

Vasilissa the Brave and Beautiful

by Anne Elezabeth Pluto

When the dust cleared, she saw him, standing silently, bow and arrow in his left hand. His face was the same as her middle brother's, broad and handsome, his dark eyes slits for light. This was her father. She would have known him anywhere, but here, at the virtual end of the known earth, she held the reins of her horse and called out.

“Koschay the Immortal.”

“Who wishes to speak to him?”

“I do.”

“And who are you?”

Her heart pulled, could he really not know her? “Vasilissa the Brave,” she called out and the birds in the trees swooped down at her boots.

“Come closer, Vasilissa the Brave. I want to see if you look like your mother.”

She held her breath and the crows made a path for her and the horse. She walked slowly. “Tata,” she whispered.

“Don't call me “daddy”. I have no little girls anymore. Your mother took both of you away.”

“My mother aches for you.”

He shook his head. “Your mother,” he started then moved his free hand into the air, a falcon landed without sound. “Your mother... how is your mother?”

Vasilissa looked at him. “She is as lonely as you.”

He bristled and sent the bird after a hare he had spied from the corner of his eye. “Well, now that you are here, I must feed you. What have you come for?”

“My sister is getting married. Mother says you promised, long ago, to give a pair of heavenly horses for the occasion. I've come for the horses.”

“Do you think *you* can bring the heavenly horses back alone?”

“No, Tata, you will come with me, to the wedding and give away the bride.”

He said nothing. The falcon returned, the hare in her talons. She dropped it into his hands, and then flew to Vasilissa's arm. The girl stroked the brown and white feathers.

Koschay looked at his daughter; she was the mirror of her mother, perhaps just bit shorter, but she smiled like his Yaga. Just the thought of her made his chest hurt. “Your mother turned into a raven and flew away, but do you know my story?”

“No Tata. She doesn't say much about you, but I have heard her call your name in her dreams. I've seen her crying when she thinks she is alone, and no one knows what she really does. She leaves at daybreak and returns at dusk; she rides in a mortar and pestle with a broom, and has the reputation of being a cannibal, but we know that she picks up the bodies of the war dead and brings them home. She lays them in the birch forest for the animals to eat, and then she bleaches their bones and hangs them on the fence. The dead men protect the house. But you, you cannot die, and my brothers and sister and myself...”

“And your mother; do you think I envisioned eternity without her?”

Vasilissa was silent; her mother had warned her that he talked sharply and listened impatiently. She tethered the horse and followed him to the yurt, lined with felted wool and carpets. Who cooked for him? Was there a woman, a wife, or a lover? When he led her inside there was no sign of a female, no scent, no scarves, only a red embroidered shoe on a pile of books. Its match was in the chicken-footed house. How she wanted to steal the shoe and return it to her mother, but her father read her thoughts. He smiled and when she looked again, the shoe was gone.

He skinned and roasted the hare and pushed the dishes towards her. They ate in silence, when only the bones were left, she picked them up and dropped them into her right sleeve.

“Smotri Tata,” she smiled.

“I am watching.”

She stood up holding the sleeve shut then made an arc with her right arm and a hare jumped from the red embroidered silk brocade.

He clapped and laughed. “What else did she teach you to do?”

“I can weave and embroider and sew and cook and clean and read and write and take care of the horses and speak three languages.”

“Educated girls are trouble.”

She ignored him; her mother had warned her about that too, and picked up the resurrected hare, stroking its long ears and soft gray fur. “I’ll put him outside.”

Koschay followed her to the open flap and watched as she bent down and let the animal go. He looked up at the moon, drawn as tight as a bow. An owl cried and the wind ran through the trees, leaves swirled around the hut.

“It will be cold tonight, come let me make you a bed.” She sat down and took off her scarf; the wheat gold braids fell to her waist. “When you were little and your dark baby hair fell out we were shocked that it grew in blonde. I wondered if it still was.” She reached to touch his hand, also remembering childhood; he pulled his hand away, but piled the quilts and embroidered blankets in the warmest corner for her. When she lay down, he covered her and passed his right hand over her face. “Sleep Vasilissechka. Sleep, you are safe with me.” He sat and watched her — her eyes fluttering in dreaming, her slender body relaxed into the soft bed. He’d need to find her a good husband, someone that would need to pass a difficult test. Perhaps she would need to assume an animal shape, a three-year trial or some sort; she’d make a pretty frog, didn’t she love them as a child, searching for spring frogs in ponds

and steams? Yes, he would turn her into a frog. Oh, her mother wouldn't like that, but he didn't need to bother himself with her just yet. He called his falcon and set her to watch the sleeping beauty while he stepped outside into the forest, laying himself down on a bed of dried leaves. The old pain was there, in his chest, where his human heart had once been, but he didn't want to revisit Yaga's flight - the most powerful moment of her sorcery. His mind traveled back to Vasilissa's birth. It was this time of year. Deep autumn when the dappled light played tricks and if he wasn't careful, couldn't tell the time of day. They were walking through the forest. He led the horse; she walked alongside of him, her body heavy with their child, the falcon on her arm, pulling at her earring.

"Stop," she said, gripping the saddle.

"What is happening?"

"The baby. It's time."

"Then get on the horse and I will take you back to the women."

"No, I won't make it; the baby is coming," she turned from him and vomited green bile.

He dropped the reins and went to her. "What shall I do?"

"You have children; have you witnessed their births?"

"Men don't do that. I've only seen horses."

"I am not a horse."

He smiled and wiped her face with his hand, "No, you are not a horse. You are much more fun to ride."

She laughed, and then winced in pain. "This is different from anything you have ever seen."

"Then what shall I do?"

"Make a fire," she whispered then screamed.

"Why?" He held his hands over her belly.

"You will roast the afterbirth and we will eat it."

He didn't dare go against her as her cries echoed through the trees. The falcon perched on a branch above them intently watching Yaga. Quickly he gathered the dry sticks and started a small fire. When he turned back to her, she was crouched between

two sturdy trees, holding onto them, her long skirt pulled up over her knees.

“Don't look at me.”

“How do you mean, don't look? How can I not look at you?”

“Don't look at my sex. It will not be the same,” she screamed again. “The baby! She is coming! Put your coat under me, and the birch bark and leaves and you must catch her. She will be bloody, and then the afterbirth. You must tie two knots and then cut between them. I will make you another caftan. Take the scarf from my hair; you can wrap the baby in my scarf.” She screamed again and the baby emerged, her dark beautiful head turned towards him. He put his hands out to catch her and then the bloody afterbirth, which Yaga falling forwards held in her hands as he made the knots. The falcon flew down and cut the connection between mother and daughter with her sharp beak.

His daughter, Vasilissa the brave and beautiful, opened her eyes and saw him, opened her tiny mouth and took her first breath before crying. He held her to his heart, then wrapped her in her mother's scarf and gave her to his true wife, who slid down into the bed of leaves and bark, her body resting on the caftan she had woven, opening her jacket to offer her breast to her baby daughter. He watched them, open to all possibilities, and then wiped his bloody hands on the leaves and stood up taking the bloody afterbirth to the fire.

