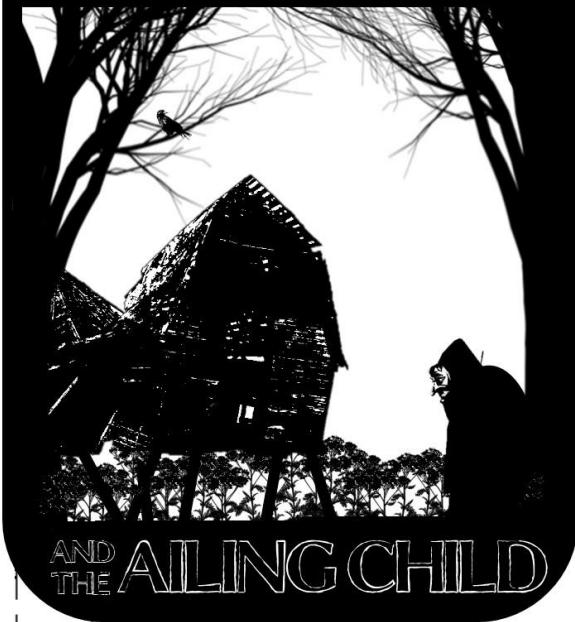


# BABA YAGA



## AND THE AILING CHILD

### BENJAMIN HOPE

Nobody but the healer had entered the forest for fifty years or more. Even the stray dogs merely whimpered and tucked their tails at its shadowy threshold. Nobody had trod its paths, in fact, since the then-young apothecary had returned from its clutches after months on her own, with wicked scaring along one flank and a head full of its secrets to show for it. And though these secrets soon made her renowned as the best healer for hundreds of miles around, her silence and wounds were enough to keep the rest of the villagers away from the darkness from which she had come.

People speculated, of course. Though, because of her muteness and unwillingness to communicate in ways other than her healing hands, nobody ever quite knew the truth of what had

happened to her, nor how she had come to attain such a wealth of medicinal nous.

The more sober among them said she'd likely been mauled by a bear, not uncommon to their part of the world, and must have survived through sheer grit and determination to learn from the flora that surrounded her, and that this had, in time, led to the regaining of her health and enhanced earthly knowledge.

Those more spiritually inclined, suggested she had been led astray by the forest dweller, Leshy, and attacked by one of his wolves. They believed, she had more as likely made some terrible pact with him in return for his woodland knowledge and safe passage back home.

Most however, (and the suggestion was enough to keep even the most cynical away) believed she had encountered the fearsome Baba Yaga and that, in exchange for an organ, had been tutored in the witch's unparalleled healing skills and methods. If she had been spared from Baba Yaga's cannibal lust, not one of them was prepared to chance being given the same treatment a second time around. And if that was not enough to make man afeared, then time and the hearsay that swelled like fungus through the decades had brought the healer's story into legend.

After fifty years, her body had grown lean; the grim details of her

story, fat, and both the healer and the forest were held in awe and dread, in equal measure. The rest of the villagers could only stand and stare as she nimbly crossed into the darkness to raid the forest's larder for riches she would later pound into pastes or boil into tinctures. At least, with her as their healer, aside from collecting fallen firewood from its boundary edge, no one else had need to enter the forest at all. Livestock was reared on the plains; water was pulled from the well.

Of course, everything changed when the healer finally died. No more could they rely on her unparalleled skill and knowledge to heal the sick and treat their wounds. And when the youngest infant among them was struck down with a fever, the villagers began to panic. They had long run out of the healer's cooling balm and it wasn't long before the babe looked to be nearing death's door.

'For the love of all that's good!' exclaimed one man, 'someone must enter the forest and seek out some yarrow; it's known to grow in abundance in the glades. Woman, let me go,' he scolded his pleading wife whose protestations (along with the rest of the village) were the only reason he had not entered the forest before now. He was not the biggest of the men but held a temper as ferocious as a wolverine. 'I can no longer sit and wait for this child to

die. We've lived our lives in fear of the forest for too long. I will gather yarrow from the woodland glade and be back before dusk.' He didn't wait to hear the plea from his wife to stay, or the caution from his fellow men. Nor did he see the secret gratitude in the parents' eyes. In he went, foolhardy as a hot-blooded youth, carrying nothing but a blade and satchel to harvest the yarrow with.

The forest quickly closed in around him, the black-barked branches leaning in from all sides, the smell of damp leaf litter kicking up into a sulphurous cloud with every step. But not once did he spot a place where the trees began to thin. Instead, trunks grew more thickly together choked with creeping vines and thorny tendrils and he was soon forced to clamber his way between them.

Then, in his haste, he caught his boot in a root knuckle and tumbled to the ground, brambles tearing at his clothes and skin. But his blaspheming turned to words of delight as he pulled himself to his feet to find the very thing he'd been searching for. Yarrow grew in flat-headed clumps in a small clearing but a few feet from him and he was about to gather it into his satchel when he noticed it was not the only thing in the glade. On spindly-legs, a dwelling stood, crooked as the wood it inhabited. Blue-black smoke issued from its precarious roof-stack. Somebody was home.

Baba Yaga, the man thought to himself, the devil whose very existence has terrified my village for so long. His temper flared at the thought of her, his wolverine mind driving him to anger.

'Baby Yaga,' he cried with his knife unsheathed, 'Hag! I have found you out! Come and meet your fate!'

And as the door creaked open, he ran to greet her with the keenness of his blade.

