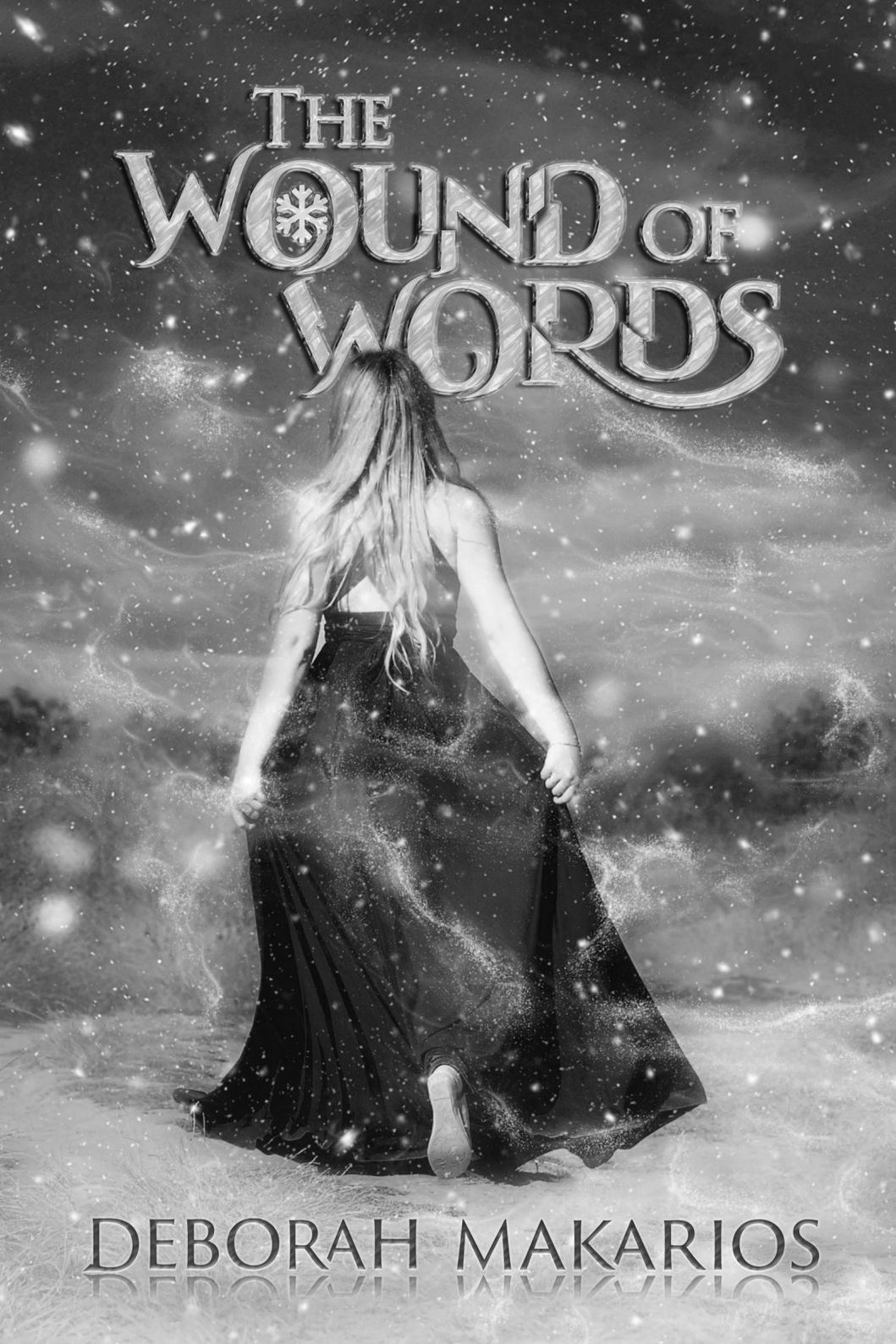


THE WOUND OF WORDS

A black and white photograph of a woman with long, light-colored hair, seen from behind. She is wearing a long, dark, flowing dress and is standing in a field. The air is filled with many small, white, snow-like particles that appear to be falling or swirling around her. The background is a dark, textured sky or landscape.

DEBORAH MAKARIOS



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deborah.makarios.nz

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The Wound of Words

Deborah Makarios

To my husband
and my father,
both men with excellent beards.

The wound of words
is worse than
the wound of swords.

Arab proverb

Unwelcome Home

“She’s coming!”

The pageboy skidded through the courtyard gate hard on the heels of his shrill cry. Already a half-numbed footman was turning to bang on the great iron-bound door, the prearranged signal to the rest of the servants waiting in the warmth within.

Andrei’s heart leapt at the page’s call. At last! He whistled to summon his fellow stablemen and turned back to see the indoor servants forming a nervous but strictly hierarchical line down the front stair, under the major-domo’s watchful eye. Housemaids on the left, footmen on the right, with outdoor staff lurking respectfully along the great grey façade of the Little Palace. It was only a week after Midwinter, despite the sunshine, and the biting chill reddened their cheeks in moments.

Andrei pulled the furred collar of the coat that marked him as Assistant Coachman closer about his neck, thankful for the turn of events that had promoted him to a position with a warmer neck. Coachman always said he should grow a beard like all the other men had, but what’s the point of your father leaving you a silver razor as an heirloom if you don’t use it? His father had never had a beard, and anyway, think what a fool he’d look while it grew in.

A faint fizzing hiss sounded through the still air: her Imperial Highness’s carriage, mounted on sleigh runners for her

Midseason travel. Faint twitches of aprons and cuffs into perfect order could be seen fidgeting down the line of servants. Three of the imperial greys swept through the gate, drawing the silvery carriage with ease. The elderly head coachman in his fur-lined coat pulled the horses up with apparent unconcern, yet the carriage door came to rest precisely at the foot of the stair.

Andrei stepped forward to take the lead horse's head, but his eyes were fixed on the empty air so soon to be occupied by the woman he loved. The head footman leapt to open the carriage door, and Andrei could have sworn every man, woman and child present held their breath. Only the horses seemed unaffected; they'd had a long run and were eager to reach the stable they scented so near.

Out came an exquisitely smooth golden head, and Andrei could almost hear a sigh of relief drift round the courtyard. Duke Maxim was here; the scene to follow could not become too unpleasant with such an urbane man in attendance. He turned, giving Andrei a view of the aquiline profile and elegant moustache that had half the girls in town sighing for him, and extended his long arm back into the carriage.

The lead horse became uneasy, flicking its head up and down, and Andrei tightened his grip. A mittened hand came into his view, resting in Duke Maxim's arm. A dark furred hood followed, falling back to reveal Her Imperial Highness Valeska Kira, only daughter of Czar Kiril. The duke smiled at her, and she smiled back, gazing into his face, for all the world as though they were newlyweds back from a honeymoon, not cousins back from the season's royal duty tour.

Andrei craned his neck, but only two figures were visible. Where was Bronya? She had to be here! Valeska Kira wouldn't be travelling without her maid... He caught sight of a blue cloth hood peeping out from the carriage door, and relaxed.

Valeska looked away from Maxim at the house and at the people lined up outside it. She froze, and the tension in the

air tightened to breaking pitch. Andrei waited impatiently for Bronya to step out of the carriage.

"What is the meaning of this?" Valeska's high, clear voice rang off the frosty stones. "Why are we here?"

The major-domo stepped forward with a measured tread and bowed. "Welcome to the Little Palace, Your Highness."

Valeska turned to fix the old coachman with an icy blue eye. "Why did you drive me here? I gave orders for home, you may recall."

Coachman bore the brunt of that cold displeasure without giving an inch, and Andrei had to admire him for it. There wasn't one man in the stables who'd be in his boots right now, not for all the benefits the position conferred: title, pay, furred coat and all.

"The Czar's orders, Your Highness," he said, keeping his eyes respectfully on her feet. Anything to avoid that gaze.

Valeska drew in the cold air with a little hiss, and turned to where the major-domo was speaking again at her elbow.

"His Imperial Majesty has bethought him of the propriety of your assuming your own household, now that you are of age," he was saying unctuously, although Andrei saw he wasn't meeting her gaze either. "The Little Palace has therefore been reopened and..."

He found he was addressing the side of her head and fell silent.

"Maxim," Valeska said in a low and urgent voice, her eyes like sapphires in the snow in that white face. "Maxim!"

"Don't alarm yourself, my dear," Maxim said, his fine voice echoing off the grey bulk of the Little Palace. "Perhaps—"

"He can't do this to me! *She* can't do this to me," Valeska muttered.

"Let us not jump to conclusions," Maxim cautioned.

"I am not jumping anywhere," Valeska retorted. "I am going home."

Andrei frowned. If she left, Bronya would leave too, and she hadn't even noticed him yet.

Valeska turned to climb back into the carriage, and paused, eyeing the coachman. The regular puffs of breath appearing before his face suddenly ceased.

"The horses must be fatigued," she said. "As must you."

Andrei's blood surged. This was his chance! "I can have fresh horses harnessed to the little sleigh in three minutes, Your Highness," he said. "And I will gladly drive you wherever you wish to go."

She gave a sharp nod, and he beckoned the stablemen into action. Three minutes he'd said, and three minutes it had better be.

"But Your Highness must be fatigued also," the major-domo was saying. "Will you not come in and rest, perhaps take tea, before you depart?"

"I will wait in the carriage," Valeska said flatly, and Bronya's gloved hand appeared to help her in. Maxim was beckoned after, and the door firmly shut.



The Great Palace was on the other side of Istvan from the Little Palace, and just for once Andrei was glad of it. There had been many weary to-ings and fro-ings with the wagon in the last two weeks, since Valeska Kira had left on the Midwinter tour, but today the sun was shining, the horses were fresh, and Bronya was perched beside him on the driver's seat.

Heads turned, eyes stared, talk buzzed as the glittering sleigh skimmed down the street between nobles' palaces and fine merchants' establishments. You didn't get this sort of reaction with a plodding cart-horse drawing the wagon to market.

"Take the back streets," Valeska said suddenly, and then, in a lower tone, "I've had enough of being stared at lately."

"Yes, Your Highness!"

Andrei deftly turned the sleigh down the first side street of sufficient width, a grin spreading across his face. The back streets weren't much to look at, being mostly crammed with unpretentious houses and unprepossessing shops, but what did he care? Back streets meant an indirect route, which meant longer at Bronya's side. True, they couldn't talk—more than his job was worth, Coachman had told him—but they were together, and that was enough for him.

As the sleigh drew near the Great Palace, Andrei spotted trouble: the gates were shut. He could guess why—the Czar had not been Valeska's father for sixteen years for nothing—but there wasn't much he could do about it. Do your duty and keep your mouth shut, that's what Coachman used to say, and he'd been in the imperial service sixty years.

Andrei drew the horses up to the gates.

"Open for Her Imperial Highness Valeska Kira!" he called, hoping fervently that he would not be called upon to contribute any more to what would undoubtedly be an awkward conversation.

The gatekeeper sidled out of his little booth and fixed his gaze high above the trees.

"My orders are to keep the gate shut," he said.

Andrei wondered what he should do next, but the decision was mercifully taken from his hands.

"I have come home. Open the gates," Valeska said in calm, measured tones, and the hair on Andrei's neck stood up.

"My orders are to keep the gate shut," the gatekeeper said, not daring to lower his eyes.

"Surely," Duke Maxim broke in diplomatically, "there is no harm in allowing Her Highness to see her father, and report on the errand on which he has sent her?"

"Allow?" Valeska hissed. "Errand?"

"My orders are—" the gatekeeper doggedly began.

"This is my home," Valeska snapped at him. "How dare you stand in my way?"

