



PROLOGUE



My house has chicken legs. Two or three times a year, without warning, it stands up in the middle of the night and walks away from where we've been living. It might walk a hundred miles or it might walk a thousand, but where it lands is always the same. A lonely, bleak place at the edge of civilization.

It nestles in dark forbidden woods, rattles on windswept icy tundra, and hides in crumbling ruins at the far edge of cities. At this moment it's perched on a rocky ledge high in some barren mountains. We've been here two weeks and I still haven't seen anyone living. Dead people, I've seen plenty of those of course. They come to visit Baba and she guides them through

The Gate. But the real, live, living people, they all stay in the town and villages far below us.

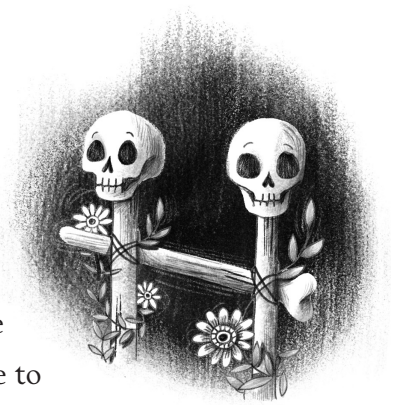
Maybe if it was summer a few of them would wander up here, to picnic and look at the view. They might smile and say hello. Someone my own age might visit – maybe a whole group of children. They might stop near the stream and splash in the water to cool off. Perhaps they would invite me to join them.

“How’s the fence coming?” Baba calls through the open window, pulling me from my daydream.

“Nearly done.” I wedge another thigh bone into the low stone wall. Usually I sink the bones straight into the earth, but up here the ground is too rocky, so I built a knee-high stone wall all the way around the house, pushed the bones into it and balanced the skulls on top. But it keeps collapsing in the night. I don’t know if it’s the wind, or wild animals, or clumsy dead people, but every day we’ve been here I’ve had to rebuild a part of the fence.

Baba says the fence is important to keep out the living and guide in the dead, but that’s not why I fix it. I like to work with the bones because my parents

would have touched them once, long ago, when they built fences and guided the dead. Sometimes I think I feel the warmth of their hands lingering on the cold bones, and I imagine what it might have been like to hold my parents for real. This makes my heart lift and ache all at the same time.



The house creaks loudly and leans over until the front window is right above me. Baba pokes her head out and smiles. “Lunch is ready. I’ve made a feast of *shchi* and black bagels. Enough for Jack too.”

My stomach rumbles as the smell of cabbage soup and freshly baked bread hits my nose. “Just the gate hinge, then I’m done.” I lift up a foot bone, wire it back into place, and look around for Jack.

He’s picking at a weathered piece of rock underneath a dried-up heather bush, probably hoping to find a woodlouse or a beetle. “Jack!” I call and he tilts his head up. One of his silver eyes flashes as it

catches the light. He bounds towards me in an ungainly cross between flying and jumping, lands on my shoulder, and tries to push something into my ear.

“Get off!” My hand darts up to cover my ear. Jack’s always stashing food to save for later. I don’t know why he thinks my ears are a good hiding place. He forces the thing into my fingers instead; something small, dry and crispy. I pull my hand down to look. It’s a crumpled, broken spider. “Thanks, Jack.” I drop the carcass into my pocket. I know he means well, sharing his food, but I’ve had enough of dead things. “Come on.” I shake my head and sigh. “Baba’s made a feast. For two people and a jackdaw.”

I turn and look at the town far below us. All those houses, snuggled close together, keeping each other company in this cold and lonely place. I wish my house was a normal house, down there, with the living. I wish my family was a normal family, too. But my house has chicken legs, and my grandmother is a Yaga and a Guardian of The Gate between this world and the next. So my wishes are as hollow as the skulls of the fence.



I light the candles in the skulls at dusk. An orange glow flickers out from their empty eye sockets, beckoning the dead. They appear on the horizon like mist and take shape as they stumble over the rocky ground towards the house.

When I was younger I used to try to guess what their lives had been like, or what pets they might have had, but now I’m twelve years old I’m bored of that game. My gaze is drawn to the lights of the town glistening far below; a universe of possibilities.

I jump as Jack swoops out of the darkness and lands on the window sill next to me. His claws click against the wood and he ruffles his feathers. It sounds like the wind in the trees and I think of

the freedom in the air.

