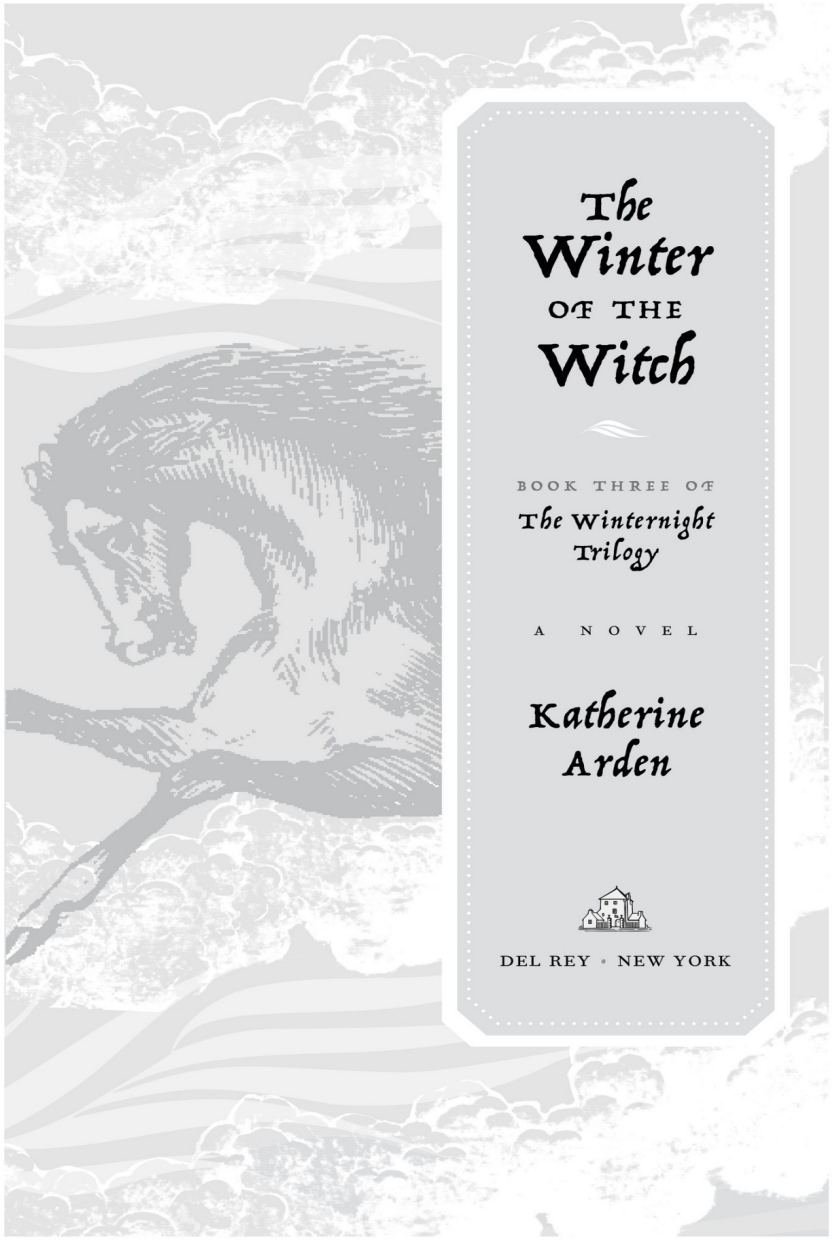
THE WINTER OF THE WITCH

a novel

KATHERINE ARDEN

Bestselling author of *The Bear and the Nightingale*



The Winter of the Witch

BOOK THREE OF
The Winternight Trilogy

A NOVEL

Katherine Arden

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Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright
Epigraph

Part 1
- Chapter 1: Marya Morevna
- Chapter 2: Reckoning
- Chapter 3: Nightingale
- Chapter 4: The Fate of All Witches

Part 2
- Chapter 5: Temptation
- Chapter 6: No Bones, No Flesh
- Chapter 7: Monster
- Chapter 8: Between the City and Evil

Part 3
- Chapter 9: To Travel by Midnight
- Chapter 10: The Devil in the Oven
- Chapter 11: Of Mushrooms
- Chapter 12: Bargaining
- Chapter 13: Baba Yaga
- Chapter 14: Vodianoy
- Chapter 15: Farther, Stranger Countries
- Chapter 16: The Chains of the Winter-King
- Chapter 17: Memory
- Chapter 18: On the Backs of Magic Horses

Part 4
- Chapter 19: Allies
- Chapter 20: The Golden Bridle
- Chapter 21: Enemy at the Gate
- Chapter 22: The Princess and the Warrior
- Chapter 23: Faith and Fear

Part 5
- Chapter 24: Turnings
- Chapter 25: The Road Through Darkness
- Chapter 26: The Golden Horde

Chapter 27: Oleg of Ryazan
Chapter 28: Pozhar
Chapter 29: Between Winter and Spring
Chapter 30: The Enemy of My Enemy
Chapter 31: All the Russias
Chapter 32: Kulikovo
Chapter 33: On the Cusp of Winter
Chapter 34: Lightbringer
Chapter 35: The Starlit Road
Chapter 36: The Army of Three
Chapter 37: Water of Death, Water of Life

Author's Note
A Note on Russian Names
Glossary
The Lineage of Vasilisa Petrovna
Dedication
Acknowledgments
By Katherine Arden
About the Author

The sea is fair in the storm-shadow
The sky wondrous without its blue
But trust me; on the rock, the girl
Excels the wave, the sky, and the storm

—A. S. PUSHKIN

Part One

1.

