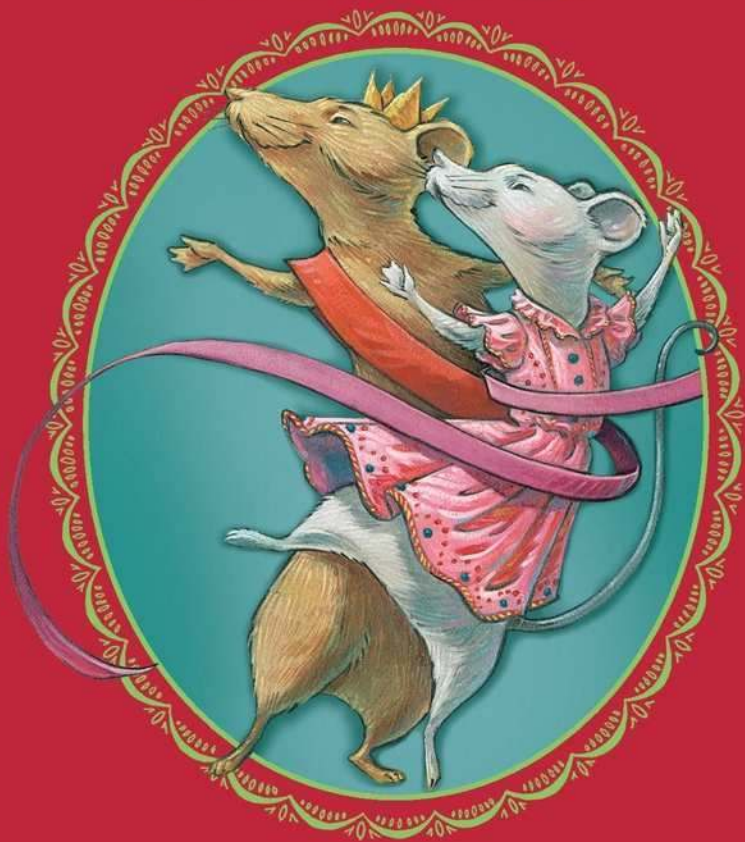


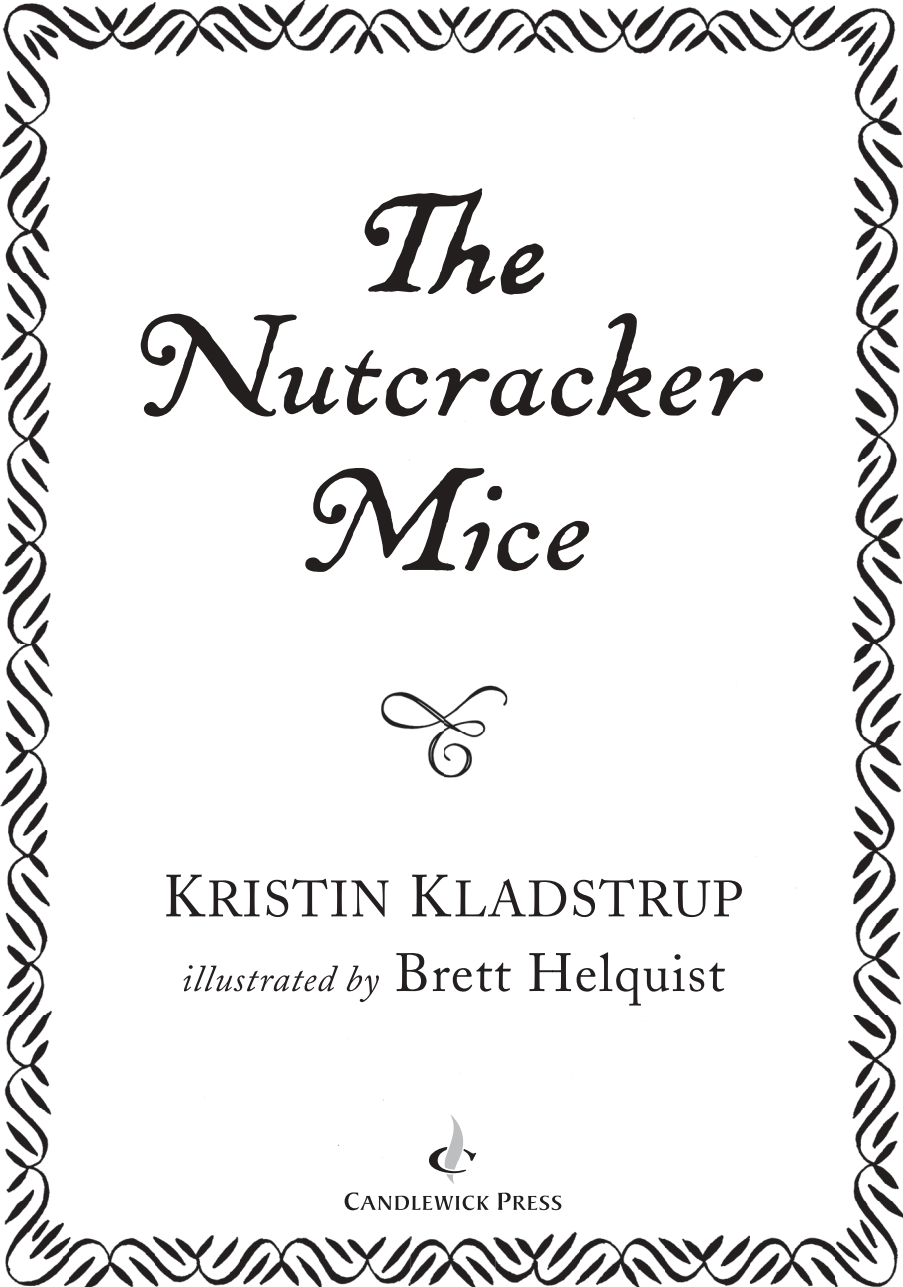
"Begu to be read by candlelight during the first snows of winter." —SLJ

The NUTCRACKER MICE



KRISTIN KLDSTRUP
illustrated by Brett Helquist

*The
Nutcracker
Mice*



The Nutcracker Mice



KRISTIN KLADSTRUP

illustrated by Brett Helquist



CANDLEWICK PRESS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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For Tommy

