

Traditional Tales

Firebird



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Chapter 1

Many years ago, there lived a rich and powerful tsar. Tsar Vislav had three sons, each very different to the other two. Tsar Vislav had something else precious to him too. In the glorious grounds which surrounded his great palace, there was a beautiful orchard. Within this orchard stood one tree that was more special than all of the others because it bore apples of pure gold.

The tsar delighted in strolling in this orchard, gazing upon the apples as they grew plumper day by day, and finally, he would pick them. Only he was permitted to pick the ripened golden apples, and should a golden apple fall to the ground while the tsar was not present, he allowed only Erik, his trusted old gardener, to pick it up and bring it to him immediately.

One day, to Tsar Vislav's horror, his guards brought him news that a golden apple had gone missing from his beloved golden

apple tree. The tsar was filled with rage to think that someone had dared to steal one of his apples, and his anger was directed towards his guards for the breach of security. "This must never happen again!" bellowed the tsar. "The culprit must be caught and punished. Bring me my sons and my gardener."



The group gathered in the orchard and as Erik the gardener approached, the tsar could see that he was holding a glowing feather. It looked a little like the feather of a peacock, but it was the colour of a blazing fire and he held it delicately at the tip as it appeared to be alight. "Your Majesty," bowed Erik. "This clue tells us who has taken your golden apple – it was the firebird! I had thought the existence of such a creature was just a legend, but I found this feather by the orchard wall and it can only have come from a firebird."

The tsar's two oldest sons sniggered at this, although they stared at the burning feather, obviously intrigued.

"Whoever is taking my golden apples must be caught," declared the tsar. "I will give half of my kingdom to the person who brings the thief to me!"

Dmitry, the tsar's oldest son, was quick to jump at a chance like this. "I shall keep watch in the orchard tonight, Father, and I will bring you the thief by dawn."

The tsar did not look convinced by this. He knew all too well that Dmitry usually had little motivation to do anything other than drink fine wines and play cards with his friends, but he agreed nevertheless.

At sunset, young Dmitry arrived in the orchard. He was wrapped up warmly, ready for the cold night ahead, and he settled himself under the apple tree, full of determination.

Dmitry had been partying the night before, and inevitably he found this boring night watch extremely dull. His eyelids grew heavy and though he jolted



himself awake a couple of times, it was not long before he fell into a deep sleep. He snored loudly, and the next sound he heard was the sound of his father's voice wailing in disbelief.

"How can you have let this happen?" the tsar cried. Dmitry rose to his feet but he knew straight away that he had failed to stay awake and that the thief had taken another of his father's apples.



The following night, it was the turn of the middle son, Vasily, to catch the thief. He was not particularly concerned with gaining half of his father's kingdom; he was a dreamer and an extremely talented musician. Although he enjoyed his comfortable life in the palace, he had no desire to become richer. He brought with him to the garden a delicious range of

nuts and treats and a flute to help the time pass more quickly. Vasily did much better than his older brother had done as, at half past two in the morning, he was still dancing and playing lively tunes around the orchard. However, by three o'clock in the morning, he was slumped in an exhausted heap beneath his father's treasured tree. At some time between three and six in the morning, therefore, the thief must have struck again,

because at six o'clock a very disappointed tsar stormed into the orchard and woke Vasily with a sharp poke in the ribs with his flute! To make matters worse for poor Vasily, his nuts and treats had also disappeared.

"Surely it is my turn now," exclaimed Ivan, the youngest son, as he met with his father later that day. "I should be allowed my chance to catch the thief."



"I see no point, Ivan," replied the tsar. "You are a good boy but you are still so young and foolish. Why would you be able to catch the thief when both your brothers have failed?"

"Well, I can assure you..." began the strong-willed prince, but his father was already waving him away, with a look of annoyance on his face.

Ivan made up his mind to keep watch that night in the orchard. At first, he settled himself beneath the apple tree but it soon became obvious to him that he was far too comfortable there and that he would surely fall asleep just as his brothers had done. He decided, therefore, to climb up into the branches and to keep watch from there.

The night felt long and, at times, Ivan longed to close his eyes just for a minute. However, he resisted and he was duly rewarded, for at about half past three, the whole orchard suddenly lit up



with a soft rosy-orange hue. Ivan was sure that the sunrise had already arrived! He felt a sensation of warmth on his cheeks as he gazed upwards and saw the most remarkable sight.

