

Firebird

R. Garcia y Robertson

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R. Garcia y Robertson lives in the charming Victorian town of Mt. Vernon, Washington. His novels to date include The Spiral Dance (1991), The Virgin and the Dinosaur (1996), Atlantis Found (1997), American Woman (1998), and Knight Errant (2001). His stories have appeared in F&SF and Asimov's with some regularity for the last fifteen years and are characterized by their broad range of concerns, stylistic sophistication, and attention to historical detail. Garcia has tended toward time travel or historical settings for both his fantasy and SF stories. Some of these stories are collected in The Moon Maid and Other Fantastic Adventures (1998). His fiction has been relatively under appreciated since the small flash of critical and peer attention garnered by his first novel, The Spiral Dance.

"Firebird," which appeared in F&SF, is set in his fantasy alternate world of Markovy, a world with a history similar to our own but tweaked in ways that make for great fantasy adventures. As in a fairy tale, a young girl is apprenticed to a witch. One day she sees a knight riding through the forest. Here, mythic and magical elements such as the Firebird of the title coexist with nifty details from real history—the bone witch's hut appears to be made of mammoth bones.

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Witch-girl

Deep in the woods, gathering fungus for the Bone Witch's supper, Katya heard the firebird call her name. "Katea-katea-katea..." Brushing tangled black hair from sea-green eyes, she searched for the bird, seeing only tall pine trunks and blue bars of sky. Her bright homespun dress had the red-orange firebird embroidered on the bodice, done in silk from Black Cathay, and the Barbary cloth called Crimson. She had stitched it herself on sunless winter days. Katya called out, "Here I am. Come tell what you see."

She listened. Insects hummed in hot pine-scented air. Farther off she heard a woodpecker knocking. She called again, "Come to me. Come to me. Come tell what you see."

Now that she was fully grown, Katya never feared the woods by daylight. Leopards, troll-bears, lycanthropes, and forest sprites lurked between the trees, waiting to make a meal of the unwary. But by day the woods had a hundred eyes alert for any suspicious movement. No lynx or leopard could stir a foot without birds calling and squirrels chattering. All Katya need do was listen. Night was another matter. But the Bone Witch did not let her out at night. Nor would the Witch let her leave the hut without her slave collar and protective rune. Each morning she made Katya repeat her invisibility spell. She was valuable property, the Witch told her. "I have not raised you to feed some hungry troll-bear—not when you are finally becoming useful."

Katya saw things differently. She began life as a girl-child thrown away in time of war and famine. Survival taught her to make the best of today, for tomorrow was bound to be worse. It taught her to lie instinctively, and never to shit where she meant to sleep. And to trust in her luck, which had kept her from the fate of hundreds like her. Death had had ample chance to take her, making Katya think she was being saved for something special. Like to be a princess.

At nine she was given to the Witch for two handfuls of salt and a cattle pox cure. The family feeding her

figured they were doing everyone a favor. “The Witch can better provide for you. We are poor,” the father informed her—as if she had somehow not noticed, sleeping on straw between the hearth and the hogs—“while you are stubborn and willful.” His wife agreed. “Getting you to obey is like trying to teach a cat to fetch.” Had Katya been a boy, it would have been different. But she was a girl, naturally wanton, unruly, frivolous and amoral, a growing threat to their son’s virtue. They were duty-bound to keep her chaste and ignorant, then give her to some man in marriage—a dead loss to the family. Better by far to give her to the Bone Witch.

Only their lazy son objected. Not the least threatened, he wanted her around. Without her, who would do his chores? Who would he spy on in the bath? He had promised to rape her when they got bigger.

Katya herself had said nothing. Even at nine, she had a stubborn sense of self-worth that regularly got her whipped. People called her changeling and worse, with her pert ways and wicked green eyes—a girl switched at birth for a defiant demon-child. Bundling up her straw doll and wooden spoon, she took a seat in the father’s cart. They lurched off, crossing the Dys at Byeli Zamak, headed for the Iron Wood. All she could think was that she was to become a witch-girl. And witches were burned.

But that was years ago. And she had not been burned— not yet at least. By now she had spent half her life in the woods. She knew which mushrooms were food, and which sent you on flights of fancy. Which berries were sweet and which were deadly nightshade, which herbs cured and which herbs killed. Having nothing of her own, she happily appropriated all of nature, making these her woods. Every screech and cry in the trees spoke to her. When it was safe, she spoke back.

“Katea-katea-katea...” The call came closer. Like her, the firebird was a curious soul, and could be coaxed with low soft calls. He hated to think of anything happening in his woods without him telling the world about it.

Picking up her bark basket, she headed for the sound, fording a shallow stream to enter a fern-choked glade ringed by stands of slim silver birch. Birches loved the light and fought to fill any sort of clearing. At the far end of the glade she skirted a pond frequented by red deer and herons. On the bare bank she saw pug marks.

Kneeling amid the bracken, she felt the tracks with her fingers. The ground was hard, and the claw prints worn and played with age. Three nights ago, after the rain when the moon was full, an old female leopard came from the same direction she had, stopped to drink, then headed up the ridge, aiming for the thickly wooded crest separating the forest from the cultivated lands beyond. Any leopard with business beyond the ridge could easily be a stock thief or man-eater.

Not a cat she cared to meet. Stomach tensed, she looked about. Mossy patches shone like polished jade. The protective rune on her armband shielded Katya from magic—but not from fang or claw. Straightening up, she set out again, keeping the breeze at her back. Leopards did not know humans have no sense of smell, and never stalked from upwind—so she need only worry about what lay ahead. These were her woods. Let some old leopard scare her, and she would never go out at all.

“Katea-katea-katea...” She spotted a flash of orange among the pine trunks. The bird waited at the crest of the ridge.

And not just the firebird, but a fire as well. Black oily smoke billowed from beyond the ridge crest, smearing clear blue sky. Hairs rose at the nape of her neck. She had not smelled the smoke because the wind was behind her—but she knew where it came from. Byeli Zamak was burning.

Topping the ridge, she stopped to stare. This was as far as the slave collar allowed her to go. Below her the forest ended. Rolling steppe spread out from the foot of the ridge, broken by loops of river, dark

patches of plowland, and the onion domes of village churches. Between her and the steppe, guarding the fords of the Dys, stood a huge round tower seven stories tall with walls twenty feet thick—Byeli Zamak, the White Castle. Smoke poured from the tower. Katya pictured the inferno inside, fed by grain and oil stored in the basement, burning up through the wooden floors, feeding on gilt furniture, Barbary tapestries, Italian paintings, and canopied beds. A cornerstone of her world was consumed in flames.

She came from these settled lands. Somewhere out there she had been born. Somewhere out there her family was massacred—for the black earth beyond the woods was sown with bones and watered by blood. Constant strife had consumed her family, and almost made an end to her. She had begged in those villages, and slept in the painted doorways of those churches, waking to find crows and ravens waiting to make a meal of her.

When she was given to the Witch, all that changed. Her slave collar kept her penned in the woods—where the worst she need fear was leopards and troll-bears. Even when old King Demitri died, Byeli Zamak remained, towering over the fords of the Dys—the gatehouse to the Iron Wood. King and gold-domed capital were the stuff of faerie tales, but Byeli *Zamak* was solid and real, part of Katya's landscape, built by earth giants from native stone. And now it burned. Her first thought was to tell the Bone Witch.

“Katea-katea...” the firebird called again, this time from right overhead. Looking up, she saw the flame-colored jay perched on the limb of a tall larch, scoffing and chuckling. Clown prince of the bird clan, the fire orange jay was a wickedly mischievous trickster, a merciless nest robber and accomplished mimic. Katya had heard him perfectly imitate the screaming whistle of a hawk, just to see what havoc he could wreak.

“Is this what you saw?” Katya tilted her head toward the inferno below. Just like a jay to revel in someone else's misfortune. He squawked back at her, this time giving the man call. Jays greeted every predator with a different call. Warnings did little good if you did not know whether to look out for a leopard, or a hawk, or a lynx. The man call was totally distinct. Jays did not use it for her or the Witch.

Hearing a waxwing whistle, Katya turned to see a roe deer bound up the slope and disappear over the ridge. Something was coming. Something alarming enough to flush a doe from cover. The firebird flew off, still making the man call.

From below came the weighty clump of slow hoofbeats climbing the ridge. A horse was coming up from the fords, carrying something heavy and clanking. She whispered her invisibility spell. So long as she remained still and silent, no one could see her. Or so the Witch said. So far it had never failed.

