

Vasilisa the Brave

Adapted: Elizabeth Winthrop/ WITW Story Charrette



Many years ago there lived a rich merchant. He and his wife had only one daughter, whose name was Vasilisa. When Vasilisa was still very young, her mother became gravely ill. She called Vasilisa to her bedside.

"Listen well, my child," she said. "I am dying and do not have much time left with you. Take this little doll and carry her with you always. Hide her in your pocket and never show her to anyone. Whenever you are sad or in danger give the doll something to eat and drink. Whisper your troubles to her and she will tell you what to do." The mother kissed her daughter and blessed her, and soon after that, she died.

Vasilisa was very sad. In the midst of her sorrow, she remembered the little doll and took her from her pocket. She set a piece of bread and a cup of milk before the doll and whispered, "My dear mother is dead, and I am so lonely for her." The doll's eyes began to shine, and suddenly she came alive. She ate a morsel of the bread and took a sip from the cup and said, "Don't weep, little Vasilisa. Shut your eyes and sleep. The morning is wiser than the evening." Vasilisa lay down and slept, and in the morning her sadness had lifted a little.

As time passed, the merchant began to search for a wife who would be a kind stepmother to his little Vasilisa. He decided on a widow with two daughters of her own who were not much older than

Vasilisa. But the stepmother was a cold, cruel woman, who married the merchant for his money. Her two daughters were jealous of their new stepsister. They forced her to do all the work around the house while they sat with their arms folded like the ladies at court.

At night, when everyone was fast asleep, Vasilisa would take the doll from her pocket. "Eat a little and drink a little," she would say, "and listen to my story. My stepmother and her daughters wish to drive me out of my own father's house. What shall I do?"

And every night the little doll's eyes would shine, and she would come alive. Once she had eaten and drunk her share, she would whisper words of comfort to Vasilisa until the girl fell asleep.

Years passed, and Vasilisa grew. The only joy in Vasilisa's life came from the little doll which she kept safely hidden in her pocket. There came a time when the merchant had to go on a long journey to a distant land. He bade farewell to his wife and her two daughters, kissed Vasilisa, and gave her his blessing. As soon as he left, his wife sold his house, packed all his goods, and moved the family to another house at the edge of a gloomy forest.

Deep in this forest, as the stepmother well knew, lived an old witch named Baba Yaga. She lived alone in a small hut that stood on chicken legs at the edge of a clearing. No one dared go near the hut, for it was rumored that Baba Yaga ate people as one eats chickens. Every day the stepmother sent Vasilisa into the forest to search for flowers and berries, hoping the girl would be devoured by the old witch. But the little doll did not let her go near Baba Yaga's hut, and every day when Vasilisa came safely home, the stepmother hated her even more.

One autumn evening, the stepmother called the three girls to her and gave them each a task. One was to make a piece of lace, the other to knit a pair of stockings, and Vasilisa was to spin a basketful of flax. Then the stepmother put out all the fires in the house and went to bed, leaving only one candle lighted.

After three hours, the elder daughter put out the candle, just as her mother had instructed her to do. "What shall we do?" she cried in mock alarm. "There is no light in the house."

"One of us will have to fetch fire from Baba Yaga," said the other sister. "She is the only one who lives nearby."

"I don't need light," said the sister who was making lace. "I have enough light from my steel pins."

"And I have enough light from my silver needles," cried the sister who was knitting the stockings. "Vasilisa, you will have to go, for you have no light from your flax."

The sisters pushed Vasilisa out of the house, and locked the door, crying, "You cannot come back until you bring us light."

Vasilisa sat down on the doorstep. From one pocket she took the tiny doll and from the other, the bits she always saved from her own supper. "Eat a little and drink a little and listen to my story. I must go into the dark forest to Baba Yaga's hut to get some fire, and I am terrified that she will eat me. Tell me what to do."

"Do not fear, little Vasilisa," the doll said. "As long as I am with you, no harm shall come to you."

Vasilisa put the doll back into her pocket and entered the forest.

Suddenly she heard the beating of hooves, and a man on horseback galloped past her. He was dressed all in white. His horse was milk-white, and its harness was white. Just as he passed her, the night paled into dawn. Vasilisa went a little farther, and again she heard the beating of a horse's hooves and there came another man on horseback. He was dressed all in red, and the horse under him was blood red, and its harness was red. Just as he passed her, the sun rose. Vasilisa walked on until she could find no path through the forest. As the light began to fade again, she came to the clearing and Baba Yaga's little hut. The fence around the hut was made of human bones, and the top of the wall was decorated with human skulls. The sight filled Vasilisa with fear.