K. K.

For Regina and Eva

B. H.

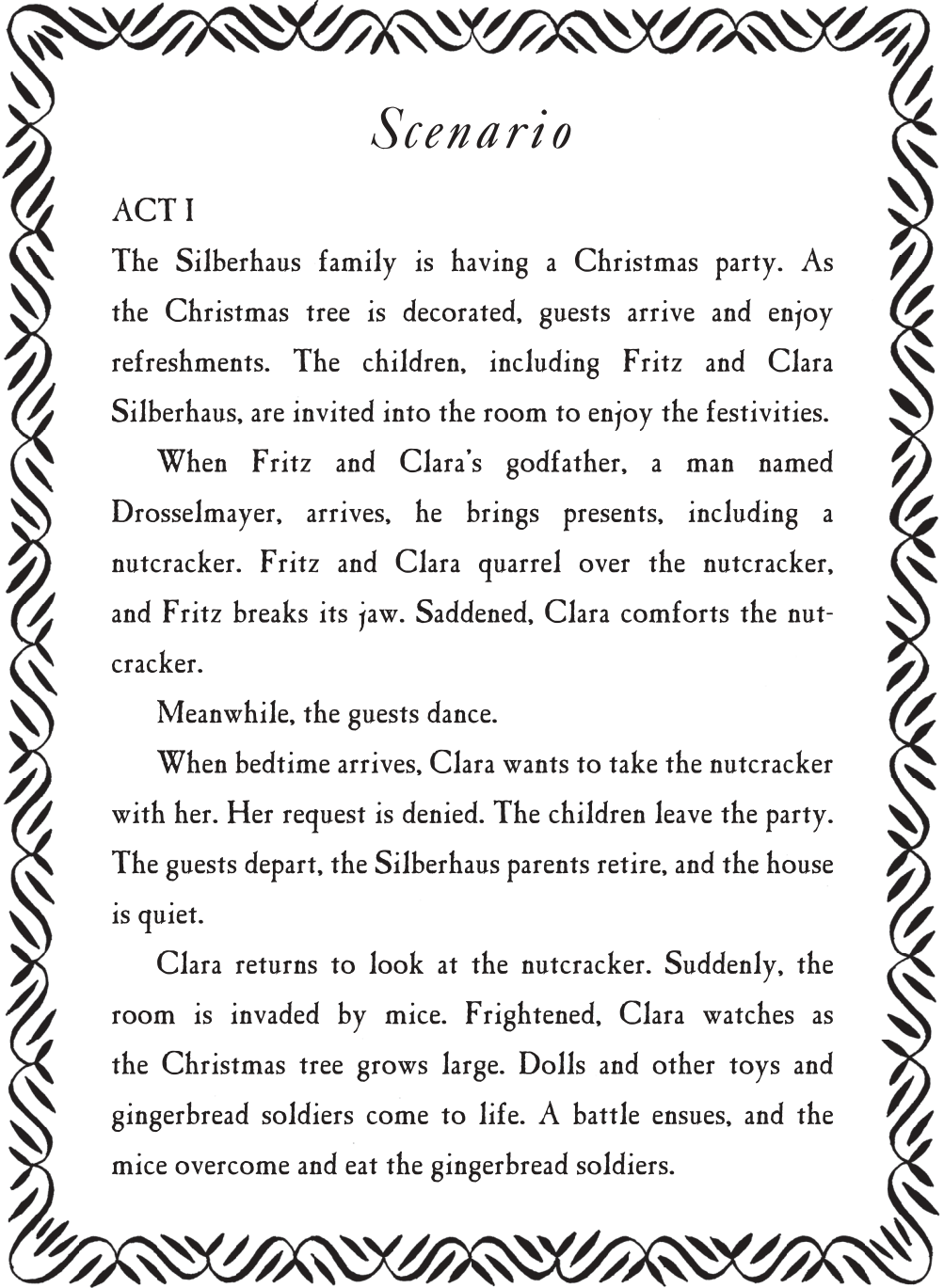
THE NUTCRACKER

A Ballet in Two Acts



with music by
Pyotr Ilyich
Tchaikovsky

*Mariinsky Theater * Saint Petersburg * December 1892*



Scenario

ACT I

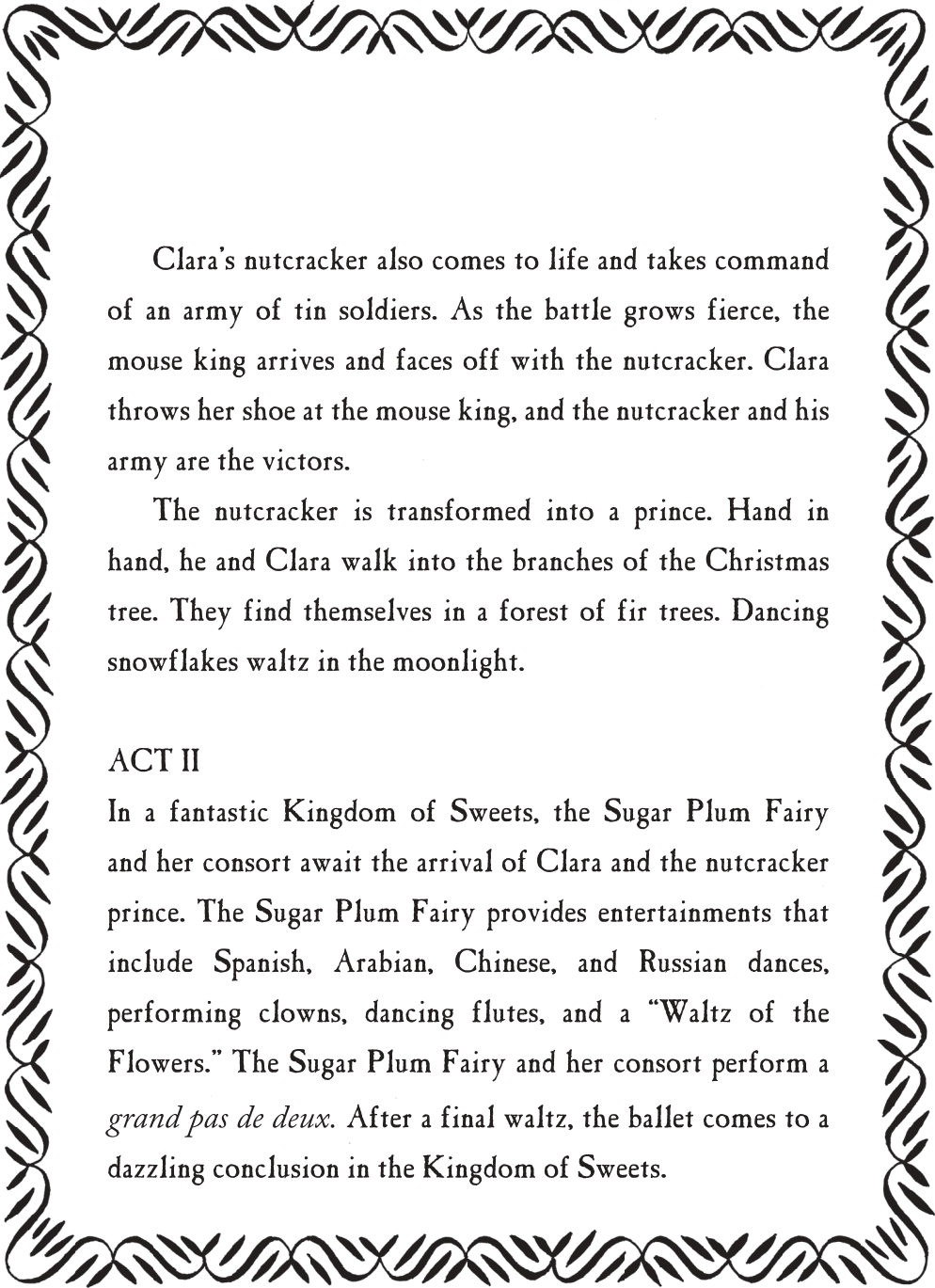
The Silberhaus family is having a Christmas party. As the Christmas tree is decorated, guests arrive and enjoy refreshments. The children, including Fritz and Clara Silberhaus, are invited into the room to enjoy the festivities.

When Fritz and Clara's godfather, a man named Drosselmayer, arrives, he brings presents, including a nutcracker. Fritz and Clara quarrel over the nutcracker, and Fritz breaks its jaw. Saddened, Clara comforts the nutcracker.

Meanwhile, the guests dance.

