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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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Prince Ivan and The Grey Wolf

In a distant land, with snow-covered mountains and winding rivers, once lived a powerful Tsar. His people loved him and were not at all afraid of him. The gaze of his eagle eye was very friendly. He was always ready to listen to their pleas for help or justice. When he rode abroad on his great white horse with golden trappings, the people gathered to bless him. In his vast kingdom, there was not a single dissatisfied man, woman, or child to be found. He had no enemies who troubled him, as other rulers knew that their troops would vanish like mist in the sunlight from an attack by his victorious army. His three sons, Dimitri, Vasili, and Ivan, were everything a father could wish for. Yet the good Tsar had worries, and as he walked through his garden, he sighed deeply from time to time.

This garden was his greatest pride. The most beautiful trees grew in the woods. In the shade stood dazzling, rare flowers that travelers from all parts of the world brought to him. The delightful scent of his million rose bushes was carried by the wind up to fifty miles from the palace. Their colors were so wondrous that anyone who saw them was blinded by so much brilliance. Then there were the beautiful orchids for which men had risked their lives to obtain, in order to make the garden of their beloved Tsar the most beautiful in the world. Furthermore, all imaginable kinds of fruit hung in large

clusters on the branches of the trees. When you looked at them, your mouth watered. The Tsar shared his garden and its fruit with the sick people in his kingdom.



The tree that gave him the most pleasure was an apple tree with golden apples. When spring arrived and buds appeared on the branches, the Tsar had a fine net spread over it, so that the lovely songbirds could not come near. They could feast on any other tree in his garden as much

as they wanted, but the golden apples were for him. And it was as if the birds were grateful for his many kindnesses, for no bird came near the tree. Even when the net was removed and the apples shone like fairy gold amidst the emerald green leaves, no birds came to eat the golden apples. When state cares weighed too heavily on the Tsar, he sought rest beneath the branches and forgot his cares by looking at the sunlight shining on the golden apples.

But one morning he found the apple tree without the golden apples, and its emerald green leaves were scattered on the ground. This was the work of the Magic Bird, who lived in the great cloud castles in the golden West, but was now the slave of a distant king. The feathers of the Magic Bird were as radiant as the plumes of the sun god, and her eyes were as clear as

she flew happily home to her own master's garden. And no matter how hard the Tsar's gardeners tried, they could not even catch a glimpse of the Magic Bird.

The good Tsar thought about this for a long time, and on a windy morning in the fall, he called his three sons to him. "My children," he said, "you know the source of my sorrow, and now I implore you to help me. Each of you will take turns standing watch so that you can look in my garden when the Magical Bird comes. To the one who catches her, I will give half of my kingdom, and when it is my time, he will rule in my place." "Gladly, Father, gladly," answered his three sons.

Prince Dimitri, as the eldest, was the first to stand watch. The garden was flooded with moonlight as the prince lay down under a tree. The scent of the roses soon put him to sleep. From a thicket came the singing of a nightingale who softly sang, "Gluukuuk-gluukuuk-gluukuuk". As the prince listened to her, he fell into a deep sleep. When he woke up, it was daylight again. The apple tree was once again plundered, and the Magical Bird had flown away.

The same thing happened when Prince Vasili stood watch in turn. To be fair, he did not fall asleep until the night was almost over. But when it started to get light in the east, he too was overcome by sleep. The Magical Bird took advantage of the opportunity again and emptied the apple tree once more. When questioned by the Tsar, both princes solemnly assured him that no strange bird had been in the garden at night. Although he wanted to believe them, he doubted that they were not telling lies.

Now it was Prince Ivan's turn to stand watch. He was not nearly as handsome as his brothers, but he had a good heart and was level-headed. He decided, at all costs, to stay awake. Instead of lying on the ground, he sat in the branches of a tree. When the singing of the nightingale threatened to lull him to sleep, as it had with the older princes, he plugged his ears to prevent himself from hearing the bird.

Slowly the hours passed. Suddenly the entire garden was illuminated as if by the light of the sun. With beams of light flashing from each of her golden feathers, the Magical Bird flew down and began pecking at the shiny apples. Prince Ivan, who hardly dared to breathe, reached out his hand and grabbed as much of her tail as he could. With a startled cry, the Magical Bird spread her beautiful wings and wriggled free. In doing so, she left behind one glittering feather, which the prince held tightly. At daybreak, he brought this feather to his father and humbly apologized for his lack of success because he had not caught the Magical Bird himself.

