

THE WIND CHILD

To my parents.



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Gabriela Houston

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Illustrated by Alexis Snell

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CREATURES AND GODS

- **Stribog** – God of Winter Winds, Music and Silver
- **Zevena** – Daughter of Stribog, a minor wind spirit
- **Dogoda** – Brother of Stribog, father of the three Zoryas, God of Summer Winds
- **Zorya Yutrenna-ya** – Daughter of Dogoda, Goddess of the Morning
- **Zorya Vecherna-ya** – Daughter of Dogoda, Goddess of the Evening
- **Zorya Necna-ya** – Daughter of Dogoda, Goddess of the Night
- **Sudiki** – The three sisters in the Veeray Tree, Goddesses of Fate and the guardians of the Root Souls
- **Veles** – The trickster God of Navia, the afterlife, and the God of the Sea
- **Vila** – The Goddess of Lightning
- **Upior** – a demonic ghost
- **Stigoi** – a demon with two hearts, preying on travellers
- **Gamayun** – A half bird/half woman
- **Kania** – a female demon who kidnaps lost children
- **Viaterce** – Wind demons
- **Vodyanoi** – Water spirits
- **Rusalki** – Female water demons, who drown men foolish enough to approach in to the water

- **Dusiol** – A malicious demon which saps the life and health from its victims
- **Heidash** – A minor demon with the head and legs of a ram
- **Viatroduya** – One of Stribog's many children. A malicious wind sprite
- **Borovy and Borova** – The Guardians of the Forests
- **Baba Latingorka** – A powerful shape-shifting witch guarding the Alatnir
- **Lubac the Serpent** – A monster snake
- **Koschei the Deathless** – An immortal creature who hides its soul within the stone Alatnir

CHAPTER 1



"THERE ONCE was a girl and the girl was me."

Mara sat down among her mother's fine pillows and said the familiar words, as she had done for the last three of her eleven years. They were from a story her father told her long ago, a fairytale she no longer remembered. But the words remained.

There was comfort in them. Like a pretty frame with an ugly picture inside, they made her into something more than she was. More than a disappointment to her mother.

She stared out of the arched window. There was always snow on Stribog's mountain but down below, where the trees changed colour with the seasons and the rivers thawed in the summer, lay a different world, a more forgiving one perhaps.

The towns and the villages of Prissan were just about visible over the horizon, the colour of them drained over the distance, so they all seemed grey and blue to Mara's eyes.

Mara looked at her mother, bustling about in her shimmering beauty. Zevena's skin was light blue, like a frosted-over forget-me-not, and so bright it hurt if you looked at it for too long.

But Mara's skin was the unremarkable white of skin bereft of the sun; of uncooked dough; of her human father's tired eyes, lined with small pink veins. Her eyes were light brown, like his, and her hair was a mousy brown, its two plaits falling down her back.

If Mara waited long enough, every now and again Zevena would stop what she was doing and would pet her daughter's head in an absent-minded way.

Like you'd pet a half-feral cat.

It was as if her mother was saying, "Such a surprise to see you here. I don't expect you to stay." Mara could see the confusion in her mother's eyes every time they chanced to pause on her daughter's face, yet she stayed, not knowing what else to do with herself, aside from sitting in this room by her dozing father.

How different it was when Yaris, Mara's father, her beloved da, was well. He'd take her hunting with him, nearly every time he went, and he used to go nearly every day. He'd go to escape the boredom of Mara's grandfather's icy palace,

or perhaps to escape Zevena; Mara wasn't sure. Perhaps it was just that he liked to feel the cold air pinch his cheeks once more, to remind him he was alive.

All Mara knew was she loved those times, sitting in front of him on his ageing black pony, so different from her mother's almost unnaturally well-behaved silver palfrey. He brought his pony with him when he came to live with her mother, and loved that animal, for the same reason Zevena would wrinkle her nose at it. It was small and fat and ungainly, and solid in a way no other creature in Stribog's palace was. When Mara rode on it with her father she would lean forward and inhale its earthy smell, letting her small ungloved hands run over its silky neck, moist with perspiration.

"Look, *Marushka*!" her father would sometimes say, and he'd point to a track in the snow or to a shape moving between the trees. He'd always hold Mara with one hand, though they both knew she could hold onto the saddle well enough.

But that was before. Before he began spending each day in the fur-covered bed, colour draining from his face. At first Mara searched for the cut, for the place where all her da's colour and his blood must have been draining away, leaving him almost as pale as the covers he lay on. She could see his pain when he tried to smile for her sake. They both knew she needed those smiles. They were the only ones Mara got in the House of the Winds.

Now she smiled at him from the edge of the bed where she sat. His eyelids fluttered and he stroked her shoulder, then let his hand fall away as if the effort exhausted him. Mara reached out and squeezed his hand. Soon he'd get better and they'd go out on an adventure again. Ride out till they reached the green grass and the leafy trees with their ripe nuts and pinecones filled with sweet little seeds.

