



Plain
Kate

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SCHOLASTIC INC.

*To the memory of my sister Wendy —
artist, friend, and fierce good soul*

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THE SKARA ROK

A long time ago, in a market town by a looping river, there lived an orphan girl called Plain Kate.

She was called this because her father had introduced her to the new butcher, saying: “This is my beloved Katerina Svetlana, after her mother who died birthing her and God rest her soul, but I call her just plain Kate.” And the butcher, swinging a cleaver, answered: “That’s right enough, Plain Kate she is, plain as a stick.” A man who treasured humor, especially his own, the butcher repeated this to everyone. After that, she was called Plain Kate. But her father called her Kate, My Star.

Plain Kate’s father, Piotr, was a wood-carver. He gave Kate a carving knife before most children might be given a spoon. She could whittle before she could walk. When she was still a child, she could carve a rose that strangers would stop to smell, a dragonfly that trout would rise to strike.

In Kate's little town of Samilae, people thought that there was magic in a knife. A person who could wield a knife well was, in their eyes, halfway to a witch. So Plain Kate was very small the first time someone spat at her and crooked their fingers.

Her father sat her down and spoke to her with great seriousness. "You are not a witch, Katerina. There is magic in the world, and some of it is wholesome, and some of it is not, but it is a thing that is in the blood, and it is not in yours.

"The foolish will always treat you badly, because they think you are not beautiful," he said, and she knew this was true. Plain Kate: She *was* plain as a stick, and thin as a stick, and flat as a stick. She had one eye the color of river mud and one eye the color of the river. Her nose was too long and her brows were too strong. Her father kissed her twice, once above each eyebrow. "We cannot help what fools think. But understand, it is your skill with a blade that draws this talk. If you want to give up your carving, you have my blessing."

"I will never give it up," she answered.

And he laughed and called her his Brave Star, and taught her to carve even better.

They were busy. Everyone in that country, no matter how poor, wore a talisman called an objarka. Those who

could, hung larger objarka on horse stalls and doorposts and above their marriage beds. No lintel was uncarved in that place; walls bore saints in niches; and roads were marked with little shrines on posts, which housed sometimes saints, and sometimes older, stranger things. Plain Kate's father was even given the honor of replacing Samilae's weizi, the great column at the center of the market that showed the town's angels and coats of arms, and at the top, supported the carved wooden roof that sheltered the carved wooden gods. The new weizi was such a good work that the guild masters sent a man from Lov to see it. The man made Kate's father a full master on the spot.

"My daughter did some of the angels," he told the man, gathering Kate up and pulling her forward.

The man looked at the faces that were so beautiful they seemed sad, the wings that looked both soft and strong, like the wings of swans that could kill a man with one blow. "Apprentice her," he said.

"If she likes," Piotr answered. "And when she is of age."

When the guild man went away, Plain Kate chided her father. "You know I will be your apprentice!"

"You are the star of my heart," he said. "But it is two years yet before you are of prenticing age. Anything might happen."

She laughed at him. “What will happen is that I will be a full master by the time I am twenty.”

But what happened was that her father died.



It happened like this: The spring swung round into summer, full of heat and flies. The wheat crop withered. The first frosts came and found food already short. And then a sickness called witch’s fever ate through the town.

At first Plain Kate and her father were too busy to worry. People wanted new objarka — some wore so many of the carved charms that they clacked softly when they moved. They carved all day, and into the night by the bad light of tallow lamps. They carved faster than they could cure the wood. And then they grew even busier, because there were grave markers to make.

Witch’s fever was an ugly thing. The sick tossed in their beds, burning up, sobbing about the devils that were pulling their joints apart. They raved of horrors and pointed into shadows, crying, “Witch, witch.” And then they died, all but a few. It seemed to Plain Kate that even those who were not sick were looking into shadows. The cresets in the market square — the iron nests of fire where people gathered to trade news and roast fish — became a

place of hisses and silences. More fingers crooked at her than ever before.

