



## *A PRELUDE*

Baba Jaga tugs the curtain back from the window with a gnarled hand. The reflection of the sun on the river is sharp as a knife. It cuts at her and she lets the curtain fall again.

Centuries of life have taught her there are certain patterns. Not just in other people's behavior, but in her own. She falls into them without meaning to, and her body knows before she does, remembering its old shapes. When she turns back to the Knight, she's young and sturdy, a warrior, with an as-yet-untested womb and a muscled arm.

If he's startled by the change in her, from old woman to young, he doesn't show it. But then, that's what she expects from this particular Knight. And though she reacts to him as if he was truly a Knight—a zealot with a holy mission to execute so-called monsters, such as herself—she knows that pattern doesn't actually apply to him. He chose a new path, one she's never seen walked before.

He asked her for destruction, and then, when that didn't suit . . . for transformation.

“And how are you settling into the new skin I gave you?” she says.

The last time she saw him, he had the look of someone who was creeping toward the edge of a cliff. Now he’s unchanged in all the ways that would matter to a mortal—still tall, still strong, still with that dusty brown hair and eyes to match it—but in the ways that matter to an immortal, he’s fundamentally altered. He looks shifty to her, like he might become something else entirely if she doesn’t keep an eye on him.

“Ala is teaching me,” he answers, and it’s that accent, too, that carries her back to another time. He’s fresh from the mother country, still on a guest visa, his consonants going still in his throat, his vowels too short.

“Ala,” Baba Jaga repeats.

The experience of time is relative to age, with the minutes stretching long and lazy for a child and imperceptible for an adult, and so it might as well have been a second ago that she turned this Knight into a fear-eating nightmare creature. She amplified the few drops of *zmora*’s blood that had crept into his veins until they drowned out the rest of him. That makes him a *zmora*, too, but perhaps . . . not all the way.

“Ah yes,” Baba Jaga says, because it was only a second ago, after all, that Aleksja Dryja knelt on the rug not two feet from where the Knight currently stands. “Aleksja Dryja. A capable illusionist, I hear. But unimportant.”

“Unimportant.” He looks offended.

“A young Dryja who, up until you brought me the fern flower to cure her, was a ticking clock.” Baba Jaga drums her fingers on her sternum, a habit she’s passed along to some of her wraiths. The sound it makes is louder and higher than it should be, like her chest is hollow.

“The other Dryjas will not be so welcoming,” she predicts.

“I don’t expect to be welcomed.”

“No, you don’t, do you?” Baba Jaga laughs a little. “You expected death, and pain, and a life of suffering. You came to me for those things, thinking they would be your penance.” She moves closer, her feet bare on the hardwood floor. As she walks toward him, the Knight’s head bows further. “But soon you will get used to this new life, and you’ll begin to want things you don’t deserve. Acceptance, and trust, and yes—welcome.”

She reaches out, and flicks beneath the Knight’s chin to get him to raise it, to look at her.

“Already you want something you don’t deserve: your sword. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? To inquire about your sword?”

In truth, she’s the one who summoned him here. But not everyone comes when she calls—the wise know it’s better to flee. Only the desperate turn up at her door, and she knows the source of this Knight’s desperation.

It hums behind her, fixed to her wall. A longsword made of bone, bright white with a gilded hilt. It was made by magic, but not a magic Baba Jaga understands or

respects—a magic that uses pain as currency, the magic of monster-hunting Knights of the Holy Order. She can feel the agony that brought it into being every time she walks past it, like a sour taste in her mouth, like an echo of a scream. It used to be buried in the Knight's back, formed by splitting his soul in half. And now it's hers—and by extension, *he* is hers, until he manages to earn it back.

He seems to know it, given how he stands before her like a soldier reporting to his commanding officer. Shoulders back, body still, eyes forward. She would enjoy it more if he didn't seem so damn *sad* about it. She can't tease someone who's yielded so completely.

"Yes, I . . ." The Knight looks down again. "You said I could get it back, for the right price. So I am here to ask what that price is."

"And what is the cost to you, exactly, if I keep it in my possession? Do you even know?"

He hesitates. She isn't sure how a Knight reacts when parted from their soul sword. She knows they can feel where it is, and they can use that feeling to track it. She knows it's not pleasant. But that's the extent of her knowledge.

"So far, the cost is . . . pain," he admits, after a moment.

"But you don't really care about pain, do you?" She tilts her head. "You believe it's no more than you deserve. Perhaps you even crave the punishment. So what do you care if the sword lives in my apartment?"

"I . . ." He frowns. Looks away. "It's more than that.