"I wish I could fly down there, Jack." I stroke the back of his neck. "And spend an evening with the living." I think of all the things the living might be doing, things I've only read about in books but could actually do if I went to the town: run races or play games with other children; watch a show in a theatre surrounded by warm, smiling faces...

"Marinka!" Baba calls and the window blinks shut.

"Coming, Baba." I throw on my headscarf and run to the door. I should be there to greet the dead with her, to watch as she guides them through The Gate. After all, it's "a serious responsibility" and I have to "focus" and "learn the ways" so I can do it on my own one day. I don't want to think about that day. Baba says it's my destiny to become the next Guardian and, when I do, my first duty will be to guide her through The Gate. A shudder bursts through my chest and I shake it off. Like I said, I don't want to think about that day.

Baba is stirring a great cauldron of *borsch* over a roaring fire. She turns and smiles as I enter the room,

an excited twinkle in her eyes. "You look lovely, my *pchelka*. Are you ready?"

I nod and force a smile, wishing I loved guiding as much as she does.

"Look." Baba glances at her chair where a violin sits, freshly strung and polished. "I finally got round to mending it. I hope one of the dead will play us some fresh tunes."

"That would be nice." The prospect of new music would have excited me not so long ago, but these days, no matter which of her old musical instruments Baba fixes up, the nights spent guiding all feel the same. "Shall I pour the *kvass*?" I look at the table, where an army of stout glasses are waiting to be filled with the dark, pungent drink.

"Yes, please." Baba nods. I push my way through the steamy sour smells as she wails a song off-key, swaying a spoonful of the bright red beetroot soup up to her lips. "More garlic," she mutters and throws a handful of raw cloves into the mix.

I open a bottle and pour the *kvass*. Its yeasty stench plumes into the air, mixing effortlessly with the reek

of the soup. I watch the creamy coloured bubbles rise through the dark brown liquid and erupt into a thick, foamy froth on the surface. One by one the bubbles pop and disappear just like the dead will all vanish at the end of the night. It seems so pointless getting to know the dead when we'll never see them again. But it's our duty as Yaga, living in this Yaga house, to talk to them and give them one last wonderful evening reliving their memories and celebrating their lives, before they pass through The Gate and return to the stars.

"They're here!" Baba exclaims and she sweeps across the room, arms outstretched. An old man is hovering in the doorway. He's faint and wispy, a sure sign he's been expecting this for some time. It won't take long for him to pass through The Gate.

Baba talks to him softly in the language of the dead, as I fill the table. Bowls and spoons, thick black bread, a basket of dill, pots of sour cream and horseradish, mushroom dumplings, an assortment of tiny glasses and a large bottle of spirit *trost* – the fiery drink for the dead. Baba says it's named *trost* after a walking stick because it helps the dead on their journey.

I try to listen to them, try to focus and understand what they're saying, but the language of the dead evades me. I've always found it more difficult than the languages of the living, which I pick up as easily as shells on a beach.

My mind keeps drifting to the town. The way it curves around the narrow end of the lake. I've seen the living go out on little fishing boats in the morning, in groups of two or three. I wonder what it would be like to row one with a friend. We could go all the way to the island in the middle and explore it together. Maybe build a fire and camp under the stars...

Baba nudges me gently as she helps the old man into a chair. "Would you get a bowl of *borsch* for our guest, please?"

More dead flood in. Daydreams loiter at the edge of my mind as I serve, arrange chairs and bring cushions, and try to reassure the dead with smiles and nods. Soon they relax, warmed by food and drink and the lick and crackle of flames in the hearth. The house gives them energy and they become more solid, until they almost seem alive. Almost.

Laughter echoes around the rafters and the house murmurs with satisfaction as the dead reminisce about their prides and joys, and sigh at their sorrows and regrets. The house lives for the dead. Baba too. She flits from guest to guest, her twisted old body now nimble as a hummingbird.

On the few occasions the living have wandered close to the house, I've heard their whispers. I've heard them call Baba ugly, hideous, a witch, or a monster. I've heard them say she eats people. But they've never seen her like this. She's beautiful, dancing among the dead, bringing comfort and joy. I love her wide, crooked-toothed smile, her big warty nose, and her thinning white hair that floats out from under her skulls-and-flowers headscarf. I love her comfortable, fat belly and her bowed, stumpy legs. I love her ability to make everyone feel at ease. The dead come here lost and confused, but they leave calm and peaceful and ready for their journey.

