

## THE VILLAGE



*If the old bell had been hanging in the steeple it would have rung to announce midnight, twelve solemn iron klongs which would have woken the villagers from their sleep and startled any small*

creature new to the village and unaccustomed to the noise. But the bell had fallen from its height weeks ago, and now lay buried in silence beneath rubble; no small creature foraged in corners, because every scrap had already been carried away in beak and mouth and paw; and no woken villagers lay grumbling, for the people, like their bell, were gone. Their homes stood ruined, their beds broken into pieces, the bedroom walls slumped across the streets. Even the steeple, where the bell had hung for centuries, had had its pinnacle torn away, so the tower now stood against the sky like a blunt unfinished question.

In the clouds above the village, the legendary black-clad horseman who is Night noticed the silence and reined in his steed, which is also black as coal. Taking his vast and circular lantern, the moon, Night brushed aside a constellation of stars and came closer, curious to discover why no bell klanged, no creature paused, and no newborn baby, woken by midnight's arrival, opened its pink mouth and wailed.

Along the cobbled streets of the hamlet, no tabby cat ran. No glass shone in the rows of shop fronts. Pots filled with geraniums had once sat beneath the streetlamps, making the village pretty; now the pots lay destroyed, and soil had spilled onto the road, and the lampposts, which had been stately, stood in the awkward angles of shipwreck masts, glass scattered at their feet. Chiseled stones which had once made houses for people and halls for officials and pillars for the market and, in the square, a pagoda to frame the town band, now lay about in ugly piles, clogging the streets and heaped against those walls that were still standing. Here and there, lazy fires burned, feeding on window frames and spilled fuel.

Bringing his great, whitely burning lantern close to the ground, Night saw a spider wandering across the stones, seeking, from amid the countless crannies, the best place to string a web; and when a cloud had passed and the light of the moon draped once more across the village, Night saw, to his surprise, two boys walking the ravaged streets.

The children stepped carefully around the rubble, their footfalls making no noise, the taller walking ahead of the smaller and deciding their path. They were younger than Night had ever been, two scraps of life with scanty limbs clad in worn jackets and boots. Their eyes in their young faces were dark, like raven eyes, and their black hair was straggly, as unkempt as raven nests; they were clearly brothers, as kittens from the same litter are brothers and remain brothers for as long as they can. Both boys carried sacks on their backs, the older bearing the weightier load, the younger charged with the more delicate. As he picked his way through the debris the small boy dared to glance up occasionally and look around himself unhappily: "Andrej," he said, but his brother ignored him and did not turn back, intent on navigating the shattered tiles and sagging awnings, the splintered timbers and toppled walls. Night watched the small boy struggle to contain himself, and fail: "Andrej!" he whispered, but still Andrej said nothing and took no notice. Something had rolled beneath his feet, tinkling as it went, and

he crouched to search the cobbles with cautious open palms. His fingers closed around a corkscrew: holding the find up to the white lamp of the moon, Andrej saw, silhouetted against the light, a sharp tip of iron, the snaky curves of the screw.

Tomas murmured, "Andrej," for a third, stubborn time. Andrej sighed. He knew his brother was tired, that the bag he carried was heavy, and that the desolate streets would seem haunted to him. Andrej was twelve, but he had looked after Tomas all his life, and he thought of his nine-year-old brother as a child, but not of himself as one. He strove to understand Tomas the way his uncle, Marin, had understood the rugged ponies he'd bought and trained and sold. "A horse wants to please you," Uncle Marin had said, "but it can't do so unless you tend its needs. Feed, rest, shelter, and courage!" Courage was important: Uncle Marin said, "Horses aren't fools. They like a quiet life. But if bravery is asked of them, they can be brave as gods. All it takes is someone courageous to show them what courage looks like. If you want a horse

to put its faith in you, you must convince it you are fearless—Andrej the hero!—even if your courage is only make-believe." So although fear beat inside Andrej like a dark, angry bird, although every corner might conceal a soldier watching and waiting for children like them, although Marin was gone and the boys were almost alone, Andrej tried always to appear calm and undaunted for Tomas, as if the precarious life they lived was unexceptional, and held no terrors at all. He tucked the corkscrew away and said, "Come on. It's all right. We'll stop soon."