Marya Morevna

Dusk at the end of winter, and two men crossed the dooryard of a palace scarred by fire. The dooryard was a snowless waste of water and trampled earth; the men sank to their ankles in the muck. But they were speaking intently, heads close together, and did not heed the wet. Behind them lay a palace full of broken furniture, smoke-stained; the screen-work smashed on the staircases. Before them lay a charred ruin that had been a stable.

“Chelubey disappeared in the confusion,” said the first man bitterly. “We were busy saving our own skins.” A smear of soot blackened his cheek, blood crusted in his beard. Weary hollows, like blue thumbprints, marred the flesh beneath his gray eyes. He was barrel-chested, young, with the fey energy of a man who has driven himself past exhaustion to a surreal and persistent wakefulness. Every eye in the dooryard followed him. He was the Grand Prince of Moscow.

“Our skins, and a little more,” said the other man—a monk—with a touch of grim humor. For, against all hope, the city was mostly intact, and still theirs. The night before, the Grand Prince had come close to being deposed and murdered, though few people knew that. His city had nearly burned to ash; only a miraculous snowstorm had saved them. Everyone knew that. A swath of black gashed the heart of the city, as though the hand of God had fallen in the night, dripping fire from its nails.

“It was not enough,” said the Grand Prince. “We may have saved ourselves, but we made no answer for the treachery.” All that bitter day, the prince had reassuring words for every man who caught his eye, had calm orders for the men wrangling his surviving horses and hauling away the charred beams of the stable. But the monk, who knew him well, could see the exhaustion and the rage just beneath the surface. “I am going out myself, tomorrow, with all that can be spared,” the prince said. “We will find the Tatars and we will kill them.”

“Leave Moscow now, Dmitrii Ivanovich?” asked the monk, with a touch of disquiet.

A night and a day without sleep had done nothing for Dmitrii’s temper. “Are you going to tell me otherwise, Brother Aleksandr?” he asked, in a voice that made his attendants flinch.

“The city cannot do without you,” said the monk. “There are dead to mourn; there are granaries lost, and animals and warehouses. Children cannot eat vengeance, Dmitrii Ivanovich.” The monk had no more slept than the Grand Prince; he could not quite mask the edge in his own voice. His left arm was wrapped in linen where an arrow had gone into the muscle below the shoulder, and been dragged through and out again.

“The Tatars attacked me in my own palace, *after* I had made them welcome in good faith,” retorted Dmitrii, not troubling to keep the rage from his reply. “They conspired with a usurper, they *fired my city*. Is all that to go unavenged, Brother?”

The Tatars had not, in fact, fired the city. But Brother Aleksandr did not say so. Let that—mistake—be forgotten; it could not be mended now.

Coldly, the Grand Prince added, “Did not your own sister give birth to a dead child in the chaos? A royal infant dead, a swath of the city in ashes—the people will cry out if there is not justice.”

“No amount of spilled blood will bring back my sister’s child,” said Sasha, sharper than he meant. Clear in his mind was his sister’s tearless mourning, worse than any weeping.

Dmitrii’s hand was on the hilt of his sword. “Will you lecture me now, priest?”

Sasha heard the breach between them, scabbed over but unhealed, in the prince’s voice. “I will not,” said Sasha.

Dmitrii, with effort, let go the twining serpents of his sword-hilt.

“How do you mean to find Chelubey’s Tatars?” Sasha asked, trying for reason. “We have pursued them once already, and rode a fortnight without a glimpse, though that was in deepest winter, when the snow took good tracks.”

“But we found them, then,” said Dmitrii, and his gray eyes narrowed. “Did your younger sister survive the night?”

“Yes,” said Sasha warily. “Burns on her face, and a broken rib, Olga says. But she is alive.”

Now Dmitrii looked troubled. Behind him, one of the men clearing away the wreckage dropped the end of a broken roof-beam, swearing. “I would not have come to you in time, if it weren’t for her,” Sasha said to his cousin’s grim profile. “Her blood saved your throne.”

“The blood of many men saved my throne,” snapped Dmitrii without looking round. “She is a liar, and she made a liar of you, the most upright of men.”

Sasha said nothing.

“Ask her,” said Dmitrii, turning. “Ask her how she did it—found the Tatars. It can’t be only sharp eyes; I have dozens of sharp-eyed men. Ask her how she did it, and I will have her rewarded. I do not think any man in Moscow would marry her, but a country boyar might be persuaded. Or enough gold would bribe a convent to take her.” Dmitrii was talking faster and faster, his face uneasy, the words spilling out. “Or she may be sent home in safety—or stay in the terem with her sister. I will see she has enough gold to keep her comfortable. Ask her how she did it, and I will make all straight for her.”

Sasha stared, full of words he could not say. *Yesterday she saved your life, slew a wicked magician, set fire to Moscow and then saved it all in a single night. Do you think she will consent to disappear, for the price of a dowry—for any price? Do you know my sister?*

But of course, Dmitrii did not. He only knew Vasilii Petrovich, the boy she had pretended to be. *They are one and the same.* Beneath his bluster Dmitrii must realize that; his unease betrayed him.

