

## ELENA THE WISE

In a certain tsardom , in a certain country, this tsar had a golden regiment, and in this regiment there served a soldier by the name of Ivan who was a very fine young man. The ruler was very fond of him and began to reward him with ranks. In a short time he made him colonel. The senior officers envied him. "Why have we served for thirty years to reach our ranks and he has taken all the ranks at once? We need to take him down a little, or else he will outrank us." So the generals and the councillor boyars went strolling by the sea and they fitted out a ship and then they invited Ivan the colonel to join them. They went out into the open sea and they sailed until late evening. Ivan grew tired and lay down on a cot and fell into a very deep sleep. The boyars and the generals had been waiting for this very thing. They took him and placed him in a sloop and let it loose on the sea, and then they all returned back. A little bit later, heavy clouds came up and a storm arose. The waves came up and carried the sloop to some unknown place. It was carried far, far away and tossed up on an island.

There Ivan woke up and saw that the place was deserted and that there were no signs of the ship, and that the sea was fearfully agitated. "Obviously the ship was broken up by the storm and all my comrades have drowned. Thank God that I have somehow survived!" He set off to explore the island. He walked and walked. He didn't see a single wild beast or passing bird, nor was there a human dwelling.

Whether after a long time or a short time, Ivan happened upon an underground entrance. He went down this entrance into a deep abyss and came to an underground tsardom where a six-headed serpent ruled. He saw the white-stone palaces and went in. The first one was empty, in the second there wasn't a soul, but in the third, in the deep sleep of a warrior, slept the six-headed serpent. Alongside him stood a table and on that table lay an enormous book. Ivan opened up the book and read and read and he read up to that page where it said that the tsar could not give birth to a tsar, that a tsar could only be born of a tsaritsa. He went and scratched out these words with a pocket knife and in their place he wrote that a tsaritsa could not give birth to a tsar, that only a tsar could give birth to a tsar.

After an hour the serpent turned onto his other side and farted so loudly that he woke himself up. Ivan just gasped. "Listen, father," he said to the serpent," it's time for you to get up."

The serpent heard this human voice, cast his eyes over his guest, and asked, "And where have you come from? As many years as I have lived on earth, up to now I have never seen a single human in my tsardom."

"What do you mean, where am I from? Why, I am your son! Just now you turned over on your side and you made such a bang that I jumped out..."

"Well," said the serpent, "let me look in the book to see whether a tsar can give birth to a tsar." He opened up the book and read through to where it said that and he was convinced. "That's true, my son!" He took Ivan by the hand and led him through all the storerooms and showed him all the innumerable riches and they began to live and dwell together.

Some time passed and the six-headed serpent said, "Well, son, here are the keys to all my palaces. Go everywhere, you can go into anything you like, only you dare not glance into this one palace that is locked with a double lock, one gold and the other silver. I am going to fly around the world, take a look at people, and amuse myself." So he handed over the keys and flew away from the underground tsardom to wander around the whole, wide world. Ivan remained all alone. He lived there a month, then a second, and a third, and a year was nearly up. He was bored now and thought about looking around the palaces. He walked and walked and turned up by the forbidden chamber. The young man couldn't endure it. He pulled out a key, unlocked both locks – the gold and the silver – and he opened the oaken door.

In the room there were two maidens both fettered in chains. One was the tsarevna Elena the Wise and the other was her servant. The tsarevna had little golden wings, her servant had little silver ones. Elena the Wise said, "Greetings, young man! Do us just a little favour and give each a little glass of spring water to drink." Ivan, looking at her indescribable beauty, forgot all about the serpent. He felt sorry for the poor prisoners and he poured out two glasses of spring water and gave them to the beautiful maidens. They drank, they shuddered, the iron rings of the bonds snapped, their heavy chains fell off, the beautiful maidens flapped their wings and flew out of an open window. Then Ivan came to his senses and locked the empty room, went out onto the porch, and sat on a step. He hung his unruly head lower than his mighty shoulders and was deeply, deeply saddened. What sort of answer could he give?

Suddenly the winds whistled, a strong storm came up and in flew the six-headed serpent. "Greetings, my son!" Ivan couldn't answer a word. "Why are you so silent? Or has some misfortune taken place?"

"It's bad, father! I did not observe your commandment and I looked in that room where the two maidens were sitting fettered in their chains. I gave them some spring water to drink. They drank it, they shuddered, they flapped their wings, and they flew away through the open window."

The serpent was extremely angry. He began to curse and swear at Ivan in every way. Then he took an iron rod, heated it red-hot, and weighed in three blows across his back. "Now then, it's just lucky for you that you are my son. Otherwise, I would eat you alive." As soon as Ivan's back had healed up, he asked the serpent, "Father, permit me to go out into the world and search for "Elena the Wise."

"Get along with you! I tried to catch her for thirty-three years and barely managed to catch her by trickery."

"Oh, let me father! Let me try my luck!"

"Oh alright, as you wish then. Here is a flying carpet for you. If you desire, it will carry you out of here. But I feel sorry for you because Elena the Wise is really clever. If you catch her, she will still get around you and deceive you."

Ivan sat down on the flying carpet and flew out of the underworld stardom. He hardly had time to wink before he turned up in a splendid garden. He went up to a pond, sat down beneath a broom bush, and began viewing and admiring how little gold and silver fishes were playing in the clear water. Not five minutes had passed when Elena the Wise came flying up with her servant girl. They

took off their wings, put them down near the broom bush, undressed completely, and rushed into the water to bathe. Ivan stole their wings away quietly, came out from under the broom, and shouted in a loud voice, "Oh, now you are in my hands!! The beautiful maidens leapt out of the pond, threw their clothes on and approached the long man to plead and appeal to him to return their wings. "No," answered Ivan, "I won't give them back for anything. I've taken a liking to you, Elena the wise, more than the bright sun. Now I shall take you to my father and mother and I will marry you and you will be my wife and I will be your husband."