She watched the rider top the ridge. Bareheaded, he rode slumped forward, eyes half shut, his soot-stained blue and white surcoat covering a body encased in steel—a man-at-arms, maybe even a knight, just managing to stay atop a big gray charger. Her heart went out to him. He looked so hurt and handsome, his long elegant eyelashes wet with tears. Bloody clots in his fashionable pudding-basin haircut dripped red streaks down proud cheekbones, past genteel lips. His beardless face made him look young, marking him as a foreigner. Or a eunuch.

Here was her storm petrel: strong and beautiful, but a sure sign of the whirlwind to come. So long as Byeli Zamak had held for the King, only unarmed serfs crossed the fords into the forest, to gather sticks and snare squirrels, stripping bark for their shoes and stealing honey from the bees. On May Day they came singing, their arms full of flowers, celebrating the return of spring, slipping off in pairs to make love upon the forest floor—while she watched, invisible and intrigued. In summer the forest rang with their axes—the nearest thing they had to weapons. It was a flogging offense for a serf to have a bow, or a boar spear. Death to be caught with a sword.

But this stranger had a huge sword slung across his back, and his torn surcoat bore the embattled blue bend of the King's Horse Guards. His crested helm hung from his sad-die bow, alongside an ugly saw-toothed war hammer. Hunched forward, he carried something heavy in the crook of his shield arm, wrapped in silk embroidery, tucked against his armored breast. She stood stock still, letting him rattle past, close enough to touch.

When he had gotten far enough ahead of her, she set off after him, slipping silently from tree to tree, following the bird calls down the ridge onto the forest floor. Tiny red flecks of blood shone on green fern fronds, marking his trail for her.

Now the breeze was full in her face, which she did not like. A leopard could come up behind her, stalking her as easily as she trailed this knight. Worse yet, the breeze brought the foul scent of a troll-bear's lair, faint but growing stronger. The rotting corpse smell of discarded carcasses, mixed with the rank odor of the troll-bear's droppings, was unmistakable, like smelling a long dead lizard on a hot day. Only the image of the knight's hurt face kept her going.

She nearly caught up with her knight beneath a cool coppice of oaks. Leaves rustled like water overhead and the rattle of armor had ceased—but the smell of horse droppings, followed by a nervous whinny, warned her she was getting too close. Sinking to all fours, she wriggled through the undergrowth, curious to see why he had stopped. Had he smelled the troll-bear?

Her knight had dismounted. Kneeling in the bracken beside his horse, he attacked the ground with a big saxe knife, digging a hole in the dark earth. She watched patiently. When he had dug down the length of his arm, he sheathed the knife, and reached for an embroidered bundle lying beside him. Gently he lowered the bundle into the hole. Whatever it was had to be something precious—she could tell by how he handled it. A gold icon perhaps. Or a great crystal goblet. Or a dead baby.

He carefully covered over the hole, hiding his work with fallen leaves. Then he looked up, sensing he was watched, staring straight at her. But she stayed still as a fawn, and the spell held. Drained by the simple act of digging, he heaved himself onto his horse, no mean feat in full armor. Then he lurched off upwind, headed for the troll-bear's lair. Unless she did something the troll-bear would savage both horse and rider, cracking her knight's armor like a badger breaking open a snail.

When the carrion odor got unbearable, his horse stopped again, refusing to go on. She waited for her knight to turn or dismount, but he stayed slumped in his saddle, eyes closed, his horse nervously cropping the bracken. Warning calls died away and the woods grew still. A good sign. Either the troll-bear was gorged senseless, or away from its den. Shrugging off her spell, she stepped out from between the trees, slowly walking toward her knight. His horse saw her first, snorting and shying. Speaking softly, she reached out and took the reins, "Have no fear. I will take you to good grass and water."

Her knight opened his eyes, which were blue and alert. He smiled at what he saw, saying, "*Mon Dieu*, I am dead." He did not look very dead, clinging stubbornly to his saddle. "And here is an angel to take me to Heaven."

"I am no angel," she told him. She was a witch-child, willful, disobedient and hopelessly damned.

His smile widened. "Then a forest sprite, young and beautiful. What more could a vagabond want?" He spoke with a funny foreign accent, but his tone told her he was friendly. Gently turning the tired horse's head, she led him slowly downwind away from the troll-bear's lair. Her knight swayed alarmingly in the saddle. "Fair nymph," he called down to her. "Where are you taking us?"

She smiled over her shoulder. "To water." He was by far the most marvelous thing she had ever found in the woods, and she wanted to see him with his face washed.

Leading the horse back to the base of the ridge—to where a spring burst from beneath tall triangular rocks—she helped her knight dismount. Sitting him down, she wet a cloth and wiped his wincing face. He cleaned up nicely. She liked his handsome beardless face, firm and manly, but smooth to the touch. His scalp wound was bloody but not deep, and merely needed to be cleaned, then sewn shut. Luckily she knew which plants produced natural antibiotics, had been gathering them for the Witch.

He watched as she worked, smiling ruefully. “Just when you wonder what you are fighting for, Heaven sends a reminder.”

“What reminder is that?” She searched through her bark basket for the right leaves.

“You really do not know, do you?”

“No. That is why I asked.” Her knight had a funny way of talking, even for a foreigner. She crushed the leaves with a rock, mixing them with water from the spring.

“I have had a most damnable day,” he told her, “trying to hold Byeli Zamak for your infant Prince Ivan. Besieged by the boy’s own uncle, upholding the honor of your dead king, and being badly beaten for my pains. Just when I think I cannot go on—that there is nothing in this benighted land worth saving—you come along. Proving me completely wrong.”

“This will hurt,” she warned him, parting his hair to expose the wound.

“*Certainement*; so far today, everything has.” Taking that as assent, she poured her makeshift potion onto the bloody gash. He shouted in protest, raising a steel-gloved hand to shield his head. “*Merde!* Does *Mademoiselle* mean to murder me too?”

She grabbed his gauntlet to keep it away from the wound. “No. This will help you. I swear.” She found her embroidery needle with her free hand.

He relaxed. “*C’est bien, c’est bien. Mademoiselle* merely took me by surprise.” He sat stoically while she poured potion on the needle, then began sewing his scalp back together, wincing when she tightened a stitch, but otherwise acting as if she were clipping his curls. Asking, “What may I call *Mademoiselle*?”

“Katya,” she replied shyly, resisting the impulse to invent. She wanted him to know her name.

“*Enchante*. Sir Roy d’Roye, Chevalier de l’Etoile, et le

Baron d’Roye. At your service.” He winced again, as her needle went in. “What does *Mademoiselle* do when not torturing wounded knights?”

She pulled the stitch tight, saying softly, “I serve the Bone Witch.”

“A Witch? But of course. And a wicked one too, from the way that potion burned me...”

“But she is merely my foster mother. My real mother was a queen. And I am a princess.” Not knowing who her parents were, she felt free to invent royal ones.

Baron d’Roye raised an eyebrow. “Princess in disguise, I presume?”

“Of course,” she replied scornfully. “Why else would I be dressed like a peasant?”

“Your majesty carries off her masquerade amazingly well.”

“Shush!” she whispered. From atop the ridge came the firebird’s man call. She listened harder. The call

came again, fading as the bird took flight. Someone was coming. She asked, “Are there men after you?”

“Indeed, though for no good reason.”

She hastily finished her stitching, saying, “I must hide you.” She had no fear for herself, but the thought of seeing her newfound knight hurt or killed was too much to bear. Helping him to his feet, she guided him up the rocks to a protruding shelf where two boulders formed a tiny cave between them, too high up to be seen from the spring. She shoved him inside, saying, “Stay here.”

“Only if your majesty promises to come for me,” he replied.

“I will.” She truly wanted to see more of him, only not right now. Not with men coming.

“Promise?”

“I swear.” She pushed him farther into the cave, where there was no chance of him being seen from below.

“Bring food,” he begged.

“I will,” she hastily agreed.

“And wine.”

She did not bother to answer, scrambling back down the rocks to the spring. Taking his mount’s reins, she turned the horse away from the spring.

“Good wine. If your highness has it.”

Still thirsty, the horse balked at being led off by a stranger. She had to heave on the reins to get him pointed back the way she wanted to go. Her knight called down to her, “And what about my horse?”

“I will hide him too,” she promised, pulling harder, hauling the unwilling animal away from the spring.

