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Opening extract from

The Wolf Wilder

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A Note on Wolf Wilders

Wolf wilders are almost impossible to spot.

A wolf wilder is not like a lion tamer nor a circus ringmaster: wolf wilders can go their whole lives without laying eyes on a sequin. They look, more or less, like ordinary people. There are clues: more than half are missing a piece of finger, the lobe of an ear, a toe or two. They go through clean bandages the way other people go through socks. They smell very faintly of raw meat.

In the western wild parts of Russia there are gangs of wolf merchants who hunt newborn pups. They snatch them, still wet and blind, and carry them

away in boxes, selling them to men and women who live elegant lives in thick-carpeted houses in St Petersburg. A wolf pup can fetch a thousand roubles, a pure white one as much as twice that. A wolf in the house is said to bring good fortune: money and fame, boys with clean noses and girls without pimples. Peter the Great had seven wolves, all as white as the moon.

The captured wolves wear golden chains and are taught to sit still while people around them laugh and drink and blow cigar smoke into their eyes. They are fed caviar, which, quite reasonably, they find disgusting. Some grow so fat that the fur on their stomach sweeps the ground as they waddle up and down stairs, and collects fluff and ash.

But a wolf cannot be tamed in the way a dog can be tamed, and it cannot be kept indoors. Wolves, like children, are not born to lead calm lives. Always the wolf goes mad at the imprisonment, and eventually it bites off and eats a little piece of someone who was

not expecting to be eaten. The question then arises: what to do with the wolf?

Aristocrats in Russia believe that the killing of a wolf brings a unique kind of bad luck. It is not the glamorous kind of bad luck, not runaway trains and lost fortunes, but something dark and insidious. If you kill a wolf, they say, your life begins to disappear. Your child will come of age on the morning that war is declared. Your toenails will grow inwards, and your teeth outwards, and your gums bleed in the night and stain your pillow red. So the wolf must not be shot, nor starved; instead, it is packed up like a parcel by nervous butlers, and sent away to the wolf wilder.

The wilder will teach the wolves how to be bold again, how to hunt and fight, and how to distrust humans. They teach them how to howl, because a wolf who cannot howl is like a human who cannot laugh. And the wolves are released back on to the land they were born on, which is as tough and alive as the animals themselves.

Chapter 1

Once upon a time, a hundred years ago, there was a dark and stormy girl.

The girl was Russian, and although her hair and eyes and fingernails were dark all of the time, she was stormy only when she thought it absolutely necessary. Which was fairly often.

Her name was Feodora.

She lived in a wooden house made of timber taken from the surrounding forest. The walls were layered with sheep's wool to keep out the Russian winter, and the inside was lit with hurricane lamps. Feo had painted the lamps every colour in her box of paints, so

the house cast out light into the forest in reds and greens and yellows. Her mother had cut and sanded the door herself, and the wood was eight inches thick. Feo had painted it snow blue. The wolves had added claw marks over the years, which helped dissuade unwelcome visitors.

It all began – all of it – with someone knocking on the snow-blue door.

Although 'knocking' was not the right word for this particular noise, Feo thought. It sounded as though someone was trying to dig a hole in the wood with their knuckles.

But any knocking at all was unusual. Nobody knocked: it was just her and her mother and the wolves. Wolves do not knock. If they want to come in, they come in through the window, whether it is open or not.

Feo put down the skis she was oiling and listened. It was early, and she was still wearing her nightdress. She had no dressing gown, but she pulled on the

jumper her mother had knitted, which came down to the scar on her knee, and ran to the front door.

Her mother was wrapped in a bear-skin housecoat, just looking up from the fire she had been lighting in the sitting room.

'I'll do it!' Feo ran past her to answer the door. It was stiff; ice had sealed the hinges.

Her mother grabbed at her – 'Wait! Feo!'

But Feo already had pulled the door open, and before she could jump back it slapped inwards, catching the side of her head.

'Ach!' Feo stumbled, and sat down on her own ankle. She said a word that made the stranger pushing his way past her raise his eyebrows and curl his lip.

The man had a face made of right angles: a jutting nose and wrinkles in angry places, deep enough to cast shadows in the dark.

'Where is Marina Petrovich?' He shoved past her down the hall, leaving a trail of snow.

Feo got to her knees – and then lurched back, as two more men in grey coats and black boots marched past her, missing her fingers by inches. 'Move, girl.' They carried between them, slung by its legs, the body of a young elk. It was dead, and dripping blood.

'Wait!' said Feo. Both wore the tall furry hats of the Tsar's Imperial Army, and exaggeratedly official expressions.

Feo ran after them. She readied her elbows and knees to fight.