So then the tsarevna's servant spoke, "Listen, young man! You want to marry Elena the Wise, but why are you holding me here? It would be better to give me my wings. At some time I will be of use to you! Ivan thought and thought and then he gave her the silver wings. She quickly tied them on, shook herself, and flew far, far away.

After that Ivan made a chest, put the golden wings in it, and locked it tightly with a lock. He sat down on his flying carpet, took Elena the Wise with him and flew away to his own country. He flew to his father and mother and he introduced his promised wife to them. He asked them to love her and accept her. Then they had a celebration such as no one had ever seen. The next day Ivan gave his mother the key to the chest. "Watch over it," he asked her, "until the right time, and don't give the key to anybody. I will go and appear before the tsar and summon him to the wedding."

The moment he was gone, Elena the wise came running in, "Mother, give me the key to the chest. I need to get a dress to get prepared for the wedding." His mother, who knew nothing about it, gave her the key without any fear. Elena the Wise rushed to the chest, opened the top, took out her wings, tied them on, flapped them a time or two, and she was out of sight! The groom returned home: "Mother, Where is my bride? It is time to get ready for the wedding."

"Oh, my son, she has flown away."

The young man sighed deeply, said farewell to his mother and father, sat down on his flying carpet, and flew off to the underground tsardom and the six-headed serpent. The serpent saw him and said, "Well, my daring fellow! It wasn't for nothing that I told you that you wouldn't acquire Elena the Wise for yourself and that if you did, she would deceive you."

"You are right, father! But nevertheless, I am going to try. I am going to court her."

"Oh, you are irrepressible! You see, she has this rule laid down: everybody who courts her has to hide three times, and if she finds him, then she will immediately chop off his head. Many fine warriors have come to court her, and every single one of them has lost his head. The same is prepared for you. Listen to me. Here, take this flint and steel. When Elena the Wise makes you hide, strike the flint against the steel, make a spark, and light some feather grass. At that moment a grey-winged eagle will appear and lift you up to the third layer of clouds. If that doesn't work, strike the flint again and put it in the deep blue sea. An enormous pike fish will swim to shore and take you and carry you into the abyss of the sea. If Elena the Wise finds you there, then there's no place else to hide from her." So Ivan took the flint and steel, thanked the six-headed serpent, and flew off on the flying carpet.

Whether long or short, whether near or far, he flew well beyond the thrice-nine land into the thrice-ten country where Elena the Wise lived. Her palace shone as if it were on fire, for it was made of

pure silver and gold. At the gates on iron palings were stuck eleven warriors' heads. Ivan, the young man, started thinking, "Eleven heads are already raised up on these palings. Mine is sure to be the twelfth." He landed in the broad courtyard, went up to a high porch, and went right into the room.

Elena the Wise met him. "Why have you dared to come here?" she said. "I want to marry you," he said.

"Just try it! If you can manage to hide from me, I will marry you. If you don't, you will pay for it with your head."

Ivan went out into the empty steppe, took his flint and steel, made a little fire, and burned some feather grass. Suddenly out of nowhere up flew a grey-winged eagle and spoke in a human voice: "Quickly, young man, mount up and hold tight, or else you'll fall off."

Ivan got on the eagle, grabbed tight with both hands, and the eagle flapped its wings and soared high up and went beyond the third bank of clouds. It looked like he was well hidden, that no one would find him, but Elena the Wise had this mirror. She only had to look into it all the universe would open to her. In an instant you can see what is going on throughout the whole wide world. So she went up to this mirror and gazed at it and she immediately saw the whole truth. "That's enough of that, my clever one!" shouted Elena in a loud voice. "I see that you have flown beyond the third cloud bank, that the grey-winged eagle has carried you there, and now it is time to come back to earth."

So Ivan returned to earth, got down from the eagle, and went up to the seashore. He struck the flint and steel, started a little fire and let it go out on the deep blue sea. Suddenly out of nowhere an enormous pike fish came swimming up to the shore. "Well, young man," said the pike, "climb into my mouth and I will hide you on the bottom of the sea." The fish stretched open its jaws, swallowed the young man, and together with him it descended into the abyss of the sea and covered itself all over with sand.

"Well," thought Ivan, "I just hope this turns out all right!"

But not quite! Elena the Wise just had to look into her mirror and she immediately knew everything. "That's enough, my clever one! I see that you have managed to get yourself inside that enormous pike fish and you are now sitting in the abyss of the sea, covered over with the shifting sands. It is time to come out onto dry land." The pike fish swam out onto the shore, cast the young man out of it, and once more went away into the sea. Ivan returned to Elena the Wise and broad courtyard, sat on her porch, and fell into deep thought and sadness.

Just then Elena the Wise's servant girl came running up the steps. "Why are you so sad, young man?"

"How can I be happy? If I don't hide on this third try, I will have to part with whole, wide world. So I am sitting here waiting for death."

"Don't grieve, don't think bad things for your unruly head! There was once a time when I promised to be of use to you. I did not speak empty words. Come on, I'll hide you." She took him by the hand and led him into the palace and put him behind the mirror.

A little later Elena the Wise came running in and looked in the mirror, but she could not see her groom! The time passed and she was angry. She struck the mirror out of vexation and smashed the glass into bits, and then the young man, Ivan, appeared to her. There was nothing else to do, she had to submit. But at the home of Elena the Wise there was no one to brew meads, no one to cure the wines. But there was a fine feast and a fine little wedding. They were married and began to live and dwell and even prosper.