THE SECOND SETTING IN RASSIYA

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The Flight of the Firebird

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Introduction



Once upon a time, Rassiya's first tsar built a palace with a magnificent garden. His pride was an enormous apple tree, which was as tall as the palace. It yielded apples made of rich, pure gold, which the tsar would count from his window. One day, in the dead of winter, the king wrapped a fur around himself and went to check on his apples. Ten were missing! Outraged, he called his son, Prince Ivan, and asked him to watch the tree overnight to see if the thief came back.

Ivan curled up in a corner of the garden with a blanket and waited. Just before midnight, he saw a rosy brilliance over the horizon coming closer and closer. When it arrived, Ivan could scarcely believe his eyes. It was a bird, glowing like a furnace. Its feathers were molten gold and a ruby light burned where each eye should have been. On its head was a flickering crown of fire. The bird lit on a branch, plucked an apple, and began to eat. Prince Ivan watched, entranced, as the light from the regal creature spilled onto the snow. Once it was done eating, it shook its feathers, cocked its head, then flew off into the woods. The Firebird left a large tail feather behind; lvan snatched it up, marveling at its warmth.

In the morning, the prince breathlessly related what had happened to his father, showing him the Firebird's glowing feather. Astonished, the king demanded that the prince seek out where the Firebird had gone and capture it. Giving his son a coal-black horse, a fine steel sword and his blessings, the king sent him out into the world.

As Ivan journeyed, he came across a wolf stuck tight in a hunter's trap. He approached, intending to set the wolf free, but the creature warned him: "Little princeling, I have not eaten in three days. You would not make a mouthful, but if you let me go, I will surely eat your horse." Unbelieving, Ivan freed the wolf, which immediately leapt upon the prince's horse and devoured it.

Ivan wept for his mount but, remembering his mission, carried on. Fatigued by the long road the Firebird had traveled and by the freezing wind that bit through his clothes, he finally lay down in a snow drift, exhausted.

A shadow appeared across his face, and a warm breath huffed down on his cheek.

"I have come to make amends for eating your horse, little prince," the Gray Wolf told him. "Jump on my back, and I will take you to the home of the Firebird."

The prince gratefully buried himself in the wolf's thick fur coat as the enormous beast leapt off, traveling the distance faster than a horse ever could. The wolf took him to the palace of the emperor of Dolmat, where the Firebird preened inside a golden cage in a garden.

"Touch the bird but not the cage," the Gray Wolf warned. The prince grabbed the bird but could not resist stroking the gold of the cage. Bells rang and soldiers surrounded Ivan.

"What's this?" cried the emperor of Dolmat. "Who are you, foolish youth? What are you doing here?"

"I am Prince Ivan, your majesty," the prince admitted, shamefaced. "I have come to take the Firebird to my father, the tsar, since it has been eating the golden apples from his tree." "If you had presented yourself to me properly, I would have given it to you since I hold your father in great esteem," the emperor replied crossly. "To make amends, go to the country of Afron and return with the sultan's Golden Horse, which I lent him many years ago but which he has not yet returned."

Prince Ivan agreed, and he and the wolf set off for the kingdom of Afron. There, they found the horse, a proud, goldencolored animal tied to a post with a silken rope.

"Take the horse, but do not touch the rope," the wolf cautioned. The prince, however, could not help himself and brushed his hand across the rope as he freed the horse. Bells began to clang, and a group of soldiers ringed Ivan.

"Thief!" cried the sultan of Afron. "Who are you?"

"Prince Ivan," the young man confessed, blushing. "I was sent by my father to retrieve the Firebird of the emperor of Dolmat, who in turn commanded me to take back his Golden Horse."

"Ridiculous!" said the sultan. "I hold the emperor in high regard. Had you presented yourself to me properly, I would have given the horse to you with my blessing. You may redeem yourself, however, by rescuing my daughter, Elena. She was carried off a year ago by Koschei-Without-Death, who lives in the middle of a great wood, in a place where it is always summer. If you save her, I shall give you both the horse and her hand in marriage."

Prince Ivan agreed and set out with the wolf once more, this time to find



Koschei-Without-Death. Eventually, he came to the middle of a wood where it was summer even though the rest of the world was wrapped in winter. The wolf, carrying Ivan on his back, leapt over the walls of Koschei's palace where they found Elena the Fair.

"Brave prince," she said to Ivan, "you have courted death by coming here. Koschei cannot be killed, not by any sword or axe or bow."

But the prince had instantly fallen in love with her gentle manner and shining hair, and he refused to leave her side. Just then, Koschei, monstrous and reeking of death, stepped inside. The wolf growled but did not move any closer, as it knew it could not break the unclean magic keeping Koschei alive.

"What's this?" Koschei the Deathless asked. "A Rassiyan fledgling! I will crack his bones and break his skull!"

Ivan tried to cut off Koschei's head with his sword, but Koschei laughed and snapped the blade in two. Then Ivan drew his bow and arrow and tried to pierce Koschei's heart, but the monster laughed and seized the arrow. Desperately, Ivan looked in his pack, but the only other thing he had was the Firebird's feather. He held it for comfort as Koschei picked up an axe whose blade was bigger than the prince's head.

"The Firebird!" Elena cried out upon seeing the feather. "Think of the Firebird!"

Ivan did, and a fiery light blossomed inside the palace. Koschei cursed and put a hand over his eyes as the Firebird appeared. It dropped a golden sword that it had clutched in its talons in front of Ivan, who seized it and lopped off Koschei's head with one stroke. The head howled, still alive and cursing as the Gray Wolf grabbed Ivan and Elena and leapt over the palace walls and ran back to the Kingdom of Afron. The sultan was so glad to see his daughter that he had them married on the spot. They rode to the kingdom of Dolmat, whereupon the emperor, so pleased to hear of the marriage, gave them the horse as a wedding present. Then Elena and Ivan arrived back in the kingdom of the tsar, whose astonished ruler saw that his son had brought back a beautiful wife, a magnificent horse, and a fine sword. He declared them tsar and tsaritsa on the spot.

"This is where we part, Tsar Ivan," said the wolf. "I will now go back to hunting in your forest."

Weeping goodbye, Ivan and Elena thanked the Gray Wolf and watched it run off into the woods.

Afterward, in appreciation for its help in defeating Koschei, Ivan let the Firebird go free. The bird wheeled around once, singing with joy for its freedom as it flew off toward the sun. Once every year, however, Tsar Ivan would look out his window and see that some of the apples from the golden tree were missing and a few fiery feathers were scattered on the ground.

A cheer arose from the children, and they started clapping—all except one in the back, who crossed his arms and scowled.

"I don't believe it!" he said, kicking a

stone toward the bench where Yanos was sitting to emphasize his words.

Yanos harrumphed. "Then it is a good thing that the tales I tell are not restricted merely to what you believe, young Muri."

"The tsar travels across the city, but he never rides a golden horse. Or wears a golden sword," Muri said.

"This happened many centuries ago," Yanos said, a bit more gently. "It has been a legend for so long that some of the things from it are gone or forgotten. But even the history books tell us that Tsar Ivan had the help of the Firebird when fighting."

"It's stupid!" Muri interrupted." Where's the golden apple tree then? Why don't we see Fireb—ow!"

"You're stupid, Muri!" A girl next to him had grabbed hold of one of his ears and pulled. "You always complain about stories. If it wasn't true, then why did the Firebird come back to help Prince Ivan fight the barbarians?" A few of the children yelled their agreement with her.

"That happened when Koschei was a mortal man, Zenochka!" Muri countered, trying to shove the girl away. Zenochka looked up at Yanos."Is that true?"

"Sometimes tales can tell the truth in different ways, from different points of view ..."Yanos began but was interrupted by Muri's howling.

"Let go!"

"Not until you take it back!"



"Stupid witch! Ow!"

"Zenochka," Yanos said, "nice girls do not kick boys like that."

"I like your stories," Zenochka announced as Muri slid away from her, clutching a shin and biting his lip."And the Firebird came back to help Prince Ivan. Isn't that true?"

"Oh yes," Yanos said. "Vyslov would have fallen if the Firebird hadn't come back to help us."

"Then why hasn't it come back since then?" Muri asked, almost agitated. Yanos hesitated. "Well, we are all safe right now. We have not seen war for centuries. Only times of great peril call for the Firebird's return."

"I heard it was because the tsar's not worthy," someone else piped up, "and no one comes to the kingdom anymore. That's what Poppa says."

"Your father should not say such things about the tsar," Yanos said stiffly, irritated at the child's casual criticism."Tsar Alexi is a good man. His ancestors built the finest buildings in the city—the great cathedrals, the royal library, the parks and gardens and fountains..."

"But those are so old that they're falling down!" Muri exclaimed. "And the new buildings are all so ugly! How come nothing nice is new?"

Yanos was saved from answering by the arrival of Muri's father.

"Muri? Time to come home. Supper is ready." The butcher patted his son's

head. "I hope he has not been a handful again, Yanos!"

"No, no," the storyteller said. "He is welcome to come and listen anytime."

Yanos looked at Muri and said firmly, "Stories are important. They let us know where we came from and lighten the heart when needed."

Muri rolled his eyes and followed his father down the street. The other children asked for more stories, but Yanos demurred, telling them he needed to rest for the remainder of the day. One by one, the other children left. As Yanos closed up his shop, the last rays of sun bathed the bell tower with an orange light. Yanos noticed that the gargoyles had never been replaced after they'd fallen off the tower, and that the door at the base was crude and wooden. Yanos seemed to remember carved lilies and wild birds adorning the old door in his childhood. Or perhaps that was another detail he was getting mixed up with his stories? That happened more often the older he became.

Yanos looked around, noticing how quiet everything was after dark. That hadn't been the case when he was a child. There had been dancing and drinking; the trading had gone on into the early hours of the morning, except during the coldest of the winter months. But people moved away from rather than to Vyslov now. Did the world outside even know they were here? Even Vyslov's old enemies, Dolmat and Afron, seemed more interested in bickering with each other than in noticing their dwindling mountain kingdom neighbor. Yanos creaked to his feet and shuffled off toward the inn for diner. The beer and food there wasn't bad. He was lucky the inn was so close to his shop, just a few buildings over. The old man noticed a glow around him and frowned, leaning on his staff. Where was it coming from? The lamplighters hadn't been here yet, and the buildings beside him were dark. Perhaps it was the sun, reflected off a window. Yanos looked up to search for the source of the light and gasped.

Perched on the roof of Yanos' shop, ruffling its feathers as if it'd just woken up, bigger than Yanos had ever imagined it to be, was a bird that looked as if it were dripping golden flames. Its scarlet eyes blinked, and it uncurled its bronze-colored tongue in what looked like a yawn.

Yanos's staff clattered to the ground. The bird stood up, stretched out its wings and launched itself into the air, bathing the square in its strange, golden radiance. After wheeling around twice, it headed off in the direction of the palace.

Yanos found himself sitting down, unable to do anything for the longest time. Finally, he struggled to his feet and set out as quickly as he could to the inn. He might have doubted what he saw, passed it off as exhaustion or a hallucination, except for something clutched in his hand. Just before pushing the inn door open, Yanos uncurled his fingers and looked at it again.

Nestled in his palm, radiating warmth, lighting up his fingers with amber and ruby was the tiny metallic feather he'd scooped up off the ground.



Many of the world's folktales are rich in fantastic creatures and magical places, and the tale of the Firebird is no exception. This Russian story has kidnapped princesses, golden treasures, talking animals, and supernatural villains—all of which are elements of a good folktale. It's been adapted and expanded here to allow you to bring to life some of the strange and wonderful things from the Firebird legend.

The storyteller in the introduction lives in the city of Vyslov, capital of Rassiya, a country that has seen better times. As adapted here, the story of the Firebird is now merely a legend about events that happened to the first ruling family generations ago, when things were better. Ever since the destruction of the larger mountain trade routes by prince Koschei's army centuries ago, commerce with the outside world has been limited. Construction of new roads and stronger ties to its neighbors might help Rassiya, but the kingdom would also need a bold leader to shake it out of its gloomy apathy. A sense of melancholy resignation infects the royal court, most of whose members while away their days with idle distractions. More and more people are moving their families to more vibrant places. It seems as if Vyslov is destined to become a shell of its former self, eventually forgotten by the rest of the world.

That is, until the player characters are given the opportunity to make a difference in the kingdom's fortunes.

Rassiya's present-day citizens have seen odd healing potions from magicians and witches, but that'ss about the extent of the wizardry in their lives. True magic seemed to lie only in the legends of old, in stories of heroes making their way through worlds where the supernatural is considered the norm. This changes with the reappearance of the Firebird. An old myth from bedtime tales, the Firebird signals by its arrival the beginning of a new legend. Story creatures that have long haunted and fascinated the Rassiyan people have amazingly come to life. The PCs find themselves chatting with animals and uncovering ancient treasures. Ghosts moan in cursed woods, and a deathless prince plots from an enchanted castle. Throughout all of this, the Firebird leads the PCs onward as a symbol of rebirth for a kingdom.

Whether the PCs put the riches they find back into the kingdom is up to them. If they turn over at least some treasure, they could gain royal favor and exalted positions, and in so doing help put Vyslov onto a better path. Then again, they may retain the treasure for themselves, forging their own legends as they adventure. Either way, Rassiya and its neighbors are at a turning point, one marked by the Firebird's call to arms.

