

Mire House

by George Squares

Katia had nearly four hundred photographs pinned to the board hanging in her darkroom, and only one confused her. Her eyes were getting strained from the red-brown glow of the safelight that had always been so comforting to her in the past. The emperor moth placed her silver lorgnette down on the desk with two of her claws while a third reached for a mug filled with lukewarm coffee, jangling the pearls hanging over her fine setae. The safelight flickered, most likely from prolonged use, plunging the photos into an occluding darkness every so often.

Katia's work at the museum had taught her that Ljubljana was not a city with a heterogeneous style of architecture. Over time it had been fissured by earthquakes, which crumbled its foundations into a craggy reckoning many times over, shaped by different peoples: Franks, Slavs, Roman Catholics and Protestants. Structures were built upon structures, with bricks, stones and friezes segmented and interlocked until the skeleton of the city pieced itself together-- long past the age of wooden structures, when post huts entwined in flax sat on stilts above the murk of the Ljubljana marshes.

That picture wasn't intentional, either. She had been assigned by the museum to catalog the damages of a Renaissance church which had survived both of Ljubljana's earthquakes. There would need to be replaced plastering, and the structural integrity was compromised due to water damage. There was nothing altogether strange with the church at all, except what could be seen from outside of its window in a single picture.

In the background of the photo, from the ground floor, there was a stilt house visible in striking detail-- a hut made from clusters of assembled logs, perched above a canal on four posts that looked remarkably ancient aside a cobbled street annexing New Square. She rose from her desk, trying to steady herself on fragile legs, balancing herself with her tattered gold and pink eye-patterned wings. Her profession called for a black and white frock with minimal color. Leaving her room, she approached the telephone, placing her finger inside of the ring. She pulled back a number and waited for the chime. One number. She pulled back the ring for the second number, claws trembling as the cold stung them. It always took her too long to make calls. Her mammalian friends could slip their graceful digits into the damned circles, considering the wicked little contraptions were customized to let them dial so fast. Perhaps it was time that she invested in a good stick.

In due time, Katia made contact with five local businesses near the site, each less helpful than the last. She had received more information about the church that she was working on than the stilt house. "I wouldn't worry too much about it. Foreigners do lots of weird stuff around the city on Halloween. Same with the university students," said a butcher on that block.

"But it's a strikingly accurate palafitte that appears to be embedded in the river," said Katia over the phone, puzzled, twirling in her skirt with the coils of the phone. "I've

never seen a house there before, and if it had been there, it couldn't have possibly survived earthquakes in the 16th or 19th century. If it's a recreation, though, it looks strikingly professional in the photograph. Wooden structures are illegal here." But if it *wasn't* a recreation, and it *was* an ancient house dragged from the marshes, chances were likely that it wouldn't last long in the aerobic conditions above the swamp. The site could be damaged beyond valuable research in days. This would also mean somebody was in trouble if she could contact UNESCO to address this matter.

"I don't know what that means, really. Sorry miss, but I don't see anything there outside of my window." He hung up after that.

She plucked her pocket watch from her sash to check the time-- half past noon, and she still hadn't eaten. She pocketed her MOVSKA 3 folding camera into its bag and slung the strap around her shoulder. It clung heavy to her white blouse.

She took her purple shawl from the coat rack and wrapped it around her golden wings, fluttering irritably as they folded. After she had her purse too, she opened the door and locked it behind her. Light flooded her face from between the rolling mountains on the horizon, grey and mottled with green, orange and red.

Her home was petite and in the art nouveau style with its curved wood and its decorative primary colored mosaics adorning the asymmetric dormers. It sat snug between two four-storey flats that sometimes overshadowed her home entirely, with a yard and a gated fence filled with boxed marigolds. Across from her was a vacant lot, which had been empty ever since fascist Italy had occupied the city in World War II, during her girlhood, when more than a few homes were raided and leveled.

After she raised the slat of her gate, she paced quickly into the shadows of the roman colonnades, avoiding the noisy whirrs and the black smoke of automobiles sputtering down the street. They had been increasing by the droves as of late.

She ducked under a loud family of chattering huskies, whizzing past what looked to be their youngest daughter, likely still in primary school, who was slightly shorter than Katia. A ferret and a pine marten hauled boxes together, guffawing at something while she turned a corner, rushing down narrow sets of alley steps between towering stone walls that annexed New street.

Once she had stepped on a landing past the shadows of the alley stairs, her gait relaxed into an amble, more comfortable under the clouds and the falling orange leaves than the suffocating enclosures of compacted flats. The statue of Zmaj was there to greet her; this legendary dragon was said to guard the city. It regarded her with its snarling beak

and bat-like wings that outstretched into a proud display, while its stubby forearms and hind legs sat comfortably, betraying some hint of hospitality rather than intimidation on its stone pedestal.

She stopped and smiled, staring up at the protector of the city. “Such a conflicted dragon, aren’t you? Just like any father.”

Katia heard a whistle and flinched, thinking about what a dragon’s screech might sound like. She turned, eyes listing across the opposite side of the street, which was absent of people and cars save one policeman. He hurried towards her-- a male snow leopard that stooped well above her. He had a bold brow and a wiry frame. She stood in place as he halted, a puff of his breath forming smoke in the crisp autumn air.

“Is there some trouble, officer?” she said, looking up at him, seeing the bottom of his chin.

“Ah... uh, sorry miss, no trouble. I just wanted to stop you.”

She tensed, feeling the weight of her bag get heavier as she stopped in place. “Of course. Is there a reason? I am in somewhat of a hurry.” Ever since the Italians had been driven out, she had heard stories of the police abusing the paranoia of the times, frisking citizens who didn’t need to be frisked. Women tended to be the easiest targets, as were ethnic minorities, two groups which Katia belonged to.

