The Witch of Duva

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN THE woods near Duva ate girls.

It's been many years since any child was taken. But still, on nights like these, when the wind comes cold from Tsibeya, mothers hold their daughters tight and warn them not to stray too far from home. "Be back before dark," they whisper. "The trees are hungry tonight."

In those black days, on the edge of these very woods, there lived a girl named Nadya and her brother, Havel, the children of Maxim Grushov, a carpenter and woodcutter. Maxim was a good man, well-liked in the village. He made roofs that did not leak or bend, sturdy chairs, toys when they were called for, and his clever hands could fashion edges so smooth and fasten joints so neatly you might never find the seam. He traveled all over the countryside seeking work, to towns as far as Ryevost. He went by foot and by hay cart when the weather was kind, and in the winter, he hitched his two black horses to a sledge, kissed his children, and set out in the snow. Always he returned home to them, carrying bags of grain or a new bolt of wool, his pockets stuffed with candy for Nadya and her brother.

But when the famine came, people had no coin and nothing to trade for a prettily carved table or a wooden duck. They used their furniture for kindling and prayed

they would make it through to spring. Maxim was forced to sell his horses, and then the sledge they'd once pulled over the snow-blanketed roads.

As Maxim's luck faded, so did his wife. Soon she was more ghost than woman, drifting silently from room to room. Nadya tried to get her mother to eat what little food they had, giving up portions of turnip and potato, bundling her mother's frail body in shawls and seating her on the porch in the hope that the fresh air might return some appetite to her. The only thing she seemed to crave were little cakes made by the widow Karina Stoyanova, scented with orange blossom and thick with icing. Where Karina got the sugar, no one knew—though the old women had their theories, most of which involved a rich and lonely tradesman from the river cities. The thaw came, then the summer, another failed harvest. Eventually, even Karina's supplies dwindled, and when the little cakes were gone, Nadya's mother would touch neither food nor drink, not even the smallest sip of tea.

Nadya's mother died on the first real day of winter, when the last bit of autumn fled from the air, and any hope of a mild year went with it. But the poor woman's death passed largely unremarked upon, because two days before she finally breathed her last ghostly sigh, another girl went missing.

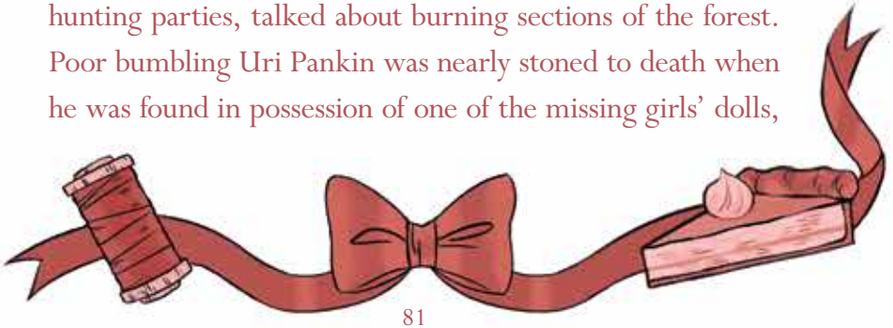
Her name was Lara Deniken, a shy girl with a nervous

laugh, the type to stand at the edges of village dances watching the fun. All they found of her was a single leather shoe, its heel thick with crusted blood. She was the second girl lost in as many months, after Shura Yeshevsky went out to hang the wash on the line and never came back in, leaving nothing but a pile of clothespins and sodden sheets lying in the mud.

Real fear came upon the town. In the past, girls had vanished every few years. True, there were rumors of girls being taken from other villages from time to time, but those children hardly seemed real. Now, as the famine deepened and the people of Duva went without, it was as if whatever waited in the woods had grown greedier and more desperate, too.

Lara. Shura. All those who had gone before: Betya. Ludmilla. Raiza. Nikolena. Other names now forgotten. In those days, they were whispered like an incantation. Parents sent up prayers to their Saints, girls walked in pairs, people watched their neighbors with wary eyes. On the edge of the woods, the townspeople built crooked altars—careful stacks of painted icons, burnt-down prayer candles, little piles of flowers and beads.

Men grumbled about bears and wolves. They organized hunting parties, talked about burning sections of the forest. Poor bumbling Uri Pankin was nearly stoned to death when he was found in possession of one of the missing girls' dolls,



and only his mother's weeping and her insistence that she had found the sorry thing on the Vestopol Road saved him.

Some wondered if the girls might have just walked into the wood, lured by their hunger. There were smells that wafted off the trees when the wind blew a certain way, impossible scents of lamb dumplings or sour-cherry babka. Nadya had almost given in to them herself, sitting on the porch beside her mother, trying to get her to take another spoonful of broth. She would smell roasting pumpkin, walnuts, brown sugar, and find her feet carrying her down the stairs toward the waiting shadows, where the trees shuffled and sighed as if ready to part for her.

Stupid Nadya, you think. *Stupid girls. I would never be so foolish.* But you've never known real hunger. The crops have been good these last years and people forget what the lean times are like. They forget the way mothers smothered infants in their cribs to stop their hungry howls, or how the trapper Leonid Gemka was found gnawing on the muscle of his slain brother's calf when their hut was iced in for two long months.

Sitting on the porch of Baba Olya's house, the old women peered into the forest and muttered, "Khitka." The word raised the hairs on Nadya's arms, but she was no longer a child, so she laughed with her brother at such silly talk. The khitkii were spiteful forest spirits, bloodthirsty and vengeful.

But in stories, they were known to hunger after newborns, not full-grown girls near old enough to marry.

"Who can say what shapes an appetite?" Baba Olya said with a dismissive wave of her gnarled hand. "Maybe this one is jealous. Or angry."

