

Lara's Gift

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by Annemarie O'Brien



Russia, 1910

On the eve my beloved Ryczar was born, under a bright, full moon, the north wind whistled and howled. Like a forest spirit gone mad with merriment, it ripped through the Woronzova Kennel and sprawling grounds of Count Vorontsov's grand country estate. All night long, icy flakes of windswept snow drummed against the stable windows until the last pup was born at dawn.

Settled inside the birthing stall on fresh, golden straw, Papa and I huddled around Zarya and her newborn pups—in awe of the wondrous miracle that lay before us on plush brown bear hides, for every borzoi birth was a gift from God.

“Lara, it’s time to name the pups,” Papa said. Whenever a new litter of pups was born, the Count gave me the honor of naming each one. His son, Alexander, told him I had a knack for choosing names the dogs lived up to.

With Zarya’s permission I lifted the pup with a big red spot on her rump and looked her square in the face. “You shall be Umnitza. The firstborn is always clever.”

Papa raised his bushy brows. Hidden behind the long black hairs of his beard, I glimpsed a grin full of pride. Like me, Papa was a firstborn, too. He gently tugged at the long, dark braid that hung down my back. With a nod of his head he motioned toward the rest of the pups. “We’ve no time to dawdle.”

I put Umnitza down and picked up the second and third pups, both champagne in color. They had come out with such force and such quickness. “Your names will be easy,” I told them. “You, little girl, will be called Sila for your strength, and you, sweet boy, will be Bistri, for your speed.”

As I returned them to their mother, Papa interceded and took Bistri from my hands—turning him from front to back and front again. Then Papa ran his finger along Bistri’s spine and grinned from ear to ear. “The Count will be pleased with this pup.”

Like Papa, I, too, ran my finger along Bistri’s spine. “But, Papa, I don’t feel anything different.”

“Be patient, Lara. You’re only ten. You’ve got plenty of time to learn the art of breeding fine borzoi, so long as your mama doesn’t give me a son in the meantime. . . .”

Papa's voice trailed off into a sigh.

There was little chance of Mama giving Papa a son. She couldn't carry a baby longer than a few months. All of them had been taken away from us before we could even swaddle them.

I put Bistri down and picked up the fourth pup, as gold as the straw she lay on. She squiggled so much her tiny nails scratched me. "Such a sweet little thorn, you shall be called Zanoza."

"Hmmm." Papa eyed the little marks on my hands. "That name suits her well."

The fifth pup of cream color looked like he would grow up to be as fast as the north wind. "I will call you Borei."

Papa took him from my hands and ran his finger along his spine. "I'd wager my lucky hunting horn that this pup becomes the Count's finest hound one day."

Before I could I run my finger along Borei's spine, a *swoosh* of wind clapped against the window and rattled the panes. I cupped my ears and listened to the ceaseless wind that clawed along the length of the stable walls in tipsy mirth.

"Your mama would say it's a sign and not a good one," Papa said. He shrugged his shoulders and gave me a look—the one that said I could pick another name for the pup.

He didn't believe in superstitions, and because of it, nor would I. "Borei's a perfect name for a top dog," I said with confidence.

Papa patted my head, like he would with one of the dogs. "That's my girl."

So pleased was I with Papa's praise, had I been born a dog, my tail would be wagging.

The sixth pup was the tiniest pup I ever did see and his coat was as white as snow.
“You shall be Ryczar—my knight of knights.”

I scooped him up and cradled him in my hands. Just as I nuzzled him to my neck, Papa grabbed him from me.

“Don’t bother giving him a name,” Papa said. “He’ll need to be culled.”

“But he’s the only white pup in the litter.” It was the color His Majesty Tsar Nicholas, ruler of all Russia, favored most of all. I was certain Ryczar would be prized more than the other pups—even if he was small.

“Zarya doesn’t produce much milk. You know that,” Papa said. “White pup or not, with the runt gone the other five will have a better chance.”

Zarya’s limited supply of milk was her only failing as a mother.

“*Tyatya, nyet—*”

“Enough.” Papa’s ruddy cheeks reddened a shade darker. “You know what must be done.”

I did know. But knowing did not mean I agreed. As much as I dreamed of one day walking in Papa’s boots to breed borzoi worthy of His Majesty Tsar Nicholas, I shunned culling any pup.

What I thought didn’t matter. Papa was the Count’s kennel steward. Not I.

“Let me hold Ryczar one last time,” I braved, for I knew what awaited the pup. A drowning in a deep bed of snow.

“You’re only making it harder on yourself,” Papa griped.

On tiptoes I reached up for the pup with outstretched arms, and a twinge of headache pulsed across my forehead. “Please, dear *Tyatya*. Just one last time.”

