

Baba Yaga and the Firebird

Once upon a time, not so long ago in a land not so far away from here, Tsar Demyan lived in his kingdom with his three sons. The Tsar had a beautiful garden with many trees and flowers, but his favourite was an apple tree which bore golden apples that shone like the sun.

One morning the Tsar noticed that one of his golden apples was missing and that night, he set his eldest son, Peter, the task of guarding the tree and catching the thief, but the boy fell asleep, and in the morning another apple was missing. The next night, the second son, Vasily, tried to catch the thief, but he too fell asleep and the Tsar lost another apple.

On the third evening, Ivan Tsarevich, the youngest son was set the task. He was determined to not fall asleep like his brothers, so he paced the garden the whole night long. In the wee small hours, something glimmered in the distance and a light flew through the air. The whole garden grew as bright as day. It was the Firebird. It perched on the apple tree and pecked at one of the apples. Ivan crept along the ground and leapt up at the Firebird and grabbed it by the tail, but the Firebird was too strong. It flew away, leaving one of its fiery feathers in his hand.

Ivan was so ashamed at this failure, he decided then and there he would leave home before anyone else was awake, go after the Firebird, and bring it home to his father. He tucked the glowing feather inside his coat, saddled his horse with the golden mane, and rode off into the dawn.

When the Tsar awoke and found another apple and his youngest son missing he became very angry. He told Peter and Vasily to saddle their horses and find the thief who stole his apples and now, his favourite son. The two older brothers set off on their journey with grumbling hearts.

The Tsar's favourite tree lost no more apples, but he found no joy in that because now all three of his sons were missing. He and all the people of the kingdom fell into years of sorrow and regret.

Meanwhile, Ivan had come to a crossroads marked by a stone pillar upon which was written:

If you ride straight on, you will grow cold and hungry
If you turn to the right, you will live, but your horse will die
If you turn to the left, you will die, but your horse will live.

Ivan did not want to die, so he turned to the right. Immediately, a large grey wolf leapt from the shadows and tore his horse in two. Ivan cried in despair. Without his horse he knew he could never find the Firebird and bring him home. The wolf said, "You read what it said on the pillar. You chose the road. Still, I feel sorry for you. Jump on my back and we will go to Baba Yaga's house in the forest. Her raven knows where to find the waters of life and death and we can bring your horse back to life."

So Ivan did as he was told. He jumped on the grey wolf's back and soon they were clearing whole mountains and valleys with a single stride. When they arrived at Baba Yaga's house, she was curled up and sleeping inside it, her body filling the whole space. Her raven was keeping watch from the roof top and was, at first, suspicious of the visitors, but when she heard their tale, was moved to help them. Truth be told, the raven loved the journey to the other end of the earth, but would only agree to go, if Ivan and the wolf would keep her watch. This they agreed to do.

The raven was gone a long time. Baba Yaga slept on. Ivan and the wolf waited. Finally the raven returned with two bottles of water tied to her legs and many stories to tell. Ivan thanked her, promised to return someday to listen to her tales, jumped on the wolf's back and away they ran back to where the horse with the golden mane lay torn in two.

The wolf sprinkled the two halves with the waters of death and they knit back together. He sprinkled the waters of life on the body and it shuddered, scrambled to its feet, shook its head and tossed its golden mane. Ivan was overjoyed and thanked the wolf.

The wolf told him how to get to the kingdom of Koshchey the Deathless, for this was where the Firebird lived. "Before you go, a word of warning. Take the bird but not the cage. If you do, all is lost." Ivan agreed and they parted ways.

The road to Koshchey's kingdom was dark and cold. Along the way he saw statues of people and animals frozen in snow. He shivered and tucked his coat closer around the glowing feather that kept him warm and gave him hope.

After a long time, he came upon a clearing in the woods and knew by the warm glow that shone up into the night sky he had come to the end of his journey. He tied his horse to a tree and crept to the side of the clearing. There sat the beautiful Firebird in his golden cage. Ivan wondered how to capture the bird without the cage when Vasilisa, the most beautiful girl he had ever seen came from the icy house to bring the Firebird a golden apple.

Ivan fell in love with her on the spot, but Vasilisa, her heart numb and frozen by a spell from Koshchey, felt only fear. Ivan decided then and there to take Vasilisa with him, but to do that he had to take the Firebird in his cage. The minute he did that, the bells attached to the cage by long ropes rang out, and woke the evil Koshchey. He arrived in a fury and in one icy blast turned Ivan to a statue of snow.

Koshchey then cursed all those who helped Ivan in his quest. The horse with the golden mane, the wolf, the raven and Baba Yaga herself were all transformed into pillars of ice and snow. They became frozen in time like the hundreds of others he had bewitched in the past. Only the Firebird withstood the wizard's curse and was the only one left to see and scream out at this great evil.

The awful cry woke Vasilisa from her frozen state. When she saw Ivan turned to snow, she cried out in sorrow and found her heart in her tears. As her heart melted, she fell deeply in love with Ivan and with that, Koshchey's spell of many ages began to dim. Ivan, his horse, the wolf, and all the people Koshchey had frozen began to thaw. All evil things eventually fail, and when they do, the evil turns inward. So it was with Koshchey. As the cold crept through his body, he struggled to make it to the warmth and safety of the Firebird, but he did not succeed.

The Firebird flew from his cage, settled on the branch of a tree and waited for the wizard to freeze. Then he shook himself, scattering his glowing feathers all over the ground. Vasilisa and Ivan gathered them up and gave them to the people who came from the woods and the valleys and the mountains to witness Koshchey turn into a pillar of snow.

When the people saw him like this, they realized he never had any power over them except that which they had given him. It was only their shame and their regret that froze their hearts, and made them vulnerable to his spell.

They decided they would each take two feathers from the Firebird – one to light the way and warm their hearts, and one on which to write their regrets. These they would take with them on the long journey home and burn so they would be free forever more.

It was a triumphant procession led by Ivan, Vasilisa, and the Firebird that reached the kingdom of Tsar Demyan, where they found a great welcome. The people of the kingdom had long realized their pain at losing the three princes had come from their shame and regret. They had built spirit house in the central square of the village, wrote their regrets on pieces of red paper shaped like feathers and had been praying for the return of the Firebird to them on fire so they could be free.

This they did with great joy. Ivan and Vasilisa were married. The Firebird danced and flew to the apple tree, took the largest golden apple to great applause and disappeared into the night.

The end