

Chapter 1

The skull glared at me ~~with-out of~~ empty ~~orbitseye~~ sockets. Odd runes marked its forehead, carved into the yellowed bone and filled with black ink. Its thick bottom jaw supported a row of conical fangs, long and sharp like the teeth of a crocodile. The skull sat on top of an old STOP sign. Someone had painted the surface of the hexagon white and ~~wrote-written~~ KEEP OUT ~~across it~~ in large jagged letters. A ~~reddish-brown~~red splatter stained the bottom edge ~~of it~~, looking suspiciously like dry blood. I leaned closer. Yep, blood. Some hair, too. Human hair.

Curran frowned at the sign. "Do you think he's trying to tell us something?"

"I don't know. He's being so subtle about it."

I looked past the sign. About a hundred yards back, a large two story house waited. It was clearly built post-Shift, ~~with-out of~~ solid timber and brown stone laid by hand to ensure it would survive the magic waves. ~~ButYet~~ instead of the ~~usual~~ simple square ~~or~~

Commented [AS1]: OK? This is more the usual phrasing--please stet or rephrase if I got it wrong.

~~rectangular box~~~~box~~ of most post-Shift buildings, this house had all the pre-Shift bells and whistles of a modern prairie home: rows of big windows, sweeping horizontal lines, and [a](#) spacious layout. Except prairie style homes usually had long flat roofs and little ornamentation, while this place sported pitched roofs with elaborate carved gables, beautiful barge boards, and ornate wooden windows.

"It's like someone took a Russian log cabin and a pre-Shift contemporary house, stuck them into a blender, and dumped it over there."

Curran frowned. "It's his... what do you call it? Terem."

"~~Terem~~ [A terem](#) is where Russian princesses lived."

"Exactly."

Between us and the house lay a field of black dirt. It looked soft and powdery, like potting soil or a freshly plowed field. A path of rickety old boards, half rotten and splitting, curved through the dirt to the front door. I didn't have a good feeling about that dirt.

We'd tried to circle the house and ran into a thick thorn-studded natural fence, formed by wild rose bushes, blackberry [brambles](#), and trees. [The fence was twelve feet tall and when Curran tried to jump high enough to see over it, the thorny vines snapped out like lassos and made a heroic effort to pull him in. After I helped him pick the needles out of his hands, we decided a frontal assault was a](#)[the](#) better option.

Commented [AS2]: ha!

"No animal tracks on the dirt," I said.

"No animal scents either," Curran said. "There are scent trails all around us through the woods, but none here."

"That's why he has giant windows and no grates on them. Nothing can get close to the house."

"It's that, or he just doesn't care. Why the hell doesn't he answer his phone?"

Who knew why the ~~priests~~priest of the god of All Evil and Darkness did anything?

I picked up a small rock, tossed it into the dirt, and braced myself. Nothing. No toothy jaws ~~exploding~~exploded through the soil, no magic fire, no earth-shattering ~~kaboom~~explosion. The rock just sat there.

Commented [AS3]: maybe "boom" to avoid echo?

We could come back later, when the magic was down. That would be ~~a reasonable~~the sensible thing to do. However, we ~~drove~~had driven ten miles through ~~the~~ lousy traffic in the punishing heat of Georgia's summer and then hiked another ~~mile~~three through the woods to get here, and our deadline ~~to get this done~~ was fast approaching. One way or another, I was getting into that house.

Commented [AS4]: OK? This didn't seem needed, and also avoids echo with "get / getting".

I put my foot onto the first board. It sank a little under my weight, but held. Step. Another step. Still holding.

I tiptoed across the boards, Curran right behind me. Think sneaky thoughts.

The dirt shivered.

Two more steps.

A mound formed to the left of us, the dirt shifting like waves of some jet-black sea.

Uh-oh.

“To the left,” I murmured.

“I see it.”

Long serpentine bone spines slid through the soil, the fins of a sea serpent gliding just under the surface of a midnight-black powdery ocean.

We sprinted to the door.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a cloud of loose soil burst to the left. A scorpion the size of a pony shot out and scrambled after us.

That’s all we needed. If we killed his pet scorpion, ~~wethere~~ would ~~never hearbe the no~~ end of ~~itecomplaining~~.