"My orders—"

"Those are my rooms," Valeska went on, gesturing to the corner of the massive block of the Great Palace. "Since the hour of my birth—" She broke off. "Who is that up there? What are they doing in my rooms?"

The gatekeeper hunkered into his coat. "The Royal Nursery is being prepared for the forthcoming heir."

"I am the heir," Valeska ground out, "my father's only heir."

"But you're a grown lady now," Maxim said, though his tone seemed to suggest otherwise. "The nursery is hardly your place. I dare say the Czar has simply arranged for you to stay at the Little Palace while the Czarina's suite is refurbished." He lowered his voice. "After all, it has been some years now since your mother passed away."

The gatekeeper bore the expression of a man who has found his hands full of someone else's dirty work, and is becoming more and more convinced that he is not paid enough for the job.

"The Czarina's rooms are at present occupied by the Czarina," he said, scrunching himself further into his coat and clearly wishing he could disappear.

This produced a moment of dead silence from the back of the sleigh as Bronya clutched at Andrei's arm. And then they were all talking at once, Valeska's high clear voice, Bronya's low sweet one, and Maxim's like a golden trumpet over all.

"The Czarina? What do you mean? Who?" he demanded. "Speak, man!"

"The Czarina Svetlana," the gatekeeper said, eyes on the sky as though looking for an eagle to swoop down and carry him away. "Lately united to His Imperial Majesty Kiril."

And soon to bear his child, Andrei finished silently. He waited for the storm to break behind him, but after a long, deathly silence came only the words "Turn the sleigh."

"Yes, sir," Andrei said, only too glad to have something to do, and that something removing him from the unpleasant scene. Or at least part of it, since he was obliged to carry a large part of the late confrontation—and that the most distressed part—away with him.

The Great Palace's drive was designed with the idea that arriving vehicles would turn in the enormous sweep of courtyard in front of it, but little thought had been given to turning at the gates. Andrei pulled off the feat quite neatly, ruefully reflecting that his passengers wouldn't even have noticed.

"The Little Palace," Duke Maxim snapped, once the turn was complete.

"Anything but that!" Valeska countered.

"You must! It is hardly consistent with the dignity of an imperial princess—or of a duke—to plead with menials at the gates. Like a beggar!"

"But—" Valeska ground her teeth. "To be turned away from the doors of my own home!"

"To appear powerless is to be powerless," Maxim continued. "You should have known better than to begin a confrontation which you could not be certain to win."

"I can't believe he's actually married her," Valeska said in a toneless whisper, barely audible above the hissing of the runners. "A mere laundress, and vulgar besides!"

"You should have seen the danger," Maxim said. "If you had given me a more accurate idea of the situation, I would certainly not have accompanied you on the Lake visit, and all this might have been prevented! If I had only been there to put the right word in his ear at the right time! You know as well as I do this is the madness of a moment. A laundress as Czarina? Ridiculous! You have made a slip from which you may never recover!"

"Maxim! How can you be so cruel? You know I would have told you if I'd had the slightest—I never dreamed that he could have lowered himself in such a way."

"Oh, my dear," Maxim said, his voice suddenly gentle and caressing. "You know I have always been entirely partisan in my support of you, and my passion for the cause may have led me to speak unguardedly. You will not breathe a word of what has passed?" he suddenly demanded, his tone changing again like lightning.

"No, sir," came Bronya's low tones.

"No, sir," Andrei snapped, glaring at the road ahead. As if he needed to ask! Bronya was Valeska Kira's personal maid, wasn't she? Personal and confidential, and you didn't reach those kinds of heights in your profession by having a flapping mouth. Nor did Assistant Coachmen.

The sleigh pulled up at the foot of the Little Palace's front entrance, precisely where the carriage had stood less than an hour before. Maxim climbed out, helped Valeska down, and ushered her weary form within, Bronya hurrying after. Not a word from Bronya; not a look. Andrei heaved a sigh and drove the sleigh slowly round to the stables.



Personal and confidential maids didn't get much time off, Andrei knew, but in the few brief conversations he'd managed to have with Bronya—at servants' dances and the like—he'd learned she liked gardens. Hoping very much she still liked them at this time of year, he spent the afternoon hanging about in the one part of the garden which was visible only from the service wings, and therefore permissible for servants to use.

He was jumping from foot to foot in an attempt to keep warm, and brooding on the possibility that Bronya's position might allow her access to the parts of the garden Valeska Kira herself would walk in, when the heavy side door creaked open.

"Bronya!"

"Oh—Andrei." Not very enthusiastic, but at least she didn't go back inside.

"Are you all right?" he asked anxiously. "You look a bit tired."

The next moment he could have slapped himself. Of all the things to say!

"I don't—I mean—"

She gave a weary smile, and his heart turned over.

"I'll go away if you like," he offered.

"Have you been waiting to see me?" she asked, a hint of that smile peeking out the edge of her hood.

"Yes," he said boldly.

"And got thoroughly chilled, I dare say," she said.

He grinned. "You wouldn't be so unkind as to make me go and warm up, would you?"

Bronya's smile vanished. "No more than you deserve, I dare say. Offering to take Valeska to the Great Palace like that, knowing the reception she would face!"

"I just wanted to be near you," Andrei said honestly. "Anyway, from all I've heard, the princess is hard enough to cope with anything."

"You haven't heard very much, then," Bronya said, and turned away to stroll along the frosty path.

Andrei was beside her in a step. "So tell me more."

"You really want to know?"

"If it's you telling me."

Bronya rolled her eyes, but moved a little to one side, allowing room for Andrei to stroll down the path beside her.

"I would be dead if it wasn't for her. Do you remember the Lady's season, oh, it must be ten years ago now?"

Andrei scrunched up his face. That was before he came to Istvan, but... "The year the wells froze over?"

"That's the one."

"I remember dropping rocks down the well-shafts to see if we could break the ice."

"I was living on the streets," Bronya said softly. "I'm an orphan, you know. And I would have frozen to death if it hadn't

been for Valeska. She was out for her daily drive, muffled up in so many furs you could hardly see her, but she made the driver stop when she saw me, and she asked me my story, and then," Bronya laughed, "then she ordered me into the sleigh, and took me home to the Great Palace to be her companion."

Andrei blinked. This was a side of the princess he had definitely not seen.

Bronya sighed, a great white plume drifting up into the grey air.

"It's not the past that's weighing on you, is it?" Andrei guessed shrewdly.

She turned startled eyes to him.

"If you ever want to talk about it," Andrei said, "you know I'm always here for you. A problem shared is a problem halved, right?"

Bronya smiled again, and it was the smile you'd give a child.

"That's sweet of you," she said, "but no. Sometimes a problem shared is just a problem spread."

"But—"

"I must go," she said, turning back towards the door. "My lady will be needing me soon."

She gave him that smile again, and disappeared through the door.

Andrei hunched into his coat and paced up and down. All right, Valeska Kira wasn't the cold-hearted monster some made her out to be—or wasn't always. And clearly, Bronya was loyal to her. All to the good—he admired loyalty—but equally clearly, she didn't take him seriously as a suitor. Not at all. Somehow, he would have to change her mind.



Andrei darted across the street, nipped under the noses of two plodding dray-horses, and rapped smartly on the door of the Howler station. Purely as a matter of form, since the door

was always open, even on the coldest days when snow drifted in.

"Pyotr!" he called, dancing up to the long wooden counter in an effort to keep warm.

An old coat in the corner pulled itself together, and revealed itself to be Pyotr, the senior Howler at the local station. He was dressed for outdoors, which Andrei supposed he was, in a sense. He shivered.

"Ah, Andrei! Come to do business?" Pyotr asked, adjusting the tiny glasses on his round nose.

"You know that old brush—valuable antique brush, that is to say—which I asked you about before?"

"The last time you were stony broke?" Pyotr asked with a mischievous beam.

"I am *not* stony broke," Andrei said. "I have money in my pocket, I'll have you know, just not enough for the...investment I want to make."

"Dear me! An investment, is it? What heights stableboys rise to these days."

"Assistant Coachman now," Andrei corrected. "With the princess moving to the Little Palace and a bigger staff employed, I've been promoted."

"And you're overspending your increased wages already?" Pyotr asked, eyebrows raised.

"The increase has barely begun," Andrei said. "And this can't wait. So about this brush..."

"I've had a nibble of interest," Pyotr said. "A would-be buyer, in fact—an old widow-lady down south."

Andrei hesitated. An old widow-lady down south could be construed as his Granny Sonechka, and he didn't want her hearing about this. Not that there was anything underhanded in it, he would just rather she didn't know.

"How far south?"

"Right down by Summer's Meadow," Pyotr said, heaving what could have been a nostalgic sigh.

Andrei relaxed. Much further south than Granny, then.

"My cousin's wife's sister's boy runs the station down there. They've all the luck, that branch of the family, let me tell you. Been years since I saw the place. I keep telling myself it's time I paid a visit, but there! business is too good, and I mustn't complain. Now, then, where were we?"

"The buyer," Andrei prompted.

"Oh, yes. Well, she's offering two and a half eagles, which seems a fair price, considering the condi—"

"I'll take it," Andrei said instantly. He undid the top button of his coat to scuffle in the inner pocket, and the cold air dived in like an eagle plummeting on its prey. "Here you are."

He handed across the old bone-backed brush. Not without a twinge, for it was an old familiar friend, but he wasn't one to sacrifice the future to the past. He needed those two and a half eagles, and the sooner the better.

Pyotr took it, automatically turning to the light and scrutinizing the brush carefully.

"The brush hasn't changed since you last saw it, Pyotr," Andrei said.

"No offence, Andrei, just a matter of business. I've got my reputation to think of, after all. What good would the Howler network be if you couldn't trust us, eh?"

"Yes, all right, all right!" He jiggled in place, wishing the old man would get a move on. The silversmith shut up shop early, the days being as short as they were, and he didn't want to miss him.

"Now then." Pyotr carefully placed the brush on the battered old counter, and withdrew from a concealed drawer two eagles and a 'wing', a half-eagle coin. They clinked as he set them down beside the brush.

"I receive from you this bone-backed brush, for the agreed price of two and one half eagles," Pyotr said, his voice taking on the sing-song intonation of long-familiar words oft repeated.

"Yes, yes."

"The two and one half eagles I pay to you today in trust; the brush shall be sent by the Howler courier network until it reaches the final station."

"Pyotr, I know all this!" Andrei said desperately. "Can't you just give me the money and—"

Pyotr looked over his glasses severely, and Andrei gave up the struggle, letting the old man maunder on through all the terms and conditions of the transaction, while his mind shot away to the silversmith's shop and perused the wares for sale. Two and a half eagles—that would buy something fairly impressive, he was sure.

"—the last purchaser shall have the space of one day to reverse the transaction, unravelling the chain in all its particulars." Pyotr seemed to be winding down, so Andrei flashed him a grin in hopes of staving off further details.

"I hope you're not making any decisions you'll come to regret," Pyotr said, as he finally—with infinite slowness it seemed to Andrei—took up the coins and held them out.

"I never regret anything," Andrei said, seizing the coins and dashing out the door with a quick "thanks!" flung over his shoulder.

The silversmith's shutters were still open. He was in luck! Ten minutes later he was speeding through the dusk towards the Little Palace servants' hall and a hot dinner, a precious little bag tucked carefully into his shirt for the safest of keeping.



Bronya stepped out into the thin sunshine of the side garden and leaned against the wall with a sigh.

"Bronya!"

She looked up and saw Andrei waving from among the close-clipped hedges.

"Here again?" she asked, coming slowly down the steps. "If you carry on like this, the horses will forget what you look like."

