THE NIGHT BIRD'S FEATHER



By

JENNA KATERIN MORAN

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Dedicated to:

Cync Brantley
Rand Brittain
Cheryl Couvillion
Jim Henley
Elane Imgoven
R'ykandar Korra'ti
Angela Korra'ti
AJ Luxton
Jenn Manley Lee
Various Maginns
Andrey S.
Amy Sutedja
Chrysoula Tzavelas
Raymond Wood

The Night Bird's Feather

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Choice



In the late 1300s, three ships of refugees from the Mongol invasion of Kievan Rus' found their way to an isolated, demon-haunted otherland. They settled at the edge of its lake and founded the human settlement of Fortitude. To deal with local conditions, certain of its families developed strange talents. One such was the Sosunovs, who practiced the arts of lucid dreaming, spiritual combat, and communicating with their loved ones (across arbitrary distances) through shared dreams.



"THE TOPIC of this class is practicality," she said. "And I am Mrs. Senko, and I will devour all your dreams."

She looked down. She stared at the desk blankly. She sighed, and blew a strand of hair away where it had fallen down over her eyes.

"And yet, for some reason, some among you have failed to grasp this lesson. When your life is troubled, you come to me, as if I am expected to care. When you face these ridiculous mirage-problems of childhood, you expect me to understand them. To assist. Even as recently as this morning, I was approached by one of my students, asking me, 'Mrs. Senko, Mrs. Senko, what do I do if I am haunted by an evil witch?'"

She turned to the chalkboard. She started by writing, neatly, midway down on the right side of the board, *Witches do not exist*.

She footnoted it, after a moment.

"Obviously," she said, "there are those who call themselves witches, and those who are called witches by others. Yet, this fundamental principle remains valid. The word has a meaning. In the fervid, overworked imaginations of the rustics, there is a totemic ideal, an ideological complex, a false image, which is the 'witch' … and yet, however rich in association that ideal may be, it is a concept without referent. What does one do about witches? Nothing. *Witches do not exist.*"

She stared at the board, in satisfaction, for a moment, then she turned.

Devin's hand was raised. She stared at him for a long time, as if willing him to lower it, but he did not lower it. After a moment, she said,

as if clarifying a point for the most obdurate of minds, "I am, therefore, not a witch."

There was scattered laughter, and Devin's hand inched back, slowly, down.

"This is not our topic for the day," Mrs. Senko said. "I wouldn't waste your time on something like that. There are no witches; thus the practical matters of the disposition of witches, or the defense against witches, boil down to … nothingness?

"No.

"Today's class is not about witches," she said. "Today's class is on the ethics of self-sacrifice."

Aprosinya sat up, and then leaned forward, and there was fury in her face—but it raised little reaction from Mrs. Senko save a slight twist of her left upper lip, very close to being a smile. "Aprosinya," she said softly, then corrected herself—

"No. … Ms. Sosunova. Could you tell us a little about your family's obligations?"

Aprosinya had missed the moment of its appearance, but Mrs. Senko had written BATTLING WITCHES high on the chalkboard.

Aprosinya turned her face to the side. She looked at the window.

Finally, she said, "There is no way to put this that you will accept, Mrs. Senko, but I cannot make corrections to my family's duty as if it were a paper."

"Well-said," noted Mrs. Senko. "Very well; present it as if I were a stranger."

A bitter smile flashed across Aprosinya's face.

"Oh," she said, falsely, "you really must come by the compound sometime! Father would be delighted to tell you the family history."

"Aprosinya," said Mrs. Senko.

"Less of a stranger than that?"

"Work with me."

