



Magnificent epic on the eruption of violence

Floortje Zwigtmán

Wolf Pack

WOLFSROEDEL (Wolf Pack) is an impressive young people's book: well written by a gifted author, it has a strong narrative that is relevant, originally structured and abounding in ideas. It is a

novel in which a Romanian son talks about the tales that his father, Ion Brebu, once told him at the fireside. It's a simple beginning, but Father's own breathtaking story about the band of robbers to which he and two of his friends belonged in their youth pushes the narrow framework into the background, and the reader is drawn into a world as real as it is surreal.

The story of father Ion takes place in the nineteenth century when, as a boy of fourteen, he and his friends Alexandru and Vulpe lost interest in the hard life on the farm and slipped away to join the gang run by Vulpe's brother Lupu and known as the Wolfsroedel, the Wolf Pack. Their initiation into the robbers' existence is harsh. Gradually 'harsh' degenerates into 'immoral' and even 'criminal,' when firmly implanted scruples are not strong enough to shake off peer-group pressure. The gang desecrates an old grave at Snagov Monastery on an island in the middle of a lake. It's the grave of the fifteenth-century prince Vlad Tepes, known in Romanian folk tales as Prince Dracula. Stories of this notorious villain and his brother come to life in the *Chronicles of Snagov*, episodes narrated from days gone by. Little by little Zwigtmán reveals the relationships between the fifteenth-century royal brothers and the farm brothers Lupu and Vulpe from the nineteenth, relationships that prove to be not only historical but magical and mythical as well. The meticulous way in which the author shows how an Al-Qaida-like mentality and rhetoric can develop, albeit a Christian variant – or what passed for Christian in the fifteenth century –, is what gives the book its relevance.

The book is saturated very naturally with Romanian folk culture. It is one long fireside tale, interspersed with Romanian folk stories, mythology, riddles and vampires. Zwigtmán constantly plays with the border between reality and fantasy, and her evocative use of language lends an inescapable realism to these supernatural phenomena. A masterful young people's novel on the origins of violence, and an appeal, especially to those under peer group pressure, to think and act autonomously.

LIEKE VAN DUIN

Floortje Zwigtmán – pseudonym for Andrea Oostdijk (b. 1974) – is regarded as a great talent in the world of young people's literature. She attended teachers' training college, worked as a teacher and then started her own copywriting business. She writes and edits teaching methods for schools as well as her novels for young people. Her first book, *Spelregels* (Rules of the Game), was warmly received, and her second book, *Wolfsroedel* (Wolf Pack), also went down well with the critics; she received both the Gouden Uil and the Zilveren Zoen. She does extensive research for her novels, but always manages to blend the historical facts into her stories with subtlety. Her literary models are Emily Brontë, Melvin Burgess – whose honesty about human relationships she especially admires –, and Astrid Lindgren for her fantasies and versatility.

Magisterial youth literature about how violence erupts.

LITERATUUR ZONDER LEEFTIJD

A tome of majestic proportions, *Wolfsroedel* is so multifaceted and wide-ranging it will stay with me forever. It is about the essence of mankind and has the oppressiveness of Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, the mysteriousness of Preussler's *Master of the Black Mill* or Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, and the suppleness of Lindgren's *Ronja the Robber's Daughter*.

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A conversation with children's book author Floortje Zwigman

The evil within

by Judith Eiselin

translated by Nancy Forest

Wolfsroedel (Wolf Pack) is a historical novel, but it's also a young people's book with plenty of blood and gore. As author Floortje Zwigman puts it, "Nothing's off-limits, and young people's books are no exception."

It's evening in Middelburg. Walking along the dusky railway embankment is a frail figure with a black cat on a lead, a creature with bulging yellow eyes. Floortje Zwigman (b. 1974) is taking her cat for a walk – her witch's cat, as she tells me during our conversation one Friday afternoon at Utrecht train station. "When I walk my cat I think about what I'm currently writing. This time it has to be a light book, a story from Victorian London, which wasn't nearly as prudish and boring and stiff as many people think."

Earlier this year *Wolfsroedel* was published, a book about human evil. Three nineteenth-century farm boys from Walachia, part of present-day Romania located at the crossroads of Islam and Christianity, join a band of thieves. They're out for wealth and fame, but what they find is hatred, jealousy and thirst for blood – in each other and within themselves. Zwigman combined her story about thieves with the history of two medieval princes, the brothers Vlad and Radu. There's something oppressive about the hefty *Wolfsroedel*, like William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, and it's as dark and thrilling as Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. It may be the bloodiest young people's book ever written.

Wolfsroedel describes how thrilling it is to commit murder, how one of the young thieves is slaughtered and pickled like a pig, and how the captain Vlad Tepes, better known as Dracula, deals with people who don't strike his fancy, by impaling them on a stake. Man is a wolf. Good and evil don't exist, and the occasional glimmer of hope is rare. Zwigman is no teller of fairy tales, and that has cost her dearly. *Volkskrant* reviewer Marieke Henselmans roundly condemned the book. "Zwigman opens doors that are better kept closed", she argued in her review, "certainly as far as children are concerned".

