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MURDER GOES HUNGRY

by Margaret Ronald

The trouble at St. Thecla's began shortly after I visited my old division-mate Halliwell, or so the official record states. My friend Mieni, who is a good deal more perceptive than I and certainly more so than the recordkeepers of the Quarter, would say that it began months prior. A draugar would say that it had always begun, had never begun, and would never reach an end, but draugar are noted for their poor grasp of time.

I have long acquaintance with the staff of St. Thecla's and so did not have to enter via the relic-cluttered main lobby but could instead go straight to the new veterans' wing. The wing had only just begun construction when I had been in hospital, but time and attrition had eased some of the need for it, and now the space seemed cavernous to me.

It did not to Halliwell. "It's a cell," he complained, slumping in the armchair by the window. "A prison. Same faces every damn day. I'd almost prefer it if we were crammed in like sardines; I wouldn't get all these pitying looks when I complain. Yes, that look," he added, and I did my best to

change my expression. “Exactly that. Don’t you tell me I’m overreacting, Swifty.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I said. “Never did in the div, did I?”

Halliwell glanced sharply at me, then slumped further. “No,” he admitted. “No, you didn’t.” The light picked out the lines of his face, shadows under his eyes and hollows in his cheeks. With his dark hair swept back, it gave his once-rakish appearance a more spectral cast than the one he’d used to such good effect on most of the farmers’ daughters the year we went off to war.

Still, were he not confined to St. Thecla’s, I suspected he could cut a swath in the City. Those who could re-integrate into society were much celebrated, and Halliwell was good at that. Many of us were less skilled at hiding the strange scars left by a war in which most of our opponents, and half our allies, were entities that could only be described as magical.

It seemed a shame that Halliwell, who was in the habit of ignoring matters he no longer deemed relevant—like the aforementioned farmers’ daughters—should be stuck with an effect that lingered so. “Sorry, Swifty,” he said. “It’s just—the new treatment failed, and I’m stuck here with the likes of Parker.”

He gestured to a balding, broad-shouldered man completing a crossword at the far table, who called an expletive to Halliwell without looking up. The sister attending him gave him a reproachful look, then glanced over her shoulder at Halliwell and grinned.

“New treatment?” I asked.

“Didn’t want to mention it. Not after it crashed pretty spectacularly.” He held up his hands: his nails were bitten down to stubs and past, one or two practically torn off. “It’s all right,” he said as I drew a sharp breath. “The fingers themselves are safe; it’s just the nails. Technically fingernails are dead tissue, so I guess I was still making that much of a distinction.”

“Judas, Halliwell. I can’t even imagine.”

“Well, you never did have much of an imagination.” He put one hand over his face. “Damn me, Swifty, I didn’t mean that. Maybe you’d better come by another time; I’m in a royally bad mood.”

I was somewhat familiar with Halliwell’s moods, and I could well believe that this sort of inaction grated on him. He’d always been happiest with something to brag about; without conquests of one sort or another, he got twitchy. “Should I bring you mittens, then?” I said finally.

Halliwell jerked upright as if to challenge me, then relaxed, chuckling. “Couldn’t hurt. Couldn’t hurt at all. Maybe some of those little knitted ones that the, what was it, the Concerned Mothers used to send to the front? Remember how useless those were?”

“Useless to you. I kept my No. 5s in them. Turns out pink wool with a duck pattern keeps powder nicely dry until impact.”

“Judas, I bet that surprised a few spooks. All of a sudden a pink duck lands in the middle of them, and they’ve got enough time to say ‘what’ before it explodes.” He chuckled, but any mirth faded quickly. “Seriously, Swifty, I can’t take it here. I might be all right, if it weren’t for *them*.”

He pointed past me, and I turned to look—and shivered. Not all veterans were human, and St. Thecla’s, unlike most other City establishments, had from the beginning opened their doors to all. At the far end of the ward, far from the desiccating sunlight, two draugar whispered damply to each other. Their hair hung in long, weed-festooned coils, and their faces were paler and more hollow than even Halliwell’s. They looked like what they had been named for: the spirits of drowned warriors, and even though I knew these were living beings, still they gave me a chill.

“It’s a big ward,” I said at last, turning my chair to face Halliwell more fully. “And you don’t have to talk to them.”

“Talking’s not the issue. Although—hey, drownie! Tell me, is this gonna kill me?”

One of the draugar turned to face him. “You are already dead,” he whispered, in that loud, bone-wrapping whisper that is the draugars’ usual speech. “You have always been dead.”

“See? How am I supposed to get better with them telling me I’m already dead?” He sank back and raised one shaky hand. “I tell you, Swifty—” he began, and swallowed.

I didn’t like that swallow, nor the little, hungry cough he gave. “Sister?” I called.

“Coming,” she called back, bustling over.

Halliwell ignored us both. “I tell you,” he repeated, “if that lot has to be in here with decent people, then I might as well off myself, because damned if I’m going to listen—” The tremors intensified, and he turned his hand over, staring at the stubs of nails.

“Sister—”

“Right here.” The sister pulled Halliwell’s hand away from his face and pressed a hunk of bread into his palm. “Here you are, Mr. Halliwell, bread and salt as usual.”

Halliwell said something that could have been an imprecation against all bread and salt, but it was hard to tell as

he crammed the bread into his mouth and followed it with a fistful of salt.

I looked away, obscurely ashamed of seeing him like this. The trouble with fighting a war in a magical land—as Poma-mel had been and was now—is that even the land can be turned into a weapon. In the last days of the war, streams turned to blood as we tried to drink, trees pelted us with unripe fruit, and even the morning mist turned to poison. But worst of all was the hungry grass, patches of which would instill a hideous hunger in any who crossed them. I had seen my fellows choke themselves trying to eat their own kit, pull up handfuls of dirt and shovel them into their mouths, starve as they chewed on stones. The one mercy was that people afflicted by the hungry grass did not see living flesh as food, or else our casualties would have doubled. Our Ageless commanders could provide a treatment, but not a cure.

This was why Halliwell could not leave. He could only survive so long as every three hours he had his bread and salt, but to stray from that by even a minute would mean the hunger would sink claws into him once more. At St. Thecla's they could provide that around the clock; where else would that be possible?

Halliwell's breathing slowed, and I looked back just as he licked the last of the salt from the back of his hand and smiled

at the sister. “Of course, there are some nice bits about being here,” he said, his voice considerably more controlled. “Sister Brontia here is my saving angel, aren’t you?”

“Oh, hush,” said Sister Brontia with a blush.

Halliwell gave one of those satisfied grins that reminded me why we were less friends than division-mates.

“Where’s Callie?” I asked to chase away that cat-with-the-cream expression. “Sister Caliga, I mean. I thought she had charge of this ward.”

“That wisp of a thing? She’s moved up in the world - now she’s in charge of the whole wing.” Halliwell leaned back, but not before both of us noticed how Sister Brontia stiffened at him discussing another woman. Halliwell looked smug and waited till Sister Brontia had moved on to Parker. “Works fine by me, frankly. She always was a bit of a cold fish.”

Only Halliwell could call Caliga that. I let it slide. “Which gives you more of a free hand with Brontia.”

“If you can call it that.” He sighed. “You see what I’m good for these days, Swifty. Charming nurses. Maybe I’ll have enough spark for a game of cards next time, if you bring the cards. Parker shredded the deck after our last game.” He glanced over at the big man. “He’s a bit of a sore loser,” he added, raising his voice.

Parker turned and got to his feet, heavy brows lowering. Sister Brontia scurried in front of him, speaking quietly, and he sat back down with a sound very like a growl. Halliwell grinned wickedly and drew breath again.

“I’ll bring cards,” I said to distract him. He waved me away, but the moment—and the fun of needling Parker—had passed.

The hospital’s layout had changed considerably since my own time there, and I’m embarrassed to say that I got thoroughly lost on my way out. It wasn’t until I heard a glad cry behind me that I had any sense of where I was.

“Mr. Swift!” Mieni waved to me from the end of the hall, trotting up on legs much shorter than mine. “I am so glad to see you, if puzzled why you have come! What brings you to maternity?”

“A poor sense of direction,” I said and bowed to her. “I take it congratulations are in order?”

“Indeed, Mr. Swift, indeed! My youngest granddaughter has just had her third child!” She gestured back down the hall, and indeed I could hear the faint cheeps of newborns, human and koboldim alike. “Truly,” she went on, her voice dropping, “it was a harrowing time. But she is out of danger now, thanks to this good Saint Thecla and her sisters.”

