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THE
GIRL
IN THE
TOWER

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Part One

I.

THE DEATH OF
THE SNOW-MAIDEN

MOSCOW, JUST PAST MIDWINTER, AND THE HAZE OF TEN THOUSAND fires rose to meet a smothering sky. To the west a little light lingered, but in the east the clouds mounded up, bruise-colored in the livid dusk, buckling with unfallen snow.

Two rivers gashed the skin of the Russian forest, and Moscow lay at their joining, atop a pine-clad hill. Her squat, white walls enclosed a jumble of hovels and churches; her palaces' ice-streaked towers splayed like desperate fingers against the sky. As the daylight faded, lights kindled in the towers' high windows.

A woman, magnificently dressed, stood at one of these windows, watching the firelight mingle with the stormy dusk. Behind her, two other women sat beside an oven, sewing.

"That is the third time Olga has gone to the window this hour," whispered one of the women. Her ringed hands flashed in the dim light; her dazzling headdress drew the eye from boils on her nose.

Waiting-women clustered nearby, nodding like blossoms. Slaves stood near the chilly walls, their lank hair wrapped in kerchiefs.

"Well, of course, Darinka!" returned the second woman. "She is waiting for her brother, the madcap monk. How long has it been since Brother Aleksandr left for Sarai? My husband has been waiting for him since the first snow. Now poor Olga is pining at her window.

Well, good luck to her. Brother Aleksandr is probably dead in a snow-bank." The speaker was Eudokhia Dmitreeva, Grand Princess of Moscow. Her robe was sewn with gems; her rosebud mouth concealed the stumps of three blackened teeth. She raised her voice shrilly. "You will kill yourself standing in this wind, Olya. If Brother Aleksandr were coming, he would have been here by now."

"As you say," Olga replied coolly from the window. "I am glad you are here to teach me patience. Perhaps my daughter will learn from you how a princess behaves."

Eudokhia's lips thinned. She had no children. Olga had two, and was expecting a third before Easter.

"What is that?" said Darinka suddenly. "I heard a noise. Did you hear that?"

Outside, the storm was rising. "It was the wind," said Eudokhia. "Only the wind. What a fool you are, Darinka." But she shivered. "Olga, send for more wine; it is cold in this drafty room."

In truth, the workroom was warm—windowless, save for the single slit—heated with a stove and many bodies. But—"Very well," said Olga. She nodded at her servant, and the woman went out, down the steps into the freezing night.

"I hate nights like this," said Darinka. She clutched her robe about her and scratched a scab on her nose. Her eyes darted from candle to shadow and back. "*She* comes on nights like this."

"She?" asked Eudokhia sourly. "Who is *she*?"

"Who is *she*?" repeated Darinka. "You mean you don't know?" Darinka looked superior. "*She* is the ghost."

Olga's two children, who had been arguing beside the oven, stopped screeching. Eudokhia sniffed. From her place by the window, Olga frowned.

"There is no ghost," Eudokhia said. She reached for a plum preserved in honey, bit and chewed daintily, then licked the sweetness from her fingers. Her tone implied that *this* palace was not quite worthy of a ghost.

"I have seen her!" protested Darinka, stung. "Last time I slept here, I saw her."

Highborn women, who must live and die in towers, were much given to visiting. Now and again, they stayed overnight for company, when their husbands were away. Olga's palace—clean, orderly, prosperous—was a favorite; the more so as Olga was eight months gone with child and did not go out.

Hearing, Olga frowned, but Darinka, eager for attention, hurried on. "It was just after midnight. Some days ago. A little before Midwinter." She leaned forward, and her headdress tipped precariously. "I was awakened—I cannot remember what awakened me. A noise . . ."

Olga made the faintest sound of derision. Darinka scowled. "I cannot remember," she repeated. "I awakened and all was still. Cold moonlight seeped around the shutters. I thought I heard something in the corner. A rat, perhaps, scritchng." Darinka's voice dropped. "I lay still, with the blankets drawn about me. But I could not fall asleep. Then I heard someone whimper. I opened my eyes and shook Nastka, who slept next to me. 'Nastka,' I told her, 'Nastka, light a lamp. Someone is crying.' But Nastka did not stir."

Darinka paused. The room had fallen silent.

"Then," Darinka went on, "I saw a gleam of light. It was an unchristian glow, colder than moonlight, nothing like good firelight. This glow came nearer and nearer . . ."

Darinka paused again. "And then I saw her," she finished in a hushed voice.

"Her? Who? What did she look like?" cried a dozen voices.

"White as bone," Darinka whispered. "Mouth fallen in, eyes dark pits to swallow the world. She stared at me, lipless as she was, and I tried to scream but I could not."

One of the listeners squealed; others were clutching hands.

"Enough," snapped Olga, turning from her place by the window. The word cut through their half-serious hysteria, and the women fell uneasily silent. Olga added, "You are frightening my children."

