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THE THREE HORSEMEN OF THE BLACK FOREST

Scarlet Hyacinth

MENAGE AMOUR



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DEDICATION

For everyone who's ever read a fairytale and wanted the prince to end up with his best friend, not the princess.

With thanks to Rachel, Kyo, Alice, and my Puy for their support and suggestions.

THE THREE HORSEMEN OF THE BLACK FOREST

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Prologue

Larissa hummed a merry tune as she wove the clothing of her unborn son. Her husband, Dimitri, was out chopping wood, the material he needed to carve adornments for the richest inhabitants of their village. She missed him, but he would be back in a few hours. Until then, she had the company of her beautiful son.

She knew her baby would be a son. She dreamt about him, about a beautiful baby boy with blond locks like hers and Dimitri's blue eyes. She even thought up a name for him: Vassili. Soon, Vassili would be born and he would complete their family.

Larissa petted her stomach, laughing softly as she felt her baby kick. She already loved him so much. She couldn't wait to hold him in her arms, teach him to walk and show him everything their world had to give.

Suddenly, a gust of wind passed through the open window. Larissa frowned. She distinctly remembered Dimitri closing that window. Her husband doted upon her with almost paranoid care, so much so that he hated to be away from the house even for a few hours. When he did have to leave, he locked all the doors and windows so that no one could possibly get in to hurt her.

Therefore, the open window surprised Larissa, and not in a good way. She got up from the chair, making her way with difficulty toward it. It was foolish to panic just because of something so minor. Even so, she couldn't help but be relieved when she managed to close the window with no problems.

However, as she turned to go back to her seat, she ran into a frightening sight. Three men stood before her, and they looked unlike anything she'd ever seen. The first man had marble-white skin, and his hair and clothes boasted exactly the same color. Even his eyes shone an eerie white, almost as if he were blind. Larissa knew that couldn't be the case, since the man's gaze looked far too focused and piercing. The second man was even more striking. His clothes, his skin, his hair, everything about him burned a fiery red color. As for the third man, he seemed almost a shadow, like an angel of death. Black eyes, black hair, black skin, everything about him dark and threatening.

Larissa just stood there, frozen, unable to look away from the three men. They seemed surreal in their perfection. So much so, Larissa thought she could be dreaming. However, when the dark man took a step forward, she snapped out of her trance. They would hurt her. They would hurt her darling son. She needed to get out of there.

Larissa let out a scream as she turned to make for the exit. She didn't even manage to take one step. In front of her, the dark man suddenly appeared, frowning fiercely.

Tears blurred Larissa's vision. She shielded her swollen belly with her hand, desperate to protect her child. "Please, don't hurt me. Take anything you want, just don't do anything to harm my child."

She didn't actually expect them to listen to her words. Much to her surprise, a gentle voice sounded behind her. "Noci, you're scaring her."

Instinctively, Larissa wanted to look back toward the source of the sound. The soft voice called to her somehow. However, she hated the thought of turning her back on the dark man, Noci.

Carefully keeping her distance, she shifted so that she could have all three men in her line of sight. "Wh-Who are you?" she managed to stammer. "What do you want?"

The man in white smiled gently. "I'm sorry. We've been very rude. I am Deni, my friend in red is Sonta and our dark companion is Noci." He hesitated briefly and spoke again. "We're your friends. You don't need to fear us."

The man in red, Sonta, nodded. "We won't hurt you or your son."

Noci gave Larissa a slightly morose look. "I apologize. I was a bit...overzealous."

Larissa wanted to laugh at the phrasing, but refrained from doing so. Obviously, this man didn't apologize very often and she didn't want to offend him. Besides, she had other, more important things to worry about. "You still haven't answered my question. What do you want?"

For a brief moment, the three men didn't reply. Finally, Sonta rubbed his eyes in frustration. "Oh, for crying out loud...We're here to talk to you about your son."

At Sonta's words, Larissa let out a choked sound. They would hurt her baby after all. They would take her sweet Vassili from her.

She turned to try to find an escape route, but a strong hand gripped her wrist, stopping her. As she looked toward her captor, she realized that the one holding her prisoner was, surprisingly, Deni.

"Sonta didn't explain it correctly," Deni began again. "We want to help you, to protect your son."

Larissa snatched her hand out of Deni's grip. "Why would I believe you? You break into my house in my husband's absence and show interest in my son. You can't possibly think I'd trust anything you say. Get—"

An angry growl interrupted Larissa's phrase. "Stop, just stop." Noci glared at her. "If we'd wanted to hurt you, we'd have done so. Our presence is important and you will remain silent and listen."

For some reason, his dark gaze made Larissa feel petty and insignificant. Larissa nodded quietly. Smiling in obvious relief, Deni took a deep breath and started to explain once more. "Your son is meant for great things. His future is bound to ours and his happiness to our freedom."

Larissa couldn't really understand what Deni meant by that cryptic statement. Before she could voice her questions, Sonta took a step forward and took hold of her palm. His hand felt hot, almost scorching to the touch. Even so, strangely enough, the heat didn't burn her. In fact, it comforted her. Sonta squeezed her hand, allowing the warmth to seep through her body.

"For that to happen, Vassili will need help," Sonta pointed out. "He will encounter things in life, enemies difficult to defeat."

Noci approached once more, his tone turning calmer, friendlier. "Through you, we will gift Vassili with an important, very valuable gift." Noci leaned toward the wooden chest where Dimitri kept his carvings and retrieved a toy soldier. Dimitri had carved it just a few days ago for their unborn son. "The gift we entrust to you now must be kept a secret at all costs."

Deni nodded, placing his palm over the toy soldier in Noci's hand. "You must not tell anyone about our presence here."

Sonta finally released Larissa from his grip and added covered Deni's hand with his own. "Not even Dimitri, not even Vassili himself."

A light started to shine from the palms of the three mysterious men. Black, white, and red surrounded the little toy soldier. For a second, Larissa thought it would be destroyed by the onslaught of power. It didn't happen. When the light died, Deni and Sonta lifted their hands off the toy, and Noci handed it to Larissa.

Larissa glanced at it skeptically. It didn't look any different. "This is the gift for Vassili?"

Before the three men could answer, a different voice replied. "Yes, beautiful Larissa. I am the gift for your son."

Larissa gasped as the wooden soldier spoke, dropping it to the floor. Noci lifted it back up and Deni chuckled at the little toy's slightly put-out expression. It seemed incredible that a toy soldier could even have an expression, but there it was.

"We gave our little friend here life, wisdom, kindness, and strength," Noci explained. "He will be a valuable aid for your Vassili."

The wooden soldier nodded. "Whenever he gets into trouble, he'll just have to feed me and I will help him with his predicament."

Sonta took a step forward and gave Larissa a serious look. "Gift the soldier to Vassili when he comes of age. The toy will guide your son on the path he needs to take."

Noci placed the toy back in Larissa's hand. It once again became just a wooden, lifeless soldier. "Do not worry, Larissa. We mean well. You can feel it in your heart."

Larissa took another glance at the soldier. She did feel apprehensive about the magic she'd seen them do. However, Noci was right. In her heart, she somehow knew these men would be linked to Vassili's future. "All right," she whispered with a smile. "I will give it to him."

Noci smiled back, for the first time actually appearing to be satisfied. Taking a step back, he gripped Deni's hand and then Sonta's. Before Larissa's very eyes, the three mysterious men disappeared.

Chapter 1

Vassili knelt by the bed, his eyes on the fragile, pale figure resting before him. His dear, sweet mother. He still couldn't believe that she had fallen so ill. The strong, healthy, and happy woman who told him stories when he went to bed somehow turned into a shadow of her former self. She could no longer tuck him in or sing to him. In fact, she could barely speak now.

Vassili struggled to be strong and not burst into tears as he caressed his mother's face. She would soon be on her feet once more. The doctor had given them medicine and it would make her feel better.

Suddenly, Larissa cracked her eyes open, blinking a bit as if to focus her vision. She smiled at Vassili, urging him closer. "My dear son," she began softly, "I fought this thing that consumed me for so long, but I cannot fight it any longer. God is calling for me to join him."

Tears started flowing on Vassili's cheeks, for he knew that his mother was finally giving up the fight. Even so, he tried to protest Larissa's words. "No, Mama, I will call Papa. We will get the doctor."

Larissa coughed and held on to Vassili's hand. "No, my dear Vassili, stay here with me. I have something for you."

With that, Larissa retrieved one of Vassili's carved toy soldiers from under the blanket. Vassili saw his mother had sewn the soldier pretty blue clothes that matched his own eyes, adorning them with shining buttons. "Take it, *cyn*. If you ever get into trouble, prepare some food and feed it to the soldier and he will help you."

Dimitri walked in, his face paling visibly when he saw the tears on Vassili's cheeks and Larissa's glassy eyes. "No! No, Larissa, you cannot give up."

The sick woman gave her husband a small smile. "I am so sorry for leaving you, *lubov moya*. The illness has consumed me, and I cannot hold on any longer."

Dimitri's hands trembled as he opened a drawer and retrieved a candle. Almost automatically, he lit it and placed it on the nightstand. He turned toward his son and gave him a lost look. "Vassili, go to the village. Find the priest."

"No." Larissa clutched Dimitri's hand and beckoned Vassili back. "Too late now. Just stay here, keep me company. God loves me either way." She took a deep breath, her eyes turning a bit dazed as she struggled to speak. "And when I'm gone, bury me in the grove, so I can always be here."

His eyes swimming with tears, Dimitri pressed his mouth to his wife's in a desperate kiss. She died, giving her last breath into her kiss with her beloved Dimitri.

Vassili just stared in disbelief as his father collapsed on top of his mother's still body. It couldn't be. His mother couldn't be dead. She promised she would always be by his side.

He didn't know how long he stayed like that, clutching the wooden soldier in his hand. Eventually, he became aware of his father getting up and caressing his mother's face. His father's hand passed over Larissa's face, closing her eyes. Without a word, he exited the room. Vassili took one look at his mother's body and ran out, suddenly feeling too afraid to even see Larissa. He watched as his father rummaged through some coffers and revealed a beautiful set of clothing and a large, white sheet.

Dimitri then turned to look at Vassili. "Go to the church and get the priest. We need to...With this heat, we need to bury her as soon as possible." He swallowed, looking away, clutching the material of the clothes so tight his knuckles went white. "And let her family know." Vassili opened his mouth to say something, anything, but he couldn't speak. In the end, he just ran out, realizing that he was much better off doing this task than seeing his mother be prepared for burial.

Vassili didn't know how he managed to fulfill the task his father gave him. At some point, everything became a blur. His body seemed to be working automatically, while his mind retreated someplace remote. He distantly acknowledged the well-wishes and offers for help. When he finally returned to their cottage, he blankly watched relatives and friends arrive, giving Larissa her last farewell. The next morning, they dug her a grave in the grove behind the house, according to her wishes. It would be marked by a cross carved by Vassili's father, to forever keep her kindness and beauty in their memory.