Mara's grandfather blew into the room through the shutterless window, startling her.

"Good day, grandfather," Mara said, as was expected. Stribog didn't deign to respond as he assumed his human form. He hardly ever did, though Mara knew he'd be angry if she forgot those little pleasantries herself.

"Father," Zevena curtsied. Mara had tried to imitate the movement before, in front of a large mirror, and found it impossibly ridiculous. She had looked like a metal spring bobbing up and down. Her mother made it elegant.

"It is kind of you to join us," Zevena said. Mara arched an eyebrow. She severely doubted it. Stribog, like all his wind kin, was seldom considerate and never kind.

Yaris turned in his bed to face Stribog but said nothing. Their relationship was strained at the best of times.

Stribog's features flowed and shifted till their form pleased him. He pointed at Mara. "I have come to a decision." Mara pricked up her ears. "The three of you will travel to Yaris' human kin. It's only right Mara's human grandmother

have Yaris in his final days, and for Mara to grow among them till she no longer needs her mother."

Mara looked at him confused.

"Last days of what?" she asked. Could Stribog really mean it? Would she be allowed to leave his palace at last? A shiver of excitement ran down her spine. Once with his family, her da would recover and they would explore that new world together. The world which changed with the seasons and where she wasn't the most powerless of all she met. She beamed at her da, who didn't seem as excited as she'd hoped.

Her grandfather's long beard twisted into frost patterns as he pursed his lips, then blew a stronger breeze through her hair in an icy caress. Mara suspected he thought it was something grandfathers did but she wished he wouldn't. It felt like being plunged into icy water. Mara wondered briefly what it'd have been like to be the granddaughter of Stribog's younger brother, Dogoda, the God of Summer Winds. Would the warmth in that home extend beyond the weather, or would her great-uncle's island be as lonely as Stribog's icy palace? Zevena's voice brought Mara back.

"But I can't leave here . . ." Zevena stood up. "My place is with you, father."

"Your place is by the daughter you chose to bear. And her place is not here." The human features Stribog wore that day faded in and out of view with every breath, but his piercing

blue eyes remained, their glare suspended in the air, fixed on Zevena. Mara's grandfather kept his eyes on his daughter and never once looked at Yaris. Mara thought it was because he found him difficult and was glad of an excuse to be rid of him. She didn't mind what Stribog said of her. She was born in his palace, but she didn't belong in it, as she was often reminded. Her lack of powers and her lack of beauty. Her lack of wit and, most disappointingly, her lack of magic. Mara was defined by the lack of all the things she should have been. And her mother was shamed by it.

"She won't need me when she's with her folk." Zevena was persistent. Yaris shot her a reproachful look which she ignored.

Stribog turned to Mara. He said nothing and she realised what he wanted her to say.

"I still need her," she said. Her da smiled at her and nodded, even as her mother balled her hands into fists.

"And so you shall have her," her grandfather said before leaving.



"You did well to claim your ma," her da said that night, as she snuggled next to him in her parents' large bed. "Zevena is your mother and you need each other, though she doesn't understand it. But I believe she loved me once and if she

could love you, perhaps that would be something to keep your roots to the ground, little *zabka*."

She nodded like she understood.

"You are my roots, da," she said.

Her father smiled and brushed a strand of hair off Mara's forehead. His hand was thin and the skin on it near-translucent. She would know this hand to be his though, no matter how thin and sickly it got. She knew the hair on his fingers and the freckle on his knuckle and the shape of his long oval nails. She had little to love in her grandfather's palace: a little tune played before meals in the great hall; the robin which fluttered to her window every morning for the crumbs she'd lay out; her soft feather bed with the curtains around it to make her feel safe. Above all the wonders in Stribog's palace, Mara loved her father best of all.



The road to Mara's grandmother's house was long, but comfortable. Yaris insisted on bringing his old pony with them, and every now and again Mara would reach out from the side of the *voz* to stroke the animal's warm side. It was old and tired, too tired for the journey, in truth, but it clung to life. Mara thought maybe her da felt sympathy for his old mount: sick, just as he was. Tired just as he was . . . *No.* Mara shook her head. She would banish those thoughts.

Stribog had sent them on their way with an entourage worthy of his glory. Their journey through the snow was lit up by hundreds of ice moths, their luminescent wings filling the forest with a soft hum, warning the *upiors* and the *strigas* that the family of the God of Winter Winds was coming, and they would do well to stay out of sight.

Viatroduya, one of Stribog's many wind spirit children, was charged with checking the road ahead, and every now and again Mara could hear his annoyed whistling, as he clearly thought such a charge beneath him. He'd not dared disobey Stribog though. None of them would.

