



THE FIREBIRD AND PRINCESS VASSILISSA: *A RUSSIAN FOLKTALE*

CAST

ARCHER	<i>The Czar's finest archer</i>
HORSE	<i>The Archer's horse</i>
CZAR	<i>Ruler of a faraway kingdom</i>
FIREBIRD	<i>Magical creature</i>
LOBSTER	<i>Enormous crustacean</i>
PRINCESS	<i>Beautiful princess</i>

NARRATOR: In a certain kingdom beyond the twenty-seven magical lands there lived a mighty Czar. This Czar had an archer who was as brave as he was strong. The Archer, in turn, had a horse that was as strong as he was fleet of foot.

One day the Archer mounted his horse and rode off into the forest to hunt. As he rode the Archer noticed something glowing like fire in the midst of the leaf-covered

path. He reigned up his horse for a closer look. It was a feather.

HORSE: Neigh! Neigh! Leave that feather where it is, Master. For if you pick it up, you will have grave misfortune.

NARRATOR: This caused the Archer to think. He was not surprised that his horse was talking because this kind of thing happened all the time beyond the twenty-seven magical kingdoms. Rather he was surprised that his horse was prophesying.

ARCHER: (*laughing*) What does a horse know of the future?

NARRATOR: The Archer knew that this was the feather of a firebird, the most elusive creature in the world, and if he took it before the Czar, he would win great favor. His ambition proved too much for him, so he swung from the horse—who immediately looked annoyed—and snatched up the feather. It cast a strange orange glow over his face as he examined it.

ARCHER: With this beauty I will be a favorite of the Czar.

HORSE: (*annoyed*) Oh brother. (*neighing*)

NARRATOR: The Archer spurred his horse back toward the Czar's palace.

ARCHER: (*shouting*) Your majesty! Your majesty! Look what I have found!

NARRATOR: The Czar appeared on the balcony.

CZAR: (*grumbling*) What is it?

ARCHER: I have found a firebird's feather!

CZAR: Ha! We'll see about that. Bring it up to me.

NARRATOR: The Czar sent a servant to fetch his magical eyeglass, which could spot forgeries a mile away. He attached it to his eye and turned toward the glowing feather.

CZAR: (*shocked*) Good gracious! This *is* a firebird feather! Do you know what this means?

ARCHER: I'm your new favorite archer?

CZAR: Don't be stupid. It means that the firebird does exist after all!

ARCHER: And I'm your favorite for proving it—right?

CZAR: (*ignoring him*) Ha-ha! If you, my good archer, have found this feather, that means that you can go out and fetch me the whole bird!

ARCHER: Well—I—

NARRATOR: The Czar leered at the Archer.

CZAR: And if you *fail*, out will come my sword, and *off* will come your head.

ARCHER: (*gulp*)

NARRATOR: The horse found his master weeping in the stables. The Archer had always been a bit of a cry-baby.

HORSE: (*sigh*) Why are you crying, Master?

ARCHER: (*sobbing*) The Czar saw the feather! Now he wants the whole bird!

HORSE: (*sarcastically*) Hmmm. It seems like I remember someone telling you not to show it to him. Now who was that?

ARCHER: I'm a dead man!

HORSE: Well, don't let it get you down! There's still hope. Here's what you do: go to the Czar and tell him that you need one hundred bags of corn.

ARCHER: Corn! Of course! Perfect! (*pause*) Why do I need the corn?

HORSE: (*sigh*) To catch the firebird.

ARCHER: A-ha! Brilliant!

NARRATOR: The Archer made his request of the Czar, who perplexedly granted it. And following the horse's instructions, the Archer spread the corn over a nearby field.

The next day the Archer and his horse arrived at the field before dawn.

HORSE: Hide behind that tree! Here she comes!

NARRATOR: The Archer had thought the sun was rising, but it was the firebird, sweeping down out of the heavens. The earth shook, and the seas rose, and with an enormous whoosh the firebird landed in the midst of the field. (*enormous whoosh*) The firebird began pecking at the corn.

The horse galloped out to where the firebird hunched, and put one of his hooves down upon her wing.

HORSE: Gotcha!

FIREBIRD: Hey! What's the big idea?

ARCHER: (*shouting*) Alright, Horse!

NARRATOR: The Archer ran from his hiding place and bound the pinned bird tightly with ropes.

FIREBIRD: Help! Help! How dare you! How dare you! I'm an endangered species!

HORSE: You'll be even more endangered if you don't button your beak!

NARRATOR: The Archer and his horse presented the helpless firebird to the Czar, who was very pleased.

CZAR: Perfect! Perfect! Have it decapitated and stuffed at once! Now, my boy, truly you are the finest archer I have ever seen.