Aprosinya sighed. She breathed out. "From time immemorial," she said, softly, "they have come in off the waters of the Lake: the witches, and been a trouble to the citizens of Fortitude. They are wicked creatures, arising from and in that state of wickedness. They are beings of malice, and they live primarily in dreams. They … infect them. And this is scary because there are very few people in all the world who are strong in their dreams. If you train your body for a thousand years, still in your dreams a witch can catch you and render you helpless with one hand. If you train your soul to resist hardships and temptations, still they can walk in your dreaming mind and twist you, turn you bad. You can be as careful and practical as you like—"

Here she glared at Mrs. Senko, as if daring her to say anything, and in fact made it blatant by adding: "*and I told you that you would not accept this—*

"… you can be as careful and practical as you like, and yet, they can make everything in your life go all awry. For most people, there is nothing to be done. Thus, the family Sosunov. Thus, it is our duty to patrol the dreams of Fortitude. To protect the vulnerable sleeping minds. That is our obligation and our magic."

"One oddity," Mrs. Senko said, "leads to another."

Aprosinya tilted her head.

"Accept one fanciful notion and three others crowd the line …" Mrs. Senko twitched. "But no. That is not the topic for the day. Let us, for now, accept this lacework of fanciful follies at something approaching its face value. Would you say, Aprosinya, that this obligation extends to you?"

"I would."

"*You* are obligated," said Mrs. Senko, "to spend your nights, regardless of your own interests, and even on occasions where there is homework to be done, papers to be prepared, tests to study for, classes the next morning—in an unlimited futile struggle to defend the dreams of others from the idiosyncratic manifestations of malisons like these?"

Aprosinya pulled a face.

"That is my destiny," she said. "Though, I am not very good at it."

"Mm," said Mrs. Senko. "I have found in life, you know, that when children speak of destiny, it tends to speak not so much to destiny as to an ideological indoctrination, an unwarranted fascination with adult topics, or, a failing on the part of the adults around them. Mm?"

She turned to the chalkboard. She thought for a moment, then wrote PRO and CON under the heading of BATTLING WITCHES, with *Witches do not exist* already roughly centered a ways beneath the label CON.

"You see," she said, "it is my opinion that you ought not be having such adventures, even were we to accept their existence, but rather should be developing your character here, within this institute. There is time enough to be crushed under the faceless malevolence of irresistible monsters when you have been released from here into the broader world."

After a moment, Mrs. Senko added the following entries to the column on the right:

- *Loss of sleep*
- *Adverse side effects*
- *Detrimental influence on mood*
- *Potential suicidal behavior*
- *Risk of death*
- *Risk of transformation*
- *Risk of failed apotheosis, followed by laying waste to large portions of the afterlife and troubling he the lord of Death's dominion*

The last one took up two lines and squeezed itself unpleasantly close to *Witches do not exist,* still below.

"Mrs. Senko," Devin asked, "wouldn't 'adverse side effects' be too general?"

"Well, it's a term for generic poor outcomes in clinical trials," Mrs.

Senko said. "I can't write down everything that happened to just *one* person who fought a witch."

"Ah," said Devin, awkwardly. "But—"

"Fine," said Mrs. Senko. "Fine."

She erased the last entry.

"As Devin has reminded me," she said, seemingly put out, "'laying waste to large portions of the afterlife' has only even allegedly happened once. Now. More importantly. Does anyone have any pros?"

Bluntly, Aprosinya suggested, "Inevitability."

"Ooh," said Mrs. Senko.

She wrote *Depressive ideation* in the space that had opened up inside the CONs.

"That is not what I meant," said Aprosinya. As Mrs. Senko held up the chalk, Aprosinya added, "if you write 'snippiness' or 'denial of reality' up there I will bite you."

Mrs. Senko hesitated. "… oral fixation?" she asked, apparently wondering if she should add this, but Aprosinya only slapped her notebook against her desk.

"What I meant," Aprosinya said, "is that on certain occasions, it is not necessary to *do* Sosunov magic in order to attract the attention of witches. If they've had previous encounters with the family, or are willing to follow the prevailing trends of expectation? It is sometimes enough simply to be Sosunov."

Mrs. Senko still had not recorded anything under PRO. She stood there for a moment, and then she turned, and she looked straight at Aprosinya, and there was something hard in her gaze. "Ms. Sosunova," she said, "if I may ask, what is the point of having a family of dedicated dream guardians, if in the end the witches can bother whom they will?"