"Come for a stroll," Andrei suggested, proffering his arm and disregarding the slight on his horses. "Nothing like a bit of brisk activity to chase the worries away, Granny always says. Anyway, there's something I wanted to talk to you about."

She took his arm, but the little worried wrinkle stayed on her smooth broad brow.

"But is there something you want to talk about first?" he asked. If ever there was a woman with *Something On Her Mind*, Bronya was she. And oh, how he wanted to know what it was! Particularly as he was absolutely certain it wasn't him.

"I can't," she said.

Which wasn't exactly a no, he noted.

After only a few scrunching paces across the gravel, her arm in his as tense as ever, she spoke again. "Well? What's so important?"

"You know the sun makes your hair shine like gold?" Andrei asked, his attention suddenly caught by the band of gold showing at the front of her warm hood.

"You asked me to walk up and down in a freezing garden, just so you can tell me my hair is yellow?" she asked, and there was rather more exasperation in her tone this time.

"Not at all, and that isn't what I said," Andrei said, returning to the business in hand. "I have something for you."

He drew out the little leather bag and ceremoniously presented it to her. She opened it, and a little stream of sparkling silver flowed out onto her gloved palm. It was a snowflake, hanging on a fine silver chain.

"Andrei!"

"Do you like it?"

"It's far too good for the likes of me, and I'm sure you shouldn't have," she said, giving him a half-heartedly reproachful look.

"Nothing is too good for you," Andrei said firmly. "Let me help you put it on."

"What will Her Highness think of her maid wearing fine silver jewellery?" Bronya asked, but she dropped her hood and lifted her heavy bundle of hair out of the way.

"She's got other things on her mind, from what I hear. Courting and so on." His hands were rapidly numbing out of his gloves, and he fumbled with the tiny clasp. At last he got it. "And while we're on the subject—"

A frazzled-looking housemaid popped her head around the door. "Bronya! The duke's gone and Her Highness is calling for you!"

Bronya gave Andrei's arm a quick squeeze and darted up the stairs without a backward look.

"She says she's fine," the housemaid hissed to Bronya, her voice carrying across the cold air, "but she looks worn to a shadow, and if you ask me, she's been crying."

Andrei watched the door close behind them, and wondered if other men had these kinds of problems when trying to propose. At least Bronya hadn't refused the necklace. She wasn't the sort of girl to take gifts from a man she had no further interest in. So there was hope still!

Suddenly aware of how cold he was, Andrei did a couple of cartwheels along the gravel walk and ran back towards the stable block to get warm.



Two days later, Andrei was sitting at his ease in the stables, watching the grooms play dice, and wondering what it was that was weighing on Bronya's mind. Something to do with Valeska, he was pretty sure, and from what he could judge of Bronya's demeanour, something more—something worse—than Valeska having a new home and a new step-mother.

His ears caught the high trink of harness bells. *Lots* of harness bells. Seizing his coat, he ran to the courtyard, struggling

into the sleeves as he rounded the corner. And no sooner had he arrived in the snowy courtyard than the three most magnificent horses he had ever seen swept through the gates, drawing the Czar's favourite racing sleigh behind them.

Andrei rushed forward to take the lead horse's head, wondering if this was Duke Maxim's doing. He was trying for a reconciliation between the Czar and his daughter, according to servants' hall gossip. But no—Duke Maxim wasn't the sort to leave things to chance. If he'd arranged for Czar Kiril to pay a visit, he'd be here himself, and Valeska would have had the whole household tuned to breaking point for the importance of the visit. There would have been orders, and all the stable staff brushed, polished and in perfect array, awaiting His Imperial Majesty's arrival.

Instead of which, there was just Andrei, holding the horses, and a rather flustered-looking major-domo being thumped on the shoulder by the brawny Czar as he pushed through the front door. Unlike his daughter, the Czar was not overly fond of formality and the distinctions of rank. Which may be why he'd married a laundrymaid, Andrei speculated, keeping the dangerous thought behind his teeth.

"Long stay?" he asked the Czar's lean little jockey of a driver, while stroking the lead's silken nose.

"Search me," the driver replied with a grimace. "We were out on the flats racing with some of the lads—" for thus did he refer to the cream of the nation's aristocratic youth, "—and halfway through a race His Majesty pulls up and tells me to take the reins and drive to the Little Palace."

"Halfway through a race?" Andrei echoed. Who on earth would drive off halfway through a race? "Must have been confusing for the sleighs behind!"

The driver grinned. "Might not have been that many to be confused, if you take my meaning."

Andrei stroked the long nose again and sighed for such exquisite creatures to drive. The inhabitants of the Little Palace

stables were perfectly respectable stock, but no one had horses like the Czar. Not even his daughter.

"Look, he's been gone a while," Andrei said. "We don't want them catching a chill. How about we settle them into the stables for now?"

The driver shook his head regretfully. "More than my job's worth not to have them ready at the drop of a hat. He's not one to stand about waiting, is Czar Kiril."

"We could at least get them under cover," Andrei argued. "They'll be better off in the warm, even if they do have to stay in harness."

The driver looked at the front door, still firmly closed. "All right, then."

Andrei stepped aside, an arm extended to show the way, and the Czar's driver started his team with the subtlest of motions. The light racing sleigh was just whisking through the archway to the stable court when there was a roar from the building behind. Andrei spun round. The roar was followed by a piercing scream, the crash of broken furniture, and the thin tinkle of broken glass.

Andrei broke into a run and burst through the front door, something that would have earned him a serious dressing-down from the major-domo under ordinary circumstances.

The inside of the palace was not very familiar to Andrei—people who smelled of horses were supposed to stay outside—but he found himself in a stream of agitated servants hurrying across the entrance hall and down a wide corridor towards the back of the palace. The roaring voice grew louder, or at least, nearer.

The woman in front of Andrei came to a sudden stop, he halted himself, and was promptly barged into by the man behind. He peered down the corridor, his eyes still accustoming themselves to the relative dimness indoors. Over the heads of the pressing crowd, he could see a tall, elegant door, painted in cream picked out with gold.

The door was closed. He wriggled his way towards it, and as he did so heard further destruction within—china, by the sound of it. There was a whimper, too, but it sounded too clear to have come from the room within. He pushed closer, and found Bronya close to the door, tears in her eyes and the major-domo's firm hand on her shoulder.

"Please let me go to her," she whispered.

"Both His Majesty and Her Highness commanded that they were to be uninterrupted," the major-domo replied, pitching his voice low so that it would not be heard within. "If you open that door uninvited, you must seek employment elsewhere."

Bronya bit her lip, and Andrei reached out and touched her arm. She turned, and smiled through her tears. His heart turned over, and he longed to gather her into his arms and solve all her problems. He just had no idea how.

"If you are called for, you may enter," the major-domo told Bronya, unbending a little. Not a bad old fellow, Andrei decided, even if he was as formal as a funeral.

She pressed herself against the door, listening for the faintest hint of a summons. The roaring was more like ordinary shouting now, and the smashings had stopped. Valeska's voice could be heard from out here in the corridor, high and a little quivery, but decidedly defiant.

Secretly, Andrei was rather relieved to be banned from the room. Nothing so embarrassing as someone else's family fights, especially if they were your employer. But it had sounded rather violent...

The Czar's deep, rough voice shouted one or two rather incoherent remarks, and the door suddenly flung open. Andrei hauled Bronya back before she could fall through the doorway, and discovered to his horror that it was full of angry red-faced czar. He flattened himself obsequiously against the wall. The corridor emptied as if by magic, people melting away through any door or passage they could find.

"What are you doing here?" the Czar demanded.

For a horrible moment Andrei thought the Czar meant him, but with a surge of relief realized the Czar's driver was the man standing behind him, who began to stutter excuses.

"Sleigh! Now!" the Czar ordered, and barrelled towards the hall, the driver skittering ahead of him like a mouse before a large ramping cat.

"I'd better go," Andrei whispered to Bronya. As he slid cautiously along in the Czar's wake, he heard Valeska's voice up-lifted behind him.

"Tell the footmen to clear this room, Bronya, then come to me in the library and take down a note to Duke Maxim."

He'd bet every coin he had—which admittedly wasn't many at present—that she had been the source of that terrified scream, but there was no trace of it now. She sounded cool and clear and in perfect control.

But then, her voice dropping and hoarse, came three more words. "I need him."

Rumour and Reversal

Andrei carefully slipped past the Czar as he stamped about on the front steps calling for his sleigh, and ran for the stables. Before he had reached the far end of the courtyard, he was compelled to dive aside as the three exquisite beasts charged past, their driver's face set in grim determination.

Picking himself up and dusting the snow off his coat, Andrei considered his future. He had never wanted to be anything but a coachman, ever since he was a tiny scrap of a boy back in the village. His grandmother had pulled in a few favours and got him a place here in town, and by merit he had risen to the status of second in command (from a total staff of two) in the Little Palace stables.

He had been just about to resign himself to never driving anything more splendid than a fat cart-horse taking the cook to market, when the Little Palace was suddenly turned into a working palace again, and he found himself second in command of a staff of no fewer than eight.

Undoubtedly, he'd moved up in the world in the most satisfactory fashion. But the pinnacle of any coachman's career, only to be dreamed of by most, was to be Head Coachman to the Czar. Not so much for the status—coachmen weren't snobs, or at least not about people—but for the quality of the animals themselves.

It was now dawning on Andrei that to be the Czar's coach-

man would, of necessity, involve a certain amount of interaction with the Czar himself, and that this would not form one of the benefits of the job. And yet...those horses!

"Andrei!"

He spun around so fast he nearly fell over. Bronya, without coat or gloves, was darting after him, a note clutched in her blue fingers.

"Please, will you take this to Duke Maxim?" she asked as she reached him, holding out the note.

"Of course—at once! But go inside, you'll—look, your hands are blue!"

He took the note and watched to see her turn back towards the door before he ran and slithered on.

The stables were all abuzz when Andrei reached them, and as he saddled a horse, one of the grooms detailed all he'd seen to those who'd missed the excitement.

"White as the snows, she was, and with the red print of a great big hand on her face."

This occasioned some hisses of indrawn breath and shakings of heads, but only the head coachman, old enough to be the Czar's father, felt free to comment.

"Always been that way, from a lad, he has. Free with his hands—"

"And other parts, from what I hear," muttered one groom to another, who sniggered.

Coachman eyed them disapprovingly. "You want to be less free with your tongue, my lad," he said austere, "or you'll find it's got you into trouble it won't get you out of. The Czar won't trouble himself using the flat of his hand to the likes of *you*."

"Reckon she gave as good as she got?" the loose-tongued groom suggested, stationing himself at the door ready to open it for Andrei's departure.

To Andrei's surprise, Coachman chuckled. "She's not one to descend to fisticuffs, but a sharp enough tongue she has,

and that's one weapon His Majesty's never got the mastery of. Why, on this very last trip, we were ambushed by a road-robber, and she—out of the trees he jumps, cutlass drawn, and before I can think or blink, up she stands in the carriage—the top was down, for it was a fine day, that day, at least till the fog came up in the afternoon—up she stands, and gives him the rough side of her tongue and sends him scrambling. And all done without a word that a lady oughtn't to know, what's more!" he added, with a stern look at the loose-tongued groom, who was clearly preparing to say something vulgarly suggestive.

Andrei swung himself into the saddle, the groom swung the door open, and they were off. It wasn't far to Duke Maxim's palace—not with a horse like this under him, anyway. It would have been a dull trudge on foot, but he was almost sorry to arrive at his destination so soon.

There were, even in this exalted street and this icy weather, a band of children playing outside. He eyed them carefully, and made his choice. It was an easy choice: most were making faces at the impressive and impassive footmen at the door, a few were staring at him, but only one was staring at the horse.