“Was it bad?” I glanced down at Mieni. While her navy dress was as neat as ever, the white tufts of koboldim hair over her eyebrows and ears were stringy with the remnants of sweat, and the long nails of her brick-red hands were worn down at the ends—not from biting, but from repeated clicking against something hard, a gesture that Mieni had when she was truly nervous.

“Yes, Mr. Swift.” She let out a long breath and smiled up at me, fangs bared in exhaustion. “It was very bad, but I am happy to say all is well. Human medicine is excellent, though, much beyond what we could conjure even in our home.”

I thought of Halliwell, hollow-eyed and hungry by the window. “Some things it can’t help,” I murmured.

“No?” She peered closely at me, then nodded. “No, indeed. Still. Let us celebrate what it can, and celebrate another great-grandchild. I have blackberry wine to raise; you will drink a glass with me, yes?”

“Certainly, Mieni.” I let her lead me away, trying to put aside thoughts of Halliwell.

* * *

Mieni’s blackberry wine meant that I did briefly forget about Halliwell, as well as anything else. The next day I had to send a sparrow to the Quarter pleading illness just so I could put my head back together. I did use the time to pack up a bag

of playing cards and books the next afternoon, though I knew Halliwell would probably scorn the latter.

The next morning—two mornings after my visit to Halliwell—I'd only just arrived at the Quarter when a sparrow found me, its brass feathers green with age. I'd only had time to note the St. Thecla's insignia stamped on its underside before it began to chirp its message.

“Mr. Swift, please! This is Sister Brontia, and she's saying he killed him—please, you've got to make her believe me, Mr. Halliwell didn't kill any—” The words cut off; Brontia must have been unused to sending message by sparrow, or she would have been more careful with her time. I picked up my coat again and hurried out.

Only someone who had spent a good deal of time in St. Thecla's would have noticed the change at the veterans' wing: the bustle and traffic was much the same as before, but there was a certain silence that hung over it, like heavy clouds over the fields of Poma-mel. A woman in white stood at the closed doors of the wing, as I approached, as if guarding them, but her martial stance relaxed as I got closer. “Arthur. Oh, I'm glad it's you.”

“Hello, Callie.” I bent a little to take Sister Caliga's hand. The scarring down one side of her face—the result of a vicious case of witch-pox in her youth—gave all of her admittedly rare

smiles a twisted, wry look that probably contributed to Halliwell's opinion of her as a cold fish. But I was fortunate enough to know better. "What's happened?"

She pulled back a little, the smile evaporating. "The Quarter didn't brief you?"

"The Quarter didn't send me. I got a sparrow from Sister Brontia." I opened my hand to reveal the tarnished brass bird.

"Brontia. Of course." She sighed, then took half a step back so that she could look up into my face more fully. "I really shouldn't... but I'd much rather have someone who knows St. Thecla's on this, rather than some blundering Patrol."

"Well, you have that so long as I'm here, Callie," I said. "But I'm not even sure what's happened; her message wasn't exactly clear."

"One of our veterans is dead," she said, unlocking the doors and letting us in. "I think half the reason Brontia is so upset is Halliwell himself," she went on, leading me up the stairs to the ward I'd visited only days before. "If he could just explain—"

"Why can't he? And who is dead? Callie, I didn't get much of anything from the message."

"Bane-of-Five-Shouts," she said, then seeing my expression, clarified. "One of our draugar veterans. He was—well, I found him this morning."

We'd reached a small treatment room at the end of Halliwell's ward, and Caliga paused to unlock the door for me. "I'm not sure I see what this has to do with Halliwell," I said.

Caliga didn't answer. Instead she turned back the sheet from the dead draugar. The hollow, gray face was untouched and only a little less animated than when I'd seen it before. This was the one who'd told Halliwell that he had always been dead. The hair lay in heavy, drying coils, weeds already drying up and cracking, but that wasn't the most obvious sign of death. That was the torn throat, the mutilated arms, all with chunks of flesh torn off—bitten off, as if by an animal.

"Oh," I said, or tried to. Instead I sat down heavily, staring at the bites, remembering Halliwell's hands.

"You see our problem," Callie said quietly. "Arthur—I don't have any right to ask this, but if you could do anything with the Quarter—"

"You contacted them already?"

"I sent a sparrow to the Quarter, and got back a response that they'd send an Inspector at fifth bell."

"That gives us one bell before they arrive." I swallowed and got to my feet. "Callie, I'm sorry. I can't—can't be objective about this. But I know someone who can."

* * *

Caliga's directions took me to the nursery of the maternity wing, filled with little baskets holding pink and brown bundles sleeping or squalling, plus the occasional flame-red bundle of a kobold baby no bigger than my hand yet no less loud than the others. I scanned the room and spotted Mieni on a bench by the far wall, determinedly trying to read.

She glanced up. "Ah, Mr. Swift! You are not back for more blackberry wine, are you?"

I couldn't quite repress a shudder. "No. But I wonder if you have time to come with me, though. There's been a death in the veterans' wing."

Mieni hopped up from the bench, leaving the book face down. "An excuse! I will gladly go with you."

"Are you sure?" I said, but she was already moving and I had to hurry to catch up with her. "I mean—your granddaughter, your great-grandchild—"

"They are fine, and will be fine. Besides, Mr. Swift, when it comes down to it I am not overly fond of babies."

I stopped short, my feet skidding a little on the tile, and again had to catch up. "But you have—what, four children?"

"Six! But all were much more interesting once they could talk. As I expect this one will be." She grinned at me, and I shook my head.

I explained the circumstances as we walked, and Mieni nodded along. “This *sór* Brontia—she and Halliwell had an understanding?”

“I doubt it, knowing Halliwell.”

Mieni cast a sidelong glance at me as she heard my tone. “I had not taken you for a prude, Mr. Swift.”

“It’s not—” I sighed as we reached the doors of the veterans’ wing. “It was a cruel thing for him to do. She has her vows, and too many of us veterans are too scarred to be any sort of decent companion.”

Mieni hummed. “It seems he did not think so.”

Before I could answer, she pushed open the doors. Caliga was waiting on the far side. “Ah, *sór* Caliga! My friend Mr. Swift has mentioned you before—it is good to see you in the flesh, if in poor circumstances. Come; show me what I need to see.” Caliga looked at me over Mieni’s head, but I nodded, and she led on.

Even Mieni seemed taken aback by the sight of the dead draugar. At last she shook herself, ears rattling, and trotted up to the body. She raised one gnawed hand, avoiding the spots where bone could be seen, and let it drop again. “*Sang*,” she murmured. “Blood, Mr. Swift, around the bites. Where is Mr. Halliwell?”

“We can’t seem to wake him,” Caliga said. “And we have—well—I ordered him strapped down.”

“There may be no need. Draugar flesh has certain effects on koboldim—do not ask how I know this, please—and if it may be the same for humans, he will not wake for some time. Hence why any of Bane-of-Five-Shouts remains undevoured.” She sniffed gingerly at the wounds, then gestured to me. “Mr. Swift, your hand, please.”

I helped her up alongside the body, and she bent over the ravaged throat, inspecting the wounds. “How long has he been dead?” I managed.

“Sister Brontia does her rounds at first bell, and he was fine then. I do mine halfway between second and third, but I’ve been starting a bit early lately to make sure Halliwell is all right. His treatments have gone so poorly that the intervals between have been shrinking. Which is why I...” She hesitated, then shook her head. “Why I immediately assumed it was him. Bane-of-Five-Shouts was drying out when I arrived, so it must have been between first and second bell.”

“Closer to first, I think,” Mieni murmured, “if he was already drying.” She laid one long red finger on the dead draugar’s forehead, claw pressing against the skin, then withdrew it and watched how the flesh undimpled. “Yes. Much closer to first bell. Where is Sister Brontia?”

“Having hysterics in the staff room. I gave her a glass, but she wouldn’t take it. I think she’ll rest a bit after she’s panicked herself out.”

Mieni smiled. “No sympathy for panic, have you?”

The scarred side of Caliga’s face twisted into a half-smile. “It doesn’t do much good here, no.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen Callie panic,” I said. “Something you share with her, Mieni.”

The two women, old and young, kobold and human, exchanged a look that very firmly put me on the outside.