Aprosinya was silent.

"Perhaps I am misunderstanding?" said Mrs. Senko. "Are you the last survivor of your esteemed family? The only one west of the Lake

and all its waters who can intercept the pains of others' dreams? Are you alone, Ms. Sosunova, so that if a witch should bother anyone *else*, well, you can choose whether to fulfill your 'duty' or to leave them to suffer it, but if a witch should bother *you*, then, there is nothing to be done? Is *that* the case? For certainly if that *is* the case—ignoring for the moment that witches, again, do *not* exist—I should be more sympathetic to your plight than I have been."

"That isn't," said Aprosinya.

She looked away.

"That isn't," she said, as if it were a whole sentence, and complete.

"Then," said Mrs. Senko, "I will not write down that it is inevitable. Your family could perfectly well guard you from this, and most likely should. Have you asked them to?"

Silence.

"Have you informed them?"

This provoked a reaction: "They have to know," said Aprosinya.

"… then?"

"It's in *my* dreams," said Aprosinya. "It's *my* job. I … I want to be able to handle it. Because I am a Sosunov."

Mrs. Senko waited.

"To be one of the people who protects," said Aprosinya.

"There," said Mrs. Senko, as if she'd been waiting for that. "At last we have one for the PRO column."

She wrote down:

- *Reducing the burden on the vast unthinking herd we name society.*

"Oi," argued Devin.

"Oh," said Mrs. Senko, "I am not saying that this is a bad thing. As you can see, I have put it under the column labeled PRO. It is *for the best* that a hero takes their stand, shouldering and being crushed under the vast weight of things in order that the milling kine suffer each of them

the tiniest bit less. That is a well-established and commonly understood moral principle."

"That characterization isn't convincing," said Aprosinya.

"No?"

Aprosinya frowned. She thought about this. Then she said, "No. I don't know why not."

"Mm."

"There is," Aprosinya said, "a nameless good, you see, in it. You should help people. You should do your duty and have a place. I don't know how else to put it."

"One might say," said Mrs. Senko, "that you're a child, who goes to school. That that is your destiny. That that is your place."

She was scribbling it in, then, at the bottom of the CON column: *Distraction from one's proper duties and one's conduct.*

"I can't be a child before I'm a Sosunov," argued Aprosinya.

"Can't you?"

"I'll be a Sosunov all my life," said Aprosinya. "Even if I marry out of the family, my children will be Sosunov cousins, my magic will be Sosunov magic, my duties will be Sosunov duties. There's hardly any path in life that doesn't leave me a Sosunov. But the only way to stay a child forever is to die."

Mrs. Senko glanced at the *Potential suicidal behavior* for a moment. She looked back.

"Mmm. I will tell you a secret," she said. "It is a … cheat. It is a way of cheating at practicality. A trick I learned from your ancestress, in fact. It is this. If you ever find yourself saying things like 'I can't' or 'I have to,' or certainly 'it is my duty' or 'my destiny,' then, you stop. You may simply … stop."

Aprosinya's eyes were on her.

"You are not writing this down, Ms. Sosunova."

"It's not a real lesson!"

"Oh," said Mrs. Senko. "You're going to have *trouble* with your examinations."

Aprosinya hesitated.

"In any case," said Mrs. Senko. "That's all. That is the cheat. That is the trick. It is like crossing off factors in division. 'You can't be a child before you're a Sosunov.' 'You have a destiny.' 'You have a duty.' 'You have a job.' '*Because you are a Sosunov.*' You find yourself saying things like that. And … stop."

Her lip curled.

"Tonight I will ask you to read pages 233-246," she said, "of *A Guide to Practicality.* It is the section called *Ideological Indoctrination*— ah. Recognizing it. Spotting it. Rejecting it. You can stop before the section on receiving it."

"So that's your advice?" said Aprosinya. "That's it? Just ignore what I'm supposed to be, to do? Have my family come out here to help?"

"It's tempting," said Mrs. Senko. "But you did say one thing worth hearing."

Aprosinya blinked.

