



Praise for *The Wind Child*



‘I really enjoyed this action-packed tale of friendship, loss, and learning to let go.’ LAURA PEARSON

‘Taking inspiration from something built upon the notion of Gods and higher beings can be both charming and impactful. *The Wind Child* is this and more . . .

This fantasy adventure engages both the mind and the heart.’ *THE NATIONAL*

‘This colourful quest shimmers with Slavic myth, sacrifice, friendship, and a daughter’s bone-deep love for her dad.’

*LOVEREADING4KIDS*

‘This is a fast paced and enthralling adventure story, with a huge amount of action and some strong and likeable characters.’ *BOOKS FOR KEEPS*

‘A fast-paced story that rolls along as an unstoppable adventure.’ *JUNO MAGAZINE*

‘Gabriela Houston’s writing is both economical and evocative – a rare skill.’ *SFX*

‘Strong storytelling, startlingly vivid landscape and a depth of emotion.’ JAKE HOPE



*Dla mojej ukochanej Babci Loni.*



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Gabriela Houston



# THE STORM CHILD



Illustrated by Alexis Snell

uclanpublishing



# ★ HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED ★ HOW BOOKS ARE MADE?

UCLan Publishing is an award-winning independent publisher specialising in Children's and Young Adult books. Based at The University of Central Lancashire, this Preston-based publisher teaches MA Publishing students how to become industry professionals using the content and resources from its business; students are included at every stage of the publishing process and credited for the work that they contribute.

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## CREATURES AND GODS

- \* **Stribog** – God of Winter Winds, Music and Silver
- \* **Zevena** – Daughter of Stribog, a minor wind spirit
- \* **Koschei the Deathless** – the powerful magical creature, who placed his soul in the stone Alatnir, thus securing his immortality.
- \* **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
- \* **Gamayun** – a half-woman, half-eagle. The protector of “half things”, and a servant to the ????





- \* **Devena** – The Goddess of the Hunt, Vila’s sister
- \* **Kadooks** – burrowing monsters, and servants of Devena
- \* **Upior** – a demonic ghost
- \* **Striga/Stigoi** – a demon with two hearts, preying on travellers
- \* **Gamayun** – A half bird/half woman from Slavic mythology
- \* **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 into the water
- \* **Viatroduya** – One of Stribog’s many children. A malicious wind sprite
- \* **Borovy and Borova** – The Guardians of the Forests
- \* **Homen** – A screeching procession of the dead, bringing death to all they encounter. Servants and spies to Koschei

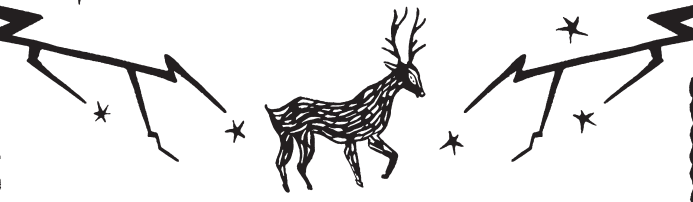








## CHAPTER 1

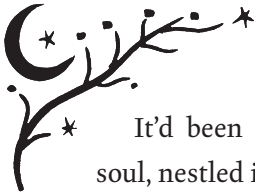


MARA RAN through the night forest, the rapidly cooling air pinching her cheeks.

Her friend Torniv, in his human form, ran alongside her, though she could see him trip and lag behind more and more. Remorse squeezed her heart. She'd ridden on his back for most of the day, before the evening light made away with his bear shape.

Torniv needed sleep and food. He needed rest in a place that was safe, where they weren't constantly waking at the smallest sound. An unthinkable luxury these days.

Koschei the Deathless was after them, and there would be no calm, no rest for either of them. They felt him in their sleep, they saw his black wings in every shadow. He was the fear that followed them every night and every day.



It'd been a year and more since Mara stole Koschei's soul, nestled inside the stone Alatnir. Since her own human soul had been ripped out of her chest by the god, Veles, in punishment for a trick she'd played on him. She would have died then had the spirit of the winds not been secretly nestling inside her immortal Root Soul.