“Tchh,” he clicked, breaking eye contact for a moment and then looking back. “No, no reason, no. I just keep an eager eye on the people in my district.” He adjusted his belt with his paw, relaxing his posture while his voice retained its commanding tone. “You know, I see you walk from that tiny house, all by yourself on the weekdays. You pass my post every day, going about your business, but you don’t seem to be shopping for clothing or house supplies. I just had a curiosity for what you do.”

“I work for the city museum,” she said, slowly. “My father left me his home when he died. I have lived here all my life, and attended university here.”

“Aha! I didn’t realize that you were a *native* flower from our humble mountainside,” said the officer, leaning against a column, getting a sloppy sort of grin on his face.

“Your posture carries a feminine grace, too, my good sir,” she said in her most official tone. This soured him some.

“Yes, well, flowers do have their thorns. You are not seeing somebody, no?”

“I am seeing nobody, no,” she said, and thought *except for you, in my way*. She started to move, losing her patience with this kind of ridicule, when he had stepped into her way again, wagging his finger.

“Careful now,” he said, his voice growing hoarse. His cat pupils had turned to slits. “If you are Slovenian, you are aware of the mountain hag, no? The Baba Yaga? She stalks and eats little boys. If you have no husband or a man to take care of, you may as well be a little boy. If I am being honest, I wouldn’t know you were a woman if it weren’t for the dress. A little boy cannot help his country until he grows into a sturdy young man-- something that I am *very* certain you will never be. Be kinder to me. I am just concerned for a small woman who is concerned with such big plans. You live with your lady friends, yes?”

Of course she knew of the Baba Yaga-- the legendary hag which stole away children, mixing their blood into bread puddings from her foul cauldron. She wanted to say: “I believed in fairy tales too, before sexual maturity. Adulthood had also taught me to recognize what a girl was and what a boy was without relying on clothing.” But she was not stupid. He was threatening her, now. There were no idle threats from policemen. She knew she would not likely take a husband, or have children. Her camera would always be the closest thing to her thorax. “No. I live alone.”

“Ah.” He stood up straight, heightening his presence. “Are you not lonely?”

She thought upon this. “If I think on the matter, I am sometimes. But I have found that one can be loneliest in a room full of people, none of which you can talk to, because they don’t even try to see you, or hear you. Perhaps we can talk another day, when I do not have something urgent upon my mind.” She curtsied with four arms, expanding her gold and pink wings before folding them in once more, and then walked away.

Still, he pursued, like a latched-on tick trying to drain her. “Sorry to keep troubling you, miss, but you continue to walk away, rather than fly, where I can’t follow. Does this mean you might still be thinking about me?”

Katia continued to walk, not turning. He would not leave her in peace until he had a satisfactory answer. *Very well*. “I’ve never flown. When I entered adulthood, I couldn’t abandon my love for the Ljubljana’s canals. I fell in, and almost drowned, losing most of my scales. Once a moth loses her scales, they do not grow back.”

The officer made a little choking noise which Katia knew had to be forced. “Oh, miss! I am so very sorry. I had no idea.”

If you were truly sorry you would have left me in peace minutes ago, she thought. “It’s no more your fault than mine.”

At the moment, there was a scream, a crash, and a metallic crunch in the street ahead of them. The officer’s eye’s widened and the inside of his ears went pale, all of his bravery whisked away as he stared at the automobile accident ahead. Fumbling with his whistle like an infant kit handling its teething ring, he blew, running forward.

Katia took this chance to run away. The stones clacked beneath her tiny-shoed claws. She had lied to the officer, in a way. It was true that she never had the opportunity to use her wings, but her father had been a balloonist. One of the best, in fact. He participated consecutively in enough of Ljubljana’s quarterly airshows to take home trophies. It was the weekend after her accident in the river so many autumns ago when her father brought her into his basket.

There weren’t many stars in the sky that night. He lit the flame. When the balloon began to inflate, it looked like her father had stolen a rainbow, clutched by all four of its lines to the basket. When the balloon had enough gas to lift, it felt as if they had clutched the wind’s coattails, where the clouds would welcome her back into their kingdom.

When the overcast had come to snuff out the light of the stars and the moon, all the other balloons in the sky burned brightly with them. The airship bodies glowed in reds, oranges and silvers in the fog, richer and brighter than the leaves of any forest grotto below them.

It was at that moment that Katia remembered feeling her father shiver in the cold. She never stopped believing that he wanted to fly away with the balloons, even at the end when winter took his life. His airship was sold for medicine, but by then it was too late to keep his body whole, his mind fluttering happily away from this world, ever upward and into the stars.

Her memory had left her by the time she reached the church. Workers on scaffolding waved to her as they chipped away rotting wood covered in mold. She waved back, meekly, turning a corner to face the river canal.

Either the butcher was blind or hadn't bothered looking for her, because there the pile dwelling was-- sitting on the side of the river, as if placed there and forgotten. It looked much like a dirty child's toy rather than a house, undisturbed by any passersby or onlookers. Mucky piles of beech and oak, grey as stone and drained of any color, were fastened together by flax, neatly stacked together to make up the walls, with all of the gaps sealed with what looked like stringy moss and daub. The door was hinged within a metal frame. There was no bridge fording the entrance of the canal to the house, but it had a rope ladder dangling from its entrance, skimming across the canal's water below.

She fumbled for the camera close to her chest, opening the clasp of the bag, and pulling out the slender black body. She unlatched the opening, extended the billows and held the lens up, looking through the slightly distorted pin hole. Snapshots went off. She got the door, the windows, the thatched roof. Whether this was a hoax or the tremendous desecration of an ancient dwelling, she'd have to have proof.