When bedtime arrives, Clara wants to take the nutcracker with her. Her request is denied. The children leave the party. The guests depart, the Silberhaus parents retire, and the house is quiet.

Clara returns to look at the nutcracker. Suddenly, the room is invaded by mice. Frightened, Clara watches as the Christmas tree grows large. Dolls and other toys and gingerbread soldiers come to life. A battle ensues, and the mice overcome and eat the gingerbread soldiers.



Clara's nutcracker also comes to life and takes command of an army of tin soldiers. As the battle grows fierce, the mouse king arrives and faces off with the nutcracker. Clara throws her shoe at the mouse king, and the nutcracker and his army are the victors.

The nutcracker is transformed into a prince. Hand in hand, he and Clara walk into the branches of the Christmas tree. They find themselves in a forest of fir trees. Dancing snowflakes waltz in the moonlight.

ACT II

In a fantastic Kingdom of Sweets, the Sugar Plum Fairy and her consort await the arrival of Clara and the nutcracker prince. The Sugar Plum Fairy provides entertainments that include Spanish, Arabian, Chinese, and Russian dances, performing clowns, dancing flutes, and a "Waltz of the Flowers." The Sugar Plum Fairy and her consort perform a *grand pas de deux*. After a final waltz, the ballet comes to a dazzling conclusion in the Kingdom of Sweets.

CHAPTER 1

Not a Very Good Story

THERE WERE MICE at the Mariinsky.

Saint Petersburg's famous theater—home to the world's most spectacular ballets—was completely overrun by creatures that Irina's father jokingly called *the world's tiniest balletomanes*.

"I think the mice really do love the ballet," Irina told Papa one evening.

"Well, if they don't, they ought to!" he said. "All Russians love ballet, and they are Russian mice, after all."



Irina was aware that her father was teasing her. She said, “But I saw the mice. They were peeking out from the carvings on the front of the tsar’s box. A whole crowd of them watching *The Sleeping Beauty*.”

Irina was nine years old, and had not only seen *The Sleeping Beauty* but had also been to any number of its rehearsals. She even knew some of the performers. That was because her father and mother worked at the Mariinsky Theater. Papa was the chief custodian, and Mama was a seamstress in the costume department. Mama had stitched the skirt on the dress worn by the Lilac Fairy in *The Sleeping Beauty*, and Irina had helped her.

“More likely the mice were there for the crumbs left after one of the parties in the tsar’s salon,” said Papa.

The tsar, who enjoyed the ballet as much as any other citizen of Saint Petersburg, often held parties in a special room behind the royal box. There were

cakes and pastries; Papa and the other custodians always had to clean up afterward.

“But they *are* clever mice,” Irina insisted.

“No doubt about that! They’ve outwitted every mousetrap I’ve ever set for them,” said Papa, who, as chief custodian, was expected to get rid of the mice. Not that he had ever succeeded in catching a single one.

Irina said, “If they’re clever, they *might* like the ballet! Do you know what I think, Papa? I think the mice might like to dance!”

“Well, I suppose they might.”

Her father was humoring her. He didn’t really believe that the mice could dance, but Irina had her own secret reason for believing that they could. She said, “I mean it, Papa. They might listen to the orchestra and dance somewhere out of sight. Under the stage, maybe.”

He chuckled. “They might have their own ballet company, eh?”



“Why not?” For the secret reason mentioned above, Irina had lately been thinking quite a bit about the Mariinsky mice.

Papa said, “I expect the mice will like the new ballet the theater is putting on.”

Irina knew which ballet he meant; it was one that no one had ever seen before. It was called *The Nutcracker*, and it would be shown at Christmastime. That was months away, but Irina’s mother and the other seamstresses were already busy sewing the costumes: dresses for a party in the first act, dresses for dancing snowflakes, and dresses of golden cloth for the “Waltz of the Flowers” in the second act. Papa had read aloud to Irina the story that had inspired the new ballet—all about a nutcracker, who was really a prince, and a vengeful mouse king leading an army of mice.

Irina had enjoyed the story, but recalling it now, she frowned. The mice in it had been such mean-tempered, nasty creatures. “Oh, but Papa! I don’t

think the Mariinsky mice will like the new ballet.”

“What’s that? Why not?”

At that moment Irina felt as if she were a mouse; she felt tiny and powerless and indignant about the unfair opinion people had of her. She felt angry with her father for setting all the mousetraps at the theater, even if it *was* his job to do so.

“Really, Papa,” she said, not hiding her disapproval. “If you’re a mouse, *The Nutcracker* is not a very good story at all!”



CHAPTER 2

Lard and Stale Bread

SNAP! THE SHARP-TOOTHED jaws of the mousetrap clamped shut. Esmeralda felt her tail twitch and her heart thump. She said, “I will never get used to this.”

“Never mind,” said her twin brother, Gringoire. “These new traps are no more a danger to us than the old ones, now that we know how to disarm them.”

The two mice stood at a safe distance from the mousetrap at the top of the stairs that led to the

attic of the Mariinsky Theater. It was Gringoire who had figured out how to toss a kopek into the trap. The coin jarred the mechanism, setting it off, so the mice could safely retrieve the bait. There were mousetraps like this one all over the theater, and all the Mariinsky mice knew how to use Gringoire's trick.

“We're lucky we got here before anybody else,” said Gringoire. There were quite a few mice who made their home in the attic, but the siblings had risen early in the hope of finding something for breakfast. Esmeralda climbed over the tightly shut jaws, shuddering at the touch of the cold metal. She picked up the kopek and handed it to her brother. Then she scraped up the morsel of lard from the metal tongue in the center of the trap. The morsel was smaller than a hazelnut, hardly enough for one mouse, let alone two.

Or three. Their cousin usually joined them for meals. “Maybe Conrad will have brought something



back from scrounge patrol last night,” said Esmeralda as they made their way across the attic floor to her brother’s home.

The scrounge patrols were a necessity of life at the Mariinsky. The mousetraps had never provided enough to eat, so from time to time, teams of volunteers would venture outside for additional provisions, which were then turned over to a special committee of mice who stockpiled the food at several locations within the walls of the theater. The food could then be parceled out to families, but patrol members, who risked dogs, cats, rats, and other dangers in the alleys, streets, and squares of Saint Petersburg, were usually rewarded with extra provisions for their efforts. Esmeralda had recently passed the birthday that marked her as an adult, which meant that she would soon go out on scrounge patrol.

Conrad was waiting for them as they rounded the corner of a wooden crate. “Lard again, I see,” he

commented. “Lucky for us I managed to wrest this fresh bread away from a gang of outlaw rats.”

He was joking. The crust of bread he had for them wasn’t fresh. Nor, Esmeralda knew, had he actually taken it from rats. Conrad would be the first to admit that he was a timid soul. He would no more seek out a rat gang than a cat, which meant that his offerings from scrounge patrol were generally the things that were easiest to find. All the same, stale bread was better than no bread.

She gave her cousin a hug. “We have all the makings of a feast!” she said. “But we’ll have to eat quickly if we’re to get to class on time.”

The class she would be attending with Conrad was the daily practice for the Russian Mouse Ballet Company. Though Esmeralda had only recently been accepted into the *corps de ballet*, she had been given an important role in an upcoming production. She was eager to measure up to the expectations of the company’s ballet mistress, Madame Giselle.



Conrad divided the bread into three pieces, and Gringoire smeared lard on each one. The mice ate in silence until Esmeralda asked, “Did you get in very late, Conrad?”