This was not entirely true. The elder, Marya, sat upright and blazing-eyed. But Olga's boy, Daniil, clutched his sister, quivering.

"And then she disappeared," Darinka finished, trying for nonchalance and failing. "I said my prayers and went back to sleep."

She lifted her wine-cup to her lips. The two children stared.

"A good story," Olga said, with a very fine edge on her voice. "But it is done now. Let us tell other tales."

She went to her place by the oven and sat. The firelight played on her double-plaited hair. Outside, the snow was falling fast. Olga did not look toward the window again, though her shoulders stiffened when the slaves closed the shutters.

More logs were heaped on the fire; the room warmed and filled with a mellow glow.

"Will *you* tell a tale, Mother?" cried Olga's daughter, Marya. "Will you tell a story of magic?"

A muffled sound of approval stirred the room. Eudokhia glared. Olga smiled. Though she was the Princess of Serpukhov, Olga had grown up far from Moscow, at the edge of the haunted wilderness. She told strange stories from the north. Highborn women, who lived their lives between chapel and bakehouse and tower, treasured the novelty.

The princess considered her audience. Whatever grief she had felt standing alone by the window was now quite absent from her expression. The waiting-women put down their needles and curled up eagerly on their cushions.

Outside, the hiss of the wind mixed with the silence of the snow-storm that is itself a noise. With a flurry of shouting below, the last of the stock was driven into barns, to shelter from the frost. From the snow-filled alleys, beggars crept into the naves of churches, praying to live until morning. The men on the kremlin-wall huddled near their braziers and drew their caps around their ears. But the princess's tower was warm and filled with expectant silence.

"Listen, then," Olga said, feeling out the words.

"In a certain principedom there lived a woodcutter and his wife, in a little village in a great forest. The husband was called Misha, his wife

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Alena, and they were very sad. For though they had prayed diligently, and kissed the icons and pleaded, God did not see fit to bless them with a child. Times were hard and they had no good child to help them through a bitter winter.”

Olga put a hand to her belly. Her third child—the nameless stranger—kicked in her womb.

“One morning, after a heavy snow, husband and wife went into the forest to chop firewood. As they chopped and stacked, they pushed the snow into heaps, and Alena, idly, began to fashion the snow into a pale maiden.”

“Was she as pretty as me?” Marya interrupted.

Eudokhia snorted. “She was a snow-maiden, fool. All cold and stiff and white. But”—Eudokhia eyed the little girl—“she was certainly prettier than you.”

Marya reddened and opened her mouth.

“Well,” Olga hurriedly continued, “the snow-girl was white, it is true, and stiff. But she was also tall and slender. She had a sweet mouth and a long braid, for Alena had sculpted her with all her love for the child she could not have.

“‘See, wife?’ said Misha, observing the little snow-maiden. ‘You have made us a daughter after all. There is our Snegurochka, the snow-maiden.’

“Alena smiled, though her eyes filled with tears.

“Just then an icy breeze rattled the bare branches, for Morozko the frost-demon was there, watching the couple and their snow-child.

“Some say that Morozko took pity on the woman. Others say that there was magic in the woman’s tears, weeping on the snow-maiden when her husband could not see. But either way, just as Misha and Alena turned for home, the snow-maiden’s face grew flushed and rosy, her eyes dark and deep, and then a living girl stood in the snow, birth-naked, and smiled at the old couple.

“‘I have come to be your daughter,’ she said. ‘If you will have me, I will care for you as my own father and mother.’

“The old couple stared, first in disbelief, then joy. Alena hurried

forward, weeping, took the maiden by her cold hand, and led her toward the izba.

“The days passed in peace. Snegurochka swept the floor and cooked their meals and sang. Sometimes her songs were strange and made her parents uneasy. But she was kind and deft in her work. When she smiled, it always seemed the sun shone. Misha and Alena could not believe their luck.

“The moon waxed and waned, and then it was midwinter. The village came alive with scents and sounds: bells on sledges and flat golden cakes.

“Now and again, folk passed Misha and Alena’s izba on their way to or from the village. The snow-maiden watched them, hidden behind the woodpile.

“One day a girl and a tall boy passed Snegurochka’s hiding place, walking hand in hand. They smiled at each other, and the snow-maiden was puzzled by the joy-like flame in their two faces.

“The more she thought of it, the less she understood, but Snegurochka could not stop thinking of that look. Where before she was content, now she grew restless. She paced the izba and made cold trails in the snow beneath the trees.

“Spring was not far off on the day Snegurochka heard a beautiful music in the forest. A shepherd-boy was playing his pipe.

“Snegurochka crept near, fascinated, and the shepherd saw the pale girl. When she smiled, the boy’s warm heart leaped out to her cold one.

“The weeks passed, and the shepherd fell in love. The snow softened; the sky was a clear mild blue. But still the snow-maiden fretted.

“‘You are made of snow,’ Morozko the frost-demon warned her, when she met him in the forest. ‘You cannot love and be immortal.’ As the winter waned, the frost-demon grew fainter, until he was only visible in the deepest shade of the wood. Men thought he was but a breeze in the holly-bushes. ‘You were born of winter and you will live forever. But if you touch the fire you will die.’