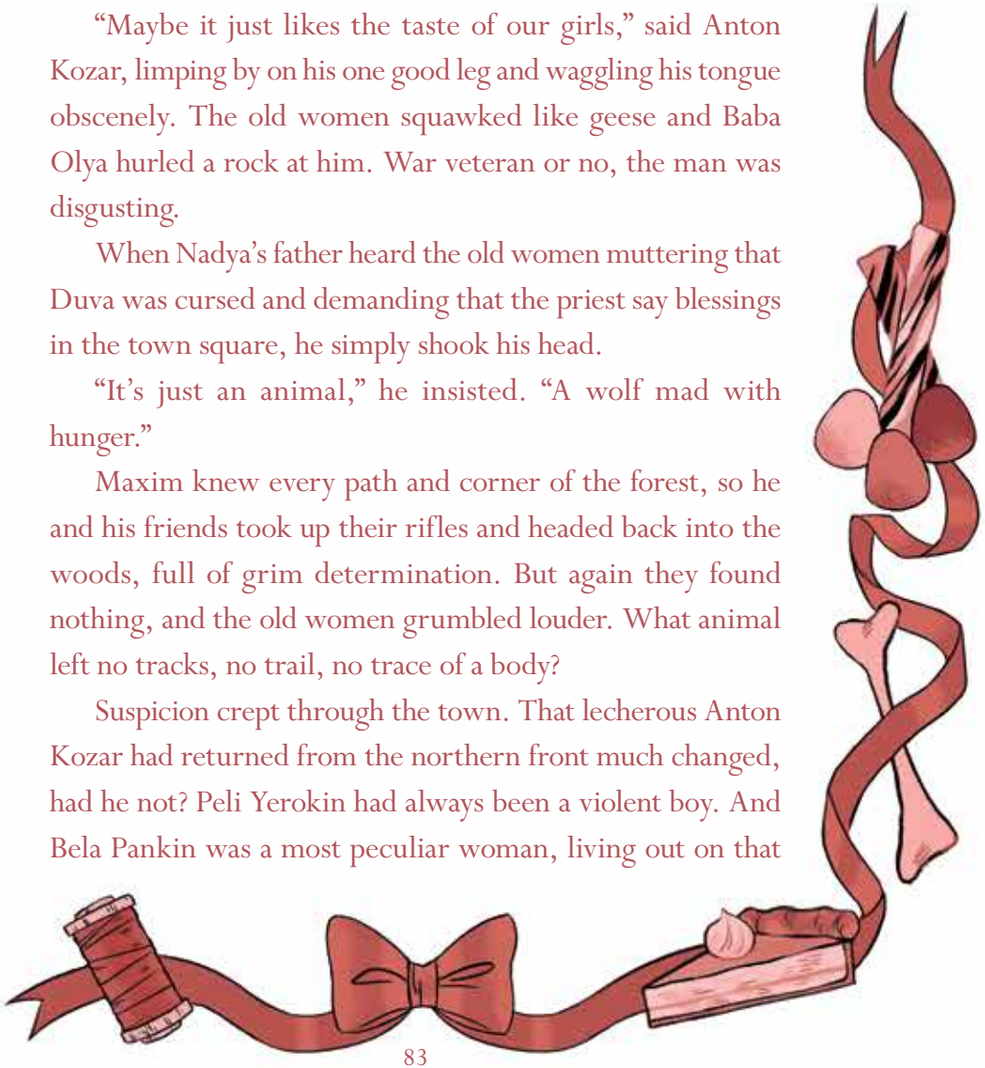
"Maybe it just likes the taste of our girls," said Anton Kozar, limping by on his one good leg and waggling his tongue obscenely. The old women squawked like geese and Baba Olya hurled a rock at him. War veteran or no, the man was disgusting.

When Nadya's father heard the old women muttering that Duva was cursed and demanding that the priest say blessings in the town square, he simply shook his head.

"It's just an animal," he insisted. "A wolf mad with hunger."

Maxim knew every path and corner of the forest, so he and his friends took up their rifles and headed back into the woods, full of grim determination. But again they found nothing, and the old women grumbled louder. What animal left no tracks, no trail, no trace of a body?

Suspicion crept through the town. That lecherous Anton Kozar had returned from the northern front much changed, had he not? Peli Yerokin had always been a violent boy. And Bela Pankin was a most peculiar woman, living out on that



farm with her strange son, Uri. A khitka could take any form. Perhaps she had not "found" that missing girl's doll at all.

Standing at the lip of her mother's grave, Nadya noted Anton's seeping stump and lewd grin, wiry Peli Yerokin with his tangled hair and balled fists, Bela Pankin's worried frown, and the sympathetic smile of the widow Karina Stoyanova, the way her lovely black eyes stayed on Nadya's father as the coffin he'd carved with such care was lowered into the hard ground.

The khitka might take any form, but the shape it favored most was that of a beautiful woman.

Soon Karina seemed to be everywhere, bringing Nadya's father food and gifts of kvas, whispering in his ear that someone was needed to take care of him and his children. Havel would be gone for the draft soon, off to train in Poliznaya and begin his military service, but Nadya would still need minding.

"After all," said Karina in her warm honey voice, "you do not want her to disgrace you."

Later that same night, Nadya went to her father as he sat drinking kvas by the fire. Maxim was whittling. When he had nothing to do, he sometimes made dolls for Nadya, though she'd long since outgrown them. His sharp knife moved in restless sweeps, leaving curls of soft wood on the floor. He'd been too long at home. The summer and fall that he might

have spent seeking out work had been lost to his wife's illness, and the winter snows would soon close the roads. As his family went hungry, his wooden dolls gathered on the mantel, like a silent, useless choir. He cursed when he cut into his thumb, and only then did he notice Nadya standing nervously by his chair.

"Papa," Nadya said, "please do not marry Karina."

She hoped that he would deny that he had been contemplating such a thing. Instead, he sucked his wounded thumb and said, "Why not? Don't you like Karina?"

"No," said Nadya honestly. "And she doesn't like me."