The two soldiers dropped the elk on the rug. The sitting room was small, and the two young men were large and moustached. Their moustaches seemed to take up most of the room.

Up close, they looked barely more than sixteen; but the man with the door-beating fists was old, and his eyes were the oldest thing about him. Feo's stomach bunched up under her throat.

The man spoke over Feo's head to her mother. 'Marina Petrovich? I am General Rakov.'

'What do you want?' Marina's back was against the wall.

'I am commander of the Tsar's Imperial Army for the thousand miles south of St Petersburg. And I am here because your wolves did this,' he said. He kicked at the elk. Blood spread across his brightly polished shoe.

'*My* wolves?' Her mother's face was steady, but her eyes were neither calm nor happy. 'I do not own any wolves.'

'You bring them here,' said Rakov. His eyes had a coldness in them you do not expect to see in a living thing. 'That makes them your responsibility.' His tongue was stained yellow by tobacco.

'No. No, neither of those things are true,' said Feo's mother. 'Other people send the wolves when they tire of them: the aristocrats, the rich. We untame them, that's all. And wolves cannot be owned.'

'Lying will not help you, Madam.'

'I am not –'

'Those three wolves I see your child with. Those are not yours?'

'No, of course not!' began Feo. 'They're –' But her mother shook her head, hard, and gestured to Feo to stay silent. Feo bit down on her hair instead, and tucked her fists into her armpits to be ready.

Her mother said, 'They are not. They are hers only in the sense that I am hers, and she is mine. They are Feo's companions, not her pets. But that bite isn't the work of Black or White or Grey.'

'Yes. The jaw marks,' said Feo, looking at the elk. 'They're from a much smaller wolf.'

'You are mistaken,' said Rakov, 'in imagining I wish to hear excuses.' His voice was growing less official: louder, ragged-edged.

Feo tried to steady her breathing. The two young men, she saw, were staring at her mother: one of them had let his jaw sag open. Marina's shoulders and back and hips were wide; she had muscles that were more commonly seen on men, or rather, Feo thought, on

wolves. But her face, a visitor had once said, was built on the blueprint used for snow leopards, and for saints. 'The look,' he had said, 'is "goddess, modified".' Feo had pretended, at the time, not to be proud.

But Rakov seemed immune to her mother's beauty. 'I have been sent to collect compensation for the Tsar, and I shall do that, immediately. Do not play games with me. You owe the Tsar a hundred roubles.'

'I don't have a hundred roubles. And I am not –'

Rakov slammed his fist against the wall. He was surprisingly strong for so old and shrivelled a man, and the wooden walls shuddered. 'Woman! I have no interest in protest or excuses. I have been sent to wrest obedience and order from this godforsaken place.' He glanced down at his red-speckled shoe. 'The Tsar rewards success.' Without warning he kicked the elk so hard that its legs flailed, and Feo let out a hiss of horror.

'You!' He crossed to her, leaning down until his face, veined and yellowed with tobacco, was inches from hers. 'If I had a child with a stare as insolent as

yours, she would be beaten. Sit there and keep out of my sight.' He pushed her backwards, and the cross hanging from his neck caught in Feo's hair. He tugged it away viciously and passed through the door back into the hall. The soldiers followed him. Marina signalled to Feo to stay – the same hand gesture they used for wolves – and ran after them.

Feo stood in the doorway, waiting for the buzzing in her ears to die away; then she heard a cry and something breaking, and ran, skidding down the hall in her socks.

Her mother was not there, but the soldiers had crowded into Feo's bedroom, filling her room with their smell. Feo flinched away from it: it was smoke, she thought, and a year's worth of sweat and unwashed facial hair. One of the soldiers had an underbite he could have picked his own nose with.

'Nothing worth anything,' said one soldier. His eyes moved across her reindeer-skin bedspread, the hurricane lamp, and came to rest on her skis leaning

against the fireplace. Feo ran to stand protectively in front of them.

'These are mine!' she said. 'They're nothing to do with the Tsar. I made them.' It had taken a whole month for each ski, whittling them every evening and smoothing them with grease. Feo gripped one in both fists like a spear. She hoped the prickling in her eyes was not visible. 'Get away from me.'

Rakov smiled, not sweetly. He took hold of Feo's lamp, held it up to the morning light. Feo grabbed at it.

'Wait!' said Marina. She stood in the doorway. There was a bruise on her cheek that had not been there before. 'Can't you see this is my daughter's room?'

The young men laughed. Rakov did not join in: he only stared at them until they turned red and fell silent. He crossed to Feo's mother, studied the mark on her cheek. He leaned forward until the tip of his yellowed nose was touching her skin, and sniffed.

Marina stood motionless, her lips bitten shut. Then Rakov grunted and threw the lamp at the ceiling.