"Nevertheless, you have done well, my son," said the grateful Tsar, and he placed the feather, which shone so brightly that it lit up the entire room in the twilight, in a cabinet of cedarwood and mother-of-pearl.



The Magical Bird did not come to the palace garden anymore, and no more golden apples were stolen from the precious tree. But the Tsar was not satisfied. He sighed that he wanted the bird that had robbed him, and he called his three sons to him again.

"My children," he said, "I am sick with longing for the Magical Bird. I implore you to seek her out and bring her to me. I have already promised that half of the kingdom will be yours."

The princes were happy to agree, each one eager to find the Magical Bird. Only Prince Ivan truly wanted to please his father. His brothers only thought of their own wealth and honor. The youngest son was so dear to the prince that he did not want to say goodbye when the time came, but the young man insisted.

"It won't take long, dear father," he exclaimed. "I will return soon with the Magical Bird that you so desire."

Prince Ivan took the fastest horse from the imperial stables and rode for days. Finally, he came to a bare field, and in the middle stood a rough gray stone. On the stone was written a strange verse:

"Hungry and cold will the man be
Who proudly rides to me
To ride from the left means death and sorrow,
Though his horse will live many days tomorrow.
Who rides from the right: all good things will possess,
But before three days are over, his horse will fall."

Prince Ivan was greatly concerned about losing his horse, but riding from the right seemed the wisest course. So he did, and his horse ran so fast that he soon left the gray stone far behind. On the third day, as he passed the edge of a gloomy forest, a large Gray

Wolf leaped out of the bushes. He flew at the horse's throat, threw him to the ground, and killed him despite Ivan's brave attempt to defeat him. Ivan now wanted to stab the Gray Wolf to death with the dagger his father had given him as a parting gift, but before he could get up from where he had been thrown, the great Gray Wolf spoke these words:

"Spare me, wise prince," he humbly begged. "I have only done what I was ordered to do. My death will not give you back your horse. If you spare my life, I will be your friend forever and carry you over the world."

Prince Ivan realized he would gain nothing by seeking revenge, and because he wanted to continue his quest, he accepted the Wolf's offer to be his horse.

"Tell me where you want to go, dear Master!" said the Gray Wolf. And indeed, when he heard the goal of Prince Ivan's journey, he galloped even faster than the horse had done. By nightfall, he came to a stop behind a thick stone wall. "On the other side of this wall," he said, "is a garden with terraces, and there, in a golden cage, is the Magical Bird. The garden is empty now, so no one will stop you if you catch her, but if you touch her cage, there will be difficulties."

Prince Ivan got off the Gray Wolf's back and climbed the wall without much difficulty, quickly grabbing the Magical Bird. However, she fluttered so wildly when he tried to hold her that he hurried back to the cage. He completely forgot the warning of the Gray Wolf. When he touched the cage, the silence of the garden was broken by the ringing of bells and the clanging of armor. The cage was connected by invisible threads to

the palace courtyard. Before he could escape, Prince Ivan was surrounded by excited soldiers who quickly brought him to the King. "Are you not ashamed?" thundered the King when he saw the young man's



expensive clothing, "to be caught in my garden like a common thief? Where do you come from, and what is your name?"

"I am Ivan, the son of a great Tsar," the young prince replied.

"My father has a beautiful garden in which a tree grows with golden apples, which is the pride of his heart. Night after night, your Magical Bird plundered these precious fruits until I almost succeeded in catching her. However, she was too fast for me and flew away, leaving me with only one of her feathers in my hand. I took this feather to my father, who was very pleased with it, but ever since then he has longed to possess the whole Magical Bird."

Tzar Dolmat now looked less angry, although he still frowned. "If you had come to me," he said, "and told me what you wanted, I would have given your father the Magical Bird as a gift. As it is, I am more inclined to let all the kingdoms know how dishonorable you have acted."

Prince Ivan hung his head in shame, and after a scrutinizing glance at him, the Tzar continued his speech. "You will go free, young prince," he said, "if you will do me a service. In the kingdom of Tzar Afron, beyond the three-times-ninth kingdom, there is a horse with golden mane that belongs to him. I want that horse very much. If you will buy it and bring it here to me, I will forgive you for the theft of the Magical Bird and offer her to you as a token of honor."