"You said 'I want.'"

"Uh," said Aprosinya. She settled lower in her seat.

"I find that interesting," said Mrs. Senko. "Here you are, poisoned. Alleging— and, since we are speaking of dreams and concepts, does it even matter that these are falsehoods? Alleging that a witch haunts you. Alleging that it has *damaged* you, that it has taken away a portion of your life's essential brightness; that it has put you on a path that leads towards only grim despair."

"I didn't tell you that—" Aprosinya started.

"And yet you tell me that you *want* to fight it. You want to be able to handle it. You see your destruction, you see the allure of your own ending, and you rush towards it with a smile. That is, while not precisely the attitude that I am seeking to encourage in this class, *interesting*. That

is worth hearing. Is it going to be worth it, Ms. Sosunova? Because I *can* tell you that simply wanting to be able to handle a thing is not enough to do so."

"Of course it isn't," said Aprosinya.

"I could even say," said Mrs. Senko, "that wanting a thing is its opposite: actively detrimental to being able to do it. Something that will prevent you from taking the most effective course of action, and instead bind you into battle with one hand tied behind your back. For there is only one excuse I can imagine that *would* justify your insistence on battling this witch alone, Ms. Sosunova, which is to say, as practice for encountering *later* witches; but you're not expecting that to happen, are you."

Aprosinya went still. Then, softly, she admitted it.

"No," she said. "No, I'm not."

"You're doing this," said Mrs. Senko. "You're letting her in. You're facing her alone. You're letting her *destroy* you. Because you're scared that you won't get another chance to be important, later on."

"That's," and here Aprosinya hesitated.

"They're rare," said Mrs. Senko. "Aren't they? Witches?"

Aprosinya seemed to be having a little trouble breathing.

"So you wake up every morning, now," said Mrs. Senko, "tired; hurt; scared. It's eating into you, it's cutting you, it's filling you up to the brim of you with despair; only, you have to let it, you have to fight it on your own, at most asking a few people for help *so that you can feel like you asked for help*, a few people who are, of course, merely practical, dull, and boring teachers who cannot possibly do more than give you vaguely relevant *tips*—"

And very sharply:

"And don't think I believe for a moment that you *expected* me to say something that would make it all *easy* for you, Aprosinya—"

Aprosinya sagged, and Mrs. Senko finished:

"Because if you don't, if you don't let her pollute you, if you don't let

her foul the nest that is your mind, *you might miss your chance,* and then live the rest of your life completely futile, a dream guardian with nothing to guard against, *a magician with no point.* Mm?"

Aprosinya was flushed. She was slouching.

She protested, "It's in *my* dreams."

"I should take her from you," said Mrs. Senko. "Yes. I will do that."

"What?"

She looked straight on at Aprosinya. It was as if she dragged the girl's eyes up to meet hers by will alone. "Witches don't exist, Aprosinya. And if they *did,* they wouldn't be interested in *you.*"

Mrs. Senko reached forward. Her hand was some ways from Aprosinya, but it was in her visual field; its fingernails reached back, not so much from the hand's spatial position as from its place in that visual field, to pinch behind Aprosinya's eyes. It was surprisingly painless as they closed on something; as she pulled it out;

"So I am confiscating the entire notion," Mrs. Senko said, and she pulled her hand away.

There was a silence after that, for a while. Then Devin raised his hand, and she called on him.

"We, ah," he said. "didn't actually discuss the ethics of self-sacrifice at all."

"There are none," said Mrs. Senko. "That is the lesson. That is the extent of it. You are children; you are to be protected; you are not to engage in any form of self-sacrifice. Then, later in your life, you will become adults. You will be untrustworthy and unreliable. You will be part of a great, seething faceless mass of malice, very like unto a witch. You will mill through the world, moon-faced and rotten, and you will not sacrifice yourself then either. But if you wish to engage in self-sacrifice, if you wish to consider it, then first I wish you to remember this—"

And she tapped the board.

"And pages 233-246, like I have said."