A cry from the men around the stable spared Sasha from answering. Dmitrii turned with relief. “Here,” he said, striding over. Sasha trailed, grim-faced, in his wake. A crowd was gathering where two burned roof-beams crossed. “Stand aside—Mother of God, are you sheep at the spring grass? What is it?” The crowd shrank away from the steel in his voice. “Well?” said Dmitrii.

One of the men found his tongue. “There, Gosudar,” he said. He pointed at a gap between two fallen posts, and someone thrust down a torch. An echoing gleam came from below where a shining thing gave back the torchlight. The Grand Prince and his cousin stared, dazzled, doubting.

“Gold?” said Dmitrii. “There?”

“Surely not,” said Sasha. “It would have melted.”

Three men were already hauling aside the timbers that pinned the thing to the earth. A fourth plucked it out and handed it to the Grand Prince.

Gold it was: fine gold, and not melted. It had been forged into heavy links and stiff bars, oddly jointed. The metal had an oily sheen; it threw a shimmer of white and scarlet onto the ring of peering faces and made Sasha uneasy.

Dmitrii held it this way and that, then said, “Ah,” and switched his grip so that he held it by the crownpiece, reins over his wrist. The thing was a bridle. “I have seen this before,” said Dmitrii, eyes alight. An armful of gold was very welcome to a prince whose coffers had been shrunk by bandits and by fire.

“Kasyan Lutovich had it on his mare yesterday,” said Sasha, disliking the reminder of the day before. His eye dwelled with disfavor on the spiked bit. “I would not have blamed her for throwing him.”

“Well, this thing is a forfeit of war,” said Dmitrii. “If only that fine mare herself had not vanished—damn those Tatars for horse-thieves. A hot meal and wine for all you men; well done.” The men cheered raggedly. Dmitrii handed off the bridle to his steward. “Clean it,” the Grand Prince said. “Show it to my wife. It might cheer her. Then see it safely locked away.”

“Is it not strange,” Sasha said warily when the reverent steward had departed, the golden thing in his arms, “that this bridle should have lain in the stable as it burned and yet show no hurt?”

“No,” said Dmitrii, giving his cousin a hard look. “Not odd. Miraculous, coming on the heels of that other miracle: the snowstorm that delivered us. You are to tell anyone who asks exactly that. God spared this golden thing, because he knew our need was great.” The difference between uncanny happenings of the benevolent and the wicked sort was no thicker than rumor, and Dmitrii knew it. “Gold is gold. Now, Brother—” But he fell silent. Sasha had stilled, his head lifted.

“What is that noise?”

A confused murmuring was rising from the city outside: a roar and snap, like water on a rocky shore. Dmitrii frowned. “It sounds like—”

A shout from the gate-guard cut him off.

A LITTLE WAY DOWN the hill of the kremlin, the dusk came earlier, and the shadows fell cold and thick over another palace, smaller and quieter. The fire had not touched it, except for singeing from falling sparks.

All Moscow roiled with rumors, with sobs, curses, arguments, questions, and yet here a fragile order reigned. The lamps were lit; servants gathered what could be spared for the comfort of the impoverished. The horses drowsed in their stable; tidy columns of smoke rose from the chimneys of bakehouse and cookhouse, brewhouse, and the palace itself.

The author of this order was a single woman. She sat in her workroom, upright, impeccable, starkly pale. Sweeping lines of strain framed her mouth, though she was not yet thirty. The dark streaks beneath her eyes rivaled Dmitrii’s. She had gone into the bathhouse the night before and delivered her third child, dead. In that same hour, her firstborn had been stolen, and nearly lost in the horrors of the night.

But despite all that, Olga Vladimirova would not rest. There was too much to be done. A steady stream of people came to her, where she sat by the workroom oven: steward and cook, carpenter, baker, and washerwoman. Each one was dispatched with an assignment and some words of thanks.

A pause came between petitioners, and Olga slumped back in her chair, arms wrapped around her belly, where her unborn child had been. She had dismissed her other women hours ago; they were higher in the terem, sleeping off the shocks of the night. But one person would not go.

“You ought to go to bed, Olya. The household can manage without you until morning.” The speaker was a girl, sitting stiff and watchful on a bench beside the oven. She and the proud Princess of Serpukhov both had long black hair, the plaits wrist-thick, and an elusive similarity of feature. But the princess was delicate, where the girl was tall and long-fingered, her wide eyes arresting in the rough-hewn angles of her face.

“You should indeed,” said another woman, backing into the room bearing bread and cabbage stew. It was Lent; they could not eat fat meat. This woman looked as weary as the other two. Her plait was

yellow, just touched with silver, and her eyes were wide and light and clever. “The house is safe for the night. Eat this, both of you.” She began briskly ladling out soup. “And then go to bed.”

Olga said, slow with exhaustion, “This house is safe. But what of the city? Do you think Dmitrii Ivanovich or his poor fool of a wife are sending servants out with bread to feed the children that this night has orphaned?”