"But *Wolfsroedel* isn't a children's book," says Zwigman. "It's a book for all readers fourteen and older. I didn't want to tell a story about how good always triumphs, because it doesn't. And I didn't want to come up with a ready-made explanation of how to deal with the problem of evil." It bothers her that her book was not judged on its literary merits but on its pedagogical message. "A writer, and that includes a writer of books for young people, has the right to broach every

subject and write about whatever he chooses. And I want to take my readers seriously.”

She doesn't want to educate, but she does have a message to convey. Her readers should at least learn to think for themselves. “I think children here have it too easy. They get everything, they're allowed to do so much, but they don't learn to listen, they don't learn to put themselves in someone else's shoes, and they don't learn to make decisions. All the decisions are made for them, at least until they're sixteen. I think you should appeal to the sense of responsibility that children, and certainly young people, carry with them. They enjoy it, too. It starts with getting the children to do the shopping by themselves.”

Violent fantasies

Zwigtman argued in the *de Volkskrant* that her book can help to “recognize the evil within yourself.” In the readers' discussion that followed on the internet, she was branded as commercial – mainly by people who had never read her books –, as someone who cashed in on her “immature violent fantasies” by foisting them on innocent young minds.

Zwigtman's first book, *Spelregels* (Rules of the Game, 2001), is about two wealthy medieval adolescents who also have little say over their own lives. She wrote the book in response to her final paper for teachers' training college, a study of children in the Middle Ages. Until then she had never written; she preferred drawing. She illustrated her favourite books at the time: *Lord of the Rings*, *Dracula* and *Wuthering Heights*. But a career as an artist was too risky, she thought, and she decided not to go to art academy. Encouraged by a teacher, she began to write. The main characters in *Spelregels* are stuck with each other because their parents are arranging a marriage between them. They don't like each other. But whereas *Spelregels* ends hopefully, *Wolfsroedel* is much blacker and heavier.

Zwigtman's aim with *Wolfsroedel* was to explore the causes of violence. Violence is never senseless. It's an important tool for getting something done. She also wanted to put into words the 'sensual' struggle for power that is hidden in each of us. In a certain sense *Wolfsroedel* is a kind of self-examination, too. As a child, Zwigtman was mainly an observer. Neither a leader nor a follower, she placed herself outside the group. When the child who was the object of everyone's teasing left the class, she herself became the temporary victim.

Zwigtman became a teacher, just like her parents. In the groups of children who made up her classes she saw how peer group pressure works and the roles that children assume, roles from which it is so difficult to break free. Now she develops and writes teaching methods for primary schools. She's currently working on a book of stories about Mohammed for the subject “schools of spirituality.” She herself was raised a Protestant. These days, she says, she

believes in “the good.” “But I don’t know where the good comes from – from God or from people.” She no longer teaches in school.

Little refugees

As a student at teacher-training college Zwigtmán found herself standing in front of a class containing refugees from Bosnia and Croatia. She heard the stories about neighbours who were transformed into enemies after years of peace, the baker suddenly being unable to talk to the butcher. “I wanted to understand it all: why everyone had to take sides, what the armies and people’s militias were like, how the past influenced the present, and whether something like that could happen here. The answer was yes. Right after that Pim Fortuyn came along. It was the emergence of boorishness. Somebody shouts something and you just go running after him, and if you don’t happen to like what he’s saying you shoot him.” Her search culminated in *Wolfsroedel*. She believes that all the research she did has given her a great deal more than the book alone. “I understand the hijackers of 11 September better than most. I don’t sympathize with them, absolutely not. But I understand their reasons. These kinds of things can develop given a certain climate.”

Zwigtmán’s research isn’t limited to serious reading. For *Wolfsroedel* she also did Romanian style cooking for a while. While writing *Spelregels* she baked medieval bread in a flower pot. “I feel like a detective. I want to know everything. If I’m walking down the street and I see a dog get hit by a car, I imagine how I would react as a medieval person, for instance. I’d toss it in the gutter.”

She insists that her main characters fit their period, instead of being modern clones with modern preoccupations, and this is refreshing. Zwigtmán is delving deep into the Victorian period, for her new book. The eyes in her white, medieval, Madonna-like face begin to sparkle. “It was such a dynamic period. London was a world city. Did you know they had theatres with electric lighting, even then? And street stands full of newspapers? The whole world converged in London!” She’d give anything to spend a day walking around in a corset. How would that feel: so stiff, so erect and so beautiful?

Sample translation from

Pack of Wolves by Floortje Zwigman

(Baarn: De Fontein, 2003)

Translated by Lance Salway

Introduction

'Pack of Wolves' takes place at different times and in different places. The story of Ion has nineteenth-century Romania as a backdrop, the story of Vlad and Radu is set in Wallachia in the fifteenth century. Wallachia is now part of Romania, but in the Middle Ages it was an independent country with a prince as head of state.