“*Au revoir*,” he called out.

“Silence, please,” she shouted back, mortified to be making so much noise with strangers in the woods. Dragging the weary charger away from rest and water, she doubled back on their original tracks. Anyone seeing the return prints would have no reason to search out the cave, and would follow the trail she was making. Katya felt confident she could lose them—these were her woods.

When she had put distance between herself and the spring, she found a swift brook and splashed along it, letting the running water hide their trail. Spotting a good place to leave the stream—a rock shelf that would not take hoof prints—she deliberately passed it by. Downstream from the rock shelf she let the horse stray, making tracks on the bank, then leading him back into the water, and up onto the opposite bank. When she was satisfied with her false trail, she carefully retreated upstream, leading the horse out over the rocks, trying her utmost not to leave tracks.

She stayed on hard ground until she was well out of sight of the stream, and could no longer hear its rippling. Then she tied the horse to a tree and went back alone. Walking as lightly as she could, she covered up any sign of the horse’s passing, smoothing over stray prints, and sprinkling dust where they had wet the rocks. When she reached the stream, she whispered her spell, lying down to watch.

She waited, her heart beating against the hard stone. On the far side of the stream she saw a splendid spider web, shot with rainbows. Worth coming back for when she was not so busy. In the meantime she

thought about her knight. He had a funny foreign way of talking, but that only made him more special. He had a good heart as well, she knew by the way he spoke to her. He even seemed to like her, though that was a lot to hope for.

First she heard warning calls—the indignant chatter of a red squirrel, the rasping cry of a frightened pine tit. Followed by the voices of men, and the neighing of their horses. They came slowly downstream, searching both banks, looking for the spot where she left the water.

One huge fellow in half-armor and big bucket-topped riding boots urged his mount up onto the rock shelf, coming so close she could count the flanges on the heavy steel mace hanging from his saddle bow. Matted hair and flecks of blood clung to the sharp steel. He wore his sallet tipped back, searching the ground for tracks. His hard bearded face could not compare to the clean elegant features of Sir Roy d’Roye, Chevalier de l’Etoile. But his surcoat had the same embattled blue bend as her knight’s—charged with a sable crescent, the badge of Prince Sergey Mikhailovich, Grand Duke of Ikstra. Crown Prince Ivan’s belligerent uncle. She held her breath as he studied the spot where she led the charger out of the stream. Did he see something? A crushed leaf or overturned stone? The scrape mark of a steel shoe?

Calls came from downstream. They had found her false trail. Prince Sergey’s man-at-arms turned his horse about, splashing back into the stream. She was safe—for now. When the calls faded into the forest, she slid back off the rocks, and carefully made her way to where she had tethered the horse. The Witch would scold her if she did not return soon with her bark basket full of herbs and fungus.

As she set out, clouds of little white butterflies whirled up from patches of sunlight, fluttering between the horse’s legs, then darting off between the trees. The deeper she went into the woods, the less she worried about hiding her trail. The only warning calls were for her. At the head of Long Lake, she saw wild swans swimming on clear water fringed by pines.

Beyond the lake the pine wood ended. On the far side stood a forest of black iron trunks with stark metal branches—the Iron Wood—a cold dark barrier reeking of magic, stretching over the hills to the east, lifeless and forbidding. She led the reluctant horse into the black leafless wood. Spiked branches closed around her, and forest sounds faded. No woodpeckers beat at the hard metal bark. No squirrels ran along the blade-like limbs. No living beasts made their home in the Iron Wood—just trolls and siren spirits, witches and the walking dead.

Happy to be nearly home, she threaded her way through the thorny metal maze. Finally a clearing appeared ahead, a white patch amid the black tangle. She led the big war horse up to a tall white hut made entirely of bones, long white thigh bones as big as a man, stacked one atop the other like grisly logs. Serfs called them dragon bones, but Katya knew better. They came from a long-haired, elephant-trunked monster that once roamed the northern tundra, bigger by far than any Barbary elephant. She had seen their great curved tusks in a forest bone pit, along with bits of the hairy hide.

Huge antlers from an ancient giant elk hung above the Bone Hut’s leather door. Swallows nested in nooks beneath the eaves. Little chestnut-throated birds peered out of the mud nests at her. Their parents flew back and forth, chattering at her, then streaking off in the direction of Long Lake, coming back with ants, gnats, wasps, and assassin bugs to feed their young.

Slowly the skin door swung open, and the Bone Witch emerged. Older than sin, and grim as death, the Witch wore a knuckle bone necklace and a linen winding sheet for a dress. White hair hung down to bare skeletal feet. Around her thin waist was a wormwood belt, supporting the thief-skin bag that held her charms. The horse backed and snorted at the sight of her.

She muttered a charm and the shying charger relaxed. “A beautiful beast,” the Bone Witch declared. “Where did you find him?”

“In the woods.” Katya had always brought lost or strayed animals out of the woods. Fallen eagle chicks. Little lame squirrels. Orphaned leopard cubs. This war horse was by far her most impressive find. She made no mention of his master. The Bone Witch had warned her not to bring men into the Iron Wood. Abandoned cubs and a weary war horse were one thing—but no stray knights. No matter how handsome and helpless they looked.

She held out her basket to show she had not wasted the whole morning, saying, “Byeli Zamak has been burned.”

The Witch nodded, “I smelled it on the wind.” It was impossible to surprise the Bone Witch.

“And a leopard drank from the pond beneath the ridge.”

The Witch nodded again. “Three nights ago, when the moon was full.” Accepting the fungus, the Witch told her to give the gray charger a rubdown, “And see he has grass and water. You cannot bring things home unless you care for them.”

“I will, I will,” she assured the Witch. And went to work at once, taking the horse around to the paddock behind the bone hut, rubbing him down, giving him water and barley. Filling a bark basket with food, she got out the Witch’s steel sickle, saying she would go cut grass at Long Lake. Nothing a horse could live on grew in the Iron Wood.

The Witch sniffed her basket. “And you will take food to the knight hiding in the cave by the spring?”

She gave a guilty nod.

“You are free to play with whatever you find in the woods, so long as your chores do not go wanting.”

“Oh, no! I will gather more fungus, and webs for spinning. See, I am taking my spindle.”

The Witch shook her head. “Your youth will be the death of me. Always rushing life along.”

“No! Never.” She kissed the Witch’s cold wrinkled lips. “You will always be here.” The Bone Witch had been in the Iron Wood forever.

“Of course, but what has that to do with it?” The Witch shooed her out of the hut.

As the Witch predicted, she went straight to the cave, fearing she would find it empty. Nearing the spring, she stopped to listen. And heard nothing. Maybe he had obeyed her and stayed in the cave. More likely he was long gone.

She was thrilled to find herself wrong. “*Bonjour*,” he greeted her with a grin when she stuck her head into the cave. Heaving himself upright, he peered at her basket. “What is this? Food, how wonderful! Did you bring wine as well?” She admitted she had not, having never so much as seen a grape. “Alas, too bad. But this is magic enough. Is there meat?”

“*Kalbasa*.” She doled out a length of smoked sausage.

“Excellent, good old *kalbasa*, and bread too. What a wonderful wood sprite. Would there be caviar to go with it?”

“There is.” She showed him the gleaming fish roe wrapped in a cool leaf. Long Lake teemed with

sturgeon.

“Caviar! Fantastic. What a feast!”

“And *myot* also.” She showed him the comb.

“Honey. How delightful.”

“And yogurt.”

“Ah yes, Markovy’s answer to sour milk.”

“And *diynya*.”

“*Diynya*?” He looked puzzled.

She lifted the melon from the bottom of the basket, holding it out to him. “*Diynya*.”

“Of course. *Diynya*. How utterly delicious.” Taking the melon, he kissed her. “*Merci beaucoup, Mademoiselle* wood sprite.”

Her lips tingled from her first kiss by a grown man. The lumpish son of the family she lived with once held her down and tried to kiss her, but she bit his tongue. This was completely different. Delicious shivers shot through her, raising goosebumps from nipples to her groin. That he did it quickly and casually did not matter. Nor did it matter that he had clearly forgotten her name. It was enough that she remembered his, Sir Roy d’Roye, Chevalier de l’Etoile, et le Baron d’Roye. She felt utterly ecstatic, having her first real kiss come from someone so special. Not just a knight, but a lord. And hers to feed and care for.

Making her worry all the more for him. “Why do they want to harm you?”