The girl sitting on the oven-bench paled, and her teeth sank into her lower lip. She said, “I am sure Dmitrii Ivanovich is making clever plans to take vengeance on the Tatars, and the impoverished will just have to wait. But that does not mean—”

A shriek from above cut her off, and then the sound of hurrying footsteps. All three women glared at the door with identical expressions. *What now?*

The nurse burst into the room, quivering. Two waiting-women panted in her wake. “Masha,” the nurse gasped. “Masha—she is missing.”

Olga was instantly on her feet. Masha—Marya—was her only daughter, the one who had been stolen from her bed just the night before. “Call in the men,” Olga snapped.

But the younger girl tilted her head, as though she were listening. “No,” said the girl. Every head in the room whipped round. The waiting-women and the nurse exchanged dark glances. “She’s gone outside.”

“Then that—” Olga began, but the other interrupted, “I know where she is. Let me go and get her.”

Olga gave the younger girl a long look, which she returned steadily. The day before, Olga would have said that she’d never trust her mad sister with one of her children.

“Where?” Olga asked.

“The stable.”

“Very well,” said Olga. “But, Vasya, bring Masha back before the lamps are lit. And if she is not there, tell me *at once*.”

The girl nodded, looking rueful, and got to her feet. Only when she moved could one see that she was favoring one side. She had a broken rib.

VASILISA PETROVNA FOUND MARYA where she’d expected, curled up asleep in the straw of a bay stallion’s stall. The stall door was open, though the stallion was not tied. Vasya entered, but did not wake the child. Instead she leaned against the great horse’s shoulder, pressing her cheek to the silky skin.

The bay stallion put his head around and nosed irrepressibly at her pockets. She smiled, her first real smile of that long day, drew a crust of bread from her sleeve and fed it to him.

“Olga will not rest,” she said. “She puts us all to shame.”

You have not rested either, returned the horse, blowing warm air onto her face.

Vasya, flinching, pushed him away; his hot breath pained the burns on her scalp and cheek. “I do not deserve to rest,” she said. “I caused the fire; I must make what amends I can.”

No, said Solovey, and stamped. *The Zhar Ptitsa caused the fire, although you should have listened to me before setting her loose. She was maddened with imprisonment.*

“Where did she come from?” Vasya asked. “How did *Kasyan,* of all people, put a bridle on a creature like that?”

Solovey looked troubled. His ears tilted forward and back, and his tail lashed his flanks. *I do not know how. I remember someone shouting, and someone weeping. I remember wings, and blood in blue*

water. He stamped again, shaking his mane. *Nothing more.*

He looked so distressed that Vasya scratched the stallion's withers and said, "Never mind. Kasyan is dead and his horse is gone." She changed the subject. "The domovoi said Masha was here."

Of course she's here, returned the horse, looking superior. *Even if she doesn't know how to speak to me yet, she knows I will kick anyone who tries to hurt her.*

This was not an idle threat coming from seventeen hands of stallion.

"I cannot blame her for coming to you," Vasya said. She scratched the horse's withers again, and the stallion's ears flopped with delight. "When I was small, I always ran to the stable at the first sign of trouble. But this is not Lesnaya Zemlya. Olya was frightened when they found her gone. I must take her back."

The little girl in the straw stirred and whimpered. Vasya dropped gingerly to her knees, trying not to jar her sore side, just as Marya came awake, thrashing. The child's head butted into Vasya's ribs, and she narrowly avoided a scream; her vision went black around the edges.

"Hush, Masha," Vasya said, when she could speak again. "Hush. It's me. It's all right. You're all right. You're safe."

The child subsided, rigid in the older girl's arms. The big horse put down his head and nosed her hair. She looked up. He lipped her nose very gently, and Marya squeaked out a tiny giggle. Then she buried her face in the older girl's shoulder and wept.

"Vasochka, Vasochka, I don't remember anything," she whispered between sobs. "I just remember being scared—"

Vasya remembered being scared, too. At the child's words, images from the night before crossed her mind like flung darts. A horse of fire, rearing up. The sorcerer withering, crumpling to the floor. Marya ensorcelled, blank-faced, obedient.

And the winter-king's voice. *As I could, I loved you.*

Vasya shook her head, as though motion could dispel memory. "You don't have to remember; not yet," she said gently to the girl. "You are safe now; it is over."

"It doesn't feel like it is over," whispered the child. "I can't remember! How do I know if it's over or not?"

Vasya said, "Trust me, or if you will not, trust your mother or your uncle. No more harm will come to you. Now, come, we must get back to the house. Your mother is worried."

Marya immediately wrenched away from Vasya, who had little strength to stop her, and wrapped all four limbs around Solovey's foreleg. "No!" Marya shouted, face pressed to the horse's coat. "You can't make me!"

An ordinary horse would have reared at such antics, or shied, or at the very least hit Marya in the face with his knee. Solovey only stood there, looking dubious. Gingerly, he put his head down to Marya. *You can stay here if you like,* he said, although the child did not understand him. She was crying again: the thin exhausted wail of a child at the end of endurance.

Vasya, sick with pity and anger on the girl's behalf, understood why Marya did not want to go back to the house. She had been taken from that house, subjected to half-remembered horrors. Solovey's large and self-confident presence was nothing if not reassuring.