She looked around, her feathered feelers wobbling in the cold air to see if anybody was watching her. The street was slow today. The few passing people either weren't paying attention or didn't care, and the boats in the canal paddled undisturbed past the dwelling.

Collapsing her camera and placing it back into the bag around her waist, she looked again at the entrance. There was a small ledge past the opening of the door. Her shawl came off in one pull, billowing about in the wind like a column of smoke before she brought it to the ground and folded it into neat triangles. Her scaled wings outstretched themselves, pink and gold, and reflecting the light of the sun, much like the hot air balloons in Ljubljana's sky. She flapped for balance and wondered if this was what flying felt like. The jump was made and she fell, clinging quickly to the ladder, her black frock billowing, ruffling like laundry lost in the wind.

At the foot of the door, she pushed it open, surprised at how effortlessly the ancient door creaked open. The inside of the abode was sparse and empty. No pots, nor jars, nor any remnants of an ancient people left behind aside from a massive solitary bowl made from clay that sat in the center of the room. The floor was solid-- segmented into crisscrossing logs layered with a hard, smooth screed. The only source of light in the dwelling aside from the open door came from tiny gaps in the crisscrossed thatches of the roof, illuminating only faint portions of the room.

There was one frame on the back of the home, attached to the wall. Passing the light and peering into the shadows, folding all four of her arms in two pairs, she looked upon what appeared to be a stretched piece of animal's skin. On it was a crudely painted depiction of a causeway on a bog, receding to a glum sky of blotched yellows and turquoise. Her antennae twitched quizzically at the crude display of receding perspective before ending in an 'aha' moment. There were no recordings of ancient paintings this complex, even if it was dour by the standards of today; an odd mistake for an otherwise flawless imitation. Appropriation, perhaps? The house was looking to be a fake, after all.

Her camera was out again. She retrieved the flash from her camera bag, held the cone up, removed her lens and squeezed, aiming her camera at the painting. The bright light illuminated the empty room, setting off a high pitched whirr. She lowered the cone and twisted the broken bulb out of place while her other three hands rummaged through the bag, searching for a replacement. The cool glass met her fingers, and she handled it with care, placing the fragile bulb at its center and then screwing it in again. She leaned over the enormous bowl, holding her claw above one of the sides for scale while her other two claws manipulated the flash and camera. Another white flash filled the room. She fastidiously packed up all of her things and crouched by the base of the wall, producing a small chisel and cloth pouch. She chipped off a piece of wood the size of her pretarsus and slid it into the pouch. Then she flew out of the door, onto the street, and made her way to the museum.

The red scalloped dormers of the city museum shined from the third storey, looking down at her, their glossy windows filled with candlelight. When she pulled a brass key ring from her purse, it jangled in her shaky grasp while she fit the key into the lock, turning, clunking with a loud thud. She pushed the doors open with all four of her hands and closed it behind her.

It was far past closing time. Borris, the night guard, hunched over the wood of his podium, the middle-aged rat's attention more captivated by the progress of his mystery novel than dedicated to his post. His eyes widened as he appeared to get to a particularly good part in the book, waving Katia by with his paw.

"Good evening, Borris." She glided behind him and cocked her head, trying to read the contents of the book.

"Ehgh! Away with you, girly, I'm at the part in the book where somebody might be getting murdered."

"Her tail had never felt so exposed against the plush coat of the mouse," she read aloud, dryly.

His bald tail absolutely curled, and he twisted away from her, nearly kicking her with his foot. "The murder scene is sure to come! But I like her. I don't want her to die in the end."

"Doesn't everybody?"

"I'm surprised at you, Katia. Did you stop believing in Zmaj right under my nose? And here I thought you had a soft spot for mythology." Iren clacked up the corridor in her heels, swaying dangerously in her unfitted Balenciaga suit. She was a stern lynx with a gentle voice; Woe betide the grabby beast with dirty fingers in her museum. Naturally, she was the colleague that Katia could rely upon more than any other.

Katia let out a one-note laugh. "I'm not sure if I'd want an immortal dragon to look over me. The police are peeping at me already."

Iren's expression flexed from amused to severe. "They don't like the women working."

"I don't like the women working," said Borris, licking his finger to flip a page.

Iren glared at the rat. "Stop speaking, you lazy thing. Sit up straight in your seat so that when gun-toting profiteers come to sack us we will have enough time to slip out the

window.”

Borris huffed, going back to his book, slouching even more. “Don’t need to fret about no sackers when the spooks will get ya.”

“Spooks, he says,” said Iren in a mock whisper, turning to Katia with a wicked smile spread across her muzzle. “The Brit must spin us a yarn of the Spooks, since he is so good with the stories. Go on, rat!”

“Can’t believe Slavs don’t know nothing about All Hallow’s Eve. Day of the Dead? It’s tonight. The kiddies dress up like goblins and gremlins and collect treats, which is a bit of a mockery, if you ask me. Folks used to dress up like the spirits to fool ‘em. Keep ‘em away until they passed back into their own realm. The dead are supposed to walk the earth on this day.”

“Ah!” said Katia. “Just like Velica Noc.”

“It does sound like Velica Noc,” said Iren.

“Are you sure that’s a holiday? Sounds like some kinda Derbyshire pin-up girl.”

They both clicked their tongues at him. Katia picked it up from there. “We dress in marvelous costumes, looking sort of like monsters. The Christians turned it into Easter, but the ancient Slavs celebrated it at the end of the year. It is the day that the god of the earth, Veles, is most potent, and the realm of the spirits opens in the marshes and swamps.”

Borris straightened his back and stretched, giving his back a good crack before he folded his pink paws together. “Believe in any o’ it?”