The story is told in the words of different narrators, each with their own history and convictions. Because their way of life is somewhat different from our own, it was felt necessary to give a little extra background information; a map has been included, together with an explanatory list of words and a chapter setting out the historical background.

Part I

One evening, when my wife Martha had put the children to bed, my father and I were sitting on the bench by the hearth. We were silent, as we had so often been recently. It was a long time since my father had said: 'Vilcu, shall I tell you another story?' I had grown accustomed to the silence but that evening it started to get on my nerves. I gave my father a nudge. 'Do what you always used to do,' I said. 'Tell me something.' He turned slowly towards me: 'So you want to hear a story? And preferably one that has never been told before, of course. That will be

difficult. I've told you all the stories that I know. All . . . except one. There is just one story that no one has ever heard.'

He moved closer to the fire and it looked as though he was about to lapse into his usual silence once more. 'Why not?' I asked, trying to get him to tell me more. 'Why not, you ask? Well, to start with, because they would say "that old Ion Brebu has at last taken leave of his senses." And because it is not a pleasant story, it doesn't have a happy ending. I've always kept it to myself, partly because I don't play a large part in it, and because you always prefer to remember the good days of your life rather than the bad. But I'm now the only one left who can still tell this story, and it wriggles around in your head, a story like this one. So someone else has to hear it before too long, and because I am old and may not have much time left, it should be this evening.'

This is the story that my father told me.

1. Young wolves

That spring we made ourselves scarce. In the end it was Vulpe who took the bit between the teeth.

'I don't want to spend another summer working like an ox on the land,' he decided.

'Nor me!' Alexandru agreed, throwing down his spade.

So we packed our things in secret and slipped out of the village the morning after the Feast of St George. When we were a safe distance from the village, Vulpe let out a loud cry of joy that startled the sleeping pigeons in the forest. 'Freedom! Farewell, dull boring work! Farewell, dull boring village! I hope I never set eyes on you again!'

'Yes, never again,' Alexandru mumbled, but he too was happy. 'No more lessons from the priest anyway.' Vulpe sniffed. 'Reading and writing lessons! I don't see what a normal man wants with such things. Reading and writing, that's just for monks and stuck-up city folk. You only get limp, girlish hands that way, not strong working fists!'

‘But I thought you were the one who didn’t want to do any more work?’ Alexandru remarked spitefully.

Vulpe went red and I quickly came between them: ‘Let’s not quarrel now. We’ve got to try and find Lupu and his gang. Is it much further, Vulpe?’

‘We can be there by midday,’ he answered curtly, ‘if you weaklings get a move on, that is.’

‘All right, all right, I’m coming, aren’t I?’ said Alexandru, following close on his heels.

We walked on, still squabbling. That’s how it had always been. Vulpe, Alexandru and I were the best of friends but there were times when we couldn’t stand each other. Vulpe wanted to be our leader. Alexandru didn’t like that idea. Why should one of us be better than the others? He just couldn’t let the idea drop and so there was always quarrelling, and I never knew which side to choose. I hoped that it wouldn’t be as bad this summer.

We had decided to join Lupu Branistari’s gang. They were all farm boys who had grown sick and tired of the village with its petty rules and eternal round of work and sleep, sleep and work, and had found a different way of earning a crust. They lived by robbery.

Branistari’s gang were hidden deep in the forest, in a place that none of the farmers knew, apart from Vulpe. Lupu happened to be his brother. We had already heard a great deal about him from Vulpe. Lupu Branistari was the most fearless robber in the district. He even stole money from the pockets of travellers while chatting to them! Alexandru and I longed to meet him, even if only to see if Vulpe’s stories were true or not.

Vulpe led the way. For a long time we simply followed the forest track, but near a twisted oak tree we turned on to a narrow path that was used only by animals. It wound through the trees, around small lakes and through marshy bogs, until we eventually came to a valley where brambles were growing. Vulpe came to a stop there. ‘From now on we must be on the look-out,’ he said. ‘They always

have someone on watch and strangers are shot on sight. Keep close behind me. I know what I have to do.'

'Yes, master, we're right behind you,' Alexandru grinned. He wasn't very impressed. 'You can come between us and the bullets.'

Vulpe pretended that he hadn't heard. He put his hands to his mouth and let out a ghastly howl, like that of a solitary wolf. Lupu's gang was called the Wolf Pack and this was their password. Before long an answer came from the little dell in the centre of the brambles. 'We can carry on in safety,' Vulpe said to us. 'Come on. They're in the bushes.'

Seen from above, there didn't seem to be anything unusual about Bramble Valley.