"I have been dreaming," the little girl mumbled into the stallion's foreleg. "I can't remember anything—except for the dreaming. There was a skeleton that laughed at me, and I kept eating cakes—more and more—even though they made me sick. I don't want to dream anymore. And I'm not going back to the house. I am going to live here in the stable with Solovey." She renewed her grip on the stallion.

Vasya could see that unless she chose to pry Marya off and drag her away—a procedure that her broken rib wouldn't bear and Solovey would heartily disapprove of—the girl wasn't going anywhere.

Well, let someone else explain to an irascible stallion why Marya could not stay where she was. In the meantime— "Very well," Vasya said, and made her voice cheerful, "no need to go back to the house unless you wish it. Shall I tell you a story?"

Marya's death-grip on Solovey loosened. "What kind of story?"

"Any story you like. Ivanushka and Alenushka?" Then Vasya's heart misgave her. *Sister, dear sister Alenushka, said the little goat. Swim out, swim out to me. They are lighting the fires, boiling the pots, sharpening the knives. And I am going to die.*

But his sister couldn't help him. For she'd already been drowned herself.

"No, perhaps not that one," said Vasya hastily and thought. "Ivan the Fool perhaps?"

The child pondered, as though the choice of tales were a momentous one that could change the history of that bitter day. For her sake, Vasya wished it were so.

"I think," said Marya, "that I would like to hear the story of Marya Morevna."

Vasya hesitated. As a child, she had loved the story of Vasilisa the Beautiful, her own fairy-tale namesake. But the tale of Marya Morevna would cut deep—perhaps too deep—after the night before. Marya wasn't finished though. "Tell about Ivan," she said. "That part of the story. About the *horses.*"

And then Vasya understood. She smiled, and didn't even care that smiling tugged at the burnt skin on her face.

"Very well. I will tell that part, if you will let go of Solovey's foreleg. He is not a post."

Marya let go of Solovey reluctantly, and the stallion lay down in the straw, so that both girls could curl against his warm side. Vasya wrapped Marya and herself in her cloak and began, stroking Marya's hair:

"Prince Ivan tried three times to rescue his wife, Marya Morevna, from the clutches of the evil sorcerer Kaschei," she said. "But each time he failed, for Kaschei rode the fastest horse in all the world, and moreover one who understood the speech of men. His horse could outrun Ivan's, no matter how great his start."

Solovey snorted out a complacent, hay-scented breath. *That horse couldn't outrun me,* he said.

"At last, Ivan bid his wife Marya to ask Kaschei how he had come to ride such a matchless horse.

" 'There is a house on chicken legs,' replied Kaschei. 'Which stands upon the shore of the sea. A witch lives there: a Baba Yaga, who breeds the finest horses in all the world. You must cross a river of fire to get to her, but I have a magic kerchief that parts the flames. Once you have come to the house, you must ask to serve the Baba Yaga for three days. If you serve her well, she will give you a horse. But if you fail, she will eat you.' "

Solovey slanted a thoughtful ear.

"And so Marya, that brave girl"—here Vasya tugged her niece's black plait, and Marya giggled —"stole Kaschei's magic handkerchief and gave it to Ivan in secret. And he went away to the Baba Yaga, to win the finest horse in all the world for his own.

"The river of fire was great and terrible. But Ivan crossed it by waving Kaschei's handkerchief and galloping through the flames. Beyond the fire, he found a little house by the shore of the sea. There lived the Baba Yaga and the finest horses in all the world—"

Here Marya interrupted. "Could they talk? Like you can talk to Solovey? Can you really talk to Solovey? Does he talk to people? Like the Baba Yaga's horses?"

"He can talk," said Vasya, putting a hand up to stem the flow of questions. "If you know how to listen. Now hush, let me finish."

But Marya was already asking her next question. "How did you learn how to listen?"

"I—the man in the stable taught me," said Vasya. "The vazila. When I was a child."

"Could I learn?" said Marya. "The man in the stable never talks to me."

“Yours is not strong,” said Vasya. “They are not strong in Moscow. But—I think you could learn. Your grandmother—my mother—knew a little magic, they say. I have heard a tale that your great-grandmother rode into Moscow on a magnificent horse, gray as the morning. Perhaps she saw chyerti just as you and I do. Perhaps there are other horses, somewhere, just like Solovey. Perhaps we all—”

She was interrupted by a decisive step in the aisle between the stalls. “Perhaps we all,” said Varvara’s dry voice, “are in need of supper. Your sister trusted you to go and get her daughter, and here I find you two rolling in the straw like a couple of peasant boys.”

Marya scrambled to her feet; Vasya followed painfully, trying not to favor her injured side. Solovey stood up with a heave, his ears pricked toward Varvara. The woman gave him a strange look. For an instant, there was a kind of remote longing in her face, as a woman looks upon something she coveted long ago. Then, ignoring the stallion, she said, “Come on, Masha. Vasya can finish your story later. The soup will be cold.”

THE STABLE HAD FILLED UP with shadows in the time Vasya and Marya had been talking. Solovey stood still, ears pricked. “What is it?” Vasya asked the horse.

Can you hear that?

“What?” said Varvara, and Vasya looked at her strangely. Surely she hadn’t…

Marya looked suddenly frightened. “Does Solovey hear someone coming? Someone bad?”