I ran up the porch and pounded on the door. “Roman!”

Behind me bone tentacles exploded from the soil and wound about Curran’s body. He locked his hands on the bones and pulled strained, pulling them apart. Bone crunched, and tThe left tentacle flailed, torn.

“Roman!” Damn it all to hell.

Commented [A55]: gorgeous description! Also, effectively creepy.

Commented [A56]: OK? To clarify. Please stet / fix if I got it wrong.

Commented [A57]: ha! This made me laugh--great line.

fyi, “we’d never hear the end of it” is the more usual colloquial phrasing (as opposed to “there would be no end of complaining”). Up to you if you’d like to switch or not.

Commented [A58]: OK? So it’s clear Curran is putting a little effort into this! Please stet / fix if I got it wrong.

A bone tentacle grabbed me and yanked me back and up, dangling me six feet off the ground. The scorpion dashed forward, its barb poised for the kill.

The door swung open, revealing Roman. He wore a T-shirt and plaid pajamas and his dark hair, shaved on the sides into a long horse-like mane, stuck out on the left side of his head. He looked like he'd been sleeping.

"What's all this?"

Everything stopped.

Roman squinted at me. "What are you guys doing here?"

"We had to come here because you don't answer your damn phone." Curran's voice had that icy quality that said his patience was at an end.

"I ~~don't~~didn't answer it because I unplugged it."

Roman waved his hand. The scorpion retreated. The tentacles gently set me down and slithered back into the ground.

"You would unplug yours too, if you were related to my family. My parents are fighting again and they're trying to make me choose sides. I told them they could talk to me when they start acting like responsible adults."

Fat chance of that. Roman's father ~~Gi~~rigorii was the head black volhv in the city. His mother Evdokia was one third of the Witch

Oracle. When they had fights, things didn't boil over, they exploded. Literally.

Commented [AS9]: good description!

"So far I've avoided both of them, so I'm enjoying peace and quiet. Come in."

He held the door open. I walked past him into a large living room. Golden wooden floors, huge fire place, thirty foot ceilings, and soft furniture. Book shelves lined the ~~farother~~ wall, crammed to the brink. The place looked downright cozy.

Curran walked in behind me and took in the living room. His thick eyebrows rose.

"What?" Roman asked.

"No altar?" Curran asked. "No bloody knives and frightened virgins?"

"Where is No sacrificial pit ringed with skulls?" I asked.

~~"No altar?" Curran asked. "No bloody knives and frightened virgins?"~~

Commented [AS10]: OK? Since Roman's question was in response to Curran's facial expression, I thought it made sense for him to reply first.

I also rephrased Kate's question to make it parallel to Curran's, emphasizing how they're teasing him.

"Ha. Ha." Roman rolled his eyes. "Never heard that one before. I keep the virgins ~~in the basement~~ chained up in the basement. Do you want some coffee?"

I shook my head.

"Yes," Curran said.

"Black?"

“No, put cream in it.”

“Good man. Only two ~~kind~~ kinds of people drink their coffee black; cops and serial killers. Sit, sit.”

I sat on the sofa and almost sank into it. I’d need help getting up. Curran sprawled next to me.

“This is nice,” he said.

“Mhm.”

“We should get one for the living room.”

“We’d get blood on it.”

Curran shrugged. “So?”

Roman appeared with two mugs, one pitch-black and the other clearly half-filled with cream. He gave the lighter mug to Curran.

“Drinking yours black, I see,” I told him.

He shrugged. “Eh... Goes with the job. So what can I do for you?”

“We’re getting married,” I said.

“I know. Congratulations. On Ivan ~~Kupalo~~ Kupala night. I don’t know if ~~it’s that’s~~ good or bad, but it’s brave.”

Ivan ~~Kupalo~~ Kupala’s night was the ~~timenight~~ of wild magic in Slavic folklore. The ancient Russians believed ~~that on that it was the time date when~~ the boundaries between the worlds blurred. In our case, it meant ~~the night of~~ a really strong magic wave. Odd things happened on Ivan ~~Kupalo~~ Kupala’s night. Given a choice, I would’ve

Commented [AS11]: fun exchange!