“I think I have examined enough of Bane-of-Five-Shouts,” Mieni said at last. “May we see Mr. Halliwell?”

Sister Caliga led us to the next door down, another of the separate rooms set off from the ward. “The other patients are out in the sunroom. I didn’t think it would be a good idea to keep them in with him.”

Halliwell looked worse than when I’d seen him—hair lank, closed eyes sunken, the unnatural stillness lending him the air of a corpse. I leaned over him, then drew back with a curse. There were a few brownish streaks by his lips, as if he’d been careless with his napkin, and the collar of his pajamas showed similar blots. “Look,” I said. “Blood.”

“Indeed.” Mieni climbed up beside him and gently pulled back his lower lip. For a moment I had the urge to snatch her

away—if his hunger had extended so far, it could not be safe to draw near his mouth, but Halliwell slept on. She sniffed his breath and recoiled. “Yes. Draugar flesh.”

“When I came in,” Caliga said, “Sister Brontia was wiping the worst of it away from his mouth. I think she couldn’t bear —”

“He didn’t do it!” A shrill, angry voice cut through the heavy quiet. I turned to see Sister Brontia in the doorway. “He didn’t! Mr. Swift, please, you have to make them believe—”

“I’m not sure I can, Sister,” I said. “He’s my friend too, but this—”

She put her hands over her face. “No. No. No.”

“Brontia, please!” Caliga snapped.

“*Sór* Brontia.” Mieni took her hand, and she jerked away, staring at Mieni as if she were a rabid dog. “Mr. Halliwell will wake, I promise you. In time. But he would not want to see you like this—please, your patience, your serenity. Return these, so that his sleep is undisturbed.”

I glanced at Caliga, but she was watching Mieni curiously. Brontia nodded and let herself be led away.

Once we’d gotten her away from Halliwell, she managed to calm down, and we interviewed her in the little half-kitchen the staff used to prepare meals and tea. Caliga brought us cups of the harsh familiar brew as Mieni and I tried to convince

Brontia to answer our questions. “He didn’t do it,” she kept whispering. “Mr. Halliwell didn’t. He’s a good man, a good man.”

I held my tongue at that. Halliwell might be a friend of sorts (friendship takes different meanings after one has served in the divisions), but it was a stretch to call him good.

Mieni laid her hand over Brontia’s. “I believe you.” I glanced at Mieni, but I’ve never been good at detecting when a kobold lies. Humans are easier in that regard. Brontia looked up, relief and terror chasing across her features. “But you must understand,” Mieni continued, “we need to know what happened, *sòr* Brontia. Did you begin your rounds at the usual time?”

She drew a shaky breath. “Yes. First bell exactly—I can hear the chime from this room.”

“That is good. Yes. And all was well with Bane-of-Five-Shouts?”

“Yes.” She folded her hands in her lap and addressed them. “I’d given him his treatment at nightfall. He and the other dr—Current-Catches-the-Leg were both fine.”

“They have damp lung,” Caliga interjected. “Both of them. It doesn’t seem to be getting better, but so long as he can—could breathe, we simply kept an eye on his condition.”

“Damp lung?” I turned to face her. “But they’re draugar. They practically live in water.”

“In Poma-mel they do.” She raised her shoulders in a shrug. “You know how strange the afflictions were for humans; it’s no different for other veterans.”

“I gave Mr. Parker his smoke,” Brontia continued, without looking up, “and then Mr. Halliwell.” She managed a little smile, sad and fond. “He almost never wakes up fully to eat. I gave him his bread and salt—” she nodded to the cupboard “—and he curled up like a little boy. He was smiling in his sleep,” she added, and burst into tears again.

Caliga gave a little sigh and knelt next to her, offering a handkerchief.

“And Bane-of-Five-Shouts was alive then? You are sure?” Mieni pressed.

“Of course I’m sure!” she wailed into the handkerchief.

Mieni began to speak, paused, then shook her head. “Come, Mr. Swift. There are others who would have noticed Mr. Halliwell getting up.”

We found Parker in a foul mood, slouched in a chair in the sunroom. “I didn’t see a damn thing,” he told us, not looking up from his paper. A battered metal tank stood beside him, and I remembered seeing it two days prior, under the table. “Didn’t hear a damn thing, either.”

“You were awake for your smoke, though,” Mieni pointed out. “Could you say when you fell asleep?”

He shot her a look out of the corner of his eye but shook his head. “Stupid question. Can you tell me when you fell asleep last night? No, of course you can’t, because you fell asleep. It’s part of the damned definition.”

“Then make a guess,” I said. “Was Halliwell still in his bed when you fell asleep?”

“Halliwell,” he snorted. “That bastard. He ate my watercolors one night, can you believe that? Got up at second bell, walked up to my bed, and scarfed down the whole set before I could do a damn thing. I hope he choked on the drownie.” He chuckled.

My temper was already frayed, and Parker’s attitude was not helping. I stood and loomed over him—I am not above using my height and bulk to intimidate. “Answer the question.”

Parker threw down his newspaper and got to his feet, and I realized that he was not much shorter than me, and certainly broader. “I don’t have to answer you, ‘Swiftly.’ I don’t have to make you feel better about your friend. And I sure as hell don’t have to listen to a goblin needling me.”

I held my ground, but there was an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. I’d seen something similar to what was flaring at the back of Parker’s eyes—that need for an excuse to

lash out, that hunger. It would come to me in a minute, but right now if I so much as blinked Parker would attack, and might well win.

Sister Caliga saved me, not for the first time. “Mr. Parker,” she said quietly. “Your smoke.”

He turned his face away in a snarl, but snatched up the mask and took a deep breath from the battered tank beside it. Almost immediately the belligerent look faded, and he settled in his chair again. “I didn’t see a damn thing,” he repeated sullenly. “Halliwell was asleep when I was awake, and I was awake for a good long while after first bell.”

I frowned—that didn’t match what Mieni had said about the body—but Mieni seemed satisfied. She hopped up from the ottoman, made a quick bow to Parker (received with a grunt), and turned away.

“What’s wrong with him?” I murmured to Caliga as we passed.

“Usurper’s Fury,” she said. “We keep it in check with a number of calming infusions, including the smoke. But it doesn’t improve his temper.”

It wouldn’t; the rage-magic that some of the Usurper’s troops had unleashed on us was indiscriminate and nasty. I was amazed he’d made it as far as the City without tearing

himself to pieces; perhaps he had reserves of self-control that were not currently in evidence.

The surviving draugar veteran had made a little nest for herself in the corner farthest from the windows, arranging chairs and ottomans into a circle as if the furniture were a fort to keep her fellow's fate at bay. Mieni skipped a siege by climbing over the wall and settling in next to her. "Honor flow with you, *aiga-morir*. My sorrow for your fellow."

Current-Catches-the-Leg raised her head, but it was to stare at me, not Mieni. "Swift," she whispered, the harshness of it like paper drawn over skin. "Swift flow the currents, swift the water through the well. Swift the water in our veins, no more, no more."

"My name is Arthur Swift, yes," I said. "City Inspector. And I, too, offer my condolences."

She shrugged, a movement like a small wave on a lake. The smell coming off her was of bog-water, not running water, and the weeds rooted in her hair sagged and stank. "He is my fellow. He fights beside. He is done, and dead, and will be so."

"Can you think of any reason—" Her drowned gaze met mine, and I swallowed. "Last night, before you went to bed, was Bane-of-Five-Shouts well?"

"He was dead," she said, and my stomach went cold. "He has always been dead," she went on, and I relaxed a little.

Asking timeframe questions of a draugar was more than useless. “I am dead, and so is your fellow who fights beside, and so is the fire-in-flesh.”

“As am I, I expect,” I muttered.

Her eyes widened, and she turned her head to one side, considering me. “No,” she said at last.

“*Aiga-morir*,” Mieni said, a little irritated that I’d monopolized the conversation, “of currents speak, and the running to the sea. Was this of Bane-of-Five-Shouts’ wish?”

“Of the running to the sea, yes. As it is mine. In the sea all currents fade.” She stretched, long arms seeming to extend then contract. “Of the feasting, no. None would wish to be the feast. Nor having feasted, would one wish it again.” She smiled, and her teeth were all the same length and shape, square within a curved mouth.

“We will see how it affects him,” Mieni said, “should he wake. But it was not his wishing, I am certain.” She imitated the stretch, and Current-Catches-the-Leg laughed, a sound like a drain unclogging. “Would currents flow by day and night?”