But in the end it was not her the town pointed to. One day, when Plain Kate and her father were in the market square selling new objarka from their sturdy stall, a woman was dragged in screaming. Kate looked up from her whittling, and saw — suddenly — that there was wood for a bonfire piled around the weizi.

The screaming woman was named Vera, and Plain Kate knew her: a charcoal burner, a poor woman with no family, with a lisp from a twisted lip. The crowd dragged Vera to the woodpile, and Piotr picked Plain Kate up and swept her away, though she was too big for it. From their shop they could still hear the screaming. The next day the square was muted and scattered with ash.

And still the sickness ate through the crooked lanes and wooden archways. Plain Kate and her father stopped selling in the square. Their money grew short. The plague burned on and the town shut its gates. Carters stopped bringing food from the countryside; the barges stopped coming down the looping Narwe. Kate had her first taste of hunger.

But slowly the dewy frost gave way to brilliant, hard mornings, and the fever, as fevers do, began to loosen its grip for the winter. Plain Kate went down to the market

to see what food could be had, and found little knots of people around stalls heaped with the last of the fresh harvest: winter-fat leeks and frost-tattered cabbages. The frowning shops that fronted the square seemed to sigh and spread their shoulders.

Plain Kate came home with her basket piled with apples, and found her father slumped at his workbench. He'd left the lathe whirling: a long hiss, winding down in the clotting silence of the shop. She could hear the shudder in his breath.

Somehow she got him up on her shoulder. It made her feel tiny, smaller than she had in years; he was so heavy and she could hardly hold him up. She took him to his bed.

Not everyone who got witch's fever died. She kept telling herself that. She tried to give him water, she tried to make him eat. She was not sure if he should be kept warm or cold. She tucked his red quilt over him and put a cold cloth on his forehead. Like the others, he sobbed and he saw things. She talked to him day and night until she grew so hoarse that her mouth tasted of blood. "You are here, you are here, I am with you, stay where you belong." She stayed awake, day and night, saying it.

After two days and three nights, somewhere in the gray hour before dawn, she fell asleep. She woke still sitting

on the chair by the bedside, her forehead resting on her father's hand.

"Katerina," he rasped.

"You're here," she stuttered, lifting her head. "I am here, Father, right here."

"Not you," he said, breaking her heart. "Your mother." There was a screen in the shape of climbing roses between their room and the front of the shop. Light was piercing through it, the long slanting yellow of dawn. Her father was staring into it, his eyes runny and blind. "Look."

Plain Kate turned for a moment to look, then turned back, afraid of what she might see if she let herself. "Father," she said. "Papa."

"Katerina," he said again. "She is in the light. She's here. Katerina, you're here!"

"Don't go," said Plain Kate, and clutched his hand to her cheek. "Papa!"

He looked at her. "Katerina, Star of My Heart." He breathed in. He breathed out. And he stopped breathing.

"I'm right here," she said. "Papa, I'm right here." She kept saying it for a long time.



The year of the hot summer, sickness, and starvation came to be called the *skara rok*, the bad time. It had

emptied their purse. Plain Kate took what money they had left and bought Piotr Carver a decent burial. Then she went back to the shop and spent a month carving a grave marker for him. She would make one and cast it into the fire, make another and still not find peace.

“People think we are witches because we show them the truth.” She could see her father’s face, feel his hands on hers. A carving had just snapped apart when her knife found some hidden flaw in the wood. “You will learn to know where the knots are and how the grain flows, even deep inside the wood where no one can see it. You will show people that truth: the truth in the wood. But sometimes, in your carving, people will see another truth. A truth about you. About themselves.” His hands were warm on hers, sturdy as his smile. “And that is magic,” he said. “You will know it when you feel it.”

She wanted the grave marker to show the truth: that Piotr Carver had been a wonderful carver, and she had loved him. But the only thing it said was that her father was dead.

At last she could not leave the grave unmarked anymore. So she finished the marker, and placed it.

And when that was done she had nothing more to do. She stood by his lathe like a girl under a spell. Her hands hung empty at her sides.

And then the wood guild sent another carver to take the shop.

