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Opening extract from

Riding Icarus

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For Alice, of course

I owe a debt to Max, for village nightmares;
Gareth, who was there for Icarus's first outing;
and the folk tales of Nikolai Gogol,
where I first found the enchanted place.



Chapter 1

Birds whistled. Those were the ones with heads as grey and furry-looking as little mice. There was an endless shushing noise, as if the Dnieper River had slipped the chains of its banks in the night and lay soughing and sighing on the doorstep. The goats in their pen made sleepy bleating sounds. Faintly from the car park above came the banging and scraping of garage doors, the rattle of engines, and the soft squishing of tyres in the sand. The trolleybus wires sang their thin, twanging song.

That was what Masha woke up to every morning. She liked to lie listening before she opened her eyes; she had a running bet with herself to see if she could predict the weather from what it sounded like.

"Sunny but hazy," she said. "Cotton wool sky."

"Get yourself out of bed; the kasha's burning. You and your cotton wool," said Granny, who had no intention of rewarding even correct weather predictions. Granny knew such things as instinctively as cows, or crows.

Masha sighed and opened her eyes. Kasha was buckwheat boiled with butter. Filling and cheap, but boring. Next to it on the table, though, Granny had laid out the remains of Masha's birthday cake. Feeling her stomach rumble, she hopped out of bed.

It was too hazy to be sunny. Less cotton wool than curdled milk. Thunderstorm weather. How do you work out differences like that from sounds? Masha pondered as she slipped out of the open door, which was covered with a curtain against mosquitoes, and into the morning air. Why do the trolleybus wires sing even when there's no wind? she wondered in the privacy of the outside loo.

She returned to her home: Icarus the trolleybus.

Lots of the buses that drove around Ukraine had the name ICARUS written on their fronts, but there was only one trolleybus called Icarus. And only this one trolleybus was home to a little girl called Masha and her very old grandmother.

Icarus had not gone anywhere for a long time. He was parked among meadows and allotments on the very edge of Kiev, by the Dnieper River. With no overhead electric wires to fix onto, the two long springy rods attached to the roof waved in the air like antennae, forever searching for a new source of power on which to drive away. There were no seats inside any more, and in their place were two cosy beds, two chairs and a table, and a little cooker which ran off a gas cylinder. A bookcase was tucked between two windows, and a broom handle strung from the ceiling made a rack for the two occupants to hang up their few clothes. The floor was covered with a strip of red carpet, and embroidered Ukrainian

cloths were draped across the windows. This mid-summer morning he was a cheerful, bright home with the birdsong pouring in through the open windows and the wires softly keening, a sound both sad and comforting.

Masha eyed her pile of birthday presents from yesterday as she ate her breakfast. It was a very small pile. Nothing at all from her mother, even now she was ten, into double figures: a one as skinny as she was, a fat zero for a peephole onto the world. "A good round number," Granny had said approvingly, as if it were an achievement to reach ten.

Masha didn't want to think about her mother's missing present. She reached over and pulled a big glossy book out of the pile. It was an encyclopaedia of animals. Uncle Igor had given it to her, but she was sure it was not really from Igor at all but from his wife, Anya. She knew this because she actually liked it – in contrast to Uncle Igor's second present, a hideous pink frilly dress his daughter Anastasia had worn once or twice and then got tired of, or grown out of.

"Planning your travels?" Granny said as Masha opened the book to look through Galapagos, where you could ride on giant turtles; the African jungle, full of sleek patterned snakes dripping from the trees. Then she got to Siberian tigers, and Granny sighed and turned away.

Looking at the picture made Masha ache faintly inside. But it was not a new ache; it was already four years old. Her father had grown up beyond Siberia in Kamchatka, thousands of kilometres away to the east, where the tigers live. He said everything there was twice as big as anywhere else. Plants like daisies and

dandelions grew so fast, a little sprout would be towering over your head by next morning. Imagine a dandelion as big as a house! Maybe you could use the seeds as parachutes. She'd never asked Papa about that. Perhaps, now, she never would.