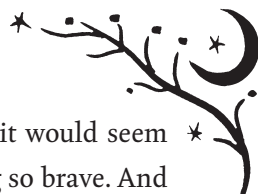
At first the changes she noticed were superficial. Her brown hair turned silver like her mother's. Her pale skin turned the blue of frozen cornflowers. And her brown eyes – the eyes which her grandmother, Sorona Gontova, had once said were like her own, that bond of familial similarity – they turned blue as well. Mara looked like any other wind spirit now, like any one of her grandfather's myriad offspring. Pretty, pale and utterly forgettable.

For a long while those were the only changes Mara noticed, and they were painful enough. She had tried and failed to save the life of her human father. Losing him was hard and becoming so unlike him seemed to erase him further from the world. The loss of her human soul and the emergence of her divine heritage came with no powers, no magic that she recognised.

"We need to rest," Mara said, as Torniv tripped and scratched his hand against a rough patch of bark.

"I can smell water," he said, his eyes reflecting the moonlight. "It falls on the rocks, and the spray travels far. A waterfall. There might be a place we can rest there."





Mara nodded. She was tired too, though it would seem churlish to mention it when Torniv was being so brave. And maybe the waterfall wasn't too far, though her own ears could tell her nothing of it.

The truth was they could afford no mistakes, no carelessness. Koschei the Deathless was ever near and more than once they had seen the tip of his black wings across the night sky.

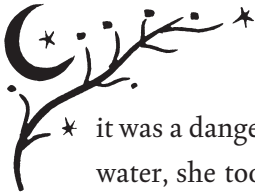
At first, Mara had thought to confront him. She held his soul in her hand, and he'd have to listen to her, she had said. But that was a child talking. She wasn't a child any more. She had seen the fields of wheat shrivel and burn as The Homen, the procession of the dead spirits, rode their ghastly skeleton horses, singing and dancing, all the while sniffing at the air, sending Koschei news through his crow messengers. Searching, always searching for the two children who dared to steal Alatnir.

Everything withered and died in the path of The Homen. If a peasant boy was unlucky enough to come across it, the skeletons would screech and scream and descend upon him, until there was no more life in him. Then what was left of his bones would stand up again and swell The Homen's ranks.

The Homen only travelled by day, as Koschei only flew by night. Mara was in no hurry to come across either of them.

She and Torniv dragged themselves to the waterfall. The air was cold, which didn't bother Mara, though she knew





\* it was a danger to Torniv. When they finally sat down by the water, she took off the cloak from her back and wrapped it around his shoulders. He didn't protest, instead leaning into Mara. She bit her lip. When Torniv's bluster ended there was a real cause for worry.

He was asleep within moments. Mara watched the falling water for a long while. Evil couldn't cross running water. Everyone knew that. But did Koschei know he was evil? Did the protection of the waterfall only start where the spirit knew itself? And what about her?

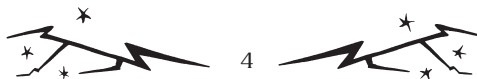
When Mara's human soul was stripped of her, the thing that was left: was it good or bad? The winds' natures were changeable. Did it mean she would sometimes be able to cross the running waters and then sometimes be stopped dead in her tracks, rendered blind and deaf and not knowing why?

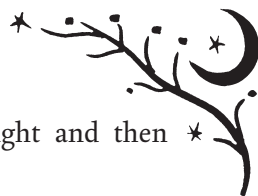
The roar of the rapids was too loud to be soothing, and Mara found her head too crowded with worry to fall asleep. She tried to listen to the rhythm of the water, for the rhythm of sounds was what always eventually brought her rest. Instead, she heard something else.

It started as a low distant rumble. Thunder. Mara tensed. Just what they needed. Another night in the rain.

But the rain didn't come. Instead, the flashes of lightning criss-crossed the sky, coming ever nearer.

Mara gently eased Torniv to the ground and tip-toed





★ towards the forest's darkness. A flare of light and then ★ another flashed between the trees.

Mara opened her eyes wide. It would be stupid to go there alone. But it might turn out to be nothing. It could be nothing and Torniv needed the rest. She walked farther till the trees became less dense, and she once more could see clearly in the moonlight.

