Feydor

Liam Cameron

Feydor was born in an Austrian village to a local father and Viennese mother. He was observant: he noticed where birds nested outside the church and the rhythms that people walked in. He was meek and unremarkable.

Saint Mathias stood in the square, its heavy doors remaining open on parade days. The soldiers would arrive radiantly, uniforms pressed and gleaming, horses snorting. The villagers lined the square, clapping and waving. Drums rolled. To the townsfolk, there was something deeply stirring in the footfall of their countrymen.

Feydor stood near the inn, watching. He recalled trying to march like the soldiers when he was just a boy, imitating the steps of passing guards. His grandfather had scolded him then. But later, by the fire, his grandfather would soften–

"They wear the coats we wore," he would whisper, with pride behind sorrow, like a personal *verbunkos*.

From above, petals floated gently down. An innkeeper, Lena, leaned from the window, smiling at the parade. A captain below caught one petal on his helmet and raised his hand to her in a jesting salute. Cries of laughter rippled through the crowd. The parade moved on, but the noise and energy clung to the square. Banners waved in the breeze as the next regiment came down the street. In the crowd, boys imagined themselves grown and gallant, and their fathers held them tighter.

Feydor stepped away from the commotion. The crowd was now too bright with passion, loudly swelling with each new regiment. As the scene faded behind him, the sounds of the parade dimmed. The festivities were still wrapping up in the village, the clatter of sabers replaced by the chatter of spoons. He walked toward the edge of the village where the trees began their faint chatter.

Feydor paused at the curb. The air outside Feydor’s house smelled like his mother’s soup. His family’s house stood at the brim of the forest, huddled near brush. The backyard was, at best, a cutout of the forest framed by a short wire fence. In the basement, Feydor shared a cold, mildewy room with his younger brother Alois, who was learning trade from a merchant in town. Though they didn’t always speak, there was a quiet bond between them at home, like two roots growing from the same soil.

Feydor heard his father’s voice snap through the front door, low but sharp. "And what would you have me do?" His mother responded in her clipped Viennese cadence. "At least try. We cannot live on pride and promises, Lukas." Feydor sighed and pushed the door open.

A humid heat hit him first. The kitchen lamplight glowed through steam rising from a large pot in the center of the table. His mother stood beside it, ladle in hand, cheeks flushed with frustration. His father sat across from her, jaw clenched, half-eaten bread in hand. Feydor moved quietly, as he always did. He filled a bowl with his mother’s soup, tore a slice of bread, and left. No one noticed him.

"You never listen!" his mother was saying. "You never see what’s coming. Vienna has work. My brother would take us in."

"Your brother wants a servant, not a family, Bettina" came the reply.

Feydor descended the narrow stairs to his room. He made sure the floorboards creaked, but still no one called after him.

His and Alois' room was small, set into the earth as an afterthought. One high window faced the back garden; the morning light that poured in was always soft. Two cots, a shelf of books, and a cracked oil lamp. Feydor sat on the floor and ate. The soup was excellent. He ate slowly, listening to the voices above carry on– quieter now, pushed to exhaustion. He could hear the weariness in them– two people trying to build a world out of broken tools.

He leaned back against his cot frame after finishing, bowl at his feet, and stared at the ceiling. The boards overhead vibrated with footsteps. He thought of the Kramniks. He remembered being younger, the summer Lena arrived in the village.

Feydor remembered the first time he visited her home. He remembered the dry, herbaceous smell of the living room. Lena would smile at him from across the table, not to be kind, but because he smiled. Lena had a laugh that made Feydor's stomach twist in ways he didn't yet understand. She showed him books written in letters he couldn't read, and he would watch her fingers trace the characters.

Then came shouting and adults gossiping at water wells. Crosses were drawn forcefully into the front door. One morning, someone painted something grim across the bakery wall. Eventually, Lena's family stopped coming to the square. Now, she worked at the inn, pouring wine with her wild hair tucked back. Feydor still saw her sometimes on her walk home. Smiles glittered if she caught his gaze. He had not spoken to her in years, not anything more than a polite nod.

Upstairs, Feydor heard a door slam. He did not feel sad, exactly, but the warmth of the soup had begun to fade. The voices above had settled. In this house, quiet was not peace, it was something waiting. The thought came to him: *I should visit them.*

Feydor swung his legs over the side of the cot and stood. He hadn't finished his soup, the taste was spoiled by the morning's dramatics. Just drank a little water, gathered his coat, and stepped outside. He walked the familiar path to Lena's home: half stone, then half timber, then up the stairs above the bakery. The same blue shutter hung crooked beside the window. The same nail stuck out of the porch rail.

