



The Republic of Birds

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'I loved this spicy fantasy.' Isobelle Carmody





efore the War in the Skies, before the map of Tsaretsvo was sliced in two and divided into the human Tsardom and the Republic of Birds, birds and humans lived in peace. In Stolitsa, the Cloud Palace floated over the Stone Palace, with cumulus turrets and battlements of nimbus. In the Cloud Palace, lived the Avian Counsel. In the Stone Palace, lived the Tsars and Tsarinas. Both Palaces ruled Tsaretsvo together, and birds and humans lived alongside each other. Birds, large and small, nested in the trees in the Mikhailovsky Gardens and splashed in its fountains in summer. Songbirds sang in the orchestra at the Mariinsky Theatre. Peacocks adorned the city walls.

Birds and humans shared the earth and the sky. And, if it weren't for the Great Mapping, things might have continued in this way. But in 1817, Tsarina Pyotrovna decreed that every corner in the land be mapped to show the broad expanse of her Tsardom.

The Great Cartographers journeyed forth, and, with the exception of the Unmappable Blank, they charted every corner of the land. Krylnikov mapped the Arkhipelag Archipelago. Belugov traced the shores of the Frozen Sea. Karelin found the source of the River Dezhdy, high in the Stikhlo Mountains.

In 1822, Golovnin set out for the Infinite Steppe,

where it was rumoured firebirds still nested amid the tussocks and streaked through the skies. And in 1824, he returned to the Stone Palace, carrying a firebird's egg in his pocket...

Excerpted from *Glorious Victory: An Impartial Account of the War in the Skies* by I. P. Pavlova. Chapter One: The Firebird's Egg.

CHAPTER ONE

Into Exile



THE TRAIN STARTS down the tracks. Through the window, the station slides away. We are leaving Stolitsa—our home—behind us.

We might not be back for a long time.

We might not be back at all.

Father sits beside me. He holds the memo from the Stone Palace in his hand. I skew my neck to read it:

Attn: Aleksei Oblomov,

In recognition of your exemplary service as head architect for the Sky Metro, Tsarina Yekaterina has appointed you Minister for Avian Intelligence, effective immediately. Her Imperial Highness has afforded you

and your family the honour of a military escort to the Imperial Centre for Avian Observation. You are to depart at your earliest possible convenience. I congratulate you, on behalf of the Tsarina, on this promotion.

Ivan Demetevsky

(Imperial Undersecretary)

‘This promotion’, says the memo. But even I know Father isn’t being promoted. It was all over yesterday’s papers. ‘Grand Opening for the Sky Metro Delayed!’ reported the *Stolitsa Zhournal*. ‘Head Architect Oblomov accepts responsibility for mismeasurements. Tsarina Yekaterina has expressed her disappointment.’

And now, Father is being sent—politely, painlessly—into exile. And we are being exiled with him.

The city slips past in snowy outline. I see the domed roofs of the Stone Palace, the bare winter trees in the Mikhailovsky Gardens, the gates of the Instructionary Institute for Girls. I wonder whether I’ll ever walk through those gates again.

Above the roofline, I see the military balloons and zeppelins, some drifting and some moored. I see the Floating Birch Forest Tea Room and the rails of the

Sky Metro, still unfinished.

The train rushes onwards and the city grows smaller. For a while I can still make out the sign for the Floating Birch Forest Tea Room, a neon-pink samovar blinking high up in the air, but the clouds thicken and then even that is gone.

Father clears his throat and smooths his moustache. A speech is coming. I have spent nearly thirteen years trying to avoid Father's speeches. I know the signs.

'Our lives,' he announces, 'will be very different now.'

At this statement, Anastasia bursts into jangling tears. She has been bursting into tears at regular intervals ever since the two soldiers who make up our military escort appeared in the front parlour this morning. And she is jangling because she spent fourteen of the fifteen minutes we were given to gather our belongings piling every piece of jewellery she owns onto her person. Her fingers are stacked with rings and her neck has disappeared under strings of diamonds and pearls that clink and clank together as she cries.

Father pats her hand, and Mira rushes across the carriage to throw her slender arms around her.

‘Don’t cry,’ says Mira. ‘At least we’ll all be together.’