“Not so very,” he said as he cleaned his whiskers. They were black, which gave him a rakish appearance that was much appreciated by Esmeralda’s friends in the *corps de ballet*. Conrad was one of the company’s principal dancers, and Esmeralda was always being pressed by her fellow ballerinas to give information about her handsome cousin. “I got more sleep than usual,” he went on, “which is good, since Madame Giselle has got me down for an afternoon rehearsal *and* an evening rehearsal with Fleur.”

Fleur de Lys was the *prima ballerina* of the Russian Mouse Ballet Company; she had starred in its last two productions.

“Rehearsals for *The Nutcracker*?” said Gringoire.

Conrad made a face. “Yes, more’s the pity.”

“You don’t sound too happy.”



“Who could be? The scenario is terrible. You never heard such a dreadful story!”

Gringoire looked surprised. “What’s wrong with it? I thought it was based on Hoffmann’s *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*. That’s a wonderful story!”

Though Esmeralda’s brother often helped out with the ballet company’s productions, he was not a dancer. When he was younger, Gringoire had ventured into one of the theater offices to nibble a pastry left out on a desk. Marius Petipa, ballet master at the Mariinsky, had come upon him unexpectedly. Esmeralda’s brother had escaped through a hole in the wall, but not before Monsieur Petipa had brought his brass-tipped walking stick down on Gringoire’s hind leg. He still walked with a limp that prevented him from dancing and, for that matter, from scrounge patrol duty.

Not that Gringoire ever complained. He often remarked that his injury was a blessing in disguise,

for it allowed him to devote countless hours to his favorite pastime of reading. All the Mariinsky mice could read both Russian and French; they attended classes as children so they could read the theater programs. But Gringoire adored books, and for this reason his home was tucked in among several tall stacks of them that someone had left in the attic. There was a French retelling of *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* among the books in his collection; Gringoire had read it aloud to Esmeralda. She hadn't liked it as much as her brother had. Some of the characters were decidedly unappealing; in addition to the wicked mouse king, there was a nasty mouse queen and a fickle-hearted princess named Pirlipat. Esmeralda was relieved these last two had been left out of the ballet. She said, "It's nothing like the story you read me, Gringoire. Monsieur Petipa and Monsieur Vsevolozhsky have changed everything!"

Ivan Alexandrovich Vsevolozhsky was the director of the imperial theaters in Russia, and



Esmeralda suspected that it was he who had come up with the scenario for the new ballet. The man seemed to have his hand in everything that went on at the Mariinsky.

Conrad said, “Everyone’s upset about the battle scene in the first act. The mouse king and his army show up for no reason whatsoever and they all get killed.”

“The other characters in the ballet are supposed to rejoice about that,” Esmeralda explained. “You know—because they’re pretending to be humans. But it’s hard to pretend to be joyful about mice getting killed!”

“The audience certainly won’t like it,” said Conrad.

Gringoire said, “All the same, the battle does sound dramatic.”

“Too bad it’s the only dramatic thing in the ballet,” said Conrad. “The second act is just a lot of candy and other nonsense.”

Esmeralda wondered if her cousin wasn't being too harsh. She did love the score for the ballet. The music had been composed by Tchaikovsky, the same man who had written the score for the Mariinsky Theater's recent production of *The Sleeping Beauty*. She said, "The 'Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy' is pretty. And the 'Waltz of the Flowers' is lovely."

Conrad gave a snort. "But nothing *happens*! If the audience hasn't left at intermission, they'll fall asleep."

The audience would be the ballet-loving mice of Saint Petersburg, and the performance would take place, as did all performances by the Russian Mouse Ballet Company, in a space behind the stage where the human dancers performed. The space had been a closet, once upon a time, before a wall was put up, sealing it off. Thankfully, the wall had not sealed off the sounds of the human orchestra. The mouse audience could hear perfectly well as they watched the mouse performers dance atop a stage made from

a shallow box that had been left in the old closet. The mice even had some light from candle stubs they had brought in through tunnels in the walls. It took three so-called *fire-mice* to light a single match and touch it to each of the candlewicks in turn. The fire-mice also kept watch over the candles in case they went out during a performance. And, in case of fire, they stood by with an array of walnut shells filled with water.

“Is anybody worried that you might not even have an audience?” asked Gringoire.

Esmeralda and Conrad winced at this blunt question. The truth was that the most recent ballets presented by the Russian Mouse Ballet Company had not been successful. An illness had swept through the colony of mice living in the theater a few years back. Many talented dancers, including Esmeralda and Gringoire’s parents, had died. The company’s remaining principal dancers and soloists weren’t quite as strong as their predecessors. Conrad

was an exception; his talent and good looks made him popular with audiences. But Fleur de Lys, though technically proficient, had yet to inspire the same adoration as the *prima ballerina* before her.

Moreover, the Russian Mouse Ballet Company had increasingly found itself competing with the human ballet company. This competition was not new; it had always been the case that the mouse balletomanes of Saint Petersburg would occasionally take in one of the human productions at the Mariinsky. The mice could sneak into the theater and watch the human stage from holes cleverly hidden in the carved fronts of the theater loges. What had changed was that the human productions had become so elaborate. First, there was *The Sleeping Beauty*, with its gorgeous score by Tchaikovsky and its beautiful scenery and costumes. The mice had danced to the same music, of course, but Madame Giselle had insisted that they didn't need costumes or sets. "It is the dancing that



matters. Monsieur Petipa's production of the ballet is nothing but spectacle!"

Madame Giselle was not alone in her assessment of Monsieur Petipa's production of *The Sleeping Beauty*; a number of human critics had made similar complaints in the Saint Petersburg newspapers. Audiences, however, didn't seem to mind. People had flocked to Monsieur Petipa's spectacular production in droves.

People . . . and mice. Indeed, the Saint Petersburg mice had preferred Monsieur Petipa's production of *The Sleeping Beauty* to such a degree that, by its close, audiences for the mouse production had dwindled away to a few loyal fans.

The Sleeping Beauty had been followed by another lavish ballet. Monsieur Petipa's production of this one had featured some two hundred dancers, a golden chariot drawn by horses, and an elephant. Small wonder that the unadorned mouse production had closed after only three performances.

Indeed, it was due to the Russian Mouse Ballet Company's failure to attract audiences that the Mariinsky mice now spent even more time than usual hunting for food. Their Saint Petersburg audiences had always paid for admission to the mouse ballets with crusts of bread, chopped nuts, bits of cheese, and even cookies and cakes. Now, with so many mice choosing to watch Monsieur Petipa's dancers (*for free*, as Conrad pointed out), the Mariinsky mice had no recourse but to scrounge for food outside. Stale bread, usually—and never quite enough.

“Of course we're worried,” said Conrad. “We've got dancers spending their nights hunting for food. They're tired and not up to practicing during the day. Everyone's trying because we all know we've got to win back our audience. But once word gets out that the scenario for *The Nutcracker* is offensive to mice, who knows if anybody will show up to see it?”

“Do you think word *will* get out?” Esmeralda asked anxiously.

“It always does — especially when you have mice like Franz spreading rumors.”

Franz had been a soloist with the Russian Mouse Ballet Company until a mousetrap had snipped off a portion of his tail. The injury had affected his dancing, and he had been knocked down into the *corps de ballet*. Embittered by this demotion, he was always complaining and gossiping. If he was talking to mice outside the Mariinsky, it couldn’t be good.

Conrad said, “Even Madame Giselle is worried about the *Nutcracker* scenario.”