"Would you like to hold the horse for me?" he asked the rotund little figure.

"Yes please!" an excited little voice piped. "I'm Duscha," the voice continued, thus giving Andrei his first clue that the person inside the bundle of boots, coat, and muffler was a girl.

"Stand right there, Duscha," Andrei said, sliding down and handing her the reins. She didn't seem at all alarmed to be right in the path of a towering animal whose belly she could almost have walked under without ducking.

"I'm going to be a coachman when I grow up," Duscha said confidently, taking a better grip on the reins with her tiny mittened hands and fixing the horse with an eye born to command.

"Well, don't steal my job while I'm gone," Andrei said with

mock severity, and left her giggling.

The footmen eyed him dubiously, but opened the door with pleasing swiftness when he informed them he had a personal message from Her Imperial Highness Valeska Kira to deliver. He was ushered into a gilded echoing hall where twin roaring fireplaces billowed forth heat.

"Wait here," the duke's major-domo instructed, and withdrew.

Andrei was only too pleased to wait near such splendid fires. But all too soon Duke Maxim strode in, the major-domo presented Andrei to his notice, and Andrei presented the note to the duke.

He opened it at once, tearing it open impatiently. His eyes narrowed as he read, and his nostrils flared slightly. Then he crumpled it up and tossed it on a nearby table.

"No reply," he said. "See him out," he added to the major-domo, and strode away.

The next moment Andrei found himself outside the grand front door, between the two footmen, wondering just what he was supposed to say when he returned.



Bronya met Andrei in the Little Palace courtyard as he trotted in. She'd been waiting just inside the door for the sound of hoofbeats, was Andrei's guess. She lifted an anxious face as he brought the horse to a halt.

"Did you—was he there? Did he get the note? How soon will he be here?" she asked, wringing her hands.

Andrei sighed and dismounted. "Yes, he was there, and yes, I gave the note to him in person. He read it straight away."

"And then?"

"And then he said 'no reply.'"

Worry flooded Bronya's large dark eyes.

"I don't know what the note said, of course," Andrei went on, "but he didn't seem happy to get it. Almost...offended? I don't think he's coming."

Bronya burst into tears, and before he knew what he was doing, he had an arm around her and she was sobbing all down the front of his coat.

"Oh, Andrei, I don't know what to think! I'm so worried!"

"You think he's too old for her—or not interested?" Andrei asked.

"It's not that...he seems attentive enough. If you saw them together!" She gave a little hiccupping laugh through her tears. "Such a fuss about placing her chair just so, moving it twice so she wouldn't get too close to the fire, telling her not to worry about things with her father, he'd handle it all for her, she wasn't to do a thing..."

The gossip was right, then, at least about that.

"So what's wrong?" he asked, drawing her a little closer into the shelter of the gently steaming horse.

"There's..." Bronya bit back a sob and dropped her voice. "There's something wrong with Her Highness's hands."

"Frostbite?" Andrei suggested with a shiver.

"They're both curled up into little fists."

"So she's angry about something. It wouldn't be the first time."

"All the time, Andrei! Ever since—even when she's asleep! I've suggested calling for a physician, or at least a healer, but she won't hear of it! It's...it's not natural."

"Well, if she won't see a healer there's nothing you can do about it, so why worry? It'll be the duke's problem soon anyway. This isn't your responsibility."

"But *she* is!"

Andrei shook his head in grudging admiration. "You're too loyal for your own good, Bronya. She has to live her life; it's time you thought about living yours."

She didn't look convinced.

He took her hands. "There's nothing more you can do," he said gently.

"There might be," she said, and suddenly pulled herself together. "I can't tell you more—I shouldn't have told you this much."

"I won't betray your confidence," Andrei said. "But I'd better get this mare back to the stables before she catches a chill."

"Of course—thank you." She dried her eyes and hurried inside.

Andrei led the mare away briskly, wondering furiously what in the four seasons was going on with Valeska Kira—and what the "more" was that Bronya was still not telling him.



The hours passed, and the duke did not come. At last the old coachman cleared his throat and hauled himself out of his chair. "Time you were harnessing the horses for Her Highness's drive."

"In this weather?" Andrei asked incredulously. Freezing cold still, and a storm coming up, if he was any judge.

Coachman gave a leathery cackle. "Clear to see you haven't been long in royal service. It doesn't matter if the lady's likely to go or not. She still wants to be offered the opportunity. Mind you," he added, easing a crick out of his back, "I can call to mind days the late Czarina took her drive when the Coachman could hardly see past his horses' ears."

He went off to dress himself in the formal uniform demanded by the occasion, and Andrei hurried to obey, pulling a couple of the grooms away from their game.

Valeska Kira was carrying on like nothing had changed—like she still lived at court. He'd even heard rumours from the indoor staff that there had been Words Passed over a mere matter of luncheon being served three minutes late. Was that what was bothering Bronya? He didn't see how it fit with the hands, though.

The harnessing complete, Andrei put on his coat to take the sleigh round to the courtyard where Coachman would appear in all his splendour and take command of it. The wind was chill and the sky leaden, but no fresh snow was falling yet. Andrei pulled up outside the door and went to hold the leader's head. Coachman appeared and stood at attention at a dignified distance from the sleigh. The front door opened, and Her Highness came out, a great furry hood obscuring most of her face. Bronya, rather less sumptuously furred, was in close attendance.

The coachman bowed, Valeska acknowledged him with an incline of the head, and all was proceeding according to the pattern of time immemorial, when Andrei's ears caught the hiss of runners on snow, and the duke's equipage came briskly through the gate. Maxim's driver hastily reined in his horses when he saw Valeska's sleigh already at the front door, but he was adept, and managed it without putting his noble passenger off balance.

Maxim descended in a single dashing stride, his tall boots squeaking on the thin layer of settled snow. What he spent on his clothes Andrei didn't like to think, but there was no denying he cut a fine figure, with his narrow breeches, long silken waistcoat and matching topcoat. His hatless head rose out of a swarm of black furs which he slipped off and flung behind him into the sleigh. Very effective look with that sleek head of golden hair, but looks weren't everything, as Andrei's Granny used to say. His ears must be absolutely freezing.

"My dear cousin," he greeted Valeska, who was still poised at the foot of the steps. "What seems to be the trouble?"

Valeska hesitated, looking from the approaching duke to the waiting sleigh before her.

"Perhaps you would join me on my drive?" she suggested.

The duke gave an exaggerated shiver. "My dear Valeska, I've just been for a drive—here, to see you. I was given to understand it was important. Of course, if you have better things

to do..."

"No, not at all," she hurried to assure him. "But I—I thought you weren't coming."

He arched a brow, glinting in the sun. "Thought? Hoped, it would seem, since you are bent on departing yourself."

"I always take a drive at this time of the day, Maxim, you know that. Just like Mother did."

"Your mother was always ready to welcome her friends," Maxim said in a gently reproving tone.

It must be hard, Andrei brooded, losing your mother young and having people all around you who knew her longer than you did. Of course, he'd lost his own mother young, but at least Granny never compared Andrei to her late daughter-in-law. "Just like your father," on the other hand, passed her lips several times a week, on average.

"Of—of course," Valeska faltered. "But..."

"But you are, after all, your father's daughter," Maxim said. "I quite understand."

"No—Maxim, that isn't what I meant at all. Of course I won't go."

Coachman receded into the background with dignity.

"Nonsense," Maxim said crisply. "It's clear you have every intention of going, and I have no intention of preventing you. I came here to help you, not to bully you into doing whatever I say."

"Maxim, I—" Valeska began, but already Maxim was handing her into the sleigh. Bronya followed, her movements disjointed as though half of her was trying to stay behind.

"You there," Maxim said, his eye falling on Andrei. "What are you doing standing in the way? Take the reins and be off with you."

Andrei gave a wild-eyed glance across the courtyard, but Coachman wasn't stepping forward to take his place, and he didn't dare disobey.

He leapt back onto the driver's seat, flourished the whip above the horses' heads, and whisked away through the courtyard gate.

No one had told him where to go, but his instinct suggested Valeska might prefer to be away from crowds. The flats just outside Istvan, where sleighs were raced, seemed indicated. An awkward silence prevailed until they reached the open country at the edge of town.

Valeska's commanding voice cut across the crisp air. "Drive fast."

"Yes, Your Highness!" Andrei needed no second invitation. Of course, he shouldn't go *really* fast, not with such an important lady in the sleigh, but—

"Faster!"

Andrei succumbed to the temptation to see what these beautiful beasts could do, before Valeska Kira got over whatever was making her behave so unlike her usual self. He was rewarded with the exhilaration of going faster than he'd ever gone before, the wind tearing at his face, the horses moving like a single twelve-legged creature. They whipped across the flats.

At last against the wind came Valeska's words, "The Little Palace."

Andrei turned the horses in a smooth arc across the snow and set a course for home. Funny she hadn't just said "home," but then—

"At a dignified pace," Valeska added.

"Yes, Your Highness."

The old Valeska was back, then. Pity.



The only way to find out what was going on, Andrei decided, was to do a bit of investigating on his own account. Bronya was so loyal she wouldn't tell him a thing, and even

if she did she'd feel awful, and he didn't want that. But that didn't mean that he couldn't look into things himself, without her knowing.

The next day, therefore, Andrei went to see a healer. She seemed rather an intellectual sort, and he hoped she wouldn't see through his story too quickly. Town healers seemed like they all wanted to be physicians, even though everyone born below the Silver Step knew physicians were as likely as not to polish their patient off altogether.

Putting on his most innocent, fresh-up-from-the-country look, Andrei explained it was his little sister who had the problem. The healer, not unnaturally, wanted to know why he hadn't brought her with him.

Andrei had foreseen this, and glibly rattled off his story: she was at home in the village; their local healer wasn't much good but they didn't want to offend her by openly seeking other help. He was coming up to town on the freight wagons anyway, so he thought he'd at least come and ask.

There was still a certain dubiousness in her eye, but the healer agreed to hear his account of the symptoms, so he took heart and described the problem with Valeska's hands as best as he could, without having actually seen them.

"No recent injury?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Even an injury to another part of her body could cause these symptoms. Head or neck injury, particularly."

Andrei shook his head. If Valeska had been injured, Bronya would have been fretting about that, and anyway, why would Valeska hide an injury? No injury.

"Any sign of similar contractions in the feet?"

"I haven't noticed any," Andrei said honestly. She still fit into her dainty little boots, so there couldn't be anything too major there.

The healer pursed her lips. "How are her water and earth?"

This Andrei took in his stride, having heard his Granny, a

healer herself, wield the same question a hundred times, generally when she felt herself not to be getting a grip on the diagnosis.

"Just as usual," he said firmly, then added "so Mother tells me."

The healer said "Hmm," and stroked her chin thoughtfully while gazing at a piece of blue glassware on the table that served as desk, bench, and examining table.

Andrei tried to look hopeful and impressed.

"And her age—sixteen, you said?"

Andrei nodded.

"Most likely temper, then," the healer said authoritatively. "Girls get it in their heads to be the centre of attention at that age, and one way's as good as another."

She got up and started bustling about, collecting a little box of waxed paper and a tiny scoop and fetching a green glass jar off a shelf.

"Tell your mother to try her on hot and cold plunge baths, alternating, and if that doesn't cause her hands to uncurl, try a dusting of this rose-hip preparation down her spine."

Andrei took the box, paid his coin, and thanked her. He found himself out on the street again, staring at the little box in his hands. If he wasn't mistaken, that healer had just prescribed him itching powder. He put it in his pocket with a laugh and sauntered down the street, debating whether it was even worth suggesting it to Bronya. He couldn't see Valeska Kira laughing it off.