Mira is always nice to Anastasia. Mira is always nice to everyone. Everyone loves Mira.

Mira strokes Anastasia’s arm and says, ‘Don’t cry, Mother.’

Calling her ‘Mother’ is taking nice too far, if you ask me. Anastasia is our stepmother.

After a while, Anastasia stops sobbing and starts whimpering picturesquely instead. She wobbles her lip and flutters her eyelashes and makes her eyes into two wells of deep, brave sorrow, just as she did in the final scene of *Bride of the Wolves* when her husband, the noble Wolf-King, is shot by hunters. Picturesque whimpering, according to Stolitsa’s cinema critics, is Anastasia’s greatest dramatic talent.

Father smooths his moustache some more and goes on with his speech.

‘Our lives,’ he repeats, ‘are going to be very different.’

‘Drastically different,’ says Anastasia. ‘No shops. No theatres. No zeppelin rides. Hardly any fresh caviar either, I shouldn’t expect.’

‘No ballet lessons,’ adds Mira, in a sad voice. Mira loves dancing exactly as much as I hate dancing, which

is to say that Mira loves dancing with her whole heart.

‘No ballet lessons,’ says Father. ‘No caviar. And besides all that, well, there are certain creatures—unsavoury creatures—who have been unwelcome in Tsaretsvo ever since the War in the Skies.’ He smooths his moustache again. If he smooths it any more, he’s going to smooth it right off his face. ‘We might expect to see...creatures,’ he says, ‘that we’re not accustomed to seeing in the city.’

‘Creatures?’ I ask. ‘Do you mean yagas?’

‘Yes, Olga,’ he sighs. ‘We might expect to see’—his lip curls as if the word makes an evil taste in his mouth—‘yagas.’

I have read all about yagas in my school history book, *Glorious Victory: An Impartial Account of the War in the Skies*. Yagas are magical but, more than this, they are cunning and dangerous. It was their wicked deceit that started the War in the Skies. For centuries the Tsars and Tsarinas relied on the magical advice of their Imperial Coven, a group of the most powerful yagas in the land. But Tsarina Pyotrovna’s Coven was tempted by the firebird’s egg. They stole it for themselves, then vanished. And as punishment for the Coven’s trickery, every yaga

in Tsaretsvo was driven out. There have been no yagas, and no magic, in Tsaretsvo since. But it is rumoured that yagas can still be found at the fringes of the Tsardom, in the Borderlands. From what Father is saying, it seems the rumours are true.

‘Yagas!’ wails Anastasia. ‘This is the last straw, Aleksei! Are we to live surrounded by those nasty, unnatural hags? It makes me ill to think of them, in their dirty chicken-legged huts, with their long yellow fingernails and their—’

‘Hush,’ snaps Father and jerks his head to Mira, who has pulled her curly hair loose from her plait. She twists a strand of it round her little finger. Mira twists her hair like this when she is anxious.

I reach over and untwist it, and when Mira leans into me, I shift along the seat to make room for her. With a wobble in her voice she says, ‘I’ve heard yagas eat the meat off children’s bones. I’ve heard they use the bones for toothpicks when they’re done.’

‘You mustn’t believe everything you hear,’ says Father gently. ‘But, yes. Yagas can be dangerous. We will need to be careful.’

I am not as anxious as Mira. I know yagas are

dangerous and mean and sly, and that they have long yellow fingernails just like Anastasia says, but, all the same, it would be a terrific thrill to see one.

Father smooths his moustache for a long time. When he has finished, he says, 'And, of course, there are the birds.'

The birds.

I have never seen a bird. But one afternoon, years ago, in the library of the Instructionary Institute for Girls I opened an old book of Tsarish history. All the books from before the War in the Skies had had the birds carefully removed. Sentences were blacked out, sometimes whole paragraphs. Engraved illustrations were cut, leaving holes that I guessed were bird-shaped in patches of sky and branches of trees.

But in this book, I came to a picture the librarian's scissors had missed.

A flock of birds against a cloud in the night sky.

I leaned in to see their stretched wings, their seed eyes, their delicately tensed claws. I wondered what their feathers felt like to touch and what sounds they made as they flew through the sky.