The characters and places in this book can be adapted to your campaign in different ways. They can add a light mystic Russian flavor to an established high-powered, high-magic world. They can also contribute something a little exotic to a conventional hackand-slash-style game. If you want a different atmosphere entirely, however, consider introducing more folkloric elements into your story.

There are certain common structures

and ingredients in folktales and fairy tales that most people intuitively pick up on after reading or hearing several such stories: things come in threes, the youngest child will be triumphant, animals can talk, kings can be tricked out of their beautiful daughters, and so on. Most players should recognize these elements right away. Thematically, too, fairy tales and folktales can have a different feel from traditional fantasy role-playing adventures:

Everyday or high-level magic is lacking. In folktales, typically only faeries, magicians, and monsters have direct access to magic. The hero is given mystical advice or objects but is rarely, if ever, magical in his or her own right. There's little explanation as to how enchantments actually work. Talking animals are a good example. There's often no reason given as to why a creature can speak—it simply can. It's an oddity accepted as natural, which adds a bizarre, sometimes dreamlike quality to a narrative. (A couple of talking animal NPCs are described below as examples.) Magic can be harder to come by than players are used to. Instead of paying for scrolls and potions at a shop, PCs can be forced to trek a mile out of town to visit a witch. The witch might trade them a few pieces of magic for performing a quintessentially folkloric task, such as sorting out a mixed bushel of wheat and barely before the sun goes down or helping her capture a rabbit that's been sneaking into her berry patch (and then having to decide whether to hand it over to her as it pleads for its freedom).

"You can trick your way out of anything." It's possible to run a very low-



combat game in a world based on folklore. Some of the most famous folk heroes never swung an axe but instead relied on their cleverness, quickness, and ability to talk fast in a tight situation. Avoiding violence often got them out of messes and into rewards. There is always a nonviolent way out in folktales, whether it's a nearby item, a gullible guard, or someone who owes the PC a favor. The important thing is that the day can be won without bloodshed and that a hero is often someone good with their wits rather than a sword.

The intangible is powerful. Love can have an especially strong effect in stories. Tears shed over a loved one can bring that person back to health from dreadful wounds, sometimes even reversing death itself. Someone itching to tell a secret whispers it into the wind only to find that it's gained life and traveled back to haunt him or her. Hate and envy can literally be bottled up and kept in a drawer. People can die instantly of heartbreak. Right or wrong, passions blaze brightly in folklore. Sometimes, the result of having such fierce emotions is as miraculous as it is unexpected.

A predictable set of moral guidelines is embedded into the universe. Stepfathers are usually hapless dupes and stepmothers evil. The good are beautiful and the bad ugly. Powerful beings such as sorcerers or fairies disguise themselves and see whether we treat them well or poorly. There's a certain logic to the judgment of the universe in folklore. No kind deeds are left unnoted and no unkind ones unpunished. The Firebird itself judges the PCs' intentions when they call on it, and the help they gather on their mission may depend entirely on their behavior toward the people and animals they meet.

This isn't to say the entire game has to follow this kind of pattern, especially since this would allow the players to guess what comes next. ("We have to help the old lady cross the stream. She'll come back and help us later on!") You can use as many or as few of these folkloric elements as you want. Maybe that old lady is just an old lady who needs the PCs' help, not a powerful enchantress testing their moral fiber. Maybe you'd like to leave ways for players to overcome obstacles while flaunting some of those folktale conventions. It's up to you. Remember, however, that many of us were raised on these sorts of stories. Using some of these folkloric elements can help you create a tale that resonates with the part of us that listened, wide-eyed and breathless, to the enchanting stories laid out in front of us when we were very young.



Inhabitants



MAJOR NPCS

The Firebird

The Firebird is a large, fiery mass of golden feathers dotted with crimson circles. There's a metallic sheen to the bird, and it constantly gives off warmth and light. A corona of flames flickers above its head, making it look as if it's wearing a crown. It does not speak, but when it sings, its clear voice sounds like a set of metal pipes. Despite its lack of words, the Firebird is clearly intelligent and understands anything anyone says.

The Firebird may briefly come into view to let the PCs know they're going in the right direction or during times of need. It never stays for long and usually appears when it's needed for a specific task. It can cause a large amount of fire-based damage in battle, and for all its delicate beauty can rend things with great force using its claws. Its magic also seems able to heal the wounded and to cleanse people or places of enchantments. The Firebird seems to know where and when it's needed if called upon by someone with a focusing talisman, such as one of its feathers, although sometimes it will show itself to someone it considers a kind or brave soul. It tends to grant virtuous requests, but it will grow irritated if it's called upon too often or for what it considers trivial things.

For example, the Firebird would see a request for light to see by when healing a gravely injured comrade as commendable. A plea to light a fire that the PCs don't need to survive the night would not be. Imploring the Firebird to light the pipe of someone who'd forgot his matches at home would be extremely poorly received.

Koschei the Deathless

Koschei used to be a barbarian prince of a tribe west of Rassiya. Charismatic and brash, he did the seemingly impossible by leading an army through Rassiya's icy mountain trails in the winter. After a meeting with a woman some say was Baba Yaga, Koschei became immortal but was nonetheless defeated by Tsar Ivan after trying to invade Vyslov. Badly injured by the Firebird, Koschei fled into the Gray Woods and came across the Summer Palace, where he now resides.

Koschei is nothing but scorched bones worn stick thin by time. Joints that no longer connect bones move through the air as if they were still attached. Koschei covers himself with cloaks and robes with hoods and visors to hide his fleshless body. At a height of seven foot one, the undead prince is a physically imposing man who towers over most of those who meet him. Koschei's mind and memory are still sharp. He knows that the people he knew and loved are dead, that to the people of Rassiya he is a myth, and that he would scarcely recognize his own lands by now. To this enchanted being, everything feels the same: dull, dry, and gray. Koschei plansto spark a war between Afron and Dolmat by kidnapping their princesses . It is an embittered attempt at rekindling his interest in the world, to stave off his despair. In truth, although he despises his lifeless existence, Koschei fears death. The old prince is certain it means oblivion—or worse—for him.

This is why he seldom ventures out of the Gray Woods, as its magically obscuring mists have hidden him from the Firebird all these years. Koschei worries that the bird's power to illuminate and purify would consume what little is left of him.

If he's threatened and has time to prepare, Koschei will go to his study and equip himself with a golden sword hidden there. If he has no time to prepare, Koschei will defend himself with the axe he has on him at all times. He cannot be harmed by mundane weapons—it will take both bravery and luck to bring Koschei his final rest.

Below are some ways the players and GM can approach defeating Koschei:

— In a game using standard d20 fantasy rules, Koschei should be treated as having the usual undead traits (e.g., no Constitution score, immunity to critical hits and all mind-affecting effects, darkvision out to 60 feet). His body is sturdier than it appears, held together by both an enchantment and force of will. Outside of divine spells, abilities, and holy items, only magical weapons or spells can cause him any damage. The flames of the Firebird, if the creature is summoned, are particularly effective against him.

— The final confrontation with Koschei can also be fought with words instead of swords. The old prince is tired of living but frightened of dying. While he won't be pleased by the PCs sneaking into his home, he has nothing personal against them. The PCs can try to convince Koschei that his cursed existence is better ended. The Firebird



may be able to peacefully burn away Baba Yaga's enchantment, bringing rest to the astonished Koschei if he lets it near. Or perhaps he fears the Firebird but agrees to a truce, giving the PCs free rein on the grounds and promising them treasures if they can find his death, which has been hidden somewhere in the Summer Palace. Koschei hands over the keys to the castle, which only he has, and if the PCs are true to their word Koschei's minions will now leave them alone.

-According to folklore, Koschei's immortality is bound inside an egg cupping his death inside its delicate shell. Under his enchantment, Koschei cannot tell anyone where his death is hidden or how to find it, and he cannot let it come to inadvertent harm. Luck, the Firebird or the PCs' own cleverness may be used to find out where the egg now lies. If the PCs don't come to an agreement with Koschei, they may have to find the egg hidden somewhere in the castle while fending off or hiding from the undead prince and his monsters since destroying it is a sure way to cut Koschei's spirit free of his body, whether he wants that or not.

The Prince

Prince Yuri, the heir apparent, is in his early twenties. Filled with restless energy, Yuri is frustrated at his kingdom's fall from its glory days. He has little patience for those who would sit back and whittle away the days with idle pleasures instead of taking action, as most of the royal court seems to do. He also despises the court's politicking for the time it wastes and its pettiness. He has a well-developed sense of honor, strictly adhering to the belief that a tsar must have the betterment of his people foremost on his mind. Although he truly loves his kingdom, Yuri has opinions that sometimes border on the self-righteous.

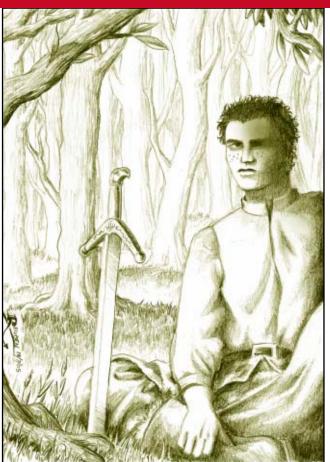
The prince has short, curly, dark brown hair, rosy cheeks, and a rash of freckles across his nose. He dislikes his looks since he thinks they make him look too much like a child. He may be right, as they do give his face quite a boyish appearance. Hours of sword practice and riding have kept him fit. Yuri is the first to charge into battle but may underestimate a situation since he

has had precious little experience with real fighting, where rules and teachers on the sidelines are absent. Yuri truly believes that his strength of conviction will let him vanquish his foes. Still, the prince's courage and concern for his kingdom cannot be questioned.

As a plot hook, the prince may have recruited the PCs to help him look for the Firebird. Alternatively, he may have already gone ahead on his own, only to be captured by Koschei and held prisoner. Then, the PCs can meet up with him later in the game, finding the prince trapped in Koschei's dungeons. If they help defeat Koschei and display what he feels are the proper attitudes, the prince will offer the PCs knighthoods and a place in his personal guard. Yuri was raised on the tales of the bravery of the guards of the earlier tsars, and the prince would love to have by his side a trustworthy group of soldiers who share his vision of honor and bravery.

The Princesses

Two princesses are held in Koschei's palace. Koschei, whose agents kidnapped the women, desires a change—any change—in the world to keep his mind off his stalled existence. He fought the armies of Dolmat









and Afron long ago and has decided that, if nothing else, a war between them will both satisfy his ancient feud and provide a fine distraction.

Yelena, the princess of Dolmat, has been trapped in Koschei's palace for a month. Yelena has not stopped searching for a way to escape since then and has snuck into some of the forbidden areas of the palace. She has a modest magical talent for healing wounds and will not hesitate to help in a fight although she isn't terribly strong. She does, however, know how to use the wickedly sharp dagger she hides in her dress sleeves. Yelena is a tall, highbrowed woman with light brown hair and hazel eyes. Self-possessed and sensible, she realizes the seriousness of the situation but tries to distract herself from it. Although she won't admit it out loud, Koschei and his undead knights frighten her. Nevertheless, Yelena will not abandon anyone to face the monsters in the palace alone.

Surjana, the princess of Afron, is shy and reserved, especially compared to the more assertive Yelena. Surjana is melancholy rather than angry at her current situation. She has been held captive for two months but is too timid to have explored much except the library and gardens. She likes to spend most of her time either outside or reading in her room. Surjana has dark skin and eyes and short, fuzzy black hair. She carries herself gracefully and speaks quietly. The princess is an excellent shot with a bow and often spends time practicing on archery targets she's set up in a corner of the gardens. If fighting breaks out, she will be frightened but will try to overcome her panic and help.

MONSTERS

Koschei's Knights

These poor souls were the men Koschei went hunting with centuries ago. Whatever happened between the prince and Baba Yaga, these knights seem to have been caught up in their leader's curse and are still his to command. They didn't retain the gift of memory that Koschei has, but their spirits are restless and resent their unnatural continuation. The knights have no bodies but instead are spectres possessing and animating suits of armor. Angry whispers in a strange, old tongue surround these suits when they are in motion. Nearly mindless but still capable of despair, the knights viciously take out their frustration on any trespassers in Koschei's home.

The knights may be freed from their bond with Koschei and, if so, the suits collapse to the ground, the spirits fled. In a high-magic game, a successful attempt at turning undead or the use of a similar ability or spell would sever the link that keeps the unfortunate knights animated. Destroying the armor would also temporarily dissipate the creatures for a number of hours. Another way to destroy the knights is to get ahold of their shriveled hearts, which Koschei keeps hidden somewhere in a box. Destroying the hearts would set the knights free. This could be an occasion in which the purifying heat of the Firebird would be ideal, as the hearts are guite dry but tough and difficult to burn with ordinary fire.

Bandits

Not all the threats on the road are supernatural. These outlaws prefer



ambushes or tricks to get people to let their guard down. One common tactic is to have a woman or child with blood on her hands run up to a traveling party, crying that a relative is stuck under a fallen tree or has broken a leg falling down a well. The "victim" is usually just out of sight of the road, where a kind soul can be beaten and robbed in privacy by the waiting bandits.