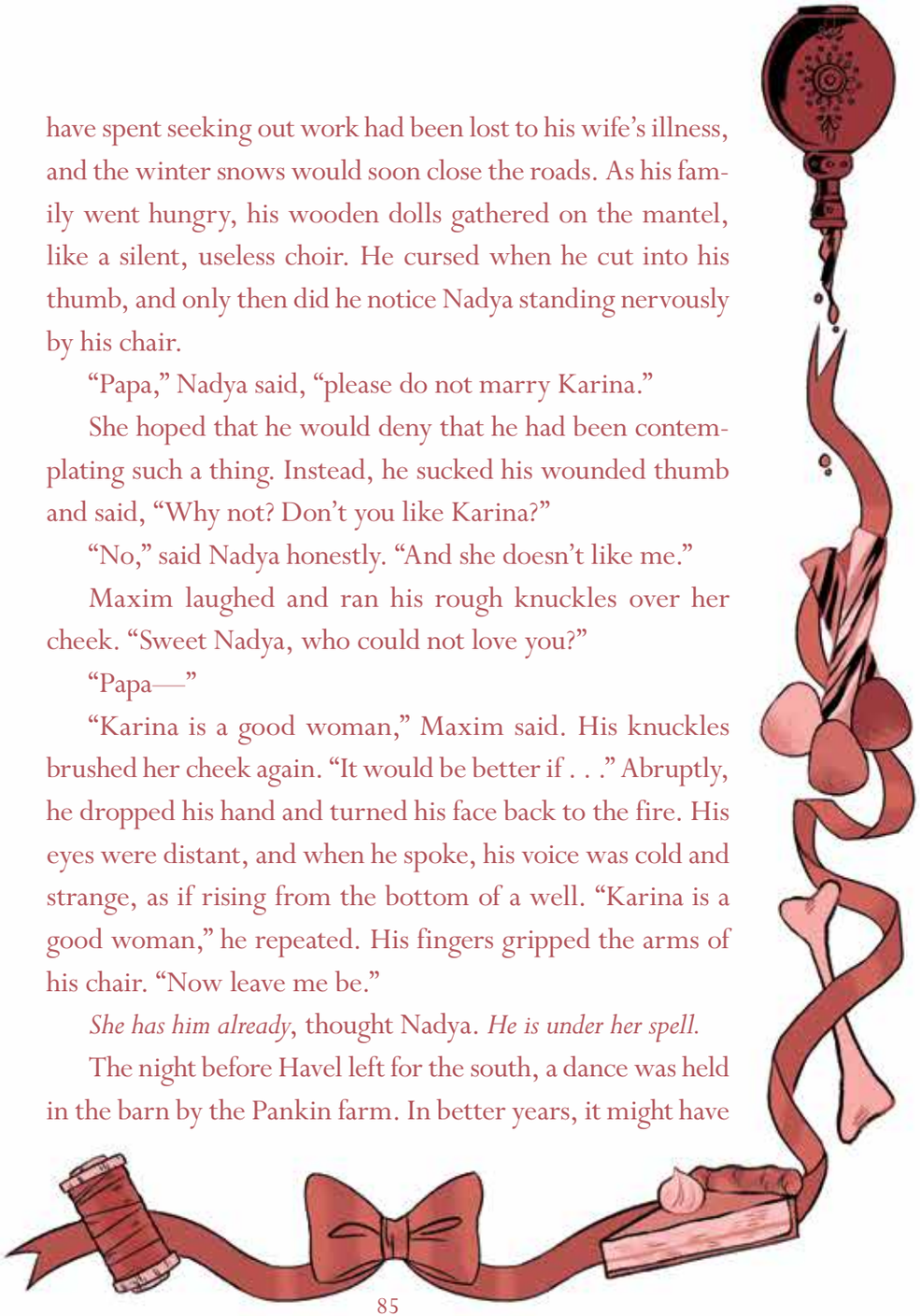
Maxim laughed and ran his rough knuckles over her cheek. "Sweet Nadya, who could not love you?"

"Papa—"

"Karina is a good woman," Maxim said. His knuckles brushed her cheek again. "It would be better if . . ." Abruptly, he dropped his hand and turned his face back to the fire. His eyes were distant, and when he spoke, his voice was cold and strange, as if rising from the bottom of a well. "Karina is a good woman," he repeated. His fingers gripped the arms of his chair. "Now leave me be."

She has him already, thought Nadya. *He is under her spell.*

The night before Havel left for the south, a dance was held in the barn by the Pankin farm. In better years, it might have



been a raucous night, the tables piled high with plates of nuts and apples, pots of honey, and jars of peppery kvas. The men still drank and the fiddle played, but even pine boughs and the high shine of Baba Olya's treasured samovar could not hide the fact that now the tables were empty. And though people stomped and clapped their hands, they could not chase away the gloom that seemed to hang over the room.

Genetchka Lukin was chosen Dros Koroleva, Queen of the Thaw, and made to dance with all who asked her, in the hope that it would bring about a short winter, but only Havel looked truly happy. He was off to the army, to carry a gun and eat hot meals from the king's pocket. He might die or come back wounded as so many had before him, but on this night, his face glowed with the relief of leaving Duva behind.

Nadya danced once with her brother, once with Victor Yeronoff, then took a seat with the widows and wives and children. Her eyes fell on Karina, standing close to her father. Her limbs were white birch branches; her eyes were ice over black water. Maxim looked unsteady on his feet.

Khitka. The word drifted down to Nadya from the barn's shadowed eaves as she watched Karina weave her arm through Maxim's like the pale stalk of a climbing vine. Nadya pushed her foolish thoughts away and turned to watch Genetchka Lukin dance, her long golden hair braided with bright red

ribbons. Nadya was ashamed to feel a pang of envy. Silly, she told herself, watching Genetchka struggle through a dance with Anton Kozar. He simply stood and swayed, one arm keeping balance on his crutch, the other clutching tightly to poor Genetchka's waist. Silly, but she felt it just the same.

"Go with Havel," said a voice at her shoulder.

Nadya nearly jumped. She hadn't noticed Karina standing beside her. She looked up at the slender woman, her dark hair lying in coils around her white neck.

Nadya turned her gaze back to the dance. "I can't and you know it. I'm not old enough." It would be two more years before she was called to the draft.

"So lie."

"This is my home," Nadya whispered furiously, embarrassed by the tears that rose behind her eyes. "You can't just send me away." *My father won't let you*, she added silently. But somehow, she did not have the courage to speak the words aloud.

Karina leaned in close to Nadya. When she smiled, her lips split wet and red around what seemed like far too many teeth.

"Havel could at least work and hunt," she whispered. "You're just another mouth." She reached out and tugged one of Nadya's curls, hard. Nadya knew that if her father

happened to look over he would just see a beautiful woman, grinning and talking to his daughter, perhaps encouraging her to dance.

"I will warn you just this once," hissed Karina Stoyanova. "Go."