Vasya took the girl’s hand. “I said you are safe and I meant it. If there is any danger, Solovey will take us all galloping far away.”

“All right,” said Marya in a small voice. But she held tight to Vasya’s hand.

They walked out into the blued evening. Solovey went with them, huffing uneasily, his nose at Vasya’s shoulder. The blood-colored sunset had diminished to a faint smear in the west, and the air was still and strange. Outside the thick walls of the stable, Vasya could hear what Solovey had heard: the rush and tramp of many feet and a muted rumble of voices.

“You are right; something is wrong,” said Vasya to the horse, low. “And, curse it, Sasha is not here.” Aloud, she added, “Do not worry, Masha, we are safe here behind the gates.”

“Come on,” said Varvara, and made for the outer door, the anteroom and the stair that would lead them back up to the terem.

2.

Reckoning

THE DOORYARD WAS STRANGELY QUIET; the day's bustle had given way to a heavy calm. Varvara slipped through the outer door of the terem, holding Marya tight by the hand. Vasya turned back at the foot of the stairs, pressed her forehead to Solovey's silky neck. She wondered why it was so still in the dooryard. Many of Olga's guards had died or been wounded in the fighting in the Grand Prince's dvor, but where were her sister's grooms, her bondsmen? From beyond the gates, the shouting rose. "Wait for me," she told the horse. "I am going up to my sister, but I'll come back soon."

Hurry, Vasya, said the stallion, unease in every line of his body.

Up the stairs to Olga's workroom. Vasya's broken rib ran a claw of fire down her side as she climbed. The big, low-ceilinged workroom had a stove for heat, a narrow window for air. It was crowded now; Olga's attendants had been awakened by the noise. The nurse sat near the stove, clutching Olga's son, Daniil. The child was eating bread; he was a placid boy, if a bit bewildered. The women were whispering as though they feared to be heard. An air of disquiet had invaded the palace of Serpukhov. Vasya found her blistered palms sweating.

Olga was standing at the narrow window, looking out beyond the dooryard. Marya ran straight to her mother. The princess put an arm around her daughter's shoulders.

The hanging lamps threw sinister shadows, quivering with the breeze of Vasya's entrance. Heads turned, but Vasya only had eyes for her sister, who stood unmoving beside the window.

"Olya?" Vasya asked. The voices in the room sank to hear her. "What is it?"

"Men. With torches," Olga said, still not turning around.

Vasya saw the women exchanging frightened glances. But still she did not understand. "What are they doing?"

"See for yourself." Olga's voice was calm. But she wore layers of chains draped over her breast, hanging from her headdress. The lamplight shimmered on the gold, blindingly, showing the speed of her breathing.

"I would send for the guards," added Olga. "But we lost so many last night, in the fire, or fighting the Tatars. The rest are at the city-gates; the bondsmen are in the city on errands of mercy. All the men we could spare, and they have not returned. Perhaps some were prevented from coming back, perhaps others heard something we did not."

Daniil's nurse clutched the child until he squawked. Marya was watching Vasya with hope and blind trust: the aunt who had a magic horse. Trying not to limp, Vasya crossed to the window. As she passed, a few of the women averted their eyes and crossed themselves.

The street before the gates of Serpukhov was thronged with people. Many bore torches; all of them were shouting. Near the open window, their rising voices came clear at last to Vasya's straining ears.

"Witch!" they shouted. "Give us the witch! Fire! She set the fire!"

Varvara said flatly to Vasya, “They are here for you,” and Marya said, “Vasochka—Vasochka—do they mean *you*?” Olga’s arm was stiff, holding her daughter close.

“Yes, Masha,” said Vasya, dry-mouthed. “They do.” The crowd before the gate spread like a river against a rock.

“We must bar the door to the palace,” Olga said. “They might break the gate. Varvara—”

“Have you sent for Sasha?” Vasya interrupted. “For men from the Grand Prince?”

“Whom exactly is she supposed to send?” said Varvara. “All the men were in the city when this started. Curse it. I would have had some warning myself, were I not in the terem all the day, and so weary.”

“I can go,” said Vasya.

“Don’t be a fool,” snapped Varvara. “Do you think you’ll not be recognized? Do you mean to ride that great bay stallion too, that every man, woman, and child in this city will know on sight? *I* will go, if anyone.”

“No one is going,” said Olga coolly. “Look, we are surrounded.”

Vasya and Varvara turned toward the window again. It was true. The pool of torches had spread.

The women’s whispers were shrill now with fright.

The crowd swelled; people were still streaming in from side-streets. They began pounding on the gate. Vasya could not make out individual faces in the crowd; the torches dazzled her eyes. The dooryard beneath them lay cold and silent.

“Be easy, Vasya,” said Olga. Her face was rigidly calm. “Don’t be frightened, Masha; go and sit by the fire with your brother.” To Varvara— “Take women to help you; put whatever you can find against the door. It will buy time, if they break the gate. The tower was built to withstand Tatars. We will be all right. Sasha and the Grand Prince will get word of the disturbance; men will arrive in time.”

The shimmer of Olga’s golden chains still betrayed her unease.

“If it is me they want—” Vasya began.

Olga cut her off. “Give yourself over? Do you think *that* can be reasoned with?” A sharp gesture took in the seething mob. Varvara was already chivying women off their benches. The wood was sturdy. It would buy them time. But how much time?