“Rank prejudice,” he replied, spreading caviar with his thumb. “Pure silly superstition.”

She broke open the melon, sipped the juice, and passed it to him. “But why would Prince Ivan’s uncle attack Byeli Zamak?”

He heaved a sigh. “*Mademoiselle* does not live in a nation. Markovy is a collection of family quarrels with vague boundaries, whose preferred form of government is civil war. Being a foreign heretic, I do not give a lead *sou* who wins—but I swore an oath to your king, to uphold his honor and his heir. Not that noble oaths mean a lot when you are having your head beat in.”

Getting over her goosebumps, she took her spindle from the basket, and started to spin spider’s thread from a web she had found on the way. Working the tiny threads relaxed her.

“Markovites are the most superstitious folk in creation,” he complained between bites. “Believing in all manner of faeries, imps, djinn, witches and whatnot. Byeli Zamak supposedly held a magic treasure—the Firebird’s Egg. A marvelous tale. And Prince Sergey is an utterly gullible Grand Duke, who thinks this mythical egg will make him master of Markovy. But I held Byeli Zamak for Prince Ivan, and King Demitri before him. As Castellan I would know if Byeli Zamak held such an egg. And it does not.”

Katya herself absolutely believed in the Firebird’s Egg. King Demitri had stolen the Egg from its nest deep in the Iron Wood, and kept it locked in a cool deep basement vault beneath Byeli Zamak—where it would not hatch and would always be his. It had been King Demitri’s greatest treasure, and his greatest curse. Making his life tragic and miserable. The curse cost him both his wives, and all his children, except for Ivan, his heir. Why Ivan’s uncle would want the ill-fated egg was totally beyond her—but that did not

mean it did not exist.

Her knight told more stories, of far-off Gascony where he was born, and how he lost everything and ended up in exile. “I possess an astounding ability to choose the losing side. Counting this latest debacle at Byeli Zamak, I have been in half a dozen pitched fights—and have always come out a loser. A remarkable record, not easily achieved. When I sided with the English they lost to the King of France. When I switched my allegiance to the King, he lost to the English. Scots in the French service call me ‘Tyneman’ in tribute to my many defeats. An honor really. Any lout with a bit of ability can run off a string of victories. But to lose every time—that requires not just talent, but uncanny luck as well.”

“I cannot believe your luck could be so bad.” She did not want to believe anything bad about him.

“Bad luck?” He laughed. “Not in the least, my luck is excellent. Could not be better.”

“Really? But is it not better to win than lose?”

“Better perhaps—but not always easier. Anyone can survive a victory, just stay to the back and shout loudly. But surviving six defeats is a rare feat. Requiring more than a swift horse. Twice—at Lipan and St. Jacob-on-Bris—I was the only one not killed or taken. That is phenomenal luck.”

“I mean, I do not believe you must always lose.”

He scoffed at her innocence. “Tell it to the Swiss. They were near unbeatable until I sided with them.”

By now dusk was settling outside the cave. Shafts of golden light slanted between the trees, slicing deep into the forest. Having seen her knight fed and cared for, she needed to get back and cut grass for his horse, then see to the Witch’s supper, making the most of the long summer twilight. Sadly she took her leave, fairly sure he would not wander off in the short night, and meaning to be back by morning. D’Roye declared himself devastated to see her go, cheering her immensely. She finally had her knight in armor. Who cared if he was a foreigner, and somewhat the worse for wear—a footloose loser from some far-off land?

Before returning to the Witch, she had one more thing to do. Cautiously she snuck up on the troll-bear’s lair, hoping her own scent would be hidden by the carrion stink. When she found the spot she sought, she dug down into the deep forest loam, using the Witch’s steel sickle. She glanced repeatedly over her shoulder, uncomfortably aware that she had watched her knight dig in this exact spot without him knowing it.

Setting aside the sickle, she dug the last few inches with her hands, not wanting to harm what lay hidden in the hole. Finally she felt something soft and warm beneath her fingers. Brushing aside the last of the dirt, she recognized the embroidered tapestry her knight had kept next to his armored breast. Unwrapping the tapestry, she felt the smooth hard surface underneath, the warm, living Firebird’s Egg.

She folded the tapestry back over the Egg, then refilled the hole, happy her knight had not lied to her. He claimed that as Castellan he would have known if Byeli Zamak held such a magical egg—and it did not. But that was because he had escaped Byeli *Zamak* with it, and buried it here by the troll-bear’s lair. Being a born romancer, she took such truthful misdirection as a sign of true love.

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Prince Sergey

She meant to see her knight right after morning chores, before he could wander away from the cave—but the Bone Witch had a dozen things for her to do. For no apparent reason the Witch wanted the

swallow's nests taken from under the eaves, and her pet rats turned loose, then her favorite fetishes hung on branches in the Iron Wood. So many pointless tasks that she suspected the Witch of trying to keep her from seeing D'Roye. The Bone Witch's motives were as obscure as her methods.

The rats seemed happy to be set free, but the swallows complained bitterly, chattering shrilly and darting at her head. It was useless to tell them that Witch ordered the mass removal. While she battled indignant swallows, the Witch sat at her bone table writing on thin strips of Chinese paper in her little cramped script. Tying these tiny messages to the feet of her carrier pigeons, the Witch released the pigeons one by one, sending them off into the blue summer sky.

Katya asked what was so important that the Witch must tell the world. The Bone Witch shushed her. "Be patient. In time all comes clear."

So the Witch always said. Katya returned to her tasks, working until the Bone Hut looked positively bare. Since the day she arrived the chaos of her new home had fascinated her—fetishes decorating bone rafters, swallows darting in and out, pigeons cooing in the eaves, rats peering from wicker cages, all lit by tulip-shaped paper lanterns. It took her mind off the terror of belonging to a witch. She fully expected to be cooked and eaten, unless the Witch chose to have her raw. Soon Katya realized that she would have to do the cooking—but by then chores and boredom made her treasure the hut's distractions. Now it chilled her to see her home so neat. All the animals were gone, except for her knight's horse in the paddock out back. She hoped this latest mad impulse did not last.

Finally the Witch agreed to let her go. "There is nothing else for you to do here. Now go and make your way in the world. Be smart. Be brave. Think of me now and again. And if you ever need help, call on me. No matter how far you go, or what you become, I will be with you."

Katya told her she was only going to take breakfast to her knight. And her slave collar kept her from going much farther—but the Witch had a way of seeing grand drama in the most mundane things, like the song of a lark, or the first buds of spring. "Do not worry, I will be back in the afternoon."

"No, you won't," the Bone Witch replied. "Always remember, I tried to care for you and teach you trollcraft. Now recite your spell."

She recited her invisibility spell, grabbed up her basket and headed for the Iron Wood, happy to be free of the Witch—if only for a while.

She did not get far. There were no warning cries in the Iron Wood. No birds or squirrels to keep watch for her. She was concentrating on the winding trail through the metal trunks, when she caught a whiff of horses on the wind. Horses meant men. She froze, whispered her spell, and waited—hoping her heart was not banging too loud.

Hearing the clip-clop of iron-shod hooves, she realized they were riding down the crooked trail toward the Bone Witch's hut—coming in twos, to save getting slashed by spiked branches. In a moment they would be riding right over her, invisible or not. She turned and dashed back the way she had come. Byeli Zamak had been gone for only a day, and already men were coming farther than she ever thought possible. At the clearing in the metal wood, the Bone Witch stood waiting by her skin door, a grim smile on her wrinkled face. Katya told the sorceress she had heard horsemen coming, but the Witch merely nodded. Had the Witch known about these horsemen? Probably. The Bone Witch had sent her off with her basket and spell, knowing full well that she would not get far.

Hoofbeats grew louder as the column of riders neared the clearing. She waited alongside the Witch, curious to see what sort of horsemen dared come into the Iron Wood. But the first figure to appear was not on horseback—and only half a man. Man-shaped and naked, he strolled lithely into the clearing,

covered head to foot with soft brown hair. His eyes were wolf's eyes. Canine fangs protruded from thin smiling lips.

Lycanthrope. She had never seen one like this before— few had and lived. He was not the harmless sort who totally shed human form to run with the wolves and mate with the bitches. He was a soulless demon from deep in the Iron Wood—the absolute worst of wolf and man. Or so the Witch always told her.