Prince Ivan promised to do his best, but he had little hope as he rejoined the Grey Wolf, who patiently waited for him outside the wall. When Ivan confessed to the Grey Wolf the reason for his imprisonment, the Grey Wolf patted him on the shoulder with a rough paw. "It takes a wise man," he remarked, "to admit he is in the wrong, so we will say no more about it. Climb on my back again, and I will take you to the wide-spread kingdom of Tzar Afron, beyond the three-times-ninth kingdom."

The Grey Wolf ran so fast that Ivan could hardly see the land they were passing through, and after many nights and days of travel, they finally reached the goal of their journey. The marble stables of the Tzar shone beautifully and statelily in the morning light, and through a door that was half open, Prince Ivan made his way inside.

The horse with the golden mane was feeding on the yellow pollen that the bees gathered from tall white lilies, and he stared haughtily at Prince Ivan as he approached. Prince Ivan grasped his golden mane firmly and led him out of the stable. The Grey Wolf had

warned him more than once not to try to take the golden bridle that hung above the door, but when the prince left the stable, he suddenly thought how useful this bridle would be. He turned around, stretched out his hand, and touched the bridle. Immediately, the bells rang throughout the palace, for like the cage of the Magical Bird, the bridle was fastened to invisible threads with the courtyard of the palace.

The stable guards rushed in, alarmed and furious, as soon as they saw Prince Ivan. They grabbed him roughly and brought him before their master, Tsar Afron, who was even more outraged than Tsar Dolmat had been about the prince's attempt to rob him. When Tsar Afron questioned the prince about his birth and position, his face grew even sterner. "Is this the deed of a brave knight?" he asked with withering contempt. "I have great respect for your father's name, and if you had come to me openly and in good faith, I would have gladly given you my horse with golden mane. But now, all the kingdoms shall be informed of your dishonorable behavior, for such deeds of yours must not go unpunished."

This was more than Prince Ivan could bear, and he quickly showed his willingness to atone for his guilt. "Very well," said Tsar Afron, "I will take you at your word. Go and bring me Queen Helena the Fair, whom I have loved with all my heart and soul for so long. I have seen her picture in the white crystal of my seer, and she is the most beautiful of them all. I cannot reach her, no matter what I try, as her kingdom is guarded by the elves. If you can capture her for me

and bring her here, I will give you everything you ask for in return."

Prince Ivan hurried to the Grey Wolf, afraid that he would refuse to help him with this new venture, having ignored his advice for the second time. He humbly confessed to the Grey Wolf that he had made a mistake, and once again the Grey Wolf comforted him. "Wisdom must be bought," he growled. "Well, climb onto my back, and I'll see what I can do for you."

Then he ran so fast that it seemed as though his feet had wings. The elves, who guarded Queen Helena the Fair's kingdom, all stepped aside for him, thinking he was a ghost. When he reached the golden stream that bordered the queen's magical garden, he told Prince Ivan to dismount. "Go back along the way we came," he commanded, "and wait for me in the shade of the great oak we just passed."

Prince Ivan did as he was told, and the Grey Wolf squatted under a juniper bush and waited until evening fell. When the light disappeared with the sunset and the pale little moon slowly rose over the mountaintops, Queen Helena entered her garden. She was so beautiful and sweet to look at that even the heart of the Grey Wolf grew soft. He wished that she would get a better partner than the strict Tsar Afron, who did not even know how to be gentle in his love. After a while, she approached the stream and wrapped a white silk scarf around her graceful neck so that she would not get cold in the evening breeze.

"Fear not, dear lady! I will not harm you!" cried the Grey Wolf, as he leaped out of his hiding place and

crossed the stream, holding her gently by her scarf, leaping back to the other side and galloping with her to where Prince Ivan waited under the great oak.

When the queen and the prince saw each other, it was as if a veil had fallen from their eyes. Never had the world looked so beautiful, and as they gazed at each other in the soft twilight, the queen's fear disappeared completely. As for Prince Ivan, he knew from that moment that she was destined to be his wife. As they rode away together on the back of the Grey Wolf, he already felt that she was his. The journey was short, and soon the palace of Tsar Afron loomed before them. "Why are you crying?" asked the Grey Wolf, when he felt the Queen's tears on his head. Queen Helena could not answer, but the words of Prince Ivan flowed out like a raging flood. "How can we help it, Grey Wolf," he cried, "that we love each other? It is impossible, now I must give up my beautiful queen to the stern Tsar Afron, or else I will be branded a thief in all kingdoms." "I have kept my promise, Prince Ivan," said the Grey Wolf, "and I have helped you well, but I will do even more for you. Through magic that only I know, I, the Grey Wolf, will take on the form of the beautiful Queen Helena. You will leave the real queen here, in the shadow of this pine forest. When you have presented Tsar Afron with his strange wolf bride, who will appear to him as a beautiful woman with golden hair, he will give you the horse with the golden mane. Then say goodbye to him as quickly as you can and ride, with your queen behind you, quickly to the west. When you have traveled far enough, I will ask Tsar Afron to let

