

The first melancholy notes of the balalaika were always Olga's favorite. They were a breath, a hesitation, a glimpse into the soul of the performer. 'Wait' the stringed instrument seemed to sing, '*remember who she dances for.*'

There was a time the jester thought she knew exactly who that was. Now she wasn't so sure.

He was broad, of medium height, with a slovik beard that made him look like the *med'ved* (1), though it was likely just to hide his twisted face. It was not his fault that it was twisted, he was born like that, with piercing eyes like the *leshiye* (2) and the ambitions of his father... and his father's father... and his father before that. That's what made it so easy to tease him so. He took her in from the streets, gave her a proper place as jester of his court, and she repaid him with insults and entertainment in kind.

"I want to perform a trick for you. The biggest and greatest trick I've ever performed- the greatest anyone has ever performed." Olga's gaze was on towers of the Kolomna citadel above them, but she could feel him looking at her- as though she had gone mad- but her madness bore genius.

"How will you perform such a trick if nobody has ever performed one as large?"

"I will train."

"With who? You may have the favor of *boyars* (3), but you are still but a woman... or have you forgotten?"

Her gaze found him, the *med'ved*, fighting a shiver as the cold heart of Russia breathed through his fur coat. Was that concern in his gaze? No... it was doubt.

She grinned wolfishly, **"why, with you of course. All of Russia knows that you are a man beyond men, beyond suffering. Surely you are fireproof, no?"** Flames licked the fingertips of her purple gloves as she wiggled them in his direction.

"Oh, we princes are many things, but fireproof? My country would not forgive me for even testing it. There is too much at stake, I must return to Moscow, reclaim my throne-"

"And put your brother in his place, I know," the jester droned exhaustedly. She'd heard the story a thousand times over by now. How Vasili's young brother

staked a claim to his birthright, and Vasili was demoted to mayor of Kolomna of all places. **"It's been a few years yet, perhaps you might try? Think of Dmitrievich's face when you ride in on your horse with a blade of fire to burn him from history!"**

That got a chuckle out of him yet, **"you might be right, jester."** Olga feigned a dramatic gasp at the idea, **"I no longer feel pain. What hurt is a little fire?"**

"Well I didn't say *that* now, did I? There is a difference between pain and suffering, my prince," She waggled her brows and circled him, catching a glimpse of his guards growing restless at her sudden movement, but one gesture from Vasili stilled them. **"There is only one creature in this land who feels no pain, and that is a woman. Last time I checked, Vasili II was a man... or have you forgotten?"** She quipped to his back.

"You little *Zho-pa* (4)," he laughed, but as soon as he looked over his shoulder Olga turned away.

"Gav-no! (5)" Olga cursed as she hit the ground hard.

"You alright *Zho-pa*?" A voice called down to her from over the walls of the citadel battlements.

"Oh yeah, just practicing. You do enjoy physical humor, don't you princess?" She sassed back to her unrequested audience as she pulled herself off and dusted off her tights.

"As much as the next man, but I was hoping for a bit more magic. Have you tried wings of fire? Perhaps then you could fly."

"An excellent idea, princess. Perhaps I should make you a gown while I'm at it."

"So long as it entertains, jester," he dismissed her with a wave of his hand and she gave herself leave to buckle over, clinging to her own body for warmth. As much as they joked, fire did not work that way. It had no master, no duty to help her fly, no desire to obey her. No, her magic was more like a dance. Her partner was fierce and demanding and her movements did not control it so much as lead it around the dance floor. It took a lot of work to convince it to follow.

The plan was simple, in her head, but out in the world with limitations like Russian winters... and gravity...

Luckily, there as always another distraction. Spring brought war with Dmitrievich, which took the prince away from the citadel and gave Olga time to practice, but upon his return she knew what would be expected of her. It was his son that reminded her of it, day after day, lest she dare forget.

"What are you even trying to do then?" He'd ask, coming to watch her practice from time to time, his governess and guards never far behind.

"You see that tall spire, Ivar?" She pointed up at the red brick of their home and the child nodded. **"I saw a monster in it, once, a huge beast that could spit fire."**

"Is it friend or foe?" He was curious, not afraid. So much like his father.