Behind him rode an incongruous pair. The taller of the two was a steel-helmeted horse archer wearing a blue Horse Guard's brigandine studded with silver nail heads. He had a huge dead swan hanging from his high saddle. Riding at his side was a dwarf mounted on a pony, wearing a particolored tunic and a fool's cap. More horsemen filed into the clearing behind them, spreading out from their column of two's—horse archers, knights, and men-at-arms, followed by squires and valets, even a steward and a butler in their uniforms of office. And an Ensign, holding up a grand duke's banner, with a black crescent and the lightning stroke sign of Ikstra. Beneath the banner rode Prince Sergey Himself. Katya had never seen a prince of the blood before, but there was no mistaking this one. Grand Duke Sergey was a prince from the bootheels up, wearing silver-chased armor and a gold coronet on his old-fashioned great helmet. He had his visor tipped back and she could see the hard cold sheen in his pale blue eyes, glinting like dangerous ice in the spring.

He stared evenly at the aged Bone Witch—two of the most feared people in Markovy were meeting for the first time. Totally different, yet each in their own way absolutely terrifying. Prince Sergey, Grand Duke of Ikstra, broke the frosty silence, “Good morrow, grandmother, we are trailing a mounted knight, riding a gray war horse and wearing a blue-and-white surcoat. He is most likely wounded. Have you seen him?”

“No, my lord,” replied the Bone Witch. “Not him, nor anyone like him.”

“Strange,” mused Prince Sergey, “our wolfman trailed his horse straight to this clearing.” The Lycanthrope stood waiting, a hideous look on his fanged face, clearly hoping to make a meal out of someone. “He was Castellan of Byeli Zamak, and claims to be a baron.”

“And yet I have not seen him,” the Witch insisted.

Prince Sergey looked to the dwarf sitting on his pony. Rising in his saddle, the dwarf took a deep breath through his nose. Two more sniffs, and the dwarf settled back in the saddle, saying, “She is telling the truth.”

Prince Sergey nodded. Then his gaze turned to Katya, staring at her like she had failed to pay her squirrel tax. “What about the girl? Has she seen him?”

The “girl” gulped. “No, my lord, never.” She shook her head vigorously, shrinking back beside the Witch.

Prince Sergey looked again at the dwarf. This time the little man swung off his pony, and walked over to her. His head came up to Katya's waist. Lifting his nose, he sniffed her belly, then ran his nostrils down her thigh. He stepped back, saying, “She is lying.”

Sergey raised an eyebrow. “Has she seen the Castellan?”

His dwarf shrugged. The little man was a lie sniffer, not a mind reader. His majesty turned back to her, “Have you seen a knight wearing blue and white?”

She had no good answer, caught between her need to lie, and knowing the dwarf would sniff her out.

Anything she said would put her at the mercy of these men. The wolfman leered at her. He was the one who had found her. Without him, this clumsy crowd of horsemen could not have trailed her from the stream—but a Lycanthrope can track a mouse on a moonless night.

“Well, have you seen him?” the Grand Duke demanded.

Before she could think of some truthful misdirection, a shout of triumph came from the back of the Bone Hut. A couple of squires came around the corner proudly leading her knight’s horse. Someone called out, “That’s his horse. The big gray that belongs to the Castellan.”

Prince Sergey stared hard at the horse, then looked back at her. “Have you seen the knight who rode this horse?”

She nodded dumbly, unable to come up with anything but the truth, though she knew it would doom her.

“Good,” the Grand Duke concluded, “we are at last getting somewhere. Do you know where he is?”

“Not for certain.” He could be long gone from the cave. In fact she fervently hoped he was.

Prince Sergey smiled, a chilling, terrible sight. “Nothing in life is certain—but I wager this will be sure enough.” He turned to his Ensign, saying, “Pay her for the girl.”

Taking his reins in his banner hand, the Ensign fished a gold coin out of his purse, tossing it at the naked feet of the Witch. The Bone Witch made no attempt to pick up the coin. “That is for the girl,” the Ensign explained.

“She is not for sale,” replied the Witch.

“Give her the whole purse,” the Grand Duke ordered impatiently. His Ensign tossed the purse down beside the coin—but the Witch ignored it as well.

“What do you want, grandmother?” Grand Duke Sergey seemed astonished that the Bone Witch refused his generosity.

“For you to leave.” There was a hint of warning in the Witch’s answer.

“We will,” Sergey agreed, “when we have the girl.”

“She is under my protection,” the Witch insisted.

Grand Duke Sergey glared at her. Katya could feel the tension in the clearing. Two dozen armed men sat loafing in the saddle, backed by valets, pages, a steward and butler. Horses looked on with equine curiosity. The Lycanthrope stood waiting, aching to use his fangs and claws. “By rights I could have you burned,” Prince Sergey pointed out.

“Do it if you dare,” replied the Witch, unworried by the prince’s power.

Sergey motioned for his archers to dismount, saying, “Seize the girl.”

Horried, Katya stepped back toward the skin door. This was all her fault. She had brought the horse to the Bone Hut. An archer tried to brush past the Witch to grab her—but the Bone Witch shoved him sideways, landing him in a heap. Two archers seized the Witch’s arms, but she whirled about, faster than the eye could follow, sending the armored pair flying to opposite ends of the clearing. Another archer tried to draw his sword, but the Witch reached out and grabbed his wrist, twisting it until it snapped. His blade dropped from limp fingers.

Archers fell back, appalled by the old woman's strength. The Lycanthrope dropped to a crouch, prepared to spring. Prince Sergey shouted, "Use your bows—but do not hit the girl. I will flay the man that misses."

A half dozen arrows leaped from their bows, striking the Witch in the chest and hip. She hardly even winced, standing between Katya and the men. Katya clung to the skin door, her fist jammed in her mouth, stifling a scream, aghast at what she had done.

More arrows thudded into the Witch. Painfully the old woman turned to face her. The Bone Witch's chest looked like a bloody pin cushion. Arrows continued to hit her from behind. Staggering from the impact, the Witch opened her mouth as if she meant to speak. All that came out was a horrible gargling sound, followed by a great gout of blood. Shocked and sickened, Katya watched the Witch sink slowly to her knees.

"Stop shooting! Stop shooting!" Sergey cried. "You will hit the girl." Silence settled over the clearing as tears poured down Katya's cheeks. Half a dozen bows were pointed at her, arrows knocked and ready. She could see their gleaming chiseled steel points aimed at her chest. The Witch lay at her feet, feathered with arrows. Katya too expected to die— if not now, then soon.

Prince Sergey broke the silence, spurring his mount to put himself between her and the archers, shouting, "Down bows! Damn you! Down bows!"

Hurriedly his men obeyed. Wiping her tears away, Katya seized the Prince's stirrup. "Why did you kill her?" she wailed. "I am the one who lied."

Startled, Prince Sergey stared down in disbelief, as if astonished she could speak. "The Witch did not know where he was. You did." So the Witch died, and she lived—for now. "You do know where the Castellan is?" Sergey wanted to be sure.

She nodded. Any other answer would be her death warrant.

"And you can take us to him?"

She nodded again.

"Good." Prince Sergey pulled his boot from his stirrup, planted the heel on her shoulder and shoved, sending her sprawling. He waved to his men, "Burn the place. Burn the Witch's body. Burn it all."

Prince Sergey cantered off. For a moment she lay looking up at blue sky framed by black iron tree tops, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Without warning, a big bearded archer took the Prince's place. Looking down at her, he laughed, saying, "Here's a cute young case of the clap. And already on her back."

"Give your middle leg a rest," another archer advised.

"What do you mean?" the man asked indignantly. "I've not been fucked in a fortnight."

"Small wonder." The second archer helped her to her feet, brushing the dirt off her dress, which was spattered with the Bone Witch's blood.

Someone called out, "Does she have a name?"

"Do you?" asked the archer.

Of course, she thought—but all she said was, “Katya.”

“She calls herself Katya.” The horse archer was speaking to a huge man in an oversized suit of plate armor. Mounted on a big black Frisian, he towered over everything, seeming to reach right to the ridgepole of the Bone Hut. He wore the same blue-white surcoat as her knight, but many times bigger, and marked with the sword-and-shield badge of a Master-at-arms. Tipping back the visor on his German sal-let, he asked her in a big booming voice, “Where do you come from, girl?”

Scared senseless, she still had the presence of mind to lie. “I am the daughter of a Kazak hetman, Kaffa Khan. Harm me, and he will come with a *tumen* of horse archers to hunt you all to death.”

He laughed, saying, “Have knee-high give her a sniff.”