Katia felt a bit of vertigo and pursed her lips, memory racing back to the house. “No-- but there has been something that dragged itself out of the swamp-- or was dragged, more than likely. Iren, do you have a moment?”

“Ah, yes,” she said, taking the hint and walking away with her. Borris grunted again as they turned a corner and unlocked Iren’s office.

“We may have a bit of a problem. Somebody seems... to have dragged a pile dwelling from the swamp.”

A hollow laugh left Iren’s lips. “That is impressive, if it’s true. It would take some 20 men to drag such a thing. What makes you think this?”

“I took photos. I’ll develop them so you can take a look at them too, tomorrow. Thing is, I didn’t want to wait for a valuable abode to rot like this out in the open if it was snatched for tourists.” She pulled the pouch from her pocket, pulling out the slice of wood and putting it into a plastic zipper bag. “Would it be possible to get a carbon dating on this?”

Iren opened a drawer, took out a flashlight and shined it over the zipper bag. “There’s only one lab that does carbon dating in the city at the moment. It’s still not a relatively popular procedure.” Iren tilted her shoulders and bit her lower lip, smoothing the wrinkles out of the plastic. “It won’t be cheap, but I know we have money yet to be budgeted.”

She tilted her horn-rimmed glasses and placed her head in her paw. “But if what you say is true, the historic society would be furious that somebody had the gall to steal a pile dwelling for tourism. There are few and far in between, and we still don’t know much about them. We’d have no other choice but to take the house ourselves, find a way to preserve what’s left, and then set up an exhibit. For that, we’ll probably have an open house. I’d rather show off a piece of our own history than buy another set of Belgian silver that’s been pilfered by the Germans, which we’d have to return in due time.”

“Thank you so much!” said Katia, clapping. “I’ll go develop the pictures right away.”

On her way home, she passed the police station again, looking from the opposite side of the street and into the windows. There was nobody present-- just dead leaves carried by the wind set smacking against the windows, leaving splotches of rain water and pollen.

Splashes of water slid down her back. After her wings lost their scales, she had nothing to fear from the rain anymore. She even enjoyed the cool droplets which splashed against her body. Sometimes, she dreamed of the sea at night, plunging into the ocean with her widening wings, where she could see her scales sitting at the bottom of the ocean, glowing brighter and more beautiful than those of any fish.

She opened the latch to her iron fence and trekked through the yard, mindful of twigs and rocks on the path while the zephyrs blasted past her wings, making it difficult to walk on her stilt-like legs. She crouched and clung to a marigold box, her shawl twirling behind her and her wispy feelers feeling near plucked from her head. A wicked bolt of lightning tore through the sky, striking in the distance and taking out the power. Lights went off all around her and she cursed under her breath.

As soon as the storm was upon her, it abated. Her wings twitched manically. She rose to her feet, balanced but shaking as she continued her trek up the path to the stoop of her home. As she opened the door and turned, she saw an orange light in the vacant lot on the opposite side of the street, although what was on the other side wasn't apparent from this distance.

Whatever the light was in the vacant lot, its source would most likely be a gas lantern or a flame. She could see nobody, but there had to be somebody there. She expected the damn leopard to show his idiotic face any second.

Thoughts of the policeman went through her head. *They don't want the women working.* She had never been the most loyal communist, but they wouldn't fault her for that now, would they? She only had her albums and her dark room; jewelry and spun sugars from India that she would nibble on at night; crafted glass in pastel colors that reminded her of the sea. Minor luxuries.

"Who's over there?" she shouted, walking towards her fence, her dress twirling in the wind. When nobody answered, she shouted again. "The power is out! Are you burning something, or do you still have power?"

She opened the latch in her fence and rushed across the street. There weren't any stars out, meaning that without power much of the city would be entrenched in darkness.

As she crossed, she sucked in some cold air and froze, staring at the appearance of the pile dwelling right in front of her, collapsed on the ground with broken stilts. Wind forced itself through the holes in its wood, creating a reedy whistle as the door's entrance clattered in its frame.

The house that had once been behind the site she was working at was now next to her home in the vacant lot. Same thatched roof. Same width. Same driftwood door. There was no doubt in her mind that something very wrong was happening to her. Iren was correct when she said only a force of about 20 men could muster the movement of this house. They could pull it with strings and rolling logs to move it, unhindered, but there were cars in the streets, and the alleys were too narrow.

She was afraid, but she had to know why it was here.

When the door to the house opened. She peered, looking at the light that glowed the neon orange of light pollution.

The orange glow was coming from a lantern placed over the giant black bowl that sat in the middle of the room. The sickly gleam flooded every corner of the room, making her eyes hurt. The painting in the pile dwelling was different this time. There was a figure in the background of the painting, now. It was a naked, bipedal creature with ivory skin, stretched fingers of uneven length and pale pink eyes. The skin around the eye socket looked infected and seemed to be swelling around their center. The creature was frozen in a sluggish gait, looking to be walking into the foreground of the painting, a long tongue extending from his maw.

This was a modern painting. She didn't understand why it was even here, unless it was meant to taunt her, make fun of her. She was so disgusted with the painting that she almost went to rip it from the wall and tear it to pieces, but a feeling inside kept her from doing so. A very uneasy instinct that made her want to forget the artwork entirely, much less touch it. She tumbled out the door, slamming it shut, searching for any onlookers. Once again, there was nobody.

Her shawl flapped noisily as she rushed across the street, past her fence and into her house, popping her bag and camera onto the floor. She looked at the cuckoo clock. It was half past two am. The power was out, but the phone lines might still work. But who could she call? The police? Would they even send anybody aside from the boorish snow leopard?

