



THE TOO-CLEVER FOX

LEIGH BARDUGO

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TOR·COM 

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The first trap the fox escaped was his mother's jaws.

When she had recovered from the trial of birthing her litter, the mother fox looked around at her kits and sighed. It would be hard to feed so many children, and truth be told, she was hungry after her ordeal. So she snatched up two of her smallest young and made a quick meal of them. But beneath those pups, she found a tiny, squirming runt of a fox with a patchy coat and yellow eyes.

"I should have eaten you first," she said. "You are doomed to a miserable life."

To her surprise, the runt answered. "Do not eat me, Mother. Better to be hungry now than to be sorry later."

"Better to swallow you than to have to look upon you. What will everyone say when they see such a face?"

A lesser creature might have despaired at such cruelty, but the fox saw vanity in his mother's carefully tended coat and snowy paws.

"I will tell you," he replied. "When we walk in the wood, the animals will say, 'Look at that ugly kit with his handsome mother!' And even when you are old and gray, they will not talk of how you've aged, but of how such a beautiful mother gave birth to such an ugly, scrawny son."

She thought on this and discovered she was not so hungry after all.

* * *

Because the fox's mother believed the runt would die before the year was out, she didn't bother to name him. But when her little son survived one winter and then the next, the animals needed something to call him. They dubbed him *Koja*—handsome—as a kind of joke, and soon he gained a reputation.

When he was barely grown, a group of hounds cornered him in a blind of branches outside his den. Crouching in the damp earth, listening to their terrible snarls, a lesser creature might have panicked, chased himself in circles, and simply waited for the hounds' master to come take his hide.

Instead Koja cried, "I am a magic fox!"

The biggest of the hounds barked his laughter. "We may sleep by the master's fire and feed on his scraps, but we have not gone so soft as that. You think that we will let you live on foolish promises?"

"No," said Koja in his meekest, most downtrodden voice. "You have bested me. That much is clear. But I am cursed to grant one wish before I die. You only need name it."

"Wealth!" yapped one.

"Health!" barked another.

"Meat from the table!" said the third.

"I have only one wish to grant," said the ugly little fox, "and you must make your choice quickly, or when your master arrives, I will be obliged to bestow the wish on him instead."

The hounds took to arguing, growling and snapping at one another, and as they bared their fangs and leapt and wrestled, Koja slipped away.

That night, in the safety of the wood, Koja and the other animals drank and toasted the fox's quick thinking. In the distance, they heard the hounds howling at their master's door, cold and disgraced, bellies empty of supper.

* * *

Though Koja was clever, he was not always lucky. One day, as he raced back from Tupolev's farm with a hen's plump body in his mouth, he stepped into a trap.

When those metal teeth slammed shut, a lesser creature might have let his fear get the best of him. He might have yelped and whined, drawing the smug farmer to him, or he might have tried gnawing off his own leg.

Instead Koja lay there, panting, until he heard the black bear, Ivan Gostov, rumbling through the woods. Now, Gostov was a bloodthirsty animal, loud and rude, unwelcome at feasts. His fur was always matted and

filthy, and he was just as likely to eat his hosts as the food they served. But a killer might be reasoned with—not so a metal trap.

Koja called out to him. “Brother, will you not free me?”

When Ivan Gostov saw Koja bleeding, he boomed his laughter. “Gladly!” he roared. “I will liberate you from that trap and tonight I’ll dine on free fox stew.”

The bear snapped the chain and threw Koja over his back. Dangling from the trap’s steel teeth by his wounded leg, a lesser creature might have closed his eyes and prayed for nothing more than a quick death. But if Koja had words, then he had hope.

He whispered to the fleas that milled about in the bear’s filthy pelt. “If you bite Ivan Gostov, I will let you come live in my coat for one year’s time. You may dine on me all you like and I promise not to bathe or scratch or douse myself in kerosene. You will have a fine time of it, I tell you.”

The fleas whispered amongst themselves. Ivan Gostov was a foul-tasting bear, and he was constantly tromping through streams or rolling on his back to try to be rid of them.

“We will help you,” they chorused at last.

At Koja’s signal, they attacked poor Ivan Gostov, biting him in just the spot between his shoulders where his big claws couldn’t reach.

The bear scratched and flailed and bellowed his misery. He threw down the chain attached to Koja’s trap and wriggled and writhed on the ground.

“Now, little brothers!” shouted Koja. The fleas leapt onto the fox’s coat, and despite the pain in his leg, Koja ran all the way back to his den, trailing the bloody chain behind him.

