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LAND OF THE GOLDEN APPLES

Once upon a time, there was a kingdom known as the Land of the Golden Apples. The kingdom was named for its magical apples, which grew by the sea, and emitted a deep warmth. No one ever picked the golden apples, as they were very precious to the kingdom. The Land of the Golden Apples was ruled by a King and a Queen. They dearly loved their people, and their people loved them. The kingdom was filled with laughter and love.

One day it was announced the Queen was to have a baby! On the day of the royal birth, the entire kingdom gathered outside of the castle. The fish came from the seas with gifts of pearls. The squirrels and deer brought plants from the forest. Even the birds came to sing beautiful lullabies. Everyone waited patiently outside the castle for news. They waited and they waited.

Suddenly, they heard a great cry from the castle. A bird flew to investigate, only to return screeching terrible news, "The Queen is dead!" Broken hearted, the kingdom returned to their homes in disbelief. Consumed by grief, the King shut himself in his room. He even refused to see the baby princess, whom the Queen, with her dying breath, had named Summer. The King descended into a sorrow so deep that he talked to no one. He could not even bear to look at his own daughter Summer. Every time he tried to catch the quickest glance, his heart broke all over again.

So the King locked Princess Summer in the highest tower of the castle. Her only companion was Magda, a nursemaid who raised the princess as her own daughter. As the years passed, the King never left his room. His heart, once as warm as the apples that glowed in the royal orchards, grew colder and colder. When at last his heart turned to solid ice, a dark and frozen curse fell upon the Land of the Golden Apples. Soon the kingdom lost its warmth. The castle became a fortress of ice. The Golden Orchard withered, and the magical apples fell from the trees like snowballs. Sadder still, the people's hearts began to grow cold. Many were afraid to leave their homes. Others became suspicious, and seldom spoke out loud.

The curse transformed the King's guards into ferocious White Wolf People who became his secret police. The entire kingdom grew cold and silent. There was no love left in the kingdom - save for in the highest tower of the castle. Princess Summer had grown into a beautiful young woman. She shared abundant love with her nursemaid. Magda would tell funny stories, and they would sneak laughs that sometimes soared on the bitter winter wind. The people, who were denied joy, resented the laughter from the tower. They wrote down all their cold feelings - feelings that made them sad or fearful or angry with regret. They held those negative thoughts close, and read them daily.

Meanwhile, in a neighbouring kingdom, young Prince Gerald grew up hearing tales of a beautiful young princess locked away forever. Prince Gerald decided to go on a quest to rescue this princess from the tower. At the frozen border of the kingdom, Prince Gerald was spotted by a pack of White Wolves. News of the handsome Prince's trespass reached the highest tower. When night fell, Princess Summer snuck out of the castle to rescue this Prince from the wolves. Magda awoke to find her gone, and ran to the King with the news. Furious, he commanded her to leave the castle to find the Princess. The King, whose cursed heart had for so long known nothing but cold, felt a pang of warmth. It was love for his daughter. Without hesitation, he left the castle to find Princess Summer.

Deep in the forest, Princess Summer searched for Prince Gerald. Prince Gerald searched for Princess Summer. By sheer chance, both sought refuge in the icy lair of the White Wolves. Each recognized the other immediately. Soon, their love began to melt the lair around them. Outside, Magda had nearly given up her search for Summer when she heard laughter and voices coming from the lair of the White Wolves, which was melting quickly. Although happy to discover them safe, Magda urged Gerald to go away. She knew the King would be furious. Neither Gerald nor Summer would listen. Their love was too warm. They laughed more.

The King heard the laughter. It guided him through the blizzard. He slowly entered the lair, and faced his daughter for the first time since she was a baby. "Papa?" Tears fell from the King's eyes. In fact, his heart melted so quickly that the tears flowed like a waterfall. Much to the amazement of all, a tree sprouted in the very spot where the King's tears had fallen. A golden apple tree grew in an instant, its apples emitting a golden glow. The dark and frozen curse melted away from the Land of the Golden Apples. The King proclaimed that the people BURN their written feelings of fear, regret and grief. The good people of the Kingdom, even those who had once been transformed into White Wolves, lived happily ever after in the golden warmth of love and joy.