In a clearing stood a tall woman. Her golden braids were so long that they coiled at her feet. She wore golden armour over a red tunic, though she carried no weapons that Mara could see. She had no helmet and no shield, but there was no doubt in Mara's mind that the strange woman didn't need either.

"I'm glad to finally meet you, Wind Child," the woman said. She was beautiful in the way that a stone carving was beautiful. She was cold and perfect, smooth and angular at the same time. Wide bracelets decorated her muscular arms and her eyes shone with a fire of their own.

"My name's Mara," Mara said, standing a little taller, as she always did when very, very frightened. "Not 'Wind Child'. Did Koschei send you?"

The woman raised her eyebrow. "If he had, you'd already be ash under my feet . . ." She checked herself. "I mean, no. He didn't send me."

"What do you want then?" Mara bristled at the 'ash' comment.





"I'm Vila. And I thought you might be up for striking a bargain."

"Vila?" Mara's mouth hung open. "You mean . . . as in 'the lightning' Vila? 'The warrior using her braids as whips' Vila? 'Veles' messenger, Vila?'"

"All of that, but only the first two willingly," Vila said, with a sideways smile.

"Prove it." Mara crossed her arms.

Vila stared Mara down, the goddess's green eyes turning orange and yellow as her irritation grew. With her palm up, she ran her hand along the length of one of her braids, then turned her wrist in one fluid movement. What happened next was a blur of motion as Vila raised her braid and cracked it like a whip at a tree to her right.

Sparks filled the air as the huge oak was rendered in two, through bark and root, the droplets of sap charred before they reached the ground.

"Wow!" Mara watched, entranced. This was so different to her grandfather's powers, to the slow creeping of frost and the artistry of ice. This was power at its most raw, fascinating and terrifying at the same time.

"Well, you believe me now?" Vila said, crossing her muscular arms.

Mara nodded, still looking at the tree. "Oh, yes. I knew it was you. I just wanted to see you use your whips."

Vila widened her eyes.





“It’s pretty amazing.” Mara beamed a smile at the goddess.

Vila stared for a moment and then burst out laughing. “I can see why Veles is fond of you!”

Mara bristled at that. “What do you mean ‘fond of me’? He tore my soul from me! He tricked me into believing he would get my da back!” She stomped her foot, like a small child, she knew, but she was too angry to feel shame. “It’s his fault Koschei’s after me and Torniv! ‘Fond of me’? If that’s what he does to people he’s ‘fond of’, what does he do when he dislikes them?”

Vila suddenly turned serious. “Unspeakable things, child. Unspeakable things.”

They stood in silence for a moment. Then a voice rang through the air. “Step away from Mara!” Torniv stood by the clearing, leaning against a tree to hide how his legs shook from exhaustion.

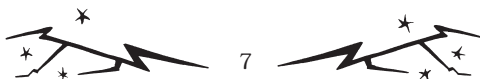
Vila took in his emaciated frame and a smile softened her features. “You have a brave friend there, Mara. A loyal friend.”

Torniv looked at Mara in surprise.

Mara nodded. “She’s not here to hurt us, Torniv.” She looked up at Vila. “In fact, I think she needs something.”

Vila nodded. “Yes, I do.” She sat down on the ground, her legs crossed. “Like I said before, Veles is fond of you—”

Torniv puffed up. “Fond of’ Mara? It’s his fault we—”





Mara waved her hand at him. “Yes, yes, we’ve covered that. Apparently, this is Veles at his nicest.”

Vila smiled a crooked smile. “Indeed. In any case, though it might not have gone the way you wanted, tricking Veles is a very rare occurrence, believe it or not. And he was duly impressed. I see that as an opportunity.”

“To . . . ?” Torniv sank down by the tree, resting his back against the trunk.

“To get back what he stole from me.” Vila smiled. “Do you think the Goddess of Lightning, one of the two Chaos Sisters, serves willingly?” She shook her head, sparks flying above her. “He stole my golden headdress, my *kokoshnik*. He stole my ring. With the two he can compel me to his will.”

“He made you his servant with a *ring*?” Torniv raised his eyebrow.

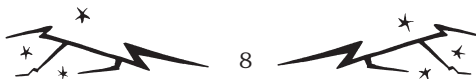
“And the *kokoshnik*,” Vila said without looking.