ARCHER: Thank you! I suppose now you'll be showering me with gold and silver.

CZAR: No, no. Not yet. If you can fetch me the firebird, then you are capable enough to do yet another task for me. You must go fetch me a bride. I will marry only one girl. Her name is Princess Vassilissa.

ARCHER: (*sarcastically*) Let me guess. She's not a local girl.

CZAR: Of course not. She lives at the very end of the world, where the bright sun rises. Go there and bring her back to me. Or—

ARCHER: You'll cut my head off. I know. I know.

NARRATOR: The horse put a hoof on his shoulder.

HORSE: (*whispering*) Psst. Before you start crying again—ask the Czar for a gold-topped tent and his best food and drink to take with you on your journey.

ARCHER: How can you think about food at a time like this?

HORSE: Just do it!

NARRATOR: And so the Archer asked these things from the Czar, who gladly complied. This archer was rising high in his estimation. He sincerely hoped he would not die on this next mission. He was making an excellent royal go-for.

The Archer and his horse set off. They rode to the very edge of the world, beyond the twenty-seven magical kingdoms. As they stood on the edge of the world, they looked out over the vast waters that lay beyond. There on the waves—in a silver barge—was the princess.

ARCHER: So what's so great about this water-logged princess?

HORSE: Set up the tent! Put out the food and drink—then call her over.

ARCHER: This is never going to work.

NARRATOR: But the Archer did as his horse said. Then he called to the princess:

ARCHER: Yoo-hoo! Yoo-hoo! Princess! Care for some lunch, melody?

NARRATOR: The princess, who just so happened to have a weakness for gold-

topped tents, pulled out a glistening paddle and propelled her way to the shore.

ARCHER: Welcome, Princess Vassilissa! Come inside! Try the best food and wine that our far-off land has to offer!

PRINCESS: Answer me one question. Is this really a gold-topped tent?

ARCHER: Why yes, melody?

PRINCESS: (*giggle*)

NARRATOR: The princess, never sensing a trap, came inside and began to feast. She drank a whole cup of wine in the process and sank forward onto the feasting table.

PRINCESS: (*snoring*)

ARCHER: I feel a bit funny about abducting her like this.

HORSE: Don't worry. There's worse to come.

NARRATOR: The Archer quickly folded up his gold-topped tent and piled it—along with the drunk princess—onto the horse, whose hooves had them back to the Czar's palace in a flash.

CZAR: My bride! You have brought me my bride! (*pause*) What's the matter with her?

ARCHER: She's a bit—groggy. Give her a bit.

NARRATOR: Some smelling salts were brought for the princess, who woke up indignantly.

PRINCESS: (*confused*) Where am I? Where is my barge? The last thing I remember was being in the most beautiful gold-topped tent.

CZAR: Hello, my dear. I am the Czar. I'm to be your husband.

NARRATOR: The princess eyed him coldly.

PRINCESS: You just had your *lackey* here kidnap me, and now you're proposing?

CZAR: And if you don't say yes I'll—

PRINCESS: Cut my head off. I know. I know. I've been through proposals before. Well, in that case—I'll marry you. But I can't get married without my wedding dress.

ARCHER: Oh great.

PRINCESS: It's back at the edge of the world.

ARCHER: That's not so bad.

PRINCESS: At the bottom of the sea—underneath a rock.

CZAR: What an interesting way to manage your wardrobe, my dear. No problem. I will have my favorite archer here to fetch it for you. Archer—

ARCHER: No need for the threats this time. We're on it.

NARRATOR: The Archer and his horse raced off once again.

HORSE: You just had to pick up that feather, didn't you?

NARRATOR: They reached the edge of the world, and the Archer began to dive into the sea. Before he could, an enormous lobster emerged from the brine and flew a spray of water a mile high. It scuttled onto the beach.

ARCHER: (*frightened*) Ah!

HORSE: Don't let these invertebrates intimidate you!

NARRATOR: The horse thundered forward and kicked the lobster with his front hooves then brought them down hard upon the lobster's head.

LOBSTER: (*screaming*) Oh! Help me! A horse! A horse!

HORSE: Listen up, you!

LOBSTER: Please! Don't kill me!

HORSE: We need a wedding dress from the bottom of the ocean. It's trapped beneath a rock.

LOBSTER: I'll get it for you! Just don't kill me! I have so much to live for!

HORSE: Yeah right. Just get us the dress.

NARRATOR: The horse backed away from the lobster, which put its pinchers to its lips and whistled. A hundred other lobsters rose from the waves, listening for its command.

LOBSTER: Gentlemen, we all knew this day would come! The Horse of Doom has

come for our souls! He has graciously given us a task, and if we succeed he will spare our meaningless lives. Follow me!