After all was said and done, Dimitri wept for weeks and weeks after his lost wife. Vassili could hear him every night, going to Larissa's grave, calling out her name into the darkness. Even in the mornings, Dimitri would wonder around, an absent expression on his face, completely ignoring Vassili. For a while, Vassili lost himself in his own grief and he hoped that he would, eventually, manage to get his father back. However, when Dimitri finally stopped weeping, Vassili saw that his father had changed. He was no longer the happy woodcarver who made him toy soldiers. He was now a cold man, dead inside, his spirit crushed by the loss of his beloved wife. Vassili received no more smiles and his childhood became as chilly and barren as his mother's grave.

A few years passed in the now lonely cottage. As much as Vassili tried to find a way to reach his father's heart, all his efforts ended up futile. Finally, Vassili's father decided to take a new wife, a seamstress named Mariya. Vassili knew her to be a widow, as her husband died the same year as Larissa. He thought his father probably saw some sort of comfort in this kinship and he tried to be optimistic. Mariya was not only beautiful, she also had two older sons, Nikolai and Vladimir. Therefore, Vassili hoped that he would finally have

someone to spend time with. This way, maybe they could at least fix some of the things torn apart with Larissa's death.

Alas, it wasn't meant to be. For all Mariya's beauty, she lacked Larissa's kindness and gentleness. When her husband was present, she pretended to care for Vassili, but when he left the house, she changed entirely.

Vassili never told his father anything, as he did not want his father to fall even deeper into despair. Even so, in spite of Mariya's efforts and Vassili's silence, Dimitri seemed to notice the problem. He started spending less and less time at home. Finally, after only a year of marriage with Mariya, Dimitri left for the big city, supposedly to sell his carvings. Vassili waited for him to come back, but as the months passed and his father did not return, he realized that Dimitri had decided to leave them. He wanted to be angry, but in truth, he felt too hurt that his father abandoned him to his fate.

In the midst of all the sadness, Vassili did have one light, the toy soldier his mother]left him. Whenever Mariya and her sons ordered him to do unreasonably hard tasks for his young age, he would retreat to his small room and feed the wooden doll a piece of bread and cheese. Just like that, the toy would come alive and help Vassili finish his difficult tasks.

Of course, it would have been easy for Vassili to allow his wooden friend to do everything for him. However, Larissa had not educated him to be idle, and so he always worked by his soldier friend's side, doing his best to finish at least a part of the chores Mariya gave.

Sometimes Vassili asked himself how his mother even managed to gift him with such a valuable treasure. However, he felt too afraid to ask, knowing that Mariya would probably punish him and take away the toy. As such, Vassili kept his mother's gift a secret. Even if Mariya or her sons saw the soldier, it seemed nothing more than a wooden toy. The soldier remained silent and lifeless to everyone but Vassili, nothing but a harmless, old toy. Only Vassili knew that the

soldier could actually do impossible tasks and lift incredibly heavy weights.

As the years passed, Vassili grew into a handsome young man. The girls in the village would turn their heads when he passed, giggled or sighed dreamily. They blushed when he smiled gently at them and offered to carry their heavy baskets. Sometimes they would bake him cookies and modestly send them to him with their thanks for all his help.

His stepbrothers weren't happy at all about Vassili's popularity. They sent their younger stepbrother to do the worst of the tasks around the house. Vassili knew they hoped that one day, he'd drop his axe and accidentally chop one of his limbs off. Perhaps the sun would burn his fair skin, or his body would suffer in consequence for all of the hard work. However, all their plotting failed. With the help of the toy soldier, Vassili managed to do all the tasks and foil all their plans.

This changed one dark autumn night. As usual, Vassili and his brothers silently worked in the chilly kitchen, each on their assigned tasks. Nikolai attempted to repair an old chair, while Vladimir sharpened knives. As usual, Vassili carved wood. He'd discovered that he inherited his father's talent to carve. Vassili knew his stepmother hated this reminder of her husband, but she still accepted Vassili's carving. His work was beautiful and earned them healthy sums of money.

Since Dimitri had left, Vassili's stepmother insisted on saving as much money as they could, so at dusk, they would leave only one candle burning. Given that they often worked with dangerous tools, it was unwise. Vassili refrained from pointing this out, for it would only earn him a beating.

Suddenly, Vassili heard a sound outside, echoing in the silent kitchen like an eerie omen. He looked up from his work to see a dark shadow pass through their courtyard. It seemed like the silhouette of a horseman, barely discernable, almost invisible in the darkness of the night. Just as Vassili got up to find out the identity of the intruder, the candle that shed light over the kitchen blew out.

Nikolai cursed and got up to look for something to relight the candle with. He slipped into the house where the fire still burned to keep the rooms warm. Vassili waited for his stepbrother to return, squirming when Vladimir glared at him as if the situation was somehow his fault. Finally, Nikolai reentered the kitchen, a glum look on his face.

"The fire in the stove is out as well. I tried lighting the candle using the embers, but it simply won't work."

Vladimir directed his glare toward Nikolai. "What do you mean it won't work? How hard can something like that be?"

"You try!" Nikolai snapped angrily. "I'm telling you, even as I light it, it flickers out."

Vladimir gave Nikolai a skeptical look, but didn't say anything else. Finally, Vassili realized it would be up to him to fix the situation. "I'll go ask someone in the village," he suggested. "Maybe they'll be able to help."

Vladimir turned toward Vassili once more and nodded. "We go together. God knows what stupid things you'll do. You're practically incapable of doing anything right."

Vassili suppressed the urge to counter his stepbrother's unfair insult. He pulled his own weight in their household. In fact, more often than not, he worked more than Vladimir and Nikolai. However, saying this would only get him in trouble. Therefore he remained silent.

Even so, he couldn't help but have a bad feeling about the whole thing. Taking advantage of a brief moment of inattention from his stepbrothers, Vassili slipped into the house, snatching a piece of bread from the table in the process. He heard his stepbrothers call after him, but he kept going until he got to his little room. Once there, he hastily found his toy soldier and wrapped it in a piece of quilt from his

mother. He didn't have time to ask for advice. He'd take it along, just in case.

As Vassili got out of the room, he bumped into Nikolai. He let out a small awkward laugh. "Just got my coat."

His stepbrother grabbed Vassili's wrist and pulled him toward the exit. "Come on. We need to hurry."

Vassili winced as Nikolai dragged him along, squeezing his arm with brutal strength. He released his wrist from Nikolai's grip and followed his stepbrothers out of the cottage.

They walked down the path toward the village in silence, with only Vladimir making a few crude comments from time to time. Vassili hated being forced to withstand their company, but he could do nothing about it. He just walked behind them, ignoring Vladimir and focusing on anything else but his stepbrother's voice.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, they reached the village. Vassili noticed that just like their cottage, the other houses were shrouded in darkness. Vassili felt more and more thankful that he'd brought his toy soldier along.

Much to his shock, he realized a crowd of people swarmed the village center. They hastily approached and Vladimir stopped the first person he ran into. "What's going on?"

The other man gave Vladimir a slightly nervous look. "The light, it's gone. No one can light any candle or fires in their homes."

Murmurs started in the crowd, whispers of a curse falling over the village. The people started to panic and Vassili thought he could hear children crying.

Luckily, or unluckily, his stepbrother intervened to take control of the situation. "Calm down!" Vladimir shouted. "This isn't helping."

Nikolai nodded. "We need a solution. Weeping and bemoaning won't fix things."

"What solution?" the man they'd approached practically screeched. "Not even the priest knows how to deal with this. We've tried everything."

"I say we fight fire with fire." Vladimir's tone turned sly. "Someone has to go to ask for light from Baba Yaga. Her power would surely break the curse over the village."

Cold dread slipped into Vassili's bones. Only a few miles from the town center, the village path split in two and went on to reach a dark and mysterious forest. Everyone called it the Black Forest, because even on sunny days, it seemed gloomy, dangerous, and scary. Furthermore, dark whispers spoke of a terrible witch, Baba Yaga, inhabiting the Black Forest. Everybody knew that all those who entered the accursed forest were never heard from again. Baba Yaga did not take kindly to trespassers, and all those who dared to enter the forest ended up eaten by her.

Silence fell over the village center as the people contemplated Vladimir's suggestion. "Witchcraft?" the first man asked. "I don't know... Besides, who could possibly go to the Black Forest?"

"Vassili will go," Nikolai immediately replied. "He knows his way through those paths."

Vassili's eyes widened in horror as everyone turned toward him. He started to shake his head, hoping that the townspeople wouldn't force him into the Black Forest. However, as he opened his mouth to protest, a masculine voice suddenly sounded in his ear. "Go, Vassili! Go to the forest. We are waiting for you."

The voice sent shivers of pleasure down Vassili's spine. He almost gasped as his cock instantly hardened, as if obeying a command from the mysterious presence.

Feeling grateful for the darkness hiding his predicament, Vassili turned to find the source of the unexpected encouragements. Alas, even as the voice whispered endearments in his ear, his questing eyes couldn't find the person speaking.

Taking a deep breath, Vassili struggled to focus and offered the villagers a small smile. "All right. I'll go."

At that, the peculiar voice disappeared. Several people patted him on the back, congratulating him for his bravery. A few girls approached him, kissing him on the cheek and wishing him a safe return. Even the priest came forward, whispering a blessing. All the while, Vladimir and Nikolai just smirked smugly, and Vassili knew they thought he would be going to his death.

Vassili just ignored his stepbrothers. He thanked the villagers, although he wanted to smack them for their hypocrisy. Finally, when he couldn't take anymore of the smiles and well wishes, he turned on his heel and headed toward the Black Forest.

Chapter 2

The road from the village toward the woods wasn't easy, but Vassili was a strong young man and wasn't afraid of effort. In spite of the cold weather, his brisk step kept him warm. The moon shone brightly, and the wind whispered merry songs, playing with Vassili's long blond locks like a naughty tyke. It almost made Vassili forget about the horridness of his task.

However, all too soon, Vassili reached his destination. The Black Forest loomed ahead, looking even more silent and threatening at night. Vassili shuddered, feeling for the soldier in his pocket. He found comfort in its solid weight, knowing that his mother's eyes watched over him. Yes, she would protect him. He'd get through this, he just knew it. He still had his toy soldier, and as long as his mother's blessing supported him, Vassili could accomplish anything. Disregarding the feeling of dread that threatened to overwhelm him, Vassili continued walking along the path into the dark forest.

It was quiet, too quiet. Vassili knew from experience, for he spent a great part of his life outdoors, that nature was never silent. Birds chirped away, singing their own little ode to life. Sometimes crickets would announce the coming of a new rain that would feed their crops. Bees buzzed around in their hectic yet fascinating routine. If one paid attention, one could hear rabbits, deer, and all the other animals passing through the thicket. At night, the wolves howled their own song. There was always the sound of the river crashing against the rocks. In winter, when the river iced up and the rabbits hid in their boroughs, the wind would knock at the cottage's windows. Vassili sometimes imagined that the wind actually urged him to come out and

play in the snow. Here in this forest there was nothing. Even the wind had gone silent, dead.