'Chyort!' cried Feo, and ducked. Broken glass rained down on her shoulders. She lunged forward at the General, swinging blindly with her ski. 'Get out!' said Feo. 'Get out!'

The General laughed, caught it and wrenched it from her. 'Just sit down and behave, child, before you make me angry.'

'Get *out*,' said Feo.

'Sit! Or you will end up in the same position as that elk.'

Marina seemed to jerk into life. '*What?* What insanity in your head makes you think you can threaten my child?'

'You *both* disgust me.' Rakov shook his head. 'It is an abomination to live with those animals. Wolves are vermin with teeth.'

'That is …' Feo's mother's face spoke a hundred different swear words before she said, 'inaccurate.'

'And your child is vermin when she is with those wolves. I've heard stories about you both – you're unfit to be a mother.'

Marina let out a sound that it hurt Feo to hear, part-way between a gasp and a hiss.

He went on, 'There are schools – in Vladivostok – where she could learn the values of a better mother – mother Russia. Perhaps I will have her sent there.'

'Feo,' said Marina, 'go and wait in the kitchen. *Immediately*, please.' Feo darted out, rounded the door and stopped there, hesitating, peering through the crack in the hinge. Her mother's face, as she turned to Rakov, was shining with anger and with other, more complicated, things.

'No – Feo is *my child*. For God's sake, do you not know what that means?' Marina shook her head incredulously. 'My child is worth an entire army of men like you. And my love for her – the love any parent has for their child – is a thing you should

underestimate only if you have a particularly powerful death wish. That love – it *burns*.'

Rakov ran a hand along his chin. 'What is your point? This is ranting, not logic.' He wiped his boot on the bed. 'You're tedious.'

'My point is that you will keep your hands off my daughter if you value their current position at the ends of your arms.'

Rakov snorted. 'That is somewhat unfeminine.'

'Not at all. It seems profoundly feminine to me.'

Rakov stared at Marina's fingers, the tips of two of which were missing, and then at her face. His expression was frightening: there was something uncontained about it. Marina stared back at him. Rakov blinked first.

He grunted, and strode out the door. Feo twisted backwards out of his way, then ran after him into the kitchen.

'You are not making this easy for yourself,' he said. His face was dispassionate as he upturned the dining table. Feo's favourite mug crashed on the floor.

'Mama!' said Feo. She took a handful of her mother's coat as Marina swept into the room and held it tight.

Rakov did not even glance in her direction. 'Take the paintings,' he said. They had three, each with boldly coloured cubes arranged in shapes that hinted at men and women. Marina loved them. Feo humoured her.

'Wait, don't!' said Feo. 'That's Mama's Malevich. It was a present! Wait! Here. There's this!' Feo fished her gold chain from around her neck and held it out to one of the younger soldiers. 'It's gold. It was Mama's mother's before it was mine, so it's old. Gold's worth more when it's old.' The soldier bit the chain, sniffed it, nodded and handed it to Rakov.

Feo ran to open the front door. She stood by it, the snow blowing in and coating her socks. Her whole body was shaking. 'Now you have to go.'

Marina closed her eyes for one brief moment, then opened them and smiled at Feo. The two soldiers

spat on the floor in a bored kind of way and headed out into the snow.

'This is the only warning you will be given,' said Rakov. He ignored the open door and the snow-covered wind. 'The Tsar's orders. The Tsar will not have his animals slaughtered by wolves *you* have taught to hunt. From now on, if the people of the city send you wolves, you shoot them.'

'No!' said Feo. 'We can't! Anyway, we don't have a gun! Tell him, Mama!'

Rakov ignored her. 'You will send back a message to the superstitious idiots who send their ridiculous pets to you that you have released them into the wild, and then you will shoot the animals.'

'I will not,' said Marina. Her face looked empty of blood. It made Feo's stomach ache; it made her wish that she had a gun to point at the man in the doorway.

Rakov's coat wrinkled as he shrugged. 'You know the penalty for those who act against the orders of the

Tsar? You remember what happened to the rioters in St Petersburg? This is the only warning you will receive.' He crossed to the front door, and as he passed he pointed a gloved finger at Feo's heart. 'You too, girl.' He jabbed once, hard, against her collarbone. Feo jumped backwards.

'If we see that child with a wolf, we'll shoot the wolf and take the child.'

He slammed the door behind him.

* * *

Later that day, Feo and her mother sat by fire. The shards of broken glass and china had been swept clear and the elk had been packed in ice and stored in the woodshed – Feo had wanted to bury it properly, with a cross and a funeral, but her mother had said no: they might need to eat it, if the winter kept marching on. Feo dipped her head to lie on her mother's shoulder.