Goblins

Deformed dwarves serve Koschei. They clean, cook, and act as guards, spies, and thieves. None of them speak; most simply snicker and leer unpleasantly at whoever walks past. They obey Koschei, although they are none too bright and are easily distracted. They rely mainly on strength of numbers in a battle and will run if things look bad for them. The goblins are hairless and waist high to an average-height adult male human. Their skin is a sickly green, and their bodies are misshapen, with impossibly swollen joints, small, knobbly ears, and limbs too long for their bodies. Despite this, they're surprisingly nimble, if not terribly strong, and can perform even the most delicate of tasks remarkably well.

ANIMALS

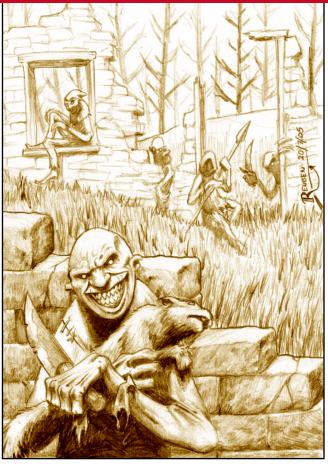
The Gray Wolf

The Gray Wolf is a shaggy, powerful-looking beast twice the size of a normal wolf that speaks in a deep, rough voice. If the wolf is spotted, the PCs can offer it food in an attempt to strike up a conversation or attempt to sweet talk it into tagging along (which would definitely require a diplomacy check). Even if the Gray Wolf does not join them immediately, it may shadow the PCs through their journey out of curiosity and offer them aid if they or their quest impress it. This wolf is the same one that befriended Prince Ivan all those years ago and will be more inclined to aid people working on behalf of Ivan's descendants. The wolf is not naturally loquacious but will answer any ques-

tions the PCs ask to the best of its ability. It has seen much, although doings in the cities of man remain a mystery to it. The Gray Wolf may lope off into the woods to hunt every once in a while but will eventually return to the PCs if accompanying them on their adventure.

The Crow

The Crow is a talkative, inquisitive bird the size of a large dog. Unlike the Gray Wolf, the Crow needs no coaxing to join the PCs. Once the Crow spots them traveling, he'll fly down and inquire about what they're up to. Whether they tell him or not, the Crow will keep following the PCs, claiming it can help them and eager to see whether anything exciting happens. The Crow is given to boasting and exaggeration. He will happily chat about any topic and will tenaciously stick with the party once the PCs have caught his interest, flying off every so often to find food. The Crow will scout for the party, although he'll fly away from a direct battle in a squawking panic.







MINOR NPCS

Tsar and Tsaritsa

Tsar Alexi and Tsaritsa Tanya are stable, if not excellent, rulers. They are aware that their kingdom has little anymore to attract people. The tsar refuses to raise taxes toward clearing out the blocked trade routes, as he believes there would not be enough money from all his people to purchase the manpower needed to free the mountain roads. Any efforts toward that end would simply make the poor poorer while annoying the rich. The tsaritsa encourages Alexi to take a more active roll in court politics, something the tsar sees as pointless. The couple is often seen out among the people, as Tanya enjoys visiting the common folk and Alexi welcomes the respite from bickering nobles. Although not the most effective royal couple, the tsar and tsaritsa's love of their city and its inhabitants are welcomed and sincere.

Their majesties are worried about their son, who chafes at the state of the country. While the tsar wishes Yuri would grow to accept it, he and his wife both regret leaving their son a kingdom in decline.

The Astronomer Witch

Natasha The Uncanny owns a large and prosperous shop in the mar-

ket square called the House of the Fifth Moon. She deals love potions to peasants and tells the future of tarot-loving dukes. Despite a streak of charlatanism (those potions certainly won't cause anyone to ask for a hand in marriage at first sight). Natasha is an excellent astronomer. She also possesses a bit of real magic: after reading the stars for someone going on a journey, she has a knack of knowing what they should take with them. Unaware that this is magic, she will simply throw out bits of advice on what to pack for an adventure. She also has a few authentic magic items in the back of her shop. Natasha is a woman to whom melodrama comes naturally, which drums up business for her shop. Underneath her friendly and sometimes theatrical exterior, however, is a shrewd businesswoman who can drive a hard bargain. The astronomer is a statuesque woman in her thirties with straight black hair down to her waist and dark blue eyes by which crow's-feet are beginning to form. She adorns herself with clothes of solid, contrasting colors, jangling bronze jewelery, and thick eyeliner. Natasha also wears mysterious-looking pendants that, she whispers to some clients, are rare and ancient talismans spoken of in forgotten lore. (The fact that she has a dozen of them tossed carelessly into an upstairs drawer may indicate their real value.)

The Diplomats

The royal palace houses diplomatic envoys from neighboring countries who are usually more interested in spying on each other than in dealing with the Rassiyans. Currently, the diplomats from Dolmat and Afron are particularly incensed with each other. Afron believes that Dolmat kidnapped Princess Yelena, and Dolmat thinks Princess Surjana was abducted by Dolmat in retaliation. Compounded with a few trading disputes, this insult may lead to a war between the two countries.

Yanos the Storyteller

An old man who likes to sit in the market square and spin tales to whomever wishes to hear them, Yanos is a good source of local lore and history. It doesn't take much to get him to become mistily nostalgic over the better days of Vyslov, and many of his stories center around its old heroes and legends. Most people leave a few coins with the old man as a courtesy, but all he asks for is an open ear. Although his voice is not as powerful as it once was, Yanos knows when to pause during a story and how to pitch his words to make it sound as if others are speaking, capturing the imagination of those who care to listen.

The Kingdom of Rassiya



Rassiya is ringed by a set of jagged, snow-covered mountains. Foreign armies would have a hard time invading since even the largest passes are treacherous, especially in the cold, harsh winters that last nearly eight months. Summers are brief but treasured by the inhabitants. The hunting is quite good in Rassiya's thick pine forests, which blanket most of the mountain slopes. The innermost land is mostly forests and plains. The main river, the Tishka, floods every four or five years, bringing nutrients to the soils of the farmlands surrounding the waterway. The country has to trade for iron and other metals. Ever since the passes through the mountains were damaged centuries ago, it has been difficult to travel to Rassiya. However, within the past few decades, more

and more people have begun to take the long and arduous move away from the country.

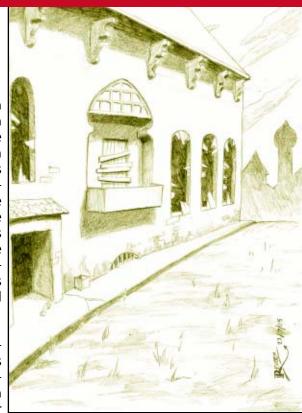
The countries of Dolmat and Afron

These two countries have been rivals as far back as anyone can remember. Rassiya used to be the most prosperous kingdom of the three until its trade routes were sabotaged; Dolmat and Afron quickly took advantage of the situation to ensure goods were routed through their countries instead. Rassiya has never quite recovered from that blow, and today its main interaction with its neighbors is providing a neutral ground for them to meet on.

Rassiyans' opinions of their neighbors are influenced by bitterness over the fact that Dolmat and Afron are doing so much better than Rassiya and by resentment over the fact that few Dolmanites and Afrons visit Rassiya nowadays (and the ones who do are most likely diplomats or part of a diplomatic entourage, not a group that would be expected to mix with the general population). Hardly anyone in Rassiya outside of the royal court has the money or reason to travel to either country, bringing back stories and ideas and new goods. Most of what Rassiyans know about Afron and Dolmat comes from legends and sometimes spiteful hearsay. Perhaps if the main trade routes were opened again, this resentment would begin to dissipate.

The Country of Dolmat

Dolmat lies to the east of Rassiya and has more people and wealth than its



neighbor despite its smaller size. It exports fine wool, silks, dyes, and lumber. The climate is a bit milder than Rassiya's, and there are more plains than forests.

The Dominion of Afron

To the west of Rassiya lies Afron, a land whose growing season lasts longer than both Dolmat's and Rassiya's. It exports grains, fruits, and bows and is renowned for its horses. Afron's steeds are bred for stamina and intelligence, and fetch dear prices outside the country.

The capital city of Vyslov

The city housed nearly fifty thousand

people in its glory days. Now, only six thousand people live there. Still, some of the advantages of a city remain, such as a large library (vastly underused) and a larger market than one would see in any other place in the country. Prices will be high, but some of the merchants are specialists in their chosen fields instead of the more general craftsmen found in villages and can thus provide finer goods.

Vyslov is in a noticeable state of disrepair. More often than not, half measures have been taken to fix up collapsed roofs or holes in the walls. Without a sufficient population to sustain it, much of the city's periphery has been condemned or simply abandoned to the poor or to criminal elements. In contrast, the city's core is comparatively intact, although there are signs of decay there as well—a



fallen stone here, rough lumber substituting for finer wood there. Watchmen are set by both the eastern and western gates of the city, but with a reduced staff, they rarely if ever patrol abandoned sections. In a fortunate irony, even the outlaws seem to be abandoning the capital despite the shortage of guards, so the city is at least spared a wave of crime.

When coming into the city

(Passages marked off by quotation marks are meant to be used as flavor text read out loud by the GM)

"Half the houses you pass are boarded up and dark inside. The older buildings at least have an air of crumbing gentility about them, but the newer ones are rough wood-and-brick affairs that have none of the polished grace of the old styles. The streets were well-paved at one time but are now riddled by networks of cracks formed by tiny plants that have pushed through everywhere but the center of the main roads. The outskirts of the city are mostly empty, with the occasional family of beggars or cutpurses looking at you suspiciously as you go by."

So long as the PCs keep walking, those beggars and cutpurses are content to leave them alone. Most of the time.

The center of Vyslov, closer to the palace

"Further in, the condition of the city improves. The houses here seem much better maintained. A testament to better days, most of the churches, public buildings, and homes of the rich are made of a creamy white or pale pink marble. The older churches are set back from the road and fronted by generous courtyards and gardens. The cathedrals are cruciform shaped, often with gold or silver onion-shaped domes topping their towers."

The Market

"Only a few blocks from the palace, the market is the liveliest place in Vyslov. You see blacksmiths pounding glowing-hot metal as farmers lead cattle along the street. A juggler entertains a crowd of children while a baker puts fresh loaves of bread on display. Several men are in a heated argument, presumably over the horse one of them is holding and the others are pointing to. Dominating the middle of the square is an enormous fountain in the shape of three gigantic fish squirting water out of their mouths and into a large oval basin.."

Not far from the palace, the market is set inside a square that takes up at least four blocks, Most of the city lives near here, or at least the reputable citizens do. Tents are set up to form stalls, while the more established businesses have buildings around the perimeter of the square. Mounts, weapons, armor, clothing, and almost any sundry the players need may be purchased here.

A city park

"The park is quite large, easily the size of one of the great squares in the city. The benches here are made, curiously enough, of wrought iron and wood instead of stone. The grass is short cropped, and trees provide pools of shade for anyone wandering the flower gardens. In the center of the park is a pool with a small fountain shaped like a nymph. Water pours out of the lip of the urn she carries over her shoulder. She's smiling widely at her scattered reflection, as if just getting a joke someone's told her. A few people are walking in the park, apparently drawn to its tranquility."

House of the Fifth Moon

The House of the Fifth Moon is Natasha's shop, which doubles as her business and home. It faces the market. It is the PCs' best bet for finding magic items inside the city, although they will be quite pricey unless the characters work out some sort of bargain with Natasha.

"A sign outside the shop declares this place to be the House of the Fifth Moon. The building is painted a bright blue with a few daubs of yellow and white on the trim; diamond-shaped windowpanes dot the exterior. Chimes ring as you open the door. The inside is lit by gas lamps and a small, black iron chandelier. The floor is covered by rugs with intricate patterns of flowers, flowing lines, and other shapes woven in different colors. The low shelves are filled with crystals, dried flowers, herbs, and candles."

Magic Items: There are quite a few "junk" items on Natasha's shelves, such as worthless crystals and potions that are little more than colored water. If the PCs convince her that they are going on a difficult quest, she will offer to do a star chart reading for them and lets them take a look at her stock in the back. The merchandise there is expensive, but Natasha will lower the price in exchange for a favor or if she takes a liking to a PC. Her genuinely magical items might include:

—A few minor healing potions.



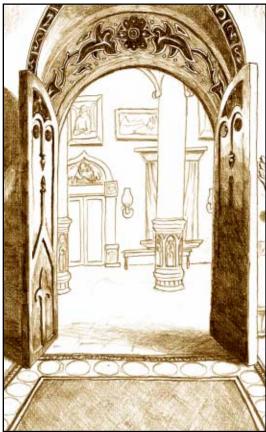
—Vials of holy water supposedly blessed by one of the region's revered figures, St. Peyter. Whether or not the saint was genuinely involved, the water has been sanctified by someone. —A weapon or two with a modest magical enchantment, such as a +1 longsword..

—An item taken from folklore, such a magical ball that will roll in the direction the PCs need to go or a crown of woven lilies that mysteriously enhances the senses of the wearer but leaves her vulnerable to the sun.

AT THE ROYAL PALACE

Outside the palace

"The royal palace of Vyslov is made of white marble and capped by three



enormous red domes. It's surrounded by tall, pointed spires decorated with stonework filigree. Carved figures stand on ledges, and the pathway to the courtyard is flanked by statues of earlier tsars. There are many trees here, but the road is kept clean of needles, dirt, and leaves. Flower beds are also neatly tended, with rows of white and crimson blossoms forming diamond patterns on the ground. Despite the impression of austere tidiness, one or two details mar the image: the statues appear weathered, and some of the missing tiles on the roof have yet to be replaced."