“All right, all right,” Papa said.

With a grumpy frown, Papa handed Ryczar back to me.

I smothered his soft, little rump with kisses and cuddled him against my cheek. If only given a chance, this pudgy white ball of skin with knobby legs and a squished-in face might grow into a sleek, silky-coated borzoi with long, graceful legs, and an elegant muzzle to match. As I rubbed noses with Ryczar and took in the sweet smell of puppy breath, I counted my blessings that I had been born into a long line of kennel stewards and not into a family that harvested crops, for the borzoi wasn't just any dog. Borzoi were a national treasure, gifted among nobility like Fabergé eggs. A peasant girl like me might never get an opportunity to lay her eyes on a borzoi and I had dozens around me.

My twanging headache suddenly turned into throbbing pain at my temples.

Quickly I put Ryczar down alongside his mother, Zarya. With my fingers pressed against my forehead I tried to rub away the pain—a pain I had never experienced before.

“Larochka, are you all right?” Papa's voice carried a haunted tone.

“I'm scared, *Tyatya*.” I pressed harder against my temples, yet the pain didn't subside.

I closed my eyes.

In the darkness behind my eyelids—as if in a dream—stood an older-looking Ryczar. He was smaller than most male borzoi and his coat was thick with wavy white curls. He held his head high and his chest puffed out with pride. Below him lay a dead wolf of silvery-red-tipped color in snow soaked in blood.

Ryczar's image was as crisp as a photo and as real to me as my love for the dogs.

In complete awe and wonder, I willed myself to see more and squeezed my eyes

shut until it hurt.

Despite my will, the image faded away along with the throbbing pain.

I opened my eyes and tugged at Papa's sleeve.

"We must keep this pup. I think I saw his future." The words raced off my tongue like a borzoi in pursuit of its prey.

A hundred tiny lines creased Papa's forehead. "What do you mean?"

"Ryczar won't be the runt forever. He'll catch wolves just like borzoi are bred to do," I said.

Papa covered my mouth with his hand. "Not another word," he whispered.

"But—"

"Bad things will follow from a vision, if given credence." To scare me even more, Papa added, "You know how the Count feels about psychics like Rasputin. Do you want to lead a life like his?"

I shuddered at the thought. Whenever his name cropped up, harsh, ugly words flew through the air like a raging blizzard. "Of course not," I answered. "My place is here with you and the dogs."

"Then speak of this to no one," Papa said. "Not even to Alexander."

"Why, *Tyatya*? I don't understand." I shared everything about the dogs with Alexander. Nobody loved them more than we did.

Papa's ruddy cheeks paled and that scared me. Nothing ever shook his nerves.

"Promise me."

Just then, Mama entered the birthing room, carrying our morning basket of black bread. With her black eyebrows, thick like a sable's tail, almond-shaped amber eyes, and

pitch-dark plaited hair, I resembled Mama more than I did Papa. Unlike the stable clothing I wore, she was dressed in reds and golds and always looked like an iconic angel whenever she lighted prayer candles in the chapel.

No doubt for a second child.

“Promise what?” Mama looked from me to Papa.

“Evil courses through Lara’s veins,” Papa whispered.

Mama’s eyes filled with worry. She knelt down beside me and placed the back of her hand on my forehead. “There’s no fever,” she said with relief in her voice. “What kind of evil do you speak of?”

“Lara had a vision,” Papa answered, as if that one word would explain it all to Mama.

His hands, stone tight like a steel trap, clutched my shoulders. He stared deeply into my eyes and looked like he had a thousand secrets hidden underneath his sheepskin hat. “If you have another one, you *must* ignore it, Lara.”

I couldn’t bear to disappoint Papa even if I didn’t understand. “Forgive me. I’ll never do it again. I promise.”

“A promise is a promise,” Papa stressed.

“Yes, *Tyatya*—Golden Rule Number One.”

The lines on Papa’s forehead softened. “To be a great kennel steward, you must live by your word, as well as by the Rules that govern us.”

“When the Rules make sense, dear husband.”

Mama and Papa exchanged looks that puzzled me. I didn’t dare interrupt.

“Visions, whatever they might bring, are a gift from God—a gift we must

embrace.” Mama folded her arms. “Don’t go filling our daughter’s head with your nonsense.”

Papa shook his head. “Only a fool in the guise of a devil makes decisions based on a vision.” He grabbed his sheepskin coat and laced his felt boots. “I don’t have time to bicker. I’ve got to ring the stable bells to announce the birth.”

Papa snatched Ryczar from his littermates by the scruff of his neck, dropped him into an empty sack, and tied it shut with some hemp.

“*Tyatya*, let *me* care for the little white pup,” I proposed.