She had forgotten about the Dwarf. Too much had happened since she last saw the little man. He walked over and took a deep sniff, then turned to the Master-at-arms, saying, “She lies.”

The Master-at-arms did not look surprised—her lie had been feeble at best. “Come, my little khanum, give us the truth. Or I will see you suffer.”

She admitted she did not know who her parents were, saying, “I was raised here, by the Witch.” Mentioning the Bone Witch made her want to cry, but she stopped herself.

“Are you virtuous?” asked the Master-at-arms.

She stared dumbly up at him. What a stupid question to ask a witchchild. How could anyone be both damned and virtuous?

“There’s your answer,” the lecherous horse archer chuckled. “She does not even know what you are asking.”

The Master-at-arms grinned, “Well, it is bad luck to execute a virgin...”

“Especially for the virgin,” a horse archer added, getting a laugh from his fellows.

The Master-at-arms signaled for silence. “But in your case we will risk it. Stop your lying, and lead us to the Castellán. Otherwise we will have you flayed and left to fry in the sun. Unlucky or not. Do you understand?”

She understood.

He turned to the squires and archers, telling them to get busy, “Drag the Witch into the hut, and set it on fire.” None too happy with their task, archers dragged the Witch’s body into the Bone Hut. Katya watched them pile the straw beds atop the Witch, then throw on firewood, furniture, and the contents of the winter clothes chests. Dousing the pile with cooking oil, they set it alight. Soon the Bone Hut was blazing away. She saw her life going up in smoke and flames— just like Byeli Zamak.

“Mount up,” the Master-at-arms ordered. Squires hoisted her aboard D’Roye’s gray charger. One of them handed her the reins, and something to go with them. Looking down, she saw it was her straw doll—the one she had brought with her when she first came to live with the Witch. The young squire who had given it to her looked embarrassed. Of all these men—from Grand Duke Sergey down to the lowest valet—this boy alone seemed ashamed for what they had done.

The Master-at-arms gave her a grin that was all beard and teeth, saying, “Now lead us to the Castellán.” She nodded, clutching the straw doll to her belly. Somehow, some way, she meant to come out of this

alive and whole. But how that would happen, Heaven alone knew.

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The Firebird's Egg

Mounted on her knight's gray charger, she led the whole cavalcade along the winding trail out of the Iron Wood. The Master-at-arms rode beside her, with the dwarf mounted pillion behind him, and the Lycanthrope loping on ahead. Boxed in by armed ruthless men, she could neither lose them nor lie to them—not so long as they had the wolfman to track her, and the dwarf to sniff out her lies.

Only a stroke of monumental good fortune could save her, and she had long ago learned she had to make her own luck.

Whenever the Master-at-arms questioned her directions, the dwarf made sure she told only the truth, putting a heavy burden on someone who always relied on lies. Whatever saved her now had to be the Lord's honest truth. At the head of Long Lake, hot perfumed pine scent replaced the cold metal odor of the Iron Wood. Swans clumped at the center of the lake, already learning to be wary of the archers. She turned west, straight for the ridge line separating the forest from the steppe. The Master-at-arms looked askance. "You are leading us back toward Byeli Zamak?"

"That is where I left him, in a cave by the spring at the base of the ridge."

"Is that so?" he asked the dwarf riding behind him.

"She is telling the truth," replied the dwarf, looking pleased that she had learned not to lie.

The Master-at-arms turned back to her. "And this is the shortest way there?"

"Absolutely," she assured him. The dwarf confirmed her. An east wind had blown all morning, and she was determined to lead them straight downwind, avoiding the roundabout way she came the day before. No need now to hide her tracks. "If I take you right to him, will you let me go?"

"Of course, of course," the big man answered affably. But she was looking behind him at the dwarf, who glanced sharply up, saying nothing. Having a lie-sniffer riding on your horse's rump worked both ways. She had seen that same look of contempt on the dwarf's face when she tried to lie. The Master-at-arms did not mean to let her go. None of them did. Once she had served her purpose they would burn her as a witch. If they had not already promised her to the Lycanthrope.

As they plunged into the living wood, with its green trees and countless eyes, she heard a squirrel chatter, followed by the firebird's cry. It was not the flame jay's man call. She kept her eyes fixed on the path ahead, making sure the Master-at-arms got no warning from her. As the firebird's cry faded behind her, she strained her ears, trying to tell what was happening at the back of the column. All she could hear was the horse archers, laughing and joking behind her. They had a seemingly endless stock of sacrilegious stories to keep their spirits up.

Suddenly a scream rang out. The Master-at-arms grabbed her reins, looking back down the column. They waited. The story tellers fell silent. She watched little white butterflies dance in the sunlight. Presently a horse archer on a bay mare came galloping up. "What happened?" demanded the Master-at-arms.

"A leopard," the horse archer gasped.

"A leopard?" The Master-at-arms looked shocked.

“Yes, it dropped out of a tree on the last man in the column—Vasily, from Suzdal. He stopped to tighten his stirrup and take a piss. Before he could remount the cat was on him. By the time we got back to him, he was dead and the beast was gone.”

“That makes no sense,” complained the Master-at-arms. “A leopard attacking an armed man in daylight?” And from upwind, Katya added to herself, carefully searching the trees. A wood tit stared back at her. “No cat could be that hungry,” insisted the Master-at-arms.

The horse archer shrugged. “The cat did not act hungry. It just broke Vasily’s neck, then went on its way.”

The Master-at-arms snorted, “Which makes even less sense. Sling his body over a horse, and tell Prince Sergey we are ready to move.” The archer turned his bay mare about and went trotting back down the column.

Again they waited. Katya sat listening to the pines murmuring overhead. A woodpecker started to hammer, then stopped suddenly. Had it seen something? Slowly the profane stories reappeared—“A nun, a bishop, and a brothel keeper are in a boat. The bishop says to the nun. . .” She kept her ears tuned to the trees, listening for the woodpecker, and wondering why it was taking so long to get started again.

Finally Prince Sergey’s Ensign trotted up, asking the same question, “Are you ready to move on? His highness means to be back at Byeli Zamak by dusk.”

Rolling his eyes, the Master-at-arms told him, “I sent a man back saying we were ready to ride.”

“What man?” asked the Ensign.

This provoked another commotion. A search failed to find the messenger, but did discover his bay mare, nervously cropping bracken in a nearby clearing. Fresh blood shone on her saddle. The Master-at-arms exploded, “This is absurd. We cannot sit here waiting to be eaten. Tell His Highness we are setting out—unless the leopard gets you first.”

She started up again at a brisk trot. No one complained. Not with bloodthirsty leopards stalking the column. Men kept twisting in their saddles, glancing over their shoulders, looking everywhere but ahead. She saw a familiar break in the pines, backed by a tall stand of oaks. Since they were headed downwind there was no warning but the cry of a crossbill, which the men ignored. Only the Lycanthrope looked uneasy, padding silently along, ears cocked forward, claws extended.

Suddenly the werewolf froze, hairs quivering. She braced herself. This was it. The next seconds would decide if she lived or died. The Lycanthrope spun about and vanished into the undergrowth. An archer called out, “What scared the wolfman? Why has he run off?”

As if to answer him, the troll-bear burst from his hidden lair, bellowing defiance at the intruders. Twice the size of a normal bear, with steel-hard hide and razor claws, the beast roared into the column, scattering men and horses. Rolling out of her saddle, Katya dropped to a crouch and whispered her spell. Instantly she vanished.

From her invisible crouch she got a close-up view of the swift horrific conflict. The troll-bear’s forepaws flailed about, mace-headed battering rams slashing through plate armor like parchment. The Master-at-arms seized a lance from a squire, slapped down his visor, and charged the monster full tilt. His lance shattered on the troll-bear’s hornlike hide. The enraged beast backhanded him out of the saddle, crushed him with a hind foot, then bit his horse’s head off.

None of the other heroes who captured her tried to stop the troll-bear. The whole column—six lances of Horse Guards, with their attendant squires, valets, and archers, along with Prince Sergey's entourage of pages, Ensign, steward, and butler—vanished in an eyeblink, as if they too knew an invisibility spell. The troll-bear went howling after them, snapping pine saplings and uprooting boulders.

