

AUNTIE ILJA CRANEFLY, WISP HAG

Background:

Ilja wasn't always a Dame of the Murk.

Her life began in the marshy province of Vyndlvelm where she was born DANIKA GRAŠOVEC, third child of seven to fungal farmer parents, SVETO and MARJANA. Only four of Danika's siblings survived due to perpetual malnutrition, floods, and disease. Life was harsh for the Grašovecs, but Danika hardly noticed. Aside from being scolded for sneaking home an assortment of toads, warblers, and lantern leeches as pets, her parents paid her little mind, thinking her touched with "a head full of mud." No one noticed when Danika began to talk to the beasts as if they were other children at play - or when the beasts talked back.

The Reaper Cranefly is a notorious parasite that plagues Vyndlvelm, known to carry a lethal illness known as "Scythepox." One fateful day, a bereaved cranefly came to Danika seeking her sympathy. She invited the misunderstood insects to find shelter in her room, where they could safely lay eggs and pupate. When her parents found out, however, they were terrified. The Grašovecs stripped Danika of her possessions and destroyed them in a bonfire to eradicate the dangerous infestation. With the fire flashing in her eyes and the screaming of the craneflies in her ears, Danika could not forgive her family's crimes.

Blind with petulant rage, she conspired with the craneflies, slipping their larva into her father's mead and her sister's stockings. It wasn't long before Scythepox ravaged the household, reducing them to a shivering mess of invalids - all except Danika. By the time her family realized she was the culprit, it was too late. The Grašovecs were dead, killed by Danika herself.

But she was not alone...

Following Danika's murder of her family, a strange old crone began to visit the girl, calling her "my little cranefly" and bearing gifts of food and drink. NANA ANISE was her name, and beasts were drawn to the elderly woman, so Danika implicitly trusted her. They became close, and soon Nana Anise introduced the child to her companions, an assortment of eccentric women with staggering powers who had endured traumas similar to poor Danika's. The hags called themselves the DAMES OF THE MURK, and they offered Danika a new life in their coven.

She grew up under the care and tutelage of the Dames, enraptured by their mysterious gifts and unbreakable bond. Danika aided them in their rituals and helped conspire against the people of Vyndlvelm, all of whom deserved their fate, according to the hags. Sometimes, the victim had committed an infraction against the land, others had supposedly incurred the ire of unmentionable spirits. Because the Dames were her elders and mentors, Danika never dared speak out against their evil acts, even when she privately questioned them. The young woman reached maturity and was inducted into the coven, molting out of her former self and abandoning her humanity to become more akin to the beast with which she shared the deepest affinity. Gone was Danika Grašovec - she was reborn as Auntie Ilja Crane-fly, Dame of the Murk.

Ilja was an enthusiastic participant in her coven, wielding influence over the Reaper Crane-fly to spread Scythepox where the Dames required it. She eagerly committed atrocities in devotion to her sisters. Yet something nagged at her. Wisps appeared to Ilja in the marsh and were drawn to her, but Nana Anise drove them away, forcing her prodigy to don talismans that warded the meddling spirits off. The decades wore on, and the unnaturally old Nana Anise became feeble. Because all things of the marsh must die, Nana was soon on her death bed, and with her final breath, she bade Ilja to remove her talismans and seek the wisps.

Auntie Ilja obeyed and made contact with the beings. The truth was laid brutally bare - these wisps were the restless spirits of Danika's murdered family, her parents and siblings, beings of love and sorrow and bitterness. Joining them, was the spirit of Nana Anise, who had a terrible confession to make: long ago, she had taken the form of an innocent crane-fly to visit Ilja as a child, manipulating the girl to commit a vile blood sacrifice and kill her own family in order to become a hag and join the coven.

Everything Ilja had done, everything she had become - all lies. She fled the Dames of the Murk to wander Vyndlvelm, where she vowed to devote her remaining years to atoning for her sins.