As he came abreast of the Howler station, he found a crowd spilling out the door, forcing passers-by to descend into the muddy squelch of the street proper.

"What's going on?" he asked a man at the back of the crowd.

"That's what we'd all like to know," he answered solemnly.

"Strange doings afoot, it seems! Boba's telling, listen!"

His curiosity piqued, Andrei hung about until he could squeeze through the door and find out what exactly the un-

seen Boba was saying. The tale was well and truly told by then, of course, but Boba—a Howler courier, by his uniform—was by no means averse to having a fresh audience.

"I take my run out to the south and west, as you know," he said, "and there was I at the relay station, waiting for hours, when finally Toma staggers in. I give you my word, I thought he'd been set upon at first, but once I got him in and his coat off, there wasn't a mark on him. He just sat there and shivered by the fire for an hour, and finally he speaks."

The room waited, hanging on his every word. Half of them had heard it before, of course, but it seemed they hadn't sucked the full horror out of the tale on the first telling.

"He tells me he was leading his horse along the forest path, seeing as it had got so dark already, and he collided with a wandering man—or I thought it was a man," he said to me. "Two arms and legs and all, just like you and me, but Boba," he says, his eyes wide with the horror of it, "he hadn't no head."

A murmuring shiver ran round the room.

"'No head?' says I. 'Come now, Toma, how's a man to walk around anywhere, forest or not, without a head? It's against nature,' says I. 'It's dark out there in the forest, as you say. Likely you didn't see right, that's all.' And he gives this little laugh which I swear I'll hear to my dying day, he gives this laugh and he says, 'Oh, I saw his head all right. It was a solid block of wood, is what it was.' Now, that's another matter altogether, and so I said. 'Many's the man whose head could be a block of wood for all his brains, or his looks, if it comes to that,' I said. 'No use frightening yourself half out of your wits because you meet an ugly fool on the path. Us Howlers aren't bred from chickens, you know.'"

Pyotr made approving noises from behind his counter.

"And he looks at me," Boba went on, his voice dropping, and his hearers leaning in, "and he gives that mad laugh again, and says, 'how many ugly fools have faces of bark, Boba?' and he holds out his hand...and there's a fragment of bark, clutched

tight in his hand, so tight it's drawn blood."

A long sigh went round the room. Boba was well known as a storyteller, and he certainly had material worthy of his powers today.

"Are you sure it was his own blood?" Andrei asked, and had the satisfaction of hearing groans of horror echoing round the room.

"No, young man, that I am not," Boba said solemnly.

"What's all this?" said a fresh voice, and Boba turned to tell his tale again. Andrei felt a pluck at his sleeve.

"Pyotr? Don't tell me you've got a story to tell, too."

The Howler man frowned, a little wedge appearing at the top of his nose. "I've got a story all right, but you won't like it."

Andrei sucked in a breath as the draft from the ever-open door went down his neck. "Don't tell me..."

"A reversal. Sorry, lad, but there it is. Hand over, and we'll none of us have to think of it again."

"But it's been ages! Are you sure it was done in time?"

Pyotr drew himself up, and the light glinted off his little spectacles. "Is it my integrity or that of my fellow Howlers you're questioning?" he demanded. The Howler clan prided themselves on their integrity; indeed, the whole system ran on it. *Honest as a Howler* was practically proverbial.

"I didn't mean—"

"You ought to be sure what you do mean before you go opening that big mouth of yours," Pyotr said sternly. "It was done within the day—matter of fact, the old woman at the other end started it back inside of an hour. But a long chain there and back, you've got to expect it to take some time. All fair and above board, and I'll thank you for the two and a half eagles you owe me. Then you can have your brush back."

"The thing is," Andrei said with a winning smile, "the thing is, old friend—"

"Don't call me your friend," the Howler man said unsympathetically. "People only call me friend when they're planning on cheating me, and I hope you aren't intending to do that."

"Of course not!" Andrei said hurriedly. "It's just...I don't have it on me just now."

"Don't have it at all, more like!" Pyotr eyed Andrei closely. "I hear you've been seen shopping for an item much too pretty for your neck—a not unrelated fact, eh?"

Andrei blushed, and hoped it would be put down to the nip in the air from the open door.

"Let's hope she's understanding about giving it back, then, because—"

"No! I don't ask for gifts back," Andrei said hotly. "I'll get the money some other way."

"Better make it soon," Pyotr advised. "No one owing to a Howler man can use the Howler network—"

"I know, I know!"

"—and no one's Granny is going to be getting a little something from his weekly pay without the network."

"All right! You don't need to tell me; we all know how it works!"

"No one's above the Lore, lad. I'll be seeing your two and a half eagles by tomorrow's close, then."

"Tomorrow?"

"That's what I said." Pyotr turned his attention to another customer, and Andrei turned away, his mind racing through fog.

Boba was hotly rebutting the recent arrival's suggestion that Toma's monster was no more than a tree combined with a certain quantity of recently imbibed alcohol. Howlers weren't ones to drink to excess, he said, earning nods from around the room, and certainly not while on duty. And what was more, he'd never yet heard of a tree that walked around and groaned, and he hoped he never did.

This was immediately taken up by the listeners. Groans? He hadn't mentioned groans before.

"Wordless groans," Boba said firmly. "As though it willed to speak but hadn't a tongue."

Andrei gave a wordless groan of his own, startling a nervous fellow by the door, and passed out into the street.

Two and a half eagles. By tomorrow.



Late that night, Andrei lay fretting on his straw mattress, huddled under a thick scratchy blanket. If he scrunched himself down just right, he could see out the tiny window to the main bulk of the Little Palace. There was a light still burning in one of the upstairs windows. That much illumination in a room late at night—it had to be Valeska's chamber. Not that he cared a straw for her rest, but if she was still awake, Bronya was likely with her. Just over there...

Warmed by the glow of the fire and lit by half a dozen candles in silver mirrored girandoles, Valeska Kira sat in a low-backed chair and let Bronya brush her long dark hair. Bronya worked in silence, as was usual, keeping her eyes on her work. Valeska watched her in the dressing table's large mirror.

"It's a wonderful thing to be loved, Bronya," she said, breaking their accustomed silence.

"Yes, my lady," Bronya said, rather startled. The duke's arrival early in the morning with a large bouquet—at this time of year!—had resulted in a rather emotional reunion, and if Valeska had apologized for perhaps more than her fair share of the falling-out, well, it was none of Bronya's business. As long as Valeska was happy...and she'd certainly looked happy today, basking in Maxim's assiduous attentions.

"And to love in return," Valeska continued, "provided that the object of one's affections is suitably worthy."

"Yes, my lady," Bronya said, and when this did not seem enough, added "The duke is a fine man."

If there was a lack of warmth in her tone, Valeska did not heed it.

"He is...superlative," she murmured, a little smile toying round her lips. "Indeed, Bronya, I could hardly imagine a more perfectly suitable man. He is, perhaps, a little older than I, but a true lady knows how to value wisdom and experience."

"He's very handsome, too," Bronya put in, hiding a little smile of her own as she carefully parted Valeska's hair in two.

"A consideration," Valeska allowed, "though hardly a prime one. Maxim has charm, which is something more; he is diplomatic, shrewd, mannered—the perfect courtier. And who else in the kingdom even approaches me in birth? His father was a second cousin of my grandfather, the late Czar, you know."

Bronya made a tactfully indistinct murmur and began to plait the long dark hair down one side of Valeska's head. As always, she marvelled at the perfect posture which held her lady's head high, without a hint of sag or slump, from the moment she sat up in bed in the morning to the moment she laid her head on the pillow at night.

"While it is an excellent match for Maxim," Valeska said, still gazing reflectively in the mirror, "it cannot be said to be beyond his deserts. Nor do I think I am lowering myself by the match. In fact," her lips twisted wryly for a moment, "it could be said that I am fortunate in the match too. Just imagine—if Maxim had married in his early youth, I should have been condemned to spending my life alone. For who else is there that I could possibly marry?"

Bronya bound the first plait with ribbon, silently reflecting that if Maxim had married in his early youth, Valeska would probably be engaged to his son by now.

"I may be young," Valeska's voice went on, calm and even, "but I am not a fool. I know perfectly well that a lady of rank does not marry solely to please her own inclinations. A peasant girl may marry without considering the position of the man of her choice, but those born to a higher Step may not."

A laundress might very well consider the position of the man of her choice, Bronya thought, if she wanted to be Czarina, but she didn't say so. Duke Maxim wasn't the only one who knew how to be diplomatic.

"What a good thing it is," Bronya said with a warm smile, "that your inclinations run in the direction of such a suitable man."

"Fortunate indeed," Valeska said. "But I am well aware—as must you be—that not everyone shares my good fortune. I understand that one of the stableboys has been showing you rather more attention than necessary."

"The Assistant Coachman," Bronya said, not meeting Valeska's eyes in the mirror.

Valeska dismissed this distinction with an airy wave. "An outdoor servant regardless, Bronya. Beneath you."

"Beneath a child of the streets?" Bronya asked, trying to make light of the matter.

"Bronya," Valeska said severely, "you have been brought up at court. You may be a servant, but you are the personal servant of the heir to the throne. A titled husband is not out of the question. A servant smelling of horses is."

It was true, Bronya reflected as she tied the ribbon round the second plait. Andrei did smell of horses. It was a warm, dry, salty smell, a strangely comforting smell.

"I shall have the major-domo speak to him," Valeska said firmly. "You will not be troubled further with his attentions."

"Yes, my lady," Bronya said, not being in a position to say anything else. She held the thick velvet dressing gown as Valeska slipped out of it and helped her lady into bed.

"Maxim's coming again tomorrow," Valeska said. "He said he has something very particular to say to me."

Judging by the barely restrained excitement in her tone, Valeska was in no doubt as to what this very particular speech might be.

Bronya extinguished the candles one by one, leaving the

room lit only by the glowing coals in the fireplace, and slipped out the door. Her eyes were prickling. Tiredness, she told herself. Or perhaps she had extinguished the candles clumsily, and the smoke got in her eyes. Nothing to do with Valeska's well-meant and caring advice. Nothing at all.

Across the stableyard, Andrei saw the light behind the curtains slowly dim. He sighed, and settled himself to sleep. Two and a half eagles by tomorrow's close.

Two and a half...

Bronya...



Dawn came, bringing Andrei no illumination in the matter of the two and a half eagles. It did reveal to his sight yet another problem to deal with: the water in his bedroom ewer had frozen over again. Andrei sighed, shook it to be sure it was part liquid, and poked at it gingerly with his cherished silver razor. No good. He folded the razor again and slipped it into his shirt pocket, wincing at the cold biting his skin through the thin linen.

Andrei clattered downstairs to the stable block's main room. It was stuffy and smelled of horses, to be sure, but it was the one place in the building you could be sure of being warm.

"Morning, Coachman," Andrei said respectfully.

The old man coughed vigorously in his blankets. Slept here all night, by the looks of it, and with that cough it was probably just as well.

"You're late," he said.

"My water's frozen again," Andrei said, putting the ewer down by the little coal stove and taking a seat beside the coachman's makeshift bed. "That's the one thing I hate about win—" A large leathery hand clapped over his mouth.

"Never speak ill of the Lady," Coachman said in a gravelly undertone. "Never by name, you hear me?"

Andrei nodded, since speech was at present impossible. Might as well humour the superstitious old fellow.

"Good," Coachman said, and coughed long and hard, spitting at last into a small bowl beside his makeshift bed. "It's turned colder in the night, but it's crisp yet. Her Highness'll want the sleigh out this afternoon as always, and I can't be sure of keeping this cough under."

