

Ventsei hiked the hill trails to remind him of that place long lost to him. The fragrant spruce and fir were the same as those he'd left behind, and their roots reached for the heart of the mountain with gnarled, patient fingers.

Time had passed since the eagle had landed on foreign soil and deposited a young boy and a woman who could not speak. The boy wandered far, the soles of his feet still burning with the dance. His mother followed three steps behind, a silent shadow whose grief faded-to-lingering with each step.

They drifted both north and west until they found a place where Ventsei could breathe without the air catching in his throat; a place where both the mountains and trees whispered "home" in his adopted language.

Tereza looked from mountain to forest, and she pulled out the first of the stitches that sealed her lips shut. Every year after that she removed one more, until the only thing that prevented her from speaking was her decision to swallow her words rather than give them voice.

Twenty stitches pulled; twenty years gone, as though they were no more than a series of heartbeats, a hand coaxing a rhythm from the stretched-skin surface of the ceremonial drum.

Ventsei counted out twenty paces and turned to look back at the lone set of footprints he'd left in the snow. He had the park to himself when the others scattered during the lunch hour. It sounded too fanciful to say that he'd rather feed his soul, and so he said nothing when he put on the pair of sturdy boots he kept under his desk.

Today, the boughs filtered the thin light of winter's-end, and he was glad of the down-filled jacket over his starched cotton shirt. Spring was a dream to this place, still decorated in blue-tipped frost, and most of the wildlife had not yet roused from under that blanket. Though there were claw-marks high in the trees, they were not fresh.

The bears still slept.

He hoped that among them was a once-brown bear now white with snow and sorrow; that Baba Metza had also found her way to this tranquil place—

"Dobar den."

He spun about, feet skidding on the ice. "Izvinete... I mean, excuse me."

"No need to translate for me, Ventsei." An old woman sat upon a rock—one he'd passed only moments before. Wearing innumerable layers and a frown, she leaned on a stick of forged iron and looked about her with an air of condescension. "You have done well for yourself here, the winds tell me."

"I'm sorry for not greeting you by name," Ventsei apologized, wondering how someone so old and so crooked could have climbed the incline. "Are we acquainted?"

"We are that," she said but didn't elucidate. "You're a doctor, the winds whisper. A specialist."

"An internist, yes."

She harrumphed, but her breath did not crystallize in the freezing air so much as it danced away in a flurry of snowflakes. "Internists know everything, but don't know how to do anything."

"My grandfather used to say much the same," Ventsei said, with a smile despite himself. "And surgeons don't know anything, but know how to do everything."

"And there are those who both know nothing and can't do anything," she added. "So maybe better to be an internist, eh?"

"I thought so, Baba..." He allowed the word to trail off, waiting for the stranger to supply her name.

"You don't recognize me? You've been gone too long, too long." He didn't answer fast enough for her liking, and the stranger's stormy expression summoned thunderclouds. "You walk these paths and see the other forests, the other mountains."

Ventsei nodded, though his neck was stiff. "That is true."

She slanted a gaze at him that was sharper than a kitchen knife. "You wonder if that silly bear escaped the hunters' rifles and the gypsies' leashes."

"I don't deny it, although how you know—"

She interrupted with a rush of words that was like an ice-fed stream down his back. "And your thoughts stray to little girls with pink mittens. You wonder what it would be like to have married a nice Bulgarian girl, one who speaks the language you confine to your dreams."

Ventsei flinched as though she'd struck him and bit his tongue to keep from answering; his mother's son, indeed.

The stranger cackled with unexpected laughter that called back the sun. "You have nothing to say to Baba Marta, eh?"

The chill spread along Ventsei's limbs. "My apologies, Grandmother March."

She snapped her wizened fingers at him. "Hold out your hand." Ventsei did as she bade him. "Twenty years without wearing a martenitza, it's a wonder you're not dead from bad luck." She tied threads of red and white about his wrist as she hummed. "White for purity of snow, red the setting sun." She tied the knot tight. "It must be worn until you spot the first stork of the year."

It must be worn to appease her, so that winter passes and spring arrives. "There are not many storks here, Baba Marta."

She turned Ventsei's hand over and his gold wedding band glinted. She hissed and shoved him away. "Stupid thing, what have you done?"

He rubbed it with his thumb, as he often did to reassure himself it was still there. "You are wise. I doubt I need explain it to you."

Grandmother March rose from the boulder and slapped him twice in quick succession. "Once for forgetting the rites of the season."