The thief had come indeed and, as the gardener had suspected, it was the firebird. Its enormous plumes were glowing brightly in the sky, shining with a mixture of yellows, reds and oranges.

Although Ivan's instinct was to gape in wonder at this glorious beast, he quickly stretched out to grab the firebird as it reached with its arrow-like beak for one of the valuable fruits.

The firebird let out a huge squawk and frantically beat its wings in an attempt to fly upwards, away from Ivan's purposeful grasp.

The almighty bird was just too powerful for Ivan and it managed to escape, leaving Ivan holding a gleaming feather.



Chapter 2

The tsar was pleased to have it confirmed for him that it was the firebird that had been stealing his apples, and he praised Ivan for staying awake and snatching a feather from the bird. The tsar took the feather in his hand and said, “I want this bird. Whoever brings the firebird to me shall have half of my kingdom.”

Dmitry and Vasily were jealous that their younger brother had stayed awake and seen the firebird where they had failed, so they set off together on their horses to find the firebird, their minds fixed on making their father proud of them.

Tsar Vislav waved them off and wished them well, but when Ivan asked if he too could go off in search of the firebird, the tsar was dismissive. “Ivan, you did brilliantly to stay awake to witness the firebird stealing my golden apples, but to go off



on a dangerous journey is another thing entirely. You are still young and have much to learn about the world.”

Ivan’s eyes opened wide in disbelief and he opened his mouth to argue but then thought better of it. Instead, he shrugged and skulked away to his chamber, where he hastily grabbed a few items and set off on one of the mares from his father’s stables.

Ivan had noticed the direction in which the frantic firebird had taken off and he set out to follow it. He soon reached a forest.

Forests, of course, are always darker than elsewhere, but Ivan felt sure that this forest was particularly dark. There was a thin mist and Ivan felt uneasy as he led his horse along the sandy path which ran through the forest. After a while, Ivan came to a split in the path. There were three paths ahead of him and right in front of him was a stone about the same height as himself which bore this ominous message:

‘Travel by the middle path and you’ll endure hunger and cold.

Travel by the path to the left and you will not live to come out of this forest, though your horse shall live.

Travel by the path to the right and you will survive but your horse will die.’

Ivan’s first response at reading this was to turn around and gallop for home. However, he knew he could never return home without the firebird so he thought for a minute. The best option had to be to take the path to the right.

The path took them deep into the forest where the branches hung so low over the path that Ivan had to almost lie flat on the saddle to fit beneath them. They reached a clearing and it was there that Ivan saw a grey wolf. This wolf was significantly bigger than any wolf Ivan had seen before. His horse obviously sensed the danger as she stood on her hind legs, throwing Ivan to the ground. Before the horse could flee, the wolf swiftly



pounced and, to Ivan's amazement, consumed the poor horse in just a couple of mouthfuls.



The wolf looked at Ivan curiously, licking his lips. Ivan stared back at the wolf defiantly then began to continue on his way on foot. The wolf jogged along behind Ivan, caught him up and then, to Ivan's surprise, spoke to him. "You are a brave young thing. You did not flinch when I came near you. What brings you to my forest?"

Ivan stopped walking, looked the wolf straight in the eye and said, "I am here to trace the firebird. Do you know where I might find it?"