Inside the palace

"Lamps are placed everywhere in the castle's corridors. The lights are reflect-

ed in the marble, and servants in red and gold livery silently cross the polished floor, intent on their errands. The walls show a fondness for baroque ornamentation, as there are painted tiles or carvings on almost every surface. Reds, greens, whites, and golds are the favored colors. The sheer amount and detail of the decorations are a little overwhelming. It all achieves an artistic harmony, however, as colors are balanced and patterns are used to draw the eyes to the intricate workmanship of the design. There are more statues inside, mostly of saints and nobles."

The throne room

"Their majesties sit on a pair of thin and narrow thrones, the chairs a few feet higher than the guards standing beside them. The room is well-lit, with large half-oval windows letting in the light. Shields, weapons, and banners hang from the walls, all symbols of tsars past.



Rassiya's own coat of arms—a red bird flying above a black bear, positioned on a white background bisected by a vertical green line—is suspended above the throne."

Traps

The only traps here are portcullises suspended above the entrances to the treasury, armory, and throne room. The one above the entrance to the throne room is only meant to be used in case of emergencies, while the other two are set and safeguarded by a pair of castle guards.

ltems

If they decide to help, the tsar and tsaritsa can provide the PCs with basic adventuring equipment, such as armor, swords, bows, torches, and rope. The key word is "basic": the more expensive pieces were sold off long ago to contribute to palace upkeep. If a PC is particularly persuasive and the royal couple senses something sincere or trustworthy in them, the tsar may lend a PC a horse from the royal stables (although asking for more than one or two would be pushing it).

Treasure

The treasury has seen better times. However, it holds something more interesting than silver or gold: Kept in a place only the tsar and tsaritsa know about is the tail feather of the Firebird that Tsar Ivan himself found in the royal gardens long ago. The feather is golden, as long as a grown man's arm, and slightly warm to the touch; it gives off a soft glow visible in darkness as bright as a burning torch.



The feather is heavy and feels as if it's made of metal.

Characters holding the tail feather may attempt to call on the Firebird in a time of trouble or for guidance. Whether the bird answers the call is up to the GM, although it's a benevolent creature that will tend to respond to legitimate requests for aid.

By taking the feather into the Gray Woods, the characters can bring the Firebird's influence into Koschei's realm. The Firebird has been blocked from entering the Gray Woods on its own thanks to an enchantment laced over the entire forest which keeps it at bay. If the PCs don't have the feather on them, perhaps Prince Yuri has taken it with him and hidden it somewhere if he was captured by Koschei.

If a GM wishes to limit the PCs' calls for help, he or she can describe the tail feather as having three red dots on it. Every time the Firebird is called, one of the dots stops glowing. Once all three stop glowing, the illumination and warmth fade from the plume, and it turns into dull lead. The Firebird can still assist the PCs if the GM feels it's appropriate, but they're now incapable of calling it at will.

If the PCs aren't going to Vyslov or the palace, the GM can create an encounter with the Firebird in their own village, where the bird drops a similar tail feather on the ground then vanishes.

The Village of Fedov

Fedov is a village the PCs can stop in on their way from one place to another. Supplies, hints, and rumors and stories of the goings-on in the area can all be found here, and the place presents numerous opportunities for side adventures. The village has a few hundred people, who are accustomed to strangers stopping by for provisions and who are interested in any news outsiders may bring.

The Bear and Dove

The rooms in this inn are small but clean, and the owner is a courteous man whose family helps run the place. The prices are reasonable, and the food, while plain, is filling. The local wine is a bit pricey but surprisingly excellent.

"The only brick building in the village, the two-story inn towers over the humbler log and mud huts nearby. The thatched roof looks watertight, and, inside, fresh straw covers the floor. A serving maid puts down a platter of steaming soup and greets you pleasantly before rushing back to the kitchen for more food. All eyes are on you when you step inside, the looks curious but not unfriendly."

The Herbalists'

The local apothecary and midwife are married and jointly run a small business that does enough trade with travelers to warrant a shop next to the inn.

"The wooden building looks simple but well-kept. A set of bells jingles when you enter the shop. Racks of herbs and salves in jars line the walls, and a set of brass scales sits on the counter. Scattered around the shop like a glass forest are dozens of thin vials containing dif-



ferent-colored liquids. The shop smells faintly of mint and candle wax."

The PCs can purchase bandages, poultices, ointments, and several minor magical healing charms from the shopkeepers. The apothecary and midwife will attend to anyone's wounds for free, although it's common courtesy to donate whatever one can reasonably afford for their efforts.

The Blacksmith's

A burly, somewhat sullen man, the local blacksmith doesn't care for outsiders, which is somewhat of a problem since much of his trade depends on them. He will try to charge steep prices to anyone from out of town, although he'll back down if it looks like a PC is about to leave without buying anything.

"There's a large man cursing at a boy inside the smithy. The young apprentice is sent running around the store, fetching fuel for the furnace, buckets of water to cool a sword, and a loaf of bread for his hungry master. A few weapons and some farming equipment lines the walls. There's nothing ornate or elegant but they look like solid enough pieces. The yelling man, presumably the blacksmith, catches sight of you and scowls."

The blacksmith has a few run-of-themill swords, axes, spears, and shields for sale. Anything more exotic he doesn't make but can repair. He can also reshod horses.

The Gray Woods

The Gray Woods are east of Vyslov, a week's journey through the farming



plains. There are stories from people who live near the woods that raiding parties of small, grotesque men occasionally come out of the forest to destroy homes and farmsteads, taking all the livestock and food and burning the buildings to the ground. This seems to be borne out by the ruins spotted only a day's journey from the woods.

Passing a raided farm

"The skeletal remains of a building are off the road to your right. It looks as if it was destroyed by fire: only a few exposed beams remain upright, pointing toward an indifferent sky. From the layout of the foundation, it looks as if it was a modest house. A charred section is perhaps where a barn and livestock pen used to be. There's a field beside the ruins, overgrown and untended."

The beginning of the woods

"A gray mass begins to creep closer on the horizon. Once you arrive, you see a mess of snarled branches and deadlooking trees inviting you into the forest. They form a solid wall of stems and thorns, and the only way in seems to be the road which squeezes its way through."

The path becomes narrow once the PCs step in, forcing anyone on mounts to ride single file.

The woods proper

"It's surprisingly quiet in the woods, which are full of dead vines, tangled bushes, and trees growing far too close together. The noisiest thing is you as you make your way along the path. The place must get its name from the dull gray-brown its alarmingly dry plant life exhibits. Branches break off and bark crumbles at the slightest touch. It's only the sheer mass of vegetation that prevents you from being able to simply push straight through the forest wherever you please. The track through the woods is overgrown, although not completely impassable. There's a mist in the forest that makes it difficult to see more than thirty feet down the path and impossible to see the sun."

Every so often, the path opens up into a small clearing which the PCs can use for making camp. Any timber gathered for a fire will burn blue instead of red and give off much less heat than a normal fire would. It also seems to burn more quickly. If the woods themselves are set on fire, the burn will be localized, not spreading far beyond



the immediate area. This strange phenomenon may explain why, despite the dryness of the plants and trees, the Gray Woods have not burned down by now. The only source of water the PCs can see is the occasional stream.

ENCOUNTERS IN THE GRAY WOODS

Roll three times per day in the Gray Woods. In the case of duplicates, simply discard the whole encounter. If the PCs have either the Gray Wolf or Crow traveling with them, re-roll any encounters with the gray Wolf or Crow.

Encounter	d% roll
The Gray Wolf	01-15
Crow	16-30
Ghosts	31-40
Goblins	41-55
Goblin Trap	56-66
Bear	67-77
Boar Herd	78-88
Dire Rats	89-100

This table does not list numbers for encounters, as the levels of the PCs can vary depending on the campaign being played. As such, before running the Gray Woods, it is best to determine how many of each creature the PCs are likely to encounter so as not to end up with encounters too easy or too hard. It is suggested that encounters in the Gray Wood are kept to within 1 or 2 levels below the party level to keep them from overpowering the group.

The Gray Wolf and Crow: Either of these talking animals will travel with the PCs for some time, so long as the PCs prove trustworthy and don't attack them. Crow will most likely leave when the PCs reach the Summer Palace, and isn't much help in a fight. The



Gray Wolf will help them get into the palace, but might not enter the build-ings.

Goblin Traps: These traps are simple and designed to harass more than kill. As such, feel free to use any applicable trap from the SRD that one might find in the woods, probably no higher than CR 3.

The streams

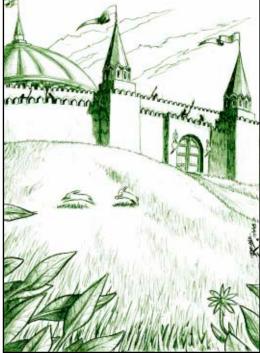
"You find a little brook not far from a clearing beside the path. The water is stale and muddy but will serve to quench your thirst. There seems to be nothing living in the water. No fish play in the shallows, and the rocks are free of moss or plants."

The ghosts

Searches of clearings sometimes turn up human skulls and bones. At night, the PCs may encounter the ghosts of past adventurers who met their demise in the woods. These apparitions can't harm anyone directly but can create eerie effects, such as rustling noises when there's no wind, curses and warnings whispered into a sleeping PC's ear, and dancing lights and tinkling chimes meant to lead a PC farther and farther away from her companions. A PC may wake up after a bad dream to see a spectral figure sitting on a collapsed log, glaring at her for a few seconds, then disappearing. The rest of the day, she will have the unshakable feeling of being watched.

The more corporeal threats the PCs can encounter are wild animals, such as rats, wildcats, herds of boar, and occasionally even a black bear. Even in

this realm, not all animals are capable of speaking and being reasoned with. The ones in the Gray Woods are particularly aggressive and vicious, staying to fight for food or territory long after others of their species would have fled. The PCs may find several snares from Koschei's goblins throughout the woods, indicating that someone else inhabits the place. If they encounter a hunting party of goblins,



the creatures will attack the players for sport if they have the advantage of numbers. Otherwise, they will flee back to the castle.

Traps

The goblins have constructed several crude traps in the woods. There's the tried-and-true covered pit with sharpened stakes at the bottom. They've also set up trip wires that will send a rain of rocks hidden in the trees down on a victim's head.

ltems

PCs may find a few old coins or flint and tinderbox in some of the glades. Other than that, there's nothing of value in the woods. The goblins have stripped away anything they could find from the dead adventurers that preceded the PCs.

The Summer Palace

Koschei's palace sits on a low hill in the middle a large clearing at the center of the Gray Woods. Unlike the stunted growth in the woods, the meadow surrounding the palace is a lush and healthy green. The palace's magic keeps the meadow locked in an eternal summer day.

To Koschei, the lovely weather surrounding his palace is another painful reminder of what he has lost, as he no longer retains the sense of touch or taste that would allow him to enjoy the eternal summer that surrounds his home. Rumor says that with Koschei's death, the palace's enchanted summer will end and the natural cycle of seasons will resume its course inside the castle grounds and the rest of the Gray Woods.

First seeing the Summer Palace

"You push past the last bushes of the Gray Woods and step onto lush, fragrant grass. In front of you is a meadow peppered with wildflowers. The sky above is perfectly clear and blue, and the sun shines down warmly. A hundred feet into the clearing is a hill ringed by two thick-looking stone walls and topped



by a gleaming palace. A pair of rabbits bounds along the grass, and the two chase each other into a burrow. Not far from you, a startled quail takes flight." **The palace walls**

"The walls appear to form an inner and outer courtyard for the palace. You can see a few figures patrolling the tops. They don't quite look human—something about their size and proportions is off. The walls look to be about twenty feet high. There's a pair of solid iron gates on the outer wall."

There's a matching set of gates on the inner wall, located on the opposite side of the hill, to prevent anyone from breaching both entrances in a single charge. At least two of Koschei's knights patrol the outer courtyard at all times. The outer wall would take about ten minutes to circumnavigate. The gates are thick and iron banded, and are manned by the goblins that act as Koschei's servants.

If the PCs find the walls too daunting and have aided any animals along the way, this is a time when the creatures could return the favor. A raven might become bigger and fly the PCs over the wall on its back. A badger could summon its family to dig them a tunnel into Koschei's grounds. The Gray Wolf might simply tell the PCs to get on his back and, one by one, leap over the walls with them.

The exterior of the Summer Palace

"The palace has a central dome and three wings to the north, west, and east. It's a low building, only one story tall. There are many open windows covered by brilliant blue curtains flapping in the breeze. The roof is the same color as the curtains and extends beyond the building; supported by pillars, it creates a covered walkway around the palace. Curving archways instead of doors allow access inside."

The gardens

"The gardens are filled with strange plants. There are flowers whose petals are as large as a man's hand. Thick vines curl around everything and sprout bunches of white, waxy flowers. Some of the trees have red or purple leaves, and large bright yellow fruit dangles from vines growing on the walls. Several small fountains can be found bubbling throughout the foliage. Off in a corner, someone has set up what look like archery targets."