THE ENVY TROLLS

Once upon a time in a land not so very far from here at all, the Kingdom of the Golden Apples was preparing for a royal wedding. It was a very happy and special Kingdom, because the Golden Apples gave not only food, but love and happiness to the people who ate them. The Kingdom was especially happy now, because the Princess and Prince of the land were going to be married. Princess Summer and Prince Gerald had fallen in love some time ago when they defeated the White Wolves and broke the frozen curse of fear and despair that had taken over the land. Princess Summer's father, the king, had announced he was ready to retire and hand the kingdom over to his daughter and her beloved on their wedding day. The preparations were taking months, as everyone in the kingdom was coming together to celebrate. The kingdom was so full of warmth and love that in the frozen mountains to the West, the Envy Trolls started feeling the great love in the Kingdom. The Envy Trolls were starving for love and came down into the Kingdom to feed on the love of the people.

The Envy Trolls were big and scary and fed themselves by capturing and sucking the love out of people. They replaced the people's love and generosity with jealousy and suspicion. After someone was taken by the trolls, they returned home with their minds full of lies and doubts about the people they once loved. As the trolls sucked more and more love out of more and more of the people, a great darkness fell over the kingdom. The envy of the trolls replaced the Kingdom's Golden Apples of love with suspicious red eyes that watched every person's move. Snakes began to eat their own tails. The fish grew jealous of the creatures of the land and leapt out of the seas.

The Envy Trolls kept getting hungrier and hungrier and were desperate to get their claws on the greatest love in the Kingdom: that of the Princess and her Prince. One day when Prince Gerald was out walking in the woods, the Envy Trolls captured him and imprisoned him in a fortress made of ice, waiting for the daring Princess Summer to come to find him so they could capture her too. By consuming both their loves at the same time, the trolls believed they would grow powerful enough to take over the entire Kingdom.

Back in the castle, when Prince Gerald did not return, Princess Summer feared the worst and decided she would go to get him back regardless of the danger. She was very brave and very smart, and despite the pleas of her best friend and caretaker Magda, she set out to find him.

Prince Gerald was very clever when he was captured. As the trolls took him away, he whispered messages of love for Summer to the fish, to the trees, to the coral and the leaves so that she would be able to find him. As Princess Summer started out on her quest to find Gerald, she found the clues Gerald had left her. The trolls kept trying to catch her, but she was wise and was able to outsmart them as she went.

Finally, she managed to find the ice fortress in which Gerald was imprisoned. It was impossible to find the entrance, but she called out Gerald's name. Within the icy walls he heard her and called back, saying "Summer! I love you! I'll love you forever, no matter what happens." The trolls were closing in on them when he called this out. Although the Envy Trolls almost had the two of them in their grasp, the couple's love for each other proved too powerful for the trolls. Princess Summer's and Prince Gerald's declaration of love and trust in one another shattered the walls of the ice prison. They hugged each other deeply, and their love was so powerful that it broke the trolls into ten million little pieces.

With the trolls defeated, all the love that had been sucked out of the Kingdom of the Golden Apples returned to the people's hearts. The King declared that not only would the marriage of Princess Summer and Prince Gerald go ahead immediately, but the Kingdom would celebrate the love of every single person within it. The celebration would not only happen this year, but every year ever after. Each person would write down all their jealousies and fears and burn them in a yearly bonfire to make sure they never came back. This way, everyone would live together in peace and harmony, loving their friends and neighbours for all the years to come.

THE SINGING TREE

Once upon a time there was a magical Kingdom known as the Kingdom of the Singing Tree. Everyone who lived there was happy and confident and loved to sing to the Singing Tree at the heart of the Kingdom. In return the tree would light up the land with love and warmth. The caretaker of the Singing Tree was a Fairy Queen who shared all the magical songs with the people of the Kingdom and helped to distribute the light and warmth of the tree throughout the land.

Eventually, stories of the kingdom of the singing tree and its magical fairy queen reached the ears of a powerful King from the North. He wanted the power of the Singing Tree for himself and he devised a plan to harness the warm power of the Tree. He started holding auditions so that only the best of the best singers could sing to the tree, in order to make it more powerful. Because of this, the people of the Kingdom of the Singing Tree began to be afraid they weren't good enough to sing, and so one by one they stopped trying. The Singing Tree began to die, and the Kingdom of the Singing Tree became a cold, sad and fear-filled place.