Iren might not be asleep. Katia knew that she was working on a brass armor exhibit, likely still polishing some of the pieces, even at this hour. Running to the rotary phone, she put her finger

inside of the ring, and pulled it back. One number. Just one number. Anxiety had made her claws clumsy. As she pulled the incorrect second number back, she cried out in frustration, forcing her to restart the entire call.

At last, she had placed Iren's number. The phone rang for three sets until she got a pick up.

"Hello?" said the lynx's garbled voice over the phone.

"Thank goodness! Do you have power at the museum?"

"Katia? Yes, we do. The radio mentioned some outages in the city, though."

"Mine's out-- but that's not what I'm calling to tell you. I'm sorry to bother you again, Iren, but don't send in that sample."

"You mean the piece of plank?" She could imagine Iren wilting by the tone in her voice.

"Yes."

"What changed your mind?"

"I don't know why, but the house is here-- across the vacant lot. It has followed me home, like a stray puppy... or a police officer."

"They put the pile dwelling near your house?"

"I don't know... I really don't know. It's a not a small house. It's a big clunky bundle that shouldn't be here. I don't know what to make of it! There is also a crude painting inside of it. I can assure you, no ancient peoples would have made such a thing."

"I don't like how this sounds, Katia. A prank is vandalizing your home with paint and frightful messages. This does not sound like a prank."

"Would you visit me in the morning? I'm locking the door for tonight. The weather is foul, and I don't particularly want to walk about in the dark again by myself."

"Of course, dear. Locking your doors is the first thing to do. I can be there around 9 tomorrow for a proper breakfast. We can bring Borris the scraps."

"Borris is a grown rat and he has his own food," Katia snapped. "And isn't 9 a bit early for you?"

"I'll be there, don't worry." There was a metal crash over the phone, and a curse. "I have to go."

Katia put the phone back in its cradle. The rain started coming down hard. She sighed, moving easily in darkness and then hopped up the stairs. She wiggled out of her skirt and blouse, folding

the clothes neatly in her drawer and slipped into a gown, letting her wings out of the holes in the sides before folding them. Clambering into her bed, she pulled the green sheets over her and dozed off to sleep.

A violent disturbance woke her. She gasped and flung the covers from her bed as she skittered out of it, in a daze. The first thing that she noticed was that the rain had stopped. There was no wind, either. Just the sounds of clattering wood and breaking stone. Dust fell from her ceiling. Something was destroying her house. This wouldn't be the first earthquake in Ljubljana's history. At the moment, she wasn't sure what was worse—being crushed inside of her home or losing all that she had left in the world.

She rushed to peep out the window, so she could check for toppled trees, or fissures in the ground.

All she saw outside were two grotesque looking logs. She crouched for the flashlight under her bed, flipped the switch and pointed into the mist. When the light fell on one of the logs, she blinked. The scaled texture looked like animal tissue. She pointed the flashlight at the ground, revealing the gnarled feet of a giant bird. They crouched with a sudden swiftness that Katia could not expect for a creature so large, ducking down, showing that the legs ended right where the stilt house began.

The wooden poles that made up its walls bloated, then contracted, like fetid lungs that respired toxic gasses. Something jerked the side of her own house forward, and she heard a cracking sound below her. There was a disturbance, and something big dislodged itself behind her. She turned, too late, as a wardrobe shelf smashed into her and sent her hurtling out the window.

Scaly limbs clutched and collected her, and she passed out.

When she opened her eyes, she was on scratchy and uncomfortable flooring. She wobbled, attempted to stand and felt a little dizzy. She didn't immediately recognize that she was inside of the pile dwelling. The walls looked more like writhing organs than wood. She could feel the turbulence below her, shaking her about as it moved. Sometimes, small holes formed in the walls, which were quickly resealed by grime and slithering tendrils of something living.

She had been stolen. The police hadn't been looking for her. She had been stalked, and waited, and now it was too late. Images of ritual sacrifice played through her head. All of the healthy young women who had been tended like roses in a garden flitted through their mind. Watered, pampered, and loved in the morning sun until they were plucked from the bushes for ulterior purposes.

Women who had been given to gods; they were often whispered to at night of the honor of their sacrifice, led to believe that their beauty and their youth could quell the fumes of volcanoes, or stop the raging of the earth's crust-- even melt away the sting of winter.

Bashed in the head. Burned at the stake. Dragged to the bottom of bogs, chains bound to their ankles while they sang songs to the forest as the water filled up their lungs. So many minds wasted to feed a thing that doesn't hunger.

A good-sized hole formed in the side of the wall. She ran to it, looking out as cold wind bit her face. There were no buildings in sight. Faraway thickets of trees looked small enough to be broccoli florets. Shale formations blocked her view, embedded with glimmering mica. The hole collapsed again, and she was closed to the outside world once more, with only the light of the orange lantern to keep her company, bathing her in a sickly hue, taunting her forward.

Being a moth, light naturally compelled her. The sheen of the bowl almost looked friendly to her-- inviting, in a way, that beckoned for her to crawl over and sit in the bowl. She would have, too, if she didn't remember the painting.

The pale creature was in the foreground now. Its legs were no longer visible, because its chest and face now took up what seemed to be the majority of the painting. The eyes of it were no longer a distant smattering of paint, but two well-rendered spheres, pink like strawberry milk. The creature had no nose-- merely a slit under the eyes where a mouth might have been that trailed down its thick neck and into its chest, like a turnip that had been cut into by surgical instruments.

The slit opened a bit, revealing strips of yellow teeth, proving once and for all that the painting was moving.

Katia scratched against the door with her claws, banging, forcing her body against it when it wouldn't budge. The walls responded to her scratches, shaking and hissing like angered roaches, writhing together and making scuttling sounds that drowned out the first scream Katia had made in years.