“For some,” she whispered in response. “For the hungry, the fire, the ministering.”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

Mieni glanced at me. “We know from Mr. Parker that Mr. Halliwell sleepwalked. This is how I can ask who else was awake at first bell: Mr. Parker, and of course the sisters.”

“We know this already,” I began, but was interrupted by the clatter of a tray beside me.

Sister Brontia dropped a tray on the ottoman, soup spilling over the side of the bowl. “Broth,” she said shortly, and turned away.

She really shouldn’t have been still working, I thought; not with such a burden on her mind. I turned back to see Current-Catches-the-Leg gazing after her. “It is hard to bear the hate of another,” she said conversationally.

Mieni hissed agreement. “I see. Thank you, *aiga-morir*. May the sea keep your channel clear.”

I helped Mieni up and over the circle of furniture, only to freeze as a cold hand caught my wrist. Current-Catches-the-Leg stared up at me, that fishbelly face intent. “It is also hard to bear the love of another,” she whispered, and let go.

I did my best not to rub my wrist as I stepped back, unsure whether that had been some obscure declaration of interest. Draugar were hard enough to understand in battle, when an allusion could mean a plan of attack. Outside of battle, they were damn near opaque.

Mieni was at the door to the hall, tapping her fingers against her palm. She drew a deep breath, then paused, her nostrils flaring. “I believe, Mr. Swift, that I could use a cup of tea. Will you come with me?”

I followed her to the little kitchen and poured two cups from the urn balanced above the little coal-fired oven. “Tea isn’t going to help, Mieni. Even if Halliwell didn’t mean to do it —”

“Meaning is irrelevant right now, Mr. Swift. Unless you mean motive, for which we now have more.”

“You’re treating this as if it’s a murder, Mieni. But as far as I can see the answer is clear.” I leaned against the counter, elbowing aside the remnants of breakfast: rolls going stale and browning apple slices, forgotten by Brontia in her grief. “It’s like you always said: the simplest explanation is the most likely answer.”

Mieni cocked her head to one side. “Simplest? Perhaps you will tell me what you consider simplest, then.”

I sighed. “Halliwell said his recent treatments hadn’t been going well, to the point where he’d gnawed off his own fingernails. So it seems obvious that his treatment deteriorated further, and he—well—he got hungry.”

Mieni gazed at me for a long moment, then clambered up the cabinet so that she could sit on the counter. “Mr. Swift,

someday I would very much like to understand how you think. I know you *do* think, for all that you profess otherwise. But truly, it is not only bad deduction but bad for your head to confuse *simplest* with *what you fear most*.” She began rattling the breakfast trays. “Attend. I would have you take a bite of something.”

I glanced at the rolls and reached for the closest, a still-whole one flecked with chives. It was smaller but seemed made with more care than the others.

“Not that.” Mieni’s tone was sharp enough that my hand dropped without my volition. “Here. This will, I think, suffice.”

She handed me a plain roll, and I took a small bite. “If you’re thinking to compare tooth marks, I don’t think it’ll do much good. After all, Halliwell had blood on his mouth.”

“I am thinking no such thing. But note: a simple bite in the roll, yes?” She took the roll from me and handed me another, equally stale. “Again, please. After all, you do not eat enough, Mr. Swift, and this will serve a dual purpose of nourishment and explanation.”

I shrugged and put the roll to my mouth. But no sooner had I bit into it that Mieni leapt up and seized the roll, worrying it back and forth until I’d spat it out. “Mieni, what on earth—”

“See?” She held up both rolls, one with a clear bite, the other with a ragged wad of half-chewed bread hanging off it. “A bite is not necessarily a bite, Mr. Swift, and even though a draugar may seek an end, even he would struggle. There was no struggle on Bane-of-Five-Shouts; only the plain, neat bites. So clear, so careful, as if he were a roll that had held still until Mr. Halliwell’s hunger faded.”

I stared. “You mean—”

“I mean, Mr. Swift, that what is simplest is this: Mr. Halliwell perceived Bane-of-Five-Shouts as dead flesh and therefore food because Bane-of-Five-Shouts was already dead. No horror needed, beyond what is in front of us. Your imagination runs too freely, Mr. Swift.”

“Halliwell would argue with you there,” I muttered, then paused. “Wait. If he was already dead, then who? Parker might have, if the fury took him—”

“Indeed. And Current-Catches-the-Leg had reason enough to end her fellow’s suffering. But I think, instead, we must look for a different motive, and a different kind of treatment gone wrong.” She hopped down and propped the door open, then pitched her voice to carry. “Indeed, Mr. Swift, it has been a long morning already. Would you hand me Mr. Halliwell’s bread and salt? I do not think he will be needing it today.”

Confused, I looked among the plates, but Mieni pointed to the chive-flecked one and made pulling motions. I picked up the bread and tore it in half just as Sister Brontia reached the door, stumbling in her haste. She reached out to stop me, then halted, an expression of dread surfacing under her panic.

“Is there a reason Mr. Swift should not eat that bread, *sòr* Brontia?” Mieni’s tone could have cut skin. “Some reason that Mr. Halliwell’s bread might not be good for him?”

I looked down at the torn bread, smelling the herb now—not chives, but something sharper, more vicious. “Hungry grass,” I whispered, and dropped the bread, even though in its dried form it couldn’t hurt me by touch. “You were feeding him —”

“He would have left,” she whispered, and behind her I could see the rest of the ward, Parker and Current-Catches-the-Leg and Sister Caliga, her hands over her mouth in horror. “He would have left me, and he would have killed himself if that drownie had stayed around to tell him he was dead all the time. He said so. You heard him, Mr. Swift, he said so, he said the place was all right except for them. And I wanted it to be right for him, so he’d be happy.” She picked up the fallen bread, and for a moment I thought she would eat it and consign herself to a similar fate, but instead she clutched it so hard that crumbs

began to sift through her fingers. “I never meant for him to look guilty!” she wailed. “I never meant—”

To my surprise Parker stomped forward and put his arms around Brontia, holding her as gently as one might an injured bird. “Shush,” he said. “Shush, now. You didn’t mean harm to him. I knew you never meant harm to any of us. It’s all right.”

“It is anything but,” Mieni said, but even she quieted when Parker glowered at her.

* * *

The Inspector from the Quarter (Borwitz, not a friend but a good Inspector regardless) arrived at the same time as one of the presiding physicians called in. The former took a quiet Sister Brontia into custody, shaking his head as she tried to confess to him and telling her to wait until she had counsel; the latter went to Halliwell’s bedside and began inspecting him and making copious notes.

“It was Current-Catches-the-Leg who made it clear,” Mieni said at last as we watched Borwitz lead Brontia away. “Mr. Halliwell hated the *aiga-morir*, and *sòr* Brontia took that hate on herself. It is, indeed, a hard thing to bear the hate of another, and worse to act on it.”

“I never realized,” Caliga said. “I knew she’d grown attached to Halliwell, but I didn’t know she was keeping him

sick to keep him here. It goes against every principle of St. Thecla's."

Mieni glanced at me, then at her. "Indeed. But principles can bend under other forces. It is no less hard to bear the love of another."

There was a pause in which I could feel Mieni's gaze on my face and just as clearly Caliga's refusal to look at me.

At last Caliga spoke up. "We try not to burden our patients here. With anything."

I cleared my throat. "You know, I doubt Halliwell even noticed how much she cared for him. He didn't exactly pay much attention to a girl once he'd gotten her to fall for him. So maybe she had cause to fear his leaving after all."

Mieni shrugged. "He would have changed in any case. I do not know what it will mean that Mr. Halliwell has eaten draugar flesh. If he wakes, if they try the treatments again now that he is not being constantly poisoned, I suspect he will not be quite the same man that *sòr* Brontia loved."

I ran my hands over my face, trying to clear away the events of the morning. "Nor the man I knew. Judas, Mieni, it's enough to make a man despair."

She thumped my leg with the knuckles of one hand. "Ah, Mr. Swift, it is not so bad. Love can make a number of wonderful things as well. Come back to the maternity ward

with me, both of you; I will introduce you to one such, my newest great-grandson, and you may remember that we are in the midst of life.”

“All right.” I started down the hall after her, then glanced back at Caliga. “Coming?”

She shook her head, smiling. “It’s not my place. But thank you.”