"A friend, here to protect your family, and I want to show it to all of you. So, every day I climb the spire, and I ask him pretty please, if he would dance--"

"For our family?" His little hand found hers and her eyes grew wide, her mask failing her for but a moment. She never had a family.

"I'd like to see this monster," a stranger's voice called, and before she could even react the boy was swallowed up by his guards. As they drew blades she could see a fur-adorned figure approaching on horseback, lines of horses not far behind, but that wasn't what caused Olga's heart to drop out of her stomach. As the governess screamed, she caught a glimpse of him, being dragged by ropes around his wrists. War-torn, defeated.

"You tell this monster that Yury Dmitrievich, Grand Prince of Moscow, commands him to dance. As a creature of Russia, he will yield. Tonight."

"Tonight," the jester echoed, her voice empty and cold.

Vasili had lost.

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"Grand Prince, Duchy of Dmitrov," the jester called from her place on the battlement walls as though this were any other performance despite the war prisoners and strange soldiers staring up at her, **"and ladies and gentlemen of the court."** The music spoke the truths she could not. **"It is not I who calls you out of your warm halls tonight, but a monster, a great beast with snarling teeth and fearsome eyes! He has been watching you, each and every one, to see who has been honest and true to his one true master,"** she removed her hat with a flourish and bowed slightly towards Dmitrievich.

"Tonight, I will call him fourth, let him spit fire on those who have venom in their hearts, and warm all those who stand with Russia!" There was a grunt from the soldiers, like a battle cry as they beat on their chests and toyed with the ropes that bound their prisoners as the jester climbed.

From the top of the tower now she had vantage over the crowd like none before. This was meant to be a trick, but perhaps it could do more. Fire couldn't make her fly, but it could make their enemies burn.

She removed her gloves, tossing them carelessly over her shoulder and cried, **"behold, the Creature of Kolomna!"** Amber flames poured from her palms, crawling up over the red brick of the citadel and illuminating the jester in warm light. It took the shape of *med'ved*, a huge flaming bear that, with Olga's help, roared out over all of Kolomna.

Now the dance began.

As the musician played faster the fiery beast ran down the tower, leaving a flaming path in its wake. It reached the battlements and let out another roar as Olga blasted her magic at it, using her fire to trick the bear's flames into approaching the crowd, but this technique came with a hefty toll as she felt herself getting weak and unsteady, her magic rapidly depleting.

The crowd was in awe, with cheers of delight from the men as the bear walked on hind legs, dancing and spinning for them from its place on the wall. Even Dmitrievich was enchanted, so much so that he'd loosened his hold on Vasili's bindings. Her prince could slip away.

She had one chance.

With what was left of her strength she sent a large blast of fire towards the bear, rushing it forward into the crowd who's delight turned to shock and fear as the fire was hurled towards their prince, but Olga's world had gone black as she fell from the tower one last time.

"So? What, are you responsible for the death of a prince?"

It had been years since Olga knew who she performed for, but not a day went by that she didn't think of Vasili, of the people who once called her family.

"Don't be silly, I'm just a court jester," she laughed at the stranger, and downed the drink in her hand. She was at a party, a beautiful party she had not been invited to, in a magical castle of all places, but part of her had been left behind, in Kolomna. **"Besides. I missed."** It was barely audible to her, so she doubt the stranger heard it, but the memory shook her to her core.

She missed.

The fire had hit Vasili, her prince, her friend. *Vasili the Blind* now, that's what they called him, while she earned the title of *traitor*. She could never forget the sound of suffering in his voice when he told her to leave, that she was no longer welcome in his court. The fire didn't cause that kind of pain; she alone was responsible.

Yet still, the question lingered with every mocking note of the balalaika.

Who does she dance for now?

- (1) *Russian Bear, literally "one who finds honey"*
- (2) *Russian forest spirit, similar to Christian Devil*
- (3) *Russian Nobility*
- (4) *Ass or brat (teasing curse, often said to children)*
- (5) *Shit! (as stress relief)*