Coachman would split himself before he'd do anything so against his code as intruding his ill health on Her Imperial Highness.

"You'll have to do it," Coachman concluded, and Andrei's heart leapt. Another chance to drive something swifter than a cart-horse—and with any luck, Valeska Kira would be wanting another whip across the flats.

"And mind you do a proper job of it!" Coachman warned.

"I'll take as much care of her as if my life depended on it," Andrei said, springing to his feet.

"It probably does," the old man said dryly, but Andrei was already rattling his wash-water around the jug and dashing from the room.

Once upstairs in his own little attic room, he carefully wedged his piece of broken mirror at the right angle, worked up some foam before the water could freeze again, and, removing his now warm razor from his pocket, began most carefully to shave. And it was as he glared at his contorted half-foaming face in the mirror that it hit him. Coachman! Of course—he'd know what had happened. And he'd talk, if Andrei approached him the right way.

His shave completed, Andrei went to butter the old coachman up. He was a bit cranky to begin with, but never one to miss a chance of telling the younger generation about the good old days. With care, Andrei drew him on to the subject of the recent Lake trip, and the excitement with the road-robber. This led to a discourse on how the roads weren't kept as they used to be, nor were young carriage drivers prepared to cope with

the vicissitudes and dangers of the roads as they had been in his younger days.

Andrei wasn't sure why they would have needed to be prepared for such eventualities in Coachman's day, if the roads were as safe as he said, but he didn't want to miss his chance at posing the question he'd engineered the whole conversation for.

"Did the princess shake her fist at him, or point accusingly, or anything like that?" Andrei asked, as casually as he could, "or was it purely the power of her words that scared him off?"

The coachman snorted. "How would I know, lad? I don't have eyes in the back of my head, do I?"

Well, there went that avenue of enquiry. The only person in the Little Palace—apart from Bronya, who'd never say a word—who was with Valeska for the whole journey, and he'd had his back to her the whole time.

The stable door creaked, opening just far enough to allow a pageboy to squeeze himself through the gap.

"Her Highness wants the sleigh?" Coachman asked, automatically heaving himself to his feet.

"No—it's Andrei," the pageboy said. "And not Her Highness at all."

"Make yourself clear, can't you?" Coachman demanded testily, creaking back into his chair. "Aren't pages hired for their wits? My old cart-horse could deliver a message better."

The pageboy rolled his eyes—taking care that Coachman could not see him do so—and tried again. "The major-domo wants to see Andrei."

"Assistant Coachman to you," Andrei said, swapping his grandfather's warm but shapeless coat for the more formal jacket before following the pageboy out of the stables, across snowy paths, and into the depths of the Little Palace's service wing. The pageboy delivered him to the door of the major-domo's office with a pert word, skipping away before Andrei could mess up his perfectly smoothed hair for him.

Andrei knocked and was bidden to enter. The major-domo was sitting in a heavy chair, as befitted his station, behind a large plain table covered in papers.

"Andrei," the major-domo said, with a rather more human tone than he'd ever been heard to use in the presence of Valeska Kira. "Sit down, will you?"

Andrei did so, his mind racing. This wouldn't be about the eagles—Howlers were discreet, unless provoked to be otherwise—and it wasn't likely to be another raise in his pay. A horrible thought gnawed its way into his mind. Had someone found out about him driving Valeska so fast the other day? Was this the sack? But no, you weren't likely to get the sack for obeying your lady. Not unless the Czar had given orders to the contrary, and *that* didn't seem likely.

"Enjoying being part of a larger household?" the major-domo asked.

"Er, yes," Andrei replied cautiously. This didn't sound like the sack. Not yet, anyway...

"Particularly as it involves having more young women about the place, eh?" the major-domo said jocularly, leaning back and folding his arms across his black silk waistcoat.

Andrei grinned, and the major-domo chuckled.

"Known Her Imperial Highness's maid Bronya long?"

"A couple of years," Andrei said, stretching the truth nearly to breaking point. He'd seen her two years ago at one of the periodic servants' dances, and had managed to actually dance with her a year later, which was the first time they'd ever spoken. Not that she'd been far from his mind in the meantime.

"Mm." The major-domo leaned forward again, his expression more serious. "Fond of her?"

"Very."

The dark eyes across the table scrutinized him under bushy brows. "Plenty of other girls in the imperial service—and out of it."

"None like Bronya," Andrei said firmly.

The major-domo sighed. "Well, it may be, and it may not. The point is, she's not for you. You're not to speak to her again."

"What?" Andrei stared, his mouth hanging slightly open. The major-domo couldn't say who Andrei was and wasn't allowed to talk to, could he? Or marry, if it came to that!

"Her Highness had a word with me this morning, and bade me have a word with you. Which I have."

The major-domo stood, indicating that the conversation was over. Andrei didn't notice.

"But...doesn't she want Bronya to be happy?"

The major-domo sighed again and leaned on the table. "People have different ideas of what makes for happiness. Valeska Kira values Bronya a good deal, and she has no particular reason to think highly of you. It's a blow, I can see," he went on, his voice gentling a little. "But those in service can't always act according to their wish. You're still young. You'll get over it."

Andrei got to his feet in a daze and somehow found his way out through the door. Get over being separated from Bronya? Never! He wasn't going to change, and if Bronya wanted him, he wasn't going to let Valeska Kira stand in the way, not if she was seated on the Throne of Seven Steps and all.

He stumbled out into the little garden where he had talked with Bronya, and the cold cleared his mind in a moment. That was it. Valeska had to change her mind. He had to find a way to make her change her mind. Perhaps if he pleaded with her this afternoon—no, he wasn't exactly silver-tongued, and she wasn't easily swayed. Nor likely to listen to a servant she paid little more heed to than she did the horses he drove. But somehow... Today was his chance; he might not get another. Somehow, he had to change her mind.

The day crept slowly by, Andrei moving as in a dream around his daily duties, accepting with indifference Coachman's scolding for his unaccustomed slowness. Duke Maxim's driver arrived, delivering his master to dinner with the prin-

cess, and as the hours wore on it seemed less and less likely that the duke would depart before Valeska's accustomed drive.

Andrei's heart began to thump. What if today of all days she decided to stay in? His one chance, gone! Not that it would do him any good if he couldn't think of a way to make use of it.

No message came to countermand the standing order for the sleigh. At the usual time, the sleigh was drawn into position, and the horses led out for harnessing. And as Andrei's hands moved about the harness, checking here, buckling there, the idea came to him. His lips curved up, and his hands moved faster. He'd only need a minute spare, and with any luck the duke's presence would slow things down just a little.

Mere minutes later, three perfectly harnessed horses, white against the grimy snow, drew the delicate silvery sleigh out of the stable alley and along to the main courtyard gate. A handful of children were playing in the street as usual. Andrei grinned, slowed the horses to a walk, and beckoned to a small boy in a grubby blue jacket engaged in a slushball fight.

"Andrei!" The little boy slid expertly across the icy patches towards the sleigh. "Do I get a ride?"

"Maybe another day," Andrei said. "I'm on Her Highness's business, you know. But I've got a job for you..."

Out of the Frying Pan

The front door opened just as Andrei pulled up outside it with a little spray of ice. Just in time. Bronya eyed him narrowly as she helped Valeska down the steps. He grinned back. Valeska Kira was hanging on Duke Maxim's every word; she hadn't noticed a thing. Maxim handed her solicitously into the sleigh, her mittened fist resting like a ball in his hand. Once Bronya had her lady well tucked in with furs and lap robes, she took her own seat at Andrei's side.

"Shall we?" Duke Maxim said, his fine voice sounding clearly in the freezing air.

Andrei knew his cue and started the horses with a flourish of the whip over their heads. A good driver's whip never needed to make contact with the horses at all. He turned them neatly, circling the courtyard to leave by the same gate. The remaining boys cheered and jumped up and down on their slush heaps.

Andrei drove at a dignified pace down the larger streets, heading by degrees for the edge of town. A scattered few bowed and curtsied as they passed. Her Highness's favourite place to drive, he had been reliably informed by Coachman, was not the flats, but the low hill overlooking the palaces and huddled streets of Istvan. It was carpeted in snow, and stands of snow-capped evergreens dotted its sides.

The route Andrei chose was perhaps a little less than direct, but with any luck the two in the back would be too wrapped

up in each other to care, or even notice. He couldn't afford to reach the hill too soon.

Valeska took a deep breath as they left the city behind, and let it hiss slowly away. "So nice to be out of the city," she observed to her companion. "As far away as possible from *that woman*."

Andrei kept his eyes straight ahead, and pretended to be deaf in the approved manner.

"Don't even demean yourself to think of her," Maxim advised.

"What else have I to think of, shut away as I am?" Valeska asked. "Except for you, of course..."

"You'd rather I brought you court gossip?" Maxim asked with a faintly disapproving note. "The same old feuds and scandals, hashed over and over again? Not to mention the chatter over the laundress's first grand ball this evening—hardly appropriate in her condition."

"A ball?" Valeska's voice sharpened.

"But haven't you—? My dear cousin, you don't mean to tell me you haven't been..."

"Not invited," Valeska said, in tones which made the frosty air seem mild. "Not that I would attend such a demeaning event if I were. He won't even see me, Maxim."

"Perhaps he is concerned for your safety," Maxim suggested, though even he didn't seem very convinced. "Across town by night..."

"He didn't seem so concerned for my safety when he sent me to make the Midseason visit to the Lady's Lake," Valeska said bitterly. "I believe he would have been content to send me off with no protection but the old coachman, if you hadn't volunteered to accompany me."

"As I recall," Maxim murmured, "there was no threat you were not perfectly capable of counteracting yourself."

A tactful reference to the road-robber she'd yelled at, Andrei guessed.

"Threat? I would have died of boredom without you," Valeska said, a little humour creeping into her voice. "No one but that mindless flirt Lala Bora to talk to!"

That must be Valeska's temporary lady-in-waiting, acting as chaperone for the trip. Bronya counting as "no one" again, Andrei supposed grimly.

"Now don't say that," Maxim scolded. "You talked to the peasants in practically every village we passed through."

"True," she conceded, "but one can hardly have an intelligent conversation with someone who goggles at one when one speaks and gets utterly tongue-tied when they try to speak themselves." She sighed. "If you didn't come to see me every day I believe I'd die of boredom even now. I'm so entirely cut off from everything, Maxim."

"So you say," Maxim said, with a sudden edge to his voice. "But you do not seem to lack for amusements. Why, you drive out every day!"

"Alone," Valeska said bleakly. "A solitary drive each afternoon is hardly the height of a social whirl, Maxim. I never meet anyone!"

"And who did you meet yesterday?" he enquired. "I hear you were at the silversmith's for well over an hour."

"How did you hear about that?" Valeska asked, a shade defensively.

"You are Her Imperial Highness Valeska Kira. You must expect your movements to be noted," Maxim said smoothly. "I note you do not answer my question as to who you met there."

"No one, Maxim! I was shopping, that is all."

"For over an hour, in the one little shop?"

"I couldn't decide what to buy. I wasn't sure what—my friend would most like."

"Mysterious friends without names," Maxim said, "and this from a lady who claims to be friendless?"

Valeska tried to laugh. "Not nameless at all, Maxim. You must trust me a little."

"Yet it would appear that you do not trust me at all," he said coldly, and began to speak in a rather distant voice about the latest trivialities of court gossip.

Gossip was a favourite recreation in the servants' hall, but Andrei had never seen the attraction: endless words about people you didn't know, weren't likely to meet, and wouldn't care for if you did. He turned his attention to the driving ahead. They were coming to a more heavily wooded part of the hill now, where the branches bent slowly down under the accumulating weight of snow, before the weight bent them too far and the snow would slip off in a miniature avalanche.

