

In the clearing where it was always-spring, Grandmother Bear took Milena's hand in her paw and smiled. "I am to be married today."

"Again?" Milena laughed. Grandmother Bear was forever getting married to someone or other. "Will there be mummers and fire-dancers? Will we drink rosewine and dance until morning?"

"Of course," said Grandmother Bear. "That is how these things are done."

Milena pointed to a lovely thing of white mist, woven from spidersilk and woodland lace. "And will you wear your veil, Baba Metza?"

"Yes, I will," said Grandmother Bear with a laughter that was sunshine and tears that were the soft, sweet rain. The soon-to-be bride rose and took up a ceramic dish filled with wheat, coins and a raw egg. Then she tossed it over her head.

The dish smashed on the forest floor in a hundred-thousand pieces and Milena skipped over them to retrieve the veil. It was not as tricky as fire-dancing, but it still brought very good luck indeed.

It was a sunshine-on-snow morning. Brilliant white light poked fingers through the curtains, but Milena knew better than to put her bare toes on the floor. They'd freeze, sure as anything, and she'd be stuck there until spring. Her suspicions were confirmed when she poked her nose out from under the covers like a little brown wood-bunny and an icicle formed on the end of it.

Somewhere in the basement, the furnace grumbled to life. It gobbled up coal in shovels-full, its chin hovering over the bin like an old person eating soup; even under the covers Milena could hear it chewing with its furnace-door mouth hanging open, belching smoke and sooty cinders. She could also hear Tatko listening to the morning news on the television.

And Mama opened the door to her room. "Good morning, darling."

"Did you have a nice time at your party?"

"Of course." Mama, with her face turned to the curtains, didn't sound as if she was telling the whole truth.

"Can I come with you next time?" Milena pressed.

"It's not that sort of party." Mama patted the hump of blankets that covered Milena's knees. "Did you have pleasant dreams?"

"I didn't sleep last night; I went to a party too. A wedding." Milena tasted her quilt when she answered. "Grandmother Bear got married."

"Again?" Mama turned, and her smile warmed the room as much as the radiator which clanked and hissed like a tea kettle. "Who did she marry this time?"

"Father Time." Milena rubbed at her sleepy eyes with her fists. "He's old, with a long white beard and crinkles around his eyes. But she likes him ever so much. So they married, and I was the best girl."

"But, of course! And then what?"

"There was sunshine and rain, all at once. And when the stars came out, she

tucked me into the big bed in the middle of the forest," Milena said. "I didn't want to sleep there because the ghosts might take me in the night."

Mama froze as though icicles had grabbed her elbows. "The ghosts?"

"The ones that take people from their beds in the middle of the night," Milena told her. How silly of Mama to not know about the ghosts! "Ventsei told me—"

"Yes, well, your friend Ventsei shouldn't say such things." Mama had the frown-line that cut her forehead in half. "Get dressed now. Breakfast is waiting."

Milena pulled and stretched her sweater like it was saltwater taffy until her head popped through the opening at the top. Then she skipped down the stairs. "Good morning, Tatko!"

Her father greeted her at the table with a smile like warm chocolate. He kissed her with a loud smacking of his lips, and his moustache sprinkled her with drops of coffee. "Eat!" he commanded.

"All right, all right." Milena reached for her napkin and wiped off the offending coffee. Her plate held slices of spicy lukanka sausage around the edge, with a buttered pitki alongside a soft-boiled egg. While Milena ate, her parents talked, words tossed back and forth over her head like the red rubber ball on the playground.

"Another one taken in the night," Milena's father said with his eyes on the paper. He had his mouth full of caviar and toast.

"Shush," Mama told him. "Not in front of the little one. The words are sparrows; once released, they cannot be caught."

"We should tell her, before she hears at school. It was the fire-walker—"

"Ivan?" Mama said with a sharp intake of breath.

"What about the nestinar?" Milena asked. Ventsei's grandfather performed the ritual every year on Saint Constantine and Helena's Day.

"The glowing coals are a bridge between the village and the patron saints and venerable ancestors," he once told her, then winked. "Some hail me as a prophet, but most just call me crazy."

No one in Ventsei's family went to the parties, so Tatko didn't like Milena to visit Ventsei's house.

"He... left last night," Milena's father told her with a rattle of his silverware.

"Did he disappear like a magic trick?" Milena asked. "Magicians can make people disappear with a poof of green smoke and nothing's left but a rabbit." She swung her legs against the rungs of her chair. "Maybe it was the ghosts. They steal people from their beds. Do you know where they take them?"

"You'll be late," her mother interrupted. "And put on your coat."