Commented [AS12]: I’m seeing this more commonly referenced as “Kupala Night”, with Kupalo spelled as Kupala; with the first name included it appears as “Ivan Kupala Day”--change needed to “Kupala Night” here and in the next paragraph, or OK?

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kupala_Night

Commented [IA13R12]: Technically it’s Kupalo in Russian, but it’s pronounced as koo-pah-lah, rhymes with koala. I think you are right, the English references seem to go with the way it’s pronounced rather than written, so we will make a global change.

Commented [AS14]: I was trying to think of a suggestion for rephrasing this to avoid the echo with “night / night” in this sentence and my brain just came up with:

“In Slavic folklore, Ivan Kupalo’s night was the equivalent of magic gone wild.”

Feel free to use if it fits Kate’s voice, or rephrase differently if the echo is not deliberate.

Commented [IA15R14]: Changed to time. It seems more conversational?

Commented [AS16]: Like Halloween!

Commented [IA17R16]: ☺ Yes!

picked a different day, but Curran had set the date. To him it was the last day of werewolf summer, a shapeshifter holiday and a perfect day for ~~our~~the wedding. I told him I would marry him, and if he wanted to get married on Ivan ~~Kupalo~~Kupala night, then we'd get married on Ivan ~~Kupalo~~Kupala night. After moving the date a dozen times, that was the least I could do.

"So did you come to invite me?" Roman asked.

"Yes," Curran said. "We'd like you to officiate."

"I'm sorry?"

"We'd like you to marry us," I said.

Roman's eyes went wide. He pointed to himself. "Me?"

"Yes," Curran said.

"Marry you?"

"Yes."

"You do know what I do, right?"

"Yes," I said. "You're Chernobog's priest."

"Chernobog" literally meant Black God, who was also known by other fun names like Black Serpent, Lord of Darkness, God of freezing cold, destruction, evil, and death. Some ancient Slavs ~~divided~~broke their pantheon into opposing forces of ~~into a balance~~ of light and dark. These forces existed in a balance, and according to that view, Chernobog was a necessary evil. Somebody had to be

Commented [AS18]: OK? To clarify. Please stet / fix if I got it wrong.

his priest and Roman somehow had ended up with that the job.

According to him, it was the family business. trade.

Commented [AS19]: or "business"?

Roman leaned forward, his dark eyes intense. "You sure about this?"

"Yes," Curran said.

"Not going to change your mind?"

What was it with the twenty questions? "Will you do it or not?"

"Of course, I'll do it. Ha!" Roman jumped off the couch. "Ha! Nobody ever asks me to marry them. They always go to Nikolai, my cousin, Vasiliy's oldest son."

Commented [AS20]: OK? This didn't seem needed, since he says the same thing in the next sentence.

Roman had a vast family tree, but I remembered Vasiliy, his uncle. Vasiliy was a priest of Belobog, Chernobog's brother and exact opposite. He was also very proud of his children, especially Nikolai, and bragged about them every chance he got.

Roman ducked behind the couch and emerged with a phone.

"When some supernatural filth tries to carry off the children, call Roman so he can wade through blood and sewage to rescue them, but when it's something nice like a wedding or a naming, oh no, we can't have Chernobog's volhv involved. It's bad luck. Get Nikolai. When he finds out who I'm going to marry, he'll have an aneurysm. His head will explode. Good that he's a doctor, maybe he can treat himself."

He plugged the phone into the outlet.

It rang.

Roman stared at it as if it were a viper.

The phone rang again.

He unplugged it. "There."

"It can't be that bad," I told him.

"Oh it's bad." Roman nodded. "My Dad refused to help my second sister buy a house, because he doesn't like her boyfriend. My Mother called him and it went badly. She cursed him. Every time he urinates, the stream arches up and over."

Oh.

Curran winced.

"You hungry? Do you want something to eat?" Roman wagged his eyebrows. "I have smoked brisket."

Curran's ~~eyes lit up~~ ~~face got a speculative expression.~~ "Moist or dry?"

"Moist. What am I, a heathen?"

Technically, he was a heathen.

"We can't," I told him. "We have to leave. We have Conclave tonight."

Curran grimaced.

"I didn't know you still go to that," Roman said.

"Ghastek outed her," Curran said.