If the PCs inspect the targets, which were set up by Princess Surjana, it's obvious that whoever the archer is, he or she is quite good.

ltems

The fruit is edible, deliciously ripe and sweet. The water is cool and crisp. Any fruit taken from the meadow, however, will immediately shrivel, and any water will turn stale. This doesn't apply to any of the fruit the PCs have already eaten.

Inside the Summer Palace

Patrols: Inside the palace, goblins can be found industriously tidying, cooking or tending to the castle's gardens. While some keep watch on the walls and some go out in raiding parties that strike at villages near the woods, there are at least a dozen goblins in the palace itself at all times. Goblins will attempt to flee from the intruders at first. If alerted to the PCs, most goblins will seek out a knight or, if he is closer, Koschei himself. If cornered, a goblin will not hesitate to lash out violently, often trying to cripple an opponent by aiming for the eyes, hands or joints.

Koschei's knights endlessly patrol the grounds. There are seven of them in all. As mentioned above, two guarding the castle's outer walls. A pair of knights are also stationed in front of the Room of Life. The other three march around the palace and the gardens in a fixed pattern, never tiring and never stopping until ordered to by Koschei or alerted to the presence of unwelcome guests.

Koschei may order his knights to merely subdue the PCs if he knows they're in the castle, and have his minions throw them into the dungeon. If they have no contrary instructions, however, the knights will do their best to kill the PCs, usually leading with a charge and persistently hounding them until either the PCs or the knight have been destroyed. If there are two or more knights fighting the PCs at the same time, the undead warriors will attempt to work co-operatively to bring the intruders down.

"The floor consists of polished white and blue tile. The walls and ceiling have been painted a snowy white. There appear to be no lamps. Instead, small orbs of light drift slowly through the halls, providing dim illumination. Again, there seem to be no doors, merely open arches leading into most rooms. A peek inside one room shows it has a plush couch with pillows, a vase of blue flowers, a round stone table, and nothing else. The entire



palace seems to be furnished with the same uncluttered aesthetic in mind." **Treasures:** The occasional pieces of statuary, usually a gently curving, abstract shape , decorate some rooms and hallways. They're made of blue jade and are often no bigger than a hand. None of the PCs has seen this minimalist style before, but the jade itself is valuable even if they should decide that the statues lack appeal as art.

The dungeon

If Prince Yuri has gone off to chase the Firebird, the PCs might find him chained up in a lightless cell here. He has been captured recently, and Koschei is still deciding what to do with him.

"The rough black stone here is a contrast to the white and blue of the rest of the palace. The floor is slick with moisture. The cell doors are solid metal, with covered slots placed at eye level. From the outside, you can slide back the coverings to peer into each cell. Some of the door locks have rusted. The floating lights of the palace are fewer here, making the room quite dim."

Items: There are some old torches tossed into a corner.

Treasure: There is a skeleton in one of the cells, evidently either forgotten or deliberately starved to death by Koschei. With a successful Heal check, someone will be able to guess that it was female. On one of its fingers is a ring with a rose on it. The seal is ivory, which is not usually found in Rassiya.

The study

Unlike the rest of the palace, this room is blocked off by a pair of locked doors. This room doubles as a study and library. When he was alive, Koschei was chiefly a man of action, but now his ageless existence has given him time to see the benefits of intellectual pursuits as well. Most of the books are in foreign or unknown languages. The tomes in languages the PCs can understand are usually about far-off lands and contain collections of stories or, sometimes, treatises on magic.

"Past the doors is a large chamber with a dozen bookshelves lining the walls. At one end of the room, there is a large desk shaped like a crescent moon in front of a cold fireplace. There are no ashes in



the fireplace and no piles of wood, either. It seems to be simply for show. Several tapestries, depicting battles with armies or legendary creatures, hang on the walls."

Items: On his desk, Koschei has a curious orb mounted on a frame that allows the sphere to turn on its axis. It looks like a map someone merely stuck onto a ball. What looks like Rassiya is there, although its name is marked on the map-ball in a language no one but Princess Surjana, after her hours of study, can read. Someone seems to have sketched on the map a few landmasses across the ocean, which is strange since everyone knows there's no land there.

There are several quills, an inkpot, and

sheets of parchment sitting on Koschei's desk. There's also a magnifying glass with an oak handle sitting on one of the bookshelves.

Magic Items: Locked in a cabinet are a couple of minor magical items. One is a set of pipes made of three reeds bound together by willow bark. In each reed, the viewer can see a maiden sitting by a lake, surrounded by rushes. The wind blows through her hair and creates ripples in the water, and she smiles at something the viewer can't see. The ladies on the left and right reed are lovely, but the one in the middle is absolutely breathtaking. Her appearance varies depending on who is looking, but she is, guite literally, the most beautiful woman the viewer has ever seen. Breaking eye contact with the pipes leaves someone with an intense feeling of bittersweet melancholy.



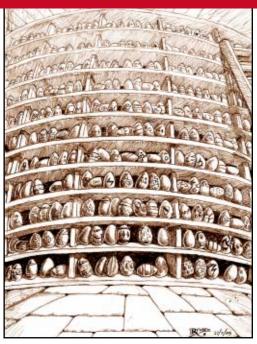
The other item is more down-to-earth: a blue hand mill with gold stripes. When the handle is cranked, a small cake, pie, or pancake pops out. The food is fresh, warm, and delicious. Happily for the hungry adventurer, the mill's supply of baked goods seems to be inexhaustible, though the variety is limited. Why someone like Koschei would keep it is somewhat of a mys-

tery. Perhaps he values anything magical, or perhaps the mill's whimsical nature brought something like a smile even to the undead prince.

Treasure: Above the study door is a decorative, jeweled saber, nearly useless in battle except as a crude bludgeoning instrument, but with a blade studded with sapphires of different sizes. In a world with no printing presses, the books in the library are also worth a sizable fortune to the right people.

There is also the Golden Sword, used by Prince Ivan to chop off Koschei's head. The Golden Sword is a broadsword, the blade light and extremely sharp. The hilt has a simple bar crosspiece and is unadorned except for a ruby in the middle. The jewel has some sort of design on it. If Princess Yelena sees it, she will be surprised to recognize her family's crest on the jewel and tells the PCs that this is a sword belonging to a distant ancestor of hers. The princess of Dolmat grew up with stories claiming that the blade was forever lost—an obvious exaggeration. Like the Firebird, the sword is warm to the touch and glows very faintly in the dark. After seeing its effectiveness in battle, Koschei decided to keep it despite the temporary injury it had done to his person. The sword is part of the set of Golden Treasures (see the section below).

Traps: There is a tiny hole in the ceiling above the doors to the study. A mechanical trap positioned above the hole will shoot a paralyzing dart into anyone trying the door without using a key or who has failed to disarm or otherwise avoid the trap.



The lock on the cabinet holding the pipes and hand mill will, if picked improperly, release a burst of poison gas from a decorative brass knob.

The Golden Sword is inside a locked, poison-needle trapped iron box, which is in turn hidden in a secret compartment in one of the walls. The compartment itself is guarded: a sharp blade at roughly waist height on a Medium creature slices out of the wall, bisecting anyone who attempts to open the compartment by force or without



disabling the trap first. (A small switch hidden behind one of the bookcases at the other end of the room will stop the blade from coming out, and another hidden inside the fireplace will unlock the compartment.)

The Room of Life

Down a short flight of stairs at the end of the north wing are the doors to the Room of Life. This cylindrical room is topped by its own peaked roof, making it look like a little stone hut sitting inside the hallway. The 'hut' looks as if it has a circumference of about six feet. The doors are locked and guarded by two of Koschei's knights at all times.

"Stepping across the threshold brings a brief tingling sensation. Looking around the room, illuminated by the same mysterious lights as the rest of the palace, you realize that it's bigger on the inside than the outside suggested. There are shelves, reaching up to the ceiling, that curve to the left and right. They're filled with decorated eggs, tucked into holders to keep them from rolling off the shelves. Some of the eggs are elaborate, with ribbons and tiny seed pearls in swirling patterns on their surfaces. Some are plain, dipped in dye once or twice for a simple tint to their shells. There is a stepladder for access to the higher eggs."

The room is doughnut shaped: if the PCs walk in one direction long enough, they curve back around to the entrance. The two walls are twelve feet apart and the ceiling is as high as the Summer Palace's. The room has shelves on both sides containing thousands of eggs. If the PCs break any, they hear a brief, jarring scream



and have a terrible feeling of loss. Koschei's death is here somewhere, but so are the deaths of countless others. Who they are, no one knows. They could be innocent people or other immortals like Koschei. Perhaps he's used these other souls to camouflage his own egg. Either way, there's something that feels instinctually wrong about cracking them open.

There's a few shattered eggshell pieces underfoot. Either the goblins never tidy this part of the castle or they were recently smashed. Whatever broke them, the PCs feel uneasy treading on the discarded shells.

Koschei's death, inside a light blue egg with a black star painted on it, can be found on the top shelf.

Traps: The doors to the Room of Life are guarded not only by the knights but also by a magical burst of lightning that electrocutes anyone who tries to open the doors without a key. **The treasure vault**

An enormous padlocked steel door bars entry into the vault. Once inside:

"The room is quite tidy, with chests stacked neatly on top of each other and objects of value displayed on shelves and tables. At the back, dominating the room, is a slightly larger-than-life-size statue of a golden horse. Despite the care taken to arrange things, there is a thick layer of dust on everything. Apparently, no one has bothered to look in on this room in some time."

Traps: The lock on the door isn't really a lock but rather the trigger for a pit trap positioned in front of the doorway. Should anyone attempt to pick the lock or use a key in it, the trap is set off. Anyone in the 5-foot square directly in front of the door is sent sliding down an incline that deposits its victims into one of the dungeon cells. The slope is quite steep, making it nearly impossible for anyone to try to crawl back out through the hole in the cell's ceiling. The door's real opening mechanism is a slightly discolored tile on the ceiling that must be pressed. Inside the vault, three of the chests have poison-needle traps hidden inside their locks.

Magic Items: Three golden apples, taken from the legendary tree in Vyslov, lie nestled in silk inside one of the chests (a trapped one). Despite the fact that they are made of gold, the magical apples are edible, yielding succulent flesh at the slightest bite. Eating an apple will completely cure someone's wounds and ailments. The only inedible parts are the seeds, also made of gold. If planted in the garden they originally came from in Vyslov, the seeds will sprout a tree that grows to its full, towering maturity in less than a week. When the growing season begins, the tree will start to produce hundreds of lustrous, golden apples.

The Golden Horse, originally a wonder of the kingdom of Afron, is here. If Princess Surjana is with the PCs, she'll recognize him and tell them a little about it. It appears, to anyone who doesn't know better, to be a statue. In reality, it's merely asleep and has been for centuries. Putting one of the golden apples into his mouth will wake him; his jaws move as he chews and swallows the magic fruit, and his mane shakes. The horse, like the Fire-



bird, appears to be made of living gold. His hair is made up of tiny bristles that are soft yet unmistakably metal, and his hooves are sharp steel. In motion, the horse is literally a blur, taking only hours to travel distances that would take other horses days or weeks. A bit bigger and stockier than a normal warhorse, he can easily accommodate three people on his back.

This golden steed has the same temperament as that of a normal domesticated horse, although he seems to understand whatever anyone says to him. He's an amiable creature, willing to be ridden by anyone who climbs onto his back, although he will buck any rider who uses a whip or otherwise mistreats him. He will suffer no bridle and is frightened to the point of panic by Koschei. Unlike the Firebird, the Golden Horse won't disappear and reappear but happily sticks with the people who've freed him. Fortunately, the dungeon passages are wide enough to accommodate his bulk.

Treasures: Koschei has several chests full of gold, silver, and jewelry. Their total worth is left up to the GM, but the coins are all long out of circulation, taken from ancient cities years ago. There are also jewel-encrusted vases, pitchers, and statues as well as a few weapons that even to the untrained eye are obviously ceremonial.

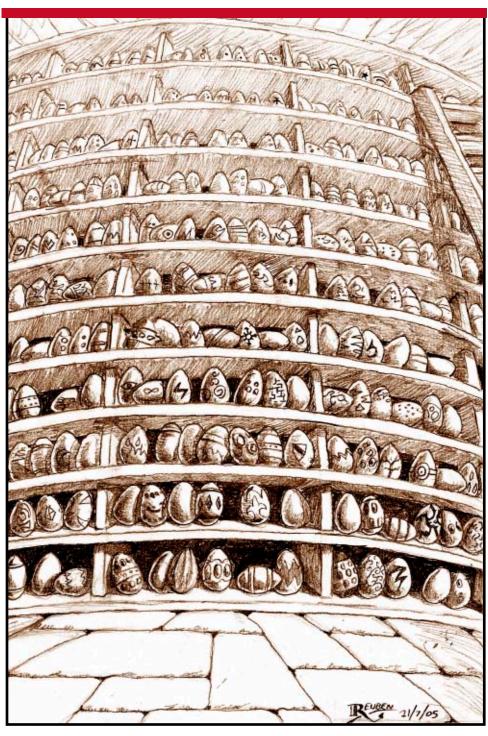
The Golden Treasures

The Golden Apples, the Golden Horse, and the Golden Sword comprise a set of legendary treasures that each come from a different country. The apples belong to Rassiya, the horse to Afron, and the sword to Dolmat. Of course, the PCs could keep these for themselves. The princesses and Prince



Yuri, if around, would object, but the individuals who own all three items would be well-off indeed. If the PCs choose to return them or give them to the prince and princesses, the treasures would be received differently in each country. The seeds from the apples will grow only in the palace gardens in Vyslov. As noted above, a tree planted there would grow quickly and become a steady source of revenue for the kingdom, giving Alexi or perhaps Yuri the money to begin hiring workers to fix up the trade routes. The emperor and empress of Dolmat would be pleased to get back the Golden Sword, a relic to which they attach a great sense of pride as a national treasure. The royal couple of Afron would marvel at the Golden Horse and he, in turn, would seem happy enough with them since he could graze and run in the sun again. The sultan would begin to breed the creature with his stock, which would transmit some of the Golden Horse's strength and endurance to his progeny.