I hunched over the book and coughed loudly to cover

the sound as I tore out the page. I folded it and tucked it in my pocket. Later, when I was alone, I took it out and looked at the picture and wondered if the sky had ever been so busy with birds. I wondered if they could really be as large as they appeared in the picture, with their wings spread so wide they stretched across the moon.

Anastasia caught me and she burned the picture in the parlour fire.

I rest my head against the train window. I close my eyes and try to remember the birds in the picture: their long sharp beaks, the way they filled the sky.

A rap at our carriage door jolts me awake. The train is stopped at—I squint through the window to read the station sign—Kalinzhak.

Kalinzhak, one half of our military escort informs us, is the end of the line.

‘Have we arrived, then?’ asks Anastasia, as she is helped down from the carriage.

Her question is answered by the unceremonious dumping of our trunks onto the platform. The train moves off, back in the direction it came, trailing gusts of soot that settle blackly on the snowdrifts banked on

each side of the tracks.

Father takes a letter from his pocket. ‘Train travel past Kalinzhak is not possible before the snow melts,’ he reads. ‘We go by sled to Demidov, where we will be met by the departing Minister for Avian Intelligence, a man by the name of Krupnik, who will take us the rest of the way.’

‘A sled,’ mutters Anastasia into the collar of her white mink coat. ‘How primitive.’

The sled is long and narrow. It is drawn by twelve dogs so white they would disappear into the snow if they weren’t marked out by their black eyes and noses. It is the kind of sled that promises adventure—the same kind of sled that Belugov travelled on when he mapped the edges of the Frozen Sea. I am about to tell Mira this, when I remember that, while the sled and the dogs made it back to Stolitsa, Belugov did not.

Passengers mill around, waiting for the driver to ready the dogs. Anastasia is busy brushing snowflakes from the shoulders of her snow-white mink. She enlists Father to help her. I count our trunks as they’re loaded onto the back of the sled. And Mira—

Where is Mira?

I whip my head around.

Mira is lying in the snow.

'Look!' she says, leaping up. 'It's almost perfect.' She points to where she was lying, at a snow angel.

'You make one,' she says. 'Yours are always better than mine.'

I am almost thirteen years old. Too old for snow angels, really. But the snow is so white and so clean and so fresh. When a flake lands on my tongue it tastes of pine, unlike the snow in Stolitsa, which turns gritty and grey-coloured almost as soon as it has fallen. 'There's no time,' I say, as Mira runs towards me and pushes me so I fall back onto the cold, powdery snow. I flap my arms and legs and the shape of an angel appears around me. Mira hauls me up and we admire the impressions we have left in the snow.

We make more snow angels, laughing like we did when we were little, until the crack of a whip in the air jolts me upright. We shake the snow from our clothes and sprint back to the sled and into the only seats left, one each side of an old lady with a face as wrinkled as a walnut shell and a ring of silver keys on a chain around

her neck. From her pocket she takes half a raw onion and a paper twist of salt. She lets the salt fall on the onion just like the snow that is starting to fall from the sky.

With a crunch of onion and a second crack of the driver's whip, we start. The dogs pelt through the snow and the forest slaps the sled as we fly along. The first time a branch comes at me, I end up with a snow-dripping mouthful of pine-needles. I'm still spitting the needles out when I see the second branch. This time I duck.

For a moment the sled is airborne and then we land with a long skid on a frozen river. The River Dezhdy. I have always loved the chapter in *Great Names in Tsarish Cartography* where Karelin travelled up the Dezhdy to discover its source, high in the Stikhlo Mountains, catching trout with his dagger to sustain himself as his weeks on the river stretched into months.

The dogs patter over the river's glassy surface. I am beginning to enjoy the ride when I feel prodding between my shoulder blades. I turn around and Anastasia thrusts a cold handful of diamonds and silver at me.

'Put these in your pockets,' she hisses. 'Where no one can see them.'

‘Why?’ I hiss back.

‘People’—she closes her coat over her necklaces—‘are looking. We’ll be robbed if we’re not careful.’

I snort. People are looking because Anastasia, tinselled with jewels, looks like a Christmas tree.

‘Did you just snort at me?’

‘No!’ I lie. ‘And besides, they’re probably only looking at you because they recognise you from one of your movies.’