However, Vassili knew he could not turn back, not without the light for his stepbrothers. He walked in the eerily quiet forest, humming a merry tune to fill the unnatural silence. Vassili didn't know how long he walked through the undergrowth, when suddenly a horseman appeared. The horseman's face, his hair, and his skin were all as white as pure marble. He wore blindingly white clothing composed of a beautifully sewn white tunic and tight pants, complete with white riding gloves and boots. Even the horse was white.

The mysterious man glanced toward Vassili as he rode by. When the horseman offered Vassili a bright smile, Vassili resisted the urge to shelter his blue eyes at the almost blinding light. He wondered if he should strike up a conversation, maybe ask if he'd taken the right path to reach the witch's house. Before he could open his mouth, the horseman passed him by and disappeared into the foliage.

Vassili stared several minutes back into the place where he'd last seen the mysterious horseman. Something about the other man's smile had held him captive, frozen, and speechless. Shaking his head, he told himself to forget about the weird occurrence. Only then did he realize that dawn already bathed the world in daylight. Had he really walked for so long in the cursed forest?

Shuddering slightly, Vassili picked up the pace, knowing that he'd never hear the end of it if he didn't bring back the light from the witch. He walked and walked, stumbling over the numerous tree roots on the forest floor. He shielded his face with his hands when tree branches snapped at him, seemingly trying to stop his progress. Suddenly, a peculiar sight froze Vassili in his tracks. Yet another horseman. Everything about him was a fiery red, his flowing red braid, his clothes, even the pupils of his eyes and his horse. Much like the white horseman, the red one passed Vassili silently, but his lips twisted into a grin when he looked at Vassili's face.

As soon as the red horseman disappeared into the foliage, Vassili realized the sun now shone in the sky. Taking a deep breath, he struggled to compose himself. He wanted to get to the witch's house already, get the light and go back to his cottage. He most certainly did not want to think about the excitement he felt whenever the weird horsemen smiled at him. Focusing on his task, Vassili continued his journey toward Baba Yaga's house.

Finally, after wandering for countless hours, a cottage appeared in front of Vassili. It was surrounded by a fence made of human bones and decorated with human skulls. Vassili froze in horror and fright at the terrible sight.

In that moment, as if to complete the otherworldly spectacle, a third horseman appeared. His skin was black, he wore black clothing and rode a black horse. Vassili watched, fascinated as the horseman passed him by and vanished next to the gate of the house, but not before giving him a seductive grin.

The magic of the horseman's smile dissipated and Vassili once again realized his location. Night had fallen and the eyes of the skulls now shone like bright embers, casting an eerie light over the grove. Alas, he could no longer turn back. The earth started to shake and Vassili watched in horror as the witch entered the glade. She flew through the air in a stone mortar, using a pestle to guide her on her way and erasing her tracks with her ugly black broom. Vassili's eyes widened at the sight. The mortar actually looked like the one he used in their home to grind herbs. At the same time, though, it seemed so incredibly large and scary. The way the witch rode in it, crouched, her knees almost reaching her chin, only added to the unnatural, horrific spectacle.

Sniffing the air, the witch hissed in a raspy voice, "I smell a pure soul. Who dares to enter my domain?"

"It's just me, Vassili, *Babushka*," Vassili answered, unsure if addressing the witch with such familiarity was very wise. He hoped it

would help him stay alive and uneaten. "My stepbrothers sent me to get some light from your beautiful cottage."

The witch examined Vassili with undisguised interest. "I will give you your light," she said chuckling, "but it will not be for free. You will receive a task. If you complete it, you will get what you came for. If not, I will eat you and your bones will join the others in my fence."

Vassili nodded numbly, too scared to speak again. Still grinning, the witch made a wide gesture with her pestle and the gate to the cottage opened. She pushed Vassili inside the courtyard, urging him toward the door of her house. Out of the blue, a black cat hissed at Vassili and a huge black dog lunged to bite.

"Away, you blasted beasts!" The witch waved her black broom around threateningly. "I am bringing him in. You will not hurt him!"

Just like that, the animals disappeared, melting back into the shadows they'd emerged from. Behind Vassili, the gates closed instantly with a loud bang.

Baba Yaga rubbed her bony hands in satisfaction. "As you can see, you cannot easily escape me," she cackled. "If you try to leave, the gates will not open. My cat will scratch and my dog will bite you. Now, for your task...Outside on the porch is a sack of peas mixed with poppy seed. By morning, you are to separate the two. If you do not succeed, you will be eaten."

After giving Vassili these instructions, the witch turned her back on Vassili and entered the cottage. Vassili sneaked a peek inside and watched Baba Yaga fall asleep almost instantly. He considered asking the help of his wooden friend but decided against it. What if the witch woke up? He would be in terrible trouble then.

Vassili took post on the porch, grabbed a rickety looking chair, and buried himself in the tedious task. He slaved all night long to separate the peas from the poppy seeds. Several times his eyes threatened to close, since his long journey had been incredibly tiresome. However, Vassili was nothing if not brave and persevered. He managed to clean the last of the peas just as dawn started to break.

Relieved at having finished his task, Vassili leaned against the closed door and sighed tiredly. A sudden noise startled him and his eyes flew open. There, in the witch's courtyard, the white horseman stood, smiling brightly.

"You are a very courageous and hardworking young man," the white horseman said and rode up to the porch. "Never change and always trust your heart."

Vassili gasped as the mysterious man gently caressed his cheek. Just like that, Vassili's fatigue disappeared and he felt refreshed, as if he'd spent the night sleeping and not cleaning a bag of peas. "Who—" he started to ask, but the horseman disappeared.

Before he could have time to contemplate this peculiarity, the door behind him opened and Baba Yaga emerged from the house.

"Are you finished with your task, Vassili?" the witch asked, her eyes sparkling with malice.

"Yes, *Babushka*. The task is done," Vassili answered, showing the witch the results of his work.

"Hmm...I am not convinced." Scowling at Vassili, the witch clapped her hands. Instantly, the black cat and the black dog padded to her side. "Tell me, my pets, is our guest speaking the truth? Or did he use some sort of trickery to deceive me?"

"He did it by himself, mistress," the cat said.

"It's true," the dog added. "We saw it with our own eyes.

The witch grimaced, obviously displeased that Vassili succeeded in finishing her task. Vassili inwardly breathed a sigh of relief upon realizing that had he asked for his friend's help, he would have been eaten.

"After I leave, you have to clean the house until it is spotless. Repair the roof and cook me dinner. After all this is finished, you will go to the barn and clean all the grain you find there of dirt. If you do not get everything finished until my arrival, *you* will be my dinner."

Terror gripped Vassili as the witch clutched his wrist with her bony hand. For a second, he actually thought that in spite of her words, Baba Yaga would eat him. He felt her magic seep through him, making his mind fuzzy and weakening his body. Closing his eyes, he sent a prayer out to the heavens. *Please, God, make her leave! Help me!*

Much to his surprise, Baba Yaga let go of his wrist. Vassili didn't know if it had anything to do with his prayer, but he didn't really care that much. Chuckling darkly, the witch climbed in her mortar and disappeared into the darkness of the forest.

Immediately, Vassili dashed inside the kitchen and found some leftover bread. He could still feel her black magic surrounding him, threatening to consume him. He needed help. Taking his toy soldier out of his pocket, he gave it the bread.

"Oh, my dear friend! The witch gave me such a difficult task and she will eat me if I don't manage to finish it! What am I going to do?"

The toy soldier immediately came alive and ate the crust of bread. "Worry not, Vassili. Go work on cleaning the house and fixing the roof and let me worry about the rest!"

Yet again, Vassili obeyed his wooden friend. He found that fixing the roof of the cottage was easy for one as skilled in wood working as him. Still, he almost slipped and broke his leg when the familiar trot of a horse sounded in the courtyard. Vassili carefully climbed down to see that his new visitor was the red horseman from before.

The strange man gave Vassili a decidedly lecherous look and whistled. "You should have stayed up there," he said. "I had such a great view."

His expression sobering, the horseman gazed at Vassili with those peculiar red eyes. "Be careful, young Vassili. If you get in trouble, don't stand around and wait for her to eat you. There's a hole in the fence behind that tree. If something happens, take that route, run and don't look back."

Vassili nodded and opened his mouth to thank the strange horseman for his advice. He wasn't all that surprised when he didn't get the chance. The red horseman pressed a kiss to Vassili's forehead. Just like his white counterpart, he then disappeared into thin air before Vassili's very eyes.

Vassili took a few minutes to recover from the entire thing. It wasn't that he felt surprised at the horseman's disappearance. He'd already understood that in the Black Forest, things that shouldn't happen were a common occurrence. Furthermore, he'd realized long ago that things existed that couldn't quite be explained. After all, he owned a hand-sized toy soldier coming to life and helping him lift heavy pieces of wood.

It was something else that bothered him, a sensation deep inside, like his body melted and his blood turned into liquid fire. His mind seemed clouded by a peculiar haze. It had been the same with the white horseman's caress. That time, the witch dissipated it with her appearance. Now, Vassili found himself unable to put it out of his mind.

However, Vassili was a practical young man. He soon managed to compose himself and finish repairing the roof with relative ease. Cooking was a bit of a problem, since he'd never been a particularly good cook. Even so, he followed the toy soldier's careful instructions. Soon enough, a pot of delicious stew cooked over the fire.

As he started to clean up the leftover ingredients for the stew, Vassili heard a miserable meow outside, followed by an echoing howl. Looking out the window, he saw the black cat and the black dog sitting by the window, their noses sniffing at the tantalizing aroma of the food coming from the house. Now in the daylight, he could see that they were practically only skin and bones.

"Oh, you poor things! How long has it been since you've eaten?"

Vassili considered the wisdom of what he was about to do. If the witch found out that he'd wasted her food on the animals, she'd be angry. However, he couldn't leave the poor cat and the dog to starve.

Decision made, he grabbed a thick piece of meat and hurriedly sliced it in two. He gave the smaller piece to the cat and the larger one to the dog. "I would give you more," he said mournfully, "but if the witch comes and realizes that I fed you, it'll be bad for all of us."

With that, Vassili resumed working on his task. While the food cooked, he decided to start cleaning around the place. He almost threw up when he realized human remains littered practically every corner of the cottage. He steeled himself, determined now more than ever to succeed in his task.

"Oh, my dear wooden friend," he addressed his toy soldier, again feeding it with a little piece of bread, "will we be able to get out of this mess?"

The toy didn't answer, and Vassili couldn't help but be confused. He froze when he realized the cat stared at him intently, its eerie feline gaze fixed on the toy soldier. In his despair and terror, he'd completely forgotten about the witch's interrogation of her pets. What was he going to do now?

