Winter was Katya’s favorite time of year. Snow fell constantly in Moscow, the Kremlin receiving a gentle frosting that transformed it from building to confection. The Moskva and its canals iced over and a skating rink was set up in the park. The yearly pilgrimage to *The Nutcracker* was made. Outside Katya’s icy windows the world became a fairytale wonderland and when darkness fell and the city lights shone, glistening beneath the snow, Katya imagined she was in another world. One where the palace she lived in did not belong to a madman—in this dream, her mother was still alive.

“*Odin, dva, tri*…” Alexei began counting, his face hidden in his hands, golden head facing the corner. Katya stole quickly out of the ornately decorated room, dashing down the hall, away from her fourteen-year-old brother’s counting. The two had become excellent at hide-and-seek after many winters spent exploring the palace. Unfortunately, this meant that they both knew where all the best spots were. This time though, she vowed that she would not be found, somehow she would beat her older brother.

Katya dashed down the hall, grabbing at her ivory stockings as they slid down her legs. Veering right, she darted behind one of the plush, red velvet curtains. No, that wouldn’t do; she threw back the curtains and kept running. Her brother must be nearly finished counting by now.

Flying around a corner, she skidded to a stop. *Ob no,* she thought. In her eagerness to defeat her brother, she’d lost track of where she was headed and had ended up in the forbidden section of the palace. Ducking behind a well-placed nude, she peeked out at the hall beneath the statue’s marble elbow. At the end of the corridor stood five men in sharp military dress. Most wore their hats and held sturdy black briefcases in their hands. There
was her father, standing solemnly, his dark hair covered and blue eyes stormy. Only one man
held his hat in hand; though he was shorter in stature than the rest, he held himself with the
confidence that could only be found in the most powerful of men. Though his back was
turned to her, Katya gulped. Even at a distance, even when he could not see her, she was still
terrified of her father’s boss, a fearsome man they called Stalin, the man of steel.

Quick as a whip, Katya flew into the closest room from her hiding place. “Do
svidaniya,” she heard the men chorus, wishing each other well. Grabbing the door, her blonde
hair and the blue hair ribbons that matched her eyes barely made it inside the room before
the thick mahogany slid into place. She could hear footsteps coming, the sound of boots
echoing down the hall. Scouring the room, her eyes roved madly. There! The cupboard!
Without so much as a second thought, Katya leapt into the cupboard, pulling the door shut
behind her. Pushing aside what felt like the summer drapery, she wedged herself in place, eye
to the keyhole. At least Alexei would never dare to look for her here. Though she couldn’t
say that she looked forward to the consequences should she be found. At thirteen, she was
more than old enough to know not to travel to this wing of the palace. Pushing the thought
of punishment from her head, she scooted closer to the keyhole.

Hardly making a sound, the big doors were pushed open and Stalin made his way
behind his desk. Sitting, Katya could see exactly why he was so feared. Light poured in from
the French windows behind him, sunlight reflected off the snow providing a strong
backlight. His form was a well of shadow, drawing her in as she tried to make out his
features. Stalin sat at his desk and began to work. Katya watched in silence, until, without
realizing, she fell asleep.

Katya woke with a gasp. Forgetting where she was, she burst up. Stretching her arms
out before her, she knocked open the cupboard doors and tumbled out of the closet.
Landing with an oomph, the carpet cushioned her fall much more than she’d thought. The
fact that the floor was freezing and damp was just as strange. Blinking, Katya pushed herself
up. She was sitting in a thick snowdrift. At least that explains the wet. Looking around in the
blue light, all Katya could see were tall trees and their ice-laden branches. Tilting her head
towards the sky, she found that she couldn’t make out anything more than intertwined
branches. She screamed. Desperate, Katya ran towards the nearest trunk and began pounding it with her fists.

“Let me go back! I want to go back!” she shrieked. Katya cried and beat the smooth bark of the tree until her knuckles bled. Finally losing strength, she sank into a girl-shaped puddle in the snow. Without fierce anger to distract her, she quickly became aware of the frigid air. Her winter clothes were warm enough for a palace too large to have effective heating, but they did nothing against the ferocious temperatures of the forest. Standing, Katya pulled herself together, brushing the snow off her gray velvet dress. Taking a deep breath, she took stock of her surroundings. The forest was completely, eerily silent. It was too cold for any streams to gurgle; they were all frozen solid. Except for the occasional icy gust through the upper branches, there was no movement in the trees. She could not see a single track in the snow, no record of the deer, hares or foxes that surely occupied the area. The sun set early in the winter and without it Katya could not even tell North from South. Determinedly, Katya picked a direction and began to walk, wishing for her good fur boots. Her stockings were already soaked.