* * *

It was an unpleasant year for the fox, but he kept his promise. Though the itching drove him mad, he did not scratch, and even bandaged his paws to better avoid temptation. Because he smelled so terrible, no one wanted to be near him, yet still he did not bathe. Whenever Koja got the urge to run to the river, he would look at the chain he kept coiled in the corner of his den. With

Red Badger's help, he'd pried himself free of the trap, but he'd kept the chain as a reminder that he owed his freedom to the fleas and his wits.

Only Lula the nightingale came to see him. Perched in the branches of the birch tree, she twittered her laughter. "Not so clever, are you, Koja? No one will have you to visit and you are covered in scabs. You are even uglier than before."

Koja was untroubled. "I can bear ugliness," he said. "I find the one thing I cannot live with is death."

* * *

When the year was up, Koja picked his way carefully through the woods near Tupolev's farm, making sure to avoid the teeth of any traps that might be lurking beneath the brush. He snuck through the hen yard, and when one of the servants opened the kitchen door to take out the slops, he slipped right into Tupolev's house. He used his teeth to pull back the covers on the farmer's bed and let the fleas slip in.

"Have a fine time of it, friends," he said. "I hope you will forgive me if I do not ask you to visit again."

The fleas called their goodbyes and dove beneath the blankets, looking forward to a meal of the farmer and his wife.

On his way out, Koja snatched a bottle of *kvas* from the pantry and a chicken from the yard, and he left them at the entrance to Ivan Gostov's cave. When the bear appeared, he sniffed at Koja's offerings.

"Show yourself, fox," he roared. "Do you seek to make a fool of me again?"

"You freed me, Ivan Gostov. If you like, you may have me as supper. I warn you, though, I am stringy and tough. Only my tongue holds savor. I make a bitter meal, but excellent company."

The bear laughed so loudly that he shook the nightingale from her branch in the valley below. He and Koja shared the chicken and the *kvas*, and spent the night exchanging stories. From then on, they were friends, and it was known that to cross the fox was to risk Ivan Gostov's wrath.

* * *

Then winter came and the black bear went missing. The animals had noticed their numbers thinning for some time. Deer were scarcer, and the small creatures too—rabbits and squirrels, grouse and voles. It was nothing to remark upon. Hard times came and went. But Ivan Gostov was no timid deer or skittering vole. When Koja realized it had been weeks since he had seen the bear or heard his bellow, he grew concerned.

“Lula,” he said, “fly into town and see what you can learn.”

The nightingale put her little beak in the air. “You will ask me, Koja, and do it nicely, or I will fly someplace warm and leave you to your worrying.”

Koja bowed and made his compliments to Lula’s shiny feathers, the purity of her song, the pleasing way she kept her nest, and on and on, until finally the nightingale stopped him with a shrill chirp.

“Next time, you may stop at ‘please.’ If you will only cease your talking, I will gladly go.”

Lula flapped her wings and disappeared into the blue sky, but when she returned an hour later, her tiny jet eyes were bright with fear. She hopped and fluttered, and it took her long minutes to settle on a branch.

“Death has arrived,” she said. “Lev Jurek has come to Polvost.”

The animals fell silent. Lev Jurek was no ordinary hunter. It was said he left no tracks and his rifle made no sound. He traveled from village to village throughout Ravka, and where he went, he bled the woods dry.

“He has just come from Balakirev.” The nightingale’s pretty voice trembled. “He left the town’s stores bloated with deer meat and overflowing with furs. The sparrows say he stripped the forest bare.”

“Did you see the man himself?” asked Red Badger.

Lula nodded. “He is the tallest man I’ve ever seen, broad in the shoulders, handsome as a prince.”

“And what of the girl?”

Jurek was said to travel with his half sister, Sofiya. The hides he did not sell, Jurek forced her to sew into a gruesome cloak that trailed behind her on the ground.

“I saw her,” said the nightingale, “and I saw the cloak too. Koja ... its collar is made of seven white fox tails.”

Koja frowned. His sister lived near Balakirev. She’d had seven kits, all of them with white tails.

“I will investigate,” he decided, and the animals breathed a bit easier, for Koja was the cleverest of them all.

Koja waited for the sun to set, then snuck into Polvost with Lula at his shoulder. They kept to the shadows, slinking down alleys and making their way to the center of town.

