

## **In Which Phyllis B Takes Over the World**

by Elise Hebert

By midday, the entire army of Russia had amassed in a threatening wall around a patch of taiga no larger than a suburb. Their guns were trained on the center of the woods like spokes to a wheel. Their commanders had started to reconsider, and they were usually entirely indisposed to reconsider.

The threat they faced was unlike any that human civilization had ever faced before. It was a ruthless threat. It was an insane, inane threat. It was an avocadoish-periwinkleish-colored threat.

The soldiers heard, from somewhere in the woods, a low and sinister clucking. Nobody moved. Something rustled amidst the conifers. Nobody moved. Something thudded very close by. Nobody moved.

A huge fuzzy wave broke over the tops of the trees and crashed down.

Everybody moved.

Soldiers yelled, guns ratcheted, grenades were tossed. Tanks revved. The commanders reconsidered furiously.

They were fighting thousands upon thousands of knitted men, all alike – on the short side, obscenely avocadoish-periwinkleish-colored, bent on destruction. For yarn, they were strong, especially because they knitted themselves back together after being shot, but many perished, of course, falling to the ground in piles of wool, or ashes.

But more poured from the center of the woods in a raging river. Soon there were perhaps ten thousand knitted soldiers swarming all over the meaty ones, and when a yarn soldier got close enough to touch a human soldier, it did something very startling.

It reared up and fell upon the human, pulling them both to the ground, and only the yarn one got back up. However, it always seemed to be larger than before, and emitted a lot of muffled yells while its compatriots remained perfectly voiceless.

This happened again and again until the larger yarn people outnumbered the smaller ones, and there were no more human soldiers left to fight, or human commanders left to reconsider. For a moment, the yarn people stood perfectly still, in perfect silence. A light, downy snow began to fall.

Then, in a quiet and orderly fashion that would have made any airport security employee grind their teeth in envy, they separated, and the larger ones went to hide in warehouses while the smaller ones walked back to their master's house.

Phyllis B lived in an anomalous house in an ordinary Russian woodland. The house was a tiny square cottage, white, with a red trim and a slate roof, and cozy despite all the weathering it had endured, and the fact that it had no plumbing or electricity because it never touched the ground.

From the bottom of the house sprouted a pair of wiry, muscled chicken legs, large enough to hold it up. Every morning it laid an egg, which Phyllis B cooked and fed to herself and the shrunken head which was her companion. The house keys, which had "MS. YAGA" written on the tag, gave Phyllis B the power to direct the house's path.

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Soon after renting it she had come to discover that it was a living, though not usually conversational, being. Sometimes, at night, it whispered disturbing secrets of the eldritch realms, but this was alright, because it was not an apartment in a retirement home.

That was the hellish place Phyllis B had left. The walls of her apartment were scabby, the bed was cold, and the sun shone far too brightly into the room when she was trying to read. The worst part was that management wouldn't let her change it.

Fed up with it all, she had hatched a devious plan. She retrieved an old family heirloom from its locked box on her dresser – a jewel, an uncut avocadoish-periwinkleish-colored one, about the size of a grape. Along with its companion set of ivory knitting needles engraved with the runes of a dead tongue, it allowed the bearer to knit infinitely, with astounding speed, and bring their creations to life.

Phyllis B had snuck out of her apartment stealthily in the night, accompanied by an enormous winged crocodile spun out of yarn. This she rode across the Bering Strait and into the taiga, where she dismounted and unraveled it, as she did with all her creations.

Remembering an old pact, Phyllis B made her way to the grove where Ms. Yaga had parked the house at that moment. “Enjoy your stay,” the middle-aged lady had said, and then added that Phyllis B had better keep the house in immaculate condition and feed the shrunken head, on pain of sudden and unsolicited transmogrification into a hamster, or perhaps a periodical cicada, thank you, goodbye.

Then she had tossed her the keys and, stepping into her enormous mortar-and-pestle, rose into the air and teleported to another plain of existence.

Phyllis B had shambled into the cottage, and, with a primal howl of victory, cracked the keys in the air to set the chicken house galloping, and proceeded to take over the world.

All was going according to her plan.

The anomalous house slowed down from its fierce poultryish gallop on a wide scrubby plain. Phyllis B stared at the cuckoo clock and waited. She ate a piece of hard-boiled egg. The shrunken head swung toward her on its chain and grunted; she fed it. It inhaled the crumbs of egg through its nostrils because its mouth was sewn shut. Also, it had no stomach.

There was a squishy knock at the door.

Phyllis B shuffled over and peered through the peephole. Two thousand familiar, identical figures stared up at her eyelessly. She opened the door.

The parts of her knitted army that hadn't fulfilled their purpose stood outside.

Phyllis B crowed. “You have come home! Russia has fallen, I see!” She turned to a body of soldiers who were soggy and salty-smelling. “And here is my American regiment! A fine job you did! Soon our purpose will be realized!”

She raised her knitting needles ceremoniously above her head and tapped them together. The soldiers unraveled in a flurry of yarn, which dissolved upon falling, like snow in warm weather.