"Yes, Mama." Milena slid out of her chair and ran for the front door.

"It's not so important that I am well," her father was saying in the kitchen, "but that my neighbor is worse off than I."

Milena pulled on the heavy wool coat, the one with fur around the collar. She strained her ears to hear what Mama would say.

Normally that phrase— but that my neighbor is worse off than I —made Mama laugh, but she wasn't laughing now.

"Indeed, they are worse off this morning for certain."

Something in her voice prickled Milena's throat, and she decided she didn't want to hear anymore. She reached for her hat, scarf, and mittens of pink yarn. She shoved her slipper-shod feet into her overshoes and lifted her voice to bellow down the hall, "Ciao!"

"What is wrong with your own Bulgarian, eh?"

Milena called back, "Divizhdane!"

"Have a good day!"

Milena saw Ventsei trudging up the first hill. He'd gone on without her.

"I thought of a new riddle!" she called as she struggled through the snow to catch up. They played this game every day on the walk to school. "As small as walnuts, they sit in a low place but reach to the skies. What am I?"

He didn't answer, and he didn't stop to wait for her either. Instead, he plodded through the snow with his chin tucked against his chest and his coat collar turned up against the chill of the morning. She skippity-skipped up next to him and nudged him with her book bag.

"Dobro utro, Ventsei."

Ventsei shook his head. "No, it's not a good morning." His nose was red just as it was every morning, but she could tell from the way he swallowed hard that he'd been crying.

"What happened?" she asked, then she remembered the rubber-ball words her parents had exchanged. "Is it about your grandfather?"

"I don't want to say."

That was a first. Milena blinked at him. "Are you all right?"

"No."

They plodded in silence for a few minutes. Only their boots, scuffing through the snow, murmured tsh-tsh-tsh to each other. Ventsei's breath came in short pants and the crystals hung in the air long enough to freeze in ugly misshapen imps. He shoved them away and seemed to make up his mind about something. "The ghosts came last night and took him."

"I thought he left," Milena said.

"No, they stole him right from his bed."

The imps snapped and snarled and then dove headfirst into the snow banks that lined the road. Milena stopped and stared at her friend, but he kept marching

forward, and she had to run to catch up.

Milena's coat blew open, and the icy wind rattled her bones. "Did you see it happen?"

Ventsei shared a bed with his grandfather because their house was old and small and there wasn't enough space for everyone.

He jerked his chin up and then down. "They were all in dark suits, and they had guns."

"Now you're exaggerating," Milena said. It was a big word, but she used it with confidence, having been told on occasions too numerous to count by her parents and her teachers that she exaggerated too. "Ghosts are white. And they carry chains."

"Not these ones." Ventsei came to a standstill in the snow; with his pale face and blank expression, Milena thought he looked more like a ghost than the ones he'd described. "He never thought they'd come to the house because of the stolinina—"

Milena gasped at the idea of the ghosts rummaging through the icons, rearranging the votives, or maybe even tapping on the drum. The little chapel in the back of Ventsei's house held the icons of saints and the sacred drum, and all the villagers considered it holy. "Did they touch anything in it?"

"No."

She put an arm around his shoulders and squeezed him as hard as she dared. "Why didn't you stay home today?"

Ventsei shook his head. "My mother thought it would be better if I got out of the house and away from the trouble there."

"And your father?"

"He didn't say anything." Ventsei's hands doubled over into fists. "But I think he went to look for my grandfather."

Milena didn't know what to say to that. She scuffed the snow with the tip of her boot. "Did you have any breakfast this morning?"

"I don't remember."

"Come on. Silviya's window is open. Let's get banitchki."

Ventsei hung back. "I don't have any money with me this morning."

"I have coins." She tugged him across the snow and to the blue-shuttered window. Lelya Silviya's house leaned just a little to the left, like a tired old woman resting on the way home from the market. Its wooden shingles slanted this way and that, the plaster walls crumbled a bit around the edges. But Silviya's oven was hot, and her wizened hands rolled the finest pastry in town.

Milena reached up on tiptoe to slide her coins over the timber-framed windowsill. The smell of melted butter and hot baking pans set her stomach rumbling. "Two please, extra hot."

"Every morning you say that, Milena," Silviya grumbled, "and every morning I

give you a bantitza that is hot as the sun blazing down on Rose Valley in June. I am not a doddering old woman to forget such a thing. These just came out of the oven. Be careful you don't burn your mouth. You too, Ventsei."

"Yes, Silviya," they chorused as they each juggled a hot pastry from one mittened hand to the other. Steam rose off them like smoke from Tatko's cigars, but they smelled infinitely better. Milena took a bite before she ought and, of course, scorched the roof of her mouth.