"How—" Claire asked.[1] "Ma'am, I mean, how are we supposed to read the sections on spotting and rejecting indoctrination without reading the actual indoctrination section?"

"Don't try to be cute," Mrs. Senko said.

Claire shrank back in her seat. She struggled with words for a moment before finally managing, "but they're the same pages?"

"Ah," Mrs. Senko said. "Right. I had forgotten I had done that."

She'd written the textbook, of course. Or, at least, she had compiled it.

"Well," Mrs. Senko said, and tidied up her own notes, and rapped them on the table. "That's because nothing means anything and all ideas, concepts, and motivations are just hypotheses that somebody or other put together. Class dismissed."

1 She was the ghost at the back of the class.

PROLOGUE

ONCE UPON a time, there was a fishing village named Fortitude on the shores of a Big Lake in the middle of an endless, seething nothingness.

It sat towards the southeastern end of a roughly 700-square-mile parcel of reality.

Most of that parcel of reality was taken up by the lake. Most of the rest, by unclaimed land, or the village. To the west, across the hills, there *was* a tented city that strange creatures dwelled in, though; this, in time, would become "Horizon." Beyond *that* lay the Walking Fields.

This haven, as a whole—this promontory of reality—was simply known as "Town."

IF YOU went to the north, across the nothingness, you would find a few more scattered pockets of existence. Schism, and Soma Village. The mountain, Kailas Mantra.

Eastward—'round and past the lake—you might find the Bleak Academy.

The rest ... was lost.

It was nothingness and chaos; emptiness, mystery, and disorder. This, was known as "the Outside."

There was no direct connection between all this and the world we know.

It was a geographically disconnected fragment of existence.

... but, if one knew how to sail the Lake correctly—at the proper times, along the proper courses—one could find one's way to the rivers, lakes,



and seas of Earth. Conversely, if one just knew how, one could sail all the way from Earth to the docks of Fortitude, as well.

If you were to go and sail there now, of course, it would be too late. This story would have already happened. But … if you'd woken yourself up, a couple centuries back; rolled out of bed; stared up, bright-eyed, at the sky, and caught yourself a ship to Fortitude—there's just a chance that you would have been there for the beginning of all this; caught the moment when all of this was just barely starting:

With Fevroniya Sosunova, and a bird.

ONCE UPON A TIME, then …

Fevroniya Sosunova was telling a story.

She was telling a story, and a bird started listening. What kind of a bird? It was a beautiful heron, fat-bodied and narrow-beaked, all white with red tips to its feathers.

It listened, but it didn't know that it was listening.

It heard the story, but it didn't know that it was hearing the story. Not at first. But it liked the sound of the words. It liked the sound of the words, and it started wanting to *own* the sound of the words. It started wanting to be the one *making* the sound of the words. And when Fevroniya reached the part of the story where she said, "Like the world was a mirror, which cracked," the bird fluttered its wings, and it echoed those words in its harsh croaking voice:

"… ich cracked …"

And in that moment, quite entirely by accident, the bird looked down at the waters by its feet, where the ripples broke up its reflection. It caught sight of that broken, cracked likeness. It noticed, in that instant,





that it was thinking a thought, a thought in words, and that that thought had *meaning:*

"Like the world was a mirror, which cracked."

After that, it … *she* … couldn't be a heron any longer. She had to give it up. She'd had a thought, with words, that had meaning in it, and from that moment forward the fire of her consciousness was a fire that ate words.

From that moment forward, she couldn't be a heron; she had to be people. Or, at least, a *kind* of people.

She became a witch.

MRS. SENKO, ONE SUPPOSES, must have been wrong, or lying. What with a witch just *existing*, like that—

… which just goes to show (if you've had her class) that even obvious and well-known things can be deceit.





CHAPTER ONE

VALENTINA AND THE HERON-WITCH

Once upon a time, but not so very long ago, Miruna Sosunova learned to see through the back of her eyes like the front of them. She raised up the curtains of the self and went out beyond them, into the territory of nothingness and death. She saw there the secret that was like the rain, that was like a cloud passing over nothingness. She lit up the void, in that moment, like a candle in the dark, and she understood for the first time, then, that she was beautiful.