Ventsei rubbed the burning spot on his cheek. "And the second?"

"I intended you for another," she said as she hobbled away. "You made promises to her."

Yes, he had made promises. And his regrets about those left behind had a way of tinting all his memories; his past was the same crumbling brown of old

paper, and as likely to fall apart if handled roughly.

Grandmother March didn't take her leave of him, but she added, "She will be disappointed."

Ventsei had to step off the path to give chase.

The blood ran, as did he. He slid down the mountain, ripping his jacket down one arm and scratching his face on naked thorns.

In the ravine, the forest lost all familiarity. The trees Ventsei had counted as friends were now strangers, and the river—a crooked finger when viewed from above—showed hairline fractures in its frozen surface.

Grandmother March could not be wholly displeased if the ice was melting, but the martenitza tightened around his wrist.

"Who will be disappointed, Baba Marta?" Ventsei called as he threaded his way through the firs: the slender elha.

"You think to keep pace with lightning?" Grandmother March taunted him from the other side of the stream.

Ventsei rested his hands against his thighs as he tried to catch his breath. "What are you doing here? Now, after so long?"

"There was no reason to come any sooner," Baba Marta said. "She traded me twenty years, and twenty years I collected."

"Who traded you twenty years?" But he knew.

Baba Marta's face crinkled with a sly smile. "Your Milena made a beautiful samodiva."

"You changed her into a wood nymph." It was not for him to question, he who had counseled with bears and escaped upon the eagle's back. His fruitless searches were now explained, why no one knew what had happened to her. "In exchange for what, Baba Marta?"

She whistled low through her teeth. "You were the one so fond of riddles. 'A world without people, cities without houses, forests without trees and seas without water.' Answer your own question."

The wound on Ventsei's heart opened just a little. "A map."

Baba Marta raised a hand. "I offered gold." Coins spilled through her wizened fingers. "And I even offered back the years." The coins turned into discs: pocket watches dangling by thin chains before they hit the snow and disappeared with a hiss. "But she would have nothing but the map. So I gave it to her. And now she's come, looking for you."

Ventsei took a step forward and heard the ice crack under his boot. "Milena's here?"

"What do you care?" she demanded. "You, with your doctoring and your ring and your new life? You, with your forgotten promises?" She pointed her walking stick at the stream. The ice broke, and cold flooded into Ventsei's boots and socks. "You'll need deeper water than that if you wish to drown out the past."

"There were no promises—" He jumped to keep from falling in and landed beside her on the far bank. "Except the ones you made to trick her."

Grandmother March tucked her arm in his, delighted by his accusations. "No tricks, no tricks." She cupped a hand about her ear. "Can't you hear her singing?"

Ventsei held his breath. There was a sound, thin and silver, that might have been a voice calling to him.

"Come," Grandmother March coaxed. "She is just down the river and across the bridge."

"There's no bridge in this park, Baba Marta."

"Oh no? Then how to you explain the mostovi?" She drew him around an outcropping of rock.

"You didn't—"

She had. The Wonderful Bridge rose high overhead. Once-high river water had transformed the stone into vaulted arches that spanned the canyon.

But it had no place here. It belonged in another valley, another time. Ventsei stared at it, aghast. "You had no right to bring it here."

"I was doing you a favor, stupid boy. Your true love is just on the other side." She tried to pull him forward with her.

"Milena was a childhood friend." He stood fast, refused to be budged. "I married my true love."

"Cross the bridge," Grandmother March urged him as though he'd said nothing at all. "You can go back."

"I can't. I have a life here. A daughter—"

"A mongrel child." Grandmother March spat into the snow. "Not a child of kings."

"There aren't any more kings, Baba Marta. All the kings are dead. The princes stand alongside the peasants." Ventsei shook his head. "Enough. This folly keeps me from my work and my home. Go back where you belong, and take your threats and your bridges and your fairy tales with you."

Baba Marta chuckled. The mist crept around her ankles like baggy, wrinkled stockings. "If you will not go to her, I will bring her through myself. Come across, dear Milena. See how he speaks to your godmother."

Tiny whirlwinds stirred the loose snow. Sparkling crystals stung Ventsei's eyes and then the blizzard cleared.

"It is you!" someone cried and kissed him with her cold lips. The woman was a stranger to him, but she wept diamond tears with Milena's brown eyes.

She wore a loose-fitting shirt and gown, a green leather belt and a sleeveless jacket. Every garment was decorated with feathers. Ventsei reached out with a tentative hand and brushed back a strand of her hair. Loose and wild, it reached down her back and the ends were tipped silver with ice.