There was a quick flash of blue in the trees ahead. Andrei braced himself against the footboard. As they went under the trees, a sudden fall of snow from a branch high above dropped right in front of the sleigh.

The startled horses reared and plunged. Two tried to veer left, but the right-hand horse shied right, and then they were running wild, all thought of pace and gait forgotten. Valeska screamed, and Bronya would have been thrown backwards into the body of the sleigh had she not clutched at Andrei's arm.

This was his moment! With a calm panache which he hoped was noticeable to the pair in the back, he masterfully gathered in the reins, stood up in his seat like a charioteer of the old days, and brought the horses gradually to a halt.

He turned to his passengers, bowed as deeply as his thick coat permitted, and said in his most impressive voice, "I trust Her Highness is unharmed?" At her shaky nod he bowed again, and added "Please excuse the delay while I see to the horses."

He leapt down with a limberness the old coachman hadn't shown in years, and laid a soothing hand on the nose of each trembling horse in turn, checking over their harness as he did so.

"Maxim..." Valeska's normally autocratic voice had an un-

accustomed quiver.

"Calm yourself," Maxim said. "You see the driver is entirely master of the situation."

Andrei hid a smile as he bent to check on the sleigh's ornately carved shafts. Valeska Kira had no particular reason to think well of him, eh? Well, the shafts might be a day or so closer to their eventual demise, but there was no real damage, and the Czar could certainly afford to buy his daughter a new sleigh when needed. Perhaps even a better one...

Jumping back into his place, he took up the reins and waited for orders.

"The Little Palace," Valeska said, the wobble already firmly eradicated from her voice.

"Of course," Maxim said. "Straight to the samovar—you need something hot and comforting after your shock."

Andrei took a shortcut back to the Little Palace, avoiding the possibility of running into crowds on the wider streets. As Valeska descended, Maxim and Bronya fussing round her, the small boy in the dirty blue jacket appeared from the back of the sleigh.

"Hoy! What do you think you're about, boy?" Maxim demanded sternly.

"Don't shout at the poor child," Valeska said. "Were you riding on the runners?" she asked the little boy, who snatched off his cap.

"Yes, Your...Your..."

"Highness," Bronya murmured.

"Highness," the boy finished with an abashed grin.

Valeska was by now almost smiling—an unfamiliar expression which made her look more human than usual. "It's very dangerous, and you must promise me not to do it again," she told him. "You might have been badly injured when the horses bolted."

"Oh, I didn't get on till after that," the boy said cheerfully. "Didn't I do a good job with the snow?" he asked Andrei, who

glared at him. "Jumped on the branch at just the right moment, din' I?"

"Do you mean to say," broke in Maxim, "that you engineered that—that accident?"

"Wasn't an accident," the boy protested. "Nobody got hurt. Not with Andrei driving. He's the best! Don't forget," he told Andrei, "you owe me a hot pie."

A silence fell, during which the boy finally caught Andrei's eye.

"I mean, um..." he faltered, and stopped.

"Bronya," Valeska said icily, "take this child to the kitchens and see he is given a hot meal. Maxim, send this reckless fool packing. He is not to come under this roof again."

She swept into the hall and the door was closed behind her. Andrei caught Bronya's eye, and wished he hadn't. Words hovered on her lips, but Maxim broke the silence first.

"You heard Her Highness," he said. "No doubt your young friend here will see your things are sent on."

"Where?" Bronya asked bitterly.

"I don't like to see a talented young man's life blighted by one foolish decision," Maxim said easily. "Thought you'd impress the princess and gain a reward, eh? Well, we were all young and high-spirited once. Take this card to the Four Corners coach inn—I've done a favour or two for Fredek in my time; he'll take you on."

"Thank you!" Bronya said fervently.

A cab driver? Him? With a rickety old cab and an even rickettier old nag to draw it? Andrei opened his stiff lips to protest but caught Bronya's eye again, and forced out "Thank you, sir," instead.

"No need for Her Highness to hear about it," Maxim added pleasantly. "And now I'd better be getting along to that samovar before I'm missed." He ruffled the little boy's hair. "Mind you stay off runners in future, lad."

The little boy glared at Maxim's retreating back, flattening his hair and jamming his cap back on.

Bronya drew a big breath, and Andrei braced himself.

"You fool!" she said, and it was plain that this, though delivered with a wealth of meaning, was but a preliminary salvo. "What on earth possessed you to risk the life of the heir to the Throne of Seven Steps? And her cousin as well!"

"I didn't!" Andrei protested. "I wouldn't! They were perfectly safe—they aren't even bruised!"

"Andrei's the best coachman in the world," the little boy said, clearly anxious to regain his lost favour.

"You stay out of this," Bronya snapped, and the little boy closed his mouth and opened his eyes very wide. "He's not a coachman at all, thanks to his tricks!"

"Bronya, I only did it for you!"

"For *me*?" she said incredulously. "How is—"

"So Valeska Kira would think better of me—not forbid me to talk to you. See you. Court you," he added despondently.

"You thought this—" Bronya broke off, apparently lost for words. But not for long. "You thought *this* would persuade Valeska you'd make a good husband for me?"

The little boy's eyes grew rounder.

"You don't *think*!" Bronya went on. "You're reckless and foolhardy and—"

"Bronya—" Andrei tried.

"Don't you Bronya me! A woman marries to gain a husband, not to have one more child about the place!"

"Marry me, and I'll treat you like a princess," Andrei tried desperately.

Bronya snorted. "You already did treat me like a princess—nearly broke her neck and mine," she retorted. "All I want is a man who'll be responsible," she continued in calmer tones. "Prove you can take responsibility and I might reconsider. After all," she added, "a princess is allowed to set her suitor a challenge, isn't she? There's yours: grow up."

"Ooo," the little boy began, but retired precipitately behind Bronya's skirts when he saw the look in Andrei's eye.

"Time you were packing your things," Bronya went on. "Oh, and you'd better have this necklace back too," she added, her hand going to the collar of her coat.

Andrei hesitated, but only for a moment. "It was a gift," he said. "Keep it."

As he started the horses back towards the stables, face grim, a small snowball exploded on his shoulder.

"Hey mister," a little voice called, "don't forget you still owe me a hot pie!"



The samovar was just coming to the boil as Maxim entered the drawing room. Once the waiting maid had filled the teapot, Valeska bid her depart. "Duke Maxim will pour."

"Anything for a drop of something hot inside me," Maxim said agreeably. The maid bobbed and disappeared. The tea duly poured, Maxim settled back in his chair, stretching out his long legs to the fire.

"Now that we're alone," Valeska said demurely, "wasn't there something you wanted to say to me?"

Maxim looked blank, and the hint of a frown crept across his fine forehead.

"I remember you saying yesterday," Valeska continued, keeping her eyes on the delicate cup carefully held between her two little fists, "that you had something very particular to say to me."

"So I did," Maxim said, his voice low and resonant. He set the cup down.

"Yet you haven't said it," Valeska said, now looking at his cup instead of hers.

"Do such thoughts need to be given utterance," Maxim asked softly, "when you understand me so well?"

Valeska's cheeks blossomed pink.

"You know what I would say," Maxim said. "You understand me as none of the shrill and shallow court ladies have ever done."

"Oh, Maxim." Valeska looked up with a brief and brilliant smile, but her lids drooped again.

"You do not seem as joyful as I had thought you might," he said, a hint of reserve creeping into his voice.

"Oh, I am! But...when? My father..."

"This must remain our secret for the present," Maxim said, taking her cup and setting it aside so as to be able to take her hands in his. "You must trust me to open the subject with your father when the time seems right. I would not, of course, do anything to jeopardize your position. You know that. He must give permission—what reason could he have to object?"

Valeska sighed. "No reason, of course, you are right. Yet..."

"Yet what? You do not trust me?"

"I do! But I have waited so long to be happy. How can I believe at last that my waiting is at an end?"

Maxim bent forward and kissed her hands. "How can you doubt it? After all I have done—"

He broke off as the door opened and Bronya entered.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, my lady, sir," she said, blushing, and began to withdraw.

Maxim was already on his feet and standing casually with an arm draped along the mantelpiece.

"Bronya!" Valeska called, as the door was about to close.

"My lady?"

"Has that person been removed from the premises?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Good. You may go. I will ring when you are wanted."

Bronya bobbed a curtsy and left, closing the door carefully behind her. She ought to rejoice in her lady's happiness, she told herself as she walked slowly away. At least someone was

happy... Her hand went almost automatically to where the silver snowflake lay hidden under her dress, and she sighed.



Andrei huddled into his grandfather's old coat as the thin wind blew occasional stray snowflakes down his neck. He tried not to think about the thickly furred coat of the true coachman; tried to ignore the creak of the shabby sleigh beneath him.

The line of sleighs leading to the Czar's palace started and stopped, started and stopped. The single horse under Andrei's command huffed, a little white cloud in the chill air. The fat old mare wasn't that bad a horse, Andrei told himself—as long as he didn't compare her with the imperial beasts.

He was lucky, he supposed: having Duke Maxim's patronage meant he was spared the worst horse with the worst sleigh which as new boy he would otherwise be doomed to driving—if he was allowed to drive at all. Manure didn't shovel itself.

Still, he was never going to strike Valeska Kira as a suitable husband for Bronya while he was driving fourth-rate nobles to parties. Anyone who was anyone had their own equipage, and by the looks of it, every single one of them was in this line. Andrei's horse clopped on as the sleigh in front moved up.

Andrei sighed. Here he was, practically the best driver in the land, and his horse could do the job without him. And his neck was cold. And that blasted packet of itching powder had come open in his pack and spilled all over his spare shirt—which he'd been told to put on before he went to collect the fourth-rate noble. He squirmed uncomfortably.

Still, there was one comfort: things were so bad for him now there was nowhere to go but up.

At last they creaked into the palace courtyard—more or less a square in its own right—and came to a halt at the foot of the grand stair. A footman handed the extremely minor nobleman out with a flourish.

"Over there," another footman directed, and Andrei nodded, followed the line of empty sleighs around the edge of the square, and parked up. Jumping down, he pulled the blanket off the floor of the sleigh and draped it over his horse. No sense in them both freezing.

The mare whickered in a pleased manner and tried to nuzzle Andrei's neck. As her chin was still covered in the frozen condensation of her breath, this friendly gesture was less than warmly received, but Andrei dodged her nose and huddled up against her neck for warmth. At least he was out of the wind now, and was free until his fourth-rate passenger left the ball—at whatever hour that might be.

Around him, drivers were settling in for a long night, some rolling themselves in blankets for a bit of shut-eye, others bringing out playing cards or small flasks. Andrei wasn't interested. Not that he minded the risk, but if you wanted to be a successful gambler, you had to be good, and to be good you had to work at it. Andrei was only interested in being good at one thing, and cards wasn't it. And if you weren't going to be good at something, why bother with it at all?

There was a good deal of shop talk, in which Andrei joined, gritting his teeth against the inevitable jokes about his change of employment.

"I like your horse," one liveried fellow said, choking himself on a mouthful of liquor at the thought of his forthcoming witticism. "Was she your grandmother's?"

"Laugh all you want, Pavel," Andrei retorted, "I'm still a better driver than you." He was. And if he got a chance to prove himself, there was hope for him yet. Nowhere to go but up...

"Oh, really? Going to win races with that old nag, are you?" Pavel jeered.

"I didn't say I had a better horse, you cloth-eared idiot," Andrei said. "Give me my pick of horse and sleigh and I'll beat you on any course you choose."