Great rampant brambles with impenetrable offshoots were growing there, ugly prickly bushes, but beneath the dead shoots a sort of cave had evolved, where a temporary hut had been made with planks. It was here that the robbers of the Wolf Pack hid when there was nothing to steal or, more usually, when they were simply feeling lazy. It was safe, because no farmer dared venture into the thorny wilderness of Bramble Valley, despite the delicious fruit growing there. Vulpe knew how to find the entrance to the cave, hidden behind some loose branches, and he crept inside. We followed him. In the gloom under the bushes, about nine lads were sitting round a low spluttering fire. They didn't look at all like robbers, even less like wolves. They were ordinary farm boys, just like us. The one in the middle was a little larger than the rest. That must be Lupu, I thought. He looked a lot like his brother: sturdy, muscular and just as ugly as he was strong. 'So, who have you brought with you?' he asked Vulpe, without greeting us.

'Two clever and useful boys from the village, Alexandru and Ion.'

'And what can they do?'

This was turning into a sort of interrogation. 'Ion is as handy with the bow as he is with the knife, and Alexandru can run very fast and read and write like the best of them.'

‘And he has such a nice face that he’d never be mistaken for a robber,’ Alexandru grinned, ‘which is more than can be said about certain others I could mention.’

Lupu didn’t take this personally and he carried on briskly. ‘I’ve got enough boys who are handy with the bow and can run fast. What else can they do?’ Vulpe brought his imagination into play. ‘We can creep through the forest more silently than a fox in the night and we can smell money from a long way off. When I was with Alexandru once, true as I’m standing here, a beggar came to our door and Alexandru said: “Don’t give him anything, Vulpe, that man’s rolling in money!” And blow me down if it wasn’t true.’

‘Yes, yes, they can stay’ Lupu interrupted his chatter. ‘I can always use a few greenhorns for the boring jobs. If they get through the initiation, that is.’

‘What initiation?’ Alexandru asked as carelessly as he could.

‘You’ll find out soon enough!’ one of the lads by the fire called out. They were enjoying the fact that they knew what was coming but we did not. It was hardly reassuring.

That afternoon everything was made ready in a small clearing that lay behind the brambles. We had to know nothing and so we were guarded by two lads from our village. Despite all Vulpe’s urging, they didn’t give anything away and we could only guess what was going to happen to us.

It was evening when Lupu came to fetch us, followed by the others. He was wrapped in a sort of fleece and was carrying a mask, a wolf’s head.

‘Are they scared enough yet?’ he asked our guards. His eyes were shining with pleasure.

‘I’ve never been so scared in all my life,’ Alexandru said drily. He had no intention of being taken in by their little game. Lupu threw him a skin. ‘Put that on!’

‘Fine by me!’ Vulpe and I also had to wrap ourselves in skins. They smelt greasy; the animal scent still clung to them. Then all three of us were given a wolf mask. ‘Perhaps we’re going to hunt deer in the dark forest,’ Alexandru whispered.

I grinned. After all our fears, it looked as though this would turn out to be just a rather ridiculous charade.

In the centre of the clearing lay a circle of sticks and clubs, and a pile of reed figures like scarecrows, each as tall as a man. I wondered to myself what it could all mean. Lupu came and stood before us. 'This is the test that will decide if you are worthy to join Lupu Braistari's gang,' he said. 'Those who pass will be admitted into the brotherhood, but those who fail . . .' He shook his head and clicked his tongue.

'I wouldn't think you've got much of a chance,' added a tall lad beside him. His name was Beldie and, we heard later, he was Lupu's second-in-command. 'Are you ready to proceed?'

With great difficulty, Alexandru put on his most serious expression. 'Yes.' Vulpe and I agreed too.

'Now let commence the night that will last longer than three full days!'

Lupu had assumed a different voice and posture, as dignified as a priest. The robbers took us to the centre of the clearing. They were not exactly gentle, pulling us along as though we were stubborn horses.

'Put on your masks!' Beldie ordered.

We obeyed. The masks were of rough wood that grazed our cheeks. I heard the muffled chuckling coming from behind Alexandru's mask. I too still thought it was all a joke, a good way of making fun of us greenhorns. The first doubts began to creep in when I saw the cooking pot. It was an old-fashioned cauldron with a mysterious substance steaming inside. Lupu scooped out three dishes full. Were we expected to drink that disgusting stuff? With obvious pleasure, Beldie told each of us to kneel down in front of a dish. We had to keep our hands behind our backs. 'Lap it up, you dogs!'

My nose was pushed into the steam. The stuff smelt disgusting, like rotting leaves, pus and dead animals all mixed together. I could not take in more than a couple of mouthfuls. The stuff was like liquid fire, burning a path from my gullet to my stomach.

The resulting coughing fit caused much pleasure among the robbers: ‘Just look at him! He’s never drunk anything stronger than milk!’

Now they had sticks and cudgels in their hands and they started to poke us with them.

‘Come on, get up, wolves. Let’s see how fierce you are!’ We made a few playful lunges at them but all too soon something strange started to happen, over which we had no control.

‘I . . . I’m going to be sick,’ Alexandru said anxiously.

Lupu came up to him, pushed his head forward and forced his mouth closed. ‘Swallow,’ he ordered. It was clear that we had to keep this strange stuff inside. What was it? Poison? An intoxicating potion?