She held out her hands and this understanding pooled inside them. It became a thing: a chunk of silver; it became a key. ...

— from *A Beginner's Guide to the Sosunov Magic,*
by Sidonie Sosunova

LET'S TELL the story of Valentina Grigorievna Sosunova and the heron-witch!

Generations and generations before Aprosinya was born, Valentina was a young girl from the Sosunov family.[2] She'd been trained since birth in how to fight witches, but she hadn't ever been expected to have to actually fight one. Certainly not one like the heron-witch, who was the worst witch the Sosunovs had ever seen.

What did the heron-witch do?

She hollowed people out. She made space for herself inside them and nurtured her own spirit there. She cultivated herself inside her victims like a chick in an egg. And while she was doing this her victims would sleep and sleep and no one would be able to wake them. That was pretty bad, but it wasn't the bad part. The bad part was that she was really *good* at it. She wasn't like most of the horrible witches that the Sosunovs had seen before, who might do pretty bad things but would just fall over when someone with powers of their own stood up to oppose them. The heron-witch was strong, strong enough that the whole Sosunov family, who thought they were pretty darn good at handling witches, didn't stand even the ghost of a chance.

The Sosunovs drifted off to sleep, one by one, and they did not wake again, until only little Valentina was left to care for them, and to keep the house, and to fight alone against the witch to win them back.

It wasn't easy. The fight wasn't easy. She had to work very hard, and for a very long time.

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2 The "a" on her last name was a local convention.

IT STARTED like this:

It was a warm night in summer and a wind blew in past thick magenta curtains and Valentina's family was having dinner, and among all the clatter of silverware and all the talk at the table, Valentina's great-grandfather found himself nodding off. His eyes slipped closed. He drifted off into darkness. He floated off into dreams. Only, where his dreams should have been, he found a witch waiting instead.

The river of his dreams ran past the two of them. It was a many-colored tumult. It cast up white spray.

She stood athwart that river: the witch.

"Shoo," he said.

She tilted her head. She fluffed and settled her feathers. She took a step forward.

"Don't want to get dragged into the business of witches," he said. "Want to dream of my wife."

The witch didn't understand words like those. The witch could barely understand the words that she *knew.* She wasn't approaching Valentina's great-grandfather to *talk* to him. She was approaching him because there was a nesting instinct waking in her, a hungry witch's instinct, and she wanted to take something that the old man had.

He almost realized that, and started to react, but by then it was just too late.

There was a great fluttering of wings, and a lunging beak, and that beak struck him on the forehead, and his consciousness of the world went out. He fell into the kind of dreams that have no dreamer, deeper and deeper dreams until he was just a shell for her, a dreaming shell to her, and she cultivated her *own* nascent consciousness inside him, like an egg.

He nodded off at the table, and he did not wake.

He was just the first. Valentina's grandmother was next, and her grandfather, and her great-uncles. The witch took them at different places and at different times. Two went to bed. One sat down on the couch. One

was out walking around the complex where the Sosunovs lived. … and the witch found them. She raised up her wing. They fell under the shadow of that wing, and they fell asleep. And in that sleep, no matter how hard they fought, no matter how strong they had believed themselves to be, they fell under her sway, they fell into her power, they were turned into empty containers for her will, and she cultivated herself inside the dreams of them, like an egg.

This wasn't the first time that a witch had troubled the Sosunovs. Chaos blows across the surface of the Lake and roils in the lands Outside the town. From time to time it stirs up something that becomes a witch or monster. That's nothing unexpected. There'd been five or six witches already that century, and all manner of oddnesses to boot. Like weeds, they'd be cut down, and like weeds, they'd spring up again; that a witch would arise to make trouble—well, the Sosunovs weren't all that surprised.

They gathered their strength. They prepared to fight.

Only, this time, they lost.