Katya walked for what felt like hours, trudging her way through the drifts, when suddenly, she spotted a crow. Perched near the top of one of the forest’s few pines, it was the first sign of life she’d seen since finding herself transported to the forest. She took it as a good omen and continued forward. Later, she stopped again. The teasing breezes that had been blowing her hair in her face had shifted, coming now from the direction she was headed. She could smell smoke. Sucking the air in deeply, she reveled in the smell upwind. It strengthened her; and so she continued walking. By the time she stopped again, the twilight had faded and the first stars had begun to wink through the treetops. I’ll climb to the top of this next drift and then I’ll find shelter, she decided. The smell of smoke had thickened as she had walked and she had been hopeful that she would find its source before night fell. Katya struggled up the snow bank, more tired and cold than she had ever remembered being, even more so than when she was six and their family had traveled to St. Petersburg with the Premier.
She remembered standing on the bank of the Neva River in February, watching the ships go out onto the Baltic Sea. The winds had been strong that day, but she had known better than to show her shivers. One could not show any weakness before the Premier. That had been the last trip they had taken as a family. In the spring, her mother had suddenly vanished on the way home from visiting her sister. The Premier had assured her father that his very best men were investigating, but their search had yielded no results.

Katya shook her head. It would do her no good to freeze to death out in the wilderness mooning over the loss of her mother. Katya studied her surroundings. She had climbed to the top of the drift while lost in thought. What she had thought was just another snow bank was actually a hill. From here she could see much more than the endless trees and snow the last few hours had afforded her. And to her extreme surprise, a light danced at the bottom of the knoll. A fire! In her excitement, Katya slipped, sliding all the way to the bottom of the rise, narrowly avoiding the thin trunks scattered on the hillside. Loosing momentum, she stopped just short of the circle of light.

Now that she was closer, she could see that what she had thought was a mere fire was an entire hut, firelight dancing through the windowpanes. Katya sprang up and scurried to the thick pine door. She sent a quick prayer heavenwards that whoever resided in the hut would not harm her. Then, she knocked.

Within seconds, she heard rustling inside. Something scratched at the door before opening it. Standing there in the open door, almost as tall as herself, was a tawny-eyed wolf. Katya’s hands flew up to her mouth, trapping the scream before it could escape. It stared at her warily, as if deciding whether there was enough of her to provide a meal. To come all this way only to be eaten by the most fearsome creature she’d ever seen....

“Now, now kotenok, come inside. You’re letting the cold in. And Pavel, stop scaring our guest. You already brought in a deer today.” Pavel growled at Katya before turning and trotting back to the fire. Katya shuddered as she stepped over the threshold. How anyone could give that beast a name meaning small was beyond her. Pushing the door shut, Katya took stock of the wooden hut. It was warm and cozy, more than she’d possibly hoped for. In the corner, an old woman stood bent over the stove.
“Privet. Hello. Thank you for the shelter. You have to help me, I’m lost and I’m not sure how I got to this forest in the first place. Where am I anyway? And who are you?” Katya spoke rapidly, the words falling out of her before she realized she was speaking at all. The old crone cackled.

“Sit, sit, child. Stew’s almost ready. Pavel, bring the poor girl a blanket.” Katya sat at the old, roughly carved table, watching the wolf unfold himself and snatch a thick woolen blanket from the basket in the corner. Obediently, he dragged it over to her, offering it. Eagerly, she took it and thanked the animal. The aroma of stew and bread overtook her and she forgot every manner she’d ever learned as soon as a bowl and loaf were placed in front of her. The old hag laughed again, setting a bowl on the floor for Pavel before seating herself across from Katya. The three ate in silence. Finishing, Katya set down her spoon and looked up. Dipping the remainder of her bread in the remnants of the stew, she studied the woman across from her. Lines wove their way across her face and hands, some deeper than others. The elderly woman’s hands were knotted and knarled, as if they had seen more than their fair share of work. Her gray hair was braided back away from her face. Though her face did not seem unkind, there was something undeniably strange about this old woman who lived alone in the woods with a gray wolf as her pet.

Finishing her stew as well, the old woman looked up, matching Katya’s stare with an unblinking one of her own. “How did you get here?” she asked, as if she was amazed that someone had found her little hut.

“I’m not really sure,” Katya answered. “It sounds strange even to myself. One minute I was sitting in the Premier’s cupboard and the next I was out there, in the forest.” Katya gestured at the window. “I started walking and I was just about to stop when I saw a light at the bottom of the hill.” She paused. “I suppose that’s all of it.”

The old woman looked at her thoughtfully. No one had found her hut for nearly a hundred years. “And what is your name, my dear?”

“Katya. My name is Katya,” she replied. “Who are you?”

