

THE FIREBIRD

A Tale from Russia

Long ago, in a vast area of Russia, lived a Tsar and his three sons. On their land was a most unusual tree. It grew apples made of solid gold. It was the Tsar's favorite tree. One night a thief came and stole one of the precious apples from the tree. This made the Tsar very angry.

His two oldest boys took turns staying out at night in hopes of catching the thief. But, they fell asleep. While they dozed, the culprit came to take more of the precious apples. Ivan, the Tsar's youngest son, wanted a turn. His brothers didn't believe he could do what they could not. But, Ivan insisted and his father let him.

Unlike his brothers, Ivan stayed awake. Shortly before dawn the sky lit up. A magnificent bird arrived and landed on one of the tree's lower branches. Its feathers glowed like fire. Ivan quickly reached out and grabbed the bird by its tail. Startled, the bird beat its wings and flew away. However, one of its tail feathers came out in Ivan's hands. This he gave to his father, the Tsar.

Although the Tsar loved having the firebird's tail feather, he did

not stay content for long. Soon, he wanted a whole firebird. His two oldest boys set out to capture one but were unable to. When they returned empty handed, Ivan said he wanted to try. His brothers didn't believe he could do what they could not. But, Ivan insisted and his father let him.

After a long journey, Ivan met a large grey wolf who offered to help him find, and capture, a firebird. Ivan climbed onto its back and, in an instant, they found themselves in a sunlit glade. Here the wolf told Ivan to mix his beer, bread and cheese then scatter it over the ground. Once this was done, the wolf told Ivan to hide behind a tree. Shortly thereafter the sky lit up because several firebirds were flying to the glade.

As the birds ate the beer soaked bread and cheese, they began to get drunk. This enabled Ivan to sneak up on one and capture it. As soon as he did, he put it in a sack and ran to where the grey wolf was hiding. Ivan jumped on to the wolf's back and, in no time at all, the wolf brought Ivan back home. Ivan immediately gave the special bird to his father.

The Tsar was so happy that he rewarded Ivan handsomely. But, because the Tsar was a greedy man, he didn't stay content for long. He heard about a princess named Yelena the Beautiful, and he wanted to marry her. So, he asked his sons to find her and bring her to him. His two oldest sons tried but failed. When they returned empty handed, Ivan said he wanted to try. His brothers didn't believe he could do what they could not. But, Ivan insisted

and his father let him.

Ivan was again aided by the Grey Wolf who quickly brought him to the kingdom where Yelena the Beautiful lived. The wolf also helped Ivan capture Yelena. As they rode back to Ivan's home, Yelena and Ivan fell in love with each other. Ivan did not want to give her to his father. Again, the wolf offered to help Ivan. He turned himself into a princess that was the spitting image of Yelena. Ivan then brought the fake princess (which was really the wolf) to the Tsar. Ivan's father was so happy that he rewarded Ivan handsomely. He also had the marriage performed immediately. When the Tsar went to kiss his bride, she turned back into the grey wolf. This startled the Tsar so much that he dropped dead from shock.

The real Yelena then appeared in front of the guests. She addressed the crowd, saying that since she was now the queen, and the Tsar was dead, that she would marry his son, Ivan. The wedding took place immediately and Ivan became the new Tsar. He and Yelena were wonderful rulers, who were loved by all. They had many children and lived happily ever after.

Adapted by Kathleen Simonetta. Inspired by the following tales.

"The Firebird," Russian Folk-Tales. Retold by James Riordan. Illustrated by Andrew Breakspeare. Oxford University Press, c2000, pp. 86-91.

"Tsarevich Ivan, the Firebird and the Grey Wolf," Russian Fairy Tales. Retold by Gillian Avery. With Illustrations by Ivan Bilibin. NY: Alfred A. Knopf, c1995, pp 127-147.