Masha shut the book. She suddenly remembered the dream she'd had last night, when it seemed she had followed a great striped burning tiger through sizzling jungle. No, it hadn't been jungle. It had been a night of hot dim velvet under the trees beside the river. She'd been wearing the frilly dress from Uncle Igor, and trying to swim in the Dnieper in it. Her mother – or maybe it was her father – was waiting on the island, waving a white T-shirt like a flag. But the stupid dress clung tightly to her legs, and when she looked down she saw that the frills had turned into green snakes with cartoon smiles and long lolling tongues. They weren't really scary, but she couldn't swim with them tangled round her knees. The current was pulling her under. She struggled, trying to shout for help, and her mouth filled with water. Her mother wasn't there any more; there was just a big black cauldron with smoke oozing out of it under the oak trees on the island.

Masha felt slightly aggrieved that she'd woken up at this point. Maybe something really exciting had been about to come out of the cauldron. She considered telling Granny about the dream. Granny would probably know what happened next – if she hadn't put the dream into Masha's head in the first place. You never knew with Granny.

There wasn't time to mention it because her best friend, Gena, appeared at the door with his new

rollerblades. They went off to the car park by the market to try them out.

Gena lived in Masha's old home, a flat on the seventh floor of a concrete tower block, with green lampshades and a piano. He shared it with his mother, Ira, while his father was away working in England. His father paid the rent, and for presents like rollerblades, and even a summer holiday in England.

"He bought me proper football boots as well as the rollerblades," Gena told Masha proudly. "I quite like having a father in England really."

"One in Kamchatka is better," Masha said quickly, and Gena knew not to argue.

Masha's father didn't pay anything, which was why the flat with the lampshades and the piano had been sacrificed. He had gone away again to Kamchatka four years ago, but this time he hadn't come back. Then Mama's friend Igor had appeared. Igor, who told Masha to call him uncle even though he wasn't, and who had found Mama a job abroad where she could earn lots of money. So Mama had gone to Turkey, leaving Masha with Granny. But when the money Mama promised to send didn't come, and didn't come, and didn't come, it was Igor's idea for them to rent out the flat for some income. Now they lived in the trolleybus, waiting for the little house rich Uncle Igor had promised to build them, of which not one brick had appeared so far.

Masha didn't mind. She loved living inside Icarus. Granny fretted about winter, though, and how they would survive there when it was so cold the little mousy-headed birds keeled over on their branches stone dead, frozen justlikethat.

But winter was ages away. It was summer, and the tarmac was sticky with heat under the rollerblade wheels. They went instead to the river to swim.

"You know, people hardly ever swim in English rivers," said Gena as they cooled off in the brown water. "Everyone says they're too dirty. People really worry about things being dirty, over there."

Gena liked talking about England. It sounded a mad place to Masha. Full of castles and cafés, where everyone ate porridge for breakfast in their red brick houses, each with a square of lawn outside guarded by garden gnomes. "But they don't grow anything in their gardens," Gena said. "Except at Alice's. Her family grow their own strawberries."

Alice was Gena's new friend in England. Masha felt a bit jealous of her. Alice had a piano too, and a creature called a guinea pig that Gena said ate chocolate for breakfast. Her father worked with Gena's, and so Alice even had her very own Cossack outfit to dress up in. Masha felt that was a bit much. Here *she* was living in Ukraine, where those distant romantic figures called Cossacks came from, and she didn't have an outfit to wear. Still, she comforted herself that she was better at Cossack dancing than Alice, because Gena, who went to classes, had been teaching her since Christmas.

"We had so many strawberries this year I got sick and tired of eating them," she said now. "In fact, we fed them to the goats. Even the goats got sick of them."

"I bet your granny put a spell on them to make them grow," Gena said. "I bet she mushed up frogs and snails and dog poo and bats' blood and put it on

the plants. Eugh!" he shouted, dancing out of Masha's reach. "Masha's been eating dog poo on her strawberries; no wonder the goats got sick."

Masha kicked out, flattening him under a large wave. They splashed and yelled at each other until a fisherman told them off.