His name was Chuny and he wasn't half the carver she was, but he had a warrant from the guild. Plain Kate had nowhere to go. She'd been born in that shop. She'd been a baby watching the light shift through the rose screen. She'd been a chubby-fisted toddler putting wood shavings in the pottage. But now the guild warrant gave Chuny claim over the shop and its fittings, its tools, even the wood Kate and her father had cured but not carved.

Master Chuny stood watching her pack. There was very little she was allowed to take. A bit of food: apples and oats, a jar of oil. Her own three dresses. Her father's smocks and leggings. His leather carpenter's apron. There were two bowls, with porridge dried like parched earth at the bottom of the one that had been her father's. Two spoons. The red marriage quilt from the big carved bed, which smelled like her father and like sickness. Her own small hand tools: knives and chisels and awls and gouges.

"The carving things stay with the shop," said Chuny, still watching.

Plain Kate was slotting the tools into the pockets of her own leather apron. "He gave them to me," she whispered. She did not look up; the hair around her face hid her strange eyes and the tears in them from the man watching

her. She raised her voice: “These are mine. My father gave them to me.”

“An apprentice’s tools —” Chuny began. The rule was that an apprentice’s tools belonged to his master, and through the master to the guild.

“I was not his apprentice.” She looked up and she was not crying anymore. “I am going. Do you want to search my bags?”

“I —” Chuny began, then shook his head. His fingers were twined in the rose screen; it hurt her to see his hands there. Kate and her father had had an old joke where they would smell the carved roses, but even outside of the joke Piotr would never have closed his hands round a blossom, as Chuny was doing now.

She tore her eyes away. “I am going to the market,” she said. “I am going to live in our stall.”

“*Live* in it?” he echoed, shocked.

“The bottom drawer will be big enough.”

The stall too belonged to the guild. Plain Kate raised her witch’s eyes, daring Chuny to make that claim. He looked back, then looked at his shoes, and didn’t. Kate picked up her bags.

“They, uh,” he said, “tell me you can carve a little. I would — when you are of age, that is, if I still need an apprentice —”

She was insulted by the awkward half kindness. “You have nothing to teach me,” she said. “And I don’t have the fee.”

“Go, then,” he said, angry.

So she did, with her head held high.



In the market, she put down her bags and looked at the square with new eyes. The tall and narrow shops seemed leering to her, the streets crooked. Underfoot, cobble-backs rose like islands from the packed and dirty snow. Above it all the weizi towered, sending a long sunset shadow across the gray roofs of Samilae and toward the black wall of the hills beyond.

Her father’s stall was sitting in that shadow: a big box cabinet with many drawers, large and deep on the bottom and little on top. The front was carved to show a deer hunt: a stag leaping into a patch of wood, hounds and riders at its heels. Plain Kate had always thought before that it looked as if the stag was going to get away. Tonight it looked different; one of the riders had nocked an arrow, his aim true. The poor beast was dead and just didn’t know it.

The cold grew bitter as the sun fell; her breath swirled around her. She pulled open the big bottom drawer. She

put the quilt in it, and pushed it as much closed as she could and still get in. Then she rolled in through the gap and lay down.

The wood was hard despite the quilt; the air was stale. She couldn't see, but the drawer walls pressed her shoulders, and the sense of the wood above pressed her from inches away. *A coffin*, she thought, and pushed the thought away. It came back. *This is my coffin*.

With no standing in the wood guild, she could carve but she couldn't sell, not without telling all who asked that there was a guild shop not a hundred steps away. An apprentice's fee was the price of a matched team of horses, a fortune she couldn't imagine earning. A dowry was beside the point for a skinny girl with witch's eyes. She was going to starve. It was just a matter of time.

But she wasn't hungry yet. She lay still and listened. The drawer grew brighter as her eyes grew used to darkness, then darker as the world darkened. Finally she couldn't see anything. As the night grew still each sound got sharper, and each sounded like it was coming for her. Boots. The bark of a dog. Like a knife through the darkness, the bell of a watchman, calling the hour.