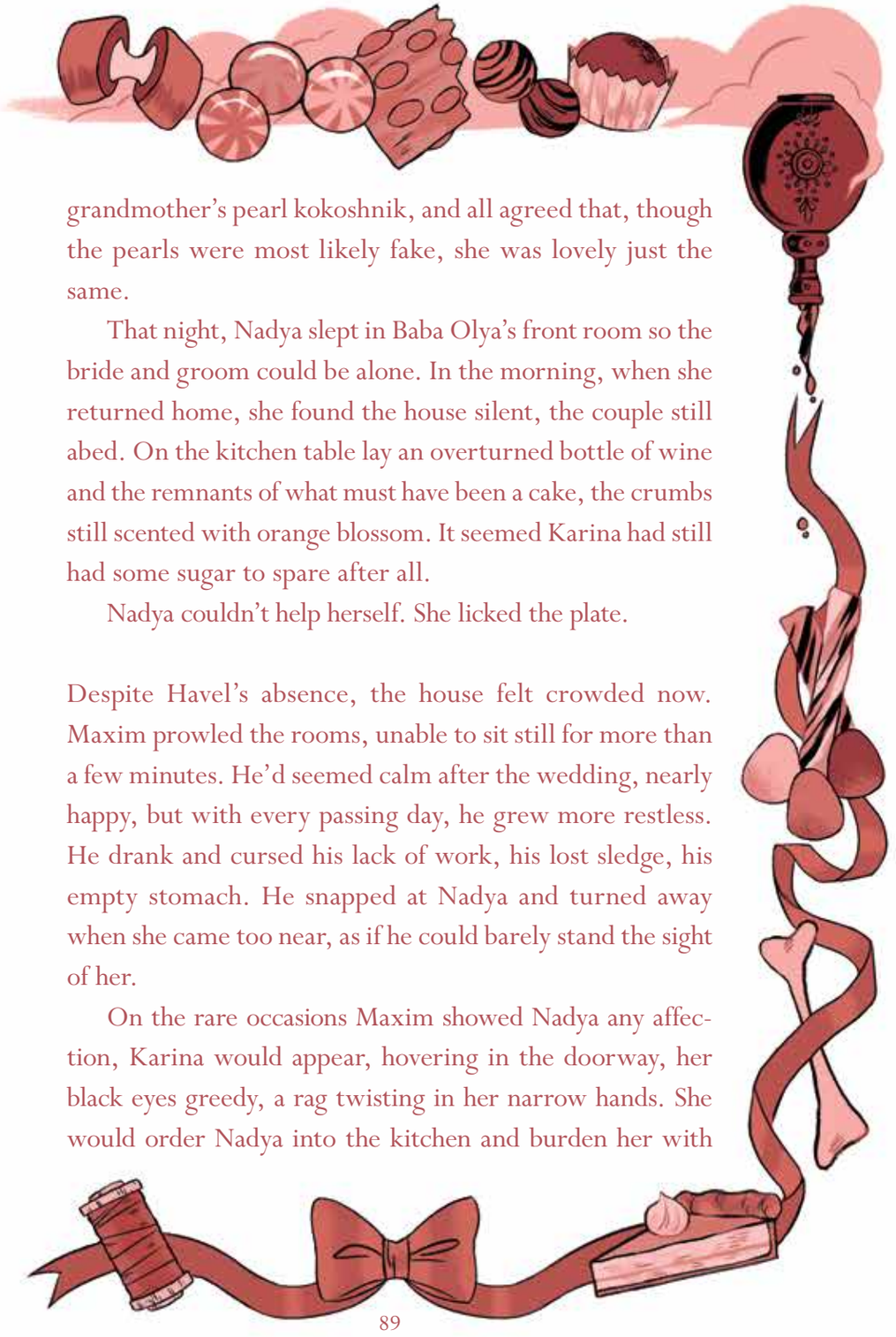
The next day Genetchka Lukin's mother discovered that her daughter's bed had not been slept in. The Queen of the Thaw had never made it home from the dance. At the edge of the wood, a red ribbon fluttered from the branches of a narrow birch, a few golden hairs trailing from the knot, as if it had been torn from her head.

Nadya stood silent as Genetchka's mother fell to her knees and began to wail, calling out to her Saints and pressing the red ribbon to her lips as she wept. Across the road, Nadya saw Karina watching, her eyes black, her lips turned down like peeling bark, her long, slender fingers like raw spokes of branches, stripped bare by a hard wind.

When Havel said his good-byes, he drew Nadya close. "Be safe," he whispered in her ear.

"How?" Nadya replied, but Havel had no answer.

A week later, Maxim Grushov and Karina Stoyanova were wed in the little whitewashed chapel at the center of town. There was no food for a wedding feast, and there were no flowers for the bride's hair, but she wore her



grandmother's pearl kokoshnik, and all agreed that, though the pearls were most likely fake, she was lovely just the same.

That night, Nadya slept in Baba Olya's front room so the bride and groom could be alone. In the morning, when she returned home, she found the house silent, the couple still abed. On the kitchen table lay an overturned bottle of wine and the remnants of what must have been a cake, the crumbs still scented with orange blossom. It seemed Karina had still had some sugar to spare after all.

Nadya couldn't help herself. She licked the plate.

Despite Havel's absence, the house felt crowded now. Maxim prowled the rooms, unable to sit still for more than a few minutes. He'd seemed calm after the wedding, nearly happy, but with every passing day, he grew more restless. He drank and cursed his lack of work, his lost sledge, his empty stomach. He snapped at Nadya and turned away when she came too near, as if he could barely stand the sight of her.

On the rare occasions Maxim showed Nadya any affection, Karina would appear, hovering in the doorway, her black eyes greedy, a rag twisting in her narrow hands. She would order Nadya into the kitchen and burden her with

some ridiculous chore, commanding her to stay out of her father's way.

At meals, Karina watched Nadya eat as if her every bite of watered-down broth was an offense, as if every scrape of Nadya's spoon hollowed out Karina's belly a little more, widening the hole inside her.

Little more than a week had passed before Karina took hold of Nadya's arm and nodded toward the woods. "Go check the traps," she said.

"It's almost dark," Nadya protested.

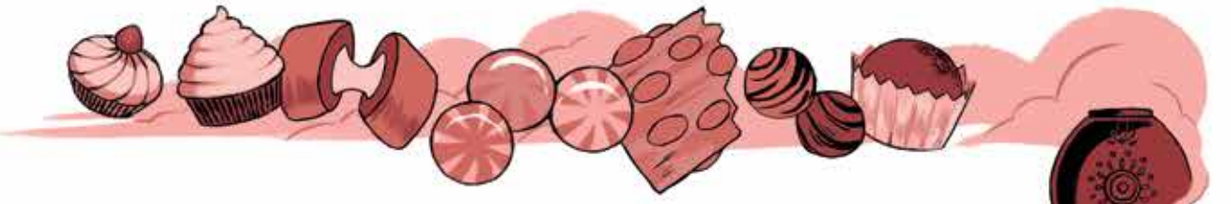
"Don't be foolish. There's plenty of light. Now go and make yourself useful and don't come back without a rabbit for our supper."

"Where's my father?" Nadya demanded.