Mara and her da were set up comfortably on one of the three large horse-drawn *vozy*. The *vozy* were beautiful but moved slowly, so as not to jiggle them around, and Mara wished for a whip she could crack in the air to make the sharp-toothed horses pulling them pick up the pace. At least she and Yaris were warm, snuggled under the thick furs. Her mother, of course, needed no such comforts. Zevena sat rigid and still in her gauzy gown, a high *kokoshnik* of silver and sapphires spilling its treasures on her forehead and around her face, the long beaded strands of sparkling jewels trailing down her bare neck.

Zevena looked regal and beautiful, just as she'd intended. She was staring straight ahead, a blank look on her face. Mara knew it hurt her mother to leave Stribog's domain, though she tried not to show it. Mara's grandfather travelled

where he willed, but not so his daughters. His icy offspring seldom ventured outside of the palace compound. Of course her mother had done so once, years ago, and brought Yaris back with her, like a souvenir, a trophy from an adventure.

Mara was an unexpected, unwelcome surprise. Years ago, Zevena had told her daughter she suspected Stribog had breathed vitality into her frozen womb, so that she'd be punished for her dalliance with Yaris. It didn't bother Mara too much that Zevena considered her a punishment, because she knew, to her father, she was a gift.

Branches domed over the path, obscuring the sky. Only now and again did Mara catch sight of a sliver of the moon's crescent. She counted the number of times she spotted it, leaning against her father's warm shoulder: *One. Two. Three…*



The horses whinnied as the procession stopped abruptly, with the drivers pulling hard of the reigns. Mara nearly fell from her seat.

"What's the matter?" Yaris called out.

Zevena stood up, and clicked her fingers, blue flame rising high above her hand, lighting the shadow perched on the branch above them.

"Gamayun," she said, her voice devoid of emotion.

"Zevena." The creature sitting above them replied. Mara

squinted. Gamayun's face and torso were that of a woman, though much larger than that of any human woman Mara had ever seen. The rest of the body was that of an eagle, with clawed feet leaving sap-wet tracks on the branch where they tore through the bark like butter.

Mara pressed against her father. But then she looked at Zevena, sitting up tall and fearless, and was instantly ashamed of her own childish fear. She straightened up and forced herself to look up at Gamayun. The bird woman locked eyes with her and smiled. Her bare arms, muscled like a man's, were folded nonchalantly over her chest. She had a handsome face, with an owlish look around the eyes, perhaps. Mara found herself smiling. There was something akin to recognition in Gamayun's expression.

Zevena noticed and frowned.

"What do you want, Gamayun? We still have far to go, and my daughter and her father are human and susceptible to the night's dangers."

Gamayun moved her taloned feet along the branch. "Koschei the Deathless is in your path. Find a different way."

Zevena stiffened slightly. "We have no business with Koschei. No quarrel with him either."

"Your child is quarrel enough," Gamayun said, looking at Mara. *Gauging my reaction*, Mara thought – so she showed none.

"Koschei dislikes half things, and though he might not go

out of his way to break what's out of his sight, like a cat with a vase within its reach, he can't resist giving a slight *push*."

Zevena looked at Mara and bit her lip. "Stribog wouldn't allow it."

Gamayun laughed. "Stribog banished you to live with the humans. There's hardly a living thing up and down the Veeray tree who hasn't heard and laughed at Zevena the Proud's exile. Stribog wouldn't raise a finger. And Koschei has his own history with you, the least of Stribog's children, doesn't he?"

"What does she mean?" Yaris, who had hitherto been silent, asked.

Zevena didn't bother turning towards him. "An old tale from before your grandfather grew a beard, Yaris." To Gamayun she said, "Why did you bother coming to warn me? What do you care what happens to me and mine?"

Gamayun spread her wings. "Half things are Koschei's to loathe and mine to protect. And I like you owing me."

"Your Masters have sent you, haven't they?" Zevena raised an eyebrow.

Gamayun bristled slightly but nodded an acknowledgement. She jumped off the branch and swooped so close by Mara's *voz,* she brushed against the girl's hair with the tip of her wing. Then she flew away, till she was no more than a shadow against the moon.

Zevena sat down heavily. "Turn the horses," she called

out to the servants. "We will go the long way around."



After that they travelled in silence, each comfortable with their own thoughts.

Mara sat opposite her mother, snuggled next to Yaris. She could hear his raspy breathing and put her small hands over his. He smiled at her and she thought, for certain, the family that had brought him up must be so filled with love, its force alone would cure him.

She had never met her human grandmother. When Mara was still small, her mother wished her ever close to the palace, expecting that some of its magic would rub off on her. No excursions beyond the lands of Stribog were allowed, though Yaris often bent the rules in his excursions with Mara. But as Mara's hair and then her eyes turned brown, Zevena had lost all hope her daughter might display any gifts of her divine side of the family.