"You've changed," he said.

Milena stepped back, as if she needed the extra room to take in his height. "As have you."

"There now." Grandmother March beamed, and the sudden flood of sunshine-on-snow blinded him again. When Ventsei blinked, she was gone. But Milena remained.

"Take me to your house," she demanded, clasping his hand with the impetuosity of the child he remembered. "I want to see everything."

Ventsei wondered how he would explain this woman, so oddly dressed, arriving without warning or luggage or money. How would he explain it to his mother, who would surely remember Milena's eyes?

Milena shivered in her thin garments, and he knew whatever trouble it might cause to bring her home, he couldn't leave her to freeze in the park.

"Of course," he said, because it was the only thing he could say. He shrugged out of his down jacket and placed it over her shoulders. "My car is this way."

She followed him up the mountain, nimble as a goat.

Ventsei paused on the porch to stamp off his boots. He inhaled the sweet breath of night and... not wood smoke, but the scent of roses. Droplets of oil fell from Milena's fingertips and onto the steps.

Another thing to explain.

Kimberly looked up when he opened the back door, her expression startled. She had the phone cradled between her neck and her ear.

"No, he's here. Never mind." She set the phone back on the cradle. "That was the office. They've been calling since you didn't come back after lunch." Her eyes traveled from Ventsei to Milena, then back to her husband to demand an explanation.

"This is a friend," he said in English. "From the old country."

"Ah." Kim smiled and gave him the look that meant the house is a mess, I wasn't expecting company, we'll discuss this later and you won't enjoy it before she turned to Milena. "Dobar vecher."

Ventsei switched to Bulgarian. "Milena, this is my wife, Kimberly."

"Good evening to you as well," Milena said as the scent of roses filled the room.

Kim shook her head. "I'm sorry, my Bulgarian isn't as good as it should be." She wiped her hands on the back of her jeans. "I'll go get your mother, Ventsei. She'll want to greet your guest."

Milena turned to him as Kim left the kitchen. "She's upset."

"The little one tires her." The kitchen was hot, crowded though it was just the two of them.

"Little one?"

"Our daughter, Damascena."

"A child named for the roses," Milena said, her voice low. "It is lovely."

Then there was only the soft tick-tick-tick of the clock on the wall. Ventsei stared at it so he wouldn't have to look at anything else. The clock was new, but painted to look old and cracked. Kimberly shopped at thrift stores and brought home scuffed and rusted bits she called 'antiques' that were the source of much gentle teasing on his part.

Kim's fascination for collecting things that would otherwise be fodder for tetanus shots both puzzled and delighted him. But how would their house, their odd collection of furnishings, look to an outsider?

To one of my oldest friends, he amended.

Milena looked from the kitchen table, where none of the chairs matched, to the cheerful curtains cut down from an old tablecloth, to the wood-burning stove that produced a constant glow. "It's just like home."

A drop of oil fell from her extended hands to land on the hot metal with a hiss and sizzle. A smoke-flower bloomed atop the stove and was gone.

"Milena."

Just like the clock, the voice was flecked with rust; the sort of thing that would scratch deep if handled carelessly. Ventsei turned to see his mother standing in the doorway to the kitchen, Damascena balanced on her hip.

His mother had broken her long silence.

The child in her arms crowed with surprise. "Baba!"

"Yet another Grandmother," Milena laughed. "Congratulations are in order. Chestito!"

Tereza poured into the room like sparkling wine after a cork. A stream of welcoming words flowed from her: well-wishes about Milena's journey to this place and Tereza's own happiness about her marvelous grandchild.

Milena looked at Damascena with solemn eyes. "Nazdrava, little one. To your health."

The child held out her fat arms and went to Milena. Face-to-face, Ventsei could see they shared the same curve of the cheek, the tilt to the nose—

His daughter so resembled the Milena that he'd left behind, that he could hardly breathe. The tightness was back, squeezing his chest with fears and longings he thought he'd abandoned.

Kim saw it too. She hovered in the doorway as though the shared joy and memories of the other women prevented her from entering. When she turned, he followed and caught her halfway down the hall.

Kim spoke to her own ghosts. "In all the years, your mother has never spoken a word to me. Not a word to her granddaughter. But she says another woman's name and it's like some magic spell has come undone."

Ventsei caught her hand in his. "She's homesick."

