

The autumn fog still clings to the ground this early in the morning. It makes the woods seem dangerous and exciting, even though these are the same trees you grew up with.

It also makes for slippery footing, which is not ideal for sparring. But this is the only time you and Cyril can get out of the village without being noticed, so you make do with the dewy ground.

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With a sidestep and a well-placed swing, you knock Cyril to the ground.

He yelps at the impact. Once your friend's collected himself, he glares up at you from among the leaves.

"Good match," you say, reaching down to help Cyril up. "Need a hand?"

"Sure," he says. He clasps your hand.

Then he *pulls*, hard, and you're down on the ground next to him. Your hip smarts from the impact.

Cyril grins at you. You roll your eyes.

Together, you clamber back to your feet.

"Now let's get home," Cyril mutters. "I like these woods less and less."

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Something rustles in the brush up ahead.

As expected, Cyril jumps so badly he nearly knocks into you. You dodge with ease, guided by over a decade of muscle memory.

"Did you hear that?" Cyril asks. "I knew there was something out here!"

"It's nothing, Cyril," you say, patting him on the shoulder. "Just the fog playing tricks. Come on, you know these woods as well as I do. Nothing's out here."

"Nothing but bears and bandits," Cyril mutters, shrugging off your hand. Still, his shoulders are a bit more relaxed now. You pat him once on the back for good measure.

Then you hear the rustling again. Louder this time. Closer.

You hold a finger to your lips, and Cyril gives a jerky nod. He holds his wooden sabre at the ready with shaking hands.

You creep towards the sound alone.

The mist parts slowly, thousands of gossamer veils lifting one by one.

You aren't sure what you're seeing at first. Their pale gray bodies blend in almost seamlessly with the fog. But the dark shapes of their ragged clothing betray them.

They're people — or they *were*, once. Now they're little more than bags of withered flesh stretched too-tight over old bones.

They move slowly, with the strange grace of predators. Straight for you and Cyril.

You know better than to take on several inhuman monsters by yourself. You turn tail and run.

Cyril scrambles after you, with less success; you hear him stumble and slip on the wet leaves underfoot. He cries out as he falls.

With precious little time to spare, you turn to help Cyril up. You grab at his hand and try to haul him away, only to slip and fall in the leaves yourself.

A dull roar builds in your ears even as a ghoul reaches out and swipes at Cyril. The roaring grows in volume until it's deafening, and you realize it's not in your head. It's the wind.

Cyril cries out.

Something catches at the back of your shirt, and in the space between this moment and the next you are pulled up and out. The forest falls away. Treetops blur into a green smear beneath you.

Someone screams. You look over to see Cyril in the air next to you, held up by the gnarled old hand clutching his collar. You follow the hand up to an arm, then a sleeve, then the back of a head trailing strands of long grey hair.

The head turns, and you stare up into the wizened face of an old woman.

"Close call," she says. The wind whips sharp past your ears, but her voice carries, piercing, sharp as her long hooked nose.

You'd swear you know her.

The pieces click into place: the face, the flight, the voice. This is Baba Yaga. Witch of the woods, friend to none. Your parents used to tell you bedtime stories about what she did to children who wandered into her woods. Clearly, the lesson never took. You're starting to regret that now.

You've never heard of her *saving* anyone before, but she's known to be tricky. Maybe she saved you just to kill you herself. Whatever her reasons, they're unlikely to be altruistic.

The world tilts again, and trees spring up around you. Damp earth blooms beneath your feet. Baba Yaga's hand releases the back of your shirt. You sway in place, but manage to stay standing — even when Cyril stumbles into your side.

Baba Yaga stares down at you, eyebrow cocked, mouth pursed.

You stare back, unwilling to concede first, even as a shiver runs up your spine.

“Thank you,” Cyril says suddenly.

You glance over; he's shaking like a leaf, but his chin is held high. “We wouldn't have made it out alive without your help,” he says.

“So,” she says, glancing between the two of you. Her gaze lands on Cyril. “You know who I am.”

“Yes,” Cyril says. You can see him mustering more confidence. His voice is barely shaking at all now. “Thank you for your help, Baba Yaga.”

The Cyril before you now is more the wild-eyed boy you grew up with than he has been in years.

“Why save us?” you ask, shooting for bravery and landing in the vicinity of impertinence. “In all the stories, you've never once given out favors.”

Baba Yaga grins, baring a mouth half-full of crooked teeth. “I don't give favors. I trade in them. And I'll collect on the debt you owe me soon enough.”

Cyril pales.

“The ghouls have been spreading,” Baba Yaga says, her voice scratchy as old wool socks. “My herd took a hit a week ago.” Her gaze darts to Cyril's upper arm. “You did, too, by the looks of it.”

Cyril glances down. “It's just a scratch,” he says. But his hand shakes as it prods at the cut.

Baba Yaga steps back — no, hops. Beneath the tattered folds of her skirt, you can make out the long wooden shape of a giant mortar.

She hops again, and this time the air catches her mid-jump. She hovers in the breeze, long grey hair spinning around her in wild tangles.

“You're looking for adventure,” she says, staring straight into your eyes. Her gaze hits you like a spear to the solar plexus. “You'd do better to avoid it. If you know what's good for you, you'll steer clear of the old barrows.”