Perhaps more important, returning the treasures to their respective countries would be a renowned feat, bringing acclaim not only to the PCs but also to the country of Rassiya itself. Tales of such an event, told far and wide, could bring interest, attention, and perhaps even admiration to Rassiya. It may even ease tensions between Afron and Dolmat, as the recovered magic items would be proof that the kidnapping of the princesses was supernatural and not merely an elaborate plot by either kingdom. The triumph of the PCs against Koschei and the reemergence of the Firebird could catch the imagination of the Rassivan people, bringing them hope and showing them that heroic deeds can still be performed in their kingdom.







FIREBIRD'S FEATHER

From time to time the Firebird will leave one of its feathers to a person it deems worthy. This feather is warm to the touch and emits a soft glow. A person granted the Firebird's feather can use it to call upon the aide of the Firebird. A character doing so must simply concentrate on the Firebird while holding the feather and, so long as it is not imprisoned and deems the situation worthy of its time, the Firebird will reach the character in 1d6 rounds and do whatever it can to help them out.

Strong conjuration.

THE GOLDEN APPLES

These apples, though made of gold, are edible and restore any lost hit points, heal any temporary ability damage, and removes and disease or poison effects. Lost levels cannot be regained, nor can permanent ability drain be healed or curses removed. The entire apple must be eaten for this effect, save the seeds, which may be planted in the Tsar's garden in Vyslov to grow a new tree that will fruit golden apples.

Strong conjuration (healing); price 5,000gp each

THE GOLDEN HORSE

The Golden Horse works very much like a stone horse (see SRD) with a few exceptions. The first is that the horse is made of gold, not stone; the second involves the Golden Apples. If the Golden Horse is left to its own devices for too long, it will fall asleep, appearing to be just a statue. The only way to awaken the Golden Horse then, is to feed it one of the Golden Apples of Vyslov. Once fed one of these apples, the Golden Horse will function just like a stone horse.

The Golden Horse cannot be ridden in combat, and unless it undertakes some kind of tricky maneuver (jumping a ravine, etc.) no ride checks are required while riding it. The Golden Horse will not fight in combat, but will instead flee to safety, returning once the fight is over. Finally, the Golden Horse is extremely strong and fast, it is capable of carrying three people and their gear, and can travel 40 miles in one hour instead of one day, without tiring. While awake it has the statistics of a heavy warhorse.

Strong transmutation; price 14,800gp; Weight 6,000 lb

THE GOLDEN SWORD

This is a +1 holy broadsword that is warm to the touch and glows very faintly in the dark, though not enough to be warmed by or to see by.

Moderate evocation, good; CL 7, Craft Magical Arms and Armor, holy smite; price 18,335gp

THE LILY CROWN

When worn, this crown of woven lilies grants a character enhanced senses, but renders them weak in the bright light of the sun. A character wearing the Lily Crown is more in tune with the world, and as such has both physical and mental senses increased by it's magic. The character gains a +2 competence bonus to Listen, Search, Sense Motive and Spot.

However, the character's increased senses mean that very strong stimuli can harm them, and in direct sunlight the character takes 1d4 nonlethal



damage each round. This damage can only be restored by removing the crown or finding some kind of shade.

These effects are only in place so long as the character is wearing the Lily Crown.

Faint transmutation; CL 6, Craft Wondrous Item, owl's wisdom; price 6,400gp

THE PASTRY MILL

This small hand mill, when cranked, produces cakes, pies or pancakes, at random, which have no magical healing properties, but can be eaten and are quite tasty.

Faint conjuration; CL6, Craft Wondrous Item, create food and water; 8,000gp

THE REED FLUTE

This flute performs wonderfully and grants a +4 competence bonus to any perform checks made while using it, but its real oddity comes from that fact that, by looking into any three of the reeds, one will find the animated image of a beautiful girl sitting near a lake, smiling at something the viewer cannot see. The girl in the center reed is especially captivating and anyone looking at her must make a DC 20 Will save in order to look away. Characters may not take 10 or 20 on this roll, but may attempt it every round. When the character finally manages to look away, they are filled with a terrible melancholy resulting in a -1 penalty to all rolls for as many rounds as they looked at her image.

Faint transmutation; CL 6, Craft Wondrous Item, eagle's splendor; price 1,600ap





Crow: male crow; CR 6; medium animal [talking animal]; HD 9d8+27; hp 71; lnit +4 (+4 Improved Initiative); Spd 30 ft., fly 60 ft; AC X, touch X, flatfooted X; BAB +6; Grp +7; Atk +7 claw (1d4+1, weapon); Full Atk: +7/+2 claw (1d4+1, weapon; Space/Reach 5 ft./5 ft.; SQ talking animal subtype abilities; AL NG; SV Fort +6, Ref +6, Will +8; Str 13, Dex 11, Con 16, Int 14, Wis 14, Cha 14.

Skills and Feats: Bluff +9, Diplomacy +11, Knowledge (history) +9, Knowledge (local) +9, Knowledge (nobility and royalty) +9, Listen +10, Sense Motive +11, Spot +10; Alertness, Flyby Attack, Improved Initiative, Negotiator.

Talking Animal: The talking animal subtype is a special subtype added to creatures of the animal type, which grants them several abilities not normally seen in animals. The creature gains access to Common and Fey as starting languages, the creature can also read these languages, but may not write them. If for whatever reason the creature gains more skill points, it may spend them to learn new languages as well. Talking animals can always speak with their own basic species as normal. In addition, the talking animal subtype grants the creature access to the Bluff, Diplomacy, Knowledge (history), Knowledge (local), Knowledge (nobility and royalty) and Sense Motive skills as class skills. Creatures with the talking animal subtype gain 4 skill point (plus Int bonus) per hit die instead of the normal 2. Finally, creatures with the talking animal subtype have a base Intelligence, Wisdom and Charisma of 14. The overall bonuses of the talking animal subtype increase a creature's CR by +1.

The Gray Wolf: male dire wolf; CR 7; large animal [talking animal]; HD 17d8+51; hp 131; lnit +6 (+2 Dex, +4 Improved Initiative); Spd 50 ft.; AC 14, touch 11, flat-footed 12; BAB +12; Grp +18; Atk +19 melee (damage, weapon); Full Atk: +19/+15/+9 melee (1d8+7, bite); Space/Reach 10 ft./5 ft.; SA trip; SQ low-light vision, scent, talking animal subtype abilities; AL NG; SV Fort +12, Ref +12, Will +7; Str 25, Dex 15, Con 17, Int 14, Wis 14, Cha 14.

Skills and Feats: Bluff +11, Diplomacy +13, Hide +13, Knowledge (history) +12, Knowledge (local) +12, Knowledge (nobility and royalty) +12, Listen +13, Move Silently +13, Sense Motive +13, Spot +13, Survival +11*; Alertness, Improved Initiative, Iron Will, Negotiator, Run, Track, Weapon Focus (bite). Racial Traits: +2 to Hide, Listen, Move Silently, and Spot checks. +4 to Survival while tracking by scent.

Talking Animal: The talking animal subtype is a special subtype added to creatures of the animal type, which grants them several abilities not normally seen in animals. The creature gains access to Common and Fey as starting languages, the creature can also read these languages, but may not write them. If for whatever reason the creature gains more skill points, it may spend them to learn new languages as well. Talking animals can always speak with their own basic species as normal. In addition, the talking animal subtype grants the creature access to the Bluff, Diplomacy, Knowledge (history), Knowledge (local), Knowledge (nobility and royalty) and Sense Motive skills as class skills. Creatures with the talking animal subtype gain 4 skill point (plus Int bonus) per hit die instead of the normal 2. Finally, creatures with the talking animal subtype have a base Intelligence, Wisdom and Charisma of 14. The overall bonuses of the talking animal subtype increase a creature's CR by +1.

Trip: If the Gray Wolf hits with a bite attack, he can attempt to trip his opponent as a free action without making a touch attack or provoking an attack of opportunity. If the attempt fails, the opponent cannot react to trip the Gray Wolf.

Princess Surjana: female human aristocrat 2; CR 1; medium humanoid [human]; HD 2d8; hp 12; Init (+2 Dex); Spd 30 ft.; AC 12, touch 12, flat-footed 10; BAB +1; Grp +1; +3 ranged (1d6, shortbow), +3 ranged (1d6+1, shortbow using Point Blank Shot); Space/Reach 5 ft./5 ft.; AL LG; SV Fort +0, Ref +2, Will +3; Str 10, Dex 14, Con 10, Int 12, Wis 12, Cha 14.

Skills and Feats: Diplomacy +9, Knowledge (history) +6, Knowledge (nobility and royalty) +6, Perform +7, Sense Motive +8; Negotiator, Point Blank Shot.

Possessions: masterwork shortbow, 20 arrows, potion of barkskin +5, noble's outfit, 2x potion of cure light wounds, 294gp.

*Note: All these items except for the noble's outfit have been stolen from Koschei. Surjana does not carry money on her, but any additional items she may possess should be taken from her remaining coins.



Princess Yelena: female human adept 1/rogue 1; CR 1; medium humanoid [human]; HD 1d6 + 1d6; hp 9; Init +3 (+3 Dex); Spd 30 ft.; AC 14, touch 13, flat-footed 11; BAB +0; Grp +0; Atk +1 melee (dagger, 1d4); Full Atk: +1 melee (dagger, 1d4); Full Atk: +1 melee (dagger, 1d4); or +4 ranged (dagger, 1d4); Space/Reach 5 ft./5 ft.; SA sneak attack; SQ spells, trapfinding; AL CG; SV Fort +0, Ref +7, Will +7; Str 10, Dex 16, Con 10, Int 14, Wis 16, Cha 14.

Skills and Feats: Concentration +4, Diplomacy +6, Heal +7, Hide +6, Knowledge (history) +6, Knowledge (local) +6, Knowledge (nobility and royalty) +6, Move Silently +7; Iron Will, Lightning Reflexes.

Spells Per Day: 3/2

Possessions:masterwork dagger, bracers of armor +1, noble's outfit, potion of invisibility, 2x potion of cure light wounds, 223gp.

*Note: All these items except for the noble's outfit have been stolen from Koschei. Yelena does not carry money on her, but any additional items she may possess should be taken from her remaining coins.

Yanos: male human expert 5; CR 4; medium humaniod [human]; HD 5d6-5; hp 15; Init +0; Spd 30 ft.; AC 10, touch 10, flat-footed 10; BAB +3; Grp +2; Atk +2 melee (1d6-1, quarterstaff); Full Atk: +2 melee (1d6-1, quarterstaff); Space/Reach 5 ft./5 ft.; AL LG; SV Fort +0, Ref +1, Will +6; Str 9, Dex 10, Con 9, Int 14, Wis 14, Cha 16.

Skills and Feats: Bluff +10, Diplomacy +12, Decipher Script +9, Gather Information +10, Knowledge (geography) +9, Knowledge (history) +13, Knowledge (local) +9, Knowledge (nobility and royalty) +9, Perform (oratory) +14, Sense Motive +11; Negotiator, Skill Focus: Knowledge (history), Skill Focus: Perform (oratory).

Possessions: quarterstaff , scholar's outfit, Firebird feather, 4,294gp.

*Note: There is no conceivable way for Yanos to have this money, if the GM decides he needs anything else, it can be taken from this money.

Prince Yuri: male human aristocrat 2/fighter 4; CR 5; medium humanoid [human]; HD 2d8+4 + 4d10+8; hp 43; Init +6 (+2 Dex, +4 Improved Initiative); Spd 30 ft.; AC 18, touch 12, flatfooted 16; BAB +5; Grp +8; Atk +10 melee (1d8+3, longsword); Full Atk: +10 melee (1d8+3, longsword); Full Atk: +10 melee (1d8, longbow); Space/Reach 5 ft./5 ft.; AL LG; SV Fort +6, Ref +3, Will +5; Str 17, Dex 14, Con 14, Int 14, Wis 12, Cha 14.

Skills and Feats: Bluff +7, Climb +7, Diplomacy +7, Disguise +7, Handle Animal +7, Intimidate +6, Jump +8, Knowledge (history) +7, Knowledge (nobility and royalty) +7, Ride +11, Swim +7; Combat Expertise, Quick Draw, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (longsword), Improved Initiative, Weapon Specilization (longsword).

Possessions: masterwork longsword, mithral shirt, mithral heavy shield, masterwork longbow, 20 arrows, potion of cure serious wounds, 2x potions of cure moderate wounds, light warhorse (named Demyan), military saddle, saddlebags, bit and bridle, chainmail barding, nobles outfit, 548gp. *Note: These are Yuri's possessions as of capture, they will not likely be on his person if the PCs meet him as Korschei's prisoner.