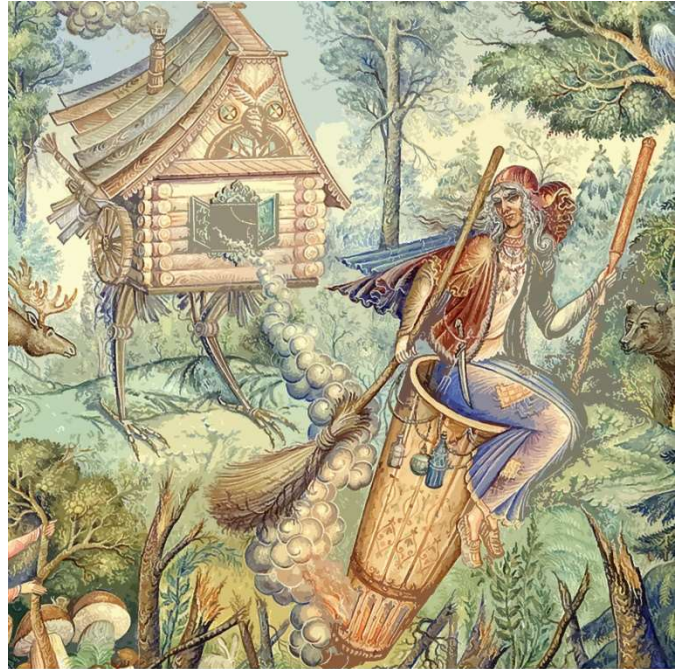
Inside the wall, by the gate, stood a tree. The tree looked withered and its branches drooped across the gate. Vasilisa felt for it, and poured the last of her water and the last few crumbs in her pocket on the earth. The tree immediately began to look better, and its branches straightened, leaving the gate clear.

Then a third horseman came galloping up. He was dressed all in black, and his horse was coal-black, and its harness was black. As he thundered up to the gate of the hut, he disappeared as if the earth had swallowed him up. At that moment, night came and the forest grew dark. The skulls on the wall lit up, and the clearing around the hut was as bright as day.

Suddenly the forest was filled with a terrible noise, and Baba Yaga came flying through the trees. She traveled, not in a chariot, not in a coach, but in a great iron mortar that flew along by all by itself. She rowed it with a pestle, and all the while she swept out the tracks behind her with a broom made of long-dead persons' hair.

Even more strange was Baba Yaga's house. It sat atop huge, scaly yellow chicken legs, and walked about all by itself, twirling sometimes around and around like an ecstatic dancer.

Baba Yaga stopped at the gate and cried: "Little House, Little House, Turn your back to the forest and your face to me."



The little hut spun around to face her and stopped. Baba Yaga began to sniff, first in one direction and then another. "FOO! FOO! I smell the smell of a human. Show yourself, whoever you are!"

Trembling with fear, Vasilisa stepped forward. Bowing low, she said, "It is only me, Vasilisa. My stepmother has sent me to you to fetch some fire."

"I know your stepmother," said the old witch. "If you want my fire, you will have to stay and work for it. If not, I will eat you for my supper."

Then she turned to the gate and shouted, "My strong locks, unlock! My stout gate, open!" They obeyed in an instant, and Baba Yaga swooped in. Once Vasilisa had passed through, the gate slammed shut and the locks snapped back into place.

"Bring me all the food from the oven," Baba Yaga shouted, and Vasilisa hurried to obey. There was enough food for three giants, but Baba Yaga ate it all, leaving only a tiny shred of meat and a crust of bread for Vasilisa. Then the old witch lay down on the stove.

"Tomorrow when I leave," she said, "you must clean the yard, sweep the floors, and cook my supper. Then take a bushel of wheat from my storehouse and pick out of it all the black grains and all the wild peas. If you do not do as I have asked, I will eat you for my supper." Then she turned to the wall and soon began to snore.

Vasilisa went into the corner and took the tiny doll from her pocket. "Eat a little and drink a little and listen to my story," she said. "I am locked in this old witch's hut, and if I do not do all that she has ordered, she will eat me for supper tomorrow. What shall I do?"

The doll ate a bit of the bread and a snippet of the meat and said, "Do not be afraid, Vasilisa. Hold me tight and go to sleep. Remember, the morning is wiser than the evening."

The next morning Vasilisa rose early. When she looked out the window, she saw the white horseman gallop from around the corner of the hut. As he cleared the wall, the night paled into dawn. The old witch whistled for her mortar and pestle, and as she climbed into the mortar, the blood-red horseman galloped from around the corner. He leaped over the wall, and at that very moment, the sun rose. At a command from Baba Yaga, the gate swung open and the old witch rode off, sweeping away the trail with her broom.



The yard was clean and the floors of the hut had been swept. The little doll was sitting in the storehouse picking the last black grains and wild peas from a bushel of wheat. So Vasilisa rested all day. In the afternoon, a thin sad cat came and twined their way around Vasilisa's ankles meowing pitifully. Vasilisa fed them a few scraps left from dinner the night before. The cat immediately jumped in her lap and purred, looking sleeker already.

When evening came, the cat left the house and she laid the table for the old witch's supper and sat looking out the window. As it had happened before, just as the coal-black horseman came galloping up to the gate and disappeared, night fell. The eyes of the skulls began to shine. Soon the trees began to groan and creak, and Baba Yaga rode up in

her huge iron mortar. "Well, have you done all that I ordered?" she asked.

"See for yourself, Baba Yaga," answered Vasilisa.