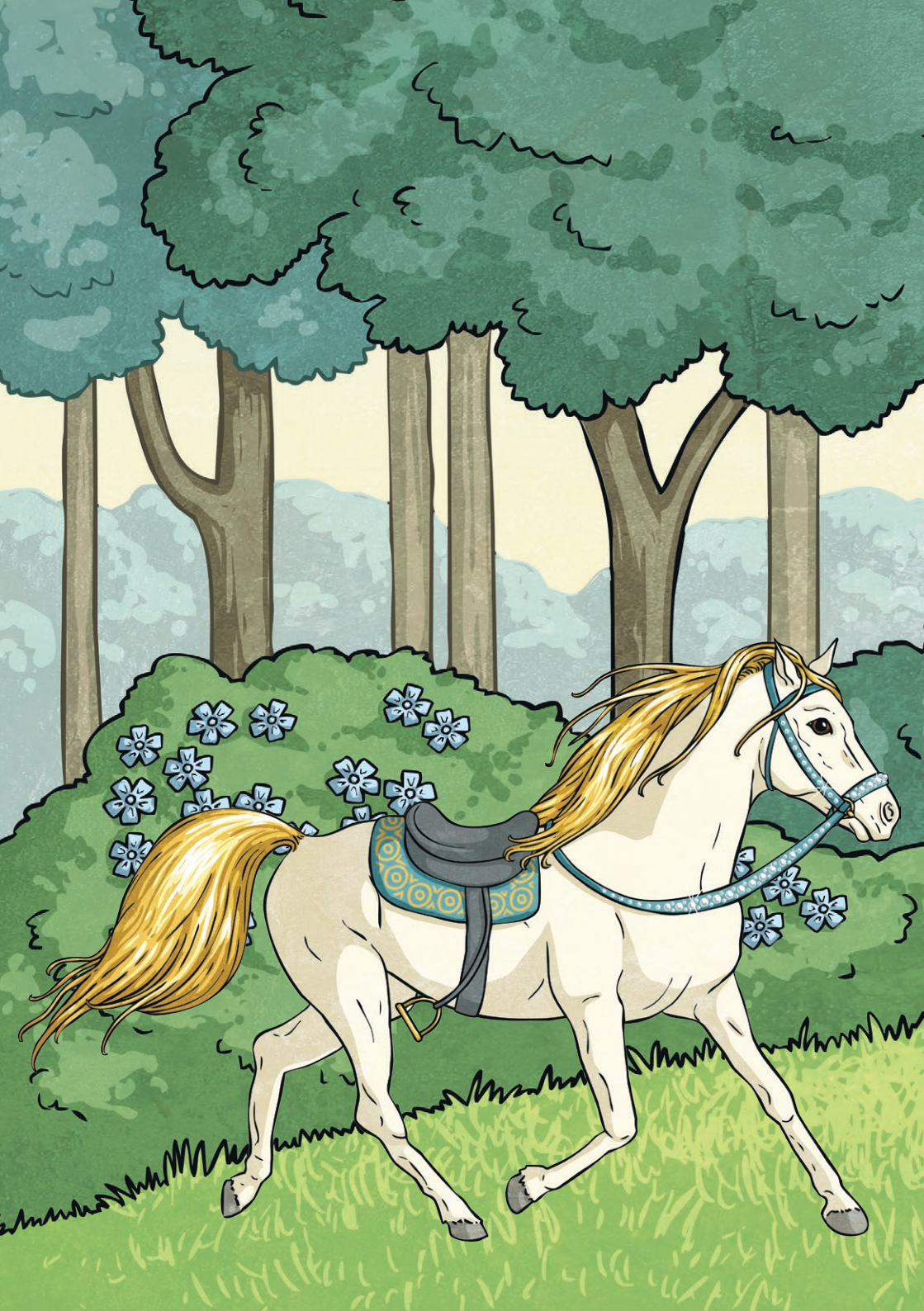
"As it happens, I do," replied the wolf. "Look, I am sorry that I ate your horse. If you climb on my back, I will take you to the firebird."

Without a moment's hesitation, Ivan leapt onto the wolf's back, holding tight as he had a feeling this was not going to be a gentle ride. Sure enough, the wolf took off at a terrifying pace, galloping through the dark forest and then out from the trees and into the open countryside. He headed purposefully to the

walls of the next kingdom and it was there that he stopped. The wolf was not a bit out of breath. He spoke calmly and sternly to Ivan as he climbed off his back. "Beyond these walls are the magnificent gardens of Tsar Dolmat. In one of these gardens you will find the firebird in a cage hanging from a bracket on a wall. Reach into the cage and grab the sleeping firebird. Whatever you do, though, do not touch the cage in which she rests."

"Thank you, Wolf," said Ivan as he clambered nimbly over the wall. He wandered from garden to garden and eventually his eyes fell on the firebird again. As the wolf had predicted, she was sleeping peacefully and was in the most dazzling cage. Ivan saw the cage of pure shining gold and he said to himself, "It will be far easier to carry the bird in the cage rather than risk grabbing the bird and waking her."

As soon as his finger touched the gold cage, deafening alarm bells went off. Ivan instinctively covered his ears and almost immediately he found guards appearing all around him.