“You’ll be awake all night for weeks until he’s big enough to eat on his own,” Papa said. “Assuming he makes it past the first few days.”

“There’s nothing wrong with him,” I insisted. “He’s small, that’s all.”

“I don’t have extra kopecks to bottle feed every runt,” Papa barked.

“I’ll take on more kennel chores to earn his keep.”

“Splendid,” Papa said, crossing his arms. “Like you have time to spare. You already spend every waking moment working in the kennel.”

“*P-l-e-a-s-e*,” I begged.

Mama placed her hand on Papa’s shoulder. “What harm is there in letting Lara try, dear husband? If the runt is not meant to live, as you say, surely he will die, regardless of her efforts. Give her the chance to learn this for herself.”

Papa twisted the long black hairs of his beard, just as he always did whenever he struggled with a decision.

“This isn’t the lesson I intended to teach you,” Papa grunted, handing me the sack. “But your mama’s right that you’ll learn this for yourself, if you experience it

firsthand. Your runt can have one final feeding with Zarya, and then his fate falls on you.”

“*Spasibo!*” I thought I’d jump out of myself I was so thankful.

“Don’t come crying to me, when the pup drops dead. Culling him now would save us all a lot of trouble,” Papa said.

I unfastened the hemp and freed Ryczar as quickly as a dog licks his bowl clean. I wrapped my hands around him, brought him to my lips, and kissed his little face. And then I hurried him back to the warmth of his litter and placed him on one of Zarya’s nipples. “Drink up, little boy. It’ll be goat’s milk after this.”

Ryczar squirmed into place between his littermates, Sila and Bistri, and suckled. Gently, I stroked his back. “You’ll remain Ryczar, for the knight you’ll one day become, but I’ll call you Zar in honor of your mother, Zarya, for bringing you into this world—and to me.”

“*Korotyshka* would be a better name for the runt he’ll always be,” Papa said.

“Pay him no heed.” Mama lovingly poked Papa’s round belly.

Although he swatted at her hand, a slight smile crept onto his face.

“It doesn’t matter what Papa thinks right now,” I told Zar. “One day, he’ll see that it was right to let you live.”

The wind whistled in beautiful song, as if it heard me and echoed after it.

“Curse that wind,” Papa complained. He gathered three birch logs and tossed them into the wood-burning stove. With a poker he pushed the logs into place until they popped and hissed and a red-orange flame roared around them. Then he wagged his finger at me. “Remember, Lara. Not a word of your vision to anyone.”

Even though it would kill me to keep it from Alexander, I answered, “Of course not. I wouldn’t dare break my promise.”

With a pleased look on his face, Papa left to ring the bells.

“Be careful what you promise,” Mama said to me. She peeled away the cloth towel covering the black bread. From it she cut a thick slice, slathered butter on it, and then handed it to me. “Eat, *dorogusha*. You’ll need your strength to prove your papa wrong about Zar and to help him find the truth.”

“What truth?” I asked.

Mama took a deep breath. “The truth behind your visions. He’s afraid of them.”

Afraid? Papa didn’t fear anything.

“Don’t you see?” Mama’s face brightened with hope. “God has chosen you. Accept his gift and learn to trust it.”

As the *zvon* of stable bells, decorated in legendary borzoi images, clanged—*ding-ding-dong, ding-ding-dong*, the inside of my head felt like two mismatched pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that pulled and yanked at my heart.

Mama held one piece called Gift and Papa held the other called Evil.

Neither piece interlocked with the other.

“I’m confused, *Matushka*. None of this makes sense,” I said.

“Patience, *dorogusha*. One day it’ll become clear to you which path to take.”

While the crackling fire warmed my back, I peered down at Zarya and stroked her fine, lean head. Everything about it was pure borzoi down to her long, straight nose, her dark, almond-shaped eyes, and her well-placed ears—tucked and hidden among soft, wavy curls. And just as Zarya had inherited these traits from a long borzoi ancestry, Zar

would inherit them, too, as well as beauty and grace, speed and strength, and keen eye to hunt.

A life without these splendid dogs I could not bear. Nor could I imagine living my life any differently than the way Papa lived his. Just as Grandfather had once served as the kennel steward for the late Count Roman Vorontsov, and just as Papa now served the current Count Vorontsov, I would one day serve as kennel steward to Alexander when he became the next Count. I'd be the first girl in my family to become kennel steward.

I would never risk losing that.

It became clear which path I had to choose.

I must keep my promise to Papa and get rid of the evil inside of me.

Suddenly, the wind died down and the tug-of-war battle in my head ended. It became eerily quiet, as if . . . God had heard me.

Mama placed her hand on my shoulder. "It's a sign, Larochka."

I pushed that notion away. I couldn't let myself get sucked in by Mama's silly signs.