Esmeralda gave a start. It hadn’t occurred to her that the ballet mistress might be worried. Only last week, Madame Giselle had said, “This is the perfect ballet for you, Esmeralda! I predict that we may have a new *prima ballerina* after the audience sees you in the role of Clara.”

The role of Clara was perfect for Esmeralda for one very important reason. But what would that matter if nobody came to see *The Nutcracker*? Esmeralda said, “There must be something we can do!”

Conrad licked a last trace of lard from his hand. “Short of performing a completely different ballet, I’d say we’re doomed. But that can’t stop us from practicing. Come on, Esmeralda, or we’ll be late for class.”



CHAPTER 3

The Training Ribbon

DESPITE THE GLOOMY prospects for *The Nutcracker*, Esmeralda felt her spirits rise at class that morning. She grasped the barre—a length of twine stretched between the stud nails behind one of the walls of the Mariinsky—and followed the movements of the line of dancers in front of her. *Demi-plié, grand plié, tendu, relevé, rond-de-jambe . . .* With each movement, Esmeralda reveled in the command her mind held over her body. How easy it was to keep the count for the *grand battement en cloche*! She raised her left leg, stretching it high:

forward on the count of one, backward on the count of two, forward and backward again, like the clapper on a bell.

Madame Giselle always held her morning class at the same time as the humans held theirs. Small holes in the wall, carefully hidden around the full-length mirrors in the human rehearsal room on the other side, ensured that the mice had light for their practice. They also had music. Just now the human rehearsal pianist was playing a rather tinny-sounding march, more militant than lyrical; all the same, it was easy for Esmeralda to imagine that she was on stage, dancing to the uplifting music from *The Sleeping Beauty*. She held her head erect, letting her arm trail through the air like a wisp of smoke.

Meanwhile, Madame Giselle strolled up and down the line of dancers, scrutinizing their movements. Sometimes she praised. More often she criticized. Which was only right: like Monsieur Petipa, Madame Giselle was French and had high

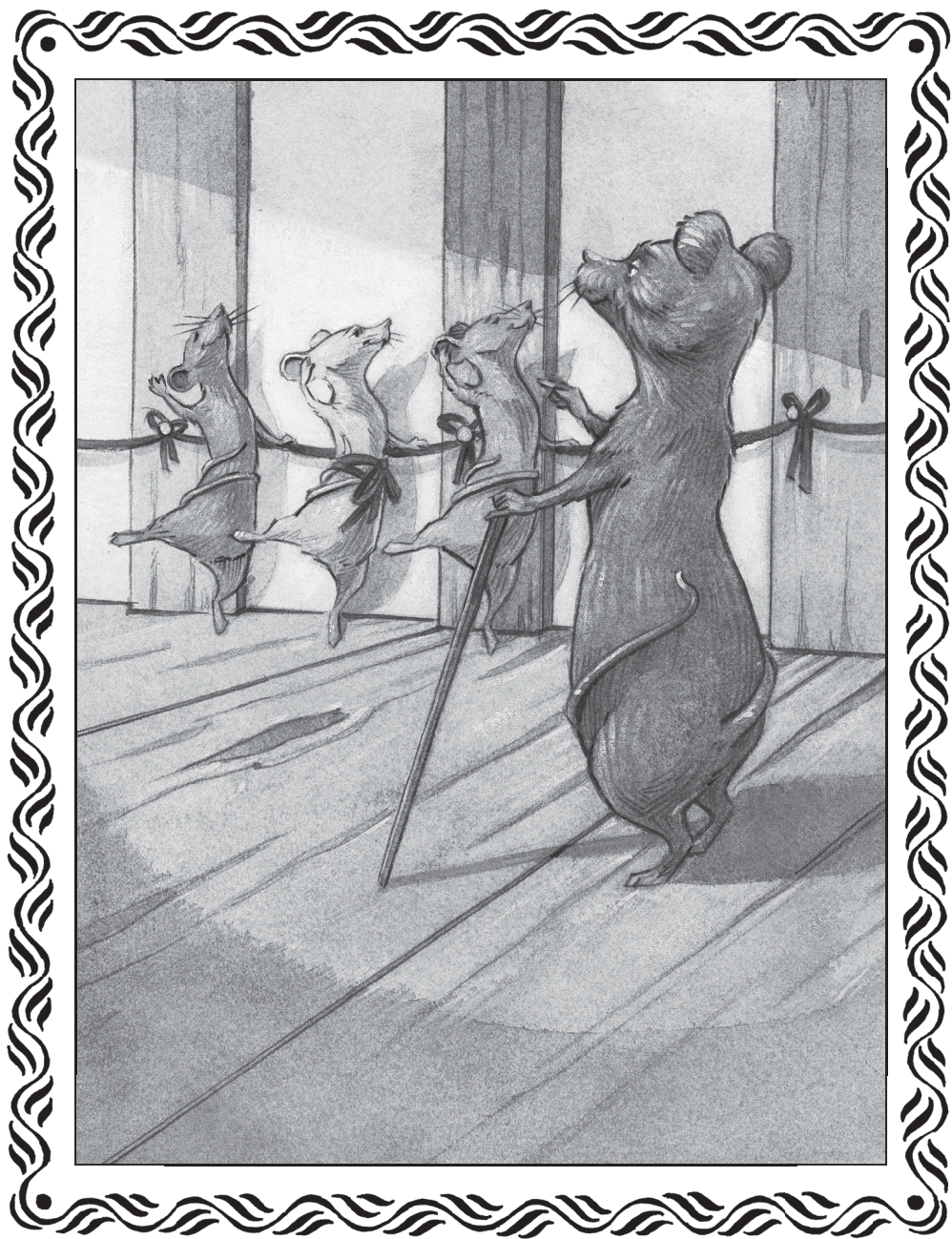


standards. She had come to the Mariinsky inside the carpetbag of a visiting Parisian ballerina. Although the ballerina had left soon after arriving, complaining that the Russian winter was unbearably cold, Madame Giselle, inspired by the fiery enthusiasm of the Saint Petersburg balletomanes, had decided to stay on as ballet mistress of the Russian Mouse Ballet Company. “We must reward the audience with our very best performance,” she was always declaring.

Now Esmeralda sensed that Madame Giselle was watching *her*. Surely it was impossible to improve her extension. Still, Esmeralda made every effort to do so, stretching her leg high in what she hoped was a perfect *développé à la seconde*.

She was rewarded. “*Très bien*, Esmeralda! The training ribbon is helping you maintain the correct position of your tail.”

Though Esmeralda felt pleased, she did wish that the ballet mistress would not draw attention



to the lavender-colored ribbon looped about her tail and tied around her waist. The ribbon kept her tail in the proper ballet position: wrapped tightly around her body. Keeping one's tail in position without the use of a training ribbon was not easy; it tended to hinder one's movement and make one feel rather stiff. It was common for children in Madame Giselle's ballet school to wear training ribbons. The problem was that Esmeralda was not a child. Nor was she a beginning dancer. She was a member of the Russian Mouse Ballet Company. None of the other dancers in the company needed to use a training ribbon, and it was a source of enormous frustration to Esmeralda that she did.

It was a source of frustration for Madame Giselle as well. "I do not understand why you have such trouble with your tail, Esmeralda. You come from a long line of truly great dancers."