A deep, droning voice called out to her. "Sit in the bowl, girl."

She whirled around to look. The thing in the painting had opened its maw now fully. The gaping orifice, which looked like it had been cut from a gourd, extended all the way to the bottom of the creature's chest. It could easily swallow her without chewing. Its face now extended past the frame of the painting, extruding past the skin.

"NO!" she screamed and tore the lantern from the ceiling. She smashed it on the floor, setting the front of the house ablaze. The walls wriggled in pain and sizzled like fat tubers frying in a pan. She could still see the moving forms around her without any light.

But the roar behind her was more disconcerting. As she rounded on the noise, fleshy white claws of the creature had plucked her from the floor like a ripened cherry. The overbite of the monster had extruded past the image, exposing endless rows of ingrown teeth that took different shapes--canines, incisors, lamprey hooks, daggers, crowns growing upon crowns in infected looking clusters. It was as if a tide of teeth were falling over her, slowly, in between the wails and moans of the fleshy decay.

She clawed and kicked to get away, and it so happened that luck was on her side. One of the malformed fingers of the horror snapped off with a kick, flowing out a teal ooze that looked like congealed paint. She fell into the bowl-- but something invisible grabbed a hold of her ankles.

The bowl was rising.

"No," she whispered, near breathless from fright as the bowl brought her closer to the gums which smelled strongly of formaldehyde.

"No," she said as the beast made a churning sound, producing a hollow pocket in its flesh, the exact proportions of her body.

"NOOO!" she screamed, letting the horror tear from her throat, kicking inside of the pot and breaking from the invisible grab as it suddenly slammed into the bottom of the floor, breaking through, sending Katia into a torrential darkness.

The house had been climbing up the mountainside, which meant she had a long ways to fall. She looked out to the inky abyss surrounding her as she hurdled toward the earth into the valley below like a falling meteorite. The only thing separating her body from thousands of miles in the sky was the bowl from the pile dwelling. A wave of nausea overtook her, and she threw up a colorless liquid that spiraled out of the bowl's opening. Curling inside, she was close to losing consciousness with one final thought in her head before the black out: she imagined a stained-glass palace in the sky, where all the winged things of this earth could find light and laughter, far from the dreadful house with the painting.

A bellowing, primordial moan came from the house as the pot crashed through the branches and

the wood while Katia's white gown flapped wildly around her. There was a dull thud, and then a crunch.

When Katia awoke, she was covered in a motley blanket that smelled like ash. A fire crackled in a stone pit next to her pad on the floor. Katia rose, fluttering in place and hobbling, as she looked around her for the first time. She was in a black, hollow sphere of a room, barring the open roof with the orange sky above. There was a fire pit at the center with a bubbling kettle on top of it. Trunks, wardrobes, wooden boxes and drawers crowded the surrounding floor space.

“Caught up in too much wind, little bug,” said somebody. The voice was cracking, and she recognized it as the same one from the pot. She shivered in response, too terrified to look above her to where the sound was coming from.

“I may be ugly, but I aint no villain. Not ta you, anyhow,” said the figure that loomed above her. It smelled like dust and moss and old books. Katia tilted her head to look at the massive swan above her. She had a blue shirt, a red head scarf and a grey stole much darker than her feathers. Her fearsome expression seem locked, with bulging, accusatory eyes that might even put inanimate objects to shame. Even as a hag, her presence displayed an overwhelming amount of vigor. Katia wondered how frightening the swan might have appeared when she was Katia’s age.

The hag swan clacked her beak before speaking once more. “There’s ingenuity in your blood, girly. You don’ have much ta use in dis world, but you work ‘til ya fall asleep. You’ve watched this city all yer little life an’ didn’t even know it was watching back. Didja?”

She cackled and then hopped backward, making forceful gusts of wind with her mighty wings as she ripped a hunk of meat from some kind of carcass, throwing it into a stew. Whatever she was eating, it had fur.

“Girly’s gonna work her wings to death, way she’s going.”

Katia found her voice at last. “I don’t know if I’m working myself to death-- but I do know that everything dies.” She thought of her father, wondering if he was happy in some afterlife, or if he simply ceased to exist.

The swan screeched louder at that, laughing in a way that made Katia’s antenna curl and nearly give her a migraine. “Mortals is always thinkin’ about death, I s’pose. Pretty little words on paper ‘till it curl up and dry and crumble into the dust, all ‘fore it’s written by another meat sack.” The swan cocked her head again to slide open a drawer, plucking herbs to put into the pot. “I don’t care ‘bout what’s pretty. I care ‘bout what works. You found yerself in a scary world just now, didn’t ya?”

“I was stolen,” said Katia.

“What if I told ya you died?” hissed the bird.

“That isn’t true!” screamed Katia.

“Course it’s bird shit!” screeched the swan, excitedly. “Girls didn’t always accept anythin’ they was told. Bet most of the girlies I be tellin’ that to would start cryin’. That’s how ya know they’re already dead an’ spittin’ up carrion snacks.” She hopped up to Katia, bowing almost protectively to take a look at her damaged wings. “Veles got ya good, looks like.”

“Veles?” echoed Katia. She had always wanted to know more about him-- the Slavic god of earth, water, the underworld and shepherds. Keeper of swamps. “I’m afraid the one who did this was m-- I mean, no, it was an accident. Nobody did it... Are you the Baba Yaga?”

Nails in the bird’s webbing scraped against the floor, sharper than any swan’s Katia had ever heard. “I’ve had uglier names.”

“Then aren’t you a servant of Veles?”