“I am Baba Yaga,” the old woman answered.
Katya gulped. Surely this couldn’t be so—Alexei had told her tales about Baba Yaga when she was younger. Alexei had especially liked the tales about how Baba Yaga had tried to eat Tsarevitch Ivan when he searched for the firebird. Her brother said she was a witch; that she had lived to see the rise and fall of many a fairy tale hero. That simply couldn’t have been true; this woman had offered her shelter, she might have an odd pet and live alone in the woods but that hardly made her a witch. Oh, what had she gotten herself into?

“Can you help me get back to my family?” Katya implored. Baba Yaga smiled.

“Only one question a day, dearie. Now, tonight you’ll have to sleep on the floor, but there’s an extra pallet in the attic you can climb up and get tomorrow. Let’s get you settled, you must be tired after so much walking.”

Katya found herself being bustled along to the fireplace. “Wait, what do you mean only one question?” she demanded.

The old crone smiled. She was missing a few teeth. “Exactly that. I’ll answer only one question of you each day. If you want me to answer another, you’ll have to stay and help me tomorrow before you can ask again.”

Katya sighed. She’d been unwillingly transported to some forest in the middle of Russia; she may as well stay another day. Her father must already be worried; though there wasn’t much she could do about that. There was no way she could have gotten home tonight anyway, even if this woman was hiding a horse and carriage somewhere. She clearly wasn’t favored enough to own a car. And she was so tired…. Katya accepted the blanket Baba Yaga was offering her and settled down on the floor. Pavel lay down beside her and she closed her eyes, falling asleep immediately.

The next morning, Katya awoke to a wet feeling on her forehead. “Stop, Pavel, that’s my face.” She sat up, brushing wispy strands out of her eyes.

“Good, you’re up,” Baba Yaga said, stirring a pot of porridge. “Today you’ll be helping Pavel collect wood for the fire and sorting the black grains and wild peas from that barrel of wheat,” she announced. “And I suppose you’ll be needing that pallet from the attic, too.”

“Oh no, Baba Yaga, I don’t intend to stay another night,” Katya replied.
“Humph. We’ll see about that,” Baba Yaga muttered. Katya braided her hair as she waited at the table, Pavel’s head in her lap. The wolf had taken to the girl quite quickly. Baba Yaga ladled out Katya’s porridge.

“Now eat up, we haven’t got all day.”

Katya finished her breakfast quickly, resolved not to waste any daylight. She put on the coat, gloves, boots and hood Baba Yaga had laid out for her (“Lucky the last girl who came through these parts left these behind when she went dashing off with that man to Turkey”). The boots were a tad snug and the coat reached past her knees, but she wouldn’t complain. At least she’d be warm.

Katya and her lupine companion set off into the woods, Katya pulling a small sled behind her. The pair spent the morning gathering loads of twigs and shuttling them back to the tiny cabin. After lunch, Baba Yaga showed Katya how to get into the attic and she brought down the extra pallet. Katya spent the rest of the day by the fire, sorting the wheat from the black seeds and peas. She had only just finished when Baba Yaga called her to the table for supper.

Again, Katya dug in with a voracious appetite. At the end of the meal, she sipped her tea and asked Baba Yaga the first question she could think of. “Where am I?” The words were out of her mouth before she realized there were much better questions.

Baba Yaga scratched Pavel’s ears. “We’re south of Moscow, near the source of the Don River. About fifty kilometers southeast of Tula.”

Katya nodded and returned to her tea. After a few minutes of polite conversation with Baba Yaga, Katya went to lie down on the pallet. She fell asleep immediately.

The next day went the same way. Katya was surprised to learn that Baba Yaga had a goat in the shed behind the cabin; and was even more surprised that she was expected to milk it daily. Katya helped clean the hut and make the bread. The whole day, Katya could not stop thinking about the old stories her brother had told her. She was a curious girl and, though she’d meant to ask Baba Yaga how she could get home that night, she’d ended up asking if it was true, that Baba Yaga was a witch.
The wrinkles on Baba Yaga’s face deepened to crevices while she cackled after hearing Katya’s question. “There are many tales about what I am. Human, goddess, witch, druid. I know they still use my name to frighten the children, though it has been a long time since I’ve ventured into the human realm. First there were those sad excuses for czars and now this communism…I’ve chosen to remain a mere fairytale for now. However, you are not frightened of me. Even upon having your suspicions confirmed, sitting across the table from an eternal power. Either you are an extraordinarily stupid girl or you are extraordinarily brave, though those two are nearly the same.”

Katya shrugged. “My mother always said magic comes from inside you. Perhaps yours just comes out differently than everybody else’s.”