Chapter 3

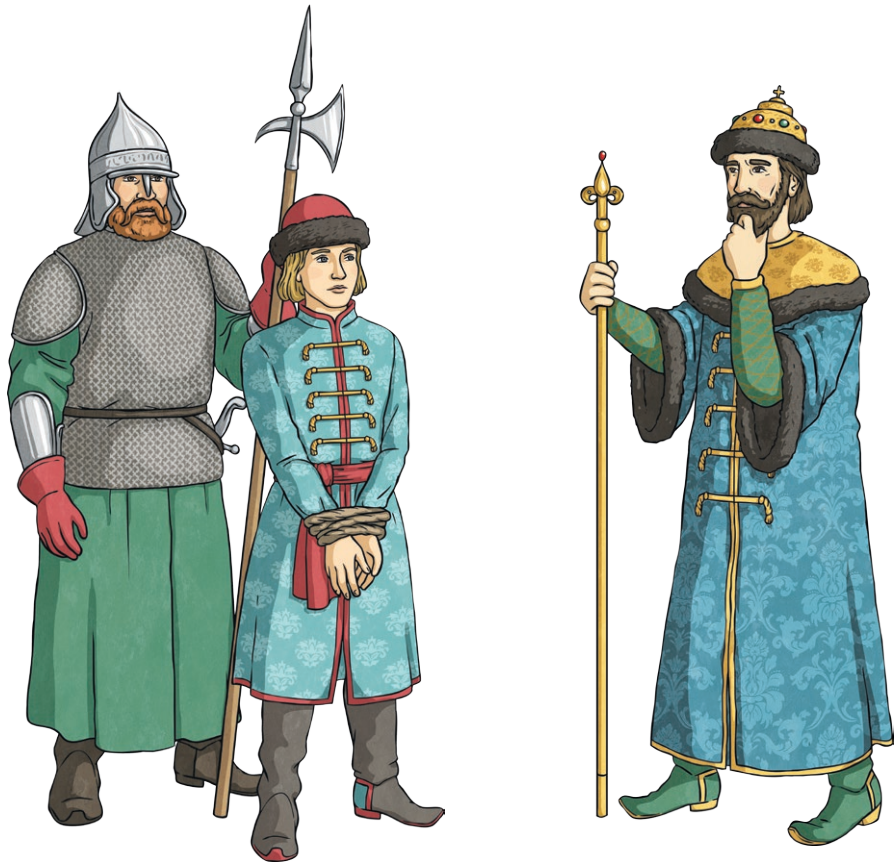
Ivan's arms were tied together with rope and he was taken in front of Tsar Dolmat. The tsar looked Ivan up and down quizzically. He didn't say anything for a very long time and then finally he spoke very softly. "Why did you try to steal my firebird?"

Ivan's heart was racing as he replied, "The bird was stealing the golden apples from my father's apple tree. I was sent to track down and capture the thief."

Tsar Dolmat stroked his chin slowly. "I see. Who is your father?"

"My father is Tsar Vislav," replied young Ivan, still very fearful of what his fate might be.

The tsar made Ivan very uneasy, even though he spoke so calmly. "I should throw you into my dungeon, you know that? You are a



prince, however, and you were doing as your father asked, so here is my decision. You do a favour for me, and not only will you be spared from imprisonment, but I will also give you my firebird.”

Ivan let out a big sigh. “Why of course, Tsar Dolmat. Thank you so much. Name your favour.”

“Bring me the horse with the golden mane and you shall have your firebird,” said the tsar, and with that, he left the room, leaving his guards to untie and release Ivan.

Once Ivan was free of the guards’ grasp, he did not look back. He ran across the gardens and hurtled back over the wall, landing in front of the grey wolf, who was waiting patiently for him. “I heard the alarm bells,” commented the wolf knowingly.

“Yes, I’m afraid I...” began Ivan.

“Touched the golden cage,” finished the wolf, shaking his head.

“Well, yes, I did, but luckily the tsar will still give me the firebird if I can bring him the horse with the golden mane. Do you know where I might find it?” asked Ivan.