It had been years since he last spoke to Lena's family. Not out of anger or estrangement, just the slow drift of time. After Lena withdrew from the square, her family had grown quieter. Still present, still working, but subdued. Their eyes, once lit, now coated with caution. They weighed their words before speaking. The village hadn't been openly cruel, but Feydor knew they weren't welcome. Gossip about the Kramniks slid just under the breath of the village. His mother's cousin once said something sharp about them over supper and laughed when no one else did. That was years ago, but sometimes things just hung in the air.

Feydor knocked, but there was no stirring behind the door. He waited a moment and knocked again, stronger but not too pointed. He stepped back, unsure now. Had he made a mistake? An imposition? Then, he leaned forward and spoke to the door. Not loud, just clear.

"It's me, Feydor."

For a few seconds, the silence deepened. Then a bolt slid back. The door opened a crack, and there was Lena's father. His beard had grown fuller, streaked with white, but his eyes were unmistakably youthful ike his daughter's.

"Feydor?" Mr. Kramnik asked.

Feydor's heart jumped slightly. He nodded, "I was nearby, I thought I'd say hello." The old man opened the door and without another word, embraced him strong and brief. When he let go, he held Feydor at arm's length, patting his shoulders.

"Come in!"

The house smelled of lemon and challah. Nothing had changed: the same low table, the same woven rug with the worn patch in the center. There were gaps in the shingles, casting patches of light like those that littered the forest. Lena's mother appeared from the kitchen, hands floured, apron dusted with spices.

"Feydor! Look at you! Sit down, sit down– have you eaten?"

He shook his head.

"Good," she said. "Then you'll have a real breakfast, not some scraps from your mother's stove."

He opened his mouth to defend his parents, but knew better– Mrs. Kramnik loved chirping at guests, especially welcome ones. Instead, he smiled and removed his coat. The kitchen table was quickly set. A pan sizzled. Before he knew it, eggs and a jar of plum preserves appeared. Her parents had brewed bitter tea.

"Lena's not here," Mrs. Kramnik said as she sat down. "She's gone to visit Ana's family. The farm out past the northern woods for two days, maybe three."

"That's alright," Feydor said. "I didn't come for her."

The conversation turned to other things: Alois' studies, the Kramniks' work at the bakery, Lena's job at the inn. Across from Feydor, her father sat quietly sipping his tea with both hands.

Then, Mr. Kramnik spoke up. "You were always kind to her. She said so. You never said cruel things."

Feydor looked down at his plate, unsure how to respond. There were many kinds of cruelty. "We were children," he said.

"Even then, character shows," Lena's father replied.

Breakfast passed slowly. The conversation continued to wander through the village's happenings. None of it was of particular consequence. There was no mention of Lena's absence from festivals at the square. No discussion of the soldiers who had just passed through town.

And yet, beneath the easy talk, there was fortitude. These people carried themselves with dignity out of defiance for their circumstance. Feydor thought of his own parents. The arguing. The bitter tension. His father's silence. His mother's disappointment. There was love, yes, but it was frayed at the edges. Here, in the Kramniks' kitchen, love was a firmly bound fringe.

"You're quiet," Mrs. Kramnik said, passing Feydor the tea kettle.

"Just thinking."

She smiled.

After the meal, he helped clear the table. Lena's mother hummed as she worked on the dishes, her voice high and soft. Mr. Kramnik lit a small fire in the heating stove and read from a tiny book.

Feydor lingered a little longer, then stood. "I should go," he said. "I've been thinking of staying out at my grandfather's cabin. Just for a few days."

Mr. Kramnik looked up. "That place is still standing?"

Feydor smiled. "Mostly."

"Good. It's quiet there," her father said.

They walked him to the door and embraced him.

"Come back soon," Mrs. Kramnik said. "We love you. Next time, Lena will be here."

"I'd like that," Feydor replied.

As the Kramniks faded from view, Feydor let his shoulders down. Feydor felt something unfamiliar creeping into his chest– not joy exactly, but lightness. Something long clenched had begun to uncurl. Inside, the house was quiet. None of them asked where he had been. In his room, he packed his satchel and left a note on the sheets of his cot. Not a goodbye, just a line saying he'd be back in a few days.

Then, without pomp, he slipped down the path toward the trees. As he walked on, the village fell away. He carried the day– not his own home, but the Kramniks'. He did not look back.