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One

In the depths of Siberia, in the harshest cold, an eleven-year-old girl dressed in grey overalls crossed the assembly square on the way to her prison quarters. She walked alone. She blew on her hands for warmth and left her breath behind her. It made white whirligigs through air laced with ice.

Lina neared the barbed prison fence. There, she stopped. The wind played in the tufts of her sand-coloured hair, her eyes glinted like varnished wood. If she'd been a fox, her ears would've been pricked. Voices? Out here? At this hour of dusk?

This wasn't good. Besides her, the only other prisoners who would be lingering about now were the ruthless kind. Thugs. Robbers. The ones that would hold a blade to your throat and strip you of everything you owned, soon as look at you. Boots,

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overalls and all. They'd leave you to freeze.

That's if they didn't do you in first.

Lina glanced around. On one side stretched the back of the barracks complex: the sleeping quarters. Half a winter's worth of snow towered next to her on the other side. Prisoners shovelled it off the path and dumped it every morning as their first job of the day, before they set out to work in the mine. It was grey-brown at its base and peaked white at the top – the closest thing to a mountain Lina had ever seen.

Every winter of her life since she could walk, she'd trudged back and forth in its shadow. Tonight, as if things weren't bad enough, it had voices leaking through it. Voices she now recognized.

It had to be mad Old Gleb, Alexei the Butcher – and someone else. Probably Vadim.

The thought of Vadim chased a shudder through her. At sixteen, he already had the tattoos of the criminal underworld. He had quick eyes and no patience for work – as if he felt he had somewhere else to be. Lina had seen it before, all too often. Denial. It made people hard to predict – which also made them dangerous.

"And supplies? We'll need more food than this, Vadim Ivanov, oh, *great* and *sage* leader. Much more, if we're to—"

"Shut your mouth, Gleb." That was Alexei's voice:

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deep, and blunt as a shovel. Enormous, dark-haired Alexei, always with his eyebrows knitted and always with coldness in his pale glare. He was Vadim's muscle – twice Vadim's age and double his size, known to act first and let others do the thinking later.

"Quiet, both of you." Vadim. "The kid will be here. Katya said this is the way she always comes. The best place for 'a quiet word', away from the guards, she said."

Lina gasped. Katya was her mother's name. They were talking about *her*. Why would her mother tell them, of all people, where to find her? Lina was confused for a moment – but only a moment. Her mother was brave. And smart. Lina trusted her. If Mama had told this lot where to find her, there must be a very good reason.

Still, Lina hesitated. These men were dangerous. Maybe they'd only *overheard* her mother saying she'd be here. Maybe they were planning something… Lina began to back away.

"*Shh*. What was that?"

Heavy, crunching footsteps, and Alexei loomed round the snow bank. Fear set Lina's bones.

Alexei reached out. To grab her. Lina sprang into action. She ducked under his arms at the last second and scrambled to get away. Too late. Alexei's ice-block hands clamped down in an instant. Lina was small for

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her age, and he lifted her up like a bundle of twigs and whisked her behind the snow bank.

Vadim narrowed his eyes when he saw her, and smiled. To the other two, he said, "See. I told you the kid would come."

"Let me go," Lina said through clenched teeth. But Alexei held her fast. No escape. She could kick, however. She drove her heel hard into his shin. He grunted in pain, though his grip didn't falter.

"Oh, for goodness' sake," said Old Gleb. "Look at him. How is he going to help us? He's so small, he'll barely be able to carry his own supplies! Hardly any muscle on him at all. And listen. He sounds just like a girl."

"Idiot!" said Alexei. "She *is* a girl."

Lina smirked. "I'm stronger than I look. And I've more meat on my bones than you, old man." Hurt flashed in Old Gleb's eyes. Lina bit her bottom lip. Starvation wasn't something to joke about in a forced labour camp – and Old Gleb was painfully thin. Almost what people here called a "goner". "And anyway," she barked, recovering. "What do you want? Why are you looking for me? Shouldn't you be getting your rations, quick, before someone else eats them?"

Vadim sneered. He was good-looking in a certain light. Not when he sneered, though – then he looked

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ugly and cruel. "Rations are exactly what we're after, but not the measly ones served up here. Can you be trusted to keep a secret, as Katya insists? You understand there's no going back if I tell you this, don't you?"

Lina tried to shrug the chills out of her spine and stand tall. "I can be trusted. Can *you*?"

Alexei and Old Gleb glanced at each other. Old Gleb's cheeks puffed with a barely contained laugh. "Well, Vadim Ivanov, oh, *great* and *sage* leader. She'll be good entertainment on the other side of the wire, at the very least."

Lina's eyes grew wide and round. "You're planning to cross the wire? To escape! Are you mad?" Hardly anyone got past the outer fence. Those who did… If the cold didn't get them, or the lack of food, then the wolves would. Or, if you believed that sort of thing, the spirits.

Even so, awe rang in her voice. She gazed at the sliver of horizon, just visible through the wire and beyond the outer fence. By some trick of the fading light, when she squinted, she could see tiny, dark shapes out there, slanted and braced against the wind.

She imagined one to be her.

"Surely, we'd die," she said.

Vadim didn't appear to see any folly in his idea, however. Not judging by that stare. His eyes seemed

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to search inside her, as if trying to strike a deal with her soul.

Lina stared back just as hard. Vadim may *think* he's clever, but could his plan, whatever it was, really be good *enough*? In two days' time, Lina would be twelve. She didn't intend to celebrate by freezing to death in the Siberian frost. No way.

Then again, how many hundreds of hours had she spent dreaming of going beyond the wire? Not just to the mine, where the prisoners hacked out precious metal every day. Beyond even that. She fixed her gaze on the horizon, and a smile crept over her face.

She'd go to Moscow. Find her grandmother. Her mother's stories of this amazing woman were one thing. But to actually find her, to finally meet her, to be with her… Lina had to come too.

Vadim smiled as if he read the resolve in Lina's eyes. "Good," he said.

A strong wind whipped through the wire fence with a howl, flinging ice crystals that scratched at their faces like needle-fine claws. The rising storm would only get worse.

"Better find your mother," Vadim said to Lina, with another nasty sneer, "and put on your warmest boots. But first, we need you to do something for us."

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Two

"If I say no?" Lina asked Vadim cautiously. It wouldn't be wise to look too keen. Not straightaway.

Old Gleb hooted with laughter and slapped his thigh.

Alexei wasn't as impressed. He shook her. "Stay here then, runt, and see where it gets you. You'll only slow us down anyway."

Vadim held up his hand. "That was Alexei's lack of patience talking. Alexei?" Alexei grunted and let her go. The sudden release made her arms tingle. She rubbed them as Vadim spoke again. "What Alexei means is that, of course, if you and your mother choose to stay, there's nothing *I* can do. But think of this: freedom. I know it's what you want, Lina. It's what we all want. But we need you to do something for us first, to prove you'll be useful to us beyond the