I didn’t know quite what to say—anything I could have said would have been far too late and, as I had said to Mieni, cruel to both of us.

This time, Mieni saved me. “Then come another time, *sòr* Caliga. I will still be there, and if I am not, then you may come find me.” She smiled, long teeth friendly in her red face, and Caliga’s smile matched hers more than mine ever could.

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Margaret Ronald’s short fiction has appeared in such venues as Clarkesworld, Strange Horizons, Fantasy Magazine, and over ten times in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, including a series of stand-alone stories set in the same steampunk world that

began with [“A Serpent in the Gears”](#) in [BCS #34](#) and includes [“Salvage”](#) in [BCS #77](#) and [“The Governess and the Lobster”](#) in [BCS #95](#) along with four others, as well as a ongoing series of fantasy mysteries beginning with [“A Death for the Ageless”](#) in [BCS #134](#) and continuing in [“Sweet Death”](#) in [BCS #161](#) and [“Murder Goes Hungry”](#) in [BCS #182](#). *Soul Hunt*, the third novel in her urban fantasy series and the sequel to *Spiral Hunt* and *Wild Hunt*, was released by Eos Books in 2011. Originally from rural Indiana, she now lives outside Boston. Visit her website at mronald.wordpress.com.

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FLYING THE COOP

by Jack Nicholls

The hut lumbered past Nadia Daniilovna's window, so close that she could have reached out and brushed her fingers against its dark timbers. It seemed to be having trouble with the rain-slick planking laid across the streets, because it moved like a drunk: tottering forward a few steps on its clawed bird feet, then pausing and listing from side to side. Nadia heard the scrape of its eaves against her roof and winced as a cascade of shingles crashed down into the street.

As the hut creaked onwards, she spotted Bogdana Osorgina peering out of her own window. Before Nadia could make some gesture of fellow-suffering, the older woman crossed herself and slammed the shutters closed.

The hut awkwardly navigated a twist in the road and turned towards the saltworks, disappearing from view except for its misshapen chimney bobbing above the modest rooftops. Its shuffling footsteps faded, and Nadia regretfully returned to the problem of her father's corpse.

Daniil Ivanov, foremost fur trader in the north, was laid out in his whites with his feet pointed towards the icon in the

corner. The three candles placed about his head were sinking into puddles of red wax, and still the priest had not come. Nobody had come. They were all hiding from the witch's hut.

Nadia sat at the head of the bier and brushed a straying grey hair back behind her father's ear. "What am I to do, Papa? I can't carry you alone, but our friends are cowards. They would not have dared to disrespect you like this when you were alive."

Daniil Ivanov said nothing. Nadia plucked at his fingers like she had as a child, trying to slip her hand in his. But his hands were as limp and cold as a dead salmon, and Nadia knew from a recent inspection that the skin over his sagging belly was turning an unpleasant shade of sea-green. Outside, the sun dipped towards the horizon. Already she had spent three nights alone with Papa's body. The thought of another, while the room filled with the stench of his rotting, was too much to bear.

Rain spat against the roof, and the mantle clock ticked away the minutes. Nadia had just about made up her mind to forcibly drag the priest down from his churchyard when there was a tentative rap at the door.

Opening it, Nadia found herself facing a curly-haired youth in a marten-fur cloak. Aleksandr Parfeev, the son of one her father's old trading partners and a frequent visitor at

Nadia's home when they had both been children. His beard was still more goat than bear, but he would be a fine pall-bearer.

Aleksandr doffed his round-brimmed hat and bowed low, the gallantry somewhat spoiled by the way he peered under his own armpit to check the road behind him. "My condolences, Nadia. I hope am not too late for Daniil Ivanov's service?"

"No, Aleksandr, although everybody else is. You have to help me get him up to the church."

A hen squawked somewhere nearby, and Aleksandr jumped. "Ah, he is still here then? I had thought, perhaps..."

Aleksandr had been brave to come, and Nadia felt sorry for him, but she wasn't about to let him out of her clutches now. "You know Daniil Ivanov always thought of you as the son he never had, Sasha," she lied, pulling him into the house. "He would have been thrilled to know that you were guiding him to his final rest."

Daniil Ivanov had been a large man, and even with Aleksandr's help, Nadia couldn't lift the casket to her shoulders. She gripped the rear handles at the level of her waist while Aleksandr held up the front. He had to walk backwards to keep a proper hold and hunch forward to match Nadia's height. They struggled up through the town like this, and to Nadia's shame she had to rest her arms twice. During these pauses they laid the coffin across their knees, to avoid placing Daniil Ivanov

onto unconsecrated dirt. Nadia knew that the neighbors were watching them, but nobody came to their aid. “Cowards!” she shouted at the shuttered windows. “He would have carried you! May your beards molt and your wombs shrivel!”

“Nadia!” hissed Aleksandr. “You will bring the witch down on us.”

They took up the body again and staggered on through the drizzle, feet slapping against the logs that kept the roads from dissolving into slush. They were in sight of the churchyard gates when the witch’s hut hopped out from between two buildings, thirty paces behind them.

It was the first time Nadia had seen it in its entirety: a dark log cabin perched atop a pair of chicken legs at least as tall as she. It bound towards them in a series of ungainly lurches, sending tremors through the logs with each jump. Aleksandr was freezing up, so Nadia shoved the casket forward to ram him in the stomach. “Come on, Sasha!” she shouted.

They ran, jostling poor Papa about inside his casket. Nadia forced herself not to look back at the charging house, but she kept expecting the witch’s soot-black tongue to snake out around her ankle and bring herself, Aleksandr, and Papa all crashing down onto the logs. She could hear its door banging back and forth as it closed the distance.

Somehow, Nadia kept her grip and Aleksandr kept his footing, and they passed between the iron gateposts just a few feet ahead of their pursuer. The gate was too small for the hut to pass through, and it collided against the railings with a ringing clang that bent the ironwork like windblown reeds.

Another charge would probably have brought down the fence, but the witch seemed to have given up the chase. The hut sank to its haunches, blocking the buckled gateway

While Aleksandr laid Daniil Ivanov's casket down by the open grave that had been prepared for him the day before, Nadia ventured into the church of the saints. To her disgust, she found it empty and the candles unlit. Even the priest was in hiding. Having gotten this far, Nadia wasn't going to wait for however long it would take for the coward to return, so she took the Psalter from the vestry and carried it back outside. The hut was still loitering by the gateway.

The rain trickled mud into the hole. Nadia stood with her back resolutely turned against the witch, crying out the church-words. Aleksandr's aghast gaze was fixed on the hut behind her, but he clasped his hands piously and chimed his responses when needed.

When she closed the book, the witch's hut clattered its shutters in ghoulish applause. Nadia's chest tightened, but she was too angry to cry. Angry at the witch, and the weather, and

her neighbors, who had all conspired to shame proud Daniil Ivanov into this pauper's funeral.

Aleksandr rigged up some sodden ropes, and together they lowered the casket into the hole. It settled with a squelch. Gravedigging was menial work, but he took up the shovel without complaint and began to splatter sods onto the casket. Rain and sweat plastered down his curls, and he gave only a perfunctory protest when Nadia found a birch broom and helped him scrape dirt down onto her father's casket.

The witch's hut remained. It was still there when Aleksandr was patting down the last of the turned earth, although half-hidden in the shadow of the church spires. In the end, Nadia and Aleksandr had to climb over the churchyard's back fence and circle around the twilight streets to get home. Aleksandr offered Nadia the protection of the Parfeev house, but she turned him down. She must be seen to be unflappable. Reputation was everything, in the furrier trade.

* * *

The next day, the hut was waiting in the road outside Nadia's house. Her startled shriek as she opened the shutters sent crows flapping up from its snow-cruled shingles, but the hut remained still. A spiral knothole above its lintel sat at the level of Nadia's window, staring in like a lidless eye. She

instinctively clapped a protective arm across her face and slammed the shutters closed.

Legs trembling, Nadia leaned her weight against the wall and counted to a hundred. When her heartbeat had steadied, she inched the shutters ajar and took another peek.

The knothole leered.

There was no point in screaming again, nobody was likely to come to her aid while a witch's house squatted outside. She was just going to have to deal with this herself.