Just then a new voice spoke. “*Death,*” it whispered.

Vasya turned her head. The voice belonged to Olga’s domovoi, speaking from the oven-mouth. His voice was the whisper of settling ashes after the fire has died.

Every hair on Vasya’s body rose. It is given to the domovoi to know what will happen to his family. In two limping strides, Vasya crossed to the stove. The women stared. Marya’s eyes met Vasya’s in horror; she too had heard the domovoi.

“Oh, what will happen?” Marya cried. She seized Daniil’s bread, making the child wail, and dropped to her knees on the hearth beside Vasya.

“Now Masha—” the nurse began, but Vasya said, “*Leave her,*” in such a tone that the whole room drew back in fright. Even Olga’s breath whistled out audibly between her teeth.

Marya thrust her bread at the faded domovoi. “Don’t say that,” she said. “Don’t say death. You are frightening my brother.”

Her brother could neither hear nor see the domovoi, but Marya in her pride would not admit that she was frightened. “Can you not protect this house?” Vasya asked the domovoi.

“No.” The domovoi was little more than a faint voice, and a shape cast by the ember-light. “The sorcerer is dead; the old woman wanders in darkness. Men have turned their eyes to other gods. There is nothing left to sustain me. To sustain any of us.”

“We are here,” said Vasya, fierce with fear. “We see you. Help us.”

“We see you,” Marya echoed, whispering. Vasya took the child’s hand, held it tight. She had already reopened one of her innumerable cuts from the night before. She smeared a bloody hand on the hot brick in the oven-mouth.

The domovoi shivered and suddenly looked more like a living creature and less like a speaking shadow. “I can buy time,” he breathed. “A little time, but that is all.”

A little time? Vasya was still holding her niece’s hand. The women were massed at their backs, wearing various expressions of fright and condemnation.

“Black magic,” said one. “Olga Vladimirova, surely you see—”

“There is death in our fortunes tonight,” Vasya said to her sister, ignoring the others.

Olga’s face drew into grim lines. “Not if I can help it. Vasya, take the end of the bench; help Varvara bar the door—”

In Vasya’s head beat a swift litany: *It is me they want.*

Out in the dooryard, Solovey squealed. The gates shook. Varvara stood nearest the door, silent. Her eyes seemed to convey something. Vasya thought she knew what it was.

She knelt, stiffly, to look her niece in the face. “You must always take care of the domovoi,” she said to Marya. “Here—or wherever you are—you must do your best to make him strong, and he will protect the house.”

Marya nodded solemnly, and said, “But Vasochka, what about you? I don’t know enough—”

Vasya kissed her and stood. “You will learn,” she said. “I love you, Masha.” She turned to Olga. “Olya, she—soon, you must send her to Alyosha, at Lesnaya Zemlya. He will understand; he knew me, growing up. Masha cannot stay in this tower, not forever.”

“Vasya—” Olga began. Marya, puzzled, clutched at Vasya’s hand.

“For all of this,” said Vasya, “forgive me.” She let go of Marya’s hand and slipped out the door, which Varvara opened for her. For an instant, their eyes locked in a look of grim understanding.

SOLOVEY WAS WAITING FOR Vasya by the palace door, seemingly calm, save that a white rim showed about his eye. The dooryard was dark. The shouting had grown louder. A splintering crash came from the gate. The light of torches gleamed between the cracking timbers. Her mind was racing. What to do? Solovey, unmistakable, was in danger. They all were: herself, her horse, her family.

Could she and Solovey hide in the stable, the door barred? No—the maddened crowd would make straight for that vulnerable terem-door, for the children inside.

Give herself up? Walk up to them and surrender? Perhaps they would be satisfied, perhaps they would not break in at all.

But Solovey—what would they do to him? Her horse, standing stalwart at her side, would never leave her willingly.

“Come on,” she said. “We are going to hide in the stable.”

Better to run, said the horse. *Better to open a gate and run.*

“I am not opening any gate to that mob,” Vasya snapped. She made her voice coaxing. “We must buy all the time we can, so that my brother will come, with men from the Grand Prince. The gate will hold long enough. Come, we must hide.”

The horse, uneasy, followed her, while the shouting rose up all around them.

The great double door of the stable was made of heavy wood. Vasya opened it. The horse followed her, huffing uneasily into the dimness.

“Solovey,” Vasya said, drawing the door nearly to. “I love you.”

He nuzzled her hair, careful now of her burns, and said, *Don’t be frightened. If they break the gate and come in here, we will just run away. No one will find us.*

“Take care of Masha,” said Vasya. “Perhaps one day she will learn to speak to you.”

Vasya, said Solovey, throwing his head up in sudden alarm. But she had already pushed his head away from her, slipped out the narrow opening of the door and shut the stallion securely in the stable.

Behind her she heard the stallion’s furious squeal, heard also the splintering, barely audible over the shouting, of his hooves on the sturdy wood. But even Solovey could not break through the massive door.

She started making her awkward way to the gate, cold and terrified.

The cracks in the gates widened. A single voice soared up into the night, urging the crowd on. In answer, the shouting rose to a greater pitch.

A second time the same voice called, silken, half-singing, cutting through the noise with its purity of tone. The slow, stabbing ache in Vasya’s side worsened. The lamps had been put out in the terem above.