"Worry not, Vassili," the cat said. "We will not tell her anything. The witch has never once given us a kind word in all the years we've been with her."

"You've been so kind to us." The dog actually wagged his tail when Vassili turned to him. "I would not bite the hand that fed me."

"Thank you, my friends." Vassili leaned down to caress the cat's black fur and smiled when she started to purr. "I wish I could take you with me when I leave this place."

"Do not fret, Vassili." The dog gave him a sad look, those black eyes looking strangely human. "In this world, each person eventually gets what he deserves. We are only paying the price for our actions."

Vassili wanted to ask what the dog meant, but he didn't get the chance. "Come on, Vassili," the toy soldier said, while chomping down on the bread. "We still have work to do."

With a final pat for the two black animals, Vassili hastily resumed his tasks. He smiled happily when he realized that his toy soldier had taken care of the hardest part of the task, the grain. "Thank you, dear friend," he said to the toy. "Yet again, you have saved me!"

Vassili didn't have time to enjoy the relative peace. The black horseman suddenly materialized out of thin air in front of the witch's house.

"Be careful," he whispered. "She is coming."

Chapter 3

Taking the horseman's advice, Vassili immediately hid the toy soldier in his pocket. The ground started to shake. Just as the day before, the witch appeared riding in her mortar, guiding it with her pestle and erasing her tracks with her black broom. Vassili waited patiently for Baba Yaga, smiling gently as the witch entered the courtyard. All the while, he tried to quiet down the whirlwind of terror he felt inside.

"Welcome back, *Babushka*," he began, feeling proud when his voice didn't shake.

The witch just glared at Vassili disdainfully, giving the house a critical look. "Are you done with your tasks, little boy?"

"Yes, Babushka. Everything is done."

The witch arched a brow, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. "Even the grain?" At Vassili's affirmative nod, the witch's frown deepened. Again, the witch clapped her hands, summoning the cat and dog to her side. "Is this true? Did he finish the task by himself or did he use some sort of trick?"

"It is true, mistress," the cat lied smoothly.

"He worked all day to finish your tasks," the dog confirmed.

Vassili mentally gave thanks for the help of the two animals. He hoped their reassurance would be enough for the witch. Alas, it wasn't meant to be.

"Traitorous fiends!" Baba Yaga snapped at the animals.

Time seemed to slow as the witch extended her hand and snatched the toy soldier from Vassili's pocket. "What's this then?"

"Just a memento from my mother," Vassili stuttered, but he knew he wasn't very convincing.

"You think I am stupid? I can feel the magic on this thing." Angrily, the witch stalked to the fireplace and threw the toy soldier inside. Vassili gasped as he saw his wooden toy being consumed by the fire. His mother's generous gift always supported him as a friend and loyal companion. Now, it was gone.

He didn't have time to ponder on the weight of his loss. Having disposed of the magic toy, the witch directed her attention toward Vassili. Oh, no! The witch would surely eat him now.

"Run!" the dog barked. "We will distract her."

Indeed, the next thing Vassili knew, the cat jumped at Baba Yaga, scratching at the witch's face and hissing angrily. The dog attacked as well, his sharp teeth digging into the dry flesh of the witch's leg. Vassili knew that the animals' attacks would not stall her for long.

Hating himself for leaving his friends behind, Vassili turned on his heel and ran toward the gate. He gasped out loud when the gates shut in his face, effectively blocking his exit.

It was then that Vassili remembered the red horseman's advice. He turned back from the gate and into the direction of the tree that guarded the entrance to the witch's courtyard. Behind the tree, he found a gap in the fence where several bones had somehow been displaced. Vassili swiftly slipped through the gap and started running. He could hear the witch climbing into her mortar to chase him. Remembering the horseman's advice, he didn't look back.

Suddenly, in front of him, the three horsemen appeared. Vassili stopped in his tracks, feeling lost and confused.

"Hello, Vassili," the trio said all at once.

It was too much for Vassili. "What's going on?" he practically shouted, his mind overwhelmed by the day's events. "Who are you? What happened back there?"

"The witch is our mistress," the white horseman answered sadly.

"But we will help you," the red horseman continued.

"If you do something for us," the horseman in black finished.

Vassili considered the words of the three horsemen. The fact that they served as the witch's slaves seemed suspicious. However, it wasn't as if he had much of a choice. After all, the horsemen helped him before. "What will you have me do?" he answered finally.

"To gain our freedom from the witch—"

"We need someone pure of heart—"

"To give us her, or his, innocence."

The three men answered.

Vassili blushed at the implication of the horsemen's words. "Wh-why do you need that?" he stammered.

"Only purity has the sufficient strength to counter malice." The white horseman gave Vassili a gentle look.

"We are cursed and only you can help us." The red horseman smiled, his eyes shining bright like embers.

"If you help us we promise you that you will receive great pleasure in return," the dark horseman purred.

With that promise, the three men got off their horses at the same time.

"I am Deni," the white horseman said softly against Vassili's right ear.

"I am Sonta," the red horseman whispered against his left ear.

"And I am Noci," the black horseman said against Vassili's mouth, just before taking his lips in a passionate kiss.

For a beautiful second, Vassili lost himself in the kiss. He broke away from Noci and gasped in a panic. "Wait! The witch. She is following me!"

"She cannot catch you here, *lubov moya*," Deni said, smiling gently, surprising Vassili with the endearment. "Can you not see where we are?"

Vassili took a look around. It seemed to him that they were still in the Black Forest. When he thought about it, though, there was something weird about it, something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

"We are Deni, Sonta, and Noci, Vassili. Daylight, Sun, and Night. We are outside of time now," Noci answered Vassili's unspoken question.

"Outside time? But how?" Vassili asked, astounded by the turn of events.

"Yes," Sonta assented with a nod. "Due to our natures, we cannot be in the same place at the same time without halting time."

Vassili gasped at the astounding notion. "That's not possible. Can you really stop time like that?"

"It would normally not be allowed," Noci said solemnly. Three identical expressions of gloom gripped the horsemen's handsome features.

"You see, *lubov moya*, we are angels, fallen from our place at God's side."

A distant expression came on Deni's face and his voice took on an even softer tone. "As angels, we had all the gifts of God. We were surrounded by light, beauty, and perfection."

"We had each other, all the seraphim and cherubim to keep us company. I suppose we were like brothers of sorts, although we didn't even have the comfort of having a blood bond between one another," Sonta said with a sigh. "Angels simply do not exist that way."

"Therefore, we were not happy, for everything seemed so cold and lonely. We could not feel anything beyond simple affection," Deni continued. "We needed real love, warmth, and passion."

"The witch came to us, promising that she would grant us our wish," Noci growled angrily. Vassili shuddered at the hatred he heard in the horseman's voice. "In our loneliness, we did not see her deception. We made a deal with her, thinking that it would not be hard to fulfill it with our powers."

Sonta gently touched the black horseman's arm, calming his erupting temper.

"And fulfill it we did," he said. "Alas, because of our rashness, God cast us out of the heavens. We were not worthy of them anymore. That is how we ended up damned, trapped into servitude."

"But we can be redeemed, if one of pure heart is willing to give us his love," Deni finished, a sad, yet hopeful smile on his face.

Vassili's eyes filled with tears at the story. Why would someone be punished for wanting love in their life? Wanting love was such a natural thing. True, they might have gone the wrong way to fulfill their wish, but did they really deserve eternal slavery for it?

"Oh, don't cry, Vassili!" Deni petted Vassili's hair comfortingly. "It's all right now. Everything is going to be all right."

Vassili wiped his tears, angry with himself for being so weak. "I want to help you, I really do. What do we do?"

Noci grinned wickedly, his eyes deep pools of alluring darkness. In two seconds flat, Vassili found himself stripped naked and flipped on all fours on the ground.

"So pure," Deni whispered against his lips, kissing him gently.

"So passionate," Sonta murmured, busying himself with licking a trail of fire on Vassili's back.

"So sexy," Noci purred from behind him.

Vassili trembled at the sudden onslaught of sensation that overloaded his senses. He wasn't afraid, not really. Somehow he knew that the three handsome horsemen would not hurt him. Still, he found comfort when Deni gently caressed his face.

"Hush. Don't be afraid," the white horseman whispered softly. "We'll go slow."

Vassili forgot all about the comforting words when he felt his body prodded from behind. An unfamiliar touch ghosted over his nether opening and Vassili let out a choked sound. The feeling of anticipation, the passion that sizzled in the air, everything was so peculiar and new. Even so, it wasn't just the novelty that felt scary. It was something else, something deep inside. He saw an emotion in his heart that hadn't been there before and that he couldn't even identify.

His thoughts evaporated when he felt his ass cheeks separated, his most hidden place exposed for everyone to see. He felt his face flame at the embarrassing position and fought to keep himself from tensing.

He didn't have to fight this battle for long. Deni slipped under his body and suddenly, wet heat engulfed Vassili's cock. Vassili's eyes opened wide at the incredible sensation. A needy moan escaped his lips. "Oh, God, Deni!"

He was so lost in the sensation he almost missed Noci's next words. "Open your mouth, *lubov moya*. Come on!"

Vassili obeyed, and he found himself with Sonta's cock teasing at his lips. He briefly hesitated, acknowledging his own inexperience. However, Noci continued to encourage him with soft, almost incomprehensible whispers in his ear. His insides burning, Vassili finally wrapped his lips around the swollen shaft. Alas, he couldn't really concentrate at all with Deni sucking him. Nevertheless, Sonta seemed to find pleasure in his inexperienced tongue. The red horseman groaned out loud as he started thrusting in and out of Vassili's mouth.

Just when he thought that surely nothing could enflame him further, Vassili felt a wet tongue teasing his entrance. Noci's tongue naughtily penetrated his passage, pushing in and out of his body, imitating an act as old as time itself. Vassili almost moaned in protest as the tongue retreated, but so many sensations took hold of him that he couldn't bring himself to do so.

And then all else faded, as Noci's cock replaced his tongue. The black horseman slowly started to push inside. Tears filled Vassili's eyes as Noci's invading cock painfully stretched his body. Even, in the sea of pleasure that surrounded him, the pain was almost welcome. It seemed like a spice in a sweet drink, complementing the cocktail perfectly. Vassili found himself impaled by a man's cock, while another man fucked his mouth, and yet another sucked him off. There was something so purely carnal and so out of this world in the whole experience that Vassili almost thought he'd fallen into a dream.

Noci started to thrust in and out of him, swiftly establishing an excruciating rhythm. Vassili gasped as the black horseman hit a magical spot inside of him, making stars dance in Vassili's vision. With every thrust that unerringly hit that spot, Vassili's pleasure increased exponentially. He moaned around Sonta's cock and felt the other man shudder as he tried to take in as much as he could from the red horseman's cock. He was surrounded by an onslaught of sensation, his entire body engulfed in a heat that threatened to consume him. They were no longer four different people brought together by a curse and a blessing. They became one entity, one soul, united in the intensity of their passion.