"He is with Anton Kozar, playing cards and drinking, and trying to forget that he was cursed with a useless daughter." Karina gave Nadya a hard push out the door. "Go, or I'll tell him that I caught you with Victor Yeronoff."

Nadya longed to march to Anton Kozar's shabby rooms, knock the glass from her father's hands, tell him that she wanted her home back from this dangerous dark-eyed stranger. And if she'd been sure that her father would take her side, she might have done just that.

Instead, Nadya walked into the woods.

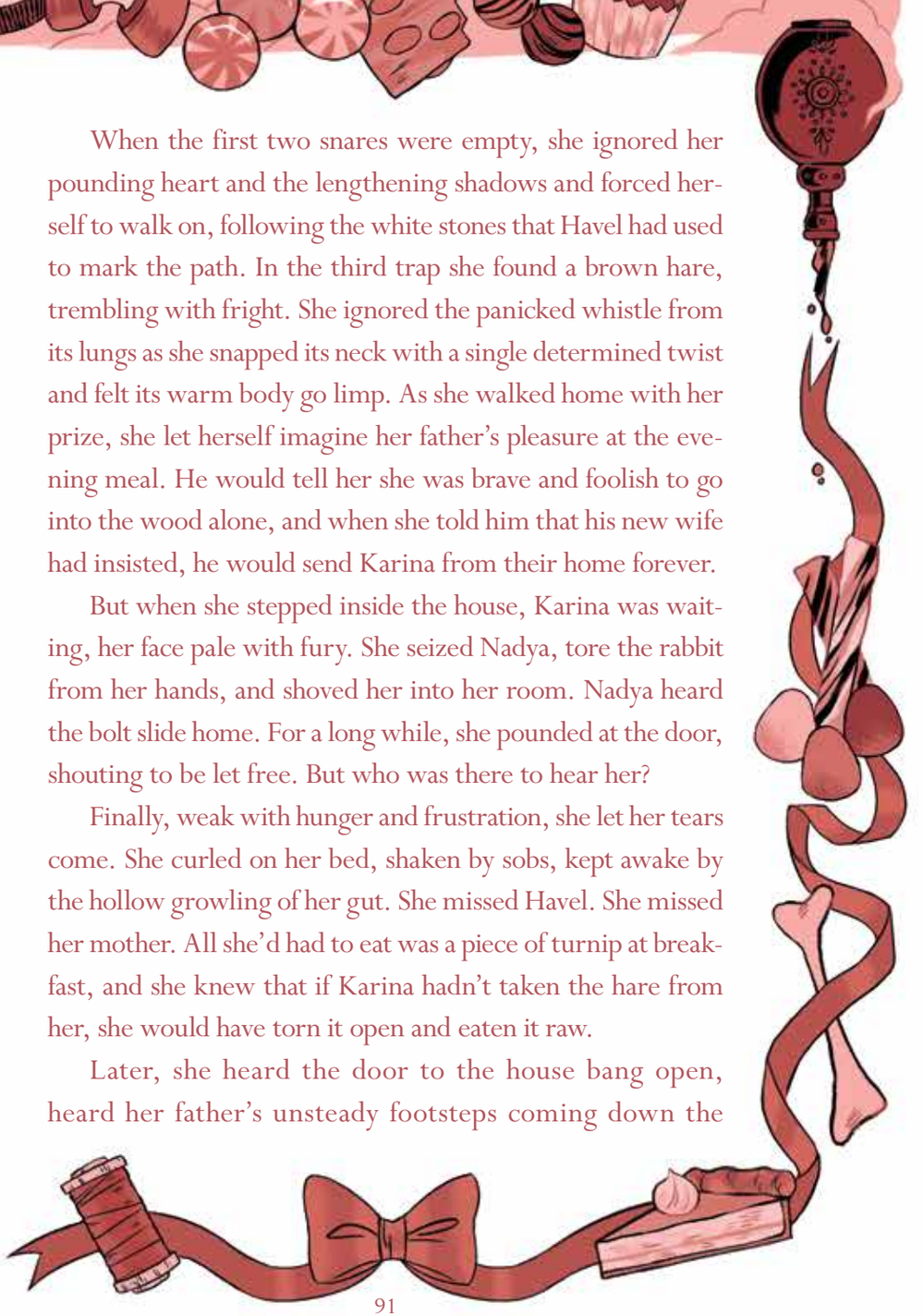


When the first two snares were empty, she ignored her pounding heart and the lengthening shadows and forced herself to walk on, following the white stones that Havel had used to mark the path. In the third trap she found a brown hare, trembling with fright. She ignored the panicked whistle from its lungs as she snapped its neck with a single determined twist and felt its warm body go limp. As she walked home with her prize, she let herself imagine her father's pleasure at the evening meal. He would tell her she was brave and foolish to go into the wood alone, and when she told him that his new wife had insisted, he would send Karina from their home forever.

But when she stepped inside the house, Karina was waiting, her face pale with fury. She seized Nadya, tore the rabbit from her hands, and shoved her into her room. Nadya heard the bolt slide home. For a long while, she pounded at the door, shouting to be let free. But who was there to hear her?

Finally, weak with hunger and frustration, she let her tears come. She curled on her bed, shaken by sobs, kept awake by the hollow growling of her gut. She missed Havel. She missed her mother. All she'd had to eat was a piece of turnip at breakfast, and she knew that if Karina hadn't taken the hare from her, she would have torn it open and eaten it raw.

Later, she heard the door to the house bang open, heard her father's unsteady footsteps coming down the



hall, the tentative scratch of his fingers at her door. Before she could answer she heard Karina's voice, crooning, crooning. Silence, the rustle of fabric, a thump followed by a groan, then the steady thud of bodies against the wall. Nadya clutched her pillow to her ears, trying to drown out their pants and moans, sure that Karina knew she could hear and that this was some kind of punishment. She buried her head beneath the covers but could not escape that shaming, frantic rhythm, keeping time to the echo of Karina's voice that night at the dance: *I will warn you just this once. Go. Go. Go.*

The next day, Nadya's father did not rise until after noon. When he entered the kitchen and Nadya handed him his tea, he flinched away from her, eyes skittering across the floor. Karina stood at the basin, face pinched, mixing up a batch of lye.

"I'm going to Anton's," Maxim said.

Nadya wanted to beg him not to leave her, but even in her own head, the plea sounded foolish. In the next moment, he was gone.

This time, when Karina took hold of her and said, "Go check the traps," Nadya did not argue.

She had braved the woods once and she would do it again. This time, she would clean and cook the rabbit herself and

return home with a full belly, strong enough to face Karina with or without her father's help.