The peculiar tingling feeling started in my fingertips. After that my entire body began to tingle as though I had been walking in the freezing cold on a winter’s day. My legs grew limp and I sank to the ground. The same thing was happening to Vulpe and Alexandru. The robbers shouted and ran up to us with their sticks and cudgels. ‘Finish them off!’ I heard Beldie screaming above the rest. ‘Finish them off!’

I wasn’t scared. Quite simply, I knew that they were going to kill me and there was nothing I could do about it. The drink had also done something to my spirit. I had turned into a feeble, trembling animal, surrounded by wolves, with no means of defending myself. The first blows felt the worst. Before long I was being beaten so hard that I could hardly feel anything any more. I tried in vain to protect my head.

Beldie walked from one to the other and then planted his boot in my side: ‘Come on, get up, you sissy! Crying for your mother won’t help you at all. They’ll beat you to a pulp if you don’t fight back!’

Slowly, painfully slowly, a spark of resistance started to grow inside me. A scream seemed to spread through my entire body until at last it burst out: ‘Scum!’

It was as if that cry was the signal for my whole body to obey, because I suddenly regained control over my limbs. I was overwhelmed by a terrible rage. Did that scum really think that they could just beat me to death like a stray dog? I

screamed again and leaped to my feet. I'd give these wretches, even if I had to do it with my bare hands! With a roar, I seized the stick of the nearest robber and broke it in two across my knee.

'Well done!' the others laughed. 'Show us what else you can do!'

I don't think that I was ever very strong as a boy, Vulpe could always get the better of me, Alexandru too, if he wanted. But there, in that clearing, I was so beside myself that I felt able to take on the whole pack of robbers all on my own. I grew madder and madder with every stick that I broke, and with every cudgel I grabbed.

'Scum!' I screamed at the robbers as they ducked hastily away from me. 'Scum! Scum! Scum!' Only the second-in-command, Beldie, dared to challenge me.

'You're roaring like an ox, new boy!'

He would have to pay dearly for those words because now I saw every joke as an insult. I grabbed him by his greasy spiky hair, pulled him towards me and sank my teeth into his nose. 'Aah!'

Beldie sprang backwards, heaping curses upon me, while the other robbers doubled up with laughter. 'He's a good boy, this new one! Look out, Beldie, he'll have your job before you know it!'

The robbers retreated into the darkness. Alexandru, Vulpe and I were left standing there, snorting like a herd of oxen. What now? There were no adversaries left for us to rage against. Then Vulpe saw the pile of reed figures. For some reason they aroused his anger.

'God-forsaken rubbish!' he screamed and rushed up to them. He grabbed the first figure he could find and started to pull it apart, limb from limb. Alexandru didn't wait for long. We hated those stupid dolls with their stiff outstretched arms and stupid grinning charcoal faces. The reeds flew round our ears as we pulled the heads from the trunks. The terrible rage of a moment ago had now been replaced by a debauch, in which we no longer realised what we were doing. The fire that I had felt in my stomach was now consuming my entire body. It was not an unpleasant feeling. It was the feeling that you get when you do

something dangerous or if you are dragged into a fast-moving dance. It makes you more than a little crazy. I no longer know what we got up to that night. I can just see Alexandru whirling round in a drunken polka, his arms full of reeds, and Vulpe standing on top of the pile of figures with his trousers round his ankles. In short, the sort of thing that you are ashamed of afterwards. But when I think about what still lay ahead of us, then these are the things of which I am least ashamed.

1. 'Steal a loaf of bread'

It's impossible to describe in words how we felt the next morning. The mother of all hangovers! We were lying in an untidy heap on top of each other in the darkest corner of the cave under the brambles.

Alexandru was the first to say something: 'Vulpe, get your dirty, sweaty feet out of my face!'

Vulpe got to his feet and dragged himself outside to be violently sick.

'What exactly went on last night?' Alexandru whispered.

The events of the day before now seemed as strange and terrifying to him as they did to me. We had lost all control of ourselves.

'I don't know,' I answered, 'but I never want to go through all that again.'

Vulpe came back in moaning. 'I thought I was going to die,' he growled.

'That's what I thought last night, too,' said Alexandru. 'By the way, they're waiting for us outside again now.'

'Why? We've had our initiation, surely? We're now members of "the brotherhood" or whatever they call it.'

'It looks as though we'll have to do something else. A sort of test.'

'Aaaah!' Alexandru covered his face with his hands. 'I'm not going outside!'

Vulpe gave him an encouraging pat on the shoulder. 'If what Beldie says is true, you'll have to. But we'll get through this together. After all, we survived last night, didn't we?'

‘If I’d known what was going to happen, I swear I’d have stayed a plain farmer,’ Alexandru declared solemnly.

The next test seemed deceptively simple. Lupu and the other lads took us to a settlement in the forest. Here stood the huts of poachers, who lived off the proceeds of the furs that they seized. Lupu’s assignment was: steal a loaf of bread. A loaf of bread! Simple! Child’s play! Alexandru would distract the poachers with a clever story while Vulpe and I crept inside one of the huts to steal a loaf.