NARRATOR: All at once the lobsters disappeared down into the sea.

ARCHER: How did you know how to do that?

HORSE: Easy. Lobsters are spineless.

NARRATOR: A geyser of salty spray announced the return of the lobster. He held the wedding dress in one pincher.

LOBSTER: Here you are, and thank you, kind horse, for not killing me.

HORSE: No problem.

NARRATOR: By the now the Archer and his horse had memorized the way home.

ARCHER: You know, it's a shame that Princess Vassilissa has to marry the Czar. Now that I think about it, he's kind of a jerk.

HORSE: It'll turn out all right in the end.

NARRATOR: When they returned to the kingdom, the Archer grabbed the dress from the horse's back.

ARCHER: I'll take this to the Czar.

HORSE: I'll wait here.

NARRATOR: The Archer saw the princess smile when he entered the throne room with her dress. Maybe she wanted to marry the Czar after all.

CZAR: What took you so long? Now, Princess, you have your dress. There's no reason to prolong the wedding any longer.

PRINCESS: Actually there is, Czar. I have one more thing to ask of you.

ARCHER: What now?

PRINCESS: I want you to boil a huge cauldron of water. And then I want to watch as you throw this archer of yours inside.

ARCHER: (*shocked*) What?

PRINCESS: He took me away from where I was happiest—the edge of the world—and brought me here to marry a man I do not love. I want to see him die.

CZAR: This seems like a strange request.

ARCHER: Yeah! Strange!

CZAR: But if it will get us on to the marriage—Guards! Fetch a pot and some water.

NARRATOR: The Archer fell to his knees.

ARCHER: My Czar! My Czar! Think of all I have done for you! Will you really let me be killed this way?

CZAR: Yes. Why wouldn't I?

ARCHER: (*to himself*) Why? Why did I ever pick up that dumb feather? Why didn't I listen to my horse? How was I supposed to know a horse could tell the future? That's weird—even here beyond the twenty-seven kingdoms. (*pause*) Wait! That's it. (*to the*

Czar) Your majesty! Allow me to see my horse one last time!

CZAR: Why?

ARCHER: Please! He's my closest friend! I want to say goodbye!

CZAR: Very well—you weird little man.

NARRATOR: When the horse was brought to him, the Archer wept his heart out.

HORSE: Please, stop crying already. I'll just cast a spell that will protect you.

ARCHER: What kind of horse are you, anyway?

HORSE: Eh. It's complicated.

NARRATOR: The horse began to chant. When the guards came to take the Archer to his doom, he met them confidently. They led him into the throne room, and the horse trotted along behind.

CZAR: Throw him in! Let's get this over with.

NARRATOR: The guards did as the Czar commanded, but instead of scalding to death when he hit the piping hot water, the Archer began to shine. He grew brighter and brighter—handsomer and handsomer—so handsome in fact that the Princess was instantly overcome with love for the Archer she so recently wished dead.

CZAR: What's going on? He's supposed to get dead—not better looking!

NARRATOR: The Archer stepped forth from the cauldron—taller and more handsome than ever before. The Czar did not like the look that the princess was giving the Archer.

CZAR: Nevermind him, my dear. This must be magical water! Give me a minute, and I'll be better looking than *he* ever thought about being.

NARRATOR: The Czar ran forward and dived head first into the boiling cauldron of water. To describe what happened next would just be gratuitous. Let's just say the Czar died a horrible death.

PRINCESS: Archer, I am so sorry that I wished you dead. How did you ever survive?

ARCHER: By the intelligence of my horse—of course.

NARRATOR: The people of the kingdom, bereft over the lost of their Czar (whom they had never liked much in the first place) selected the Archer to succeed him. After all, it was the Archer who had captured the firebird and done many other mighty deeds. Princess Vassilissa decided to give up her magical barge on the edge of the world to become his bride.

And the horse—what happened to the horse? Well, once everybody else got what *they* wanted, they forgot about that magical, spell-casting horse.

HORSE: Figures.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Folktales are stories passed down by common people—not the rich and powerful. Some common motifs (or ideas) found in folktales are the following:
 - ordinary people
 - magical animals or creatures
 - poor characters become rich
 - magical objects
 - repetition of the number three
 - wishes granted
 - youngest person in the family is the hero
 - cleverness is rewarded
 - good wins; evil loses

What elements of a folktale appear in this story?
- What is the tone of this story?
- What mythical or magical creatures appear in it?
- Why do you think the Archer is not named?
- Would you call the Archer a hero? Explain.
- Does the title fit this story? Explain.
- What would be a better title for the story? Explain.
- What other stories from other cultures feature magical helpers?