Ventsei saw the water rise in her eyes and admonished, "You do that every time."

Milena huffed around the molten cheese and danced from foot to foot. "I know."

"Then why not wait a moment longer?" he scolded without any real heat. "And the answer to your riddle? Small as walnuts, sitting in a low place but reaching for the skies?"

"Yes?" she said with a happy grin, glad to stand in a sure place for the first time since leaving the house.

"Your eyes," he answered. "Now one for you. What is the sweetest and the bitterest thing in the world?"

She thought on it as they ambled down the street, taking careful bites. "Sugar is sweet, but not bitter. Maybe lemonade?"

"Close, but no. It's the tongue that is the sweetest and bitterest thing in the world."

Milena didn't know what to say after that; she wanted to comfort her friend, to say something about her visit to Grandmother Bear and the ghosts that roamed the forests. Instead, she picked the phyllo-dough crumbs from her mittens as they neared the schoolyard.

At the gate, Ventsei grasped her by the elbow. "Don't say anything to anyone else, all right?"

Milena lowered her voice. "About the ghosts?"

He nodded. "It's not safe right now. Nothing is."

"Maybe..." Milena hugged her book bag to her chest. "Maybe we should ask Baba Metza. She'll know where they've taken your grandfather."

Ventsei stared very hard at something overhead. Then he looked down the street and up. And finally he nodded. "Come on; let's go."

They turned the opposite direction and headed for the forest. The ringing of the teacher's bell gave chase but could not catch them.

All the rain that had fallen during Grandmother Bear's wedding had frozen in glittering rainbow-orbs that rolled and crunched underfoot as they picked their way through the forest. The trees were no longer bedecked with flower-garlands but reached skeletal arms toward the dour, gray sky.

"Baba Metza?" Milena called as they entered the clearing that was her bedroom. "Are you here?"

"I am." There was a rustle in the frost-speckled bushes, and then she ambled in on all fours. At first Melina thought the snow clung to the shaggy silk of her coat, but when Grandmother Bear got closer, Melina could see that white hairs threaded through the brown. Swirls of snow started at the corners of Baba Metza's lovely dark eyes then whorled over her shoulders and down her back.

Melina's hand twitched toward Grandmother Bear's fur, but such a thing wouldn't be polite unless invited. She twisted her hand behind her back instead. "Are you quite all right, Baba Metza?"

"Just a little tired." Grandmother Bear settled back on her haunches and looked them over. "What brings you here in the daylight?"

"Ventsei has a problem."

Grandmother Bear's shaggy head swung towards the boy. "Is that so?"

Ventsei didn't answer; he was trying too hard to keep the tears from falling, so Melina answered for him. "His grandfather was taken by the ghosts."

Grandmother Bear didn't look surprised. Just sad. "Yes, I hear the whispers on the wind."

Ventsei found his voice. "Where did they take him?"

"The bees are sleeping, but even in their sleep they whisper to me." Grandmother Bear's ears twitched toward the wild beehive ensconced in the oak tree. The buzz of a thousand creatures snoring rose louder for a moment, then faded back. "Far away, little one. And your father has joined him."

"Oh, no." Milena covered her mouth with both hands, but Ventsei only looked grim about the mouth.

"I thought that might happen," he said to Milena's surprise. "Can you ask the bees, Baba Metza, what I should do?"

Milena listened again, squeezing her eyes shut and concentrating very hard. She heard the ice crackling on leaves and the gray of the sky and even the promise of grass under the snow, but she could not make out the conversation between Grandmother Bear and the hive-mind.

"Even the bees don't know the answer to that," Grandmother Bear finally said. "But they bid you pile the logs high and burn them down to glowing coals. Then dance across the embers. And when you go into the fire-trance, you will be able to hear the voices of your father and grandfather. And they will tell you what to do next, nestinar."

"Ventsei... the nestinar?" Milena said. "But... he's too young to be the fire-dancer!"

"I am not!" he blazed at her. "I'm nearly nine and older than you!"

"Only by two months," she argued.

"Ah," Grandmother Bear held up her paw, "but his soul is far older than yours, Milena-my-love."

"How can his soul be older than mine?"

"He has heard more, seen more, knows more." Grandmother Bear stood up on her back legs and reached into the hive. Her massive paw extracted a chunk of honeycomb that she broke into two dripping-gold pieces. She handed one to each child, but her eyes were always on Ventsei. "He understands the changes coming better than you, with your head full of fairytales and loveliness."

"You make that sound like a bad thing." Milena moved honey and wax around in her mouth. "I'd rather my head be full of nice things than ugly ones."