Which was why sensible woods creatures avoided a troll-bear's lair. The carrion stink was like a viper's hiss, a warning to unwary neighbors. Silence settled on the forest. Clutching her straw doll, she surveyed the new made clearing out the corner of her eyes. The worst part of being invisible was the inability to turn her head. Absolutely maddening when you wanted to know if it was safe to be seen. She was frozen in place staring at the armored leg of the Master-at-arms, sticking out from beneath a headless horse. She saw no sign of the dwarf who had been riding behind him.

Finally she made herself close her eyes, trusting in her ears to see behind her. Nothing. No warning cries, no rustle of leaves. No smell but the stink of troll-bear from somewhere upwind. She was free.

And alive. From the moment the Witch had died, she counted herself dead as well. Her demise seemed certain. She had let herself be tracked, and had gotten the Witch killed. And she was in the hands of men who meant to dispose of her in some grotesque fashion once she did their bidding. Now her life had been saved by a troll-bear. Few indeed could make that claim.

So what to do with her newfound freedom? Her first thought was for her knight. He was at the heart of this. He and the Firebird's Egg. She did not believe Prince Sergey would risk the Iron Wood just to put an end to some foreign born Castellan of Byeli Zamak. Love did not make her that blind. Her knight was not nearly as important as the Egg he had carried.

Moving stealthily downwind, ears tuned to the slightest sound, she crept up on the rocks and spring. She did not think any of the men could have caught up with her, even if they escaped the troll-bear. But having gotten her life back, she did not mean to let down her guard. Hot afternoon air hung heavy and expectant. And unnaturally quiet. Beyond the bubbling spring, the forest seemed to be holding its breath.

Suddenly she heard the firebird's shrill cry. She froze against a big boulder speckled with bird lime, whispering her spell. This was the second time today she had heard the bird's warning. It was as if the jay were watching over her. This cry was different than any she had heard before, the man-call mixed with an unfamiliar trill.

As she strained to survey the rocks without moving her head, a heavy form dropped on her from atop the boulder. Hairy arms seized her waist, and vice-hard thighs gripped her hips. Her struggles broke the invisibility spell, which had been no match for the Lycanthrope's supernatural senses. She was merely an unarmed young woman, fighting immensely strong arms, while the man-beast's fanged hairy face leered into hers.

Horrified, she struggled harder. Keeping her arms pinned, the Lycanthrope dragged her back away from the spring—but did nothing else to harm her. No clawing. No fangs in the neck. Not reassuring in the least, with his steel-like erection digging into the small of her back.

Then she felt the Lycanthrope relax. Looking up, she saw horsemen staring down at her. Prince Sergey sat bareheaded on his charger, having lost his gold-crowned helmet. His Ensign was beside him, along with a single horse archer, several frightened squires, and a bedraggled looking butler—all that was left of the proud cavalcade that had ridden boldly into the Iron Wood. The Lycanthrope must have been stalking ahead of them. Coming on her scent trail, he had gone up the backside of the boulder and dropped down onto her.

Prince Sergey trotted over to where she stood, glaring down at her. "Did you know we were riding into a

troll-bear's lair?"

Her immediate impulse to lie died on her lips, when she spotted the dwarf riding behind the butler. She shook her head instead. "I will not tell you anything unless you let me go—"

"Be cooperative," Prince Sergey warned. "I have only to say the word, and the beast holding you will savage you on the spot."

"You will not learn a lot from that," she pointed out.

"Yes," Sergey admitted, "but I might very much enjoy it." Nonetheless he waved to the wolfman. "Let her go."

The Lycanthrope let go of her, a little victory, and likely to be her last. Katya took a deep breath, wishing she could just disappear right here. What had she done to deserve all this? Not a thing so far as she could see. Prince Sergey leaned forward in the saddle. "Now, tell us what we want to know."

"If I do, will you let me go?" She stared past the prince at the dwarf seated behind his butler.

"Just tell the truth, and you have nothing to fear."

The dwarf's nose wrinkled, as if he whiffed something foul. So much for honesty. Prince Sergey had no intention of freeing her. She closed her eyes, taking another slow breath, prolonging the inevitable. "What do you wish to know?"

"Tell where the Castellan is," Prince Sergey demanded, royally impatient.

"Right here," came the cheerful reply. Her eyes flew open. There was her knight, standing tall and nonchalant, sword in hand, a wry smile on his handsome face. Seeing him appear out of nowhere was like suddenly getting her life back. He made a mocking bow to Prince Sergey. "Baron Roy d'Roye, Chevalier de l'Etoile, and until late Castellan of Byeli Zamak. At your service."

Sergey sat up in the saddle. "My God! You! Why did you not open Byeli Zamak to me?"

Her knight shrugged armored shoulders. "You did not say *s'il vous plait*. King Demitri gave me Byeli Zamak to hold for his heir."

"I am Prince Ivan's uncle. Byeli Zamak should have come to me."

"And it has," D'Roye reminded him, smiling at his latest defeat.

Prince Sergey leaned forward again. "But not the Firebird's Egg."

"That is what brings us here." Her knight looked smug.

"So you have the Egg?"

"Not on me. But I know where it is."

"Where?" Sergey demanded.

"What will you pay to know?"

"Half my kingdom?" Sergey suggested sarcastically.

"I will give it up cheaper than that. Set this wood sprite free. Her and me, alive and ahorsed—that is all I

ask.”

Katya fought back tears. Her knight had given up his hiding place, and the Egg he protected, all to save her. A foolish impetuous gesture that would probably get them both killed. Still, she was touched.

“Almost too cheap,” Sergey mused. “Generosity from an enemy is always suspect—but perhaps you are merely a fool.”

“Obviously. Pray indulge me nonetheless.”

“You, the girl, and two horses—easy enough.” Sergey lifted a steel-gloved finger. “After I have the Egg.”

“As you wish.” Keeping his big two-handed sword drawn, her knight turned to her. “*Mademoiselle*, I must go with these men—hopefully I will be coming back with a pair of horses.”

“She comes with us,” Sergey insisted.

D’Roye rolled his eyes apologetically. “Alas, *Mademoiselle*, I fear this Grand Duke means it. Fortunately, it is but a short way into the forest...”

“By a stand of big oaks,” she reminded him.

His eyes lit up. “I see you know the place.”

She nodded excitedly. She knew better than he did. And the deeper they got into her woods, the safer they would be. Get far enough into the forest, and she and her knight were more than a match for any number of killers on horseback. But she did not say that aloud, for fear the killers would hear. She had to rely on him reading it in her smile.

He did seem to understand, setting out happily, not the least worried by the armed men around them, laughing, and making light of things. She wanted to tell him about the Bone Witch, but that too must wait. This time they approached the troll-bear’s lair from downwind—by far the safest direction. So long as you stayed out of the beast’s hearing you had little to fear. But as soon as they whiffed the carrion scent, Prince Sergey’s men revolted, none of them wanting a rematch with the monster. Their horses too refused to go any farther, shying and whinnying at the fearful stench.

Sergey immediately demanded that the dwarf sniff her knight for a lie. D’Roye submitted with good grace, for once having nothing to hide. But the dwarf went right up to him, sniffing vigorously. Katya could guess why. The little man desperately hoped to smell a lie. If her knight was telling the truth, they would have to march straight back toward the troll-bear’s lair.

Finally, the dwarf admitted D’Roye smelled sincere. Sergey was forced to leave the horses and squires behind, but he bullied the Ensign, horse archer, and butler into accompanying him on foot. Katya did not fear any of these men half so much as she feared the Lycanthrope.

The dwarf did not get a choice. Like her, he was too valuable to leave behind, and would come whether he willed it or not. She went out of her way to comfort the little man, whose only concern was for the truth. He and the Witch were the only ones she had never been able to lie to, which she very much respected. “Stay close to me,” she told him, “and I will try to see you are safe.”

He looked warily up at her, “Is that so?”

“I thought you would know.” He was the one with the supremely educated nose. As they set out walking, she slid her hand inside her dress, stroking the straw doll hidden next to her breast, just for luck.

When they got to the oak grove, the butler had to go down on his beribboned knees and dig for the Egg with his bare hands. Prince Sergey would not let him use so much as a toothpick, for fear of harming the Egg. Her knight stood watching calmly, leaning on his big two-handed sword. She motioned for the dwarf to get behind her. Which he immediately did, backing away toward the bushes. A bad sign—the little man who knew his master best was expecting the worst.

Reaching his hands into the hole, the butler drew forth the Firebird's Egg. As he unwrapped the dirty tapestry, everyone stared in awe at Markovy's greatest wonder. Except for the Lycanthrope, who kept his hungry eyes fixed on her. What had he been promised when Prince Sergey had the Egg?