The bird regarded her for a second, then hopped to another side of the room, picking garlic cloves from a hook. “I am a servant of me. I need to ask ya a question, girl. And I don’t want no stupid answer.”

The stew churned and boiled, bubbling thickly. Katia looked up, attentively. “Okay.”

“What is a god?” asked the Baba Yaga.

Katia paused. A god was many things. A protector. A destroyer. A bringer of good fortune. An archon of parties. Sex, love, death, hate, war, life. “A god is... a deity of nondescript--”

The swan hissed again, making Katia flinch. “Tell me what you know, not what you’ve been *told*.”

“A god is the attention of people.” She tensed, hoping the bird wouldn’t tear her apart from this answer.

The baba yaga nodded. “Gods is people. No gods, no people. No people, no gods. Always gonna be gods. New gods ‘part from eternal gods. This new convention called cinema can make gods out of people too-- at least the idea of people. But when a god dies, he’s not humbled. Sometimes his will is strong ‘nough to leave a ghost. Sometimes he’s gotta sleep for a very long time an’ wakes up with a temper.”

“Why does he want me?”

She laughed again, nearly a gurgle. “Cos you *saw* him. People forget to look at things over time. Most aren’t like you. You don’t see a stone. You see a timeline. I could look into the character of non-livin’ things, too. He wants to keep ya. Thinks he can have ya. Keep himself *strong*.”

“Wasn’t he trying to kill me?” she said.

“Oh yes.”

“But surely--” she stopped herself. Veles was the preserver, not the life bearer. He wouldn’t need to keep her alive. She shivered. “Is the house with the chicken feet yours, then?”

“There will always be a bit of Veles in me, and me in Veles-- fadin’ lord of the restless dead. I attend to the pieces left behind. Stole my home for ‘is purposes when a fool found it and paid the respect to the wrong owner.”

A surge of anger rushed through Katia. “I knew that painting didn’t belong.”

“I felt the same, naturally. But it was enough to awaken Veles. Wasn’t the same after rebirth. Mewling an’ mad an’ clamourin’ for the adulation of a single cultist. His only follower was devoured within a week. Thankfully, the meat was still some use.”

The swan plucked into the formless, dripping carcass dangling from the hook again, throwing what appeared to be an entire paw into the stew. It belonged to a snow leopard.

The fear inside of Katia was slowly thickening into a rage as black as tar. “Did Veles always used to be a monster?” she asked.

“He was an absolute,” hissed the swan. “Dark, an’ endless, an’ commander of fate. When ya believe that yer forever, and then yer not... can’t be surprised that the end of him is madness.”

“I had little knowledge of him, and he stole me. Could he not steal me again?”

“Thought you *knew* today is his last day.” She spat. “The birth an’ power of gods is strongest at the conclusion of October. Their death and weakness is strongest the first of November. Even if he takes you, he doesn’t know that it’s too late, an’ he’s gonna end in his misery. Best future for him is a rebirth as a different mind, if e’s got any future.”

“That cannot be!” yelled Katia in frustration.

“If you truly think it cannot be, then it will not,” said the Baba Yaga. “Yer wings are now useless for flight, so you may have mine.”

She realized then that they were inside of the bowl. The swan produced a pestle from under her wing.

“This will take ya to where you must go. When you fly to the top, you will become large again. Big enough for Veles to see you. If you make it back to the city, meet Zmaj. He’s not just a scaly beast, ya know. Nough people put faith in him ta be the city itself. He will protect you, just as you have always protected him. In the meantime, don’t drag any scum down here, else they’ll get little too, and I’ll have a mess.”

She tested her wings, feeling pain, but still managed to rise with a bit of poise. Before she left, she had to ask the Baba Yaga one last thing. “Why are you helping me?”

“‘Cause liars say the world don’t want women like us. We will see, and we will hear. We will wander and keep secrets. We will surpass the limits of death in stories because nobody can forget our faces, no matter how inconsequential men may want us to be. We are finders and makers, and not even a god may steal our homes.”

There was a piece of rope that led to the opening of the bowl. As Katia climbed, the circumference of it shrank, until she emerged at the top, sitting up in the bowl from the pile dwelling, which now had a hard bottom beneath her claws rather than a rope leading down.

Apparently, when the bowl crashed its way out of the house and fell from the mountainside, it had landed in the gnarled branch of a massive tree which had a trunk as big as a grain silo. She leaned to one side of the bowl, and it rocked precariously on the narrow branches. Holding the sides of the bowl and lifting herself, she stepped carefully over its edge and onto some sap. She hoped that the viscid fluid would keep her in place-- but a patch of moss slipped away from under the mortar, violently jerking the weighty bowl to its side and catching her other leg, knocking her over and to fall for what seemed several hundred feet.

Something fine and stretchy had caught her. She was suspended mid-air and she fluttered as hard as she could, feeling a sticky thread trap her in place as she looked around, surrounded by ancient trees that towered well above her. Child-like whispers started up from the canopy above her, hushed and hurried.

A single acorn larger than her entire body descended from a branch above, suspended on silk. It twirled in front of her. When it spun, revealing its back, it showed a smooth, fleshy consistency that jerked like twitching muscle. When eye slits on its surface revealed the underdeveloped expressions of a tiny flat-faced mammal that had squat features on its face, it opened its ragged mouth and chittered, staring at Katia with familiar milky pink eyes. It mewled and dangled like a gormless marionette that mocked sentient expression as it made another acorn fall, then more. There were hundreds of them. Once they had surrounded Katia, the closest less than a meter away, their jerks grew more forceful and more violent. One by one, they made popping noises. The pink eyes of the puppet-like faces were bursting into a gelatinous ooze. Their cupules were cracking violently, as something beneath each acorn lids was scraping to get out.