Ventsei shifted his honeycomb to one hand and licked his fingers. "I would too."

"As would we all." Grandmother Bear shook her head; the swirls of white spread down her back to meet the snow on the ground. The flakes began to fall, thick and fast. Milena blinked them off of her lashes as fast as she could. The clearing was dusted with powdered sugar snow and icicles clung to Grandmother Bear's fur.

"Baba Metza?" Milena could hardly see her for the white.

"Children, you must stack the wood high and let the fire burn bright..." Grandmother Bear said as a bearded man—Father Time—appeared between the oldest of the oak trees. Grandmother Bear nodded to him. "One moment more, my love."

"We must leave," he told her. "It's not safe to linger here. I have heard gypsy bells in the woods, and I will not let them catch you."

Milena glared at him. "Where are you going?"

"Deeper into the woods, further up the mountain." All the rich brown of Grandmother Bear's fur was gone now. Against the falling snow, it was nearly impossible to see her. "Closer in time to spring and closer to the stars in the heavens."

"Don't go!" Milena started to run forward, but Ventsei caught her by the back of her coat. "I don't want you to go."

"Go I must. My husband calls to me."

"When will you be back?"

"She's not coming back," Ventsei said. "Are you, Baba Metza?"

"Clever boy, clever boy," Grandmother Bear said with a chuckle under her sadness. "I would tell you, before I go, about the eagle. He is a creature that flies between the worlds, from the mountain heights to the underworld depths. He drinks from the lake of the water of life that lies at the end of the earth. And he is the helper of heroes."

The last thing Milena ever saw of Grandmother Bear was her honey-sweet smile as Baba Metza said:

"Watch for the eagle, Ventsei."

When they got to Ventsei's little house, his mother was hurriedly shoving clothes into suitcases. She'd sewn her lips shut with white thread and wouldn't say anything to either of them. She handed him a packing case and

gave his shoulder a push.

Milena tiptoed behind and held her breath as they passed the stolnina. The little alcove held burning candles in red votives even during this rip-and-upheaval. The icons hanging on the walls returned Milena's tentative glance with black eyes rimmed in gold paint.

She hurried to follow Ventsei to the little back room that had been his grandfather's. He knelt by the dresser and opened one of the drawers. Milena stayed in the doorway; she hadn't been invited in, and anyway, the room smelled of ashes and burned-up secrets.

"Will you take your trains?" she finally asked.

"No."

"Your teddy bear?"

"I don't think so."

"What will you take then? I'll help you pack."

"It can all stay."

"Then what are you getting?"

"His matches." Ventsei put them in his pocket and backed out of the room. He took her by the elbow and pulled her through the kitchen. Great tears rolled down his mother's cheeks, but she paid them no mind, not even when they dripped on the photographs she held in trembling hands.

The children went into the little yard behind the house.

"Will you help me with the wood?" Ventsei asked.

"But you should be packing—" Milena started to argue, but he cut her off with a sharp look.

"Baba Metza said to pile the wood high. And that's what I'm going to do, with or without your help." Ventsei filled the wheelbarrow full and rolled it over the packed snow with a bump-bump-bump around to the front of the house. Milena hefted a log under each arm and followed him.

Ventsei's house formed one side of a small square; he headed to the very center, and Milena added her logs to the pile he made. Ventsei restacked the wood the way his grandfather had, criss-crossing logs so they would burn hot and even. Then he got to his feet, knees crusted with ice, and headed back to the woodpile. Milena trotted after him, not wanting to stay in the square by herself.

By the time they came back with more wood, Ventsei's neighbors had ventured out. Wearing hoods and scarves, silent and grim, they appeared with more logs and helped with the stacking. They worked alongside the children, at first saying nothing but eventually driven to speak.

"For Gavril," Yuliana said.

"For Krasimir and Pavil," Ianka added.

"The nestinar will speak to them when the fire burns down, yes?" Zlatka asked.



"I don't know," Ventsei said, his voice low. "But I will try."

"Ask," Zlatka said with a hard swallow under her many headscarves, "if they are well."

"Ask," Ianka said, "if they will ever return."

"You know the answer to that," Yuliana scolded. "Ask instead what we should do without them."

Milena trotted back and forth until her legs and back ached. Splinters riddled her mittens, and her whole skin prickled. But she didn't stop, driven as she was by the desperation and grief of those around her.

And all the while, she wondered if her own Tatko or Mama would be taken away by the ghosts that had visited all the others. Fear hummed in her blood; perhaps they'd been taken during the day, and her house would be dark and empty, the door standing open...