The man awoke to find he could not move. He felt the bite of the tight leather thongs that bound him about his throat, wrists and ankles. He felt the hard, cold grain of cut wood against the back of his head. He'd been strapped to a table. He roared and seethed against his bindings but did not move. Instead a face peered down at him, a barbarous, contorted face with skin as thick and tan as the leather that bound him, with features as crooked as the house in which he was held.

'I am Baba Yaga,' the hideous vision said, 'and it is you who shall meet your fate. You have the reflexes of a wolverine but no intellect to match it. For that I shall eat your brain, for you seem to have no use for it.'

With that, she hammered down a cleaver upon his skull until it bit into the wood behind.

At dusk, the rest of the village grew anxious; by the following dawn, the woman wept openly to grieve for the husband she now knew must be dead. The mother of the ailing child, looked to her husband with the babe in her arms.

'You must follow him into the woods. Find the yarrow and save our child.'

The father looked to his kin and then to his wife but not a word he spoke. Instead, as his gaze fell to that of the widow and the rest of the villagers, his body began to shake. For despite his towering size, the father held the temperance of a roe-deer and was quickly seized with dread. Though he knew his wife was right and with trembling fingers he picked up a blade and satchel, forced his unsteady feet across the boundary, and stumbled into the cover of the trees without managing so much as a farewell.

The father made slow progress for his boots threatened to turn tail and flee with every step. The pounding of his heart filled him with such fear that he had to grope at the vine-smothered trunks just to keep himself upright. For he knew if he should fall, he would likely not muster the strength to return to his feet again. And when he finally came to a clearing that grew thick with the yarrow he sought, his fear only mounted further. Standing amidst the feathery fronds of the yarrow stalks was a woman draped in rough-spun shawls cutting the flower

heads with a hooked blade like a talon. Her head snapped towards him and her creased leather skin and misshaped features arced into a smile. It was a smile of malice. This was Baba Yaga.

'This is the herb you seek, I think,' croaked her paper-dry voice as she stretched a fistful out towards him.

But the father had already fled, bolted at first sight like a deer with a scent on the wind.

Baba Yaga climbed inside her giant mortar bowl and with the pestle for a rudder glided out across the forest floor in pursuit. It was mere moments before she had borne down upon him. She held her talon-blade aloft.

'You seek a cure to heal your ailing child but lack the courage to do so. For that, I shall eat your heart, for you appear to have no purpose for it.' And with the organ hooked out, Baba Yaga returned to her homestead in the forest, sweeping her track behind her to disguise the route she had come.

The following morning, the mother joined the wife in her grief. Two men were now lost to the woods and still there was no cure for the babe to show for it. In fact, the villagers had all but given up hope when one of their number stepped forward. The loner; the man with no family to his name who was respected by the rest if not at a cautious distance. A man who was

thrifty with his words and sparing in his manner, the loner was never one to cause a stir or interfere without good cause.

'I will go into the wood,' he said. 'I haven't until now out of respect for the rest of the village's wishes and seeing as others had offered up their services until this point, I'd seen no cause to do so myself. But where no-one else will volunteer, I see now that you do have need. The child is sick and lucky still to be alive. For this reason, I will go and return with a remedy to ease the fever, be assured.'

The villages looked to one another in surprise as the loner gathered his things into his bag. They watched how he moved in the same way as he spoke, with the patience and precision of an Amur leopard, and they bowed their heads to him in thanks as he stalked with deliberation into the cloak of the forest.

The loner did not let the tangle of thorns and dangling vines bother him, nor did he stumble upon the bulging roots. Instead, he moved with vigilance, never rushing; never slowing to a crawl. And as the manner of a big cat, he pricked his ears and scanned the spaces between the trees for any sign of danger or his quarry. In this way, the loner reached Baba Yaga's clearing more quickly than the men before him and he found her once more amidst the yarrow, harvesting the blooms.

Again, Baba Yaga's head snapped in his direction but the loner did not flinch. He readied his blade in caution and observed her in silence. Baba Yaga narrowed her crow-black eyes and smiled. It was a while before the loner spoke.

'Please accept my apologies for my trespass. I mean no disrespect. Though I can see that you know my reason for seeking you out.'

Baba Yaga stretched her crooked back and stroked a whisker at her chin.

'I fear the ailing child won't last another night,' the loner continued, 'though I know your knowledge of herbs and medicine is unparalleled for you were gracious enough to impart a little of that wisdom onto our long-dead healer. Though you may see me as unworthy, as is your want, I would ask that you consider affording me just a drop from that well of wisdom you possess.'

The witch grew towards him with her talon-blade in hand. Still the loner met her gaze.

'You interest me, loner,' she said, 'though you ready your claws like a mountain leopard, you don't leap to strike, nor do you hang your tail and attempt to flee.' Placing her knife inside her yarrow-filled basted, she stretched out her gnarled hand and crooked his chin in a finger. 'You have patience and restraint. You fear me yet you refuse to let it beat you.' She

took a yellow-white flowerhead in hand and crushed the tiny blooms between finger and thumb. 'I have made my decision and you shall have what you came here to find.'

The loner sheathed his blade and placed it in his sack. 'And what would you have, in return? I have lived this world enough to know that everything comes at a price.'

Again, Baba Yaga smiled. 'Indeed, you are correct in your judgement. But what I would have from you, you have already given, for you have paid me respect. This is the cost of my remedy for the child. No more. Now come,' she said, pointing toward her dwelling, 'and I shall show you how to brew the perfect tincture and how to reduce the root to paste for the perfect balm. The baby shall live, and it has you to thank for it.'

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