"This is supposed to be her home." Kim swallowed hard enough that Ventsei could see all the things stuck in her throat. "What about you? Would you go back, if you could? Would you wish things to be different than they are?"

He would not lie to her, so he said nothing.

"Our baby looks like Milena." Kim's tears glinted in the dim light. "How is that even possible?"

"It's my fault," Ventsei said, drawing her into his arms. "I thought about her so often..."

"You thought about her?"

"She was the girl I couldn't bring with me, the girl I couldn't save."

"She wasn't yours to save." Kim pulled away. "And now she's here."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"For how long?"

"I don't know that either."

"What do you know, then?"

The argument was like the automatic gunfire he remembered hearing, huddled under the quilt of his Grandfather's bed; it didn't require forethought, aim or skill but the words hit their targets all the same.

Ventsei wanted to tell her that he loved her, but the words would mean less than nothing now. "Come back to the kitchen. We'll have dinner, and visit. You can get to know her—"

"I'm tired, Ventsei. I spent my afternoon nursing the baby and folding laundry and wondering if you were dead in some damn ravine." Kim went up the stairs two at a time to get away from him as fast as she could. "I don't speak the language, and you have more important things to do than play translator."

"I don't mind—"

"But I do. Just go keep an eye on her."

Kim closed the bedroom door behind her, and Ventsei didn't ask which 'her' Kim meant.

Tereza and Milena had cleared off the little table and set it in the center of the kitchen. Next to the woodstove, a cinnamon-coated bear lay stretched out, claws extended. Damascena sat on her squat little behind in the middle of the fur, chewing her fist and burbling in a language all her own.

The bear opened one eye to look at Ventsei, then closed it again and smiled at the excited chatter of the two women. If bears could smile, that is, and Ventsei wasn't sure he wanted that many teeth on display near his daughter.

"A paint brush for an artist," Tereza was saying. "Scissors for the tailor."

"A pen for a writer." Milena stirred the contents of her junk drawer with her hands. "Money for the banker."

"It's been a long time, firedancer." Grandmother Bear shifted her bulk carefully so as not to upset her precious burden.

Ventsei was glad Kim had barricaded herself upstairs; a bear at the hearth would shake the last leaf from the tree. "It has."

"Your martenitza looks a bit tight."

"It is that." He tried to fit a finger under the binding threads, but found there was no room. "Where is Father Time? How is your husband?"

"He elected to remain on the Bridge." Her ears flicked back at the baby, who was blowing spit bubbles and pulling at Grandmother Bear's thick coat.

"You left him there," Ventsei guessed.

"Better that time should stand still tonight." The bear smiled. "You have traveled far, but the road has circled back. Perhaps the embers were only banked and not extinguished, eh?"

"You are most welcome here, Baba Metza," Ventsei said as scooped up his daughter. "But I will thank you to remember that this is not your forest, but mine." He turned his back on the bear and whispered to the child. "What big mess are your Baba and Auntie making?"

"You remember this, surely," Milena said with a laugh. "We'll let Damascena walk to the table, and whatever she sees first, she will be when she grows up. It should have been done as soon as she started to walk!" She looked to Tereza. "What did Ventsei pick?"

Tereza smiled. "A stethoscope."

"You see? It was his destiny." Milena slanted a look at him that cut.

"The eagle carried you far," rumbled the bear by the woodstove, "but you could not outrun that which had been decided."

The martenitza scored the skin now, tightening in a delicate thread-noose. Ventsei put the baby in her high chair and handed her a toy before going to the refrigerator and pulling out a carton of yogurt.

"I don't know if we have a round loaf of bread," Tereza fretted. "A square loaf won't roll, and she must chase it."

"It can wait until the morning," Ventsei said. He filled a plastic bowl and found one of the baby spoons that looked so ridiculously tiny in his hand. "I can go to the store."

Milena laughed at him. "Oh-ho! Such an important person, to buy bread instead of making it."



"Proshtupulnik is an old tradition," Ventsei said. His pulse throbbed in his fingers with each heartbeat, each word. "Perhaps one best left in the past."

The two women stared at him, while the third tugged at his beard and stuck her fingers up his nose.

"The child should know where she comes from," Tereza said after a long moment.

"Yes." After twenty years of silence, he did not want to dismiss her precious words. "And you will tell her the stories and sing her the songs. But she alone will decide where she is going." Ventsei fed Damascena a spoonful of yogurt, most of which ended up on her chin, her cheek and down her front. "I won't have you telling her 'you chose a pen, you must write' or 'you must travel the world because you took the globe.'"