Jurek and his sister had rented a grand house close to the taverns that lined the Barshai Prospekt. Koja went up on his hind legs and pressed his nose to the window glass.

The hunter sat with his friends at a table heaped with rich foods—wine-soaked cabbage and calf stuffed with quail eggs, greasy sausages and pickled sage. All the lamps burned bright with oil. The hunter had grown wealthy indeed.

Jurek was a big man, younger than expected, but just as handsome as Lula had said. He wore a fine linen shirt and a fur-lined vest with a gold watch tucked into his pocket. His inky blue eyes darted frequently to his sister, who sat reading by the fire. Koja could not make out her face, but Sofiya had a pretty enough profile, and her dainty, slippered feet rested on the skin of a large black bear.

Koja’s blood chilled at the sight of his fallen friend’s hide, spread so casually over the polished slats of the floor. Ivan Gostov’s fur shone clean and glossy as it never had in life and for some reason, this struck Koja as a very sad thing. A lesser creature might have let his grief get the best of him. He might have taken to the hills and high places, thinking it wise to outrun death rather than try to outsmart it. But Koja sensed a question here, one his clever mind could not resist: For all his loud ways, Ivan Gostov had been the closest thing the forest had to a king, a deadly match for any man or beast. So how had Jurek bested him with no one the wiser?

For the next three nights, Koja watched the hunter, but he learned nothing.

Every evening, Jurek ate a big dinner. He went out to one of the taverns and did not return until the early hours. He liked to drink and brag, and frequently spilled wine on his clothes. He slept late each morning, then rose and headed out to the tanning shed or into the forest. Jurek set traps, swam in the river, oiled his gun, but Koja never saw him catch or kill anything.

And yet, on the fourth day, Jurek emerged from the tanning shed with something massive in his muscled arms. He walked to the wooden frames, and there he stretched the hide of the great gray wolf. No one knew the gray wolf's name and no one had ever dared ask it. He lived on a steep rock ridge and kept to himself, and it was said he'd been cast out of his pack for some terrible crime. When he descended to the valley, it was only to hunt, and then he moved silent as smoke through the trees. Yet somehow, Jurek had taken his skin.

That night, the hunter brought musicians to his house. The townspeople came to marvel at the wolf's hide and Jurek bid his sister rise from her place by the fire so that he could lay the horrible patchwork cloak over her shoulders. The villagers pointed to one fur after another and Jurek obliged them with the story of how he'd brought down Illarion the white bear of the north, then of his capture of the two golden lynxes who made up the sleeves. He even described catching the seven little kits who had given up their tails for the cloak's grand collar. With every word Jurek spoke, his sister's chin sank lower, until she was staring at the floor.

Koja watched the hunter go outside and cut the head from the wolf's hide, and as the villagers danced and drank, Jurek's sister sat and sewed, adding a hood to her horrible cloak. When one of the musicians banged his drum, her needle slipped. She winced and drew her finger to her lips.

What's a bit more blood? thought Koja. The cloak might as well be soaked red with it.

* * *

"Sofiya is the answer," Koja told the animals the next day. "Jurek must be using some magic or trickery, and his sister will know of it."

"But why would she tell us his secrets?" asked Red Badger.

“She fears him. They barely speak, and she takes care to keep her distance.”

“And each night she bolts her bedroom door,” trilled the nightingale, “against her own brother. There’s trouble there.”

Sofiya was only permitted to leave the house every few days to visit the old widows’ home on the other side of the valley. She carried a basket or sometimes pulled a sled piled high with furs and food bound up in woolen blankets. Always she wore the horrible cloak, and as Kojá watched her slogging along, he was reminded of a pilgrim going to do her penance.

For the first mile, Sofiya kept a steady pace and stayed to the path. But when she reached a small clearing, far from the outskirts of town and deep with the quiet of snow, she stopped. She slumped down on a fallen tree trunk, put her face in her hands, and wept.

The fox felt suddenly ashamed to be watching her, but he also knew this was an opportunity. He hopped silently onto the other end of the tree trunk and said, “Why do you cry, girl?”

Sofiya gasped. Her eyes were red, her pale skin blotchy, but despite this and her gruesome wolf hood, she was still lovely. She looked around, her even teeth worrying the flesh of her lip. “You should leave this place, fox,” she said. “You are not safe here.”

“I haven’t been safe since I slipped squalling from my mother’s womb.”

She shook her head. “You don’t understand. My brother—”

“What would he want with me? I’m too scrawny to eat and too ugly to wear.”