Tomas wiped his eyes with a fist and shambled after his brother. The weeks he'd spent hiding in forests and sleeping in barns and wandering wind-swept roads had smudged dirt into his skin and dusted the color from his clothes; probably he was hardly more visible than a shadow, but Tomas felt as brightly lit as a shrine. Andrej was right: Tomas did think the crushed village was haunted. No dog barked, no clock ticked, no tap dripped, no baby yowled, no hands clapped to chase him

away from doors through which the fragrance of fresh bread was borne: but in the silence that lay like a cold sheet across the streets, Tomas heard the breathing of ghosts. Ghostly footsteps seemed to follow him, stopping at the exact moment he paused. Ghostly eyes seemed to watch him, and behind these eyes were thoughts about Tomas, about his littleness and helplessness, about what should happen to him. In their weeks of roaming, he and Andrej had passed through many towns, some friendly, some standoffish, some damaged, some untouched—but none that were eerie, as this one was. None that were so punished and abandoned and gray. In another town he would have stopped to warm his backside by one of the low-burning fires, but here even the flames seemed hostile, like jeering poking tongues. Hoisting the pack on his shoulders, Tomas hurried to catch up with his brother. "Andrej," he said, "I'm not tired. We don't need to stop."

Moonlight lay on Andrej like a fairy's suit of armor. His gaze ducked away from the wreckage

to give his brother a distracted smile. "Don't be frightened."

"I'm not frightened—"

"We'll find a safe place down the road, where you can sleep."

"And what will you do?" Tomas asked it, although he knew. While Tomas slept, Andrej would return to explore the town, scouring the creaky debris for anything worth keeping. He'd climb walls and crawl into crevices, opening cupboards and upending boxes, and when Tomas woke, it would be to treasure. Once, he'd opened his eyes to a cascade of silver coins tumbling from a bead purse. Once, he'd woken to six cinnamon buns and a jar of tangy pickles; another time, to three shiny bottles of tingling apple cider. Or the treasure might be a gentleman's hat or a stuffed waterbird or a set of lead animals or a necklace made of shells, something Tomas could play with and tell stories about and even keep forever, if it wasn't too big or heavy. Tomas hugely admired his brother's courage, which brought home such bounty—but he hated it, too.



Having courage, Tomas had learned, didn't mean things would turn out well, and that you would be all right. Sometimes, Tomas knew, being courageous was the least safe thing in the world.

Since the terrible day in the birch clearing two months earlier, Tomas's life had become a challenge of endurance through which he lurched as if crossing, barefooted, a fast-running, sharp-bedded river. It was a life gnawed at every edge by worry, and the very worst worry was that one day he would wake to find that Andrej had not come back to him.

Along the street a shallow breeze blew, gusting newspaper over the cobbles. High in the sky, where the dark rider Night knelt, the wind was much stronger. A flotilla of clouds as dense as battleships was unmoored by the gale, and, when the clouds coasted across the moon, the light of Night's lantern was quenched. Darkness was thrown over the village like a sorcerer's cloak: Andrej heard Tomas whimper, and felt him catch at his sleeve.

But Andrej wasn't afraid—darkness was a friend. Uncle Marin had said, "There are house

cats who sleep on doormats and sip milk from bowls. There are wildcats who live in forests, cats who can never been tamed. We are wildcat people, Andrej. You will never have a doormat, but the earth and sky belong to you." Grabbing up his brother's hand Andrej hissed, "Quickly! While it's dark! We can attack!" and the two were off, running along the perilous streets like two deer across a meadow though they had only thin starlight to guide them, dodging potholes and flagpoles and crumpling brick walls, dust devils rising and swirling black-magically in their wake. They ran laughing through the dark, and the street opened up and became an echoing village square; they swung around a corner and raced down a narrowing road where the collapsed buildings gave way to a tall and endless iron fence. Andrej let his hand jounce along the iron bars; Tomas yelled, "I'm an airplane, I'm an airplane!" and spread his arms like wings. Andrej became an airplane too, and flew beside his brother, each iron bar a solid bullet fired from his fingertips. Suddenly there was a gap in the fence,

an inviting open gate: the airplanes banked, tilting their wings to dive through the gap, and there was lawn instead of broken stone underneath their feet. "Descend!" Andrej shouted, and the airplanes swooped in tightening circles before landing, roaring and coughing, on their knees. Andrej, squinting into midnight's gloom, could hardly see a thing: but he smelled leaves above him and fresh soil below, and was reminded of a forest. "We can stop here." He was panting. "I think it's safe."

