that even her winged children take fright!”

He laughed at his own dreadful pun, which even a child could best, for the idea of a dragon hatchling taking fright instead of flight seemed disrespectful, even now, when that ancient race had been slaughtered to near-extinction.

The *skomorokh* inclined his head in assent, half-hiding what Mitya fancied was a defiant smirk. Not that the prince would notice, for already he was whispering something into Father’s ear, something that did not alter that steadfast profile one bit, not even when the ring-encrusted hand clapped down hard upon Dobrynya’s shoulder.

“From the palace of Prince Vladimir,
Oh, Vladimir of the Bright Sun,
Who shines on the wicked and the good alike,
Ruling with a golden fist,
From his high table laden with the bounty of nations,
Rode forth young Dobrynya to bathe
In the mother Puchai, in the turbid waters,
Where old Zmeya then dwelt...”

The minstrel strummed the *gusli* with right hand and damped the strings with the left, the haunting tones rising and falling with the cadence of words half-spoken, half-sung. Already, Mitya could feel the spell deepening as chatter fell away and all sat, rapt, *boyars* and *bogatyri* side by side, all animosity momentarily forgotten.

“Don’t you ride to the Sorochinsk Mountains,
Said the youth’s worthy mother,
Said the mother of Dobrynya Nikitich,
‘Hearken to my words, you who are Nikita’s son!
Do not go trampling baby dragons there,
Do not you rescue captives there,
Though the mountain’s shadow
Grows dark and long...””

It was quite preposterous, especially when sung in that wheedling tone. Mitya’s grandmother would never talk that way, though the ballads always had her nagging her son, the brave Dobrynya, as if he were a mere stripling of a lad. In real life, Ofimya Alexandrovna was still beautiful in her dotage and said more with a sidelong glance than this minstrel could manage with all his weary verses.

Mitya’s thoughts drifted along with his gaze, roaming over the faces of the *boyars* and *bogatyri* that made up the prince’s retinue. Be they administrators, advisors, or fat-bellied landholders, the *boyars* all wore their station alike, as if it were a garment whose hem the peasantry, the *smerdy*, were not fit to touch. They likewise scorned the *bogatyri*, even those of noble birth like Dobrynya—until the hordes came galloping across the steppe to breach the royal palisade. Then the *boyars* were the first to rouse the *bogatyri* to their sacred task of preserving Rus, land of Vladimir the Bright Sun. They might beg escort for merchant wares destined for Byzantium, or protection from the Pechenegs or, if those warring nomads were temporarily allied, from the troops of the Khazar Khaganate further south. Enemies of every stripe ranged just beyond Kiev’s green hills

and fertile plains, and it was always the *bogatyri* who defended Mother Rus—even as they suffered veiled insults at the prince’s high table.

None of this was lost on Mitya. He’d heard it said that he was clever, that he might someday be the equal of his father, skilled not only in archery and wrestling, in music and chess, but in the art of diplomacy for which Dobrynya was famed. Mitya pretended not to hear, yet his heart pounded in his throat each time a whisper reached his ears. He wanted nothing more than to make Dobrynya proud, to be the son his father never knew he wanted as he did the prince’s bidding in distant lands.

A handsome lad, they said, though Mitya cared nothing for that, *with his father’s golden locks and amber eyes. One day, he will make a great bogatyr.*

That was part of the dream as well, Mitya supposed, though he was not yet sure just what that meant. All he knew was that, at long last, his father was home.

But why? Why now, after all these years? And why did it seem the prince was not entirely pleased to see him? Vladimir, with his ambition verging on obsession, was not difficult to read. Even now, his smile was forced as he turned to Father, and the malice behind his eyes was unmistakable. Was it simply that Dobrynya had defied him by returning from The Field, the distant lands where Vladimir had bid him wander on countless missions these last fifteen years? Yet instead of throwing Father into the dungeon, the prince was throwing him a feast.

Why?

Mitya’s hand found the stone he kept in the pocket of his cloak. Black, smooth, it seemed to fit his hand perfectly, to warm to his touch, to understand his mind as even he did not. He’d had it since he was barely four, just old enough to be put astride a horse and begin the training that would define his every waking hour. And it had been a companion ever since, his secret—for the others would only laugh. The squire who had befriended a rock! As daft as his *bogatyr* father! Mitya knew these rumors too, whispered behind hands and into ears, heads inclined toward one another in malice, even while laurels were thrown in Dobrynya’s honor. *A strange man*, they said. *Ever since he took the form of the aurochs. Ever since he slew Marinka. Never was he quite the same.*

It was the people’s second favorite ballad about his father—Dobrynya and the Witch. But Mitya pushed the thought aside because today he was determined to be cheerful. He turned his gaze back to the gathered retinue as the minstrel sang of the dragon’s lair. Three long tables made a horseshoe shape over which Vladimir presided, raised upon a dais. From this vantage, Mitya could see far more than usual. Generally, he was forced to spy from his haunt behind the *pech’*, the great stove, for only twice had he been called to the prince’s table, and the last time he’d been too young to recall the festivities. But now, he could see all the *bogatyri* he knew so well—Alyosha, whom he used to call Uncle but who was now little more than a stranger, Churilo, ever-dashing in his emerald kaftan, Mikhailo Potyk, and Solovey who had married the prince’s niece.

But where was Ilya?

Ilya Muromets, eldest and greatest of the *bogatyri*, sworn brother of Dobrynya and more like a father to Mitya than Father himself had ever been.

How had Mitya not noticed?

The old warrior was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps that was why Father looked so darkly on the feast, his fair face set like weathered stone.

“For three whole days, Dobrynya battled old Zmeya,
For three whole days, flame lit the sky.
In the shadow of the Sorochinsk Mountains,
Fair Dobrynya thought that he would die...”

Now that he had noticed Ilya’s absence, Mitya could hardly sit still. He risked more furtive glances at his father’s face until, with lowered brow, Dobrynya turned the slightest of degrees to flash a warning look.

“Hail, Prince Vladimir, oh Bright One, I bring news!” cried a new voice, bursting into the hall along with the ragtag form of a messenger. Mitya expected a display of wrath at this interruption, but the prince only waved the poor man closer, calling for green wine to calm his ragged nerves and refresh his tongue. The Bright One was often known to cast an unfortunate courier out on his ear for little more than bad timing or unwelcome news. But not this time.

Almost as though the courier were expected.

“Silence, fool!” Vladimir cried, raging at the *skomorokh* as the ballad faltered. “Cannot you see this man bears tidings of grave importance? Come,” and he waved the messenger closer still. “What news?”

The courier gulped his wine down, then dragged a soiled sleeve across his mouth. A white bird flapped in through a high window, floundering among the rafters through shafts of light. In the following silence, three words rang out.

“The dragon flies!”