She went downstairs and lit a taper. "If you are here, Grandmother Yaga, I mean you no harm." she called out. When there was no reply, Nadia ran to the food bin and crumbled all the eggshells she could find, ensuring that the witch could not crawl out of them as her kind were known to do. Then, giving the lie to her words, Nadia picked up a sharp knife and opened every cupboard and chest, wondering as she did so whether the witch swallowed her victims whole or crunched them first, and which would be more unpleasant.

The house was empty, though to be certain Nadia had to enter her father's room for the first time since his illness. His sable coat, left hanging on the door, still carried his scent, and Nadia couldn't bear to leave it languishing in the dark. She carried it out and hung it on the workroom peg as if Papa had just come home, and fresh wave of grief wracked her. Once it

passed she was left with a rising sense of indignation. Did Grandmother Yaga have no decency, to haunt a person still in mourning?

Nadia banged open the front door and glared at the cottage. Its doorstep stood level with her head, and it was shifting its weight slowly from leg to leg so that its floor tilted first one way, then the other. It must have been there all night, because the dirt beneath its shadow was dry while all around it lay newly fallen snow.

“Grandmother, what is it you want from me?” Nadia called. Surely if the witch had wanted to eat her, she would have done so already. Emboldened by this reasoning, Nadia knocked as high up on the door as she could reach. Maybe if she offered a gift, the witch would go away. There was always a deal to be made.

The hut jolted back a step, as if it had been stung. Nobody answered. In fact, there was no sign of the witch at all. The hut’s chimney was smokeless, as it had been yesterday, and what old woman could spend October without a fire burning in the stove?

“Are you lost?” Nadia asked the hut. She noticed Bogdana Osorgina’s shutters inch open across the road and realized the absurdity of conducting a dialogue with a wooden cabin. “The forest is that way,” she said, pointing to the distant grey

treeline, and then she returned to her own house to prepare for market day, the centerpiece of her week. Hopefully, the hut would leave her alone if she ignored it.

The hut was still waiting half an hour later when she reemerged with her barrow of carefully packed skins and coats. She pretended not to notice it and started wheeling her goods down the street, but after a moment, she heard the hesitant click of claws following behind.

The pallid sun was rising at her back, and the hut dogged her heels so closely that she walked within the elongated triangle of its shadow. Ahead of her, women screamed and men cursed, and the streets quickly emptied again. It was no good; if she arrived at the trading square with the hut in tow, the market would be thrown into chaos. But she couldn't give up—with Papa gone, it was more vital than ever to show that Daniil Ivanov's Fine Fur Emporium was still in business.

She came to a narrow side-road that was little more than a drainage ditch running between two rows of stinking tanneries, twisting and narrowing as it went. Thinking quickly, Nadia swerved and pushed her cart into the alley. Behind her she saw that the hut had paused at the mouth of the tunnel, perhaps sizing up the width. It took a few cautious steps after her, timbers creaking.

“That’s right,” encouraged Nadia, adopting the falsely cheery tone she used with dogs and children. “Come along, then.”

The hut managed one mighty surge forward and then came to a halt, wedged between the walls. It kicked its legs forlornly and pitched back and forth, grinding its flanks against the buildings that confined it. Nadia, quashing a pang of unexpected guilt, trundled her way out into the next street, leaving the hut trapped.

The market was smaller than usual, but not even the threat of the witch had closed it down completely. When Nadia arrived, the air was thick with traders’ cries, smoothed of their consonants through long repetition. She pushed through the crowd, graciously accepting excuses from any who had missed Daniil Ivanov’s funeral. Several of the traders offered to man her stall for her during this difficult time, but Nadia brushed them off. An hour of weakness can cost a year of business, Papa had liked to say. When she reached Ivanov’s Fine Fur Emporium on furrier’s row, she bundled away her old stool and pointedly sat in the canvas chair that had been his.

“Fine furs, fine furs and cloths,” she called, slapping her mittened hands together to keep them limber. Her breath steamed. “Fox, badger, Siberian beaver. Or how about some Damascene silk, eighty kopeks the yard. The closest weave this

side of the Orient. How about it, Anna Parsokova? Some watered silk to bring out your eyes?”

Nadia could keep up this easy patter for hours, but it was drawing no customers today. The merchants' wives, embalmed in their pungent makeup, gave her smiles of condolence but did not pause. Former customers idly picked through her merchandise then moved on down the row to buy moth-eaten cloaks from cheap peddlers.

A humiliating hour passed, and her cries grew more strained, until at last an ironmonger shouted back, “Nobody wants your furs, girl! They're cursed by death, and you charge too much for them.”

Nadia's cheeks went hot. “The price matches the quality! How dare you say such a thing about my business!”

“It was Daniil Ivanov's business. Your business is to squeeze out a few sons,” advised the ironmonger. “That's the way to honor your father.”

Nadia was drawing in her breath to speak her mind at that, when Aleksandr appeared. “I'll buy something,” he said loudly, staring down the crowd. “I would be proud to shop at Daniil Ivanov's stall. What do you have available, Nadia?”

At last. “Well, feast your eyes on this caftan,” Nadia was beginning, when her spiel was interrupted by distant screams.

People craned uncertainly as the cries grew louder, washing towards them like a wave.

Aleksandr seized Nadia's arm and dragged her out of her booth, and then the air was full of splinters. She fell to the ground and twisted around to see the chicken hut looming against the sky, Damascene silk fluttering from its rafters like a pennant. It was sprawled lopsidedly in the wreckage of her stall, legs churning as it tried to regain its balance.

Nadia was distantly aware that Aleksandr was calling her name, but she was too furious to pay him any mind. "You...you monstrous henhouse!" she screamed. She snatched up a shard of planking and charged forward, swinging the timber like a woodsman's axe.

The hut scrambled to its feet, shedding beaver pelts, but not before she reached it. THWACK – she brought the plank up hard against its wall, chipping its dark-stained wood. "Terrifying children!" she screamed. "Interrupting funerals! Ruining markets! You're a disgrace!" She chased it across the square, raining blows onto its rear end while it rampaged desperately through the aisles. In the end it demolished a tinker's stand to break loose and waded into the shallows of the river, which it followed until it twisted away out of sight behind the monastery.

Nadia flung the plank after it and turned to see half the town staring at her in shock. "Hooray for Nadia Daniilovna," chirped a small boy, but he was quickly hushed by his father.

Nadia trudged back to the remnants of Papa's stall and began gathering her wares. After a moment Aleksandr joined her. Around them the rest of the traders were streaming out of the square, no doubt anxious to be home before the hut made a return visit.

"You have lost some stock," Aleksandr observed, as they dumped torn and muddied furs back into the barrow.

Nadia nodded tiredly. Half of the coats were now ruined. Maybe she could reconstitute them as rugs. She picked up an old birch broom from the wreckage and tried to scrape some of the mud off the pelts.

"Let me give you some money to help cover the damage."

Nadia demurred, but Aleksandr insisted on at least buying the caftan. He then pushed her barrow back up the streets in silence, although his lips moved as if he were rehearsing something to himself. When they reached her house, he coughed deliberately and turned to face her.

"Nadia, I must tell you that I have been giving some thought to our future."

"My future is in fur," said Nadia, unlocking the door.

“To be sure! But things are different now, which is why I think we can help each other. You have your father’s expertise, I have respectability. Not that you have anything to be ashamed of, only, you know how the world is.”

“I do, Sasha. Thank you.”

“I have been in touch with some trappers upriver at Khotilov, but the Parfeev name is not yet...fully established. If I could approach them with the backing of Daniil Ivanov’s Fine Fur Emporium, then they might be willing to entrust me with their stock.”

“You? Or us?”

“We would be partners, of course; and your honored father’s name would come first on the shingle,” Aleksandr explained. “I thought, ‘Ivanov and Parfeev: Pelts of Distinction’.”

“What about Danillovna and Parfeev?” asked Nadia tartly.

Aleksandr laughed nervously. “You will think on the offer?” he asked.

“Very hard,” Nadia assured him, and closed the door. It had taken Papa twenty years to build up the Ivanov name; she wasn’t going to let Aleksandr borrow it, however charitable his intentions might be.

Yet her own prospects seemed little better. She spent the afternoon sitting by the stove with a quill in her hand and

Papa's accounts book on her knee. Hearth taxes. Stall repair. Fresh skins and transport. The numbers multiplied maliciously beneath her pen.

She doodled Aleksandr's honest and open face in the income column. Had she been too hasty? It would cost her nothing to offer a name, and Aleksandr would be the one bearing all the risks of the journey.