It took them all the next day and the better part of the night to reach her grandmother's gates. It was still dark when they arrived, and there were few sounds, as even the most early-rising farm animals were still sound asleep. Yaris' mother lived with his brother and his family in a big homestead on the edge of the village. They were wealthy by village standards, with pigs, geese, chickens and a cow or

two to help fend off starvation even in the deepest winters, which was saying a lot.

One of Stribog's servants jumped off the first *voz* and pushed the creaky gate open. A dog barked in the house and after a moment a light appeared in the window. Zevena frowned at Mara, who, heedless of the servant's outstretched hand, jumped off the *voz* herself. Mara didn't care. She was eager to see her first chicken!

The door opened and a bearded face looked out. The man squinted through the dark. "Who goes there?" he called out, fear in his voice.

"It's me, Gnievos," Yaris said, in a voice so low, his brother clearly didn't hear him.

"Show yourself!" the man called out again.

Mara's da, with the help of two servants, got off the *voz*, and hobbled, half-carried, towards the light.

Gnievos' eyes narrowed for a moment in a short-sighted sort of way as he struggled to see.

The change was sudden and dramatic. Blood drained from his face and his hands fell by his side.

"Who is it, Gnievos? Why are you standing there like a calf staring at a painted gate? No thought in your head, just—" An old woman pushed her way past Gnievos and, leaning on a stick, hobbled across the porch. She shoved the candle she was holding into her son's hand and looked straight at Mara's party, letting her eyes adjust to the dark.

"*Mamusha*, it's me . . ." Yaris' voice broke.

Mara felt a ball rise up in her own throat. She imagined being reunited with her own da after such a long absence and thought she could understand how he felt. She felt a surge of as-yet-unearned love for her grandmother, for the woman who could make her father's voice break.

". . . Yaris?" Her grandmother walked another step. "Yaris! My boy!" She moved with a speed which belied her age and was met halfway by her son, who seemed to have reserved some strength just for this reunion. They wrapped their arms around each other and both sank to their knees, crying and laughing.

This surprised Mara. She'd never seen an adult cry before. She didn't know they could.

Her uncle, Gnievos, found his voice now and called out to the rest of the family in the house. They poured out of the door, a seemingly endless procession of brown-eyed faces. Gnievos ran towards Mara's father and his mother and held them tight.

Through it all Mara stood apart, next to Zevena, who remained unnoticed, in spite of her splendor. The servants were already unloading the *vozy*, the many possessions grabbing the attention of several children who wriggled out of their mother's arms to investigate the silver-lined coffers and touch the soft folded furs with their small hands. One of Stribog's servants smiled at the child closest to him, who

squealed and ran to his mother. The servant shrugged his shoulders. A *latavietz*'s rows of teeth were as everyday to Mara as her breakfast bowl, but it began to dawn on her that her normal was less than ordinary to these children, barefoot one and all, heedless of the snow on the ground.

Mara longed to approach them and introduce herself but her mother lay a hand on her shoulder. Zevena straightened herself further, which Mara wouldn't have thought possible a moment before, and said in a voice which carried straight to the mind of those around, "I am Zevena Stribogovna, the daughter of the God of Winter Winds, and the mother of your son's child."

Yaris' family all snapped their heads towards Zevena, who pushed Mara gently forward, like some kind of offering. Mara watched the surprise in their eyes. She didn't blame them. It seemed impossible that this blue-skinned goddess could claim her as her own.

Yaris nodded towards his daughter, not letting go of his mother's shoulders. "*Mamusha*," he said, breathless, and Mara's mouth gaped open at the tear-tracks down his cheeks. "This is my little girl, Mara Gontovna, my dearest *Marushka*. I know you will care for her as I do, for you will not find a child easier to love."

Yaris' mother looked at her son's feverish, eager face, and then turned to Mara. She was the oldest human Mara had ever seen, with deep grooves running across her paper-

thin skin. Her face was round and her eyebrows were perfect crescents above her thoughtful brown eyes, giving her a slightly surprised look. Sorona Gontova reluctantly let go of her son and hobbled over to Mara. She grunted with effort as she bent down to bring her face in front of her granddaughter's, before placing her hands on Mara's cheeks and kissing her on the lips. "*Marushka*, I'm so happy to meet you, child. You look just like your father." A thought struck Sorona and she turned a fearful expression towards Mara's mother. "No offence meant, Zevena Stribogovna, but this child does not bear the gods' mark to an old woman's eye."

Zevena gave a stiff little bow with her head, acknowledging the old woman's words.

Sorona looked back at Yaris, her hand brushing away an errant curl off her son's forehead. "Are you all back here for good? Is my family complete again?"

Yaris tried to smile. "Such as it is, mother, for as long as it is."