Hope made her stubborn. When the first flurries of snow fell, Nadya pushed on, moving from one empty trap to the next. It was only when the light began to fade that she realized she could no longer make out Havel's white stone markers.

Nadya stood in the falling snow and turned in a slow circle, searching for some familiar sign that would lead her back to the path. The trees were black slashes of shadow. The ground rose and fell in soft, billowing drifts. The light had gone dull and diffuse. There was no way of knowing which way home might be. All around her there was silence, broken only by the howl of the rising wind and her own rough breathing, as the woods slid into darkness.

And then she smelled it, hot and sweet, a fragrant cloud that singed the edges of her nostrils: burning sugar.

Nadya's breath came in frantic little gasps, and even as her terror grew, her mouth began to water. She thought of the rabbit, plucked from the trap, the rapid beat of its heart, the rolling whites of its eyes. Something brushed against her in the dark. Nadya did not pause to think; she ran.

She crashed blindly through the wood, branches lashing at her cheeks, her feet tangling in snow-laden brambles, unsure if she heard her own clumsy footfalls or something

slavering behind her, something with crowded teeth and long white fingers that clutched at the hem of her coat.

When she glimpsed the glow of light filtering through the trees ahead, for one delirious moment she thought she'd somehow made it home. But as she burst into the clearing, she saw that the hut silhouetted before her was all wrong. It was lean and crooked, with lights that glowed in every window. No one in her village would ever waste candles that way.

The hut seemed to shift, almost as if it were turning to welcome her. She hesitated, took a step back. A twig snapped behind her. She bolted for the hut's painted door.

Nadya rattled the handle, sending the lantern above swaying.

"Help me!" she cried. And the door swung open. She slipped inside, slamming it behind her. Was that a thump she heard? The frustrated scrabble of paws? It was hard to tell over the hoarse sobs wheezing from her chest. She stood with her forehead pressed to the door, waiting for her heart to stop hammering, and only then, when she could take a full breath, did she turn.

The room was warm and golden, like the inside of a currant bun, thick with the smells of browning meat and fresh-baked bread. Every surface gleamed like new, cheerfully painted with leaves and flowers, animals and tiny people, the paint so fresh and bright it hurt her eyes to look at it after the dull gray surfaces of Duva.

At the far wall, a woman stood at a vast black cookstove that stretched the length of the room. Twenty different pots boiled atop it, some small and covered, some large and near to bubbling over. The oven beneath had two hinged iron doors that opened from the center and was so large that a man might have lain lengthwise in it. Or at least a child.

The woman lifted the lid of one of the pots, and a cloud of fragrant steam drifted toward Nadya. Onions. Sorrel. Chicken stock. Hunger came upon her, more piercing and consuming than her fear. A low growl escaped her lips, and she clapped a hand to her mouth.

The woman glanced over her shoulder.

She was old but not ugly, her long gray braid tied with a red ribbon. Nadya stared at that ribbon and hesitated, thinking of Genetchka Lukin. The smells of sugar and lamb and garlic and butter, all layered upon one another, made her shake with longing.

A dog lay curled in a basket, gnawing on a bone, but when Nadya looked closer she saw it was not a dog at all, but a little bear wearing a golden collar.

"You like Vladchek?"

Nadya nodded.

The woman set a heaping plate of stew down on the table.

"Sit," said the woman as she returned to the stove. "Eat."

Nadya removed her coat and hung it by the door. She pulled her damp mittens from her hands and sat down carefully at the table. She lifted her spoon, but still she hesitated. She knew from stories that you must not eat at a witch's table.

But in the end, she could not resist. She ate the stew, every hot and savory bite of it, then flaky rolls, plums in syrup, egg pudding, and a rum cake thick with raisins and brown sugar. Nadya ate and ate while the woman tended to the pots on the stove, sometimes humming a little as she worked.

She's fattening me up, thought Nadya, her eyelids growing heavy. *She'll wait for me to fall asleep, then stuff me in the oven and cook me up to make more stew.* But Nadya found she didn't care. The woman set a blanket by the stove, next to Vladchek's basket, and Nadya fell off to sleep, glad that at least she would die with a full belly.

But when she woke the next morning, she was still in one piece and the table was set with a hot bowl of porridge, stacks of rye toast slathered with butter, and plates of shiny little herring swimming in oil.

The old woman introduced herself as Magda, then sat silent, sucking on a sugared plum, watching Nadya eat her breakfast.

Nadya ate till her stomach ached while outside the snow continued to fall. When she was done, she set her empty bowl down on the floor, where Vladchek licked it clean. Only then did Magda spit the plum pit into her palm and say, "What is it you want?"

"I want to go home," Nadya replied.

"So go."

Nadya looked outside to where the snow was still falling. "I can't."

"Well then," said Magda. "Come help me stir the pot."

For the rest of the day, Nadya darned socks, scrubbed pans, chopped herbs, and strained syrups. She stood at the stove for long hours, her hair curling from the heat and steam, stirring many little pots, and wondering all the while what might become of her. That night they ate stuffed cabbage leaves, crispy roast goose, little dishes of apricot custard.

The next day, Nadya breakfasted on butter-soaked blini stuffed with cherries and cream. When she finished, the witch asked her, "What is it you want?"

"I want to go home," said Nadya, glancing at the snow still falling outside. "But I can't."

"Well then," said Magda. "Come help me stir the pot."

This was how it went, day after day, as the snow fell and

filled the clearing, rising up around the hut in great white waves.

On the morning the snow finally stopped, the witch fed Nadya potato pie and sausages and asked her, "What is it you want?"

"I want to go home," said Nadya.

"Well then," said Magda. "You'd better start shoveling."

So Nadya took up the shovel and cleared a path around the hut, accompanied by Vladchek snuffling in the snow beside her and an eyeless crow that Magda fed on rye crumbs, and that sometimes perched upon the witch's shoulder. In the afternoon, Nadya ate a slab of black bread spread with soft cheese and a dish of baked apples. Magda gave her a mug of hot tea laced with sugar, and back out she went.