“Perhaps,” Baba Yaga mused. “It’s getting late. Off to bed with you.”

The next day followed the same routine. But tonight, as Katya ate, she thought about what she would be going home to. A quiet apartment inside a dusty palace, where her father would laugh at her brother’s stories but his eyes remained sad. Alexei would play with her until he found something better to do, or until their father let him play with his friends in the park. And at night, as they sat around the fire, there would be that awful, suffocating silence. It would come and settle down on the trio as they each tried not to disturb the others, knowing this was the time of day when they all were reminded of Nadia. After a bit, her father would usher Katya and Alexei off to bed, looking off out the window with undying melancholy in his eyes. So, that night, Katya decided to put off going home a little longer. She liked the small cabin and Pavel and Baba Yaga. Being cut off from the troubles of her country was nice as well. No longer did she have to worry when her teacher did not show up for school or when one of the older boys had a black eye. That night, Katya asked Baba Yaga to teach her magic. And to her surprise, Baba Yaga said yes.

Katya’s life fell into a rhythm. She would spend the morning and afternoon doing whatever needed to be done around the cabin and when night came, Baba Yaga taught Katya everything she knew. Before long, Katya could brew potions and knew how to use a scrying glass. Winter passed into spring, and spring into summer.
One day, while Baba Yaga was out picking herbs in the forest, Katya snuck away from Pavel. She took the scrying glass out of the cabinet and closed her eyes, thinking of her mother. If the glass could show her what London looked like and where the best berries were located, surely it could tell her what happened to her mother. Katya opened her eyes. Nothing had appeared on the glass. She tried again. Squeezing her eyes shut, she pictured her mother’s face. Every detail that she could remember, from her green eyes to the one tooth that was slightly crooked. This time, when she opened her eyes, her mother appeared.

Katya was so startled she nearly dropped the glass. Peering into the glass, Katya studied her mother. She was much skinnier than Katya had remembered. Her face was dirty and she wore the gray jumpsuit of a prisoner. She sat in a metal cell, the only light descending from a barred window. What was her mother doing there? It must have been a mistake, they must have been looking for someone else and taken her mother by accident. They probably hadn’t found her because the police had been looking for a body and a murderer, not a prisoner tucked away in Siberia. Unless…unless it wasn’t a mistake.

Katya couldn’t take it any longer. She shoved the glass back into the cabinet and ran outside. She kept running until she found Baba Yaga picking rosemary near the stream.

“What is it, child?” Baba Yaga asked tenderly.

“My mother. Why did they take my mother?” Katya gasped.

Baba Yaga closed her eyes. “I was hoping you’d never ask me this. Katya, they took her as a political prisoner. She was caught sneaking around with an American spy. She was lucky she wasn’t executed; they let her live only because her husband would surely find out if they did. Katya, there’s nothing you can do. You must forget about her. Your mother made her choice; you cannot change that.”

“You’re wrong, Baba Yaga,” Katya replied fiercely. “I will help her and there is nothing you can do to stop me.” Katya turned and ran back to the cabin, gathering everything she would need to get back to Moscow. She grabbed her blanket, tying it into a knapsack. Katya filled the pack with food and a small water sack. She was almost out the door when Pavel burst in the door, whimpering.
“I know you don’t want me to leave,” Katya told the wolf. She knelt down to hug him, breathing the scent of his fur in deeply. Pine, grass and a hint of thyme. A hint of thyme? Had he gotten into the herb patch again? Before Katya could admonish the dog, she fell to the floor.

“I’m so sorry child,” Baba Yaga said from the door. “It isn’t safe for you here anymore.”

When Katya woke up, she knew something was wrong. It was almost completely dark and there were none of the herbal scents she’d become accustomed to living with Baba Yaga. Sitting up, she realized she wasn’t in Baba Yaga’s forest cabin anymore—she was back at the palace. Standing quickly, she pulled open the office door. Stepping out into the hallway, she could hear Alexei calling her name. Running towards the sound of his voice, Katya decided she must have hit her head harder than she’d thought when she fell out of that cupboard. Rounding a corner, she slammed into someone, knocking them both to the floor.

“Jeez, Katya. I spend all afternoon looking for you and this is what I get?” Alexei sputtered underneath her.

Katya laughed. “Sorry, Alexei. I guess I did a better job of hiding than I’d thought. Come on, let’s go see if Cook will let us have a pastry before dinner.”

Alexei smiled. “Race you there.” The two took off down the hall. Neither of them noticed the snout peeking out around the corner Katya had just come from. Nor did they see the wolf return to the cupboard and climb inside, nosing the doors shut with a click. Instead, the two raced down to the kitchen, completely unaware. Perhaps they will eventually seek out the truth; perhaps not. But for now, they are happy.