The moment his words reached the air, something happened. A low rough noise, like a plank dragging through gravel, rose out of the blackness, and immediately became louder, and rougher, and nearer. It became a sound that had a word, and the word was *growl*. In the next moment, overhead, the clouds sank slightly, allowing a fringe of moonlight to touch the world. And in the light, the growling took on the shape of a wolf, rangy and tousled, with long teeth showing, standing so close that Andrej, reaching up, could have scratched its chin.

## THE ZOO



*Tomas screamed and scuttled backward, horrified.*

Andrej, too, fell backward, forgetting about being brave. When a wolf is so near that one can

see one's face reflected in its eyes, there is no such thing as courage. There is only the shrieking desire to become farther away from the wolf. The brothers yelled and scrambled, fighting against the weight of their packs to push themselves to their feet, slithering in the grass and striking their elbows and all the while remembering that a boy cannot escape a wolf, not even if he runs.

Nevertheless they found their feet and bolted, over the grass and out the gate and headlong down the street in a sightless plunge, Andrej hauling Tomas by the arm and both of them trilling wild songs of fear. They tore along the cobbles, the bars of the fence going by like a solid wall, yet Andrej heard the fall of wolf feet behind him, heard the smack of fangs at his ear, and knew that running was futile, and that he must make a stand. Shoving Tomas ahead, he wheeled—and saw that the street behind was empty, that only dust galloped at their heels, that the wolf had miraculously vanished, or had never been there. Staggering, Andrej shouted, "Stop!" and Tomas halted his helter-skelter charge

instantly but apprehensively, hopping and skipping, staring about with rabbit eyes. "It's all right," Andrej promised. "Look!"

Fixed to the fence was a sign painted with purple and yellow flowers and golden fleur-de-lis; ribbony blue letters woven between the flowers announced: ZOOLOGICKÁ ZAHRADA. Tomas couldn't read, so Andrej read it for him: "It says *Zoological Garden*. It's a zoo."

Tomas wobbled in the middle of the road, blinking, looking from the sign to the road and back again. "Is the wolf in a cage?" he asked finally.

"It must be. It hasn't followed us."

Tomas remained rabbit. He knew what Andrej was going to say and he didn't wait to hear it: "I don't want to," he said.

Whatever Andrej might have replied was quashed beneath a sudden and shattering screech which should have come from some frightful mythical creature but which actually burst from the depths of the sack Tomas carried on his

back. Andrej's face darkened. "Now you've woken Wilma!"

"Oh! I couldn't help it!" Tomas cried.

Andrej spun his brother, untied the sack's drawstring, and drew from its maw a bellowing wee baby wrapped in swaddling. She was bound so tightly she could scarcely move, yet her whole body emanated her outrage at the treatment she had endured, the ride on the airplane and its subsequent crash landing, the hysterical flight from the wolf. Wilma had lived most of her life in a bag slung from the shoulders of a nine-year-old boy and she was used to careless handling, but her single-note scream implied she felt they were now taking advantage of her good nature. Andrej joggled her, patted her yawning mouth, told her they were sorry and that the mayhem was at an end. "Be quiet," he begged her, for her noise was spreading out through the night like a thin sheet of steel, edgy and reverberating; but Wilma, who had never lived a day without being cajoled into muteness, seemed determined to

suffer in silence no more. Andrej clamped her to his chest and swung in waltzing circles, rasping, "Shh! Shh! Good baby!"; lifting one hand to the light he grimaced. "She's all wet —"

"She's always wet! She stinks!"

"She doesn't stink!" Andrej snapped, although, just then, she did. He did not like bad things being said about his sister, though he only vaguely understood why. "She's just a baby —"

"*You* carry her then!"

"Tom! I carry everything! You've only got a *baby*. . . ."

"A stinking baby," said Tomas.