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The house scratched a foot in the dirt uncomfortably. It was not used to the rapid evacuation of so many spirits at once. But it supposed that as long as it had room to run and its interior was clean under Phyllis B's touch, everything was fine.

Phyllis B closed the door and dusted her hands, settling into the enormous easy chair in the corner. The shrunken head muttered and warbled next to her. She scratched under its chin and thought of how lonely she had been in her apartment, not even able to enjoy the company of a good book on account of that dastardly sun, although it wasn't the sun's fault, not really. She and the sun would have gotten along very well if her apartment wasn't so unfortunate.

Phyllis B really couldn't wait for her plan to come to fruit.

She cracked the keys in the air, and they headed for Asia, where China, the last insubordinate country, still stood in that stalwart way it had. The house bounded along eagerly, with no knowledge of human geopolitics and not a care in the world.

Sometimes, though, it dreamed of flying.

Ms. Yaga sailed through the dark, howling realms of the underworld in a marble mortar, rowing with the pestle. Roars and screams echoed through the sulfurous mist. Unearthly shadows scuttled below her and on the tortuous walls beside her, clawing at the air and at each other. Ms. Yaga whistled a cheery tune to herself.

Suddenly, there was a profound shift in the air, and all fell silent. Ms. Yaga pulled up short, looking around. She used her pestle as telescope, and laughed.

It was as she suspected – spirits coming and leaving faster than a blizzard! She knew exactly what was up. She would have to visit the spirit of her great-great-great grandmother. They would have tea together – her great-great-great grandmother made a mean belladonna tea – and guffaw over all that was happening back on Earth.

Ms. Yaga pulled the top off of her pestle and pulled out the pen and slip of paper inside. Hastily, she scribbled a note. Then she pointed two fingers at it, and, when it caught fire, she blew the ashes away.

Chuckling to herself, she set out again.

On a wide green mountainside overlooking a snaky river, the chicken house waited. It knew something big was about to happen, with it at the center. Remembering its heritage with the great raptor-yurts of the Triassic, it proudly stamped its feet and screeched.

China's army clogged the plain and river below like ants on a graham cracker. They had realized by now that shooting and running over the yarn soldiers was utterly futile. Instead, they had bombs and flamethrowers. They bristled with them.

Phyllis B crouched behind the door, staring at the flamethrowers, twitchy with excitement and consternation. The gem was warm in the pocket of her old-lady shawl. What would she knit?

The house screeched again, and she remembered the childhood dream of every girl destined for world domination. Raising the needles and cackling for dramatic flair, she prepared to realize that dream.

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Phyllis B knitted a dinosaur.

The army, as one, took a huge step back as a tyrannosaur's head banged the cottage door open. The rest of the body lunged out after, growing as it was knit, until the entire furry reptile was thundering down the mountain. Another followed.

Hordes of the monsters poured out of the house and walked all over the army, who had not brought tanks, thinking that flamethrowers could do it and being tired of giving the knitted people more thinks to break. The dinosaurs stamped and rampaged and subsumed the humans. Said humans scuttled and fired off jets of flame.

They waged insane, inane, avocadoish-periwinkleish war.

The knitted dinosaurs won.

An eerie silence settled over the abandoned valley. The chicken house and its sole occupant stood completely still. Then Phyllis B cackled. Her plan had worked.

"Now for the final step," she whispered to herself, and waved a needle in the air.

All across the world, in warehouses and caves and abandoned malls and railyards, knitted heads raised. They were the ones who had fallen upon the humans and gotten up bigger. Now they woke, and now certain very important ones stood up, and they teleported.

The plain was no longer silent. Five hundred knitted figures crowded it, summoned to their master's side. They stared up at triumphant Phyllis B. Their heads opened like oranges.

Inside them were the important people of the world, alive and sputtering and raising a terrible uproar. The chicken house screeched, and they fell quiet.

Phyllis B took a long look at her handiwork.

Then she stated her terms and conditions, and completed her plan.

Phyllis B sat comfortably in her new apartment, with its clean wallpaper and warm bed and, most importantly, sunshine falling at reasonable angles. This was the final result of her devious plan. The people of the world, including the mailmen, had long been released by their yarn captors, but some letters have no need for mailmen.

A breeze carried a puff of ash in through the open window. The ash settled on the table and reconstituted itself upon Phyllis B's table. It was a slip of paper.

Phyllis B got up and read it.

*Dear Phyllis,*

*Remember how your side of the family always used to complain about your inheritance from our great-great-great-grandmother, because my side got the house and the mortar-and-pestle set?*

*Are you complaining now?*

Phyllis B smiled knowingly. She pulled a wad of money from a drawer and burned it in a saucer. She let the wind carry the ashes away.

Her rent had been payed.

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As the evening light turned honey-colored, Phyllis B whipped up a cup of tea for herself – she made a mean earl grey tea. Her new scarf, which she had knit herself, purred amicably.

Phyllis B settled down to read.