Vassili's mind soon became lost, lost in another world. He forgot everything he was, everything he had been. He only cared about the four of them locked in this intimate act together. It seemed as if he could feel all of them at once, three separate energies surrounding him with their surreal power.

Alas, all good things must come to an end, for Vassili soon felt the impending need to climax. Digging his nails into the ground and ripping the green grass, he tried to hold himself back. He did not want this to be over. He did not want to forgo Noci's power, Sonta's passion, and Deni's gentleness. He needed to live in this moment forever. Ironically, even if time had frozen for everybody else, he was still bound by it.

Obviously, the three horsemen felt the fire in his body. Sonta's hands gentled in his blond hair, turning into a careful yet teasing caress. Deni started sucking harder on his shaft as if he were trying to suck Vassili's brains out through his dick. The final blow came from Noci.

"That's it, *lubov moya*. Come! Come for us," Noci purred in his ear.

The seductive voice, the same whisper Vassili heard in the village pushed him over the brink. He came, bright lights exploding before his eyes. He felt the warmth of Noci's own orgasm fill him and tasted cum in his mouth as Sonta joined them in the peak of their pleasure. The knowledge that he'd also brought his lovers to their climax only increased his pleasure. For one moment, he thought that the intensity of his orgasm would make him black out. Thankfully, his body didn't betray him in such a manner. He managed to open his eyes and immediately turned toward Deni. "What about you?" he asked, feeling uncertain. Unlike with the other two horsemen, he wasn't sure Deni reached his peak.

"Don't worry, *lubov moya*," Deni answered him, a satisfied smile playing on his lips. "I came when you did."

"I would expect so." Noci chuckled. "He loves to suck cock."

Deni threw the black horseman a glare that would have withered trees. "You make me sound like a slut."

"You are a slut." Noci grinned, obviously reveling in the banter.

As the white and the black horseman started to bicker, Sonta winked, drawing Vassili's nude body toward him. "Let them argue. That way I get you all to myself."

The red horseman's words broke up the peculiar dispute. The other two horsemen turned twin glares of evil toward Sonta.

"Move over," Noci growled. Sonta obeyed without a word, seemingly very pleased at his ability to manipulate his two companions. Vassili suppressed a satisfied sigh when he found himself in the embrace of three very sexy men. Cuddling wasn't a very easy thing to do with four people involved, but somehow they made it work. Deni hugged Vassili from the front and Sonta spooned him from behind. Noci somehow ended up behind Sonta, his dark arm stretching over the red horseman's waist toward Vassili's.

"Sleep, *lubov moya*," Deni whispered, gently caressing his hair. "Rest now."

Lulled by the sound of Deni's voice, Vassili fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 4

When Vassili opened his eyes, he realized he was alone. Instantly, he could tell that time once again flowed naturally, which meant one thing. The three horsemen were gone. When he looked around a bit more carefully, he realized he could hear the chirping of birds and the rush of a river nearby. His eyes widened as he realized that he no longer in the Black Forest but in a little grove just a mile away from his father's cottage.

He saw then that next to him, his wooden soldier waited patiently. And next to the toy soldier lay a skull, obviously taken from the witch's fence. Its eyes burned bright in the dim light of the evening. The horsemen had come through for him.

Vassili pocketed the toy and reluctantly took the skull. Using a branch to lift it up, he then took off with all speed toward the house. His steps swiftly led him through the paths he knew so well. He simply knew his stepmother and stepbrothers would give him hell for taking so long in getting the light.

In a few minutes, Vassili reached the house that long ago stopped being his home. He had barely opened the door when his step-family attacked him.

"What took you so long?" Vladimir snapped. "No one could light one candle in your absence."

"Stupid boy, how were we supposed to work without light?" Mariya hissed, glaring.

"You're useless!" Nikolai spat. "You've always been trying to break us apart and sabotage us."

Letting out a sound of anger, Nikolai lunged and punched Vassili in the face.

At the sudden hit, Vassili lost his balance, reaching out to steady himself against the kitchen table. However, in the process, the skull he'd been carrying dropped to the floor with a hollow sound. Then, the most terrifying thing happened. It eerily started to levitate, its burning eyes fixed on Vassili's stepbrothers and on Mariya. Before Vassili's terrified eyes, fire emerged from the skull's eyes, burning into the flesh of the three. The trio started to scream and lunged for the door, trying to make their escape from the skull's lethal gaze. It was futile. Wherever they went, the skull followed. The cottage filled with the stink of death and burnt flesh.

All the while, Vassili just stood there, frozen, terrified at the sounds of the screams and even more terrified when the screams stopped. His steps hesitantly carried him out of the kitchen and into the bedroom, where he saw the unrecognizable forms of what had been Mariya, Vladimir, and Nikolai. Before his very eyes, the charred bodies withered away and turned into ash.

Vassili screamed, the gruesome sight too much for him to bear. He never had a good relationship with them, but neither did he hate them or wish them ill. Tears flowing down his cheeks, he grabbed a shovel and went to the grove behind the house, the same grove where his dear mother had been buried. He put all his pain and loneliness in his work and struggled to dig faster. Finally, after much toil, a small, hidden grave awaited in the silent and cold ground.

He then hastened back to the kitchen and grabbed a clean pot. With trembling hands, Vassili struggled to gather the ashes of his dead step-family. Fighting to contain his tears, he carried them to their final resting place. He felt terrible for not being able to give them a proper burial, with a priest and a coffin. However, he could not tell the townspeople about the skull and what really happened with Baba Yaga. They would probably ask him to show them the accursed thing and God only knew what would happen then. Perhaps Vassili would

end up with a whole village of burned people. He couldn't live with that.

With that in mind, Vassili took the skull and put it in the improvised grave. He whispered a prayer to the heavens and started covering the small hole.

When he finally finished, Vassili retreated back to the now cold and empty house, feeling numb inside. What would he do now? He had no one in this world. Bitter tears started to fall again as he remembered the three horsemen of the Black Forest. Where were they now? Had he really been so happy with them just hours before, or had it been only a dream?

He still needed to face the townspeople. Without the skull from Baba Yaga, he didn't know how to break the curse. He had no idea what to tell them, how to explain his family's absence.

As he stood there weeping on the porch, he heard the sound of a cart rolling past. It didn't really surprise him. Wagons sometimes chose this more remote path to avoid the hustle and bustle of the main road. Therefore, Vassili didn't even lift his eyes. In fact he wanted to run away, knowing that whoever was coming would probably ask him about his visit to the Black Forest. He barely suppressed his wince when an unknown voice suddenly addressed him. "What's wrong, child? Why are you crying?" An old man stood in front of the cottage, giving Vassili a concerned look.

Vassili bit his lip, wondering what he could possibly reply. "My family is gone, sir," he finally said. "I left to try and find light in the Black Forest and when I came back, they were just gone. I looked for them around the house, but to no avail. With the curse and all..."

The old man's eyes widened in alarm. "Couldn't they have gone to a friend or to a neighbor?"

"I don't know." Vassili sniffed, wiping at his tear-stained cheeks. "Maybe. I wanted to go ask in the village now, but I'm scared."

"Scared?" The man repeated. "Why, child?"

"I couldn't find the witch's cottage," Vassili cried, amazed at how easily the lies poured out of his mouth. "I couldn't help break the curse."

The old man rubbed his chin. "Don't worry about that, child. The curse vanished last night. Why don't we go look for your family now, all right?"

With that, the old man hastily gathered people from the village and started a search. Strangely enough, the townspeople didn't blame him for his inability to find Baba Yaga. Instead, they actually seemed genuinely repentant for having sent him there in the first place.

When their search bore no fruit, Vassili felt relieved but also guiltier than ever. As everyone said goodbye, sadness in their eyes, the old man gave Vassili a warm hug. "Poor child, all alone now. I'm alone as well. Come live with me!"

With tearful eyes, Vassili took in the figure of the old man. For all he knew, the man was a criminal or some sort of murderer. However, he had no one left in the world. What else could he do?

Therefore, Vassili agreed to the proposal. They left the house that bore so many sad memories and moved together into the old man's cottage.

Chapter 5

As the days passed, Vassili got more and more used to living there. He actually felt pleased for having made the decision. Even so, the memory of what he'd briefly had, and what he'd lost, still plagued him.

One day, Vassili chopped wood in front of the old man's cottage. His spirits were down, for even with the old man as company, he felt lonelier than ever. As he carried the logs inside the house, it occurred to him that whenever he felt lonely in the past, he started carving. Why not use it now to pass the time?

He sat down in the kitchen and retrieved a piece of wood that seemed smoother and of the right size. Taking a small pocket knife, Vassili started carving. He spent hours and hours working. When he finished he saw that the result was a beautiful carving of his three mysterious lovers. He wanted to cry at seeing the faces of Deni, Sonta, and Noci again, immortalized in wood by his own hand. He didn't get the chance. The door to the kitchen opened and the old man walked in.

"What are you doing, child?"

Vassili hid his tears from the old man, offering him a small smile. "Oh, nothing really. I'm done with the chores, so I'm just carving."

The old man looked at Vassili's handiwork and his eyes widened. "Child, you carved this?"

Vassili shrugged, not really wanting to see the portrait of his three lovers again. "If you think it's worth something, you can go ahead and sell it."

"No, child." The man shook his head. "This is too beautiful. It can only serve to adorn the king's hall."

With that, Vassili's old friend took the carved piece of wood, packing it carefully into a travel bag. Vassili felt thankful for the old man's idea. He didn't really want to see the carving anymore. It represented the clear proof of his hopeless infatuation and obsession with someone too high for him to reach. He couldn't help but feel that by now, the three horsemen had forgotten him already.

Vassili sighed, burying his face in his hands. At least it all served for a good cause. The three horsemen had been freed of the witch's curse. Surely that counted for something, right?

Trying to cheer himself up, Vassili got up from his chair and went out to stretch a bit. He'd been sitting down at the table where he'd carved for a long time and his back hurt. The sun still shone outside and Vassili smiled at it longingly. He reached out with his hand toward the sky, futilely trying to catch the rays. It was as hopeless as his obsession for the three horsemen. He was just a human. He could never hope to see them again.

Sighing, Vassili comforted himself with enjoying the sunlight. He closed his eyes and just relaxed, basking in the warmth of the sun. Suddenly Vassili felt ghost-like fingers caressing his face, a low voice whispering in his ear. His eyes instantly flew open, but his heart fell when he realized there was no one there. Inwardly sighing, Vassili abandoned his comfortable retreat, knowing that further lingering there would only torture him more. Taking into account the distance between the village and the big city, the old man would probably be gone for the night. Yet again, Vassili found himself alone in an empty house.

Vassili busied himself with finishing chores around the house, cleaning the chimney, dusting the little shelves, chopping more wood. He needed to feel the exhaustion of a hard day's work. Maybe that way, he would stop thinking about the three horsemen so much. It was unlikely, but he could try and he could hope.