Several Kingdoms away a young princess heard the tragic tale of the Kingdom of the Singing Tree, and because she loved music and was very brave, she decided to journey to the Tree to see if she could help. She sought out the Fairy Queen and bit by bit started to learn the long-lost songs that would spread warmth throughout the land. Her infectious joy for music sparked the memory of the love of singing in the people of the Kingdom and they joined with her to sing to the tree. The Singing Tree and the Fairy Queen started to regain their power and return love and warmth to the land. Everyone realized that love and joy were much stronger than perfection and fear and that music was for everyone, no matter what their voices sounded like.

Each year thereafter, the Princess would lead the entire Kingdom on a journey to the Singing Tree where everyone would sing their hearts to the tree before burning all of their fears on a big fire to remember that fear is just fear, and that love and trust is much more powerful than being afraid.

BABA YAGA AND THE FIREBIRD

Once upon a time, not so long ago in a land not so far away from here, Tsar Demyan lived in his kingdom with his three sons. The Tsar had a beautiful garden with many trees and flowers, but his favourite was an apple tree which bore golden apples that shone like the sun. One morning the Tsar noticed that one of his golden apples was missing and that night, he set his eldest son, Peter, the task of guarding the tree and catching the thief, but the boy fell asleep, and in the morning another apple was missing. The next night, the second son, Vasily, tried to catch the thief, but he too fell asleep and the Tsar lost another apple.

On the third evening, Ivan Tsarevich, the youngest son was set the task. He was determined to not fall asleep like his brothers, so he paced the garden the whole night long. In the wee small hours, something glimmered in the distance and a light flew through the air. The whole garden grew as bright as day. It was the Firebird. It perched on the apple tree and pecked at one of the apples. Ivan crept along the ground and leapt up at the Firebird and grabbed it by the tail, but the Firebird was too strong. It flew away, leaving one of its fiery feathers in his hand. Ivan was so ashamed at this failure, he decided then and there he would leave home before anyone else was awake, go after the Firebird, and bring it home to his father. He tucked the glowing feather inside his coat, saddled his horse with the golden mane, and rode off into the dawn.

When the Tsar awoke and found another apple and his youngest son missing he became very angry. He told Peter and Vasily to saddle their horses and find the thief who stole his apples and now, his favourite son. The two older brothers set off on their journey with grumbling hearts. The Tsar's favourite tree lost no more apples, but he found no joy in that because now all three of his sons were missing. He and all the people of the kingdom fell into years of sorrow and regret.

Meanwhile, Ivan had come to a crossroads marked by a stone pillar upon which was written:

*If you ride straight on, you will grow cold and hungry
If you turn to the right, you will live, but your horse will die
If you turn to the left, you will die, but your horse will live.*

Ivan did not want to die, so he turned to the right. Immediately, a large grey wolf leapt from the shadows and tore his horse in two. Ivan cried in despair. Without his horse he knew he could never find the Firebird and bring him home. The wolf said, "You read what it said on the pillar. You chose the road. Still, I feel sorry for you. Jump on my back and we will go to Baba Yaga's house in the forest. Her raven knows where to find the waters of life and death and we can bring your horse back to life." So Ivan did as he was told. He jumped on the grey wolf's back and soon they were clearing whole mountains and valleys with a single stride. When they arrived at Baba Yaga's house, she was curled up and sleeping inside it, her body filling the whole space. Her raven was keeping watch from the roof top and was, at first, suspicious of the visitors, but when she heard their tale, was moved to help them. Truth be told, the raven loved the journey to the other end of the earth, but would only agree to go, if Ivan and the wolf would keep her watch. This they agreed to do. The raven was gone a long time. Baba Yaga slept on. Ivan and the wolf waited. Finally the raven returned with two bottles of water tied to her legs and many stories to tell. Ivan thanked her, promised to return someday to listen to her tales, jumped on the wolf's back and away they ran back to where the horse with the golden mane lay torn in two.

The wolf sprinkled the two halves with the waters of death and they knit back together. He sprinkled the waters of life on the body and it shuddered, scrambled to its feet, shook its head and tossed its golden mane. Ivan was overjoyed and thanked the wolf. The wolf told him how to get to the kingdom of Koshchey the Deathless, for this was where the Firebird lived. "Before you go, a word of warning. Take the bird but not the cage. If you do, all is lost." Ivan agreed and they parted ways.