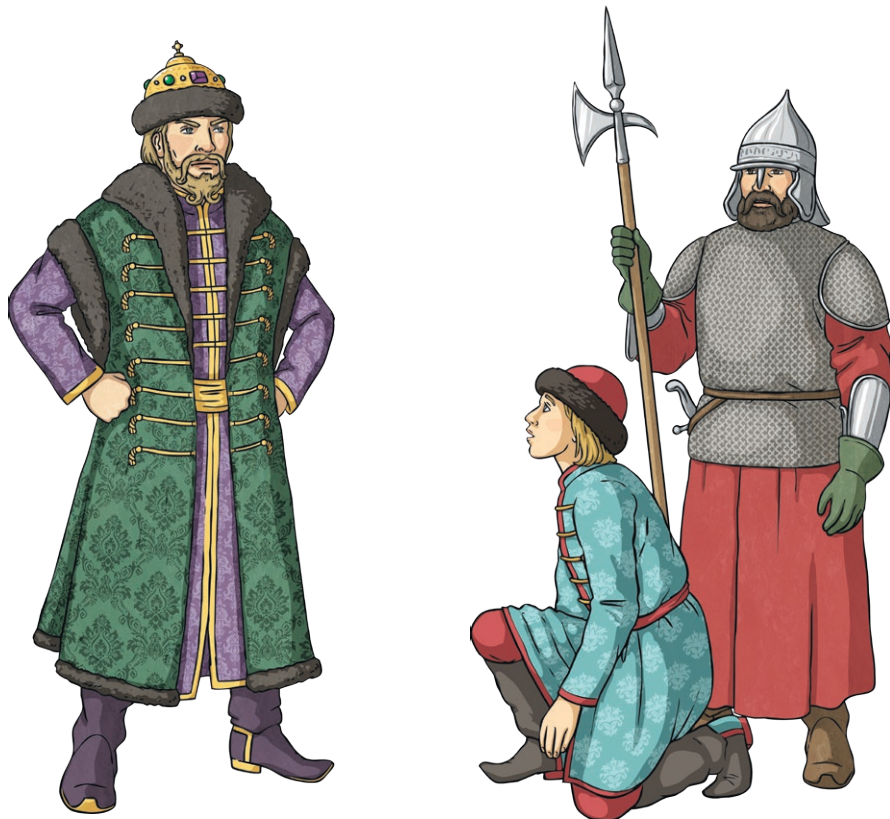
The wolf did not hide his disappointment in Ivan but he agreed to help him find the horse with the golden mane. Once again, Ivan climbed onto the wolf’s back and the pair sped away from the walls of Tsar Dolmat’s kingdom. They travelled around lakes and over fields until they reached the stables of Tsar Alfron.

Ivan climbed off the wolf’s back and awaited the wolf’s instructions. The wolf spoke in a hushed voice. “Inside the stables you will find the horse with the golden mane. On the wall of the stable you will see its bridle. Please be aware, Ivan, that this bridle is studded with the most magnificent jewels and treasures, but you must not touch it. Whatever you do, do not touch the bridle.”

“I have learnt my lesson, Wolf,” remarked Ivan, and he thanked his friend and crept into the royal stables.

The horse was easy to find and was willingly led away by Ivan. The precious bridle was so tempting to Ivan that he could not resist taking a moment to gaze on its beauty. Unwittingly, the prince must have reached out to touch the bridle because suddenly loud alarm bells filled the air. The stables were swiftly filled with stable hands, who wrestled Ivan to the ground and then marched him to their master.

Tsar Alfron was as aggressive in his nature as Tsar Dolmat had been calm. His face was bright red and he bared his teeth as he raged at Ivan, "Who are you, who has dared to take my horse and bridle?"



"I am Prince Ivan, son of Tsar Vislav," explained Ivan, feeling sure that his luck had now run out. Although the tsar was evidently still enraged, he listened to Ivan's explanation.

"You do not take what is not yours, boy," roared the tsar. "However, as it happens, I need you to do something for me. You bring me Princess Helena from the kingdom over the mountains, and not only will you walk free but I shall give you my horse with the golden mane."

Ivan readily accepted the quest and sprinted speedily out of Tsar Alfron's palace and back to the stables, where he found the wolf lurking in the shadows.

"Ivan, you have been an utter fool," lectured the wolf. "My instructions were very clear and yet you have landed yourself in trouble again."

"I know. I'm sorry," replied Ivan. "I need your help again, please, Wolf. This time I need to find Princess Helena."

The wolf despaired at what a foolish and impulsive youth the prince had been but he could not help but like him. "Get on my back," he growled. "From now on, we are doing things my way!"