Sofiya smiled slightly. “Your coat is a bit patchy, but you’re not so bad as all that.”

“No?” said the fox. “Shall I travel to Os Alta to have my portrait painted?”

“What does a fox know of the capital?”

“I visited once,” said Kojá, for he sensed she might enjoy a story. “I was the Queen’s personal guest. She tied a blue ribbon around my neck and I slept upon a velvet cushion every night.”

The girl laughed, her tears forgotten. “Did you, now?”

“I was quite the fashion. All the courtiers dyed their hair red and cut holes in their clothes, hoping to emulate my patchy coat.”

“I see,” said the girl. “So why leave the comforts of the Grand Palace and come to these cold woods?”

“I made enemies.”

“The Queen’s poodle grew jealous?”

“The King was offended by my overlarge ears.”

“A dangerous thing,” she said. “With such big ears, who knows what gossip you might hear.”

This time Koja laughed, pleased that the girl showed some wit when she wasn’t locked up with a brute.

Sofiya’s smile faltered. She shot to her feet and picked up her basket, hurrying back down the path. But before she disappeared from view, she paused and said, “Thank you for making me laugh, fox. I hope I will not find you here again.”

Later that night, Lula fluffed her wings in frustration. “You learned nothing! All you did was flirt.”

“It was a beginning, little bird,” said Koja. “Best to move slowly.” Then he lunged at her, jaws snapping.

The nightingale shrieked and fluttered up into the high branches as Red Badger laughed.

“See?” said the fox. “We must take care with shy creatures.”

* * *

The next time Sofiya ventured out to the widows’ home, the fox followed her once more. Again, she sat down in the clearing and again she wept.

Koja hopped up on the fallen tree. “Tell me, Sofiya, why do you cry?”

“You’re still here, fox? Don’t you know my brother is near? He will catch you eventually.”

“What would your brother want with a yellow-eyed bag of bones and fleas?”

Sofiya gave a small smile. “Yellow is an ugly color,” she admitted. “With such big eyes, I think you see too much.”

“Will you not tell me what troubles you?”

She didn't answer. Instead she reached into her basket and took out a wedge of cheese. "Are you hungry?"

The fox licked his chops. He'd waited all morning for the girl to leave her brother's house and had missed his breakfast. But he knew better than to take food from the hand of a human, even if the hand was soft and white. When he did not move, the girl shrugged and took a bite of it herself.

"What of the hungry widows?" asked Koja.

"Let them starve," she said with some fire, and shoved another piece of cheese into her mouth.

"Why do you stay with him?" asked Koja. "You're pretty enough to catch a husband."

"Pretty enough?" said the girl. "Would I be better served by yellow eyes and too large ears?"

"Then you would be plagued by suitors."

Koja hoped she might laugh again, but instead Sofiya sighed, a mournful sound that the wind picked up and carried into the gray slate sky. "We move from town to town," she said. "In Balakirev I almost had a sweetheart. My brother was not pleased. I keep hoping he will find a bride or allow me to marry, but I do not think he will."

Her eyes filled with tears once more.

"Come now," said the fox. "Let there be no more crying. I have spent my life finding my way out of traps. Surely, I can help you escape your brother."

"Just because you escape one trap, doesn't mean you will escape the next."

So Koja told her how he'd outsmarted his mother, the hounds, and even Ivan Gostov.

"You are a clever fox," she conceded when he was done.

"No," Koja said. "I am the cleverest. And that will make all the difference. Now tell me of your brother."

Sofiya glanced up at the sun. It was long past noon.

"Tomorrow," she said. "When I return."

She left the wedge of cheese on the fallen tree, and once she was gone, Koja sniffed it carefully. He looked right and left, then gobbled it down in one bite and did not spare a thought for the poor hungry widows.

* * *

Koja knew he had to be especially cautious now if he hoped to loosen Sofiya's tongue. He knew what it was to be caught in a trap. Sofiya had lived that way a long while, and a lesser creature might choose to live in fear rather than grasp at freedom. So the next day he waited at the clearing for her to return from the widows' home, but kept out of sight. Finally, she came trundling over the hill, dragging her heavy sled behind her, the wool blankets bound with twine, the heavy runners sinking into the snow. When she reached the clearing, she hesitated. "Fox?" she said softly. "Koja?"

Only then, when she had called for him, did he appear.

Sofiya gave a tremulous smile. She sank down on the fallen tree and told the fox of her brother.