She drew him again in expenditure, a cruel, slack-jawed caricature. Once it was known that they were partners, how long until Ivanov's Fine Fur Emporium became Aleksandr's business in the eyes of the town, and she a mere stall-holder?

For now, she needed to assess the damage from the hut's rampage at the market, see what she could salvage. Let them see her with her head held high at next week's market. Show them what Daniil Ivanov's daughter was made of.

She scattered sawdust on the damaged furs to absorb the dirt, then started beating them clean with the silver birch broom. It was tiring work, and she went out to the well for a drink after half an hour. When she came back, the broom was floating in the air, still beating furs on its own.

Nadia slumped into her chair and watched the broom carry out its duties. It must have fallen from the witch's hut at the market. That meant that sooner or later Grandmother Yaga

would be back to look for it, and an angry witch was the last thing she needed right now.

The broom swept the last of the sawdust out the door and, its business complete, dropped to the planking with a clatter.

People always said that Grandmother Yaga was a fair trader, in her way. Maybe in return for her broom she would offer some compensation for Nadia's lost furs. Business was business, surely, even for witches.

* * *

The hut had left town, but it didn't take long to pick up its trail. The guard at the wolf gate pointed wordlessly towards the woods, and just off the road oversized chicken tracks broke the crust of yesterday's snow. Each arrow-like print was as long as Nadia's arm.

Leaving the woodsmoke and churchbells behind her, Nadia followed the tracks into the mottled spines of the birch forest with the broom tucked under her arm. Broken branches littered the trail, evidence of the hut's passing. It must be nearby; nothing that large could have pushed very deeply into these trees.

She heard the hut before she saw it. The crunch of snow, the clatter of sticks. Mustering her courage, Nadia strode through the thinning trees and came out into a sunlit clearing.

The hut was tilted backwards, so that its rear edge rested against the snow. This was apparently to free up its feet, as in one claw it delicately held a thin branch which it was trying to jam upright into the ground. A lopsided line of similar branches, some already fallen prone, marked a semicircle around the clearing.

“Hello, hut,” said Nadia, extending the broom as a peace offering.

The hut started and dropped its branch. It shuffled aimlessly back and forth for a few steps, then tilted its facade aloofly upwards.

Silence descended on the clearing. Nadia hadn't bargained on the house having hurt feelings. Before she could think of a diplomatic way to get it to open its door, the hut jerked out a leg and kicked something hard and white through the slush towards her. Nadia bent forward and picked up a hare's skull, picked clean by scavengers.

Not wanting to offend, she lifted the little skull with both hands. Balancing shakily, the hut extended a talon and pointed at the line of sticks, and Nadia realized what it was asking. She jammed the skull onto the firmest post, tilting it so that its empty sockets stared up at the grey sky. The chicken-hut bent forward, bringing its doorway close to the grisly totem, then straightened again and creaked its eaves.

“I’m sorry if we both lost our temper yesterday. I didn’t want you to get in trouble for losing Grandmother Yaga’s broom. Is she in?” She stood on tip-toe to reach for the door handle, but the hut twisted away before she could grab it, leaving her facing the tightly-packed logs of the side wall.

Nadia didn’t approve of sulking. She followed the wall around the corner, catching a glimpse of the doorway, but the hut rotated to follow her movement. Nadia paced an entire circuit of the clearing like this, the doorway always just out of reach, until she had caught up with her own footprints again.

“Stop behaving like a child,” she said. This time she broke into a jog, watching the chicken feet scramble to keep up. Once the house had some momentum going, Nadia turned on her heel and sprinted back the way she had come. The hut hopped into reverse with surprising deftness, and just as Nadia reached the doorway it fell away again. Reckless with exasperation, Nadia dove between the hut’s legs and burst out beneath the opposite wall. With a crescendo of creaks, the hut leapt into the air and twisted itself around a full half-circle before landing.

“Enough!” shouted Nadia. “Turn and face me, or you’ll feel my stick!”

Cowed, the house crouched. With a groan of rusty hinges, the door swung open.

Nadia saw no fire burning inside, but the snow's reflected sunlight spilled into the doorway and cast a grey light across pine boards, soot-stained walls hung with animal skins, and an iron cauldron on the central stove. And there, hunched over the cauldron, was a seemingly headless figure, clad in furs.

"Grandmother?" asked Nadia, stomach twisting. "Grandmother, I've brought your broom back."

The figure didn't stir, and Nadia hesitated out in the sunshine.

"Grandmother?"

Mouth dry with nerves, Nadia put a knee up to the sill and hauled herself into the doorframe. She let her eyes adjust, taking in a petrified thorn bush in the corner that was usually given over to an icon, a vast mortar and pestle against the wall, and the fur-clad figure in the centre of the room. It was slumped over the cauldron, head immersed in the liquid.

The hut listed nervously; it was like being on a river-barge. "Gently," murmured Nadia, stroking the splintery wall, and she crept into the centre of the small room. The cauldron was almost full, and despite the hut's recent acrobatics the surface still glistened with congealed fat. Grandmother Yaga's head was immersed in this soup, her wattled neck like a branch frozen into the winter-ice.

Nadia took a handful of brittle hair and, when the body didn't stir, she hauled it up out of the broth.

The stink of decay burst into the frigid air. A squashed and bloated mush, too far gone to resemble a face, emerged dripping from the liquid. Nadia let the body slide down to the floor. The cold had preserved the witch well, and beneath a tattered bear-hide Nadia could see pendulous breasts and bony legs. But there were no claws, no talons. She was just an old woman, dead a long time.

Nadia sat on the sagging mattress, the broom falling to the floor. "Oh hut," she said. "I'm so sorry. Now we are both alone."

The chimney gave a mournful whistle.

It seemed rude to leave, but Nadia didn't know what to do. She stared at the old woman coiled on the floor. She knew she should go, but she couldn't leave the hut with a corpse inside it. It would be like having a dead mouse caught in your throat. Not even witches and their huts deserved that.

Nadia wrapped her scarf around her nose and mouth and bent forward to grab the dead witch's shoulders. In a series of rasping tugs, she dragged the corpse towards the sunlight, but before she could reach it the door slammed shut and plunged the room into darkness.

“We have to take her outside to bury her,” said Nadia. “You have to let go.”

A minute passed, and just as Nadia was starting to lose her composure the door reluctantly creaked open again. The chicken-hut tilted its frame forward, so Nadia was able to slither the corpse out onto the snow. In the sunlight, the body looked shrunken and pale.

Now she had another problem. Beneath the snow the soil was frozen, and Nadia had no way to thaw it. She thought about guiding the hut back into town, taking the body to the churchyard, but she somehow doubted that the priests would accept it.

Then there was a clatter within the hut’s walls and then, sailing out in stately procession, came the mortar, the pestle, and the broom she had returned.

The pestle dragged its base through the snow, tracing a circle six-feet wide. The broom then set to work whisking white clumps out of the boundary. Once the hard-packed soil had been revealed, the mortar tipped to allow the pestle to lever the witch’s limp body into its basin. The mortar ground its way into the circle’s centre and deposited the body there before returning to settle by the hut. The broom neatly swept away its tracks and then fell to the ground beside it.

This display so captivated Nadia that for a while she did not realize that she was being joined by others. Like ghosts, the creatures of the woods slipped through the trees and took up positions in a ring around the corpse. Crows shared the bare branches with squirrels. Martens and foxes sat alongside a snow-frosted bear. Nadia quailed as a pair of wolves emerged, but they paid her no mind, settling themselves down amidst a family of beavers without a snarl. Within five minutes, a whole forest family had assembled, breathing in soft unison, while the hut stood above them all like a gangly youth, awkward in his height.

Nadia drew her cloak tighter around her, and looked about nervously. “I suppose I should say a few words, being the only person who can speak. You... don’t speak, do you?”

The animals were silent.

“Well, then...

“I didn’t know Grandmother Yaga, but I know what you must be feeling. It’s very hard when the person you rely on is taken away from you. And after they’re gone, everyone just seems to expect that you’ll go away too, but you have to keep going somehow. Even if the person who should be most proud of you isn’t around to see it.”

Her voice caught, and she had to swallow back the tightness in her throat before she could go on.

“I don’t know if all the stories about her were true, and if she really ate children, then... she shouldn’t have. But I know Grandmother Yaga never had to worry about creditors. She lived a long time, she did what she wanted and she went where she wanted, and that seems like a good life to me. Wherever she is now, she should be proud.”

