



# *The Root of the Problem*

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Magic

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*5 min read*

“Banshee!” whooped the boy careening into Anya’s path. The brat’s mother looked up halting her churning song, crimsoned, and mumbling an apology swatted the child away, hastening off with both him and the butter before either could become spoiled. Anya felt her lips flush and nose begin to tingle. Soon her eyes would brim over, and she did not wish to give them that.

It was not really the name-calling which upset Anya today. Goodness knew, she and her sister, Galina, were well used to that, and to all the rumours that swarmed about them: that they were witches or changelings, that their parents had been witches or consulted a witch to beget the girls at their advanced ages. It wasn’t even that she and her sister would have just one more crop of potatoes now to last the season. No, it was chatter she had overheard at the market about the dove breeder’s daughter who had suddenly taken sick and was not expected to see the harvest festivities. Anya did not know the girl, yet she could not stop thinking about her. Round and round the thoughts revolved. How awful to die so young. How would her family manage? Did she too have a sister?

By the time she entered their warm and reeking farmhouse, she had given way to the tears which coursed liberally down her face.

Galina shook her head. “Well, at least you made it through the market. What happened? Did we sell?”

“We sold everything,” sniffled Anya before relaying of dove breeder’s daughter.

“You don’t even know her,” tutted Galina.

“Does that matter?”

“Not to you,” sympathised Galina, “Well, here is something for your tender heart.” She gestured towards two large hammered vessels covered in cloth. “It’s still light, you could take it out.”

Anya bumped the cart towards the places around the village where she knew the few homeless gathered. None of them feared her, and as they filled their bellies, Anya felt the heaviness in her bosom lift. It was a tradition started by their parents, to offer soup from a share of each good crop to the village’s less fortunate, as both thanks and prayer to providence.

Anya’s last stop was the Sparrow Lady who always gobbled the food while disparaging it. “You’re no witch,” sputtered the hag, soup dribbling down her chin, “if you was this bland slop would taste better.” Anya huddled next to her, waiting for the bowl. “You could do with one though, couldn’t you? Why don’t you go see the one your old parents saw? Northwest corner of Squat Pine if they’re still there.” The woman waved a scrawny arm towards that forest.

Anya said nothing but on coming home asked Galina. “You remember the rumours that mother and father had seen a witch? Well, the Sparrow Lady’s just told me where that witch might be. Should we go and look? Maybe she can help us?”

Galina hissed, “As if we needed to convince the village any further that we’re witches ourselves, then to go hunting around for one. And anyway, why doesn’t that Sparrow woman go herself? Surely a good witch could conjure her a proper home that’s not squatting outside the bathhouse.”

“I suppose that’s true,” sighed Anya, “and we shouldn’t make things worse for ourselves.”

Autumn approached and with it the girls’ last big harvest. The dove breeder’s daughter had recovered and so had Anya’s spirits, though she still awoke at times sobbing from dreams of bedridden girls, greyish feathers floating down to their emaciated faces like ash around a pyre.

“The Devil!” spat Galina as one after another she unearthed rotted potatoes. She salvaged whatever she could and bundled sackcloth over the half-empty crates.

“I’ll make the soup from this crop,” offered Anya skipping downstairs.

“No, no it’s fine,” said Galina, “I’ll do it while you’re at the market ...” but before she could stop her, Anya had gone out to the crates. Galina heard the shriek and followed outside. “This all there is this time — there’s not enough for us, never mind for soup.”

Anya wrung her hands, "This is all fine, we'll just have to try some other roots next ..." she bit hard into her lip, but the dams burst anyway. "I'm so sorry, Galina," she wept, "I must not have checked what I planted well enough."

Galina rushed to comfort her, "Hush sister, this land is just not that good, and it's thanks to me that we can't grow the more tender overground crops!"

"But that's not your fault!" and the injustice made Anya cry even harder. By the evening her wails could be heard around the village. Her guilt about the poor yield was implacable and seemed to draw out all her other sorrows which flew to crowd and clamour in her head. Villagers who passed by over the following days could see Anya pacing her room, weeping and beating her chest, and they crossed themselves believing she foretold ill fate when in fact she only bemoaned it.

Market Day arrived, and Galina trundled anxiously towards the village centre with the remaining crop. A little girl stopped still as an acrid stink bloomed in her direction, then seeing Galina she screeched, pinched her nose and hollered, "Brimstone, it's Brimstone, she's outside." The rest of her band took up the call, skittering around Galina like hysterical leaves. Galina snarled at them. They were the least of her problems. If an official found that she had entered the market, she would be sent summarily home. She was not good for trade.