‘Would you like it served with sausage or cheese, gentlemen?’ Alexandru asked the robbers.

‘Just make sure they don’t make sausage out of you, joker,’ Beldie threatened, but the others gestured to him to keep his mouth shut.

We crept towards the huts. The settlement was surrounded by tall bushes and so it was easy enough to reach unseen the hut that stood nearest to the forest edge. There Alexandru wished us luck and continued on his way. A little later we saw him wander into the encampment completely at his ease. We watched as he very politely greeted the first poacher that he met, a big unshaven fellow, and pointed to the furthest hut. That was where the person lived who he wanted to talk to. No, no, it would be fine outside. He had nothing to hide. As soon as the hut was empty, we sprang into action. We slipped inside without anyone noticing. It was dark in the hut. Apart from the door, there wasn’t a single opening to let light inside.

‘Let’s see if we can find some bread in here,’ I muttered.

‘There must be some,’ said Vulpe. ‘All normal people eat bread, even poachers. Aha!’

‘Aha what?’

He pointed to a wooden shelf in the corner, not from the door, on which were lying an old sausage and some fragments of bread.

‘That isn’t a loaf of bread!’

‘Bread is bread and besides, there’ll be more. Help me look. We must hurry. I don’t know how long Alex will be able to keep his story going.’

By now my eyes had grown used to the darkness, and the contents of the hut had begun to take shape. There was a straw mattress lying there, and on the wall was hanging a print taken from a book – a fairy princess festooned with jewels. There was a crooked chair there too, and on it . . . was lying the largest black dog I had ever seen! He didn't growl but kept his eyes fixed on us, his ears pricked.

'Vulpe . . .' I began but he had seen the monster too.

'Jesus,' he muttered.

Very carefully, we started to move backwards, step by step. The dog got down from the chair and followed us. His ears were lying flat now. He was getting ready to jump.

'Run,' I whispered to Vulpe.

As one man we turned and made our getaway. Vulpe snatched another chunk of bread as he rushed past. It was bound to go wrong. You can't expect to keep in front of big black dogs for ever, even if you run as fast as Alexandru Fagu. I felt something tugging at my trouser leg and measured my length on the floor. The dog was on top of me at once, growling as savagely as only a guard dog can. It seemed to me that it would be sensible to stay very still.

'Good dog,' Vulpe said hesitantly, not wanting to leave me in the lurch. 'Don't be scared, Ion, his master's coming.'

I looked up and saw the hefty owner of both the hut and the dog coming closer, followed by the even heftier poacher who had been talking to Alexandru. He was dragging Alex by the arm.

'Am I glad to see him!'

'That's right, Manja, good girl, grab him!' the first one roared. 'Thieves!'

It didn't look as though an explanation would be much help. Within a short time we were surrounded by a group of indignant poachers who had quickly drawn their own conclusions. 'It's those wretches of Brantistari's again. I wish he'd put an end to these stupid jokes. What have you come to steal this time? A loaf of bread, I suppose?'

'Of course they came for bread. It's the new boys again, still wet behind the ears. Exterminate the vermin, I say, before they give us any more trouble.'

Manja's owner grabbed the dog by the collar and promised her a tasty sausage.

'Can't you feed them to your dog, Georg?' he was asked.

Georg shook his head. He had thought of something better.

I expect you'll want to know what this was, Vilcu. Let me just say that he was a man of deeds and not words. And for the second time in two days we were beaten within an inch of our lives. Georg brought it to an end with a couple of thumping blows to the ears.

'And now get the hell out of here! And if I see any of you here again, I'll let Manja have her way!'

Defeated, we made our way back to Lupu and his gang. The robbers had followed everything from the bushes and were not impressed.

'What did I tell you?' Beldie whinnied. 'Sausage!'

'Even better: mincemeat,' growled some of the others.

'And where's the loaf of bread?' asked Lupu when his men had calmed down again.

Vulpe felt in his pocket and threw the crumbs at the feet of the leader.

'There!'

The robbers burst out laughing once again.

'Three crumbs! That's the worst ever!'

'It's not very much,' said Lupu, trying to keep a straight face. 'I must take counsel, brothers.' He retreated into the forest with Beldie and a few of the lads, and from their voices we could tell that they were not finding it easy to come to a decision. At last they returned with superior expressions on their faces.

'Ion Brebu, Alexandru Fagu and Vulpe Branistari,' Lupu began in the pompous tones that he used on important occasions, 'as leader of the Wolf Pack I must be firm and fair. Everyone who wishes to join us must pass two tests. *Two*, that cannot be altered. You have not succeeded in this. If it was left to my second-in-command, you would now be sent home, without your tongues. No one may divulge the secrets of the Wolf Pack. But I do not like such practices. I have therefore decided to give you a second chance.'

‘*One* chance,’ Beldie repeated, just to drive the point home that we still ran the risk of losing our tongues.