Behind her, Solovey squealed again.

“Witch!” called the powerful voice a third time. It was a summons; it was a threat. The gate was splintering faster by the instant.

This time she recognized the voice. Her breath seemed to leave her body. But when she answered, her voice didn’t shake. “I am here. What do you want?”

At that moment, two things happened. The gate gave way in a shower of splinters. And behind her, Solovey burst the stable door and came galloping through it.

3.

Nightingale

THEY WERE NEARER HER THAN Solovey, but nothing was faster than the bay stallion. He was coming for her at full gallop. Vasya saw a final chance. Goad the mob into pursuit; lead it away from her sister's door. And so, as Solovey flew past her, she timed his stride, running alongside him, and then leaped to his back.

Pain, weakness disappeared in the urgency of the moment. Solovey was charging straight toward the smashed gate. Vasya shouted as they went, drawing the mob's eyes from the tower. Solovey lashed out with all of a war-stallion's viciousness, tearing through the crowd. People clawed at them, only to be flung back and away.

Near the gate now. Her whole being was bent on escape. On open ground, nothing could outrace the bay stallion. She could draw them off, buy time, come back with Sasha, with Dmitrii's guards.

Nothing could outrun Solovey.

Nothing.

She never saw what hit them. It might have been only a log meant for someone's fireplace. All she heard was the hiss as it swung, and then she felt the shock, vibrating through the stallion's flesh, as the blow landed. Solovey's leg went sideways. He fell, a stride before the ruined gate.

The crowd shrieked. Vasya felt the *crack* like a wound herself. Instinct rolled her clear, then she was kneeling at the horse's head.

"Solovey," she whispered. "Solovey, get up."

People pressed nearer; a hand seized her hair. She whipped round and bit it; the owner swore and fell back. The stallion struggled, kicking, but his hind leg lay at a terrible angle.

"Solovey," Vasya whispered. "Solovey, please."

The stallion breathed a soft, hay-scented breath into her face. He seemed to shudder, and the mane pouring over her hands felt spiky as feathers. As though his other, stranger nature, the bird she'd never seen, was going to fight free at last and take wing.

Then a blade came down.

It bit into the horse just where his head met his body. A howl went up.

Vasya felt the blade go through the stallion just as though it had cut her own throat, and she did not know she was screaming as she whirled like a wolf protecting her cub.

"Kill her!" cried someone in the crowd. "There she is—the unnatural bitch. Kill her."

Vasya launched herself at them, heedless of anything, careless of her own life. Then a man's fist fell on her, and another, until she could not feel them at all.

SHE WAS KNEELING IN a starlit forest. The world was black and white and quite still. A brown bird fluttered in the snow just out of reach. A figure, black-haired and bone-pale, knelt beside it, extending a cupped hand toward the creature.

She knew that hand; knew this place. She thought she could even see feeling behind the ancient indifference in the death-god's eyes. But he was looking at the bird, not at her, and she could not be sure. He was stranger and farther away than he had ever been, his whole attention fixed on the nightingale in the snow.

"Take us together," she whispered.

He did not turn.

"Let me come with you," she tried again. "Let me not lose my horse." Far away, she could feel the blows on her body.

The nightingale hopped into the death-god's hand. He closed his fingers delicately about the creature, picked it up. With his other hand, he scooped up a handful of snow. The snow melted to water in his hand; it dripped upon the bird, who at once went still and stiff.

Then, at last, he raised his eyes to hers. "Vasya," he said, in a voice she knew. "Vasya, listen to me __"

But she could not reply.

For in the true world, the crowd drew back at a word from a man's thunderous voice, and she was wrenched back to nighttime Moscow, bleeding in the trampled snow, but alive.

Perhaps she only imagined it. But when she opened her blood-smeared eyes, the death-god's dark figure was still beside her, fainter than a noontime shadow, eyes urgent and quite helpless. He held the stiff body of a nightingale most tenderly in one hand.

Then he was gone. He might never have been there at all. She was lying across the body of her horse, sticky with his blood. Above her stood a man with golden hair, his eyes blue as midsummer. He wore the cassock of a priest and was looking at her with an expression of cold and steady triumph.

THROUGH ALL THE LONG ROADS and the griefs of his life, Konstantin Nikonovich had one gift that had never failed him. When he spoke, crowds grew pliant at the sound of his voice.

All that night, while the midnight snowstorm raged, he'd said extreme unction for the dying and comforted the wounded.

Then, in the black hour before dawn, he spoke to the people of Moscow.

"I cannot be silent," he said.

At first his voice was low and gentle, addressing now this person, now that. As they began to pool about him, like water in the hollow of his hand, he raised his voice. "A great wrong has been done you."

"Done us?" asked the soot-smeared, frightened people. "What wrong has been done us?"

"This fire was God's punishment," said Konstantin. "But the crime was not yours."

"Crime?" they asked, uneasy, clutching their children.

"Why do you think the city burned?" Konstantin demanded. Real sorrow thickened his voice. Children, smothered with smoke, had died in their mothers' arms. He could grieve for that. He was not so far gone. His words were hoarse with feeling. "The fire was God's punishment for the harboring of a witch."

"A witch?" they asked. "Have we harbored a witch?"