“But the shepherd-boy’s love had made the maiden a little scorn-

ful. 'Why should I be always cold?' she retorted. 'You are an old cold thing, but I am a mortal girl now; I will learn about this new thing, this fire.'

"Better to stay in the shade,' was the only reply.

"Spring drew nearer. Folk left their homes more often, to gather green things in hidden places. Again and again the shepherd came to Snegurochka's izba. 'Come into the wood,' he would say.

"She would leave the shadows beside the oven to go out and dance in the shade. But though Snegurochka danced, her heart was still cold at its core.

"The snow began to melt in earnest; the snow-maiden grew pale and weak. She went weeping into the darkest part of the forest. 'Please,' she said. 'I would feel as men and women feel. I beg you to grant me this.'

"Ask Spring, then,' replied the frost-demon reluctantly. The lengthening days had faded him; he was more breeze than voice. The wind brushed the snow-child's cheek with a sorrowful finger.

"Spring is like a maiden, old and eternally young. Her strong limbs were twined with flowers. 'I can give you what you seek,' said Spring. 'But you will surely die.'

"Snegurochka said nothing and went home weeping. For weeks she stayed in the izba, hiding in the shadows.

"But the young shepherd went and tapped on her door. 'Please, my love,' he said. 'Come out to me. I love you with all my heart.'

"Snegurochka knew that she could live forever if she chose, a snow-girl in a little peasant's izba. But . . . there was the music. And her lover's eyes.

"So she smiled and clothed herself in blue and white. She ran outside. Where the sun touched her, drops of water slid from her flaxen hair.

"She and the shepherd went to the edge of the birch-wood.

"Play your flute for me,' she said.

"The water ran faster, down her arms and hands, down her hair. Though her face was pale, her blood was warm, and her heart. The

young man played his flute, and Snegurochka loved him, and she wept.

“The song ended. The shepherd went to take her into his arms. But as he reached for her, her feet melted. She crumpled to the damp earth and vanished. An icy mist drifted under the warmth of the blue sky, and the boy was left alone.

“When the snow-maiden vanished, Spring swept her veil over the land, and the little field flowers began to bloom. But the shepherd waited in the gloom of the wood, weeping for his lost love.

“Misha and Alena wept as well. ‘It was only a magic,’ said Misha to comfort his wife. ‘It could not last, for she was made of snow.’”



OLGA PAUSED IN HER STORYTELLING, and the women murmured to one another. Daniil slept now in Olga’s arms. Marya drooped against her knee.

“Some say that the spirit of Snegurochka stayed in the forest,” Olga continued. “That when the snow fell, she came alive again, to love her shepherd-boy in the long nights.”

Olga paused again.

“But some say she died,” she said sadly. “For that is the price of loving.”

A silence should have fallen, as is proper, at the end of a well-told story. But this time it did not. For at the moment Olga’s voice died away, her daughter Masha sat bolt upright and screamed.

“Look!” she cried. “Mother, look! It is her, just there! Look! . . . No—no! Don’t— Go away!” The child stumbled to her feet, eyes blank with terror.

Olga turned her head sharply to the place her daughter stared: a corner thick with shadow. There—a white flicker. No, that was only firelight. The whole room roiled. Daniil, awake, clung to his mother’s sarafan.

“What is it?”

"Silence the child!"

"I told you!" Darinka squealed triumphantly. "I told you the ghost was real!"

"Enough!" snapped Olga.

Her voice cut through the others. Cries and chatter died away. Marya's sobbing breaths were loud in the stillness. "I think," Olga said, coolly, "that it is late, and that we are all weary. Better help your mistress to bed." This was to Eudokhia's women, for the Grand Princess was inclined to hysteria. "It was only a child's nightmare," Olga added firmly.

"Nay," groaned Eudokhia, enjoying herself. "Nay, it is the ghost! Let us all be afraid."

Olga shot a sharp glance at her own body-servant, Varvara, of the pale hair and indeterminate years. "See that the Grand Princess of Moscow goes safe to bed," Olga told her. Varvara too was staring into Marya's shadowed corner, but at the princess's order, she turned at once, brisk and calm. It was the firelight, Olga thought that had made her expression seem an instant sad.

Darinka was babbling. "It *was* her!" she insisted. "Would the child lie? The ghost! A very devil . . ."

"And be sure that Darinka gets a draught and a priest," Olga added.

Darinka was pulled out of the room, whimpering. Eudokhia was led away more tenderly, and the tumult subsided.

Olga went back to the oven, to her white-faced children.

"Is it true, Matyushka?" snuffled Daniil. "Is there a ghost?"

Marya said nothing, her hands clenched together. The tears still stood in her eyes.

"It doesn't matter," said Olga calmly. "Hush, children, do not be afraid. We are protected by God. Come, it is time for bed."