The night grew quieter and quieter. Her eyes ached from seeing nothing. Her ears strained after little sounds. She heard the river singing to itself. She heard the wind

snuffling at the gap where she'd entered the drawer. And finally, littler than any of those things, she heard something crying.

The small cry came from somewhere close. Plain Kate's first thought was that it was a ghost, that its next whisper would be "Katerina, Star of My Heart." But she was not the sort for ghosts, so she lay listening, afraid but brave. She moved her head from side to side to track the sound, and decided that the crying was coming from one of the drawers above.

So she climbed out of the drawer and looked.

In the smallest drawer of her father's stall, among the lace-fine carvings packed in straw, she found them: kittens. They were mouse-little, with their eyes still sealed closed and their ears tucked flat. There was no cat. It was almost dawn and frost furred everything. The market square was as still as the inside of a bell after the ringing has stopped. The straw nest was getting cold.

Plain Kate stood for a while and watched the kittens stagger about. Then she scooped them up and squeezed herself back into the drawer.

And that was the beginning of her new life.

There were three kittens: a white cat, a black cat, and a gangly gray tom. Their mother never came back. The next morning Plain Kate traded the cowherd girl the mending of

a milk stool for a squirt of milk, and the promise of more each morning. She watered the milk and let the kittens suck on the twisted end of a rag. She kept them in the felt-lined pockets of her leather apron, under her coat during the day, and beside her at night in the warm, closed darkness of the drawer. Day by day, their dark eyes opened and their ears untucked and their voices grew louder.

She was patient with them, and took care of them every moment, and against all odds all three lived. The black cat grew wild and fearless and went to live on one of the pole barges that plied the shallow, twisting Narwe River. The white cat grew crafty and fat, and went to live on mice and milk with the cowherd girl. The gray tom grew long and narrow, and stayed with Plain Kate.

He was a dandy with one ear cocked, a gleam on his claw and a glint in his eye. He sauntered through the market square elegant and tattered, admired and cursed: a highwayman, a gentleman thief. His name was Taggle, for the three kittens had been Raggle, Taggle, and Bone.

Plain Kate grew too: skinnier and stronger, but not much taller. The years were thin. But against all odds, and with the cat by her side, she too lived.

The guild man kept the shop, but Kate was the better carver. He took most of the work, because no one could afford to defy the guilds for small matters. Kate made most

of the objarka, the carved charms that drew luck. Luck in that place was a matter of life and death, and that made the guilds worth defying.

Plain Kate's own objarka was a cat curled up asleep. She had made it herself, from a burl of walnut that her father had given her. Burl wood, with its tight whorls, was the hardest sort of wood to carve, but she had carved it. Slowly and patiently she followed its flowing lines, looking for the wood's truth. When she was finished, the curling wood grain suggested lanky strength at rest.

"Kate, My Star," her father had said, "this could be a masterpiece." He meant the piece an apprentice makes when the apprenticeship is finished, to gain admission to the guild. The little objarka was not big enough for a masterpiece, but, her father said, it was good enough. "Look at it," he said. "It is telling you about yourself."

But he would not tell her what it said.

Plain Kate gave the cat objarka to her father, and he wore it always, around his neck on a leather thong. It was almost black now, shiny with the oil of his skin. She wore it inside her own shirt, over her heart. But if it was telling her something, she could not hear it.

After a while she stopped listening and simply tried to live. She made a hinged front for her drawer, so that she could lock herself in. She put ragged hems in her father's

striped smocks when her dresses wore out. She carved when there was light. When there was no light she fished, and caught trout with her wooden dragonflies. Taggle brought her mice and rats, birds and bats. She learned to suck the meat from the smallest bone. She got by.

The kinder folk of the market square gave her what they could not sell: bruised apples, carrots with strange legs. The crueler gave her curses; they spat and whispered. She was lonely, though she didn't know it. Folk said she had a long shadow.

But every night Taggle came to wrap himself around her as she slept in the lowest drawer.

And so it went for cold days and hot, wet days and dusty, and long, hungry winters.

Then one summer day, change and magic came loping and waltzing into her life, wearing white, and in that moment nothing seemed dark.