Baba is a perfect Guardian. Far better than I will ever be. But then, I don't want to be a Guardian. Being a Guardian means being responsible for The Gate and

all the guiding of the dead, for ever. And while guiding makes Baba happy, seeing the dead drift away every night makes me feel even more alone. If only I was destined to be something else. Something that involved living people.

The house shifts its weight, settling into the night, and opens its skylights wide. Stars twinkle above us, raining down tiny sparks of light. "*Trost!*" Baba shouts and she pulls the cork out of the bottle with her teeth. The sweet, spicy smell of the drink fills the air and the fire burns brighter.

The Gate appears in the corner of the room, near the hearth. It's a large black rectangle. Blacker than the darkness at the bottom of a grave. It draws your gaze like a black hole draws light, and the longer you stare at it, the stronger it pulls you in.

I move towards it, hands in my apron pocket, avoiding its yawn by looking at the floor. The floorboards seem to flow into the chasm and disappear into the blackness. Out of the corners of my eyes, I see fleeting glimpses of light and colour deep inside the void. The sweep of a rainbow, the twinkle of nebulae,

billowing storm clouds, and the infinite arc of the Milky Way. An ocean breathes far below and water smashes against the glassy mountains. I scoop the dead spider from my pocket and place it on the floor.

The spider's soul pulls itself out of the carcass and looks around the room in confusion. Animals don't need to be guided – Baba says they understand the great cycle better than humans – so it's probably wondering why it's in a Yaga house.

I mumble the death journey words anyway, forgetting half of them and mispronouncing the rest. Something about strength on the long and arduous path, gratitude for time on Earth, and peace at returning to the stars. The dead spider tilts its head at me and looks even more confused. I sigh and brush it into The Gate, wondering for the millionth time if destinies are fixed. If I really do have to become a Guardian and spend my life saying goodbyes, when I ache to have friendships that last for more than one night.

Baba starts singing and the dead join her. Their voices rise higher and louder. One of them picks up the violin and plays, faster and faster. Baba gets her

accordion and the music swells. The house bounces in time to the beat and the dead stamp their feet and spin and dance. But slowly, one by one, they tire and sigh and drift towards The Gate. Baba puts down her accordion. She whispers the death journey words into the ears of the dead, kisses their cheeks, and they sink into the darkness, smiling as they float away.

When the first light of dawn dims the stars above, there is only one left. A young girl, wrapped in one of Baba's black-and-red shawls, staring into the fire. The young always find it hardest to pass through The Gate. It seems unfair that their time spent on Earth is so short. Baba says "it's not how long a life, but how sweet a life that counts". She says some souls learn what they've come here to learn quickly and others take their time. I don't see why we can't all have long, sweet lives, lessons aside.

Baba gives the child sugared almonds, holds her close, and whispers in her ear words I don't understand, and eventually the girl nods and lets Baba guide her through The Gate. As the girl drifts away, pale golden rays of sunlight fall through the skylights

and The Gate disappears. The skylights blink shut and the house sighs. Baba dabs a tear from the corner of her eye, although when she turns to me she's smiling, so I'm not sure if she is happy or sad. "Cocoa?" she asks, her mind still stuck in the language of the dead.

"Yes, please." I nod and begin to clear away the dishes.

"Did you listen to the astronomer who had a star named after her?" Baba's face lights up, as she reverts to our usual chatter. "I guided a stargazer to the stars!"

I try to picture all the faces of the dead and work out who she might have been, but I have no idea. "I still find the language of the dead really difficult."

"You understood it when I offered you cocoa."

"That's different." Blood rushes into my cheeks. "Cocoa is just one word. The dead all talk too fast."

Baba passes me my mug, filled to the brim with the hot sweet drink, and sits in her chair by the fire. "What shall we read this morning?"

I slide my headscarf off, sit on my floor cushion, and lean against Baba's knees. She always reads to me

before we go to bed for our morning sleep. "Will you tell me a story about my parents instead?" I ask.

Baba strokes my hair. "Which one would you like to hear?"

"How they met."

"Again?" she asks.

"Again." I nod.

"Well." Baba takes a sip of cocoa. "You know both your parents were from ancient Yaga families, with ancestors stretching all the way back to the First Yaga of The Steppes."

Jack carefully folds a piece of honey bread into the fabric of my skirt and I stroke the soft feathers on the side of his face.