me walk in the forest with my maidservants. If you then call me to mind, I will disappear from their midst, even if they are looking at me, and join you and your queen."

Prince Ivan did as the Grey Wolf said, and Tsar Afron was overjoyed when he saw the long, beautiful woman whom the prince presented to him. She was even more beautiful than he had imagined from her picture, and he would have given not only his horse with the golden mane, but also his crown for her, if it had been necessary. Prince Ivan, however, asked for nothing more than the horse with the golden mane and quickly galloped across the plains with the real Queen Helena nestled against his side. He rode to the west, where the kingdom of Tsar Dolmat lay.

Tsar Afron was more than satisfied with his wolfish bride. He was not alarmed by her fierce caresses, he only smiled. He did threaten to kill her if her love for him wavered even for a single moment. On the fourth day after their wedding feast, the bride complained that she felt stifled in the royal palace. "If I could walk in the meadows," she said, "the cool fresh air would refresh my mind, I would feel better and I would be able to laugh with my Lord."

So the Tsar let her, with her maidservants, walk in the meadows. It was at that very moment that the thought of the Grey Wolf flashed through Prince Ivan's mind. "Oh, I had forgotten him," he cried regretfully to his beloved wife. "What would the Grey Wolf do now, I wonder? I wish he were here." He had spoken these words only just as a thunderclap sounded from the

distant hills, and suddenly the Grey Wolf reappeared. "You must let the queen ride alone on the horse with the golden mane," he said to the prince, "and I will be your horse." Somewhat reluctantly, the prince accepted his proposal, and so they rode to the outskirts of the capital of Tsar Dolmat. The friendly glances of the Grey Wolf encouraged the prince to ask him for another favor. "Since you can change yourself into a beautiful woman and then back into a Grey Wolf, could you not become a horse with a golden mane for a while, so that I could give you to Tsar Dolmat and keep the real one for my dear queen?" asked the prince.



The Grey Wolf immediately agreed and struck three times with his right paw on a piece of bare earth. Immediately, a horse just like the one with the golden mane appeared.

Prince Ivan left his real horse with his bride in a flower-filled meadow outside the city and rode alone to the Tsar. The Tsar was delighted to see him because the mane of the Grey Wolf's horse gleamed in the sunlight like pure gold. The Tsar kissed Prince Ivan on both cheeks, led him to his palace, and held a royal feast in his honor. For three whole days, they enjoyed the finest wines and the most delicious food. On the third day, Tsar Dolmat rewarded the prince with much gratitude

and gave him the Magic Bird in her golden cage as a gift.

Prince Ivan knew that his quest was over, and he quickly returned to the queen. He fastened the cage of the Magic Bird to the neck of the horse with the golden mane and rode with her to his father's kingdom. The following afternoon, they were joined by the Grey Wolf. Tsar Dolmat had gone riding in an open field with his newly acquired treasure and had been thrown to the ground by the false horse. He was in a lot of pain, and the Grey Wolf's horse galloped away.

Because the Grey Wolf had been such a good friend to him, Prince Ivan could not refuse his request to carry him. So, once again, the queen rode alone on the horse with the golden mane. They continued riding until they reached the place where the Grey Wolf had killed the horse that Prince Ivan had brought from his father's stable. Here, the strange Grey Wolf suddenly came to a stop. "I have done everything I said I would, and more," he said to the prince. "Now, I am no longer your servant. Farewell!" And he galloped back to the gloomy forest from which he had first come.

Prince Ivan was filled with sorrow when the Grey Wolf said goodbye, but the joy of the queen's company was even greater, and he soon forgot his loss. When they came in sight of his father's kingdom, he stopped under the shade of a group of pine trees. He put the cage with the Magic Bird and the golden bridle in the shade, lifted his beautiful queen and laid her to rest on a bed of ferns. They were tired from their long journey, and

soon they fell asleep, murmuring softly like doves in their nest.