Baba Yaga went all about the place, sniffing in the corners and tapping with her pestle. Try as she might, she could find nothing to complain of. There was not a weed left in the yard, nor a speck of dust on the floors, nor a single black grain or wild pea in the wheat. "You have done well," she said. Then she clapped her hands and shouted, "Ho, my faithful friends, grind my wheat." Immediately, three pairs of hands appeared, seized the wheat, and carried it away.

Vasilisa set the witch's supper on the table, and although there was enough food for four giants, the old witch ate it, bones and all, leaving only a small morsel for Vasilisa. Then she stretched herself out on the stove and said, "Tomorrow, you must do all that you have done today, and besides these tasks, you must take from the storehouse a half bushel of poppy seeds and clean them one by one." Then she fell asleep.

Vasilisa fed her little doll and crept into a corner to sleep. And once again, the next morning all the tasks were done, and when Baba Yaga returned that evening, she could find nothing to complain of. She clapped her hands and shouted, "Ho, my faithful friends, press the oil out of my poppy seeds." And as before, three pairs of hands appeared in the air, and carried away the poppy seeds.

Vasilisa set the supper in front of the old witch, and Baba Yaga ate enough for five giants while Vasilisa waited and watched.

"Why do you stand there as if you were dumb?" the witch snapped angrily.

"I did not speak because I did not dare," answered Vasilisa. "But if you will allow me, Baba Yaga, I wish to ask some questions."

"Remember Vasilisa, if you know too much, you will grow old too soon. What do you wish to ask?"

"When I came to your hut, a white horseman passed me by. Who was he?"

"That was my bright, white day," answered Baba Yaga. "He is a servant of mine. He cannot hurt you. Ask me more."

"Afterward, another rider overtook the first. He was dressed all in red, and his horse was blood-red. Who was he?"

"He too is my servant, the round red sun," answered Baba Yaga. "He cannot hurt you either. Ask me another."

"There was a third rider," said Vasilisa. "He was dressed all in black, and his horse was coal-black. Who was he?"

"My servant, the dark, black night," said the old witch angrily. "He also cannot harm you. Ask me more."

But Vasilisa remembered what the witch had said, and she remained silent.

"Ask me more," roared the old witch. "Ask me about the three pairs of hands that serve me."

"Three questions are enough for me," Vasilisa replied. "I would not wish to grow old too soon."

"It is well you did not ask of the three pairs of hands, for they would have seized you and ground you up for my supper. Now it is my turn. How is it that you have been able to do all the tasks I required of you?"

Vasilisa was so terrified that she almost told the old witch the secret of the little doll. Just in time, she remembered her mother's warning and said, "The blessing of my dead mother helps me in all things."

The witch sprang up from her chair. "Get out of my house this instant!" she shrieked. "No one who bears a blessing should cross my threshold."

Vasilisa ran as fast as she could. The tree by the wall opened the gate wide for her so she could escape through it. Baba Yaga seized one of the skulls with the burning eyes and threw it after her. "Here is the fire you came for," she shouted. "Take it and have the joy of it." Vasilisa set the skull on the end of a stick and hurried home.

All the night long, the skull lit a path through the woods. At one point, Vasilisa lost the path and had no crumbs to feed her doll. The cat from Baba Yaga's house suddenly appeared in the forest and Vasilisa saw that it was sitting at the end of a clearing where the path began again. Petting it in thanks, she resumed her journey through the forest.

Towards the evening of the next day, Vasilisa came out of the forest to her stepmother's house. Vasilisa saw no light through the windows of the house, so she picked up the skull and carried it inside. The stepmother and step-sisters were sitting in the dark, as they had not been able to light a fire since she left. As they saw Vasilisa enter with the skull they looked up in anger and fear. The skull blazed even brighter and laser-like beams came out of its eyes. The stepmother and stepsisters shrieked in fear and ran out of the house and into the woods. And no one has seen them from that day to this.

Vasilisa buried the skull in the ground, locked the house, and left. She took refuge with a kind old woman who lived all alone near the town gates, where she waited for her father's return.

One day she said to the old woman, "Please, grandmother, buy me some flax to spin into thread. The days are long and my hands need work." The old woman bought her some flax and Vasilisa set to work. Soon there was enough thread to weave a dozen shirts. When the old woman had gone to sleep, Vasilisa took the tiny doll from her pocket, set some food and drink before her, and said, "Eat a little and drink a little and listen to my story. I have spun beautiful thread, but I have no loom on which to weave it."

"Bring me some wood and an old basket and a few hairs from a horse's mane, and I will arrange everything for you," said the little doll.

When Vasilisa woke the next morning, there stood a loom, perfectly suited for her delicate thread. All winter long, Vasilisa sat weaving her thread into linen. Then she bleached the linen and gave it to the old woman. "Take it to the market and sell it. The money you receive shall pay for my food and lodging." And the wise woman did as she asked and they had more ease in their lives.

When Vasilisa's father returned from his long journey, he was filled with happiness to find his brave Vasilisa working as a spinner and weaver and doing so well.

As for the little doll—Vasilisa kept her always with her.