Finally, when the crickets announced night had fallen, Vassili cooked himself a frugal dinner. He absently toyed with the food as he looked out the window and into the darkness that now shrouded the world. Would every single second of his life be like that from now on? Would dawn always remind him of Deni, the sun of Sonta, and nightfall of Noci? The natural flow of nature reminded him of the difference between him and his angel lovers. How could he possibly forget them?

It was so unfair. His life changed when he allowed Deni, Sonta, and Noci into his heart and mind. Still, he'd known from back in the Black Forest about the horsemen's divine nature. He shouldn't have let foolish emotions take over. He had no one to blame but himself for his pain.

Suddenly feeling angry with himself, Vassili abandoned his uneaten meal. He wanted to break something, take out his frustration on some inanimate object. Alas, he couldn't bring himself to destroy the old man's belongings. Instead, he hit the wall with his fist, hoping the physical pain would dull the emotional one. He wasn't some weak and frail maiden mourning the departure of her lover. He would get over the three horsemen if it was the last thing he did.

Naturally, the ache of his hand did nothing to help his situation. It only made him feel worse about the whole thing, more pathetic. Inwardly sighing, Vassili left the house he shared with the old man and headed toward the stream flowing nearby. He hated the fact that he had to go out and face the night. The fact remained that he needed to cool off his hurt hand somehow. Yet again, his own stupid temper and his idiotic heart forced him into a painful situation.

Having reached the stream, Vassili absently soothed his injured hand in the cold water. His thoughts wandered once more to his three lovers. He couldn't help but reach out with his other hand toward the sky, trying to grasp the elusive night. He wanted to scream when his touch only encountered thin air. He could do nothing, absolutely nothing to reach them.

Feeling defeated, Vassili curled against the trunk of a tree and closed his eyes. This summer, the weather helped the people and their crops. The sun became less scorching and the night kind and soothing. Sometimes, Vassili liked to think that his lovers had something to do with it. Then again, he'd become obsessed with them. His desperate infatuation probably made him capable of attributing to them things that could be easily explained by the whims of nature.

He lay there on the grass, bitterly laughing at his own stupidity and at the same time, yearning for the touch of his three lovers. The wind caressed his face, as if trying to soothe his broken heart. Vassili distantly recalled a different time when the wind had been his companion, the day of his sudden trip to the Black Forest.

A low whisper startled him from his contemplations. "Vassili?"

His eyes flew open, as they did every time when he thought he felt a phantom touch or the whisper of his name in his ear. He half expected it to be his imagination again, but this time it wasn't. Vassili's eyes widened as he took in the sight of three horsemen in front of him. Deni, Sonta, and Noci stood before him, smiling, as beautiful and perfect as ever.

Vassili didn't know what to say. As much as he wanted to see them, their sudden appearance stirred a whirlwind of emotions inside of him. He couldn't help but feel resentful for the fact that they abandoned him without a word. Indeed, they hadn't made any promises. Still, that night they'd spent together in the Black Forest had to mean something.

It was that anger and resentment that gave him the power to speak. "What are you doing here?" he asked, feeling proud that his voice showed nothing of his inner turmoil.

He knew he sounded snappish, as the three horsemen looked hurt at his tone. Sonta even took a step back and Noci's smile disappeared as if it had never been, his expression turning almost stony.

"We're here because you called to us," Deni replied softly, almost pleadingly.

"I called to you many times. Why come now?"

Noci sighed and rubbed his eyes in frustration. "I told you he would say that," he muttered under his breath.

"Well, of course I would say that!" Vassili snapped again. "What did you expect?"

"Vassili, *lubov moya*. We're truly sorry we couldn't reach you until now," Sonta said apologetically.

"In truth, we probably shouldn't have come in the first place." Deni bit his lip hesitantly. "You see, the curse has been lifted, but we've not been able to return to our place in the heavens."

Vassili froze at the sorrow in Deni's voice. "I don't understand. Back in the forest, you said—"

"Yes, I know we said that," Noci interrupted him. "But in the same way your love saved us from the witch, it is now holding us back, holding us here."

"You have to let us go, Vassili." Sonta's voice trembled. Vassili thought he would burst into tears.

"I don't understand. How do I let you go?"

Deni looked away, as if unable to meet Vassili's eyes. "You have to wish it. To honestly wish us to find our way back to the heavens."

"But I do!" Vassili gasped out in protest. "I've always wanted you to be saved."

"You also wanted us by your side. Don't deny it. You know in your heart it is true." Noci reached to cup Vassili's cheek, but stopped himself just before touching him.

Vassili opened his mouth to counter Noci's statement, but he realized doing so would be a lie. It was true. He never actually wanted them to go back to being angels. In his dreams, they remained by his side, holding him, kissing him, loving him forever.

His eyes filled with tears as he realized that in his own selfishness, he kept his lovers from fulfilling their dream. Even now, a little part of him couldn't help but be bitter at the knowledge that they would leave him behind with a broken heart. Still, it would be for the best.

His three horsemen belonged in the heavens where they could live forever, and watch over the world. Vassili belonged here, with his own people, where he would grow old and die. Then, one day, he would return to the earth God had crafted him from.

Taking a deep breath, Vassili poured all his love and pain in his heart into one phrase. "I wish for my angels to return to the heavens and be where they belong." It physically hurt to know that he would never be able to see them again, but they were angels and Vassili was human. They could not belong to one human alone, as they had to spread joy and welfare to the entirety of mankind. Vassili loved them, and for that reason, he would let them go.

Three identical smiles appeared on the faces of the horsemen. Vassili hesitantly smiled back, pleased that he'd been able to make them happy. He fully expected them to leave now that he'd released them. Instead, they walked closer, so close that Vassili could feel the warmth of their bodies through his clothes.

"We have one more night together. Let's make good use of it," Noci purred softly.

Not even waiting for his reply, Noci pressed his mouth to Vassili's, coaxing it open with his tongue. Closing his eyes, Vassili surrendered himself to the passion he felt to these men, no, these angels. His horsemen, the angels he loved so much. Soon, he would have to give them up, but he would have this last night with them.

He distantly felt his clothes removed, but it was so fast he didn't even have time to register it appropriately. Soon he found himself surrounded by three naked bodies. Three pairs of hands caressed his skin and deftly found all his sensitive spots. He leaned into the embrace of the person behind him, somehow identifying the other man as Sonta. It was quite peculiar really. He found that he could easily distinguish the particularities of each angel's touch, as if their hands and bodies spoke to him without words.

Feeling dazed, Vassili opened his eyes only to be met with Noci's wicked grin. He felt Deni's hands caress his legs and gently lift them

up, the white horseman's lips pressing kisses down his slender torso. Sonta's tongue started playing with Vassili's ear, his teeth gently nibbling on the lobe and his hands wrapping around him to tweak his nipples. In perfect synchronization, Noci massaged Vassili's hard cock as he toyed with his testicles.

Lost in all the sensation, Vassili leaned against Sonta and allowed himself to become one with the pleasure. He wasn't satisfied with only receiving, however. He wanted to give as well. He wanted the horsemen to feel all the love he had for them, even if only for one night.

He gently pushed himself from Sonta's arms and smiled when he saw three confused expressions on the horsemen's faces.

"What's wrong?" Deni panted out.

"Nothing is wrong. I just wanted to give you the same pleasure you're giving me."

It suddenly occurred to Vassili that he had never seen his three angels touch each other like they touched him. The last time they made love, they all focused on Vassili. In truth, the way they unashamedly displayed their sexuality in each other's presence suggested they might have been intimate before. Additionally, Noci had said that Deni loved to suck cock. How else could he know that but from experience?

Feeling wicked, Vassili leaned back on the grass and reached to massage his cock. His lovers' eyes went wide as they watched him masturbate.

"What do you want, lubov moya?" Noci growled out. "Tell us."

"Touch each other. Touch each other like you do when I'm not around."

At Vassili's bold words, Deni blushed bright red, until his white skin could almost compare with Sonta's. Vassili suspected that the other two would have blushed as well had their skin not been red and black respectively. As it were, they just stood there, gaping at him in shock.

Unlike in the forest, it was Sonta who made the first move. He reached for Deni's white locks and pulled the white horseman in his embrace. The mouths of the two angels clashed together and they hungrily kissed, feasting on each other's lips.

Grinning wickedly, Noci knelt behind Deni and reached for the white horseman's ass. Vassili watched as the black horseman spread Deni's ass cheeks and licked across his crease, much like he had done with Vassili himself in the Black Forest. He didn't spend a lot of time preparing Deni, however. Much too soon, Noci thrust his hard cock into Deni's body, causing the white horseman to arch beautifully toward him.

No longer able to stand aside, Vassili crawled toward them on all fours and took Sonta's place in front of Deni. "Fuck me," he whispered to the white horseman.

Deni's already unfocused eyes went a little hazier and he nodded shakily.

"Let me prepare you," Sonta said, obviously realizing the white horseman would be unable to focus on Vassili with Noci fucking him energetically from behind.

Vassili found himself on all fours again, with Sonta eating his ass greedily. He seemed as skilled at it as Noci. By the time Sonta deemed Vassili ready, Vassili begged and pleaded, incoherent with lust.

Sonta positioned Vassili in front of Deni and the white horseman thrust his own hard cock into Vassili's welcoming passage. Even with the pleasure Noci obviously gave him, Deni still found the perfect angle to hit Vassili's prostate with each thrust. Moaning and gasping, Vassili blindly reached for Sonta, only to realize the red horseman was no longer in front of him. Then a particularly hard thrust hit Vassili's pleasure spot and he realized that Sonta had probably gone to fuck Noci. They moved together like an orchestrated symphony, with Vassili ending up fucked with the combined strength of three angels.

It didn't take long for Vassili to feel his peak approaching. "I'm coming!" he gasped out.

He regretted his words seconds later when Deni's hand wrapped around the base of his cock, holding him tightly and effectively stopping his orgasm.

Deni kept him on the brink until he felt he would go insane because of the overwhelming pleasure. "Please!" he begged. "Please, oh, God, please!"

The second Deni's hand disappeared from around his cock, Vassili came undone, his world exploding in a million colors. His ass tightened around Deni's cock and he felt the white horseman reach his own peak. Together, the four lovers collapsed on the grass, panting in exertion.

Vassili closed his eyes, cuddling into Deni's chest. He felt a gentle hand caress his hair and sighed in satisfaction.

"Ya tebya lyublyu," three voices whispered from the darkness.

As he opened his mouth to reply an "I love you, too," another voice interrupted him. "Vassili! Vassili!"

Vassili's eyes flew open and he took in his surroundings in confusion. The stream, the tree, the old man's house in the distance. The sun was up and the birds chirped cheerfully around him. It had all been a dream.

Chapter 6

Fighting to keep his disappointment from crushing him, Vassili focused again on the voice that awakened him.