‘You may be right,’ she says. ‘*The Glass Wife* was very popular with Northern audiences.’

She relaxes. I think she even begins to enjoy the furtive glances of other passengers.

‘Strezhevoy!’ yells the driver as the sled glides to a halt. A beet-faced man in a sheepskin coat clambers over the other passengers and lands at the side of the sled in a puff of snow.

After we pull away from Strezhevoy, I hear snapping sounds from deep inside the belly of the forest. They are soft to begin with but they quickly grow louder. Soon, it sounds like the splintering of boughs scraped from trees. One or two of the other passengers glance towards

the forest, but no one behaves as if this strange noise is anything out of the ordinary, least of all the woman sitting between Mira and me. She stares ahead and chews her onion in a slow, contemplative kind of way. But the noise makes my stomach churn. When I imagine the beast that could possibly make such a sound, I imagine something large. Something with fur and claws and teeth.

Mira reaches her hand around the back of the onion-woman. Her gloved fingers find mine.

The noise is getting louder and closer.

Behind me, Anastasia smothers a gasp, as a wooden hut, perched on a pair of pink, scaly chicken feet, lurches out of the trees. The tiles on its roof are so loose that they ripple in the wind and its walls are stippled with dark, green-black moss. It's not as fearsome-looking as the pictures I have seen in my history books: it doesn't have a fence made of bones, for one thing, or a fire-breathing horse tied to its gatepost. Apart from its chicken feet it looks almost ordinary, in a dilapidated sort of way. But still. There's no mistaking what it is—or what's sure to be inside.

The hut comes closer and I feel myself prickling

all over—with fear, certainly, but also with a spiky excitement. Am I about to see a real, live yaga?

The other passengers are calm, almost bored-looking, as if they see yagas every other day of the week. But Anastasia has covered her eyes with her diamond-encrusted fingers and her shoulders are shaking. Mira's eyes brim with frightened tears. Even Father looks afraid. His moustache trembles at its corners.

What is *wrong* with me? I shouldn't be excited. I definitely shouldn't *look* excited. Girls have been sent to Bleak Steppe for less. I wobble my lip and wring my hands. I'm not as good an actress as Anastasia, but I think it will do.

'Is it...?' asks Mira.

'It is,' I say.

'No need to panic,' says Father in a low voice. 'Eyes ahead, Olga.'

I turn my face forward, but from the corner of my eye I can see almost everything.

The hut's window is hidden behind rotting wooden shutters, but all at once the shutters fall open. As if by magic, I think. And then I think, well, of course by magic. It is a yaga's hut after all.

A face pokes out from behind yellowed lace curtains. The yaga is nothing like the illustrations I have seen in books. She doesn't have eyes the colour of blood, or iron teeth. She looks almost ordinary.

'Tell your fortune in a match!' she cries. 'Two kopecks! Find your fate in the flame!'

The sled stops and some of the passengers climb out, fumbling in their pockets for coins.

'Look directly ahead,' says Father in a tight voice. 'This unfortunate display will soon be over.'

But this time, I turn to watch. How many chances will I have in my life to see a yaga's magic?

The yaga pulls a match out of her box. She doesn't strike it. She whispers to it instead, in a voice that sounds like the rasping of tinder. And the match lights. Its flame is purple-tinged and it dances from side to side. The yaga bends down and whispers into her customer's ear.

I want to know what she sees in the fire. I wonder what she is whispering. But she is too far away for me to hear. I feel obscurely disappointed. The first time I see a yaga and I hardly see her at all.

The passengers bundle back onto the sled. The whip

cracks, and we start to move again.

Soon the hut will be gone. It will be a relief, I tell myself, when the hut is gone. A relief, and nothing more.

But the hut scrambles along the ice, trying to keep up with the sled dogs. "Tell your fortune in a match!" cries the yaga. "Read your fate in a flame!"

The hut draws level with the sled. The yaga leans out through the window. Her face is very close to mine. My excitement has seeped away and only fear remains. Why has she chosen *me* to address? Could she tell what I was thinking? Could she sense that I was curious?

"Tell your fortune in a match," she coaxes. I smell her stewed breath and recoil, but she just leans even closer. "Don't you want to find out what the future holds?" she asks.