This was true. Esmeralda's grandfather had founded the Russian Mouse Ballet Company,

serving as its first ballet master. Esmeralda's grandmother had been its first *prima ballerina*, making her name dancing the difficult lead roles in *Giselle* and *Coppélia*. Esmeralda's parents had both been soloists, and now her cousin was the company's most popular principal dancer. The only thing that Esmeralda could think was that her tail must somehow be constructed differently from the tails of everyone else in her family!

"You bring such a lovely emotional quality to your dancing," Madame Giselle had told her. "Your technique is always excellent. The only thing that keeps you from becoming *prima ballerina* is your tail. But you will succeed, my dear. Of this I am certain. In the meantime, we are fortunate that our next ballet is *The Nutcracker*. The role of Clara is perfect for you."

The role of Clara was perfect because Clara was a child.

Madame Giselle had chosen twenty young

students from the ballet school to play children in the first act of *The Nutcracker*. These little mice would all wear training ribbons. And, as Madame Giselle had pointed out, it would be awkward if Clara, who was also supposed to be a child, did not also wear a ribbon. According to the ballet mistress, *The Nutcracker* would be the perfect opportunity to showcase Esmeralda's talents. "You can wear the training ribbon, and nobody will care," Madame Giselle had observed.

The ballet mistress had adjusted Clara's choreography so that the dances Esmeralda would perform would be much more difficult than those performed by the student dancer who would play Clara in the human ballet. The dances were so difficult, in fact, that Esmeralda felt compelled to practice them day and night. She practiced them at rehearsals with the other dancers, and she practiced them when she was alone.

Only a few days ago, she had been practicing in

the costume department. Late in the day, Esmeralda had been working on her *piqué* turns, spinning across the floor beneath one of the cupboards. She had lost herself in the moment, imagining herself whirling across the stage on opening night, and she had danced right out from under the cupboard, coming to rest in a perfect *arabesque*, her arms outstretched and her body turned slightly toward an imaginary audience.

Except that the audience hadn't been imaginary. Much to Esmeralda's horror, a human girl had been watching her. The girl had stared at Esmeralda, her blue eyes wide with wonder.

The girl had stared . . . and smiled. And then a voice had called out, "Irina! Irinushka! Where are you?"

"I'm here, Papa!" the girl had answered, breaking the spell. Esmeralda had run back under the cupboard, and the girl—Irina—had run out of the room.

But Esmeralda still thought about Irina. From the girl's smile, Esmeralda had been able to guess what she had been feeling: delight at seeing something wonderful. Thinking of Irina's smile gave Esmeralda hope that the mice of Saint Petersburg might feel that same delight.

The music on the other side of the wall stopped for a moment, then started again.

"Line up, everyone! We will practice our *piqué* turns," said Madame Giselle.

Eager to show what she could do, Esmeralda placed herself first in line. She made one, two, three, four turns down the narrow space between the walls before her tail broke free from the ribbon.

She heard a snickering from some of the dancers still in line, and then Madame Giselle's firm voice saying, "Try again, my dear!"

Esmeralda knew who had laughed. Fleur de Lys was standing in line with Franz; it was no surprise that these two mice—both of them known for their

unpleasant personalities—were friends. Now, as Esmeralda walked past Fleur, she heard the *prima ballerina* murmur, “It never ceases to amaze me that someone who comes from one of the theater’s great dancing families has to wear a training ribbon!”

Fleur did *not* come from one of the theater’s great dancing families. She was an outsider who had petitioned to attend Madame Giselle’s ballet school. She had superb technique and had advanced quickly because of it. Yet, for all her success, Fleur’s dancing lacked the emotional quality that Madame Giselle praised in Conrad’s dancing—and in Esmeralda’s. “Never mind Fleur—she’s jealous of you,” Conrad was always telling Esmeralda. Whether that was true, Esmeralda couldn’t say, but she couldn’t help minding Fleur’s spiteful comments. And, as she placed herself in line again and tied up her tail, she resolved to practice harder than ever—with the training ribbon and without.



CHAPTER 4

The Spice Cookie

IRINA HAD NOT TOLD anyone about the dancing mouse. Not her friends at school, who would have laughed at her. Not Mama, who would have scoffed and told her not to be silly. Not even Papa, who would only have pretended to believe her. But she *had* seen a mouse—a silvery-gray one—wearing a lavender-colored ribbon and dancing across the floor of the costume department. The mouse had performed a tiny *arabesque*. It had looked right at her! In that moment, Irina had somehow known it was a girl mouse.

Then, too, there were the mice she had seen watching *The Sleeping Beauty* from the tsar's box. She was sure they had been enjoying the dancing. She liked Papa's suggestion that the mice might have their own ballet company.

At home, Irina sometimes pretended that the bookshelf in her room was a stage and that her doll, Lyudmila, was a ballerina. Where, she wondered, did the mice hold *their* performances? Did they have a mouse-size stage under the big stage? Once, during a rehearsal, Papa had shown Irina what it was like down there. It was dark, with only a small amount of light coming from the orchestra pit. Moreover, the noise of toe shoes striking the floor of the stage above was loud and distracting. That the mice should have to perform in such conditions bothered Irina.

One night in late October, the boiler in the furnace room at Irina's school burst. The students were to

have an unexpected vacation while it was being repaired, and Papa and Mama, unable to leave Irina at home alone, had to bring her to the theater with them.

On Irina's first morning at the theater, she helped Mama sew hems on the party dresses that would be worn by the children in the first act of *The Nutcracker*. Mama's supervisor, Madame Federova, rewarded Irina by giving her some scraps of cloth and ribbon to use for making doll dresses. The greater reward came near the end of the day, when Papa asked if Irina would like to watch the students from the ballet school rehearse on stage.

Now Irina settled herself into one of the theater seats. She glanced up at the tsar's box. No mice today. Then, from the pocket of her pinafore, she pulled out Lyudmila. Papa had carved the tiny doll from bits of wood, painting a serene, artistic expression on her face, and fitting her together in such a way that her arms and legs could bend. Irina



set Lyudmila on the arm of the theater seat so that she could see the stage.

The assistant ballet master, Monsieur Ivanov, was sitting a few rows in front of her. His head turned back and forth as he watched the students dancing to the lively music being played by the rehearsal pianist. Irina kept her eyes on the girl dancing the role of Clara. Even now, Mama was upstairs working on Clara's costume. It would be white with ruffles and a sash of crimson satin. Irina was already planning to make a similar dress for Lyudmila.

Suddenly, Monsieur Ivanov leaped to his feet. "No, no, no!" he shouted, and the music came to a halt.

The assistant ballet master strode down the aisle and up onto the stage. "Now then, children! You must form two circles when you dance: two *precise* circles, one inside the other. When the music changes, you must open up, regroup, and form a figure eight. As for you, Clara — what's your name again?"

The student bobbed in a curtsy. “Stanislava, Monsieur Ivanov.”

“I am aware that you are talented, Stanislava, but I don’t want you outshining the other dancers. It’s too much of a distraction. Three simple *châiné* turns are all that is required; no *piqué* turns!”

Irina didn’t agree. Stanislava was clearly capable of performing the *piqué* turns. Just think how lovely they would look when she was wearing her ruffled costume!

“Yes, Monsieur. I am sorry. I will do it right this time,” said Stanislava.

The music started up again. The children danced. Monsieur Ivanov returned to his seat. “Remember to smile, Clara!” he shouted above the piano.