Over the ice-capped mountains they flew and then down into a valley, where the wolf stopped again at the walls of a kingdom.

“Here, my friend, you shall stay,” instructed the wolf. “I will fetch Princess Helena myself this time.”

It seemed that no sooner had the wolf left Ivan than he had arrived back, holding the princess loosely in his jaws. She had been sleeping but began to stir. “Do not be afraid,” soothed Ivan. “You are safe with us.” Ivan could not take his eyes off the beautiful Princess Helena and he helped her onto the back of the wolf with him before the wolf shot off again over the mountains to deliver Princess Helena to Tsar Alfron as they had promised they would.



Just as the snowy landscape turned back to green and they came closer to Tsar Alfron’s kingdom, Ivan tugged on the neck of his friend and asked him to stop. “Dear Wolf,” cried young Ivan. “What shall we do? Princess Helena and I have fallen in love. There is no way I can deliver her to Tsar Alfron but without the horse with the golden mane, I cannot secure the firebird for my father.”

“Very true,” agreed the wolf. “More to the point, you will be hunted down by the tsar’s guards if you break your promise.”



Chapter 4

The wolf watched as the young couple hugged each other, discussing what they should do next.

“Ivan, there is one way we can resolve this,” explained the wolf. “Stand back, both of you!”

Ivan and Princess Helena did as he asked and then watched, their eyes wide, as the wolf transformed himself into a perfect replica of Princess Helena.

Where once the wolf had stood, there now stood another princess. Princess Helena walked around the copy of herself several times, utterly shocked.

“Take me to Tsar Alfron,” instructed the wolf. “Once I am presented to the tsar, he will give you the horse with the golden

mane. You can then ride off to Tsar Dolmat to exchange the horse for the firebird, picking up the real Princess Helena on your way. Princess Helena, we will need to hide you here while Ivan and I go before Tsar Alfron.”

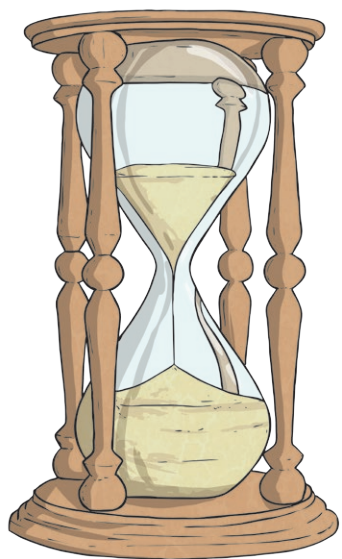
“A brilliant plan,” smiled Ivan, “but what of you, dear friend? Are you to live forever as the wife of Tsar Alfron?”

“I certainly shall not,” replied the wolf. “I shall only appear in this form long enough to secure the horse and to allow you to escape, and then I shall catch up with you.”

After hiding the real Princess Helena, Ivan and the wolf (in his new disguise) went to the palace of Tsar Alfron. He was delighted to welcome Princess Helena and grateful to Ivan for bringing her

safely to him. He instructed his many servants to prepare for his wedding to Princess Helena. He invited Ivan to stay for the wedding but Ivan politely declined. Instead, he gratefully and hastily left the palace, with the horse with the golden mane wearing its magnificent jewelled bridle.

When the clock struck midnight, the wolf returned to his original form and fled the palace in pursuit of Ivan and Helena. When Tsar Alfron’s servants



went excitedly to wake the princess the next morning, ready to prepare the young woman for her wedding, they were horrified to find her bed was empty and a surprising number of grey hairs lay all around her bed chamber.