The other vendors smelt her before they saw her, and even before she had set up stall, those nearest had packed up their merchandise and clattered off across the square. One farmer, suffering from a touch of congestion, was a little slower moving of and his lilies wrinkled and began to droop in front of his eyes. He glared at Galina before piling up his surviving floral bundles and pushing them away. A pair of young women passed by, arm in arm, swinging baskets of produce. "You'd think she'd just take a bath," one giggled, and Galina's face flared with shame and indignation. She expected she was cleaner than either of them, in body and mind.

Galina knew she had little time and began dropping her prices until eventually, customer greed overcame olfactory discernment, and she was able to move some stock. Still, at dusk, Galina trudged home with at least a third of their vegetables.

She staggered up the stairs and into the room where Anya lay, her eyes bloodshot and staring, her face white and bloated as if she had drowned in her own tears. "If you still want," said Galina, "we'll try and find the witch." Her sister's mouth twitched with what looked like hope.

To avoid aiding the rumour mill, the sisters waited till dark to slip into the forest. The trees gathered closer the further they tramped, but the chill still leaked between branches and seeped through their cloaks. Arriving at

the Northwest corner, the sisters found only an old dry well. They looked all around it, but it belonged to no witch's hut.

Galina groaned, "Come on, we'd better go home before a bear finds us." Glancing at Anya, she suddenly felt a huge wave of irritation. Anya had begun to cry. "Anya! Not here! Do you know what else howls, sister? A wolf. Do you want to summon the pack?" Anya clapped a hand over her mouth, but there was no quelling the racking sobs of disappointment nor the rushing tears. Galina grabbed an empty, rusted pail on the side of the well. "Stick your head in that then." It worked, the sound was muffled until the crying fit eased. "Come on," said Galina taking her sister's hand and flinging the pail into the well. The clatter of iron and splash of spilt tears put a few waxwings to flight. But neither were as loud as the scraping and crunching that followed, nor as alarming as the juddering that began below their feet trembling upwards to chatter their teeth. They rushed to peer into the well and saw a last spiral step slide into place. Without a word, Anya hitched up her skirts and climbed in.

At the bottom of the stairs, they pushed through a whispering curtain of crimson maple leaves and were hit by light and noise. A vast subterranean cavern glowed with lamplight and flickering fireflies. Copper vessels bubbled on a range. Books were piled high on the ground or pressed into hanging cages while an owl swivelled its head to survey them from the top shelf of an ornate walnut bookcase. A parrot hopped on a lower shelf squawking, "Always read the smaller print." At the other end of a long table laden with a complication of connected glass vessels were a pair of boots and an open Valgorod Daily Chronicle. The witch finished his article and lowered the paper to peer at them over his pince-nez. The sisters glanced at each other, he looked much the trim legal clerk.

"I do not customarily give counsel without appointment," said the witch, taking his feet of the table, "but I remember your parents and I've been anticipating your visit for an indefinite period." Before Anya could begin, the witch waved her request away. "I can't take away your blubbering or your sister's odiferousness. But," he held up a finger, "you can give them away."

"No one will agree to be given curses!" Galina protested.

"My dear ladies, I did warn your parents about the tricky caveat, but they did insist so ..." the witch took Galina's hand and stroking it said, "That from which I cannot benefit, I give to you for yours." He showed the same to Anya. The baffled sisters stared at each other and rubbed their hands. A cuckoo sounded from the third shelf.

“Well I’m afraid that is all, I hope that it assists, I’ll allow you to determine the fee in due course.” The witch hustled the sisters out through the crimson curtain. When they glimpsed back, he was settled in place with the paper.

Later the sisters both felt that, like their parents, they had somehow been duped by the witch. Anya said, “Even if the spell works, I wouldn’t wish this constant anguish on my worst enemy,” and Galina felt that this stumbling block should have been obvious to the witch. She, on the other hand, would wish her stench on any number of deserving foes. The problem was getting close to anyone to pass it on. Galina was shunned from at least five yards, never mind being near enough to touch someone’s body.

After some weeks of scratching their heads, the sisters thought no more of their adventure. Life returned to its usual rhythm, though hunger crouched a little closer to the farmhouse door.

As the days grew shorter, Anya sold candles made at home from stored tallow, and Galina tried with limited success to work the land. She experimented with several new winter-flowering crops, but as ever, anything that grew above ground was soon wilted by her fumes. She pulled up the last carrots, and indoors, sifting through her basket, came across one of the mud flavoured lumpy tubers that were rampant in the plot, and seemed to suck the nourishment away from the tasty carrots and spuds. On a whim, she stroked the ugly growth saying, "That from which I cannot benefit, I give to you for yours." Suddenly, it was as if the very centre of her palm was sweating profusely, and throughout her body grew a feeling of being leached away. When it stopped, Galina steadied herself and shouted for her sister.