Now, things had not gone well for Prince Dimitri and Prince Vasili on their travels, and they returned to the palace empty-handed. They were sad and out of sorts. But then they saw the sleeping figures and the golden cage. The horse with the golden mane sauntered calmly around them. As they gazed at them in amazement, the evil spirit of envy took possession of them. Soon, the thought of killing their brother entered their minds. They looked at each other, and then Prince Dimitri drew his sword and thrust it through Prince Ivan as he slept. The prince died without a word, and when the queen woke up, she found him lifeless.

"What have you done?" she sobbed to the guilty princes. "If you had met him in fair combat and killed him that way, he could have at least defended himself. But you are cowards, and only fit to be food for the ravens!" In vain she cried and protested, while the princes drew lots for their dead brother's possessions. The queen fell into the hands of Prince Vasili, and the horse with the golden mane was assigned to Prince Dimitri. The queen wept bitterly and hid her face in her golden hair, while her future masters spoke roughly to her.

"You are now in our power, fair Helena," they said. "We will tell our father that it was us who found you, the Magic Bird, and the horse with the golden mane. If you deny our words, we will kill you immediately, so make sure to keep your mouth shut and follow our advice."

The poor queen was so scared by their cruel threat that she couldn't speak a word anymore. When they arrived at the palace, she was as quiet as a marble statue, and she couldn't even argue with the angry words that she heard them speak.

Prince Ivan lay dead on the ground, with his face to the sky. The forest elves and guardians watched over his body, so that no beast or bird could come near to devour him, until thirty days had passed. When the sun set, a raven searching for food for her son, jumped on his chest. And she would have pecked his eyes if the Grey Wolf hadn't come galloping just in time. He immediately knew that the dead man had to be Ivan, and if he had jumped on the young bird, he would have torn it apart in his anger.

"Touch not my little bird, oh fierce Grey Wolf!" pleaded the mother pitifully. "It has done you no harm and deserves none from you."

"Listen well," replied the Grey Wolf. "I will spare the life of your bird, if you fly beyond the thrice-ninth kingdom and bring me the Water of Death and the Water of Life from the crystal stream from which they flow to the Great Forever."

"I will do as you wish," cried the raven, "just do not touch my son." And as she spoke, she flew away. Three days and three nights passed before she returned to the Grey Wolf with two small bottles. In one was the Water of Life, in the other the Water of Death. When the Grey Wolf accepted the bottles from her, he let out a cry of triumph. And with one bite of his teeth, he bit the young raven in two and tore it apart before the

terrified eyes of its mother. After he had done this, he broke one of the bottles, and when he sprinkled three drops of the Water of Death on the dead bird, its torn body immediately grew back together. Then he touched it with a few drops from the second bottle, and the little creature spread its wings and flew away happily. Thus, the Grey Wolf knew that the raven had served him well, and he poured what was left of the Waters of Life and Death over the body of the dead prince. Within moments, life reappeared in the prince, and he stumbled to his feet and smiled at the Grey Wolf. "Have I slept long?" he asked dreamily.



"You would have slept forever if I had not been here," was the Grey Wolf's answer. And the prince listened with sad amazement as the Grey Wolf told him everything that had happened. "And finally, your brother is marrying your bride today," he said. "We must hurry to the palace as quickly as possible. Climb onto my back, and I will carry you once again."

So they galloped to the palace of the old Tsar. The

Grey Wolf said his final goodbye to Prince Ivan when he dismounted at the great gates. The prince hurried into the banquet hall, and there, looking like a beautiful figure formed from frozen snow, sat the lovely Queen Helena at the side of Prince Vasily. They had just returned from the wedding ceremony, and all the nobles had gathered around them.

When Queen Helena saw who had entered the hall, her speech immediately returned to her, and she flew with a cry of rapture to her lover and kissed him on the lips. "This is my own dear husband," she cried. "I am his, and not the wicked prince whom I married today." From the shelter of Ivan's safe chest, she told the old Tsar everything that had happened and how it was his youngest son who had provided her, the horse with golden mane, and the magic bird.

The Tsar's joy at the return of his favorite son was great but tempered by his grief and amazement at the behavior of the older princes. They were thrown into prison, where they still languish. Prince Ivan and the beautiful Queen Helena are as happy as the days are long. And the Magic Bird? She was allowed to return to her home in the cloud castles of the golden West!