Masha's grandmother was a witch – everyone knew that. Most people, not just Masha, called her Babka, or Granny, Praskovia, and when she had lived in the village people had come from all over to seek her advice. She had moved to Kiev to look after Masha, and now her bunches of herbs hung from Icarus's ceiling, and bundles of soft, dark beeswax candles sat on a shelf next to the icons of Mary and the saints. People still came to see her, sometimes.

Masha could remember having terrible nightmares when she was much younger, about snakes. Worried, her mother had taken her on the long dusty trip to Granny's house in the village. She remembered Granny filling a bowl with gleaming water and pouring wax from a burning candle into it. The wax had bubbled slowly into ballooning shapes that were magically hard and cold when they came out of the water.

Granny had taken out one of the boards that made up the bed next to the stove. She'd told Masha to crawl through the gap seven times. Masha thought with awe about how small she must have been then to fit through the space. She'd slept on that bed for three nights afterwards, and not had a single nightmare. Dream snakes were never scary any more.

She told Gena about last night's snaky dream as they lay on the grass to dry off. The air was so hot and heavy it felt like a blanket over their faces.

"They don't have snakes in England either," Gena said. "They have these things called slow-worms."

"So what?" said Masha. "All worms are slow."

When she came home she was exhausted. They had skated some more, they'd played at being Cossacks fighting the Turks, and practised some dancing. The haze had thickened into dense clouds, but it had got hotter and hotter. Now thunder was growling somewhere in the distance, like a gigantic grumpy tiger complaining all the way away in Kamchatka.

Granny was sharp and fretful. She hustled the goats into their pen, swept the trolleybus floor and tied a couple of curious knots in the corners of the curtains.

"What are those for?" Masha asked. She got no answer, which showed that Granny really was unsettled. "It's only a thunderstorm."

"There's no such thing as only a thunderstorm."

When she thought about it, Masha agreed. Thunderstorms were too huge and amazing to take for granted. They raced across the flat fields of Ukraine every summer like the invading hordes of Mongol Tatars, shining and rumbling and terrible in strength.

Masha settled down on her bed to read the animal encyclopaedia. Outside the windows, the hollyhocks fluttered petals like bright rags and the willow trees tossed and heaved, flashing the silver undersides of their leaves. On the page the striped orange tiger glowed. *The Siberian tiger is the largest member of the cat family in the world*, Masha read. *Specimens have been found measuring over three and a half metres in length.*

Overhead, the trolleybus wires bounced and quivered. The whole bus swayed lightly. How long am I?

wondered Masha. I mean, how tall. One metre five, ten? She was tall for her age, taller than round, fair Gena. But three and a half metres was unimaginably big. Bigger than Uncle Igor. Bigger even than Papa, she thought, with a sudden memory of sitting high, high up on her father's shoulders, looking down haughtily on her kingdom. A tiger that took up the whole world.

She tried to read further but it was suddenly too dark. It was utterly still and close and silent. She fell into a moment of emptiness that stretched on ... and on...

Crack! went the thunder, right overhead. It was the sound of a vast backbone breaking in half; it made Masha feel sick. The trolleybus wires were thrumming and swinging. Where was the lightning? Where the rain?

"Granny..." she said nervously. As she watched, Babka Praskovia was suddenly illuminated, like an X-ray, and for a moment Masha could have sworn she saw the delicate shadows of her grandmother's bones, and other dim shapes swimming mysteriously in the whiteness. Then it went dark again.

"Granny..." She opened her mouth to say it, but a huge roar came out: it was the thunder; it was the pain of broken bones; it went on for ever. She could see her grandmother shouting at her, but she could hear nothing. Masha shook her head, shouting back, and Granny seized her arm and began pulling her towards the doorway.

Masha pulled the other way. Granny must be mad, taking her outside! She'd be blinded, she'd be deafened, trampled by the huge paws of the storm. They

struggled in the open doorway, yelling at each other and hearing nothing, while the world went once more dazzlingly white.

Then Icarus moved. A sudden, violent lurch forward. Granny tumbled off the step outside, and Masha fell inside. And Icarus, antennae suddenly straining onto an invisible humming wire, drove away into the storm.