Wilma arched her spine and screamed. Her mouth was a furious butterfly with pink, opened wings. Her tongue wagged like a fish tail between naked gums. No tears leaked from her hotly scrunched eyes, but dribble oozed over her chin. She drew a breath, and howled mightily again; she did not mean to forgive. Andrej held her at arm's length, amazed that someone so small could be so despotic. He imagined the rubble blown away



by her noise, the last timbers of the village shaken to the ground. He imagined a soldier woken from his doze and wondering about the sound. "Get the lemon butter," he told Tomas.

Tomas removed his hands from his ears to untie the drawstring of Andrej's pack and feel about inside it, tottering on tiptoe. The pot of lemon butter was small, half empty, and infinitely precious to the boys. They did not know if babies were allowed to eat lemon butter but the sweet yellow clag was Wilma's favorite thing, and they fed it to her sparingly so it would not lose its tranquilizing power. Andrej hooked a glossy gob onto his fingertip and shoved it into his sister's mouth.

For a moment she continued to cry around the finger, immunized by her fury. But when the lemon butter touched the roof of her mouth, Wilma choked a little, and tasted—and closed her mouth around the knuckle, snuffling and looking tragically at Andrej, but helpless to protest any longer. The brothers stood on the road with their ragged heads almost touching, pondering the infant and her puce

streaked face, feeling silence settle once more like a crane onto its bony nest. Wilma grunted, blew a bubble, closed her eyes and sighed. Tomas sighed too then, and felt very tired.

"Come into the zoo," Andrej said eventually.

Tomas didn't answer; he looked aside.

"The wolf is in a cage. It can't get you. There's grass to lie on. There's trees. We can give Wilma a bottle, and clean her. It's better in there than out here, on the road."

Tomas slouched. What Andrej said was true, but Tomas knew he was only saying it because he wanted to explore the zoo. And while Tomas's heart hitched to remember the wolf, he knew that he, too, wanted to investigate the zoo. It would be an adventure—and better than camping on the roadside with Wilma while Andrej explored alone. Tomas had never seen a zoo, but he had seen some things he never wished to see again from the sides of roads. "All right," he agreed, starting away with a lurch. "But *you* have to clean her."

So Andrej followed his brother back the way

they had come, the broken village whispering behind him, the baby lying laxly in his arms. The horseman of the night leaned closer as the siblings passed through the zoo's gate, and the light cast from his lunar lantern grew as radiant as its rival the sunbeams, turning the grass frost-white, icing the maple leaves peppermint, coloring the air softly pewter.

Beyond the zoo's gate, Tomas immediately lagged; Andrej, too, slowed his step, looking cautiously all around. Side by side they crossed the lawn to the place where they'd landed as airplanes. "If the wolf is free," Tomas muttered, "throw the baby to it." Andrej swallowed, saying nothing: there seemed an awful sense to the idea.

But the wolf was not free. The moon was low and brilliant enough to show them what clouds and fright had earlier concealed: that thick black bars rose up to form a cage, and that the wolf was shut behind them. The animal stood motionless in the center of its pen as the children approached, its umber eyes staring, its ears raised high. It was a

large wolf, bigger than any dog Andrej had ever seen, its summer coat colored clay-red and shale-gray, its legs long and knuckly, the muzzle whiskery and sharp. It was lean, its shoulder blades jutting, the pelt lying in ripples over the ribs. Its brushy sable-tipped tail hung still, giving away nothing. Andrej, gazing at it, drew a shivery breath. How close they had come to each other, he and this wolf. Near enough to touch.

Other cages curved away from the wolf's enclosure, and doubtless they were full of interesting creatures; but Wilma was squirming against his collarbone, and Andrej's hands were unpleasantly clammy from cradling her. He set the baby in the grass and knelt to untie her swaddling. "Whew," gasped Tomas, "she stinks like murder!" but Andrej only pressed his lips. Uncle Marin had once told him that wolves were the cleverest of animals, and Andrej could feel the caged one listening to them. "She's only a baby, she can't help it," he reminded Tomas, and the wolf. "Neither of you smells good either." Which was an actual truth. He gathered up

the soiled swaddling and buried it under a pile of leaves.