"Vassili! Vassili!" It was the old man, coming down the path in his carriage. "You'll never believe what happened."

"Calm down, *Dedushka*. What's the matter?"

"I took the carving into the city and went to the palace with it, like I said I would. When the prince saw it, he said he simply needed to meet the person who'd crafted such a beautiful piece. You've been invited to the palace."

Vassili's eyes widened. It was a great honor to be invited to the imperial palace and a special guest of the prince, no less. Still, the news the old man brought unsettled him. He had heard things about the prince, things that made Vassili's heart heavy. Supposedly, the prince was a regular heartbreaker. He spent half the time in random trysts with lovers both female and male and the other half finding creative methods to humiliate his no longer interesting toys. What if he decided to choose Vassili as his next target of interest?

Vassili hated the fact that the thought even crossed his mind. He wasn't an arrogant person. The only luxury he allowed himself was keeping his hair long. It had been in memory of his long dead mother, since he'd inherited her beautiful blond locks. Even so, he knew others considered him attractive.

Suddenly feeling very afraid, Vassili hastily stole a piece of gingerbread from the kitchen and retreated to his room. He placed it on the table and put his toy soldier next to it.

"Oh, my little friend," he whispered. "What will I do? What will I do if the prince finds me attractive? I simply cannot forget them. Even if it was only a dream, I cannot forget them,"

The toy perked up and grabbed the piece of gingerbread Vassili offered, munching on it happily. "Go to the palace now, Vassili! All will be well. You only have to follow your heart."

Relief washed over Vassili at his friend's words. Perhaps the prince wouldn't like him. After all, Vassili was only a lowly peasant. Apparently realizing he'd managed to soothe Vassili's heart, the toy stilled, yet again turning into an unmoving and seemingly lifeless object. Feeling a bit better, Vassili started packing, as usual placing his wooden friend in his pocket.

After a few necessary preparations, Vassili and the old man left in the direction of the big city. As they traveled, Vassili simply forgot about their destination, his mind lost in the recollection of the night before. Had it really been just a dream? He didn't think so. He clearly remembered hitting the wall of the kitchen with his fist and now the pain had disappeared entirely. It could only be the work of his angels. Still, dream or no, he clearly needed to let the horsemen go. He would probably love them forever, but their place would never be at his side.

Even with the cart at their disposal, it took them a while to get to the city. The roads were busy and the horse still a bit tired from the trip the day before. Therefore, the hour turned late by the time Vassili finally reached the palace. Vassili debated finding a room at an inn and going to the palace in the morning. In the end, he decided asking the old man about it.

"No, child." The old man shook his head, seemingly horrified at the thought. "You need to go now. We have already made his highness wait long enough. Ask at the gate first. If the guard says that his highness is busy, only then will we find an inn to sleep."

Vassili inwardly sighed at the old man's advice. He already didn't feel comfortable visiting the prince in daylight. Visiting him at night seemed somehow even more dangerous. Then he heard a familiar

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voice purring in his ear, urging him on and encouraging him. His heart jumped even as sadness gripped it again. He knew better than to turn. He would find no one there. However, it didn't matter whether Noci spoke to him or not. Feeling that his lovers still watched over him gave Vassili the courage to walk on, obey, and visit the palace.

And so, Vassili bravely walked up to the palace gates. Soldiers dressed in beautifully adorned uniforms stopped him when he approached.

"Excuse me," Vassili began politely. "My name is Vassili. I was invited to the palace by the prince. Do you know if the prince can see me?"

The guard gave him one look and a knowing smile spread on his face. "Right this way, sir," he said almost mockingly. The gates opened and the guard led Vassili into the palace. Only after walking for a while did he realize that the old man had not followed him inside.

The guard led him to a room where he was bathed and given new clothes to wear. Apparently, it wouldn't be adequate for him to see the prince in his dusty, plain clothing. With every passing moment, Vassili's dread increased. All these preparations only furthered his fear of what would happen when the prince saw him.

After he finished preparing himself, the tall guard reappeared and led him down a winding corridor. Finally, the guard stopped in front of two imposing doors engraved with the symbol of the royal family. Vassili gulped, knowing he was seconds away from meeting the prince.

The guard politely knocked, announcing their presence. A noble, manly voice ushered him inside. "Yes, enter."

Opening the door, the guard stepped inside the room, bowed lowly and said, "Your Highness, your guest is here."

"Ah...perfect!" the prince replied. "Show him in!"

Vassili swallowed nervously as the guard showed him in. There, lounging on a comfortable-looking purple couch, was the prince.

Vassili bowed low, his long blond locks practically touching the carpeted floor and eyes lowered at all times. As a peasant, he knew that he could not address the prince until he'd been addressed first.

He waited like that for minutes, acutely aware of the prince's eyes scrutinizing him. Every passing second made him feel even more nervous and apprehensive. He almost jumped when he felt a presence at his side. A gentle hand urged his eyes to leave the floor and Vassili looked up at the prince's green eyes.

"Please, don't bow," the prince said, smiling welcomingly at Vassili and gesturing him forward. "You are a guest."

Vassili felt a blush paint his cheeks scarlet at the prince's smile. "Thank you, Your Highness. You honor me through your invitation."

"Not at all. I am very pleased to have you here." The prince grinned, his eyes twinkling mysteriously. "I have to say, I did not expect someone so young to be the creator of the beautiful carving."

Vassili looked down at the praise. The prince's words seemed neutral, but his tone was anything but. He managed to gather his bearings and formulate a reply.

"Thank you," he whispered, struggling not to wipe his sweaty palms against the expensive material of his new trousers. "My father taught me everything I know."

"How interesting." The prince pursed his lips and analyzed his fingers in obvious boredom. "You're a woodcarver then?"

Vassili nodded. "Yes, Your Highness."

"And how old are you exactly?"

Vassili swallowed in nervousness, feeling his dread increase. "Twenty winters, Your Highness."

The prince smiled at Vassili, reaching out to take his hand. "Now tell me, Vassili, how would you like to be my permanent guest here? I'm sure we can find a lot of common interests."

Vassili gaped at the sudden proposition. "I... Your Highness, I can't—"

Vassili didn't have the time to finish the phrase. He yelped as the prince's hands wandered unbidden on his body, squeezing his behind. The prince wrapped his arms around Vassili, drawing him closer and leaning forward to steal a kiss. It all happened so suddenly Vassili didn't even have the chance to oppose him.

Vassili felt his heart constrict at the prince's actions. He didn't want to be another of the prince's toys. In truth, even if the prince became serious about him, a fact which Vassili very much doubted, his own heart still belonged to the horsemen. Just the night before, he'd relived the perfect passion that united the four of them. Still, hadn't he just promised to let them go?

The prince was indeed a good kisser. His tongue licked across Vassili's lips, seducing, coaxing them open. Vassili wondered if perhaps, he could have a second chance to love with this man. For a brief moment, he actually considered it. The prince was human, so perhaps it could actually work. He was handsome, intelligent, and experienced. But, no, it wasn't an option. Vassili's body reacted to his skillful touch, and yet, Vassili felt nothing.

He found it amazingly easy to break away from the prince's passionate embrace. It simply wasn't the same. Even if the prince could offer him love and not only sex, Vassili wouldn't have said yes. Actually, even taking into account the prince's humanity, a gap still existed between the two of them. Vassili remained a lowly peasant, a poor woodcarver. Not that it mattered. His heart would forever belong to his angels.

Vassili prayed that what he was about to say wouldn't get him killed. "I'm sorry, Your Highness. I feel very flattered, but my heart is already spoken for," he said, struggling to keep his voice from trembling.

The prince's countenance changed instantly, his charming smile shifting into a furious expression. "Insolent whelp! You dare deny me? Guards!" he yelled. "Take him away!"

The doors immediately opened , and Vassili wondered if the guards waited there especially for the purpose of dragging him away and locking him down like a common criminal.

And so, Vassili found himself thrown in the palace dungeons, all alone and miserable. Unfortunately, upon changing his clothes, he'd stupidly left his toy soldier in his coat pocket. Therefore, he didn't even have the comfort of his wooden friend. Bitter tears filled Vassili's eyes. He wished that he could at least see Deni, Sonta, and Noci one last time before he died for his transgression. He vehemently pushed his selfish wish away. They were probably in the heavens now, at God's side, as they were meant to be.

Chapter 7

The next day came much too soon for Vassili's liking. The cell door opened, the rusty hinges squeaking eerily, announcing his impending doom. The palace guards roughly grabbed Vassili and dragged him out of the cell.

Outside, an angry mob gathered. The old man who had been his friend up until the day before spat in Vassili's face. "Ungrateful traitor!"

Similar shouts sounded and Vassili thought that if not for the guards, he would have surely been lynched by the furious people. How could they say things like that? Couldn't they understand that he could not betray his heart?

In that moment, Vassili knew that he'd made the right choice. He could have never lived with himself if he agreed to the prince's proposal. His heart belonged to the three mysterious horsemen. If fate decreed that his sin and his love for three men would mean his life, so be it. He refused to feel shame. His love was true and he knew that, if only for a few moments, the three angels felt the same for him.

The whispered words of love from the dream gave Vassili strength. Head held high, he walked into to the palace courtyard, where the gallows had already been erected. Strangely enough, the prince also appeared, watching the spectacle from a palace balcony. He was dressed in all his finery and gave Vassili a disdainful look.

"You can still repent, peasant," he said, voice thick with suggestion. "Take back your words, apologize, and you will be forgiven for your transgression."

Vassili knew all too well what apologizing would imply, and he couldn't allow it. He met the prince's eyes fearlessly, shaking his head. "I cannot, my prince. Even if the price for my love is my life, I will not falter. I would not be a traitor to my own heart."

Vassili thought he saw a glimmer of envy and perhaps respect in the prince's beautiful green eyes. The shadow of feeling vanished just as it had appeared, and those green orbs became cold again.

"So you will betray me then. Fine. It will be as you will it." The prince nodded toward the executioner. Vassili closed his eyes and he couldn't help but smile as he felt the same ghost-like fingers on his face. Maybe after his death, he would be reunited with his three lovers.

A sudden collective silence made Vassili open his eyes. A thrown stone hovered, frozen in the air, inches from his head.. The rope had tensed, apparently seconds away from sealing Vassili's fate. The executioner had frozen, not breathing, his hand still on the lever that meant Vassili's death. Time stopped. There, in the middle of the palace courtyard, stood Deni, Sonta, and Noci, all smiling brightly at Vassili.

"We're sorry, Vassili," Deni said.

"Only true love could save us from our curse, and you had yet to demonstrate your love," Sonta continued.

"But we would have never allowed you to get hurt," Noci finished gravely.

Together, the three men rode up to the gallows. The rope came undone and Vassili fell into Deni's embrace.

"I don't understand. You said I needed to let you go," Vassili replied, feeling confused.