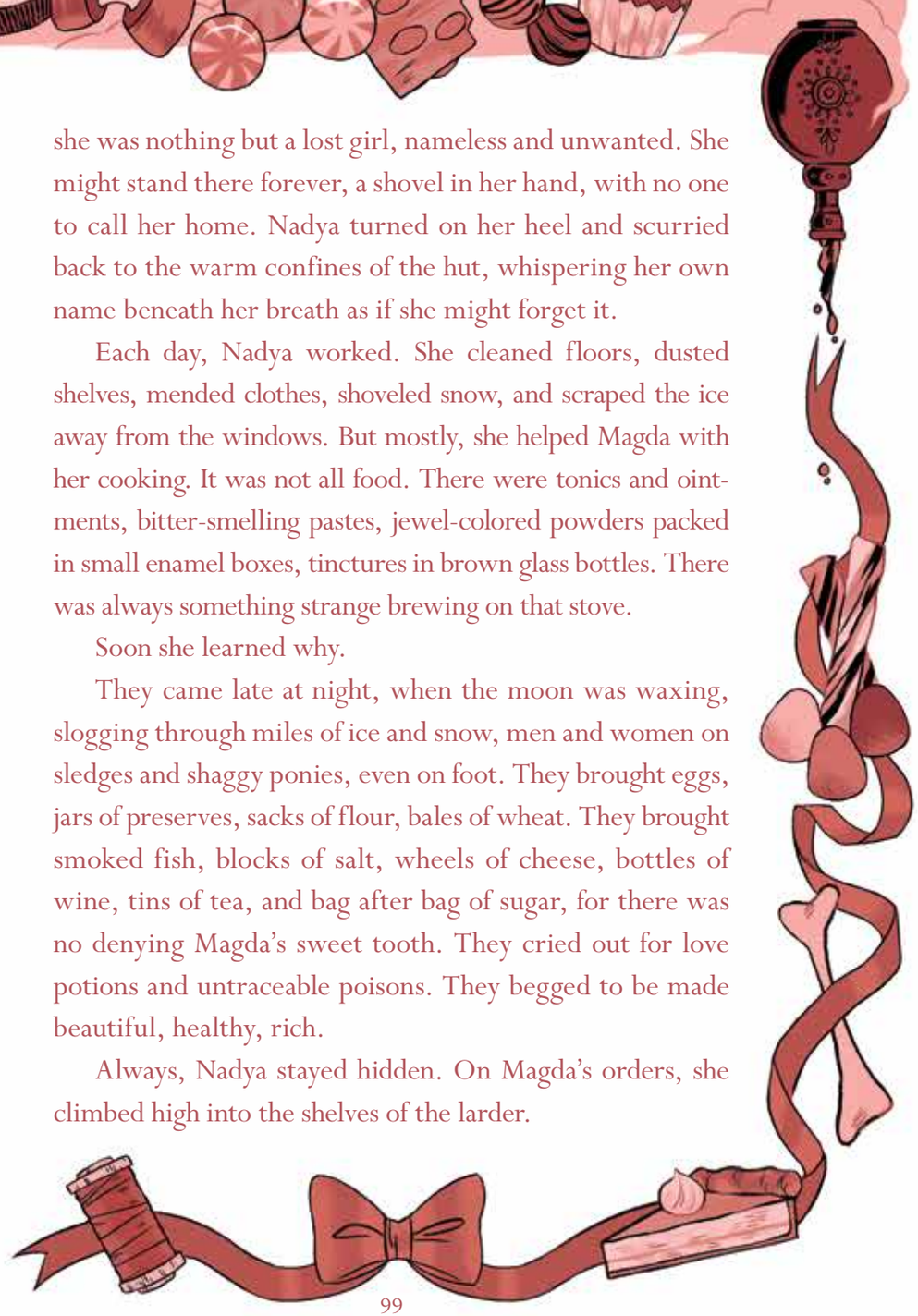
When she finally reached the edge of the clearing, she wondered just where she was supposed to go. The frost had come. The woods were a frozen mass of snow and tangled branches. What might be waiting for her in there? And even if she could make it through the deep snow and find her way back to Duva, what then? A tentative embrace from her weak-willed father? Far worse from his hungry-eyed wife? No path could lead her back to the home she had known. The thought opened a bleak crack inside of her, a fissure where the cold seeped through. For a terrifying moment, she was nothing but a lost girl, nameless and unwanted. She might stand there forever, a shovel in her hand, with no one to call her home. Nadya turned on her heel and scurried back to the warm confines of the hut, whispering her own name beneath her breath as if she might forget it.

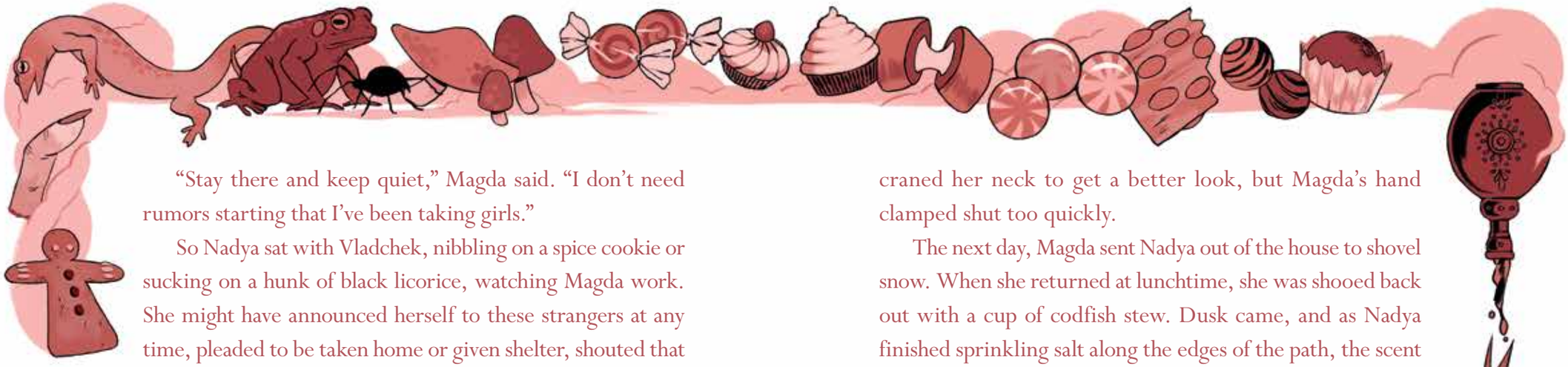
Each day, Nadya worked. She cleaned floors, dusted shelves, mended clothes, shoveled snow, and scraped the ice away from the windows. But mostly, she helped Magda with her cooking. It was not all food. There were tonics and ointments, bitter-smelling pastes, jewel-colored powders packed in small enamel boxes, tinctures in brown glass bottles. There was always something strange brewing on that stove.

Soon she learned why.