She pulled away, squirming as best as she could, but her wings were still tangled in something strong and clingy. The chittering turned into hissing, then into clackering. From out of one of acorn head, Katia could see a slender shining black leg pop out, convulsing in crab-like segmentation, dripping what looked to be an amniotic slime. The puppet faces moved no more, swelling, becoming abdomens that hung low like bloated fruit.

What meager light she had was darkened as the body of something very big blotted out the morning sun. She could see in the dark, but closed her eyes, only hearing the scuttling and the

cracking and the popping of shells. She remembered that when a spider devours its meal, even the husk remains. This truth let Katia know that Veles had found her. But she still had the pestle in her sash. It was Baba Yaga's magic that made the pestle and mortar fly. She was the arch crone, and mother of the modern witch myth. Fear had made the wizened swan a legend, but so too had respect. She held the pestle close to her chest, urging the mortar to return to its other half.

Within moments, the bowl came whirling from below, slammed into Katia's back and cupped her, tearing her from the web. She wailed as some of the silk cut into her wings, claiming more scales but decided quickly that she would not miss them. She spun in place, levitating in the flying bowl as the skittering sounds of large woody spider legs began to mass around her.

A spider lunged for her, hissing and clacking its mandibles. She batted it away with her pestle, hearing the sickening crunch of its burst abdomen, feeling a little pain in her own from an inexplicable sympathy toward the fragility of another exoskeleton. The mammoth body of the elder spider descended slowly from above. She couldn't waste any more time with the babies.

She spun in place, pointing her pestle in different directions to discern the right way. Twelve thick tree trunks were in her way. Eight of those trunks were not trees. If she picked an opening near the mouth, it could easily snatch her.

"Why is out your only option?" hissed the swan from inside of the bowl. Katia nodded, and then curled inside of the mortar, pointing her pestle straight up.

The bowl began to rumble, as if it had come to a full boil, leaking mist that fogged around Katia's midsection as it howled. Katia screeched at the spiders, clackering her maxilla back when the monster revealed its head, rearing its slimy fangs coated with drool beads larger than the little moth's entire body. Katia crouched inside of the pot as it went flying skyward, shooting off like a cannon. She angled the bowl by tilting the pestle on its side. It bulleted through the midsection of the spider, sloshing away the juices as it spun, which solidified mid-air into flaky ashes.

Katia broke through. She opened her eyes, seeing the red tinge from the sun painted like watercolors mixed into charcoal on the gray sky. She had never been this high, and the city was only a short distance away. A blissful anguish overcame her when realization hit that she had flown for the first time all by herself.

The wind brushed through her feelers as her shadow passed pools of limpid water, tearing leaves from the trees in the wake of her speed. She laughed louder than she ever had in her life, a hearty cackle that shamed the wind and the sluggish world beneath her. An army of baby spiders stamped below her, following her like the fading trail of a dazzling comet. They clawed ever upward, scuttling as the light of the sun stung their skin, slowing them until their shining carapaces ceased to move, turning back into mica within the mountainside.

Some followed her all the way back to the city. When she flew through the gate, they skittered in after her as the walls of the city came to life, coiling like were the body of a massive serpent with endless heads.

People walked past the transformation, going about their lives without even seeing or noticing, busy in their tasks and routines while the spitting sorrow of the last spider ended.

The bowl thudded dully when it landed on the stoop of Katia's ruined home. For a moment, she saw the stone, the cement and the plaster turn into the skin of an enormous reptile, piecing itself back together like a rapidly healing wound. Then, the green scales and the black veins faded, hardening into an ordinary house once more.

She picked up the bowl with both claws and stepped inside of her home, surprised to find it unlocked. Everything was as it had been. She placed the bowl on her kitchen table, took a seat, and inhaled cold autumn air.

She put her head down to rest, closed her eyes and felt all the uneasy feelings leave her. A knocking sound made her wake. She rose and petted the side of the bowl, feeling its coarse texture. Her claw slipped away as she went for the door, opening to Iren's friendly but severe expression that looked her up and down, side-to-side and quickly fixated into folds of deep concern.

"Katia? Good lord, you've been torn to pieces!" Her paw touched her chin, pushing it to the side. "Did the police come to hurt you?! I've been hearing the stories, but I blame myself most of all for not coming sooner."

Katia brushed her paw from her cheek and smiled weakly. "No... It wasn't the police."

"But who was it? I don't see the house you spoke of--"

She shushed the cat as she moved back to the table to sit. "Please don't ask me any more of it. At least not right now. I think, tonight, that all of the weight in my life tried to drag me to the bottom of the swamps. I've been battered, sickened, torn from what little efforts I've made in the world to make it better... just to gaze upon an ocean of black."

Her voice trailed off as she stared at the bowl that had taken up new residency in her home. "But I may have to think on it longer."

"Katia dear. You're babbling."

"Sit with me, Iren."

The cat swished her tail anxiously and then walked inside, closing the door behind her to sit on a kitchen chair beside the moth. Katia's claw grabbed the cat's warm paw, shaking.

"You know... I think in spite of everything, we win whenever we try. Just the act of doing-- the work, and the thought, and the copious notes that we take in our head. That is how we know the world will be better-- because there will always be those of us who dare to try. There's no

permanent fix for our world, or our lives. Things break, and we fix them. Lives break, and we fix them.”

The lynx pulled off her silk gloves, laid them on the table and hunched, playfully, warming her paws on the freezing claws of the moth. “You are a clever little thing-- but even a glacier like me would be cruel to demand food from you in this state. Fix yourself up, and we can pick you out a pastry, yes?”

Katia looked through her stained glass window. A beautiful young swan preened herself in the framing of marigolds and cerulean raindrops. “I would like that a lot.”