The huddled grooms and drivers jeered at Pavel in his turn,

who turned red and shoved his flask back in his pocket.

"I get first choice," he demanded.

"You'll need it," Andrei said. He knew Pavel. An eye for the flashy, certainly, but it wasn't the look of your equipage that won you the race. Pavel wouldn't be able to pick a winning horse if he waited at the finish line.

"Twice around the courtyard," Pavel said with an unsteady wave of his arm. "Finish line at the foot of the stairs, where that band of light is."

The great front doors stood open, their gold trim leaping and flickering in the flaming torchlight which poured out in a stream across the cold dark courtyard.

"Go on, then," Andrei said. "Choose your team." There wasn't a driver present who wouldn't loan his equipage for a race like this. Not unless his horses weren't up to it, and then he'd be taking heat from the other drivers for bringing them out. Especially on a night like this.

He checked on the old mare, who seemed to have settled into a contented nap. He didn't need to watch Pavel's strutting up and down selecting his sleigh—he was pretty sure he knew which rig Pavel would go for, in any case, and he knew for certain which one he'd choose himself.

Pavel made up his mind at last, choosing, as Andrei had suspected, the matched whites of one of the more ostentatious young noblemen—one of the Czar's racing "lads". They weren't bad horses, to be sure, but he knew for a fact that the gelding on the left had been picked to make a set with the others. He looked like a thousand silver eagles in the light of the moon, but this was a race, not a beauty parade.

"I'll take Tibor's bays," Andrei said, and Pavel sneered.

"I'm not surprised the princess fired you," he said, "with low-class taste like that. Tibor doesn't even drive for a noble!"

It was true that Tibor's rig was, in comparison with Pavel's choice, extremely plain, being made of light wood with practically no ornamentation. Pavel's chosen sleigh, on the other

hand, could have passed for the carriage of the moon, so encrusted was it with silver. Which, naturally, added a great deal of weight. It was no contest—Andrei could win this sitting backwards with his eyes closed.

They took one turn around the courtyard side by side and slowly, to warm the horses and check the way was clear. The last of the fashionably late had made their appearance, and the courtyard was left only to the drivers. The Czar's head coachman took it upon himself to drop his sash as a signal to start, and they were off.

Andrei looked back as he completed the first circuit of the courtyard. Sure enough, the gelding was giving Pavel more trouble than he knew what to do with. It was hardly even a race any more, for all Pavel's shouting and cracking of whip. Andrei eased Tibor's horses—no sense returning them blown—and grinned.

No sooner had he turned the last corner than he got to his feet on the driver's seat, turned around with the reins behind his back, and bowed graciously to the crowd of drivers and the sweating, cursing Pavel. The band of light flashed across Andrei's face and he braced himself, rising from his bow as he reined in the horses.

Showing off, yes, but you never knew who might be watching, who might be impressed. He had to take—or make—any chance he could get.

Movement caught his eye above: the glazed inner doors swung open, and a majestic figure stepped forth, a strain of music floating around him. The Czar? No—the bulging uniforms at the door weren't saluting. The figure turned, and Andrei recognized in his magnificent ensemble the uniform of the imperial major-domo.

"You there," the major-domo boomed, crooking a finger at Andrei.

"Me?" Andrei asked, adding a finger pointing at himself in case his meaning was unclear.

The major-domo nodded impatiently. "Bring your whip," he added as Andrei looked about for a place to stow it. "And get a move on—His Imperial Majesty is calling for you."

This seemed unlikely—had he been mistaken for someone else?—but he didn't argue. Hopping down, he handed the reins to Tibor and ran up the grand stair, reaching the top just as Pavel finally reached the foot and wrestled the restive horses to a halt.

Andrei followed the major-domo through the great doors and into a world of dreams. Gold and glass everywhere—or was that crystal? Andrei wasn't clear on the distinction, but everything he looked at gleamed or glittered or both. And it was blissfully warm after the chill of the midnight square, with roaring fires in every room they passed through and galaxies of candelabra tipped with fire overhead.

Wooden-faced footmen watched them pass; occasional ball attendees drew out of their way with anxious faces. A qualm crept into Andrei's heart. What if it wasn't a mistaken identity? What if the Czar *was* calling for him—calling for him as the near assassin of his daughter? Nothing like a bit of danger to make the heart grow fonder... Andrei's skin prickled with goosebumps despite the warmth of the grand rooms through which they passed. All it would take was a word from the duke and he was dead meat.

But then why did the major-domo insist on him bringing his whip? An unpleasant image appeared in his mind's eye, of the Czar flogging him with his own whip—in person!—before handing him over to the executioners.

Andrei summoned his courage to ask the major-domo why he had been called for, but his mouth was too dry and no sound emerged. Being personally flogged by the Czar was a kind of distinction, he supposed, but scarcely the sort he'd been hoping for. And with his luck, the Czar would just hand the whip to one of his footmen, and where was the distinction in that?

The music grew louder, and they entered what could only be

a ballroom, full of dozens of dancers swirling—with painfully tense expressions. Thus proving that being noble didn't mean you had more fun, Andrei supposed. As they passed down the great room, Andrei caught sight of the Czar's big red bearded face over the heads of the crowd. Sitting down, but still towering over everyone. That was thrones for you.

As they arrived at the foot of the throne's seven great steps, the major-domo coughed genteelly and bowed as deeply as his impressive belly allowed.

"A driver, as requested, Your Majesty," the major-domo said.

Andrei caught only a glimpse of the upper steps before he too was bowing deeply. His relatively thin coat formed no obstacle to the deepest reverence, and his head went down almost to the stone step which formed the base of the whole awe-inspiring stair. His heart pounded with relief. A driver. Not *the* driver. He might survive the night after all.

"You've been all night about it," said Czar Kiril, his words carried on a wave of alcohol fumes.

The major-domo didn't argue the point.

"Are you loyal to your Czar?" Kiril demanded of Andrei.

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Andrei hastily replied, bowing again for good measure.

"Stop going up and down like that," the Czar complained. "You're making me feel sick."

Andrei stood bolt upright, his eyes fixed respectfully on the gem-encrusted step on which the throne itself stood. Head height for him, being a tall lad, but also the level of the Czar's enormous highly-polished boots. The last thing he wanted was to be blamed for the Czar getting dizzy and falling off one of the cliff-like sides of the Seven Steps. It was a long way down.

"You have your whip?" the Czar continued.

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

"Good! Take it, and flog this insolent wretch to within an inch of his life. An inch!" the Czar cried, flinging out an arm. A

knot of attendants parted, revealing the figure of Duke Maxim.

"Sir," Maxim began evenly, but the Czar was not having it.

"You know where she is—the mother of my son!" he bawled down from his perch, veins bulging on his reddened neck. "Miss her own ball? Never! It is some evil you have plotted!"

"I must beseech Your Majesty to remain calm," Maxim was saying, in the teeth of all the evidence. "Think of your... health."

"You dare!" screamed the Czar, leaping to his feet. And then, before Andrei's horrified eyes, he changed. Tall already, he reared his head to at least eight feet, his skin going a darker red and becoming thick and leathery. Bony protrusions sprouted around his face, but the eyes that looked out of that dreadful face were still horribly human—and so was his voice.

"Flog him!" the great red mouth cried.

Andrei staggered forward, thanks to a discreet shove from the major-domo. A couple of burly footmen took Maxim by the arms and turned him away from the Czar.

Befuddled with terror, Andrei wondered briefly why everyone seemed to be carrying on as usual—even the orchestra kept playing, the dancers carrying on their travesty of a society ball. Carrying on as usual. Perhaps it was, Andrei thought with a shudder, and pulled himself together.

No use hoping this was all a dream. His imagination might have furnished the great hall at a pinch, but all those ladies' dresses? Never. He braced himself. To flog one's patron was unforgivable, but to disobey the Czar of the Seven Steps—impossible.

Andrei took a deep breath, and carefully placed his feet, estimating the distance. A little closer—no, a little further. He coiled his whip, shook it out, coiled it again. Another deep breath, another sidle to allow space for the backswing.

"Now!" the Czar-monster roared, planting one of his great black boots down on the golden step.

Andrei let the whip's long lash fall loosely against Maxim's

back. His arms were weak with terror, and if there was one way to escape this nightmare alive, it was to flog the duke so lightly that he would take no harm and be merciful in return. But then, what noble alive would forgive the shame of being beaten by one so many ranks below? Andrei gathered the whip in, hands shaking.

"Harder!" the Czar-monster bellowed, descending another couple of steps to stand on copper. "Or are you in league with this traitor too?"

Hoping the duke's coat and long satin waistcoat would provide a measure of padding—fortunately the Czar hadn't ordered him stripped for the whipping—Andrei struck a tiny bit harder.

The Czar-monster uttered a roar of rage, plunged down the remaining steps in one great stride, and snatched the whip out of Andrei's hand. "Conspirator!" he shouted, flecks of foam falling to his beard. "Is this how you obey your Czar?"

Andrei backed away, eyeing the wall of glass doors which ran down one side of the ballroom. A quick review of his path through the palace suggested they opened eastwards—far from the old mare, but he could get into the gardens...

"Traitor!" the Czar-monster repeated, advancing on Andrei with the whip.

"No!" Andrei cried desperately.

"Treacherous liar! Kill him!"

Andrei was staggered for a moment. He couldn't possibly kill the duke! But as another squad of muscular footmen moved towards him, he revised his opinion. It wasn't the duke's death Czar Kiril had in mind. Definitely, time to visit the gardens.

Andrei ducked and swerved onto the dance floor, dodging through the still grimly dancing couples. The ladies screamed as the footmen ploughed through the formations behind him.

Flinging open the first door he reached, Andrei plunged into the night, the cold air seizing his throat in a gasp. The light

flooding through the windows behind him revealed a wide terrace, which gave on...darkness. An iced-up fountain loomed beyond, its base lost somewhere in the shadows below.

Hoping very much it wasn't too deep a drop, Andrei vaulted over the edge and landed heavily in a rather prickly hedge. Scrambling free, he spared a moment to look behind him as he ran. The footmen did not want to spoil their lovely uniforms, it appeared—they were detouring via the stairs.

He smiled smugly to himself, dodged round the fountain, turned north—he must get away from Istvan at all costs—tripped over a low shrubby thing, staggered, recovered, and ran on, the gravel walks and frosted garden beds crunching and squeaking beneath his boots. They'd never catch him now. All those muscles might look impressive, but they weren't built for speed.

From the terrace, Kiril's great voice bellowed "Archers!" and Andrei stopped smiling. There was no outrunning an arrow. He ran faster, the chill air slicing at his windpipe as he gasped for breath. Must get away before the archers assemble...

Far too soon, there came the twang of bowstrings, the whistle of a flight of arrows, and then a sudden pained cry. Andrei was pleased to find it wasn't his. A quick look back showed him the terrace ablaze with light and lined with archers, the Czar-monster's head still towering above them.

Closer—uncomfortably closer—were two footmen hauling a third to his feet. There was an arrow in his arm, and for a moment Andrei thought they'd mistaken the unfortunate front-runner for himself.

But the Czar, it seemed, was not deceived.

"After him!" he roared, in a voice that split the night.

A moment later came the graunching sound of stone on stone, followed by a series of deep, earthshaking thumps. Andrei didn't look around. Then came a chorus of surprised yells from the party of footmen. Andrei didn't look around. The thumping continued, and did he dare suppose it was drawing

nearer?

Andrei looked, disbelieved, looked again, and wished he hadn't. He put on a fresh turn of speed, his hair doing its level best to stand on end.

Thumping through the gardens behind him was the large stone fountain.

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