

Vasilisa the Beautiful

MANY YEARS AGO, there lived a girl named Vasilisa. When she was young, her mother died, leaving her a small wooden doll as a token of remembrance. "Keep it close," her mother said. "As long as you feed it every day, it will help you in times of need."

Vasilisa grew up, and fed the doll every day. Her father remarried, but her new stepmother and stepsisters did not like her. The stepmother made her work very hard, but with the help of the doll, Vasilisa was able to complete every task her stepmother gave her. Friends would often come by to visit Vasilisa, and as she grew older, suitors came to the house to ask for her hand in marriage. Her stepmother turned them all away.

One day, her father had to leave on a business trip. Weeks passed, and Vasilisa's father had not sent any money. "Oh! He has forgotten about us," lamented the stepmother. "Without his income, we cannot afford to live here anymore. We'll have to find a new place." The house was sold, and Vasilisa and her step-family moved into a small hut in the forest. In this forest lived a witch named Baba Yaga, whom all the villagers feared.

One evening, the stepmother decided to play a trick on Vasilisa. While Vasilisa was working, she blew out all the candles except for one. "You can't work in darkness!" she said. "Our nearest neighbor is Baba Yaga. Go to her and ask to borrow a light."

Vasilisa went out into the forest. She was afraid, so she fed her doll and asked

her for advice. "Don't worry," her doll said. "Have I ever let you down? I can keep you safe."

She walked all day until at last she came to Baba Yaga's hut. It was hard to miss: It stood on two spindly chicken legs, and the fence was made of bones and skulls. The gate was made of sharp teeth that locked together. She was very afraid, but she took a deep breath and walked inside. As night fell behind her, the eyes of the skulls outside began to glow.

She entered to find Baba Yaga inside. "Who's there?" the witch said, turning around.

Vasilisa gulped. "It is I, Vasilisa. My stepmother has sent me to ask you for a light."

"Ah, yes. I have heard of her," she said solemnly, and stepped into the dim light. Vasilisa could make out her wrinkled, oily face. "I will give you a light, but you must work for it. Stay here the night and help me do some chores." Behind Vasilisa, the gates gnashed shut.

First, Baba Yaga asked Vasilisa to bring her dinner. When she got to the stove, there was enough food to feed the whole town! Baba Yaga ate it all, leaving Vasilisa only scraps.

"Alright, I'm going to bed," said Baba Yaga as she dropped the last bone, licked clean, on her plate with a clatter. "In the barn, there is a barrel of corn kernels. In the morning, you shall pick out all the rotten ones. After that, you must clean the house, cook my meals, and wash the linens and clothing. If you do not complete these tasks, right down to every rotten kernel, I will keep

you here forever.”

When she heard Baba Yaga sleeping, she pulled her doll out of her pocket. “How can I possibly finish all those chores? Oh, I will never see my father again!”

“Don’t worry,” assured the doll. “I’ll help you. Get some rest, and we’ll start our work in the morning.”

When she awoke the next day, Baba Yaga was already awake and gone. Vasilisa trod out to the barn to start her work. To her surprise, she found the corn already sorted—the doll had done it! “All you need to do is prepare supper. I will help with the rest,” whispered the doll. All day, Vasilisa and the doll worked side by side. When Baba Yaga returned, she was shocked to find a spotless house, with a hot meal waiting on the table!

“Very well,” she said, though she was suspicious. “Tomorrow, you must do the same, and also separate the poppy seeds from the dirt.”

“No problem,” said Vasilisa.

The next morning, Baba Yaga rode off, and when she returned, Vasilisa had again exceeded her expectations. “Come, sit with me,” she said as she ate the meal Vasilisa had prepared. She was beginning to see that Vasilisa had courage and confidence. Everyone else in the village was

afraid of her, but Vasilisa was not.

They sat in silence, until Baba Yaga broke it. “Let me ask you a question. How have you been able to finish the tremendous amount of work I have given you?”

Shyly, Vasilisa responded: “Before she died, my mother gave me a charm. The magic of this charm helps me accomplish the impossible.”

“I knew it!” cried Baba Yaga, leaping out of her chair in anger. “You had help. I won’t have any charms or sorcery in this house. Leave at once,” she said, pointing toward the snarled gate. Vasilisa gathered her things and went.

“Here,” she said, handing Vasilisa a skull from the fence. “A light to guide you home. That’s what you came for, right?”

All night and day she walked, and by the next evening, she had reached her home again. She was just starting to throw out the skull when she heard it speak: “Better keep me, dear. Your stepmother still needs light.”

When she entered, the skull fixed its gaze on her stepmother and stepsisters. All night, it held them in its grasp—try as they might, they could not leave its sight. When Vasilisa awoke in the morning, she could not find her stepmother and stepsisters at all, just piles of dust where they had been the night before.