Her knight spoke first. "*Excusez-moi*, this may be exceptionally foolish of me, but I beg you to listen to the advice of your late king."

"What advice?" Sergey looked suspiciously at her knight, as if he was an insect with an especially annoying hum.

"King Demitri sent a deathbed message to me, ordering that this Egg be returned safely to its Nest. Not an easy task, but one I heartily endorse. There is a terrible curse on this Egg. How many lives has that damned Egg cost in the last two days alone?" Her knight was right, Byeli Zamak had been burned. And so had the Bone Hut. Prince Sergey's proud company had been reduced to a scared handful, standing around the magical Egg.

Prince Sergey gave a snort of contempt. "We need no lessons from the loser."

"There are worse things than losing," her knight pointed out. "My own fortunes have improved mightily since I put that ill-fated Egg in the ground."

"Really?" Prince Sergey arched an eyebrow.

"Absolutely." Her knight smiled at her. "I was beaten and bleeding, fleeing yet another defeat. But as soon as I parted from that Egg, there came this delightful forest nymph, stitching my wounds and serving me caviar."

"How lucky for you," Sergey laughed. "My own ambitions are a bit higher."

Her knight shrugged, "To each their own. Hopefully, King Demitri will know I tried. Now if I may depart with my own prize." He reached a steel-gloved hand out to her.

"You may inform Demitri in person." Prince Sergey nodded to the Lycanthrope. "Kill him and the girl is yours."

Faster than thought, the Lycanthrope leaped at D'Roye's throat, claws extended. But her knight had expected treachery. His blade came up in a terrific backhand swipe. Only the wolfman's supernatural agility saved him from being cut in two. Twisting in midair, the beast managed to evade the blade, landing on all fours.

All eyes were on her knight, so Katya stepped back against a tree, whispering her spell. The dwarf had already vanished into the undergrowth. Holding her breath, she stood rigid, smelling sap sweating from the pine behind her, watching the fight and wanting to help, but not knowing how.

D'Roye kept his sword between himself and the werewolf, feinting and slashing. Despite his speed and cunning, the Lycanthrope could not get past the flashing blade. Twice he tried to duck under the sword, and got nicked in the shoulder and the ear. But the wolfman moved too fast for D'Roye to land a killing blow. Stalking sideways, he searched for an opening.

“Help the beast,” Prince Sergey commanded. “Take him from behind.”

His butler just stood there, stupidly holding the Egg—but the Ensign and horse archer obeyed, drawing their swords and trying to slide around behind D’Roye. So long as the Lycanthrope kept him busy in front, it would only be a matter of time before one of the others got at his back.

Being the bolder of the two, the Ensign was first to get in position. As D’Roye aimed a slash at the werewolf, the Ensign raised his own sword, stepping in to strike.

Seeing the Ensign lunge past her, Katya leaped forward, seizing the man’s sword arm. Coming out of nowhere, she took the Ensign by surprise. As he struggled to shake her off, D’Roye spun about, hitting him a wicked two-handed blow just beneath the breastplate. Groaning, the Ensign went down, rattling like a pile of dropped pans.

Instantly the Lycanthrope bounded at D’Roye. But her knight seemed to know what was coming. Ignoring the downed Ensign, he let his momentum spin him completely about. This time his backhand caught the Lycanthrope between the neck and collarbone, severing the beast’s jugular in a hideous spray of blood. The werewolf landed in a gory heap at his feet.

Strong arms grabbed her from behind. The horse archer had not dared to take on D’Roye, but he seized her to use as a living shield. Prince Sergey whipped his sword out, and she felt the sharp point at her throat. “Stop,” the Grand Duke commanded. “Drop your sword or I will kill her.”

Her knight let his point drop, saying, “Come now, Your Highness, that is hardly sporting. All we want is to be on our way.”

“Drop your sword,” Prince Sergey demanded. “Or I swear by God Almighty I shall slit her throat.”

With a sigh, D’Roye jammed his sword point first into the ground beside the dead Lycanthrope. Then he stepped back, away from the blade, folding his arms. “I warn you, this will bring nothing but grief.”

“Perhaps,” Sergey admitted with a grin. “But you will not be there to see it.” Katya’s heart sank. Her knight would die—merely for showing mercy—and she would have to watch. Sergey stepped toward D’Roye, hefting his sword.

As he did, a black and amber body dropped on him from the branches above. Prince Sergey gasped as the leopard sank her fangs into his neck. Staggering beneath the weight of the leopard the Grand Duke dropped to his knees, then pitched forward onto his face. Katya watched in astonishment as the big cat continued to bite down on the Grand Duke, making sure he never got up.

D’Roye jerked his sword out of the ground, saying to the horse archer holding her, “Let the girl go, if you want to live.” The arms holding her vanished, and she heard footfalls behind her as the horse archer took off into the forest. Her knight turned to Prince Sergey’s butler, who still held the Firebird’s Egg, a sick look on his horrified face. “Carefully set down that Egg, and you too may go.”

Placing the Egg gently on the ground, the butler backed slowly through the bracken, bumped into a tree, then turned and ran for his life. All that remained of Prince Sergey’s expedition into the Iron Wood was a trio of bodies, lying around the Firebird’s Egg. “*Mon Dieu*,” D’Roye muttered, “that went far better than I could ever have imagined.”

Slowly the leopard rose up, changing as she did, becoming a withered naked old woman with wrinkled skin and bone white hair. And not a single arrow mark on her. The Bone Witch smiled at Katya. “I told you I would be here if you needed me.”

Her knight lowered his point and looked over at her. “This I suppose is your witch?”

She hastened to introduce the Bone Witch to her knight, proud of the way he went down on one knee before the withered old woman, saying, “*Madame* Witch, Baron Roy d’Roye, at your service.”

“Is that just a gallantry,” asked the Witch, “or are you really at my service?”

“Absolutely. *Madame* has saved my life, and I owe her anything that honor allows.”

“Good,” the Bone Witch declared, “I have need of your honor.” Then the Witch turned to her. “Come here, my daughter.”

She walked happily over, grateful to be free of Prince Sergey’s killers and glad to see the Witch alive—but utterly ecstatic to have someone finally call her “daughter.”

Giving her a wrinkled kiss, the Witch took the slave collar from around her neck. “Now I have one last chore for you.”

“Whatever you wish.” For once she truly meant it.

“Return the Firebird’s Egg to its proper nest, so it may hatch and the curse on Markovy can be lifted.”

“But how will I get there?” She felt surprised the Witch would give her a task so important, and so seemingly impossible.

“These will take you there.” The Witch snapped her bony fingers and a trio of horses ambled into the clearing—the knight’s war horse, a black mare with a horse archer’s bow and quiver hanging from her saddle, and a big bay palfrey laden with supplies. D’Roye’s eyes lit up, seeing the gray charger he had clearly given up for lost.

“I mean, how will I find the Nest?” All Katya knew of the Firebird’s Nest was that it lay deep in the Iron Wood.

The Witch gave a low call, holding out her finger, and the flame jay flew down to land on it. Stroking the bird’s breast, the crone cooed, “You can take them there, can you not?” Throwing back his head, the jay gave a confident raucous reply, flying over to land on the black mare’s saddle. “See,” the Witch told her, “he is more than ready. Are you?”

Katya nodded solemnly, seeing that this is what the Witch had been training her for—how she would finally be “useful.”

When she had the Egg safely tucked into the palfrey’s pack saddle, Katya kissed the Bone Witch good-bye, and climbed onto the black mare. She watched her knight bow good-bye to the Witch, then mount his gray charger, grinning merrily. Her whole life led her to this point. As an orphan growing up, she invented royal parents and a magical future for herself. Just when puberty and poverty were about to lay waste her fantasies, she was given to the Bone Witch, making the magical part real. Now the rest was coming to pass—she had a horse beneath her, a charming knight at her side, and a quest ahead with the kingdom’s future at stake. She took her straw doll out of her dress, putting it in the black mare’s saddle bag.

Only one thing made her uneasy: her knight was a foreigner, not required to care if there was a curse on Markovy. And he was a real baron to boot, who did not need her royal dreams and extravagant lies. She asked softly and sincerely, “Are you sure you want to do this? You are free to go your own way if you wish.”

“Heavens no, *Mademoiselle*.” He grinned happily. “Not when my lady has at long last landed me on the winning side.”