Now Ilja is an outcast from her coven, an itinerant Wisp Hag who seeks out people in need to aid with her magics, either directly or indirectly. Though the spirits grant her abilities in this admirable pursuit, they also torment her with guilt and shame and have driven poor Ilja mad. The vagrant crone, Auntie Ilya Crane-fly, is a wretched thing of wisdom and chaos, of sorrow and cunning, as compassionate as she is unpredictable. But to a savvy wanderer in the marsh, Ilja could make an invaluable ally indeed...

Appearance:

Impossibly gaunt, Ilja isn't recognizable as humanoid at first glance, more like a jumble of rags, sticks, and rot. Her gangly arms, pocked with sparse insect hairs, stretch to the ground and aid her crooked legs as she walks. Her hunchbacked torso hooks down to a wasp-like waist that terminates in a pair of tattered vestigial wings that poke out from beneath the pile of moth-eaten shawls she wears. Her hair, limp and wet as swamp moss, dangles over her sallow face, and a hideous proboscis of a nose juts out from the tangles. Deep beneath her filthy trusses, dimly luminous eyes stare out, bulging yellowed lamps, piercingly insightful yet somehow simultaneously deranged. And all the while, the eerie ghost-lights of marsh wisps hover about Ilja, a whispering halo that both haunts and empowers the forsaken hag.

Animation/Locomotion:

Ilja has the erratic, scuttling gait of a bug, sometimes tentative and ponderous like a stick insect, other times unnaturally fast like a arachnid. Her flimsy wings are quite expressive, spreading and fluttering to emphasize her words. The hair-like protrusions on her skin also twitch and react to her emotional state. The luminous wisp spirits that surround Ilja reflect her mood as well, slow and glowing with a soothing light when she is calm or flickering and glaring when she is agitated. Her hair and shabby veils flow subtly as if underwater, giving a slightly motion-sick feeling to those who watch her closely.

Personality:

With a perpetual grin splitting Ilja's sunken face, it can be hard to know when she is joyous or sorrowful or filled with rage, heightening the tension of engaging with the unstable hag. She is ultimately altruistic, seeking redemption for her dark past, but one would never know by her demeanor, which can feel downright predatory. Ilja carries on multiple conversations simultaneously, speaking to the person in front of her, as well as the spirits around her, and the thoughts swarming in her own head at the same time. It is not unheard of for Ilja to break down in tears, erupt into laughter, or run away screaming without warning. However, Ilja's madness is tempered by her morality, which has blossomed out of the trauma she has both endured and inflicted, inspiring her to be of service to humanity. The cost of acquiring the otherworldly aid of this unnerving crone is being forced to engage her with the utmost caution.

Voice Qualities/Direction:

The timbre of Ilja's voice reflects the marsh from which she came: throaty like an old toad, sometimes buzzing and wheezy like biting midges, other times as gurgling and foul as bog gas. She is elderly, so her voice should reflect that and feel rich with experience. A seasoned VO actor in their mid-fifties or older would be appropriate, but no young performers "playing grandma." Ilja can be lyrical and sweet when her tender side is at play or when the wisps speak sweet nothings to her, yet she can grow tempestuous and wrathful without cause, and the vile, hex-spewing hag can come creeping back in. Ilja is an unpredictable creature, so her voice should reflect that, and an actor playing her should be encouraged to improvise with the direction that they are always struggling to keep the evil within them at bay.

Actor Comps:

Touchstones for Auntie Ilja are of two classifications. For her matronly and nurturing side, Frances Conroy (*Six Feet Under*, *American Horror Story*) is a perfect fit with her sensitive, thoughtful performances that seem to carry (and bury) so much pain. For Ilja's more feverish aspects, Brother Theodore's portrayal of "Gollum" in the animated *Hobbit* from 1977 is a powerful inspiration. The perfect actor for this role would have a range capable of reaching these bizarre and intense extremes.