Jurek was a late riser, but regular in his prayers. He bathed in ice-cold water and ate six eggs for breakfast every morning. Some days he went to the tavern, others he cleaned hides. And sometimes he simply seemed to disappear.

"Think very carefully," said Koja. "Does your brother have any treasured objects? An icon he always carries? A charm, even a piece of clothing he never travels without?"

Sofiya considered this. "He has a little pouch he wears on his watch fob. An old woman gave it to him years ago, after he saved her from drowning. We were just children, but even then, Jurek was bigger than all the other boys. When she fell into the Sokol, he dove in after and dragged her back up its banks."

"Is it dear to him?"

"He never removes it and he sleeps with it cradled in his palm."

"She must have been a witch," said Koja. "That charm is what allows him to enter the forest so silently, to leave no tracks and make no sound. You will get it from him."

Sofiya's face paled. "No," she said. "No, I cannot. For all his snoring, my brother sleeps lightly and if he were to discover me in his chamber—" She shuddered.

“Meet me here again in three days’ time,” said Koja, “and I will have an answer for you.”

Sofiya stood and dusted the snow from her horrible cloak. When she looked at the fox, her eyes were grave. “Do not ask too much of me,” she said softly.

Koja took a step closer to her. “I will free you from this trap,” he said. “Without his charm, your brother will have to make his living like an ordinary man. He will have to stay in one place and you will find yourself a sweetheart.”

She wrapped the cables of her sled around her hand. “Maybe,” Sofiya said. “But first I must find my courage.”

* * *

It took a day and a half for Koja to reach the marshes where a patch of dropwort grew. He was careful digging the little plants up. The roots were deadly. The leaves would be enough to manage Jurek.

By the time he returned to his own woods, the animals were in an uproar. The boar, Tatya, had gone missing, along with her three piglets. The next afternoon their bodies were spitted and cooking on a cheery bonfire in the town square. Red Badger and his family were packing up to leave, and they weren’t the only ones.

“He leaves no tracks!” cried the badger. “His rifle makes no sound! He is not natural, fox, and your clever mind is no match for him.”

“Stay,” said Koja. “He is a man, not a monster, and once I have robbed him of his magic, we will be able to see him coming. The wood will be safe once more.”

Badger did not look happy. He promised to wait a little while longer, but he did not let his children stray from the burrow.

* * *

“Boil them down,” Koja told Sofiya when he met her in the clearing to give her the dropwort leaves. “Then add the water to his wine and he’ll sleep like

the dead. You can take the charm from him unhindered, just leave something useless in its place.”

“You’re sure of this?”

“Do this small thing and you will be free.”

“But what will become of me?”

“I will bring you chickens from Tupolev’s farm and kindling to keep you warm. We will burn the horrible cloak together.”

“It hardly seems possible.”

Koja darted forward and nudged her trembling hand once with his muzzle, then slipped back into the wood. “Freedom is a burden, but you will learn to bear it. Meet me tomorrow and all will be well.”

Despite his brave words, Koja spent the night pacing his den. Jurek was a big man. What if the dropwort was not enough? What if he woke when Sofiya tried to take his precious charm? And what if they were successful? Once Jurek lost the witch’s protection, the forest would be safe and Sofiya would be free. Would she leave then? Go back to her sweetheart in Balakirev? Or might he persuade his friend to stay?

Koja got to the clearing early the next day. He padded over the cold ground. The wind had a blade’s edge and the branches were bare. If the hunter kept preying upon the animals, they would not survive the season. The woods of Polvost would be emptied.

Then Sofiya’s shape appeared in the distance. He was tempted to run to meet her, but he made himself wait. When he saw her pink cheeks and that she was grinning beneath the hood of her horrible cloak, his heart leapt.

“Well?” he asked as she entered the clearing, quiet on her feet as always. With her hem brushing the path behind her, it was almost as if she left no tracks.

“Come,” she said, eyes twinkling. “Sit down beside me.”

She spread a woolen blanket on the fallen tree and opened her basket. She unpacked another wedge of the delicious cheese, a loaf of black bread, a jar of mushrooms, and a gooseberry tart glazed in honey. Then she held out her closed fist. Koja bumped it with his nose. She uncurled her fingers.

In her palm lay a tiny cloth bundle, bound with blue twine and a piece of bone. It smelled of something rotten.

Koja released a breath. "I feared he might wake," he said at last.

She shook her head. "He was still asleep when I left him this morning."

They opened the charm and looked through it: a small gold button, dried herbs and ashes. Whatever magic might have worked inside it was invisible to their eyes.