KOSCHEI'S KNIGHTS

Medium undead (evil)

Hit Dice: 10d12+3 (73 hp) Initiative:+1 Speed: 20 ft Armor Class: 21 (+1 dex, +8 armor, +2 shield), touch 11, flat-footed 20 Base Attack/Grapple: +10/+13 Attack: +14 bastard sword (1d10+3) Full Attack: +14 bastard sword (1d10+3), +9 bastard sword (1d10+3) Space/Reach: 5/5 Special Attacks: Smite living 1/day Special Qualities: +1 turn resistance, damage reduction 5/good, darkvision 60 ft, reanimate, undead gualities Saves: Fort +3, Ref +4, Will +7 Abilities: Str 16, Dex 13, Con -, Int 3, Wis 12, Cha 10 Skills: Koschei's knights have no skills. Feats: Power attack, toughness, weapon focus (bastard sword) **Environment: The Summer Palace** Organization: 1-2 Challenge Rating: 7 Treasure: None Alignment: Neutral Evil Advancement: -Level Adjustment: -

Reanimate: If any of Koschei's knights are reduced to 0 hp or less, they fall apart and crumble into a heap of armor, sword and shield. None of these items may be removed from this pile, and after 24 hours, the knight will reanimate in the place it was felled with full hp.



Any knight destroyed by a cleric or paladin's turning check will remain destroyed permanently.

Finally, if the knight's shriveled heart, kept somewhere in the Summer Palace, is destroyed, the knight is killed instantly.

Smite living: Once per day, each of Koschei's knights may smite a living creature, adding a total of 10 damage to any one successful attack.

FIREBIRD

Large Magical Beast (Fire)

Hit Dice: 20d10+40 (154 hp) Initiative:+4 Speed: 40 ft. (8 squares), fly 80 ft. (qood) Armor Class: 21 (-1 size, +5 Dex, +7 natural,) touch 14, flat-footed 21 Base Attack/Grapple: +20/+24 Attack: Bite +24 melee (2d6+4) Full Attack: Bite +24 melee (2d6+4), 2 claws +19 (1d8+4) Space/Reach: 10 ft. / 10 ft. Special Attacks: Burn, rake, smite evil 5/day Special Qualities: Beckon, damage Reduction 10/ cold, darkvision (60 ft.), low-light vision, spell like abilities, uncanny dodge, understanding Saves: Fort +16, Ref +17, Will +6 Abilities: Str 18, Dex 20, Con 14, Int 9, Wis 10, Cha 14 Skills: Intimidate +7, Listen +5, Sense Motive +8, Spot +5 Feats: Flyby Attack, Hover, Improved Natural Armor (+2), Improved Natural Attack (bite), Improved Natural Attack (claw), Wingover Environment: Any in Rassiya **Organization: Unique** Challenge Rating: 16 **Treasure: Special**

Alignment: Neutral Good Advancement: -Level Adjustment: -

Beckon: Anyone holding one of the Firebird's feathers may summon him by simply holding the feather and concentrating on the image of the Firebird. He will arrive in 1d6 rounds provided that he is not imprisoned, and that he deems the situation worthy of his aide.

Burn: In addition to the normal effects of the burn special ability, the Firebird may suppress his burn ability for a number of rounds per day equal to his constitution score (14). While the burn ability is suppressed, the firebird may touch creatures and flammable materials without igniting them.

Spell-like abilities: The firebird has several spell like abilities that he can use a number of times per day. These function as if cast by a 10th level cleric.

Cure Serious Wounds 1/day (3d8+10 hp) Cure Moderate Wounds 2/day (2d8+10 hp) Cure Light Wounds 3/day (1d8+5 hp)

Understanding: While the Firebird is not capable of speech, it can understand any spoken language, from anywhere in the world, as if it were fluent in that tongue.





Koschei the Deathless

Koschei the Deathless: male human Bar4/Ftr5/Wiz3/Exp5; CR 23; Large Humanoid (False Immortall; HD 4d8 + 8d8 + 3d8 + 5d8; hp 93; Init +7 (+3 Dex, +4 improved initiative); Spd 40 ft.; AC 17, touch 12, flat-footed 14; BAB +16; Grp +22; Atk +24 melee (3d6+6, large greataxe); Full Atk: +22/+17/+12/+7 melee (3d6+6, large greataxe): Space/ Reach 10 ft./10 ft.; SA Spells; SQ Continued Development, Continued Growth, Damage Reduction 10/-, Fast Movement, False Immortal Traits, Rage 2/day, Regeneration 15, Spell Immunity, Trap Sense +1, Uncanny Dodge; AL NE; SV Fort +21, Ref +8, Will +16; Str 23, Dex 17, Con -, Int 28, Wis 22, Cha 31.

Skills and Feats: Bluff +16, Handle Animal +22, Intimidate +27, Jump + 13, Knowledge (arcana) +15, Knowledge (geography) +19, Knowledge (history) +19, Knowledge (nature) +21, Knowledge (religion) +19, Listen +21, Ride +17, Spellcraft +25, Survival +14; alertness, animal affinity, combat reflexes, combat expertise, dodge, eschew materials, improved initiative, mobility, mounted combat, spring attack, weapon focus (greataxe), weapon specialization (greataxe), whirlwind attack

Spells per day: 4/5/3

Spellbook: All 0-2nd level spells.

Spells commonly prepared:

0-level; *detect magic, mage hand* (x2), *read magic*

1 st-level: comprehend languages, floating disk, magic missile (x2), sleep

2nd-level: invisibility (x3)

Possessions: The contents of the entire Summer Palace are Koschei's to do with as he pleases. See the various room and item descriptions.

FALSE IMMORTAL (TEMPLATE)

False immortals gain a greatly extended life through a painful magical process. While they may live for centuries or millennia after achieving immortality, they invariably become withered husks, empty and hollow shells with no sense of touch, smell, or taste. Their flesh dries on their bones after only a few decades, turning into wrinkled and puckered leather. They constantly feel a deep hunger and thirst that can never be sated; if they try to eat or drink, their desiccated bodies cannot process the foods they ingest, and they feel great pain until they regurgitate the offending matter.

While they continue to grow in size, intelligence, and power, false immortals begin to long for death after the centuries have passed. Every false immortal can be destroyed, but there is only one way to do so, and that method is different for each false immortal. Each immortal knows instinctively what can finally bring about its demise once the ritual granting its long life is completed. But while many long for the release that only death can bring, the fear of what comes after, the very fear that drove them to seek immortality, keeps them from seeking out their own deaths.

False Immortal

"False immortal" is an acquired template that can be applied to any cor-



poreal giant, humanoid, or monstrous humanoid (referred to hereafter as the base creature).

A false immortal uses all the base creature's statistics and special abilities except as noted here.

Size and Type: The creature's type changes to undead. It retains any subtypes except for racial subtypes (such as goblinoid or reptilian). It gains the augmented subtype. It uses all the base creature's statistics and special abilities except as noted here.

Armor Class: A false immortal's natural armor bonus improves based on the base creature's Hit Dice.

Hit Dice	NaturalArmor
	Bonus
1-3	+2
4-7	+3
8-11	+5
12-17	+6
18+	+8

Attack: A false immortal retains the base creature's weapon and armor proficiencies.

Special Qualities: False Immortals retain all of the special traits of the base creature (except those lost due to type). In addition it gains the following:

Continued Development (Ex): While a false immortal does not physically age, its mental faculties continue to develop. The immortal's mental ability scores improve as normal for the base creature. These bonuses continue to accrue even beyond venerable age. After each period of years equal to



the difference between the base creature's old age and venerable age, the false immortal's mental ability scores improve by +1.

Continued Growth (Ex): A false immortal begins to grow slowly once the ritual has been completed. A creature that has been a false immortal for a century or more increases size by one category, gaining the usual benefits for increasing in size.

For example, humans reach old age at 53 years old and venerable at 70. Once a false immortal reaches 70 years of age, he accrues bonuses to Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma every 17 years (70-53 = 17). Dwarves reach old age at 188 and venerable at 250. A 250-year-old dwarven false immortal gains his next bonuses in 62 years (250-188 = 62).

Damage Reduction (Ex): A false immortal's hardened flesh gives it damage reduction 10/-.

Regeneration (Ex): A false immortal gains regeneration 15. A false immortal's special weakness deals it lethal damage.

Spell Immunity (Ex): A false immortal is immune to any spell or spell-like ability (including psionics) that allows a saving throw.

Abilities: Increase from the base creature as follows: Str +6, Dex +2, Cha +4. As a false immortal, the creature has no Constitution score.

CR: Same as the base creature +3, or +4 if the false immortal increases in size.

Level Adjustment: Same as the base creature +6, or +7 if the false immortal increases in size.

FALSE IMMORTAL TYPE

This type can only be acquired through a magical ritual that bends, twists, and finally breaks the normal rules of mortality in the world. It allows the recipient unlimited life, but there is always a price to pay.

Features: A false immortal has the following features:

• 8-sided Hit Dice.

• Base attack bonus equal to 3/4 total Hit Dice (as cleric).

• Good Will saves.

• Skill points equal to (4 + Int modifier, minimum 1) per Hit Die, with quadruple skill points for the first Hit Die.

Traits: A false immortal creature possesses the following traits (unless otherwise noted in the creature's entry).

- No Constitution score.
- Darkvision out to 120 feet.
- Immunity to all mind-affecting effects (charms, compulsions, phantasms, patterns, and morale effects).
- Immunity to poison, sleep effects, paralysis, stunning, disease, and death effects.

• Not subject to critical hits, nonlethal damage, or ability drain. Immune to damage to its physical ability scores,



as well as fatigue and exhaustion effects.

• Immune to any effect that requires a Fortitude save, except for those relating to energy drain attacks, effects that also harm objects, and harmless effects.

• Uses Charisma modifier for Concentration checks.

• Not at risk from massive damage.

• Not affected by raise dead, reincarnate, resurrection, or true resurrection. Part of the powerful ritual denies the false immortal the chance to be brought back once it has been subject to the ritual.

• False immortals do not need to sleep, breathe, or even eat. They very much desire to eat, but doing so causes them great pain until they get the food out of their dried up stomachs.

• Every false immortal has a single weakness that can destroy him utterly. He gains awareness of this weakness upon completion of the ritual that grants him immortality.

• Reform (Su): Unless slain by its special weakness, a false immortal reduced to 0 or fewer hit points falls to the ground and melts into a gray, viscous liquid, which rapidly dries over 1 round and turns to dust. The dust blows away, even if there is no wind or anywhere for the dust to go. The creature reforms in its lair, home, or base of operations in 1d4 days.

Sample Expressions and Dialogue



PRINCE YURI

On his kingdom: "I remember going on winter walks and realizing that the only reason the city was so beautiful was because the snow was covering its disrepair. I remember my tutors telling me story after story of the bravery of Tsar Ivan's Guard and how they were loved and respected because of their courage and wisdom. Today, all the royal court has are bored counts and simpering countesses who ignore the crumbling city. Who says we can't be great again? You have only to look at our past to see that the blood of a noble folk lives in our veins. We have no excuse to let it be forgotten."

On Koschei: "A few weeks ago, I would've scoffed at the notion of my family's old enemy walking the earth. The Firebird must've led us to Koschei to bring him the death that has eluded him for so long. Who knows what wicked deeds he's committed over his ghoulish existence? Once we get rid of him, the people will know that valor still resides in the heirs of Tsar Ivan."

On the Firebird: "It's both a miracle and a good omen. It's said that the Firebird stood with my great ancestor Tsar Ivan, helping him drive back Koschei's armies centuries ago. Seeing it now has lifted my spirits. Perhaps its return signals renewal for Rassiya. We must prove worthy of its trust."

THE GRAY WOLF

On the Gray Forest:"When I was young, the grass was thick, the trees were full of leaves, and plump herds of deer ran through the forest. Now, the Summer Palace hoards all the sun and wind and rain. All that's left for the rest of the wood is mist and dust."

On the Crow: "He's a wretched bird that follows me when I hunt, picking over my kills because he's too lazy to find his own food. He's noisy and nosy, and his meat is small and chewy. His ability to see above the trees is the only thing useful about him."

On Koschei: "It's been centuries since I was in his palace. Even if we were face-to-face, I'm not sure I'd do you any good: there's a smell about Koschei, a taste of death my nose cannot stand. I once tried to snap at his hand, and my mouth felt as if it'd bitten down on ashes."

THE CROW

On the Gray Wolf: "The Gray Wolf is a whiny, growly beast that only thinks of its own stomach. Careful that it doesn't eat your horse out from under you! What a stuck-up brute! Not like me, oh no."

On Koschei: "Do you know his archers shot arrows at me? At me! I've never done them any harm! He has little demon-men patrolling the grounds and strange clanking, shining things walking between the walls. I didn't get close enough for a better look, no, no. I was trying to avoid becoming a very handsome pincushion."

On Vyslov: "I have cousins there, preening city birds that think they're too good for the country. They don't know what they're missing! I'll take the open fields and a dead cow to peck at over those crowded buildings any day."



On his chattiness: "What do you mean, how can I talk? How can you talk? Honestly, what a silly question."

YANOS THE STORY TELLER

The Undoing Of Prince Koschei (told as if reciting a story):

"One cloudy winter's morning during his invasion of Rassiya, Prince Koschei went hunting with his friends. He rode back in the evening alone, ashen faced, refusing to say what had happened to the men with him, only murmuring about "a terrifying hag in the woods."The foreign prince didn't realize that he had stumbled across our Baba Yaga, whom you know is as old as the sea, as wise as an owl, and more dangerous than an avalanche.

