

THE QUARRY

The Unlikely Existence of Wolf and Bird

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For the honour of the family. That was what brought me here.

That day, my mother caught me painting. Her face was dark as she slapped the brush from my hand. *Do something useful, like your brother, she'd said. There's a camp training women to be guards, I hear.*

She bundled me up with some clothes and some boots and, before she kicked me out the door, she snapped my brushes in two and cast their splinters on the lawn. I remember the wet cling of mud up my legs. My hair plastered to my cheeks in the rain. I sobbed and I screamed and I banged on the windows until my mother whisked the curtains shut.

For the honour of the family. That was what brought me to Ravensbrück.

Sometimes the clouds cry when I bury the dead. The wheat weeps in the sunrise and the morning dew slides down their chins. They stare through a sky that blooms just for them.

I drag the last body into the ditch, hearing the smack of flesh on dirt, watching the dust pepper her cheeks like old freckles. Before the war, she might've been beautiful. Maybe I'd have asked to paint her.

I glance at my boots, rub my fingers together. The wood of a shovel is rougher than a

paintbrush and aches your shoulders more as well. As I stand over the ditch, looking in, someone shouts from behind the camp walls. Then they shriek. Then, only the birds and the wind in the meadow.

When the breeze touches my face, I gaze down at the dead ones and strain for the tears. Tears make me feel human. But I can't recall the last time I cried.

I dispose of the bodies when the crematorium can't. The building reeks, even through the bricks. I've seen prisoners dumping ashes in the lake beyond the camp.

They go now, with blackened sacks slung over their shoulders. The soot chafes off on their stripy shirts, but the guards don't let them stop to wipe it clean.

One looks over in my direction and I realise a wheezy melody is rising amongst my charges. The day is hot and the women have been digging for hours. Their faces are white stone below their naked scalps. But Frida is prowling through their ranks, cracking her whip at their backs and barking at them to sing, sing. And they must have heard the word enough to know it because they do, in a high, haunting tangle, thin with lethargy and sickness.

In older days, their sadness might've stirred my heart. I might've stopped to hear the thoughts that creased their brows before the other guards whipped them off. It seemed to help them when I first came here: to have someone listen, even if I didn't know the words. It took me days to try it, weeks for them to trust me, but just one lonely hour for Frida to beat my kindness out.

As I turn away, a face shifts among the brickwork. Wide gold eyes, satin skin, five lines of a fresh slap on her cheek. One of the Romani children brought in yesterday. She's hunkered in the gap between two of the barracks, knees to the earth, tracing her fingers through the mud. What is she writing?

Frida's back is to me, her attention caught as she snarls at a cowering prisoner. My fingers tighten on the grip of my whip and I stride towards the barracks. The girl's head is still lowered, tilted in concentration. As I get closer, the marks beneath her hands come into view. And they're not sentences, no letters or words. They're a horse. A little stick figure horse, scratched into the mud. The girl adds a squiggle for grass, pauses, and cocks her head to the other side. The movement is so oddly familiar that I almost laugh.

The girl's eyes flick up. Her shoulders pull close around her neck and her round face freezes. But something in her expression makes me drop to my knees. 'It's okay. I won't hurt

you.' I lay my whip in the dirt. Her eyes follow it as if it's a snake, but she doesn't move.

Inch by quiet inch, I reach out and skim my fingers over the horse's tail, smudging it so it seems caught by some breeze. 'See?' I smile at her.

She regards me with shadowed eyes.

'It's good!' I point at the drawing and then nod, clapping my hands in silent applause.

Her mouth twitches and then after a pause, she nods slowly.

'What's your name?' How do I gesture that to her?

I place my hand on my chest. 'Gerda.'

Her brows push together for a moment. Her gaze flits to the smudge I've made in the horse's tail and she scans her fingers across it as if reading the bumps. After a moment, she yanks back and stares at me, hard. Then she reaches into the pocket of her striped shirt and pulls out what seems to be a small nut with scales on the top. I've never seen it before, but she brandishes it in my face and raises her eyebrows importantly. 'Acorn.' Then, she too rests her fingers on her chest. 'Acorn.'