‘We will extend your period of initiation,’ Lupu went on as if Beldie hadn’t opened his mouth. ‘Let us just say that you have been allowed another month to prove yourselves. There will be no difficult assignments, no tests. Just do as you are asked. But do not think that it will be easy! If you persevere, you will be admitted to the brotherhood but if not . . . But I think that you will pull through. Take them back to the cave, men.’

The robbers shouted with joy and lifted us on to their shoulders. Singing and shouting, they dragged us back to the Bramble Valley: ‘Greenhorns! Whelps! Wolf cubs! Look out, here they come!’

Grinning awkwardly, we let it all wash over us, uncertain whether honour or humiliation had fallen to our lot.

3. Greenhorns

Even though we hadn’t passed the test, the robbers decided that there had to be a celebration. They brought out bottles, together with loaves of bread and chunks of cooked meat and sausages that certainly hadn’t come from their mothers’ kitchens.

‘It’s not so bad, the robber’s life, is it?’ said Lupu, contentedly picking a piece of meat from between his teeth.

‘Um – no,’ I answered with my mouth full. ‘Is it always this good?’

‘Well, of course there are good times and times that aren’t quite so good but on the whole . . .’

‘Anyway, it’s been a lot better since we got rid of our neighbours,’ observed Beldie.

‘The prison on the island in the lake of Snagov,’ Lupu explained. ‘We got close to the fire, didn’t we, brothers? But thank God our fingers didn’t get burned.’

‘What happened?’ Vulpe asked. He always liked to hear stories, especially if they were about mysterious places like Snagov.

Everyone knew at least one tall story about the island and the former monastery there, but Snagov was a place where no one ever went without a very good reason, and so no one knew which of the stories were true.

‘This is what happened, dear brothers. The jailers of Snagov woke up to the fact that the place was cursed and came to their senses. Too many prisoners were hanging themselves there, and what is the use of a prison if there aren’t any prisoners to guard?’

‘And the bridge,’ Beldie insisted. ‘Tell them about the bridge.’

‘Ah yes, the bridge!’ laughed Lupu. ‘Well, you see, Snagov is surrounded by water on all sides but you know that, don’t you? You can only get there by boat, there’s no place you can ford. And swim? You can forget about that. Once you get entangled in the reeds, no one can get you out! They pull you to the bottom, those reeds, and God only knows how deep the water is. Those honest jailers had to row round the plants to get all their prisoners to the other side. That had to change. They built a bridge. Oh, they worked so hard on it. We – do you still remember, brothers? – we went to have a look. We were very polite, very interested. “How’s the bridge coming along, lads? Fine? Oh, that’s good.” Then one day the bridge was finished . It was a festive occasion, of course. They even decorated the parapet with ribbons, red, yellow, blue, all very jolly. We were present too. We wanted to know if the bridge was really strong enough. Who knows, we might even have had to cross it ourselves one day, hey? Now, the first group of prisoners was ready and waiting, down-and-outs, petty thieves, all manacled together on one long chain. Not very festive. Off they went. Oh, the bridge held up, until they were halfway across! Beldie here, he shouted: “There she goes!” but no one was able to reach the other side in time. We watched them disappear, one by one. They dragged each other down to the bottom with the chain. Not a trace of those prisoners was ever found. Just one shoe came floating to the surface! Luckily a couple of jailers decided to follow them, otherwise it might have been a really sad story!’

‘Anyway, we relieved the bridge of a few inconvenient lamps,’ said Beldie. ‘What’s annoying nowadays is that people no longer understand robbers like us. They think that we’re scum, like those gangs of vagrants who’ll cut your throat for a button. They forget that we share our spoils with the farmers here, and that some of us spend the winter sitting honestly by our parents’ fireside. We aren’t criminals.’

‘That’s true,’ Lupu agreed. ‘Our hands are clean. There is no blood on them and we want to keep it that way.’ He raised his glass. ‘To life! To the good robber life! Long may we continue to enjoy it!’

The following day was anything but festive. Lupu had said that we would have a hard time of it and he was right. The good robber life? Not for us! It began the morning after the party when the three of us were woken by a torrent of cold water in our faces.

‘Wake up, sweethearts,’ drawled Beldie, grinning so broadly that I thought his face would split. ‘There’s work waiting.’

Our first job was to shave Lupu’s beard. He clearly hadn’t touched a razor for weeks and it wasn’t easy to get the leader’s cheeks as smooth as he demanded. Vulpe in particular could do nothing right. Each time he gave his brother the mirror, he found yet more stubble, and he hammered Vulpe’s head with the shaving brush. ‘Here! Do you see that? Have you got soap in your eyes or what? And now you really *have* got soap in your eyes, haven’t you!’

As Vulpe dried his face the robbers rolled about with laughter at the sheer fun of it.

‘Please, Lupu,’ Beldie pleaded. ‘I just can’t take any more . . . I mean . . . he could go blind!’

‘I ask myself if he isn’t blind already,’ mumbled Lupu. ‘Come here, blind mole. Look there! There! Yes, that’s right, *that* cheek. No, it’s not smooth, it’s like a turnip field!’