The road to Koshchey's kingdom was dark and cold. Along the way he saw statues of people and animals frozen in snow. He shivered and tucked his coat closer around the glowing feather that kept him warm and gave him hope. After a long time, he came upon a clearing in the woods and knew by the warm glow that shone up into the night sky he had come to the end of his journey. He tied his horse to a tree and crept to the side of the clearing. There sat the beautiful Firebird in his golden cage. Ivan wondered how to capture the bird without the cage when Vasilisa, the most beautiful girl he had ever seen came from the icy house to bring the Firebird a golden apple. Ivan fell in love with her on the spot, but Vasilisa, her heart numb and frozen by a spell from Koshchey, felt only fear.

Ivan decided then and there to take Vasilisa with him, but to do that he had take the Firebird in his cage. The minute he did that, the bells attached to the cage by long ropes rang out, and woke the evil Koshchey. He arrived in a fury and in one icy blast turned Ivan to a statue of snow. Koshchey then cursed all those who helped Ivan in his quest. The horse with the golden mane, the wolf, the raven and Baba Yaga herself were all transformed into pillars of ice and snow. They became frozen in time like the hundreds of others he had bewitched in the past. Only the Firebird withstood the wizard's curse and was the only one left to see and scream out at this great evil.

The awful cry woke Vasilisa from her frozen state. When she saw Ivan turned to snow, she cried out in sorrow and found her heart in her tears. As her heart melted, she fell deeply in love with Ivan and with that, Koshchey's spell of many ages began to dim. Ivan, his horse, the wolf, and all the people Koshchey had frozen began to thaw. All evil things eventually fail, and when they do, the evil turns inward. So it was with Koshchey. As the cold crept through his body, he struggled to make it to the warmth and safety of the Firebird, but he did not succeed. The Firebird flew from his cage, settled on the branch of a tree and waited for the wizard to freeze. Then he shook himself, scattering his glowing feathers all over the ground. Vasilisa and Ivan gathered them up and gave them to the people who came from the woods and the valleys and the mountains to witness Koshchey turn into a pillar of snow.

When the people saw him like this, they realized he never had any power over them except that which they had given him. It was only their shame and their regret that froze their hearts, and made them vulnerable to his spell. They decided they would each take two feathers from the Firebird - one to light the way and warm their hearts, and one on which to write their regrets. These they would take with them on the long journey home and burn so they would be free forever more. It was a triumphant procession led by Ivan, Vasilisa, and the Firebird that reached the kingdom of Tsar Demyan, where they found a great welcome.

The people of the kingdom had long realized their pain at losing the three princes had come from their shame and regret. They had built spirit house in the central square of the village, wrote their regrets on pieces of red paper shaped like feathers and had been praying for the return of the Firebird to them on fire so they could be free. This they did with great joy. Ivan and Vasilisa were married. The Firebird danced and flew to the apple tree, took the largest golden apple to great applause and disappeared into the night.

THE HOLE IN THE WALL

Once upon a long time ago when people first came to the world they were one with the heavens and the earth. They followed the rains, harvested the bounty from the land, drifted with the tides and fished in the plentiful seas. They lived in harmony with the world and one another for thousands of years until the fateful day when everything changed. On that day a party of explorers travelling through a deep forest discovered huge stones arranged in an arc on the top of a hill. Elaborate pictograms were etched upon each monolith that told the story of a lost civilization of giants with a command of technology far beyond anything known to the people of the world.

The discovery disturbed the minds and hearts of the explorers and at first they said nothing to anyone about what they had found. Eventually, as people do, they told others and these others told others until one day they decided no more people should know. They were beginning to understand the meaning behind the pictures and beginning to understand their power. When it was time for The People to move on, those with the knowledge of the stones stayed behind. They returned to the forest, and set out to recreate the ways of the ancient giants.

Time passed. The People of the world became separated into The Giants and The Gayans. Thousands of years of harmony came to an end. The Giants built walls around The Place of the Stones and turned their backs on the world. The Gayans built walls inside their minds and turned their backs on The Giants. The hearts of the people in both camps grew cold and hard against the other. Using the knowledge of the stones, The Giants became master builders of machines. They made machines for every purpose under heaven - machines to plant seeds and to harvest crops - machines to make their homes and their walls, and even machines to milk their cows. They created machines to make machines and machines that had no purpose at all.

The Gayans outlawed machines of any kind. They drifted with the tide, followed the rains, made beautiful things, thought beautiful thoughts but taught their children to fear and loathe The Giants and their mechanical creations.