What does she mean? Is she named after the nut? Frida always says the Romani are odd. I point at the girl. 'Acorn?'

A smile steals onto her lips. She leans forward and, for just a second, touches the tip of her finger to mine. 'Gerda.'

I find myself starting to grin. Then Acorn looks up.

'What's going on over here?' Frida grabs my shoulder from behind and jerks me backwards onto my rear. 'Get out of there, you ugly little thing!' She seizes Acorn by the hair and hauls her out across the grass. 'Into the barracks, now! You're meant to be cleaning!' Frida jabs a finger at the nearest housing bunker.

'She doesn't understand!' I say from the ground. A boiling heat strikes up at the back of my neck.

But Acorn crawls past Frida towards the barracks, silent tears sliding by her nose. I get to my feet and round on Frida. 'She doesn't speak German!'

The older guard hisses under her breath. Her eyes narrow. 'Something to say to me, Gerda?'

It must make for a funny sight. I'm a good head shorter than her, thick-shouldered and thin-legged. My mother said I hunch.

This time, my words come out jumbled. 'It's alright. She's going.'

Frida scoffs. 'Damn right she is. And don't forget, girl, we're wearing this uniform because we are not like them.' She raps my badge. 'I've taken enough pity on you because

you are young and dumb. If I find you're conniving with these things again, you can take off their skin yourself!'

I look towards the girl still sliding forward on her hands and knees and then back to Frida, but I say nothing. She spits at my feet and strides off to smack her whip against a woman's neck.

As my breathing slows and Acorn fumbles up the steps into the barracks, I pick my own whip gingerly from the mud and run it between my fingers.

My boots clap the hardwood as I step out of the dining hall, tossing an apple from one hand to the other. As I clatter down the stairs, a cold gaze on my back turns my head towards the building. Frida sits in a haze of her own cigar smoke, watching me through the grey. I swallow, and slip the apple into my trouser pocket.

As I pass the nearest housing bunker, my eyes are drawn by a thing crouched, doglike, on the ground inside. A child, female, scrubbing a brush at the concrete floor. She has no hair.

Something pools in the pit of my belly. 'Acorn?'

The girl turns to look at me over her shoulder, then resumes her cleaning. Her face is tight. I enter the bunker and drop to my knees by her side. Her scouring slows and she looks up at me from under her lashes.

'Your hair.' I lift a lock of my own blonde curls, pinned behind my head. My hand is shaking. Acorn's mouth twists and she rubs fiercely at the floor.

I swallow again and stare into my palm. 'It's protocol.' But I don't know if I'm telling the girl or myself.

Either way, she ignores me. I rock back on my heels for a moment and the apple in my pocket crunches against my boot. 'Hey, Acorn.'

She huffs a sigh and looks up at me once more, propping the brush on her thigh. Her body goes rigid as I slide my hand into my pocket, but her brows push together when I pull out the apple and offer it to her. Her eyes go from me to the fruit several times before she takes it, her mouth working soundlessly. My lips twitch as she smells it, rolls it between her hands and finally touches it to her lips. Now when she looks up at me, her eyes are bright with tears.

'Take it,' I say. 'It's for you.' I curl her hand closed around it. As I pull back, she reaches out and touches the tip of her index finger to mine, just as she did when she learned

my name.

‘Gerda!’

I spin. Frida is outside, advancing on the door of the bunker, spitting smoke from between her teeth. ‘What are you doing, girl?’

My mouth opens, then closes. I glance at Acorn, but she’s scrubbing dutifully at the floor as though I’m not even here. The apple is gone.

‘I’m... making sure this prisoner does her job.’ I push myself to my feet and square my shoulders.