And so it went on. I don’t think that Vulpe found it very much fun. He laughed, of course, but that was because he didn’t want to give the game away.

After the shave it was time to cook porridge. A cooking pot was hanging over the little fire and not far away was a sack of maize meal and two great cans of milk.

‘Off you go then,’ said a big robber who was called Bita. ‘I’m very fond of porridge and, as you may have guessed, I like a lot of it!’

I frowned at him. ‘You surely don’t think that I know how to make porridge? Cooking is women’s work.’

‘Exactly,’ Beldie answered sweetly, ‘and you are our little women. Our little lady cooks. And now you’re going to make delicious porridge for us. Good luck, sweetie.’

He bent down and gave Alexandru a big kiss on the lips.

‘Hey, you greasy big . . .’ Alex began, wiping his mouth, but I gave him a nudge in the back. It seemed to me it would be better to keep quiet until it was all over. Any sign of resistance would only provoke fresh teasing.

I have to admit that it must have looked pretty ridiculous, three strapping lads bustling about with cans and ladles, hastily stirring the pot to stop that blasted porridge from burning. It kept the robbers highly amused anyway.

‘If our breakfast is good enough, we might let you taste it too,’ someone shouted, and: ‘No, no, just let it burn! Then you can eat it all up yourselves!’

‘Yes! I’d really like to see their faces then.’

‘Me too! Throw another log on the fire!’

Despite all the heckling, we managed to produce something that everyone found edible. The robbers ate with relish, though of course they would never admit it: ‘This is the foulest muck I’ve ever eaten!’

‘That’s true. Look, isn’t this one of Vulpe’s hairs?’

‘Let’s have a look.’

Lupu gazed critically at the hair in question. ‘Is there a louse on it? Mmn . . . no. Then it can’t possibly be my brother’s.’

‘Best not to take any risks,’ said Bita, spitting a mouthful of porridge into Vulpe’s dish. ‘Oh, sorry, now I’ve spoilt your breakfast. Take some more, Vulpe. Oh no! The pot seems to be empty.’

There was nothing that poor Vulpe could do, other than heave a deep sigh and tighten his belt a notch.

After breakfast the robbers collected the porridge bowls and sent us outside.

‘Go and fetch water, ladies,’ said Beldie. ‘We’ll clean up this mess for you while you’re gone.’

‘Cross that field, and you’ll come to a small lake on the other side of the bushes,’ Lupu suggested cheerfully. ‘It really isn’t far.’

More than a little warily, we set off on our way. If a sugary Lupu was slightly suspicious, then a sugary Beldie was even more so.

‘You’ll see, there won’t be a lake there at all,’ Alexandru predicted.

We walked on, even so. If we were to return to Bramble Valley without any water, we’d get in the neck anyway.

The lake was nowhere near, of course. From the field, a narrow path led into the forest but it was so overgrown with weeds and brambles that it was impossible to follow without tearing our clothes.

‘This isn’t much fun,’ Alexandru said when a thorn ripped the sleeve of his shirt.

We both agreed.

It was getting on towards afternoon when, covered in scratches, we returned at last with a little muddy water in our somewhat leaky bucket.

‘Well, you took your time,’ grumbled Bitu, who had evidently been lying in wait for us. ‘Been having a nice game of hide and seek in the woods, have we? And all the time we’ve been sitting here with all this filthy washing up. It’s stinking out the whole valley.’

‘Surely the porridge wasn’t as filthy as all that,’ Alexandru joked in a weak attempt to hide his true feelings. ‘Pff! Go inside and have a smell of it then. I’ll be interested to know if you can stand it!’

We shrugged our shoulders and crept into the cave. By now we’d had enough of these jokes and there was still nearly a whole month to go. Inside, in the half-darkness, the dishes and the cooking pot were standing in a neat row.

And it was true that they didn't smell at all fresh. We bent over them, holding our noses. Inside each dish there lay a thick brown turd.

'This isn't much fun,' Alexandru said again.

The following day wasn't much better. The robbers used us as drudges and no one felt at all sorry for us.

'Here, ladies, here!' was the shout when yet another dirty, difficult or degrading job needed to be done. A stroke of luck for Alexandru and me was that the worst jobs were reserved for Vulpe. It may have been pure chance, it might also have been because Lupu wanted to make it clear that his brother wasn't being favoured. But sometimes I had the feeling that Lupu was enjoying it. He was the big, mighty Lupu Branistari, and Vulpe was just the little brother. And that's how it would have to stay if Vulpe became a member of the gang.

There was some minor teasing, like the time when Lupu deliberately stood in a puddle in the boots that Vulpe had just polished for him. But there were nasty and unpleasant things too.

One day the robbers took us with them 'out hunting', as they called it. A wine merchant would be travelling through the forest and Lupu wanted to 'do business' with him. What this meant was that Lupu would end up with the wine and the poor merchant with nothing. Excited at being taken seriously for the first time, we sharpened our knives on a whetstone. It looked as though our period of probation was over at last.