Time passed. Things were changing in the heavens and on the earth as things are wont to do. In some places the wind blew stronger, in others not at all. Rains poured down on deserts but stopped falling on jungles. Rivers tens of thousands of years old dried up, as others just born, ripped the soil from mountainsides and washed it into the sea. In the land of The Giants the machines stood idle. Full grown Giants could no longer bend to touch the earth, could not stoop to smell a flower, or even put on their own socks. Children, who had not yet reached the age of ascension when they too became Giants, were forced into a life of stoop labour and servitude. In the land of The Gayans, things weren't much better.

With walls crisscrossing the land they could not follow the rains. They could not fish the stormy seas that ripped their boats apart and tore their villages from the shores. As their hunger grew their beautiful thoughts left them. Instead of inventing ways to solve their problems they invented stories about how who was to blame.

Into this world a boy and a girl were born who were to change the world. The boy, Klaus, was born into the land of The Giants, and as soon as he was strong enough, he became a tiller of the soil. The girl, Jasmine, was born into the land of The Gayans and she had no job. She sat beside her mother and father and dutifully tried to listen to endless renditions of "How The Giants Ruined the World."

The stories were all the same and Jasmine had grown tired of hearing them. She often slipped away from the family gatherings to climb the tall tree that grew near The Giants' wall. From her perch, she could see the wild foam flecked sea in the distance, the camp of The Gayans all decked out in gossamer splendor beneath her, and best of all, she could see the young boy working in the field beyond the great wall.

Jasmine loved to watch him work, his dark muscles roped and strong from toiling in the hot sun. He looked like he enjoyed his work, not like the pale soft boys of her clan. She herself was strong from climbing and running away and longed to join him, but such thoughts came and went like dreams of flying. It was strictly forbidden to speak to The Giants or even approach the walls. There were tales of horrible things that happened to people who tried and Jasmine had doubts she would survive an attempt.

One evening as she went to climb her tree to watch the sunset she found the boy calmly sitting on her branch looking out towards the ocean. Without uttering a word or looking at her, he moved aside on the branch, letting her take her usual place. There was too much to say, so they said nothing at all. They gazed in silence at the sun. Only when it had melted into the sea, did they finally turn and look at one another. An eternity passed between them. When it grew dark, they climbed down from the tree knowing who they were and what they were to do. Jasmine followed Klaus through the hole in the wall he had made some years ago to his hiding place, a tangle of vines that grew against a curve in the wall. She sat with her back to the curve and watched him as he built a small fire. When it was lit and burning brightly, he came to sit beside her.

They watched the flames in silence for a long time. "This is all over now", he finally said, thumping the wall with his fist. Jasmine nodded. "Yes," she said. Klaus took out his knife, cut out a piece of the wall and threw it into the flames. Jasmine took the knife from his hands, cut off a chunk of her hair, and threw that into the fire. All that night they planned what they would do. "We will bring bread," Klaus said. "And we will bring salt," said Jasmine. "And we will make a fire down by the sea and throw in all those things that have kept us apart from one another. We shall live together from this day forward," they said with one voice.

The next day Jasmine gathered the young people of her clan and they prepared the fire at the shores of the sea and boiled its waters to make the salt. Klaus gathered the young people of his clan and they prepared the bread. At nightfall the two groups met at the hole in the wall and one by one the children of The Giants slipped through it. Klaus remained behind to address the outraged adult Giants who had followed them. "You are all welcome to come," Klaus told them. "But how can we?" they cried. "We can not fit through that hole." Klaus simply replied, "You would if you took off your stilts." With that he slipped through the hole, leaving the Giants standing dumbfounded on the wrong side of their wall, just as many of The Gayans were left on the wrong side of theirs.

The rest is history. Those who made it to the fire that night ate bread and salt with one another, threw things into the fire, and never looked back. The sparks from that fire flew up into the night sky. The ashes from those sparks were carried by the wind around the world and whispered their way into the dreams of every human being on earth. Walls came tumbling down.

Klaus and Jasmine lived to a ripe old age surrounded by many children and grandchildren, their favorite game called "Giants", involved stilts, falling down, and a lot of laughter.

