

the HOUSE with CHICKEN LEGS

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CHAPTER ONE

GUIDING THE DEAD

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 toward 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 that 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 windowsill 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 was down there: run races or play games with other children, watch a show in a theater, 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 her.

"Look." Baba glances at her chair, where a violin sits, freshly strung and polished. "I finally got around 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 is 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-colored 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 Guardian means being responsible for The Gate and all the guiding of the dead, forever. 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 toward 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 color 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.