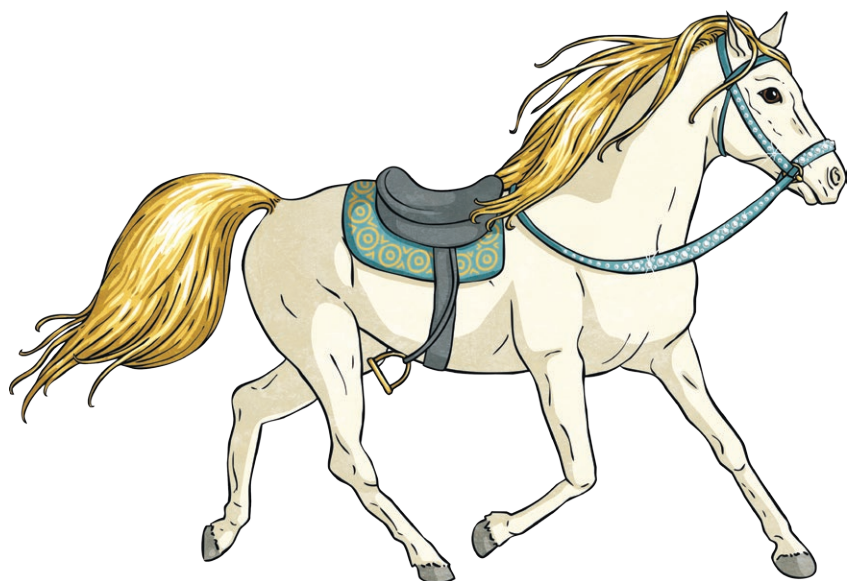
The wolf’s speed was far superior to that of the horse with the golden mane so he caught up with Ivan and Princess Helena quickly. There were still some miles to go before they reached the kingdom of Tsar Dolmat. “It is a shame that we have to part with this wonderful horse,” commented Ivan as they passed by the lake. “I am almost tempted to go straight home now and to present my father with this precious horse instead of the firebird.



“Your father would be proud of you for bringing home such a marvellous creature,” remarked the wolf, “but it was the firebird that you first set out to find and you must complete your quest. There may be a way for you to have it all, though. I shall do you one last favour, Ivan.”

With that, the wolf suddenly transformed himself into an exact replica of the horse with the golden mane. The real horse seemed unnerved by this and backed away from the transformed wolf in panic. Princess Helena soothed the horse gently and led it away to a cave by the lake, where the two of them hid while Ivan and the transformed wolf headed off to deceive Tsar Dolmat.

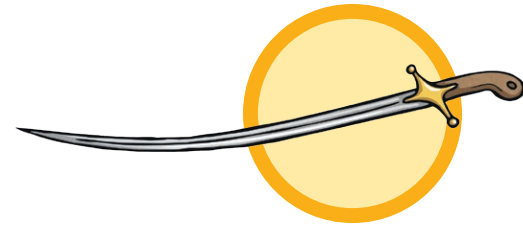
Tsar Dolmat was amazed by the beauty of the horse with the golden mane and he thanked Ivan profusely, gladly handing over the firebird and wishing him well for the future. Ivan left the palace, carrying the stunning bird in its cage of pure gold, delighted that he was so close to nearing the end of his journey. He collected Princess Helena from the cave by the lake and they both rode happily on the back of the horse with the golden mane, carrying the firebird and finally heading home.



As the clock struck midnight, the wolf transformed back into his original form. Unfortunately, Tsar Dolmat had chosen to go out for a midnight canter and when his horse changed suddenly into a wolf, the tsar was thrown to the ground. The wolf sprinted away so quickly that the tsar could hardly make out who or what was running away and he could not process what had happened.

It was back in the gloomy forest, where Ivan and the wolf had first met, that the wolf caught up with them. “You have been such a friend to me,” said Ivan. “Without you, I could not have achieved all of this,” he continued, gesturing towards his future wife, the horse with the golden mane and the firebird. “I am so blessed.”

“You have been a good friend too, young Ivan,” replied the wolf seriously. “Now I must leave you. Be happy, young man, and you too, Princess Helena. I really am sorry that I ate your horse, Ivan.” And with that, he was gone.



Chapter 5

The young couple were very close to home but the horse was clearly weary, and Princess Helena and Ivan both felt their eyes growing heavy. Without the wolf they could not travel as quickly as before. Therefore, they decided to rest for the night and to delight Ivan's father with their arrival in the fresh light of morning. They settled down to sleep in the forest, next to a fire that they started with sparks from the firebird.

While they were sleeping, Ivan's brothers happened to travel through the forest. They too were returning from their quest to find the firebird but their efforts had only ended in disappointment, so far at least.

Dmitry noticed the firebird first. Its vibrant flames were impossible to miss, even from some distance, and as the brothers got closer, they too saw the magnificent horse with the golden

mane. Finally, they set eyes on a beautiful sleeping princess and their younger brother. "Look," whispered Dmitry bitterly to Vasily. "He has everything and now he will be rewarded with half of our father's kingdom too. It really isn't fair."

