

For my little pigeons Nicky, Alec and Sammy,
smile at the stars and dance your own destiny.



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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

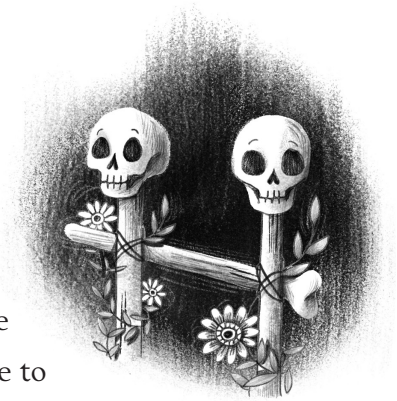
The Gate. But the real, live, living people, they all stay in the town and villages far below us.

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.



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 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.