

The House of Wandering Bone

An old woman struggles to accept her new husband, the guardian spirit of a magical house.

When he begins to fade, she must acknowledge a love already made.

When Nadia became the next Baba Yaga, she had anticipated great responsibility, perhaps power. She had not expected a husband.

At sixty-three, back curved like a sickle and hands gnarled from gout, she had been harvesting herbs when Baba Yaga's hut came for her. It was a strange calamity of a dwelling — hut and fortress patchworked with a thatch roof and five crooked chimneys. Odder still that it perched atop two giant chicken legs, lumbering about as no house should.

"I'm too old," she called. "Find someone with younger knees."

The house lowered itself down like a brooding hen, its front door swinging open.

Nadia sighed. Fate and magic were both stubborn and neither had ever cared much for her plans. She stepped across the threshold into a warm kitchen.

Inside stood a translucent figure that rippled like troubled water — a young man, barely in his prime, handsome and broad-shouldered.

"Welcome," he called out, voice deep as a well. "I am Vasily, Guardian of the House of Wandering Bone. The house has chosen you as the next Baba Yaga. I will serve as your husband."

"I am Nadia." Straightening her back despite its ancient ache. "If the house needs a tired witch, so be it. But I have no use for a husband."

"Nadia," he repeated, as if to remember. "The forty-seven before you called me what they wished and I've called each wife."

"I am too old for such nonsense," Nadia said firmly. "Show me the house and tell me of my work."

Vasily simply nodded, his form shimmering slightly in the firelight. "Come, we will soon have many visitors."

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In the days that followed, Nadia explored her new home's ever-changing corridors. Vasily was her guide in these adventures, his knowledge as vast as the night sky. Together, they followed halls that twisted at whim, discovered new rooms and admired the treasures within. A library of magical books, a greenhouse of silver plants, and a chamber of flowing hourglasses. Each day birthed new wonders: a closet, a fountain, a cupboard filled with foreign spices. Windows with shifting landscapes.

"Does the house ever stop changing?" Nadia asked once, before a staircase that hadn't existed at breakfast.

"Only when it's dead." Vasily replied, his voice gentle.

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She caught herself looking forward to their morning walks. Yet, there were times when the responsibilities of Baba Yaga came first, when they were too busy with wanderers and needful spirits. Then, she focused on the work and did her best to ignore the disappointment.

In the afternoons, he would be in the library engaged in his knitting and weaving spells with each clackety clack of his needle stitch.

"Odd hobby for a man," she remarked, watching his large hands work. "In my village, men who practiced charms were considered strange."

"Odd indeed," he agreed, lifting the yarn. "But a house that knits — that would be stranger still. So which shall I be?"

Each visitor departed with one of his creations - a scarf that warmed in deepest winter, mittens that brought luck, a blanket to ward off nightmares. Each knitted with its own little blessing.

"You give away a piece of yourself with each gift," Nadia observed.

"I do," Vasily replied. "Just as you do with each tincture and remedy. But I've always thought that magic hoarded is magic soured."

She nodded, for they thought the same.

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At night, they sat talking until the moon hid — of their lives, of magic, of those who sought their service. Some nights they did not speak at all. He would stoke the fire before her first shiver. She brewed chamomile for his restlessness, rosehip for her joints.

Knitted rugs appeared beside her bed, sparing her from cold morning floors.

Honeyed pastries left by his chair.

Small kindnesses, exchanged daily.

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One evening, she caught herself arranging her hair more carefully before their fireside talk.

"You seem troubled," he said, noticing her expression.

"I am too old for this," she replied, more to herself than to him.

"For what?" he asked.

"For..." She gestured vaguely between them.

Vasily considered her. "Perhaps, the house chose you not despite your age, but because of it. Tempered wisdom contains its own magic."

"A pairing like ours," she said dryly, "would feed the gossips through winter. Does it truly not bother you?"

"It is true. When I was only a man, I mistook youth for beauty. A wrinkled face would not charm my gaze. But I have lived many times your years. You have grieved one husband, and I have cared for forty-seven wives."

"But I am old now. Shouldn't you wait for another?"

"One day, I will," he affirmed. "That is the way of things. Another season will always come. Each has its own beauty, and I wish to fully know yours."

"Even so," she said, "I find it difficult to think of myself as a wife to a man who looks barely thirty."

Vasily laughed, a warm sound. "What I am to you, Nadia, is for you to decide."

"For now, 'Vasily' will suffice,"

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In the second month, they stumbled across an iron cauldron.

"A fine find, indeed," said Vasily. "Perfect for our new visitor's brew."

"But far too heavy," she disagreed, for it was as big as she and heavier than sorrow.

Without comment, Vasily lifted it under his arm, his form now as solid as wood or stone. As she followed him, Nadia could not help but notice the contrast between them.

"How are you man and spirit, both?"

Sly as a fox, he teased, "Shall I grant you permission to learn just how much of a man I am?"

Startled, her eyes jumped to his face, red carpeting across her cheeks. She was still learning this new humor of his.