They came late at night, when the moon was waxing, slogging through miles of ice and snow, men and women on sledges and shaggy ponies, even on foot. They brought eggs, jars of preserves, sacks of flour, bales of wheat. They brought smoked fish, blocks of salt, wheels of cheese, bottles of wine, tins of tea, and bag after bag of sugar, for there was no denying Magda's sweet tooth. They cried out for love potions and untraceable poisons. They begged to be made beautiful, healthy, rich.

Always, Nadya stayed hidden. On Magda's orders, she climbed high into the shelves of the larder.





"Stay there and keep quiet," Magda said. "I don't need rumors starting that I've been taking girls."

So Nadya sat with Vladchek, nibbling on a spice cookie or sucking on a hunk of black licorice, watching Magda work. She might have announced herself to these strangers at any time, pleaded to be taken home or given shelter, shouted that she'd been trapped by a witch. Instead, she stayed silent, sugar melting on her tongue, watching as they came to this old woman, how they turned to her with desperation, with resentment, but always with respect.

Magda gave them drops for the eyes, tonics for the scalp. She ran her hands over their wrinkles, tapped a man's chest till he hacked up black bile. Nadya was never sure how much was real and how much was show until the night the wax-skinned woman came.

She was gaunt, as they all were, her face a skull of hard-carved hollows. Magda asked the question she asked anyone who came to her door: "What is it you want?"

The woman collapsed in her arms, weeping, as Magda murmured soothing words, patted her hand, dried her tears. They conferred in voices too low for Nadya to decipher, and before the woman left, she took a tiny pouch from her pocket and shook the contents into Magda's palm. Nadya craned her neck to get a better look, but Magda's hand clamped shut too quickly.

The next day, Magda sent Nadya out of the house to shovel snow. When she returned at lunchtime, she was shooed back out with a cup of codfish stew. Dusk came, and as Nadya finished sprinkling salt along the edges of the path, the scent of gingerbread drifted to her across the clearing, rich and spicy, filling her nose until she felt nearly drunk.

All through dinner, she waited for Magda to open the oven, but when the meal was finished, the old woman set a piece of yesterday's lemon cake before her. Nadya shrugged. As she reached for the cream, she heard a soft sound, a gurgle. She looked at Vladchek, but the bear was fast asleep, snoring softly.

And then she heard it again, a gurgle followed by a plaintive coo. From inside the oven.

Nadya pushed back from the table, nearly knocking her chair over, and stared at Magda, horrified, but the witch did not flinch.

A knock sounded at the door.

"Go into the larder, Nadya."

For a moment, Nadya hovered between the table and the door, caught like a fly that might still free itself from the web. Then she backed into the larder, pausing only to grab hold of

Vladchek's collar and drag him with her onto the top shelf, comforted by his drowsy snuffling and the warm feel of his fur beneath her hands.

Magda opened the door. The wax-faced woman stood waiting at the threshold, almost as if she were afraid to move. Magda wrapped her hands in towels and pulled open the oven's iron doors. A squalling cry filled the room. The woman grabbed at the doorposts as her knees buckled, then pressed her hands to her mouth, her chest heaving, tears streaming over her sallow cheeks. Magda swaddled the gingerbaby in a red kerchief and handed it, squirming and mewling, into the woman's trembling, outstretched arms.

"Milaya," the woman crooned. *Sweet girl.* She turned her back on Magda and disappeared into the night, not bothering to close the door behind her.

The next day, Nadya left her breakfast untouched, placing her cold bowl of porridge on the floor for Vladchek. He turned up his nose at it until Magda put it back on the stove to warm.

Before Magda could ask her question, Nadya said, "That wasn't a real child. Why did she take it?"

"It was real enough."

"What will happen to it? What will happen to her?" Nadya asked, a wild edge to her voice.

"Eventually it will be nothing but crumbs," said Magda.

"And then what? Will you just make her another?"

"The mother will be dead long before that. She has the same fever that took her infant."

"Then cure her!" Nadya shouted, smacking the table with her unused spoon.

"She didn't ask to be cured. She asked for a child."

Nadya put on her mittens and stomped out into the yard. She did not go inside for lunch. She meant to skip dinner too, to show what she thought of Magda and her terrible magic. But by the time night came her stomach was growling, and when Magda put down a plate of sliced duck with hunter's sauce, Nadya picked up her fork and knife.

"I want to go home," she muttered to her plate.

"So go," said Magda.

Winter dragged on with frost and cold, but the lamps always burned golden in the little hut. Nadya's cheeks grew rosy and her clothes grew snug. She learned how to mix up Magda's tonics without looking at the recipes and how to bake an almond cake in the shape of a crown. She learned which herbs were valuable and which were dangerous, and which herbs were valuable because they were dangerous.

Nadya knew there was much that Magda didn't teach her. She told herself she was glad of it, that she wanted

nothing to do with Magda's abominations. But sometimes she felt her curiosity clawing at her like a different kind of hunger.

And then, one morning, she woke to the tapping of the blind crow's beak on the sill and the drip, drip, drip of melted snow from the eaves. Bright sun shone through the windows. The thaw had come.

That morning, Magda laid out sweet rolls with prune jam, a plate of boiled eggs, and bitter greens. Nadya ate and ate, afraid to reach the end of her meal, but eventually she could not take another bite.

"What is it you want?" asked Magda.

This time Nadya hesitated, afraid. "If I go, couldn't I just—"

"You cannot come and go from this place like you're fetching water from a well. I will not have you bring a monster to my door."

Nadya shivered. *A monster.* So she'd been right about Karina.

"What is it you want?" asked Magda again.

Nadya thought of Genetchka dancing, of nervous Lara, of Betya and Ludmilla, of the others she had never known.

"I want my father to be free of Karina. I want Duva to be safe. I want to go home."

Gently, Magda reached out and touched Nadya's left hand—first the ring finger, then the pinkie. Nadya thought of the wax-faced woman, of the little bag she'd emptied into the witch's palm.

"Think on it," said Magda.

The next morning when Magda went to lay out the breakfast, she found the cleaver Nadya had placed there.

For two days, the cleaver lay untouched on the table, as they measured and sifted and mixed, making batch after batch of batter. On the second afternoon, when the hardest of the work was done, Magda turned to Nadya.

"You know that you are welcome to remain here with me," said the witch.

Nadya stretched out her hand.

Magda sighed. The cleaver flashed once in the afternoon sun, the edge gleaming the dull gray of Grisha steel, then fell with a sound like a gunshot.

At the sight of her fingers lying forlorn on the table, Nadya fainted.