"The next morning, as Koschei led the first charge on Vyslov's armies, a wellthrown spear pierced his heart. At first, his men panicked, but then, to their astonishment, Koschei simply plucked the spear out of his chest and continued riding. Swords and axes slashed uselessly at his skin. Rattled but awed, Koschei's army redoubled its efforts.

"The barbarian prince had made a pact with Baba Yaga, you see, pleading for immortality after she had boasted that she could make a man deathless like the gods. Koschei was delighted to see that she had been true to her word, although rumor has it that to gain his immortality, he had had to sacrifice some of his own men.

"Tsar Ivan was worried that with Koschei invulnerable, the barbarians might win. As night crept across the sky, he took out his feather from the



Firebird, which he had kept since their first meeting. As Ivan cried out, 'Firebird, Firebird! Aid my country as you once aided me,' the feather became light in his hand and floated on the wind to the east.

"In the morning, a blazing spark leapt off the sun and flew toward the battle. The Firebird swooped down, heading straight for Koschei. It clawed his eyes and pecked his face and set his clothes

on fire. Horrified, Koschei realized that not only could the Firebird hurt him but also that for all his pain, he couldn't die. In agony, he lashed out with his axe, accidentally lacerating his own men as he howled curses at the sky. With Koschei's forces shaken, Tsar Ivan regained the field. Finally, the barbarian tribes broke and fled. Still burning, Koschei followed them, screaming that they were traitors. Afraid their prince had gone mad, his own men collapsed the mountain passes behind them as they left to prevent him from following. Koschei, his flesh charred and smoking, limped off into the Gray Woods, never to be seen again."

On the better days of Vyslov:"Be-

fore the larger mountain passes were turned to rubble by Koschei's

army, the caravan lines coming into the city stretched all the way to the horizon. The finest artists, poets, and craftsmen came to Vyslov to try to impress the tsar and tsaritsa and to seek commissions from the nobles. It was a place of great learning, too, and scholars came from all around the world to use the royal library and debate with each other on its steps." **On the Gray Woods:** "Death comes to those who go there. In the center, like a worm in an apple, lives deathless Koschei in the beautiful Summer Palace. He hasn't dared to leave it in centuries. Why he has stayed hidden is something my tales can't explain."

On the Firebird: "It was like the sun come down in a form my old eyes could stand to look at. Its feathers were precious metal, and its eyes were



garnet and ruby. I've never seen anything so amazing! Here, I have this to prove it happened—a small feather it left behind in the square."

NATASHA THE UNCANNY

On the Gray Woods or facing Koschei the Deathless: "Are you going into the Gray Woods? Doom doom—awaits you there, my friends.



The reaper sharpens his scythe as you take your first step into that accursed forest. Terrible things lurk in its branches! Oh, you'd be foolish indeed to go without protection. Have you seen these charms? You may play with your lives, but dare you go without a shield for your souls? These crystals have been crafted to ward off the darkness within and without! They're also very reasonably priced."

On her magic items: "Well, if you're serious about going into danger, and I believe that you are, I can show you some of the more ... potent items that I have. Not to say that anything in my shop is not purely, genuinely magical, but...better prices can buy better guards against peril."

On her travels when she was younger: "Oh, I went everywhere. One of the most interesting places was the desert of Zahim. Frightfully warm. Sand everywhere, and the natives insist on wearing veils at all times outdoors, even at night. But there were amazing sights. The snake people came to trade with us, bringing out marvelous books of magic and mathematics. There

were also the giant tombs for their tsars—pyramids of stone larger than all of Vyslov put together, if not half as fine looking."

PRINCESS YELENA

On Koschei: "He is an abomination that walks as if it were still a man. He means to begin war between Dolmat and Afron. I have talked with him. While



he cares nothing for my thoughts, he has answered some of my questions. I may be able to distract him when he comes back. Be careful: he's possessed of an unnatural strength."

On the goblin men: "They're awful, foul little things, always peering after you and snickering. Still, they do leave me alone when I go to my room for privacy. Perhaps we can hide you all in there."

On the palace: "Here, let me draw you a map. There are some places I can't go, since I will be missed or stopped, but I've explored the rest. Be careful that no one sees you! Everyone here except Surjana and I are loyal to Koschei. His knights are vicious, although I would rather deal with them than with Koschei himself."

PRINCESS SURJANA

On Koschei: "He's a man who doesn't know why he is still alive but hesitates to let go of what life he has. It's both sad and frightening. I've read that his death is hidden somewhere in the palace, protected by a trap he won from the north wind."

On Yelena: "I'm glad to know her. The palace was so empty before she came. I worry, though. One day, she might do something rash, and I don't think she can fight Koschei and all his servants herself. No one can, alone."

On the war: "Please, let my mother and father know it was Koschei and not the Dolmanites who took me. Our countries have never had much love for each other, but I can't bear to think of us at war over such a mistake."

KOSCHEI THE DEATHLESS

Koschei's voice is hollow, as if there were a faint echo from wherever it comes from. He has an accent but knows the language of Rassiya well.

On his own immortality: "The bonefields were denied me and my brothers are long fled. My pledged lady has lain cold for years, and our measure has run out. No joy or light in the waking world comes to me, yet I cannot, will not leave, nor let others know where my heart is buried."

On the Summer Palace: "I found this place as it is now when I ran to here

centuries ago. The furnishings were being cleaned and the garden tended by the beast men. They gave to me mastery of the Summer Palace, which shields me yet torments me with its delights. Never have they spoken since."

On the Room of Life: "I have not been there for many years. Once it held only a single egg, but more shells appeared and then more, until I could no longer count them."

PEOPLE OF RASSIYA

Here are some more general comments from the NPCs the players





will meet—a merchant in Vysolv, for instance, or a woodcutter in Fedov. These quotations may be bits of conversation overheard at, say, an inn or a shop and are meant to represent the general feelings of the populace.

On the crumbling condition of Vyslov:

#1."You must forgive the condition of our city. Not so many people live here anymore. Sometimes, there's only wood available to repair something that was stone, you see. The tsar and tsaritsa, bless their homes, have rejected the motions from the parliament to raise the taxes on all of us, but money is still a problem for most here."

#2. "The ruined buildings? Oh, they're such a shame. I wish the palace would spend some money to fix them. And people put no pride into repairing their own homes! I suppose no one will bother. That's the way things go here."

#3."I heard someone was killed in the old quarters again last night. There's not enough gold in the tsar's vault to get those lazy guards to patrol there anymore. Someone should put a stop to that sort of thing. It's just more proof that this city has gone to the mongrels."

On the future of Rassiya:

#1. "Why worry so much about the future? Things don't get much better, but at least they aren't getting worse, eh? When my father was a child, he told me the terrible winters forty years ago killed off a dozen villages! Thank the gods the weather has been good

to us now and we can make a living here."

#2. "My children will have a roof over their heads, and that's all I need to know. Maybe they'll move someplace else. Me, I couldn't think of it. I grew up in Vyslov. I can't understand why so many people are moving away. Mind you, money has been getting tighter for some."

#3."I plan to move soon. Maybe half a year, after I've saved up enough coins. With a war brewing, I hear Dolmat has more work. And I want to be in a city that has life to it again."

On the possible war:

#1. "Afron and Dolmat? Are they rattling their sabres again? I don't suppose it will affect us much. What will they do, come through our mountains? Not even those two would be that foolish!"

#2. "It's about time another kingdom suffered, like we have for generations. If those hot-headed foreigners kill each other off like the barbarians they are, it'll mean peace for the rest of the world after they're finished."

#3. "I was in a few skirmishes in my youth, over in the south. Awful, awful days. And those were tiny kingdoms, bandit kings attacking traders for scraps of land! To think of that happening to two entire countries makes me shake. What a terrible time they will have. A terrible time."

On the Firebird:

#1. "Funny you should ask. I haven't thought about it in a long time, but

just the other day, over in the market, I heard old Yanos the Storyteller going on about a bird of fire. He seemed excited about it for some reason."

#2."The what? A bird made of fire? Or a bird on fire? That's ridiculous. Stop pestering me."

#3. "My mother, gods rest her soul, used to tell me stories about the Firebird, how it and the Gray Wolf were Prince Ivan's good companions on his quests. But everyone's mother told him those tales when he was little. You must have heard them yourself, no?"

On Koschei the Deathless:

#1."Who? Some old legend? You don't believe he really exists, do you? He's in tales mothers tell to young children to scare them into behaving."

#2. "I've never seen any magic outside of some potions the priests and healers sell. But a man walking after death? The gods wouldn't allow it. Oh, I believe he exists, but likely he's some old bandit hiding in the middle of the woods."

#3. "Most people don't believe in him, but me? I spent a few nights in the Gray Woods once. It's a terrible place. Dry and filled with . . . with whispers. I left the woods soon as I could. Do I think that an old warlord lives there? It wouldn't surprise me!"

<u>Plot Hooks</u>



– The prince has gone missing! The tsar and tsaritsa need adventurers to look for their beloved son. They would call on the aid of their knights, but the royal couple has suspicions that someone in the court may be responsible for the prince's disappearance. The last they saw of him, he went on about how he'd spotted "a magnificent burning bird" in the night sky, which they dismissed as a dream. The last they saw of the prince was Yuri riding out, in his own words, "For a day or two". That was a week ago and the tsar and tsaritsa are worried. Their son is a responsible young man who would normally at least send word to his parents that his plans of changed.. Yuri had spoken highly to them of one (or more) of the PCs, saying that she was a capable, brave soul. The tsar and tsaritsa trust his opinion. Will the PCs go look for their son?

 The PCs live in a small town half a day's ride from Vyslov. A few weeks ago, Prince Yuri came through and stopped to water his horse. Accepting a gift of food and wine from the town leader, he thanked her and began to talk about his quest to follow "a Firebird" wherever it goes throughout the country. In such a small village, everyone soon knew about Yuri's mission. A few days ago, the PCs were gathered together when they saw a light dancing above them. It came closer, revealing itself to be the Firebird the prince had talked about. It looked at them.almost expectantly, then flew off to the east. Perhaps it's a sign the prince is in trouble. Ever since then, the PCs have had the unshakable feeling they need to go where the Firebird leads them. Perhaps, after a quick trip to Vyslov for supplies, they will answer the call and go.

— The PCs have been approached by the ambassador from Dolmat or Afron (or perhaps by both). The PCs have heard rumors in the city that those countries' kidnapped princesses may have been taken somewhere called "the Gray Woods" and that something—a local legend called "the Firebird"—has been seen around there. Either of the ambassadors will say he would send someone from his own country, but it would take time to summon a party from his kingdom, and he fears that by then it would be too late. Either (or both) of the ambassadors can offer the PCs wealth and the favor of his respective country (or countries) for helping to find the princess(es).

- Yanos the Storyteller has been going on lately about having seen a bird made of fire. His story sounds crazy, but, despite his great age, it isn't like the old man to make something like this up. He's told stories about Koschei the Deathless lately, too; these tales mention the heaps of treasure the barbarian prince plundered from the four corners of the earth when he was still a man. Someone brave enough could earn a fortune. According to Yanos, Koschei's palace is in the middle of the Gray Woods to the east. For a man in debt or a woman looking to make a name for herself, Yanos's stories might be worth investigating.

— The PCs' village is near the Gray Woods. The PCs have known the goblin men to attack nearby farms but never the PCs'homes before! The characters were badly outnumbered, and things seemed grim until a strange glow lit up the battle in the village square. A screaming entity of fire flew

over the goblins, scattering them like insects. Panicking, they ran, whimpering, back to the forest. Some of the villagers, including the PCs, chased them to make sure they didn't come back. The Firebird flew after them, circled the outskirts of the forest, then gave a frustrated cry and disappeared. A glowing feather floated down, landing at the feet of one of the PCs, who feels that this was not by accident. That PC swears that the Firebird looked at him before it vanished. Is it a sign it needs the PCs' assistance? It seemed to want to get into the woods. The feather is warm to the touch and glows softly, invitingly.



References

The story in the introduction is a blend of several stories about the Firebird. For more information about the creatures and items in that story as well as in the rest of this book, or simply for more ideas and material for adventures, consider some or all of the sources listed below. Keep in mind that folktales are mutable things and that sometimes elements found in a given story have been changed, combined, or omitted entirely from another story.

The crown of lilies is taken from the tale of the Ice Maiden, which recounts the doomed romance between a nature spirit and a music-playing youth. The golden ball that can lead a hero to where he should go appears in some of the Koschei Without Death stories. The women seen in the reed pipes are taken from the story of the World-beautiful Reed Maiden, one of those quests for peerless beauty that youngest princes are so fond of. The hand mill was from the story of the Cock and the Handmill, a short but sweet domestic tale on the dangers of greed. Baba Yaga is an extremely popular figure who can be found in literally hundreds of Russian folktales. She's also discussed in great detail in Baba Yaga: The First Setting in Rassiya by Michael Fiegel, another book in the Folkloric series produced by Dog Soul Publishing.

Some of the following books are collections of Russian folktales. Others are storybooks meant for children, which means they're lovingly and colorfully illustrated. All of them were used in putting together this book. Bibliography

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