Frida steps into the doorway of the bunker. She almost fills it out. ‘Trying to kill it with kindness, are you?’ Her boots clack on the concrete as she enters, tucking the cigar into her breast pocket. ‘What are these creatures compared to us? Weak.’ She shoves my shoulder. ‘Your heart is too soft on them.’

I remember the snap my paintbrushes made as my mother broke them in two. ‘I...’

‘Prisoner!’ Frida’s head tilts back with the weight of her shout and Acorn’s head lashes up. The elder guard pushes past me. Acorn doesn’t even get time to react.

‘What’s so special about this one that it thinks it has the right to speak up?’ Frida snatches the girl by the scruff of her neck and flings her at my feet. ‘The dumbest animals don’t survive.’

I can only stare, open-mouthed, as Acorn hugs into a ball.

Frida steps up to me and shoves her whip in my face. ‘I warned you. Since you’re so keen to spend time with it, why don’t you do the honours?’

My breath hitches. Something’s rushing in my ears. I shake my head. ‘No. No way.’

Frida’s eyes narrow. ‘Maybe you’d rather sleep here tonight? Maybe tomorrow too?’

I think of the prisoners hunched sleepless on the concrete. I think of the way my mother shut the curtains in my face. And I think of that little horse in the mud and the tilt of the head so much like my own. A weak, stupid animal, and me the wolf by her side. My fists clench. ‘I won’t do it, Frida.’

Her face contorts and in that second, I think she might slap me. Then she pulls back and the whip whines as it comes down across my cheek.

For a few shattered moments, I dream of Acorn’s face. I paint her grey with tears. And then when I’m done, Frida’s whip strikes her through with red.

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The doctors say the wound is deep, but it won't kill me. I was lucky not to have my whole face taken off. Acorn was not.

She's in here somewhere. I know that. After Frida shook her whip dry, two guards came and took Acorn away. A third shepherded me behind her. Her legs barely held her up.

I've been told I'm under review. Obstructing a fellow guard in her duty and refusing to carry out my own. Soon I am to collect my things and report to the office. There, they'll tell me exactly how much honour I brought to my family in Ravensbrück.

The doctors meant me to stay in bed a couple of hours longer to ensure I'm stable enough to walk, but then, they shouldn't have wandered down the other end of the ward. I'm passing by a row of beds near to the exit when my feet catch on each other and I almost fall. As I stumble, I fling out my hands and they latch onto the bedframe of someone small. Someone I know.

She looks like a baby bird. Skin tanned and wrinkled and featherless, head bald and thrown back to expose her throat, rucked in a nest of fraying sheets. Her face and arms are bound in bandages. I lift my hand to the medical pad across my own brow.

Acorn's chest is rising and dipping to an uneven beat. The doctors haven't bothered to put in a drip.

I look back down at her. Little bird. And me, the wolf by her side.

A nurse passes behind my back, but says nothing. She adjusts her glasses and glances between her clipboard and the sheet on the wall by Acorn's bed.

I cough. 'What's the plan for this one?'

The nurse's eyes travel from the pad on my head to the uniform still hanging off my limbs. She clears her throat. 'The doctors bandaged her up, but they're not going to try too hard. The children never last long anyway.'

Acorn huffs in her sleep.

I exhale. 'Look at her. She's half dead already.' I tap her gently on the temple. She doesn't move.

I tug my uniform straight and look the nurse right in the eye. 'I'm the one who buries the bodies. I'll take her.'

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I don't usually carry the corpses, but I carry this one. Her arms splay below her and her legs rock with every step. The movement is peaceful. I pause a moment to gaze back over my shoulder, at the shovel like a war flag in the grass, at the walls of Ravensbrück casting their shadow into the camp. The sun shines for us here.

I glance down at Acorn. Her bandages are drying. She'll make it to the train. As I look at her, she inhales and rolls her head to the other side, nuzzling her nose in my jacket. I should not cradle something so easily crushed, but here we are. A most unnatural pair.

My family's honour brought me to Ravensbrück. It was an honour of my own that brought me out.