

The
HOUSE With
Chicken Legs
* Runs Away



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PROLOGUE

All my life, I have lived in a house with chicken legs. The house has carried me safely through forests, up mountains and along rocky shores. It has grown vine hammocks to rock me to sleep, leafy dens for me to read in, and – when I was younger – tiny stick creatures would sometimes leap from the floorboards to join in my imaginary games.

We have played hide-and-seek among tall trees, chased each other laughing through grassy meadows and swum together in seas sparkling with glowing plankton. And we've always talked to each other, in our own way.

Usually, the house listens to me and lets me know

what it is thinking and feeling through the shrug of its eaves or the tilt of its windows, the smile of its porch or the impatient twitching of its long, clawed toes.

We haven't always agreed on everything, but I have always felt loved and known that we have a special bond, because of our history and the ways our lives are entwined.

The house is a Yaga house – a place where dead souls come to celebrate their lives before being guided to the stars. I came to the house as a baby, to be guided, but I was too stubborn to pass through The Gate to the Stars. So, because I could not go back to the land of the living and would not go forward to the land of the dead, the house gave me enough energy to exist within it, on the threshold of life and death.

Baba, the Yaga who lived in the house, adopted me as her grandchild, Marinka, and I spent the first twelve years of my life as an apprentice Yaga, helping to guide the dead. We became a family: the house, Baba and me, and Jack too, of course – the jackdaw I raised from a chick.

We travelled the world together, throwing parties

for the dead almost every night, and when we weren't guiding, we read books, told stories, played games... or just sat together, wrapped in the warmth of each other's company as landscapes drifted by.

When Baba passed through The Gate last year, the house did everything it could to comfort me and give me a new life that would make me happy. I didn't want to become the next Guardian of The Gate, so the house helped me find an old friend of Baba's, Yaga Tatyana. The house grew together with Yaga Tatyana's house – which was old and broken – so that Yaga Tatyana could live with us and take over the responsibility of guiding the dead.

Then the house even gave me enough energy to be alive, for real. It settled here, in The Land of Lakes, so that I could be near my best friend Benjamin, go to school and meet other children and do everything I ever dreamed of.

The house has always been kind, generous, playful and protective. It has always taken care of me. Until a couple of weeks ago, when it began to change...



THE BONES CAUSE TROUBLE

My house has been behaving strangely lately. It started with the glowing mushrooms. Overnight, they grew all over the floors and walls. In the morning, their caps opened and clouds of glittering spores erupted, filling the air with an acrid, choking smell. Yaga Tatyana and I wore our headscarves over our mouths while we scraped the thick stalks away.

A week later, purple vines grew from the rafters. They were stippled with tiny, green thorns and followed us around the house, curling around our limbs and pricking our skin, leaving a stinging rash like nettles do. Jack squawked at them constantly, pecked at them with his beak and flapped his wings angrily whenever they snaked close to him.

Yaga Tatyana and I dressed in several layers of clothes to protect ourselves as we cut the vines down. The house fell into a huff then. Its eaves scowled and smoke puffed grumpily from the chimney.

Now, it's the fence bones causing trouble.

Since the house settled in this valley, in The Land of Lakes, the fence bones have stayed hidden in the skeleton store, which is tucked into the side of the house. Once or twice a month, the house stands up on its long, thin legs and walks to an isolated, faraway place, so that Yaga Tatyana and I can spend a night or two guiding the dead through The Gate to the Stars. At these times, the bones tumble out of the store so we can build the skull-and-bone fence that keeps out the living and guides in the dead. But as soon as we return to The Land of Lakes, where I have been trying to lead a normal life with the living, our responsibilities as Yaga become secret once more – here, we don't guide the dead and so the bones stay hidden. Well, they did until now.

For the last three nights, the bones have run out of the skeleton store after sunset and caused chaos. One of

our neighbours was out for an evening walk, and they scared him so much that he fell into a compost heap. Thankfully, Yaga Tatyana managed to convince him that it was a freak accident involving the wind and an old model skeleton she had kept from her days as a scientist.

Then the bones danced in the field between my house and my best friend Benjamin's house, which made Benji – the sheep I raised from a lamb – bleat so loudly with annoyance that he woke Benjamin and his father. At least they understand about the bones –



Benjamin and his father are the only people in The Land of Lakes who know this is a Yaga house. They helped me chase the bones back into the skeleton store, then Benjamin's father gave me a shiny metal padlock so that I could secure the door.

I don't understand how the bones escaped again last night, but they did. I woke to finger bones

drumming on my window and foot bones tapping on the porch steps. Yaga Tatyana somehow stayed asleep, so I crept outside to put the bones away myself.

It's almost dawn now, and I'm exhausted from hours spent trying to drive the bones back into the store. At least they've stopped running away from me. The early morning air is bitterly cold though – it feels more like midwinter than the start of spring – and I shiver as I wander around the dark and frosty field, gathering the scattered, lifeless bones into my arms.