They might as well have been yelling at starlight. They called up their magic, all the magic that the Sosunovs knew, and they still fell asleep one right after another. Nothing they did had the slightest effect upon the witch or delayed her efforts by the smallest amount. Valentina's Dad fell asleep and he didn't wake up. Her aunts and her uncles, too. Her cousins, one by one, fell asleep.

"Be good," her mother said, as she drifted off. She took Valentina's little hands in hers to warm them. "Be good. Keep the house, and protect it."

And then the whole family slept—save Valentina.

The witch hunted her down. She raised up her wing, and Valentina fell under the shadow of that wing, and she too slipped into dreams. Only, Valentina was young. She was *too* young, the youngest of the Sosunovs, and she was yet to drink deeply enough of the nectar of the world. She had never left the immediate surrounds of Fortitude; never seen the

world; never felt the touch of the King of Evil, or of Death's dominion, or of the angel of the Houses of the Sun. The witch sent her to sleep and found that she couldn't *fit* into Valentina's dreams; or, rather, she could fit, she could walk right on in as a bird, but she couldn't turn those dreams into an egg. She couldn't cultivate her spirit and power inside.

Valentina slept, but she didn't stay asleep like the others.

She woke, instead, scared and stiff on the floor.

"BE GOOD. Keep the house, and protect it:"

Simple words for a pretty tough job.

It was hard just being alone in the house. It was lonely and difficult just being the last of the Sosunovs. But Valentina couldn't just moon around in the house being lonely.

After the first day or so, taking care of sleeping people becomes really hard on its own.

Even if they're asleep, they still need food. They still need water. You still have to turn them over so they don't get bedsores and check that they're still breathing and take care of all of the messes that they make.

A big modern hospital full of doctors and nurses would have a hard time with fifteen comatose Sosunovs. It would put a strain on their schedules.

Valentina wasn't a big modern hospital. She was just one little girl.

If she'd been left alone there with no guidance at all, she wouldn't have known what to do, and everyone would have died. She would probably have tried to feed them, but she would have forgotten about water; she wouldn't have even thought about turning them; and she wouldn't have had any idea how to keep them all clean.

If they'd all fallen asleep at once, that would have happened.

But they hadn't fallen asleep all at once. It had been slow. So there'd been time for some preparations.

There was a plan.

Valentina's Mom and Dad and aunts and uncles and cousins had had time to write up a plan and a schedule. They'd shown Valentina how to take care of people who were asleep. Everything they could do to make sure that someone left behind to care of things *could* take care of things, they'd done, just in case there actually was. And that would fine if it had been Valentina's Mom and Dad and an uncle, say. It would have even been fine if it had been Valentina and her big strong cousins Donal and Ivan, at least for a couple of days.

She was just one little girl.

She got exhausted just rolling everyone over—never mind changing the beds!

It was too much for her, and to be technical, that meant she really wasn't supposed to do it at all. That was part of the plan too. Her Mom had been clear about that. Towards the end, when it started to look like there wouldn't be enough people left, when it started to seem like keeping things going might be too much to manage, she'd written it into the plan in her big looping handwriting:

"If it's ever too much. If you're ever doing something and it's *just too much*. Even if you've already started doing it. Even if it doesn't seem there's anything you can do *but* to do it.

"If it's ever too much, you can stop."

In a situation like hers, Valentina's Mom didn't expect Valentina to do more than she could … only, while a lot of the parts of the plan had details spelled out (like how much water to use in the soup, and how often to turn people over in bed), "if it's ever too much" was just aspirational. An *idea*. That part of the plan didn't give Valentina any actual guidance on what exactly "too much" was, or on where the line was between "I can go a bit further" and "this: this is too far."

Valentina didn't do a little bit, then stop, and evaluate how much she could manage.

She just worked very hard.

The first day[3] she managed. She was a tough little thing, and she didn't shrink back from work. She bustled about the house. She kept things tidied up. She made broth and she fed it very solemnly to her family, a sip at a time. She wiped down everyone's brow. She adjusted everyone in their beds. It was a struggle, and she got behind schedule, but she had the energy to give it her best.

The next day it was harder.