Yes, thought Irina, this *was* supposed to be a happy scene. Later on, however, Clara would *not* be smiling. Not when dancers dressed as mice invaded the stage. Then Clara would have to look frightened.

Irina thought of the real mice, trying to perform

The Nutcracker on their tiny stage. Wouldn't it be silly for the mouse Clara to be afraid of mice?

Just then she felt something tickle her neck. Startled, she looked up to see Papa holding a feather duster. He used it to point toward the rear of the theater.

She slipped Lyudmila into her pocket and followed him out to the lobby.

"It's time to go home, Irina. Will you go fetch Mama from the costume department?"

"Yes, Papa."

"And listen—I've got a treat for you. Today was Yuri Petrovich's birthday—you remember him, don't you?"

She nodded. Yuri Petrovich was one of the custodians—the nicest custodian after Papa.

"His wife baked cookies, and he brought some to work for us to enjoy. I saved one for you."

It was a spice cookie, smelling of honey and nutmeg and anise, and covered with snowy-white

icing. Irina's mouth watered as she took it from Papa. "May I eat it now?"

He laughed. "I think you'd better before I decide to eat it myself. Hurry, now! Go tell Mama that I'll meet both of you in the cloakroom."

Irina headed upstairs. But she didn't eat the spice cookie.

Not because she wasn't hungry, nor because she didn't love spice cookies. Rather, because it occurred to her that she knew someone else who might like them too.



CHAPTER 5

*Konstantin Grigorovich
Gurkin*

ALMOST AS SOON AS a mousetrap at the Mariinsky was baited, somebody was sure to steal the food. Nevertheless, Esmeralda always held out hope that she might find something to eat in the mousetrap under the cupboard in the costume department. The trap was an easy stop on her way home from rehearsal, so she always checked it.

One evening she arrived later than usual, rehearsal for *The Nutcracker* having dragged on after hours.

Monsieur Ivanov had been working with the students from the ballet school, making sure *they* knew the choreography for the children's dances in the first act. Correspondingly, Madame Giselle had worked all afternoon with Esmeralda and the children from the mouse ballet school, making sure *they* knew the choreography. Esmeralda's tail had popped free of the training ribbon several times, and she was worn out and disappointed by her performance. Worse, her day was not over, for tonight she was scheduled to go out on her first scrounge patrol. If she didn't hurry, she would be late.

Oh, but she was hungry! Would there be something to eat in the trap?

No! Once again, another mouse had come before her—a careless mouse who had forgotten to retrieve the kopek. The mouse had left the coin in plain sight, where a human could find it easily. Just suppose the custodians were to figure out how the mice were springing the traps! Just suppose they



decided to set new traps that were even harder to outsmart than these!

Sighing, Esmeralda picked up the kopek. She found a crack in the floorboards nearby and nestled the coin inside, where she knew she could find it the next time she checked the mousetrap.

As she turned to head home, however, she saw something on the floor not far away. She went over to investigate, but she smelled what it was even before she reached the big, round cookie. Esmeralda breathed in an aroma of nutmeg and honey and anise. She nibbled at the icing and closed her eyes with pleasure.

A whole cookie! Somebody must have dropped it. What a lucky day!

But it was so big. Could she carry it to the attic? Maybe she could try rolling it, or—

Just then, Esmeralda heard a noise. She darted into the shadows.

A moment later a man peered under the

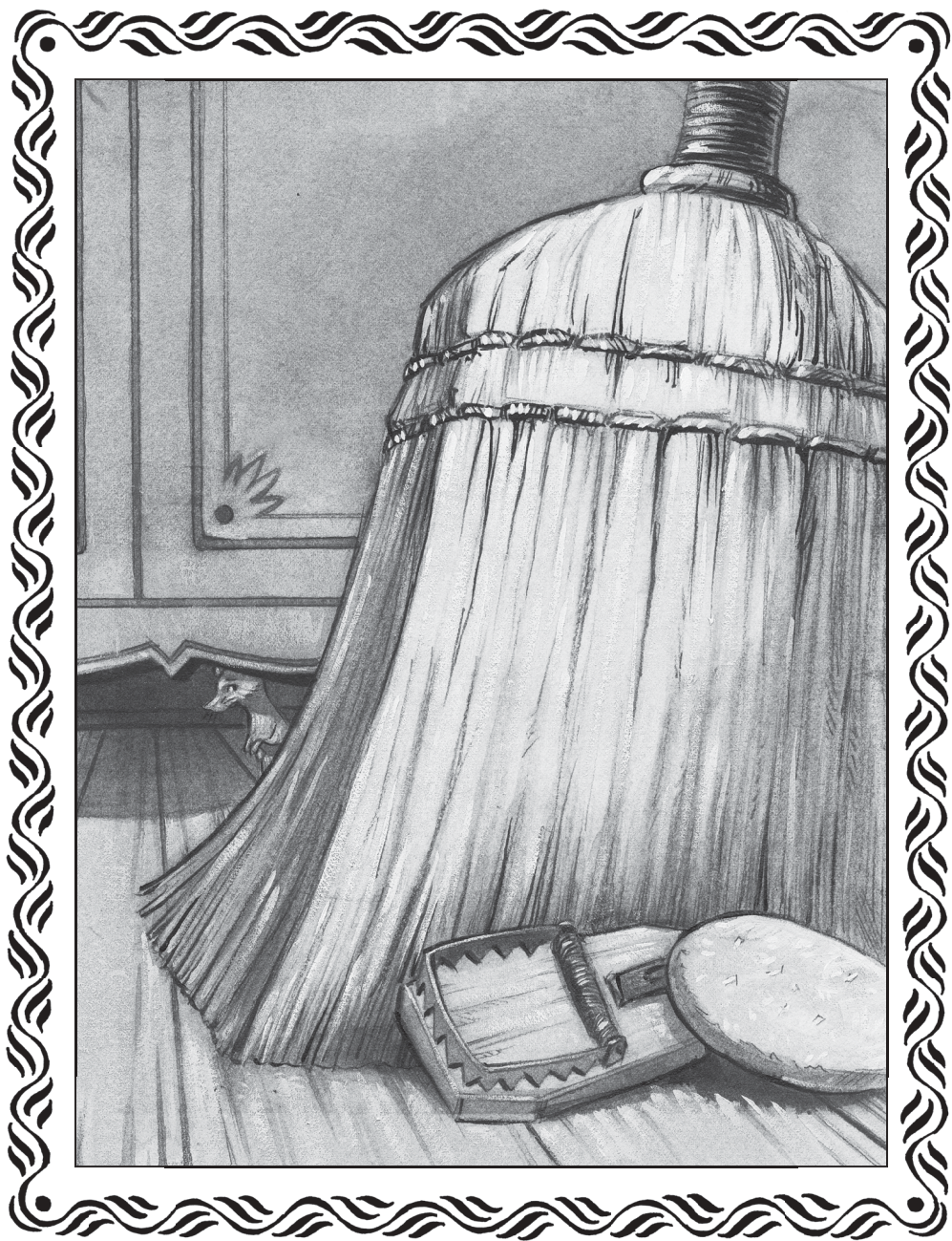
cupboard. Esmeralda recognized him and edged back farther into the darkness. Konstantin Grigorovich Gurkin was the first assistant custodian at the theater. None of the mice liked him. Gurkin was always calling them *vermin*, an ugly word that his supervisor, chief custodian Mikhail Danilovich Chernov, never used.