Benji the sheep watches me curiously, occasionally nudging a tibia or a fibula in my direction, and Jack flaps to and fro, gathering some of the smaller bones in his beak.

"House," I say firmly, trying to remain calm as I carry another armful of bones towards the skeleton store. "Will you please tell me what is going on?"

But just like every other time I've asked the house about these strange happenings, the house ignores me. This time though, the house not only says nothing, but rises slightly and turns its back on me too.

I groan in frustration. I probably sound angry and I am a little, but more than anything I'm worried. The way the house has been behaving lately makes me feel like it is trying to push me away and I don't understand why.

Jack caws loudly and a knuckle bone he must have been carrying in his beak thumps onto my head. "Jack!" I reach up to rub my scalp and one of Jack's wings hits me as he rushes clumsily past. I turn to see him land heavily on Benjamin's shoulder.

Benjamin is dressed for school, a little untidily as usual. His mousy brown hair flops over his big brown eyes, his uniform is rumpled and his trousers are slightly too short after a recent growth spurt. Although we're the same age, Benjamin is taller than me now, and slim as a reed. His sketchbook is poking out of his pocket and there are grey smudges on his fingers, probably from sketching birds this morning over

breakfast. Benjamin loves birds and drawing – his dream is to become an artist.

"Hello, Jack." Benjamin strokes Jack's feathers softly, then turns to me and smiles. "Hello, Marinka. The bones got out again then."

"Yes." I tuck some of my red curls behind my ear, realizing I probably look even more dishevelled than Benjamin. "I'm trying to gather them up before anyone sees."

"I'll help." Benjamin picks up a skull rolling near his feet.

"Thanks. I don't want you to be late for school again though."

"You're not coming? I hoped you might today." Benjamin's shoulders droop a little with disappointment. "It's been ages since you have."

"I know. I'm sorry. It's just..." I crouch down to gather a jumble of ribs. "I haven't been able to concentrate there lately. It's probably because of everything going on with the house. I need to stay here and figure out why it's behaving so strangely."

"Do you have any ideas?" Benjamin asks as we

walk towards the skeleton store, our arms full of bones.

I look at the house, its back turned towards me, and my throat thickens. "I've known the house all my life. I should be able to understand what's going on, but the answer feels just out of reach."

"I'm sure you'll work it out soon," Benjamin says gently.

"I hope you're right." We reach the skeleton store and push the bones inside. "I'll have another talk with Yaga Tatyana. Maybe look for some clues in *The Book of Yaga* or *Yaga Tales* too. Do you want to come over after school and we can look together?"

"Yes, please." Benjamin reaches up to stroke Jack again, then glances at the sky. It is paling to the blue-grey of a bullfinch egg as the sun rises behind the mountains. Benjamin sighs. "I suppose I should head off."

Jack squawks loudly and flaps up onto the house's roof, and I wave goodbye. "Thanks for helping with the bones."

"See you later." Benjamin turns and walks away,

and I close the skeleton store.

Needles of rain fall, so icily cold that they sting. I pull my shawl around my chest and head towards the front door. But the house rises and turns, just faster than I am walking, so that the front door keeps getting further away from me.

I walk faster. Then, as frustration gathers inside me like a storm cloud, I break into a run. "House! Why are you doing this?" I shout.

The house turns even faster and I stop in despair. "Please, House. I'm tired and cold, and now it's raining too!" A hot tear rolls down my cheek and the house finally halts. It lowers itself closer to the ground, then shuffles slowly back towards me.

The porch balustrade leans in my direction. It feels something like an apology, or at least an invitation. Relief flows through me as I walk up the steps to the front door. But the door is shut tight.

"House!" I push the door harder, but it doesn't budge.

Smoke plumes from the house's chimney.

"What is going on?" I ask for the thousandth time,

not expecting the house to respond. I place my palms flat against the house's door, close my eyes and try to feel an answer instead.

Life thrums through the wood, the familiar pulse of the house. My brow furrows. It feels different somehow. Fainter. I concentrate. The pulse is erratic and uncertain too.

"Ow!" A sharp pain darts through my fingertips. Thistle leaves are growing on the door, with long, pointed spines. I scowl at the eaves, but then my heart softens as I remember how the house's energy felt beneath my hands.

Maybe the house isn't trying to push me away – maybe it is trying to tell me that something is wrong. A heavy dread swells inside me with the realization. The house is struggling and it needs help.



TOADS AND BEES

Yaga Tatyana comes to the door and opens it easily. She looks up at the eaves and shakes her head. "House, you really should stop teasing Marinka. And, Marinka, you should have woken me to help with the bones." Yaga Tatyana ushers me into the warmth and I collapse into my grandmother Baba's chair near the fire.

Even after all this time, Baba's chair still smells of her – lavender water, bread dough, *borsch* and *kvass*. I breathe in her scent and, for a moment, I feel calmer. My worries ease and the sharp edges of my feelings smooth away. But then my grief swells and my eyes sting with tears.

It's been over a year since Baba stepped through