"I think I cast the spell, Anya. Am I different? The smell ... has it gone."

Anya sniffed the air and frowned. "Let's see outside," she said, taking Galina's hand and guiding them out of the farmhouse miasma. But the miasma stuck with them despite the blustery evening. "Maybe it takes time," suggested Anya to her crestfallen sister.

"Well, you try anyway. I certainly felt something," said Galina rummaging in the soil for a bigger, less misshapen tuber for her sister to use.

Anya felt the same sudden sweat and then wave after wave of swooning sadness. When she came to, Galina was holding her around her waist and peering into her face.

"Feel better?"

Anya tilted her head. "Do you know what? I think so!" Galina squeezed her hand and raised shining eyes, to the boundless indigo sky.

The sisters did not know how to dispose of cursed vegetables, so they hastily buried them.

Despite all their efforts, Galina's whiff did not abate, and Anya's initial contentment soon gave way to the usual bouts of melancholy and tears.

Spring arrived, and Galina set to work on the soil, readying it for planting. Again and again, she found her shovel hitting tough, pearly tubers until there were too many to keep gathering in her apron. They had grown fast and spread like a contagion. A horrific thought blossomed. Could these have budded from the enchanted vegetables? Galina stopped what she was doing and fell to her knees. They really were ruined now. She heard Anya clattering about in the kitchen, and then her sister was beside her.

Galina opened her apron to let a mass of cream and brown bulbs tumble and bounce out, "If you plant cursed

root, you grow a cursed crop.”

She waited for the downpour, but instead, Anya said, “We’ll try them. If they aren’t poisonous, they can bulk out the proper vegetables.” Seeing Galina hesitate, she added, “It’s better than us starving.”

Inside, Anya began chopping but was soon sniffing.

“It’s okay, I’ll do-”

“It’s not me,” exclaimed Anya, “it’s this bulb,” and sure enough Galina soon felt a sharp stinging in her eyes and tears streamed down her face.

“You look like me,” her sister laughed.

Galina began with one of the smaller, knobby bulbs which came apart in segments. When she chopped one, the air filled with a bright, sulphurous tang. The sisters finished slicing and dicing then looked dubiously at each other and their noxious crop.

“I’ll fry it all,” suggested Anya, “Maybe it won’t be so bad.”

Still, they were surprised at how not bad. The ball bulb’s fried aroma was sweet and creamy, the knobby bulb’s rich and savoury. All at once, Galina recollected the words of the spell and hurried to the pantry returning with a few carrots and potatoes which she chopped in. “Now, once we have tried it, we can give this away,” she said.

As Anya went about the village distributing the soup to the homeless, people came out of their houses to sniff at the piquant air.

She found Galina pacing the farmhouse on her return.

“Well?” asked Galina.

“Well, even the Sparrow Lady loved it, and the basket maker and that boy who works at the smithy both came out and asked for some. I said no, but that we would be selling some from the farm tomorrow.”

The sisters did not honestly expect anyone to arrive, but the two intrepid villagers did and purchased soup. Seeing that they had survived, other villagers came too. Before long Anya and Galina were able to buy more ingredients and sell casseroles, pies and different soups with dumplings. Villagers began to stay and talk, finding nothing more fearful in the farmhouse after all than two hard-working sisters, one who was very sweet, the other very sensible. Sometimes the villagers stood, and when invited, sat to eat their food at the farmhouse table.

As the farmhouse became an eatery as well as a shop, the sisters asked the Sparrow Lady to come live and work with them. And thanks to that woman’s refined palate, the food was even better.

One day Anya realised that she had not cried for many weeks, which was most unusual for her, and when she had last cried it hadn’t been a lot. Her sympathy remained plentiful, but now she was not overwhelmed by it, and so was better able to be the sort of sister and neighbour that she had always wished to be. Galina’s smell had gone. And she had gradually become used to the strange and mostly pleasant experience of having people who were not her own family standing near to her, leaning in to tell a secret, brushing a feather off her skirt or gripping her arm while they laughed.

They named the cursed vegetables after themselves. The one that made people cry was called an Anyan after Anya and the one that stank, Galin, after Galina though now we better know them as the brown onion and garlic.

The sisters never forgot to give generously to the homeless. Nor did they forget the witch. Every month they took him a basket of their cooking. The stairs of the well would be out. He knew that they were coming by the sweet and pungent, mouth-wateringly delicious smell.

THE END.

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