Gurkin's searching gaze alighted on the mousetrap. Seeing that it was sprung, he gave a dissatisfied grunt. He poked a broom under the cupboard, sweeping its bristles in an arc that barely missed Esmeralda but pulled the trap—and the cookie and a great quantity of dust—out from under the cupboard.

“Waste of lard,” the custodian muttered as he baited the mousetrap. “Waste of time setting traps in the first place, when people are so careless with food. Why not just invite the vermin to tea?”

Gurkin slid the trap back under the cupboard. He swept up the dust and the spice cookie. Esmeralda





heard a clatter as he emptied his dustpan into the wastebasket.

Only when the custodian had clumped out of the room did she dare retrieve the kopek. She tossed it at the trap. *Snap!* She put the coin back in its hiding place and scooped up the lard. It wasn't nearly as appetizing as the lost treat, but it *was* food and she *was* hungry. Her brother and Conrad would be hungry, too. She wouldn't even tell them about the cookie, Esmeralda decided as she hurried off to the attic.



CHAPTER 6

Maksim

GRINGOIRE NOT ONLY loved to read, but he also loved to write. He dabbled in poetry and had aspirations of becoming a playwright. He also kept a diary, using a pencil that had been sharpened to a stub to record his experiences on cigarette papers stolen from the theater director's office.

He was working on his diary when Esmeralda reached the attic. He looked up and said, "Ah, there you are. Conrad's already come and gone."

"Gone!"

“He said not to worry; he’ll take your place on scrounge patrol.”

“Oh, no!” Esmeralda thrust the sticky lard at her brother and ran back the way she had come. It wasn’t right for Conrad to take on her responsibility. He must be as tired as she was!

She made her way down to the rendezvous point—a crack in the stonework at the back of the theater—and squeezed through. The air was chilly and the moon already up. There were no mice to be seen, but Esmeralda recalled Conrad mentioning that they usually scrounged for food behind a bakery near the theater. Her parents had taken her to the bakery when she was small, and she was certain she still knew the way. She must follow the path along the canal behind the Mariinsky. She must cross the first bridge she came to, and the bakery would be in sight on the other side of the water.

Alas! Halfway across the bridge, Esmeralda could see that she was wrong. The bakery she remembered



was gone. A sign in the window indicated that the shop now sold carpets. Her cousin and the scrounge patrol were nowhere to be seen.

A cart rolled toward her. She leaped out of its path and nearly tumbled into the canal. She backed away from the parapet, turned, and found herself face-to-face with two rats.

Their fur was slick and smelled of fish. “What have we got here?” said the larger rat.

“A wee little mouse,” said the smaller rat—who wasn’t *much* smaller.

“Very little. She looks hungry.”

“Maybe we should drop her in the river so she can go fishing.”

“Please let me by!” said Esmeralda.

“Listen to her—very polite, isn’t she?” said the larger rat.

The smaller rat sneered. “I’m surprised she can speak Russian. Those Mariinsky mice always speak French. All hoity-toity.”

“I’m as Russian as you are!” Esmeralda’s temper was up now.

“Let’s not drop her in the river,” said the larger rat. “I’m hungrier than she is. Not much meat on her bones, but there might be enough for a snack later on.”

He must be bluffing. Rats didn’t eat mice. At least, Esmeralda didn’t think they did.

The larger rat stepped toward her. Esmeralda picked up a pebble. She lifted it above her head, ready to throw it. “Let me pass!” she said.

The larger rat guffawed. The smaller rat snickered.

Suddenly, a mouse pushed his way between the rats. He strode over to Esmeralda, turned, and faced her tormentors. His shadow stretched out impressively as he said, “You heard the lady.”

“Maksim!” said the larger rat. The smaller rat shrank back.

The mouse nodded. “That’s right. Now, get off





my bridge before I call for some reinforcements.”

To Esmeralda’s astonishment, the rats did just that. Silently, they waddled away, rounded the end of the bridge, and slid off the embankment into the canal.

Esmeralda dropped the pebble. She stared at the mouse. He appeared tough and sturdy, with charcoal-colored fur and a piratical-looking scar just below his eye. If he hadn’t just helped her, she might have felt wary of him. She said, “Thank you! Is this really your bridge?”

The mouse grinned. “Well, I have an agreement with a cat that lives under it. I bring him things—treats, you know—and he offers some protection in return. Those rats know better than to act the way they did. They’re a pair of bullies. This is their idea of fun.”

“I don’t like rats,” said Esmeralda, though, in truth, she had never met any before tonight.



“They’re not all like that. Some of my best friends are rats.”

A mouse who was friends with rats? Esmeralda had never heard of such a thing.

He must have guessed what she was thinking. “I’m friends with just about everybody,” he explained. “There’s hardly a mouse or a rat or a dog or a cat in Saint Petersburg who doesn’t know Maksim!”

“You haven’t seen other mice tonight, have you?” asked Esmeralda. “A group from the Mariinsky?”

“You’re from the theater, eh? No, I haven’t seen anybody tonight. My guess is your friends are at the bakery. That’s where they always go. Not that there’s ever much to find there.”

“But the bakery is closed.” Esmeralda pointed across the bridge.

Maksim shook his head. “There’s a new bakery. It isn’t far. I can take you there, if you like.”

Conrad would want her to go back home,

Esmeralda knew. He was always telling her how dangerous Saint Petersburg was—always warning her to beware of strangers.

Certainly, Maksim was a stranger. But she liked him already, and he was completely at ease talking to rats—and even cats. Esmeralda said, “Thank you! I’d like that very much.”

He led her back the way she had come. They walked side by side along the stone path. As they passed the mouse entrance to the theater, Maksim commented, “No show tonight.”

“No, not tonight.”

“I suppose you must be a dancer if you’re from the Mariinsky.”

“Yes, though I’ve only just joined the company. I haven’t danced in any of the productions yet.”

“In the company! Say, you’re talking to a real fan. My friends and I go to the ballet whenever we can.”

Esmeralda’s interest was piqued. She had never



met an actual balletomane before. “Did you see *The Sleeping Beauty*?” she asked.

“Ah, *The Sleeping Beauty*! Very romantic!”

“My cousin was in it. He played Prince Désiré.”

Maksim stopped for a moment. “I’m sorry . . .” He looked at her questioningly; she could tell he wanted to know her name.

“Esmeralda.”

“Right, Esmeralda. My friends saw your cousin, but I’m afraid I haven’t seen a mouse production in some time.”

Esmeralda tried to hide her disappointment. She shouldn’t be surprised that Maksim preferred the human productions. Was it the dancing that he liked better, or the costumes and sets — the *spectacle*, as Madame Giselle called it?

Before she could ask him, Maksim touched her arm. He pointed and said, “There’s the bakery, and there’s the rubbish bin. No sign of your friends.”

The narrow alleyway was quiet and lonely. Esmeralda said, “But I’m sure Conrad said they were going to the bakery.”

Maksim looked thoughtful. “It doesn’t look like this bakery owner has even put out the garbage. Maybe your friends tried their luck at some other place. Where else do they like to go?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never gone out with them before.” Esmeralda couldn’t mask her disappointment. “I suppose I should just go home.”

“You could. But . . . if I can make an observation, Esmeralda?”

“Yes?”

“You look a little hungry.”

“I am, rather . . .” Esmeralda thought of the lost spice cookie.

“I’d like to take you out to eat.”

The way Maksim said those words—as if it would be a pleasure to him if she said *yes*, and a disappointment if she said *no*—made Esmeralda’s