The third day she woke up and her whole body hurt and she thought of what she had to do for the day and she burst out crying. She couldn't get up, not until the heaves of her sobs shook free the last of the tears from her eyes.

She got up. She kept going.

She was stronger than she ever thought she would have to be. She was braver than she thought she ever could be. She started slipping, forgetting really important things, but at least she kept going.

She didn't stop, even though it was too much for her; only, it *was* too much for her.

On the fourth day, when she was rolling her dear grandmother over, she fell down. She couldn't get up.

Her hair fell over her grandmother's body like one corpse's over another's. Her eyes filmed over. She fell asleep.

VALENTINA DREAMED. It was a magical dream, but not a dream of the witch. It was a dream of the Sosunov family magic, the magic that was *supposed* to keep them from getting put to sleep forever by miscellaneous witches, the magic that she'd been trained in since she was just a baby in her mother's arms.

Here's what happened.

She dreamed she came out of the rain. She found herself in an old, gothic school. She shook herself and she looked around, but there were

3 well, the first "day." We'll go into that later.

no people anywhere around her. There were just the murmurings of ghosts.

She dreamed she walked into one of the classrooms and looked towards the front of it.

There was a teacher, but she wasn't teaching anything, on account of being stuck in an egg.

"Goodness," Valentina said.

She walked to the egg. It was twice the height of the desk, plus a little bit more.

She had an umbrella with her, because it had been raining, so she rapped on the egg with its handle.

"Ah," said a woman's voice from inside. It sounded a bit embarrassed. "Valentina."

"Hm?"

"I cannot talk to you today," the teacher said. "I am stuck in an egg."

"So I witness," said Valentina. "… if you like, then I think I could crack it …"

A snort of bitter laughter. "I am the unparalleled," said the egg. "The great and terrible. The teacher, 'Mrs. Senko.' My students they fear and admire me. The world it resounds with praise for me, for my hard-headed, clear-sighted practicality. I can hardly come spilling out with the egg whites, bits of yolk in my hair."

"Uh," Valentina said.

"The notion is unthinkable; I reject it," Mrs. Senko said.

And it sounded to Valentina like she was thinking that she might just *stay* in there. "… you can't do that, Mrs. Senko," Valentina objected. "An egg's got to crack."

"That's hardly a thing to say to someone who's *in* one."

"It's how you get chickens," Valentina explained.

The egg did not respond for a time. Perhaps its teacher was thinking. Finally, Mrs. Senko said, "I shall allow you to smuggle me out. If you

like. Then perhaps one day the students will crack open the egg, and find nothing but its gooey innards, and I can walk in behind them *just* as they all conclude I am dead, clear my throat, and say, 'Why is there a giant hollow egg in my classroom?' And my reputation would, you see, be preserved."

"You're a teacher!" Valentina said. A worm of laughter tickled somewhere deep down in her throat. "You shouldn't pull pranks."

"It would be very simple," Mrs. Senko argued. "You'd just have to poke two holes in the bottom of the egg and drain me out into a bottle—"

But Valentina just shook her head.

"An egg's got to crack, Mrs. Senko," she told her; and that's what she did. … well, what she almost did. What she *nearly* did. Valentina was *certain*—

But the wing of a dark bird of nightmare passed over that dream; and the egg was, quite suddenly, empty; and Valentina was, just as swiftly, alone.

LATER VALENTINA woke up. When she realized she had woken she cried.

Oh, she didn't want to stay in *that* dream, particularly, staring at a hollow eggshell and a bunch of empty desks. It had gone cold. It had gone lonely.

… but when she was asleep, and dreaming, she could move, and it wouldn't hurt. She could look at things, and her eyes wouldn't hurt.

In her dreams, she wasn't totally defeated.

In her dreams, she wasn't responsible for anything. At most she ought to have studied. Once she woke up, she had a list of tasks as long as her arm.

In fact, the first task was to stagger over to the message board where she kept track of her tasks for the day and start crossing them off, because she wasn't going to be able to do all of them any longer.

No "sweep." No "scrub."