"Oh, Vassili, we were forced to deceive you about that. You had to prove that you were willing to sacrifice yourself for us. Only true love can give a human the power of self-sacrifice. It was the one thing that could break the curse and return us to our place in the heavens," Deni explained.

"Please forgive us for hurting you," Sonta said. "We wouldn't have done it had there been any other way."

"We never doubted you." Noci's black eyes sparkled with affection. "We knew you truly loved us."

Vassili couldn't help but feel guilty upon remembering his one moment of doubt, the moment when he had almost yielded to the prince's attentions. He tensed and looked away as he realized that in truth, he didn't deserve the trust his horsemen placed in him.

He didn't know how transparent he'd been in his worries until Deni gently gripped his chin, forcing their eyes to meet.

"Don't worry about it," the white horseman whispered. "He is a handsome man."

"I have to admit that seeing you kiss him made me jealous," Noci said with a scowl. "Perhaps he needs to be taught a lesson in keeping his hands off other people's lovers."

"Shut up," Deni snapped. "We can't do that. We're still on probation. Besides, Vassili rejected him in the end."

Vassili couldn't help but feel both happy and extremely embarrassed at the conversation. His face flamed at the knowledge that his lovers saw him kiss the prince. At the same time, he rejoiced upon seeing them so openly jealous. They truly did love him. They loved him and came for him.

Again ignoring the minor argument taking place between Deni and Noci, Sonta smiled at Vassili. "Come with us now, please."

"But where will we go?" Vassili managed to ask. He could see them now, the wings attached to his lovers' backs. They were so beautiful it humbled Vassili.

"With God, the father of us all, of course," the red angel replied. "He is waiting. You will live outside time, with us."

Vassili could do nothing but nod in awe. So many nights he'd dreamed of this, dreamed of seeing his three lovers again. Even when he'd finally given them up, he still yearned for them. It was finally happening, his dream was coming true.

His agreement ended the fight between Deni and Noci as if by magic.

"That's wonderful," Noci purred. "I knew you would say yes. Besides, if you declined, we'd have found a way to convince you."

Vassili blushed at Noci's words. His blush vanished and turned into amused laughter when Deni kicked the black horseman in the shin and glared.

"Shut up! Really, can you two think of nothing but sex?"

"Nope!" Noci answered with a grin, ignoring Deni's anger.

Still glaring, Deni hoisted Vassili on his white horse. Before Vassili's astounded eyes, a portal appeared in the middle of the courtyard, just behind the gathering of onlookers. Just as they were about to enter the portal, Vassili heard the sound of a familiar voice. "Vassili, is that really you?"

Even after all this time, Vassili easily recognized his father. Placing a hand on Deni's arm, he urged the white horseman to stop. Noci helped him dismount as Vassili took in his father's image.

Vassili couldn't understand how Dimitri avoided being frozen in time like the rest of the people watching. He guessed it could be the blood they shared which allowed him to see his son for one last time. He wouldn't be surprised if his horsemen had something to do with it. It didn't really matter. Seeing his father in such a pathetic and weakened state broke Vassili's heart.

Dimitri had changed since he'd left the house. He'd lost a lot of weight, and his hair had turned gray, making him look older than he actually was. His eyes looked glazed, ancient, speaking of a sorrow he'd tried to drown in liquor. It was the same sorrow Vassili felt but had learned to live with. Dimitri's hands trembled as he leaned against the dirty wall, struggling to keep his balance. Those skilled hands, once so strong, barely managed to keep their grip on the filthy bricks. Instantly, Vassili knew that his father had lost everything, even the love for his craft.

Dimitri squinted as if he couldn't see very well and tried to walk toward Vassili, only to slip and fall back on the hard ground. Immediately, Vassili ran to his father's side, reaching to help him up. "Papa...oh, papa, what happened to you?"

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Dimitri clumsily wrapped his arms around his son. "Oh, Vassili...I lost myself. I wanted to forget about everything, about all the pain and the suffering your mother's death brought me." He chuckled bitterly. "It didn't work."

His vision clouded by tears, Vassili turned to his angels. "Please, can you not help him?"

Deni didn't answer, hesitantly sharing a look with the other two angels.

"Why should we?" Noci asked, his voice holding a hint of resentment. "He abandoned you, left you alone with your stepmother. Why should we help him now?"

"Because I'm asking you to," Vassili snapped, unable to hold his temper. He loved his angels dearly, but he also cared about his father. Regardless of what Dimitri had done, he'd once been a wonderful father, a wonderful man. "And because everybody deserves a second chance," he finished softly, hoping the angels would understand him.

Noci just sighed and looked away. Following a sudden urge, Vassili took the black horseman's hand and kissed it. He realized Noci felt angry on his behalf. Still, he couldn't resent his father for loving Larissa with such an all-consuming passion.

"Yes, everybody deserves a second chance," Sonta said finally. "Carver Dimitri, step forward."

"What...who are you? What do you want?" Dimitri stuttered. "Are you angels? Am I dead?"

"You're not dead and this is your second chance," Deni explained. "Or a gift from your son, if you prefer."

The three angels lifted their hands and a kaleidoscope of colors surrounded Dimitri. Vassili watched in awe as the divine power of his angels healed his father, soothing his heart, giving him back the passion for his trade, granting him the strength to start over.

When the light died, Dimitri lost his pale and sickly complexion. The strong muscles he'd earned through his hard work were back and even his hair regained its color. The angels had given Dimitri the gift of youth.

Vassili smiled in gratitude at his lovers. Leaning over, he kissed his still-dazed father on the cheek. "Good-bye, Papa. Be happy."

Having said his goodbyes, Vassili allowed Deni to help him mount the white horse again.

He took another look at the frozen crowd, knowing that today he would leave them all behind. He didn't begrudge them for their cruelty. He didn't even hate the prince for sentencing him to death. It didn't matter anymore.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to him. He clutched Deni's hand in panic. "My toy soldier," he gasped out. "I can't leave it behind."

Noci and Sonta just chuckled. Vassili felt a bit hurt that his lovers would mock him. Granted, clinging to a toy might seem a bit childish, but the toy soldier was his friend and a memento from his mother. Surely, they understood that.

Just as Vassili wanted to launch himself in a scathing rant, Noci retrieved something from his pocket. Vassili gaped in shock. His toy soldier!

Noci ruffled his hair and brushed a kiss over his lips. "We wouldn't take it from you, *lubov moya*."

"Besides," Deni whispered in his ear. "It is connected to us, just as our hearts are connected to yours."

Vassili opened his mouth to ask what Deni meant by that, but he didn't get the chance. A bright light surrounded them all, and the three horsemen of the Black Forest disappeared, carrying their human lover into the heavens that had birthed them.

Epilogue

Two beautifully carved crosses now stood in the grove behind Dimitri's cottage. The woodcarver smiled sadly at the inscription he himself had written.

"I am sorry, my love," he said softly, gently touching Larissa's name on the cross. "I have failed you. I did not know how to take care of my son. I hope he is happy, now that he is with you."

He'd seen it with his very eyes, the angels taking Vassili away on their winged horses. He'd heard Vassili's gentle voice plead for him, plead for a second chance for his wretched father. The angels had agreed. Dimitri now had his health, his skill, and even his youth back. Still, he would never have his family again.

Inexplicably, despite the fact that he'd seen the whole thing so clearly, everybody else missed it. They'd been shocked to suddenly see how the young prisoner vanished from the scaffold in the blink of an eye. It was probably the angels' work there. How else could Vassili have escaped being hanged like some common criminal?

Upon returning to his village, Dimitri realized that both his second wife and his stepsons mysteriously vanished in his absence. His neighbors could tell him nothing of their sudden disappearance, although since many of them heard of Vassili's sentence, they now blamed Dimitri's son for murdering them.

Dimitri knew that couldn't be true. His son was far too kind and generous to even think of something so horrendous. The disappearance of Mariya, Vladimir, and Nikolai would forever remain a mystery. Quite honestly, Dimitri could no longer bring himself to

care about the three. The only thing that hurt him was the knowledge of how much his gentle son suffered with so much pain around him.

"Oh, my son, will you ever forgive me for abandoning you?" the woodcarver whispered, his eyes in tears.

A sudden blinding light appeared in the silent grove. When Dimitri looked up from the cross, he was astounded to see his beautiful Larissa, holding Vassili's hand. Behind them, the three angels stood, wide smiles on their perfectly sculpted faces.

"You are forgiven, my love," Larissa said in her musical voice. "Go and live your life! When it is your time, we will be here, waiting for you."

"Don't worry, Papa! I am happy now." Vassili beamed, his blue eyes shining so bright they seemed almost inhuman. A red arm wrapped around the youth's waist and he flushed, looking back at the trio of angels. "Stop it! Behave!"

The angel in white sighed tiredly and shook his head. "You have been given a second chance, carver Dimitri. We will be watching over you."

"Besides, technically speaking, you are our father-in-law," the black angel said cheekily.

Before Dimitri could fully grasp that peculiar notion, Vassili and Larissa stepped forward, giving him a tight hug. "Goodbye now, Papa. Be happy!"

Dimitri hugged his family back, his eyes filling with tears of both sorrow and joy. Vassili broke away from their embrace and for a second, Dimitri didn't understand his son's actions.

"He's giving us a private moment," Larissa whispered and she pressed her soft mouth to Dimitri's. There, in the grove where Larissa had been buried so many years ago, they shared another kiss, a kiss that no longer tasted like death, but like hope and promise.

"Good-bye, my love. I will wait for you forever," his wife said with a smile as their kiss broke.

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"Maybe I'll come visit from time to time," Vassili told his father. "After all, I never died."

"Good-bye, carver Dimitri," the white angel said. "Until we meet again."

Dimitri watched, frozen, as Larissa took his son's hand. With a final wave of goodbye, the three angels, Vassili, and Larissa disappeared. The grove became as silent and empty as before. Dimitri would have thought it only a dream if not for the lingering taste of Larissa's kiss on his lips. As it were, when Dimitri abandoned the grove, he left his sorrow behind. In his heart he knew that both his son and his beautiful wife watched over him from the heavens. Perhaps he could not be with them now, but one day, when God willed it, they would be reunited. After all, true love lasts forever.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A native Romanian, Scarlet was born in 1986 and grew up an avid fan of Karl May and Jules Verne, reading fantasy stories and adventure. Later, when she was out of fantasy stories to read, she delved into her mother's collection of books and of course, stumbled onto romance.

As a writer, though, Scarlet Hyacinth was born one sunny summer day, when a dear friend of hers—the same friend who introduced her to GLBT fiction—proposed they start writing a story of their own. As it turned out, the two friends never did finish that particular story, but Scarlet discovered she had a knack for writing and ended up starting to write individually. And so, between working on her dissertation, studying for exams, and reading yaoi manga, she started writing the Kaldor Saga. Along the way, Scarlet met a lot of wonderful people who supported her, and in the end she found her story a home—and in the process fulfilled a beautiful dream.

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