His eyes twinkled with mirth, his mouth inviting.

With a laugh and a soft shake of her head, "You shouldn't tease. Now come, and tell me how Vasily the house-husband came to be."

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Afterwards, she wept long into the night.

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Every routine has an end. It is a sad truth, that no one can outrun.

One morning, she found him in a corridor, staring at a wall with no door.

"I cannot find the blue room," he said, his voice distant. "The twenty-third wife, Signe the Victorious. She was sick at the end."

He shook his head, "Or perhaps it was the seventeenth, Eira the Healer, who had caught fever." His fingers traced the wall, attempting to grasp a doorknob that was not there.

That night, she spoke directly to the House of Wandering Bone.

"Your guardian grows transparent," she said, kneeling before the hearth where embers glowed dull. "I will not see his undoing, or yours. So tell me what cure he needs."

The house spoke through the deep creaking of floorboards and the rat-tat-tat of rattling windows. "Each Baba has their own trial and each woman, chosen for what she brings."

"Play no games. What is it that I must do?"

"But that answer, Baba, must come from you." it replied in the sounds of settling stairs and lonely, squeaking hinges.

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"Which tea is this?"

"Lemon." She answered for the second time that hour.

His eyes traced her furrowed brow.

"That's right, how silly of me. Tell me again, which pretty wife might you be?" he asked; his eyes held a mischief that defied his wavering state.

She frowned, recognizing the jest for what it was but fearful all the same. "That isn't funny."

"Ah. It is Nadia, the stubborn one," he smiled. "My favorite."

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By the sixth full moon, they could no longer deny what was happening to Vasily. His form wavered without end. Stronger in the mornings, but with a sputtering flicker by the dinner hour. The man who had lifted iron cauldrons now struggled with teacups.

But worse was his mind — once sharp and full was now unraveling.

As Vasily weakened, so did the house. Rooms that once shifted, stood fixed. A spire toppled; one of the five chimneys collapsed. Tapestries lost color, books turned to blank pages. Walls thinned, as if corroding from within.

Then, to her horror, he started to recite to himself, word for word, that terrible tale like a single recurring memory.

"It was Yaga the First, who found me in the borderlands," he would begin, "...my bones, she ground into the hearth's mortar, my hair into lathe..."

Nadia could only listen once more to how magic made ruin and rune of him.

"...and that was how Vasily came to be."

And with each passing night, he started again, "It was Yaga the First..."

She feared the repetition, the binding, for each night he grew weaker from the retelling.

No tincture or foreign tea made a difference, and Nadia could only continue her care for both house and man. She lit candles in forgotten corners, swept dust from the ceiling beams. For Vasily, she helped how she could. When his fingers grew too insubstantial to hold his needles and wool, she sat beside him. Together, they moved, his hands with her own, guiding through motions he had once known.

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One morning, Nadia found a small bundle on her chair - a mismatched pair of hand-made socks, one pristine and the other imperfect and lumpy. A different blessing woven within each knitted row.

She found him by the hearth, flickering like a flint spark. She took to her chair and pulled the socks onto her feet.

"You made these for me," she said, wiggling her toes. "It's complicated spellcraft."

His voice was quiet but clear. "Today is a good day. They're finished now, even if one is poorly done."

"It's no matched set," she agreed, appreciating the left sock's strange whorls and uneven stitches. The perfect and imperfect, side by side. "But they're wonderful all the same."

"They will be warm, and they will serve you well when I'm gone."

The truth of it stung at her eyes.

Looking at him now, so beautiful in his fading translucence, Nadia felt a realization bloom and prick at her, for so much remained unsaid and there were no tomorrows promised.

"I -" she sobbed, "I cannot lose you. I am not ready to be a widow once more."

"Do you accept me as your husband, then?"

She paused, as if stepping through the doorway of an unexplored room. Then, she leaned forward and took his face between her old calloused palms, to touch what was left of him, cold as snow but still undeniably there.

"Yes," she answered. "Not because you are the house's guardian, but because you are Vasily - with your knitting and centuries of witnessing. You sit with me by the evening's fire. You listen to my stories. You are kind to me. Yes, I accept you as my husband, true."

Her words fell like a spell.

The hearth trembled; its flames flickered green, blue, then blazed bone-white. With a monstrous tremble the house inhaled — walls bending inward before surging out. Frozen rooms stirred again, landscapes changed, and most wonderful of all, Vasily now stood solid and whole before her once more.

"How?" she gasped.

"Nadia, my wife." Vasily eyes met hers with a warmth both familiar and new, and he leaned low to kiss her brow. "We still have much to learn of each other."

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They lived happily, and still walk between worlds, Nadia and her house-husband, Vasily.

And, this is their wisdom: magic and attachment are interwoven through daily acts of care — time spent together, a gift given, a pastry shared, a hearth tended.

Remember this: when you stand at the crossroads of indecision, when plans go awry, when you must mend what is broken, that life, though imperfect, is still beautiful, and you are worthy to walk across thresholds unknown.