"Don't answer, Olga," warns Father. "Pretend you can't hear it."

I say nothing.

"You do want to know, don't you? Tell you what," she says, "I'll do you for free."

I can feel my heartbeat thick and heavy, pounding through my blood. The yaga is wrong. I don't want to know, not at all.

She slides a match from the box. The flame leaps upright, even though we are moving at quite a speed. But the woman with the onion grabs her by the wrist and pulls the yaga's face close to her own. She whispers something too soft for me to hear, and the yaga spits on the match and it fizzles. Then she draws her head inside the hut. The shutters snap shut, and the hut slinks back into the trees.

'Tawdry tricks,' mutters the old woman, before returning her attention to her onion.

Mira leans across the woman to me. 'Are you all right, Olga?' she asks. 'Weren't you scared?'

Was I scared? How can I answer? I felt something so much more complicated than simply scared. I wait for my heart to slow to its regular speed before I say, 'Yes. I was scared. But she's gone now.'

'She's gone,' sniffs Anastasia, 'but she came awfully close to you. You'll need to wash as soon as we arrive at the Centre.'

'I don't think it's contagious,' I say.

'You can't be too careful, Olga,' says Father.

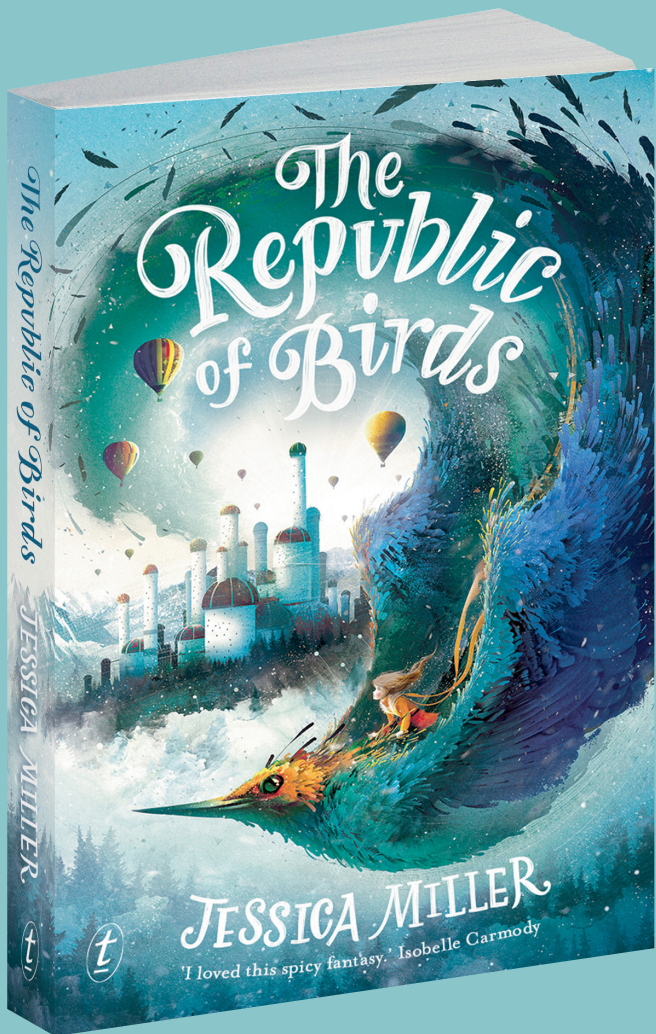
The driver calls out the stops as we pass them: 'Grizhelov!'

and 'Kibirsk!' and 'Roslow!'

Some of the places are small villages. Others are just signposts in the snow with paths that disappear into the forest. By the time we reach Demidov, which appears to be nothing but a signpost and a tumble-down wooden shelter, only the woman with the onion is left with us in the sled. She collects her paper-wrapped parcels, nods goodbye, and disappears. Her keys jingle as she goes.

We alight into the snow with our trunks, and the driver cracks his whip one final time and the dogs draw the sled back down the river, out of sight.

Sunk beneath snowdrifts is an empty wooden shelter. We go inside to wait for Krupnik. It feels like we are the only people left in the world.



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