"Your mother's house had been galloping from The Great Mountains in the East, and your father's house from The Jagged Peaks in the West. Without warning, both houses suddenly turned south and settled on the outskirts of The Sinking City for the night, to soak their legs in the water."

"The houses' feet were so hot from running..." I prompt.

"The water sizzled and steamed in the moonlight." Baba smiles. "Your mother looked out of her window and was so taken with the beauty of the city that she snuck out and borrowed a gondola, so she could explore the canals in the quiet of the night."

I imagine my mother floating over a smooth, dark, reflected sky, which gently sloshes against her boat as she strokes her oar through the starry waters.

"Not far away" – Baba taps her foot on the floor rhythmically – "your father, also taken with the beauty of the city, was dancing on the roof of his house."

I laugh. "He still lived with his parents?"

Baba nods. "Your mother had been living in a Yaga house of her own for a few years, but your father still lived with his Yaga parents."

"My father saw my mother, leaned over for a closer look..." I wait for Baba to finish my sentence.

She leans over me, like my father leaning over on the roof of his house. "Your father tripped and plummeted." Baba's eyes widen in mock fear. "Down and down, towards the canal...and then he landed, hard, in your mother's boat. It rocked so much your mother fell into the water, screaming."

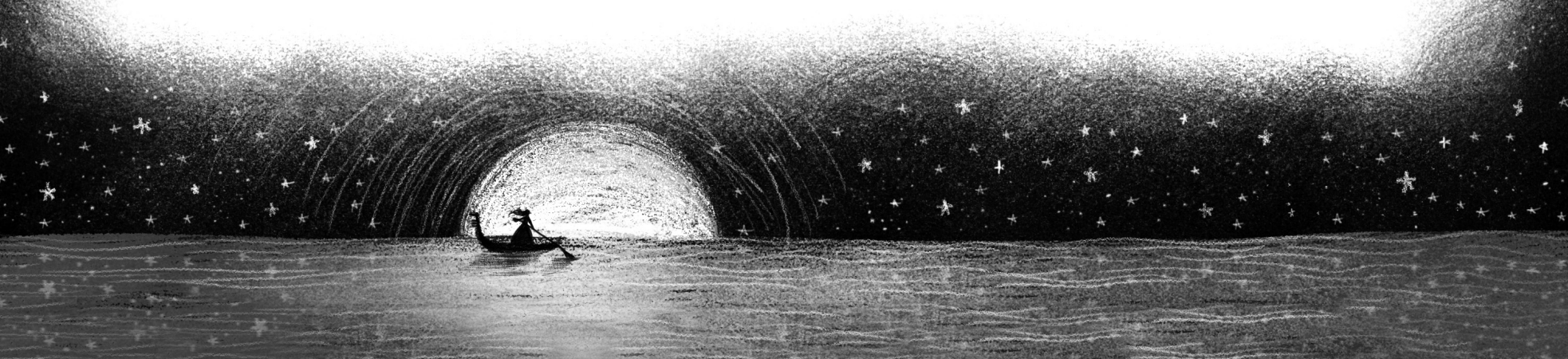
"My father dived in to save her," I rush in. "But he tripped again as he jumped out of the gondola, banged his head, and ended up unconscious in the canal."

Baba rests her hand on my shoulder. "And so your mother ended up saving him."

"Then they fell in love, and had me." I smile.

"Well that was a few years later. But yes, they had you. You were their world, Marinka. They loved you so much."

I sigh and put my empty mug down. I love that story – not because of the moonlit canals, or the



dancing on the roof, or the falling into the water and being saved, although they are all good bits. I love that story because although my mother broke the Yaga rules, sneaking out of the house and stealing a gondola in the middle of the night, nothing bad happened because of it. And I love the idea that one day, completely out of the blue, someone or something could come hurtling down from the sky and change my life, for ever.



Jack stands on the wall, his grey-black feathers ruffling in the breeze as he watches me struggle to squeeze a thigh bone back into place. The sun is high in the sky but the air is still cold. Only a small part of the fence collapsed last night, but my hands are frozen, so it's taking longer than it should to fix.

"Caaw!" Jack shouts an alarm call right next to my ear that makes me wince as I turn around. A boy, about my age, is standing just a few paces away. I blink, wondering if my daydreams are becoming more real as well as more frequent. But he doesn't disappear. My heart races with excitement. He's a real, live, living boy. His long, dark coat is open and a tiny winter lamb is poking its nose out from beneath his armpit.