Tomas rummaged inside the packs for their sister's many requirements; while Andrej cleaned her with hanks of grass and dried her with a scarf, Tomas uncapped a bottle of milk and pulled a teat over its rim. They'd traded ten plaited leather bracelets for the teat and bottle, the shepherd girl bargaining hard and Andrej agreeing in desperation and reluctance, knowing the deal wasn't fair. The bottle was made for feeding lambs, and when they'd first begun using it Wilma had objected to being fed like a lamb; but she had grown accustomed now, and had possibly forgotten ever drinking as a human baby is supposed to. Having cleaned and dried his sister, Andrej shook out a rectangle of calico and folded it deftly around her bottom, securing the cloth into place with two pins. Tomas felt the usual dart of admiration when, passing the needle through the calico, his brother slipped his fingers between the baby and her diaper so any wayward pinpoint would pierce him, not her. Their mother

had done this—Andrej had learned the trick from her—but Tomas didn't believe himself brave enough to do the same. Just the thought of that biting, unpredictable pain was enough to give him the shivers. Fortunately his task was to warm the milk as best he could, by holding the bottle against his stomach and rubbing it with his hands.

Though it was the middle of summer the night was faintly cool, so Andrej selected a woolen shawl from among the rags in Tomas's pack; pressing the baby's limbs to her body he wrapped her up snugly, leaving only her face exposed to the air. Then he scooped the infant from the ground and placed her in Tomas's arms; Tomas pushed the teat into his sister's mouth before she could comment, and finally the brothers were freed to consider the wolf.

Which stood as if carved from granite, gazing back at them. It did not seem to breathe. After a moment, its black nose tipped sideways: "It smells us," Andrej was moved to say. He knew that a wolf could detect the scent of almost anything—a snowflake fallen the previous winter, the bones of an elk

dead for years—but it was strangely wonderful to know that the animal was smelling *them*. That they had crossed over into the life of this great grave beast. “I want to pat it,” Andrej realized.

“It will bite you.”

Andrej knew it: he hunkered in the tangling grass, laced his fingers between his knees. The breeze blew through the maple branches above them, pushing leaf shadows across the earth. Moonlight shone on the bars of the cages like satiny snail trails. It wove into the wolf’s mottled coat, sparkled on the tip of each hair. The wolf continued to stand like sculpture, but in the enclosures that surrounded it many living things were moving, sniffing, turning their eyes and licking their teeth. Andrej couldn’t see this, but he felt it. Restlessly he asked, “Is she asleep?”

Tomas glanced at the baby. “No, but she’s happier.”

Andrej squeezed his palms together, tamping down his impatience. He didn’t want his investigation of the zoo to be disturbed by further demands

from his sister, so he would wait until she was satisfied. He listened to the breeze, to the sough of voices it coaxed from the fleshy maple leaves. He heard it moseying around the village beyond the wrought-iron fence, drawing sighs from crushed roofs and whistles from smashed shutters. The wolf turned an ear a little, and Andrej wondered what it was hearing. Tanks churning through burning cities perhaps, or whales talking to one another in the sea. Uncle Marin had said, "A wolf can hear your heart beating before you're even born." *Can you?* Andrej longed to ask it. *Can you hear my heart?*

"I think she's had enough." Tomas lowered the bottle. He held the baby upright and rubbed her back, not knowing why this should be done but knowing his mother had done it. Wilma sagged in his hands, kecking and gasping, and after a minute spat out a slug of milk; Tomas sopped it up with his sleeve. He wagged his fingers in her face, said, "Wilma! Little Wilma?" and she mewed contentedly. When he went to lay her in the nest of his pack, however, her eyes widened, her mouth contorted,



and she gave a cry. The sound made the wolf take a step—Andrej saw twin flames of moonlight flare in its eyes. "She doesn't want to sleep," said Tomas. "I think she wants to see the zoo."

"Give her to me."

Tomas handed his sister over gladly, wiped his hands on the grass. He hoisted his baggy trousers and adjusted the belt at his hips. The jacket he wore was too large for him, and the sleeves required constant folding if they weren't to dangle beyond his hands: but Andrej was already walking away, and Tomas yelped, "Wait!" and skipped to catch up, leaving the sleeves flying like flags.