Nadia paused to wipe a knuckle across her eyes. “I’m sorry for your loss,” she finished, lamely.

The hut lifted a yellow claw and lowered it slowly until its talons closed around the little body. Nadia watched in respectful silence. For a minute all was stillness, then the hut released its grasp and took two paces backwards.

And the animals went to work.

Nadia had never seen dismemberment, but she felt no revulsion. In the circumstances, she couldn’t think of anything more fitting. The wolves took turns tearing at the torso, the bear solemnly pulled off an arm, birds pecked away the face. Finally, the squirrels lapped up the bloodstained snow, and then there was nothing.

The service was over. As each animal left, it touched its muzzle to the hut’s legs. Some approached Nadia too – she nervously endured a pawing from the bear before it left the clearing. Rubles of fur, Nadia thought regretfully, watching it go.

When they were all gone, the hut bent its knees and swung open its door with a creak. The invitation was clear, but Nadia shook her head. “No, I have to go home, to my business,” she said. The hut bobbed and then abruptly strode off into the trees.

A fresh wave of loneliness hit Nadia as the sound of cracking branches faded into the distance. And after all that, she hadn’t even managed to return the broom – it lay with the other tools on the snow. It seemed she couldn’t even give things away this week. Maybe she could find a use for the witch’s tools left behind. She gathered up the broom and the pestle, which seemed surprisingly light for its size, and then experimentally tapped the edge of the mortar.

“Rise,” she said.

The mortar rose an inch into the air. To Nadia’s satisfaction, when she began to retrace her footprints it hovered along behind her.

Returning through the wolf gate, Nadia wrapped her arms around the mortar and feigned carrying it through the streets of town. As she approached her house at dusk, she saw Bogdana Osorgina’s son bouncing a ball in the road. Before she could call a greeting, his mother emerged from her doorway and grabbed him by the shirt.

“Stay away from that half-woman’s door! Don’t you know that Nadia Daniilovna will eat you up if you enter her house, just like she ate her father?”

The child laughed and skipped back to his house. Bogdana Osorgina met Nadia’s eyes, frowned, and hurried in after him. Her shutters closed with a bang.

“She thinks I’m a witch,” Nadia said wonderingly to her magic mortar. “And so what if I was? To think that I would harm dear Papa. How dare she!”

The mortar sounded a ringing note, like a glass being struck, and Nadia hastily dumped it by the hat-rack. Suddenly ashamed of her wild afternoon, she covered the tools with a blanket and lit the lamps.

Night crept over the town. Nadia clicked her abacus and puzzled over her father’s accounts and thought of the night wind blowing through the trees. She wondered where the hut was going, and if it would find shelter for the night. Or were its walls shelter enough?

Her reverie was interrupted by a rap at the door. She opened it to find Aleksandr stamping his boots outside. “Nadia,” he said, “May I come in?”

“Of course, Sasha,” Nadia said, stepping aside. Aleksandr hung his felt hat on the nail, hesitated before her, and then ducked his head to brush his lips against her calloused fingers.

“Have you considered my suggestion?” he asked as he straightened.

“I have,” said Nadia, tucking her hands into her skirts. “And I am flattered, but I must refuse.”

To her surprise, Aleksandr grabbed her shoulders and looked her straight in the eye. His breath smelled of vodka. “And you are right to do so! It was an insulting offer. Let me say what is truly in my heart – I want us to be married.”

“Married?” she echoed, sliding out of his grasp.

“I know how lost you must be feeling without Daniil Ivanov’s guidance,” he continued, swaying slightly.

“Sasha...”

“...a woman should not live alone...”

“Sasha...”

“...all we could achieve together...”

“Sasha!”

He paused, blinking at her.

“Sasha. You know that even if we were married, I wouldn’t be one of those wax statues you see adorning their husbands at church. I intend to carry on as I have been.”

“Naturally... naturally. You would retain your place at the stall, but we must be sensible, Nadia. A furri... a furrer... a person in our field must travel to meet with the trappers, and

the roads are not safe for a woman. Brigands will not care about your family name.”

Nadia looked into his earnest face, her fingers twitching over imaginary abacus beads. With access to the whole of Aleksandr’s savings, they could keep afloat for a year. Long enough to establish her own reputation and win back Papa’s customers. But as a stall-holder? As a *Parfeev*? Papa’s ironic eyebrows loomed in her mind.

“I...” she hesitated.

Emboldened, Aleksandr grasped her hand. “Let me take the burden from your shoulders.” he murmured. “It’s what Daniil Ivanov would have wanted.”

She snatched her hand back. “You don’t know anything about what he would have wanted!”

Aleksandr closed his eyes and wiped a wrist across his sweating forehead. “I don’t understand, Nadia, I would be very good to you.”

“I know you would, Aleksandr,” she said. “But it’s not the life I want.”

His face darkened; with his soft curls and wide collar, he looked to Nadia like a little boy about to throw a tantrum. “So, you think you can do better than me? What, you want some noble’s son?”

“Sasha! Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You should hear what everyone has been saying about you! Up until now, I didn’t believe it, but first that monstrous house, and now this manliness. You really are acting like a witch!”

“Why, because I’m trying to continue the trade I was born to? You think I need a pizzle-stick to sell fur?” With a flash of inspiration, she snatched up the pestle and poked him in the belly with it. “Well here’s mine, longer than anybody’s. Go tell that to your friends at the tavern, and tell them to pay any debts they owe me as well, or I’ll make sure they feel the end of it.”

Aleksandr stared at her, aghast, then drew himself up and took a deep breath. “I will put this madness down to your grief,” he said at last. “And give you another opportunity to accept my suit next week.” He gave a jerky bow, then stalked out—leaving his hat still hanging on the nail. Nadia heard him pause after a few steps, could picture his expression as he struggled with his pride. Then he stomped on, bare-headed.

Nadia looked dolefully at the pestle in her hand. “Poor Aleksandr, I shouldn’t have spoken so harshly to him. He was only telling the truth. What should I do, Grandmother? Who is going to do business with a spinster?”

Not that Grandmother Yaga had ever had to worry about being mocked or short-changed, Nadia thought bitterly.

Grandmother Yaga was the one woman who had commanded respect without a man beside her, and no brigand would have crossed her. Reputation was everything, in that way.

Nadia went back to her accounts and listened to the silence fill up the rooms around her. It smothered the tick of the clock and pressed against the panes, washing out from its source—the cold room, without a fire, where Daniil Ivanov’s chair sat empty.

She looked at the coat peg, where his sable coat still hung, his scent all but faded.

She began to cry.

Soft gasps at first, then great weeping sobs that shook her chest. Nadia ran to the coat and snuffled into its soft folds, her tears running down its hairs and staining the wood below her.

She knelt like that until the fire was down to its embers and the night was at its darkest. Then she took a deep breath and got to work.

She dug out her father’s sign from the pieces of her ruined stall and made the necessary adjustments. Then she packed a traveling bag, tipped her remaining valuables into her pockets, dragged the mortar, broom and pestle out onto the doorstep, and locked the front door. Climbing into the bowl, she cried out, “Take me back to Grandmother Yaga’s house.”

The mortar sprang into the air and soared over the white-capped rooftops. Nadia clutched its rim and blinked away the tears stung from her eyes by the frosty wind. The lights of the town-fires fell away behind her, and soon she was gliding above trees turned to quicksilver by the moon. Birds sang in their sleep as she passed.

Skimming across the waste, she caught up with the hut ten miles from town. It was striding across the snow, incongruously black against the white. Nadia drew up alongside and gave the door a poke with her pestle.

“Open up, my friend. It’s too cold a night to be alone.”

The door swung open and the mortar slipped inside, coming down on the planking with a crash. Nadia stepped out and stretched, then lit a candle from her bag. In the warm yellow light, the hut seemed as cozy as a root cellar. It needed a scrub, but afterwards it would do very nicely as a home.

Not a home, she corrected herself. A partner.

“How quickly can you get to Khotilov?” she called out. “There are men there with pelts to sell, and between us I think we can convince them to come to a deal. You’re not afraid of brigands, are you?”

The hut flapped its shutters derisively and quickened its pace until it seemed to be flying across the plains. Nadia leaned

out into the cold night air and hung their new shingle by the door.

DANILOVNA AND YAGAVICH: TRAVELING FUR EMPORIUM

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