The Holy Order believes that if your sword can't be integrated with your body after you die, you will . . . wander the earth forever, neither alive nor dead."

"The *Holy Order* believes," she repeats. "And what do you believe?"

The Knight hesitates again. "I don't know."

"You should maybe find someone who does," Baba Jaga says. "It may give you some urgency that you currently lack."

"Do *you* know what will happen to me if I don't get it back?"

He should have asked from the start. Foolish boy.

"I have suspicions," she replies. "But whatever the truth is, I know it's not good to walk around with only half a soul."

The Knight swallows hard. He nods.

"You're in a terrible bargaining position," she says. "You come here with nothing but that tragic face, appealing to my merciful nature—*Oh, this Knight who would rather suffer and die than kill another monster, take pity on him, Babcia*—well, let me see how deep my well of mercy is today, shall I?"

She closes her eyes, and she feels herself shifting, hunching beneath the weight of time, her hair shivering as it turns dry as a corn husk and her skin softening over her bones. She has seen so many things, and death is one of them. And where there has been death, there have also been *Knights*.

Knights, their palms stained red, their eyes glinting red, their swords dripping red blood onto the hard ground.

Knights, chasing her brothers and sisters, daughters and sons, into the ancient woods of her old home.

Knights carving wounds into their own flesh to curse her kind with bloodthirsty crows or flesh-hungry wolves.

Knights who take every powerful symbol they find to twist it and warp it into their own.

Knights who crave death, and seek it, and cling to it like an oath.

“You were named for the harvest,” she says to him, and she hears it, the way her voice deepens as she allows time to rush into her body again. It’s so heavy, time. Easier, really, to keep it at bay, like a dog she has to keep nudging away from the front door with her foot every time she opens it.

“You were named for the harvest, and harvest you will.” She looks at him. He doesn’t look well. The skin under his eyes is almost purple. “Thirty-three bones made the sword that you used to slay the innocent, and to earn them back, you will bring me thirty-three swords drawn from the spines of the dead.”

“You . . .” He almost whispers it. “You want me to kill thirty-three Knights?”

“Not just thirty-three Knights. You will begin with the one you call Babcia.”

He stares at her, his eyes wide.

“Whatever one sows, that he will also reap,” Baba Jaga

says. "Your grandmother sowed you. And you, my Knight, have sowed nothing but death."

She almost expects it, the way he goes to his knees. The posture of a supplicant comes to him too easily; he knows, too well, that he has nothing to offer but himself. A meager thing indeed.

He bows his head, and says, "Please."

Baba Jaga's bones ache. The light of the setting sun is orange, and acrid as the fruit that shares its color. She prefers night.

"I know . . ." His voice cracks. "I know they're . . ."

"You know they're what? Murderous? Violent?"

"Monsters," he supplies. "I know they're monsters. But a man can love a monster."

*Kościej*, something inside her whispers.

She remembers. She has loved a great many monsters, and *Kościej* was the greatest of them. In some ways he reminds her of the man kneeling in front of her. His soul displaced. His nature still undecided. Crooked and shrouded in darkness. But unlike this creature who begs her for mercy, *Kościej* knelt for no one.

"A man can love a monster, yes," she says. "And a man can also kill the things he loves."

"It would destroy me, to do what you ask."

"And you think I should care?" Something fierce rises up inside her, a memory self she hasn't encountered in some time. She grits her teeth so hard her jaw aches, and says, "Destruction is what you came to me for, Knight!"

A strong wind blows through the herbs that hang in dried bundles from her ceiling, blows through the pages of the books she's left open on tables and desks, here and there and everywhere, and it whips through the Knight's hair and clothes like it's fighting to tear him apart.

"Killing is all you're good for!" she shouts over the tumult.

The wind blows the Knight back, so he's cowering on the floor at her feet, an arm curled over his head. Bones sail through the air and tapestries flap against the walls and jars tumble from their shelves and crash, spilling eyeballs and dried tongues and rare powders across the hardwood.

"So kill the guilty instead of the innocent, for once," she says. "Or suffer the consequences of missing half your soul, whatever they are. Those are your choices, and don't you dare think them unfair."

She nudges time back with the toe of her shoe. The weight disappears from her shoulders, from her bones. Her skin tightens over muscle. She's young again, and a warrior again, and the air is calm.

The Knight is still cowering on the floor, windblown and terrified.

"Get out of my sight," she says.

She turns away from him, and tugs the curtain back to look at the river. The sun is still too bright on the water, but she lets it burn dark spots into her vision for a few seconds.

When she turns again, the Knight is gone.