"Fox, do you really believe this is what gave him his power?"

Koja batted the remains of the charm away. "Well, it wasn't his wits."

Sofiya smiled and pulled a jug of wine from the basket. She poured some for herself and then filled a little tin dish for Koja to lap up. They ate the cheese and the bread and all of the gooseberry tart.

"Snow is coming," Sofiya said as she gazed into the gray sky.

"Will you go back to Balakirev?"

"There is nothing for me there," Sofiya said.

"Then you will stay to see the snow."

"Long enough for that." Sofiya poured more wine into the dish. "Now, fox, tell me again how you outsmarted the hounds."

So Koja told the tale of the foolish hounds and asked Sofiya what wishes she might make, and at some point, his eyes began to droop. The fox fell asleep with his head in the girl's lap, happy for the first time since he'd gazed upon the world with his too-clever eyes.

* * *

He woke to Sofiya's knife at his belly, to the nudge of the blade as it began to wiggle beneath his skin. When he tried to scramble away, he found his paws were bound.

"Why?" he gasped as Sofiya worked the knife in deeper.

"Because I am a hunter," she said with a shrug.

Koja moaned. "I wanted to help you."

"You always do," murmured Sofiya. "Few can resist the sight of a pretty girl crying."

A lesser creature might have begged for his life, given in to the relentless spill of his blood on the snow, but Koja struggled to think. It was hard. His clever mind was muddled with dropwort.

“Your brother—”

“My brother is a fool who can barely stand to be in the same room with me. But his greed is greater than his fear. So he stays, and drinks away his terror, and while you are all watching him and his gun, and talking of witches, I make my way through the woods.”

Could it be true? Had it been Jurek who kept his distance, who drowned his fear in bottles of *kvas*, who stayed away from his sister as much as he could? Had it been Sofiya who had brought the gray wolf home and Jurek who had filled their house with people so he wouldn't have to be alone with her? Like Koja, the villagers had credited Jurek with the kill. They'd praised him, demanded stories that weren't rightfully his. Had he offered up the wolf's head as some kind of balm to his sister's pride?

Sofiya's silent knife sank deeper. She had no need for clumsy bows or noisy rifles. Koja whimpered his pain.

“You are clever,” she said thoughtfully as she started to peel the pelt from his back. “Did you never notice the sled?”

Koja clawed at his thoughts, looking for sense. Sofiya had sometimes trailed a sled behind her to carry food to the widows' home. He remembered now that it had also been heavy when she had returned. What horrors had she hidden beneath those woolen blankets?

Koja tested his bonds. He tried to rattle his drugged mind from its stupor.

“It is always the same trap,” she said gently. “You longed for conversation. The bear craved jokes. The gray wolf missed music. The boar just wanted someone to tell her troubles to. The trap is loneliness, and none of us escapes it. Not even me.”

“I am a magic fox...” he rasped.

“Your coat is sad and patchy. I will use it for a lining. I will keep it close to my heart.”

Koja reached for the words that had always served him, the wit that had been his tether and his guide. His clever tongue would not oblige. He moaned as his life bled into the snowbank to water the fallen tree. Then, hopeless and dying, Koja did what he had never done before. He cried out, and high in the branches of her birch tree, the nightingale heard.

Lula came flying and when she saw what Sofiya had done, she set upon her, pecking at her eyes. Sofiya screamed and slashed at the little bird with her knife. But Lula did not relent.

* * *

It took two days for Sofiya to stumble from the woods, blind and near starving. In time, her brother found a more modest house and set himself up as a woodcutter—work to which he was well suited. His new bride was troubled by his sister’s mad ramblings of foxes and wolves. With little regret, Lev Jurek sent Sofiya to live at the widows’ home. They took her in, mindful of the charity she’d once shown them. But though she’d brought them food, she’d never offered kind words or company. She’d never bothered to make them her friends, and soon, their gratitude exhausted, the old women grumbled over the care Sofiya required and left her to huddle by the fire in her horrible cloak.

As for Koja, his fur never sat quite right again. He took more care in his dealings with humans, even the foolish farmer Tupolev. The other animals took greater care with Koja too. They teased him less, and when they visited the fox and Lula, they never said an unkind word about the way his coat bunched at his neck.

The fox and the nightingale made a quiet life together. A lesser creature might have held Koja’s mistakes against him, might have mocked him for his pride. But Lula was not only clever. She was wise.



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