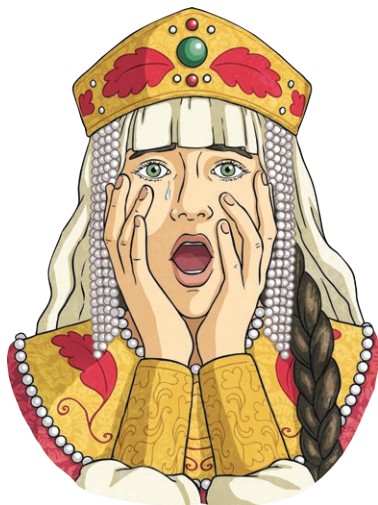
"I know," sighed Vasily. "But what can we do about it?"

"This!" thundered the jealous Dmitry suddenly and he sank his sword into his sleeping brother, killing him instantly.

Dmitry's violent yell had woken Princess Helena from her sleep. The sight that met her when she awoke was horrifying and she ran over to her beloved Ivan and embraced him. Dmitry dragged her to her feet and, waving his sword menacingly in her direction, said, "Say nothing of this to anyone, or you will die. Come with us. You shall meet our father, Tsar Vislav, and live in comfort in the palace there - if you keep your mouth shut."

Princess Helena knew then who these men were and could not believe that they could kill their brother so heartlessly. She went with them; she didn't know what else to do, with Ivan dead, the wolf gone and her family miles away beyond the mountains.

Inevitably, Tsar Vislav welcomed his sons home with open arms. He was



overjoyed to have the firebird. His love of all things shiny meant he was enamoured with the horse with the golden mane and he was pleased to offer such a beautiful princess a place to stay. He hoped that one of his sons might marry her. He thought that it had been too many years since a wedding had been held at the palace. Dmitry revelled in the attention. While Vasily took some pleasure in the fact that his father was happy, he generally seemed very pale and was seen to eat very little at mealtimes.

Meanwhile, the wolf happened to be looking for food in the forest when he came across his dear friend's body. He ran to Ivan and looked carefully at all his wounds. "Who has done this to you, my poor friend?" wept the wolf. As the wolf wept, his tears fell onto Ivan's wounds and as the magical water landed, the wounds began to miraculously heal.

Eventually all the wounds were healed and Ivan opened his eyes. "What happened?" he asked dreamily.

"I found you here dead and bleeding," replied the wolf. "If it were not that my tears contain the elixir of life, you still would be. Do you know who did this to you?"

"I can only guess," muttered Ivan. Although Ivan was still weak, he managed to climb onto the faithful wolf's back and the pair returned to the kingdom of Tsar Vislav, where they found everyone seated at a glorious banquet. The look of horror

and fear in Vasily's eyes when he saw him told Ivan all he needed to know.

Princess Helena blurted out the truth when she saw Ivan: that Dmitry had stabbed his brother and that it was in fact Ivan who had obtained the firebird and the horse with the golden mane for his father. Tsar Vislav was horrified that Dmitry and Vasily had done such awful things and they were sent to the dungeons. He hugged Ivan and praised him for his bravery.



Princess Helena and Ivan were immensely relieved to see one another again. They clung to one another and the tsar was delighted to offer his blessing for their marriage.

Some weeks later, the pair were married in joyous celebration. Tsar Vislav gave them half of his kingdom and Prince Ivan helped his father rule until his father became too old to govern.

Although the horse with the golden mane was the tsar's most treasured thing until the day he died, he gave Ivan the firebird. Princess Helena said she could not bear to see such a splendid creature in a cage and so they set the firebird free to live in the forest, although it often visited the kingdom and all who saw it delighted in its beauty.

And what became of the grey wolf?

After the wedding, he disappeared and Ivan never saw him again.

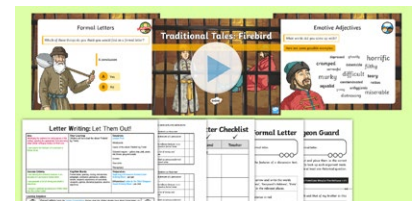


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When the dazzling firebird is found to be stealing golden apples from the tsar's tree, the young and determined Ivan sets off to capture the thief.

Where will his quest take him and what secret powers does the mysterious grey wolf possess?