She swallowed a sob, and Ventsei looked up from the mountainous stack of wood. His dark hair fell into his eyes; when he brushed it back, it was as though he peered into her soul.

"They'll be fine. They're—" but he bit off the words with a glance around him and didn't finish.

Milena fell to her knees next to him. "They're what? Tell me, Ventsei. Please. What were you going to say?"

"They're safe. You don't have to worry." He reached out and squeezed her arm. "They're members of the Party."

Milena thought of her parents' party clothes: the black suit and the coat with fur around the collar. Mama's diamond necklace. The long, dark car like a sleek panther that came for them. How tired they often seemed, and stuffed full of secrets after a night at a party. She'd always thought parties such fun. But no more.

"Ventsei," Milena held his hands in hers. "Are you certain you can do this? Walk across the fire, I mean. What if you burn up?"

"Don't ask questions," Ventsei said as he struck a match and held it to the pyre. "Simply watch and believe."

More people gathered as darkness fell: those who had been at school and at work. A few scuttled indoors like roaches afraid of the light, but most of the neighbors formed a ring around the bonfire. Bagpipes crooned and wailed. The memories of loved ones taken gathered in the smoke; wavering figures in gray that sent shudders down Milena's back.

Ventsei disappeared into the press of people and returned carrying the ceremonial drum. "I will not use the icons... but I would have you play this for me." And he handed it to Milena.

She accepted the instrument with great reluctance. "I'm too little."

"Those are not the words of a girl who talks to bears," Ventsei chided. By now, the fire had died down and only the embers remained. "I would have you do it. You can't make nothing out of something—"

"But I can make something of nothing," Milena finished.

"So make a loud noise for me." Ventsei took a deep breath, and he stepped out onto the coals.

Milena found her heartbeat and his in the drum. She pounded the taut-pulled leather with the flat of her hand, unable to look away. Ventsei tread in the short, even steps of the tipane, on the whole length of his feet.

She didn't disappoint him; the beat of the drum was strong and loud. Milena lost herself in it, as Ventsei lost himself in the dance. Everyone else was chanting, holding up their hands. Voices climbed in the old songs. Young and old called to those who had died, to those who had been taken.

The ghosts gathered along the edge of the crowd and watched with empty holes for eyes and grim mouths. They wore the dark shadows like cloaks, and the sight of them startled Milena so that she nearly missed a beat; heartbeat, drumbeat. Her breath was in her throat, and she wanted to scream to Ventsei to run. But her friend looked at her, into her, through her. His lips moved—

Drum harder. Drum faster.

And because he was older, because Grandmother Bear trusted him so, Milena did as he told her.

"Speak to us!" someone cried. It might have been Zlanka or Yuliana. And one by one, the hazy gray memories moved forward to embrace those who mourned them, to whisper in the ears of those left behind.

Ventsei reached out and grasped her by the hand. With a swift tug, Milena too was on the embers. And then they were running down the road, past the school. They tossed riddles like red, rubber balls over the stone walls, but they did not stop. They galloped over cobblestones and onto the dirt path through the forest. They dodged trees and leapt over fallen logs until finally they stood on the top of the hill behind Grandmother Bear's forest.

The eagle hovered overhead and then dipped down. Ventsei's mother clung to its neck, and she motioned to her son.

"I have to go." Ventsei's words matched Milena's thudding heartbeat and the memory of her hand against the drum.

"How will I find you, when I grow up?" Her tears were rainbow orbs that rolled down the mountainside.

"One last riddle, then." Ventsei clung to the eagle and smiled down at her. "A world without people, cities without houses, forests without trees and seas without water."

She knew this one, and each tear she shed held a laugh. "A map."

"There is no hero without a wound." Ventsei touched a finger to his chest. "Mine is in my heart, leaving you. Don't forget me."

"I could never—"

But the eagle flapped its mighty wings, and they were gone, borne aloft on the wind. Milena blinked once, twice, and they were gone over the horizon.

And she was back on the village square, with the drum still in her hand, looking at the empty space where Ventsei had danced across the embers. The villagers had fallen silent. The ghosts were gone, thwarted by Ventsei's escape.

Milena hit the drum. "For Gavril." And twice more. "For Krasimir and Pavil." And one last time. "And for three generations of nestinari taken from us."

Her parents pushed through the crowd, and Tatko caught Milena as she fell, exhausted, into his arms. Mama took her by the hand and cried big, silent tears.

"What happened?" her father demanded as he bore her through the deserted-night streets.

"Ventsei left," Milena told them. "He's gone where the eagle flies." She looked up at the night sky, where only one star burned. "And I will go to meet him... as soon as I find the map."