Milena shook her head, whether in disappointment or disapproval Ventsei couldn't tell. The feathers had thickened along the fluttering edges of her dress and belt. "It's harmless—"

"It's not!" He brought his fist down on the table and everyone jumped. Damascena puckered her face and began to cry, and it took several frustrating seconds to extricate her from the high chair's safety harness. By the time he had her on his shoulder, she was alternating wails with hiccups.

Ventsei patted her heaving back, swaying a bit and trying to soothe her as the back door opened to admit a third Grandmother.

"Tell them about the nightmares, nestinar." Grandmother March leaned heavily on her stick. "Or did you lock them away with your language and your traditions, firedancer?"

If he hadn't cradled his daughter, trying to calm her, he might have punched the wall. "I dream that the ghosts come, that they pull my wife from our bed, our child from her cradle. I dream that my life here is the dream, and that reality burned the night I danced on the embers."

Kim was back, summoned by the noise. "I heard her crying." His wife's eyes were red from doing the same. "Why are you shouting?"

Ventsei didn't answer her. Instead, he divided his anger between his mother, his friend, the bear and the crone. "I will not be dragged into the past by the whims of others."

Kim tugged at his arm. "Stop screaming over the baby. Give her to me."

"You will never see a stork here," Baba Marta shrieked. "This land will never again know the spring!"

Damascena shifted in his arms, and Ventsei looked down at the naked, creased folds of her neck. A cluster of veins stood out on her skin, dark pink against the white-as-snow.

Kim tugged at his arm again. "What are you staring at? Give her to me, Ventsei!"

"What did they call this mark at the hospital?" he asked. He pitched his voice very low, very soft. "I've forgotten how to say it in English."

The clock on the wall counted off the seconds. Tick-tick-tick...

Kim looked at the birthmark and wiped at her running nose with her sleeve. "It's a stork bite. Please give her to me."

"The stork has already been and gone." Ventsei raised his chin at Baba Marta. "The spring will come anyway, with or without your say-so." His eyes passed over Milena as he turned to Kim. "She has no hold on me."

He didn't explain which 'she' he meant.

Baba Marta threw her head back and keened. She hit her walking stick against the floor; once, twice. Her stick came down a third time, and she was gone.

Ventsei gave the baby to Kim. "I'll explain when I get back."

Kim jerked her chin at Grandmother Bear. "And perhaps you'll explain that, too."

"That, too," Ventsei agreed. He went down the hall to the closet to retrieve a camping lantern and another jacket.

By the time he returned, the kitchen door stood open. His mother sat on the floor, her hands over her eyes. Kim hugged the baby close, but didn't say a word. She only kissed him on the cheek with lips as warm as the Rose Valley in June.

Both Milena and Grandmother Bear were gone, and two sets of footprints led away from the house.

To hike back into the park by moonlight was to step into a black-and-white photograph. Ventsei found Milena and Grandmother Bear at the edge of the bridge that led back to his homeland and his childhood.

Milena had her back to him, one hand stroking Grandmother Bear's head. "I should never have come."

Ventsei moved to stand next to her. "Not true. My heart dances, knowing that you survived. And you don't have to leave."

"This place has its own spirits." She'd shed his coat. The dark feathers along her arms were tipped silver with starshine and ice. "My mountains and my forests are on the other side of that bridge, and the old country needs the samodivi."

"And what about you, Baba Metza?" he asked.

"I don't see why I can't stay a while." Grandmother Bear sat on her haunches and studied the claw marks high in the trees. "When Damascena gets old enough, she can visit me in this forest."

"Will you get married again?" Milena asked in her little-girl voice. "Will you wear your veil?"

"I am already married," Grandmother Bear reminded them, "and too old to wear white." She unwound the hidden scarf and offered it to Milena. "Take my veil back with you, find a use for it. Wear it in good health."

Milena put it on with a laugh; the spidersilk and woodland lace covered her with a layer of frost. "I will that."

Ventsei found his voice. "Take something back for me too."

"A message?" Milena turned to him. "Will you bind it to my leg with golden thread?"

"No." Ventsei opened his pocket knife and slid the blade under the red and white threads. He cut through the martenitza. He could have tied it to a fruit tree, giving it health and luck, or he could have buried it under a stone. Instead, he wrapped it about Milena's wrist. "May each spring be lovelier than the last."

"Leka nosht, Ventsei."

Good night.

"Dovizdhane, Milena."

Farewell.