“Sounds like you should have been more careful with them then.” Torniv snickered, but the smile died on his lips when Vila turned her flaming eyes towards him and he swallowed hard. “Sorry. Yes, please continue.”

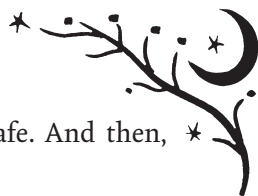
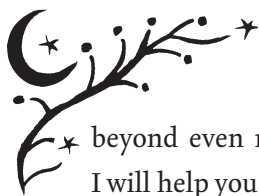
“He keeps them hidden, so that I remain in his servitude. But if you find them and get them back for me, I will help you with Koschei.”

“You’ll kill him for us?” Mara brightened.

“Kill the Deathless?” Vila laughed. “I believe that’s







beyond even me. But I will help you stay safe. And then, I will help you face him.”

“And my human soul?” Mara crossed her arms.

“What about it?”

“I want it back.”

Vila shook her head. “That is beyond my skill. But I will help you where I can.”

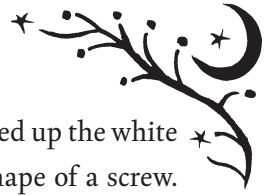
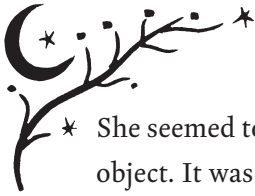
“Well, I think I want—” Mara started.

“You’ve got a deal!” Torniv piped in. He gave Mara a meaningful look. “Don’t overplay your hand. I would pick poppy seeds out of ashes right now to not have to worry about Koschei anymore. We’ve stolen Alatnir. How much harder can this possibly be?”

Mara sighed, her hand rising towards the pouch hanging from her neck. Inside it, Alatnir vibrated like a moth caught between cupped hands. “We knew Alatnir was on the Island of Buyan. We had help. We don’t know the first thing about where Veles might have hidden Vila’s headdress or her ring. *And* we’re still on the run, remember? Kind of hard to look for Vila’s things when The Homen is wailing and screeching its way up our trail.”

“I might be able to help with that particular problem,” Vila smiled. She picked up one of her braids and took off the thread that secured its end. She shook it loose and something fell from between the strands and glistened white in her lap. “The bone of a great creature. A mighty opponent.”





\* She seemed to smile at the memory and picked up the white object. It was smooth and carved into the shape of a screw. "It will protect you both from The Homen."

She motioned for Mara to come closer. When Mara leaned down, Vila took one of Mara's braids into her hand and twisted the bone shard round and round until it was secured in Mara's silver braid. "Now, for you, bear boy," Vila nodded at Torniv.

Torniv approached the goddess.

"I understand Mara helped the Zorya sisters with her mother's silver braid. Well, here," Vila smiled, and cut a strand of her golden hair, "is a piece of mine. Its light will protect you from Koschei's eyes when you travel by night." She twisted the strand like a rope and tied it around Torniv's wrist. The hair seemed to flow and melt until it resembled a gold bracelet. Torniv bit his lip. Understanding, Vila looked at him with a twinkle in her eye. "Don't worry, when you turn into a bear, the bracelet will grow in size as well." She became serious. "But for the charms to work on both of you, you must not separate. Remember, only when you stay together will you stay safe. And the charms can blur your pursuer's vision, but cannot make you disappear entirely."

"But how will we find your *kokoshnik*?" Torniv furrowed his eyebrows.

"That, I'm afraid," Vila said, "is up to you. But now you're





\* hidden from Koschei, I suppose you will have a better chance \*  
of finding it.”

“It’s not inside Veles’ palace in Navia, is it?” Mara looked up suspiciously. “I don’t think he’d let me back in there.”

Vila shook her head. “I’m afraid not. But you have friends, little ones. Some you wouldn’t even suspect. If you follow the music, you might find some of them.” And with that, Vila shot up into the air, lines of fire zigzagging around her face.

“Huh,” said Mara once the goddess was gone. “Any idea what she meant?”

“Nope.” Torniv looked at the gold bracelet with a grim expression. “But I imagine we’ll soon find out.”