RED RIDING HOOD AND THE BABA YAGA

Once upon a time not so long ago and not so far away, in the Village of Comfort there lived a little girl named Red Riding Hood. Life in the village was good and everyone had a fine warm place to live and more than enough to eat. One would think, with all these riches, there would be nothing to fear but the more the villagers prospered, the greater and more numerous their fears became. The forests beyond their fields and pastures were feared most of all. Ancient stories of witches, wolves, outlaws and vagabonds who lived there were told and retold so often in the village they were believed to be true. At first, Red Riding Hood believed them too. The woods did seem dark and scary as she skipped along the path to Grandmother's house, but as years passed, she began to have doubts. She had, after all, already stepped on a crack and not broken her mother's back, walked under a ladder on Friday the 13th, made friends with black cats, and slipped out of her bed in the dark of night to dance with the fireflies. Red's Grandmother never told any horror stories about the forest. On the contrary, most of their time together was spent in the woods playing like children in a magical kingdom.

Red's Grandmother spent hours teaching Red the lore of the forest - which plants were good to eat, which were poisonous; which birds stayed for the winter, which flew south; which animals pawed through the snow to find the dry grass, which burrowed nests into the soft earth to sleep away the cold. On rare occasions, Red was allowed to stay overnight at her Grandmother's house and the two of them would sneak far into the woods to lie on their backs in the soft moss listening to the night sounds and watching the stars twinkle through the canopy. If they were very lucky they would even hear the coyotes and wolves howl at the moon.

Each year, in the dead of winter, the Village of Comfort held an annual Manifest Your Fear Festival and villagers created effigies of things they feared the most. Red thought about her greatest fear and decided she could not stand the oppressive mood of the village one minute longer. She feverishly went to work to create a model of the village and all its citizens. Her sculpture angered many. "How can she be afraid of our Village of Comfort!" the villagers exclaimed. Red was all too ready to escape their disapproval and she drew on her red cape, packed some supplies into her basket, and headed off into the woods to visit her Grandmother. What awaited her was to change her life forever.

The path through the woods to Grandmother's house was strangely quiet, almost eerie, but Red, still flush from her rebellion, missed all the signs that something was amiss. As she came upon her Grandmother's house all was silent, cold, and dark. Trembling with fear, she pushed open the door and made her way through the darkened room. Red fumbled for a match and lit a candle. As the flicker of candlelight began to illuminate the room, she saw a letter resting upon the table. Summoning all of her courage, she picked it up and opened it. Tears began to flow down her cheeks like rivers as she read about her Grandmother's decision to make her final journey to the deep woods where she had begun her life, a place for which she was deeply homesick. Red smiled when she read about all the adventures her Grandmother was going to have. These were make-believe stories she had heard before. But when she got to the part where Grandmother told her where to find the Portal that would let her follow, her eyes widened in amazement. How was that even possible? Red tucked the letter into her bodice, blew out the candle, and took one final look around the room where she had spent so much of her childhood. She squared her shoulders and set out into the night.

When she found the place where the Portal was supposed to be, it looked exactly like the edge of the forest she had known her entire life. There was no path that she could see. What had her Grandmother said? "You have to not look and see what is there." It was a game they played to find the air sparkles on bright sunny days, but Red had never done it at night. Nothing happened for a long time. No matter what she tried, the Portal would not open. After a time, her mind wandered. She forgot about the task, and stood steaming, swaying with her breath, enjoying the night, thinking of nothing really, and then suddenly there it was, a shimmering path through an entirely different world. She laughed, stepped through the Portal and onto the path.

A full moon was rising over the hill at the edge of the forest illuminating everything in its unearthly light. The valley beyond the hills glowed as if the stars in the heavens had fallen to earth. The silence of the night was broken only by the crunch of her footsteps on the snow and the beating of her heart. Red raced to the top of the hill and there, spread out before her was a sight so amazing, so utterly enchanting, she wept with joy at the wonder of it all. "Thank-you Grandmother", she whispered as she saw all the magic that was foretold in her Grandmother's letter.

To her right lay the Valley of Aminata Muscaria, where giant glowing red mushrooms rose from the snow. The trees above bore equally large Apples, which too glowed as if made of live embers. Ahead lay the dark woods of Ruebezah, lord of mountains and valleys, a figure so fearsome, that some who saw him thought he was a demon. Others thought he was like the wind, some like the waters that gushed in the streams. What is sure, no one who ever encountered him could forget him. It is said he gave everyone what they deserved. "And that is why," Red's Grandmother used to say with a laugh, "Everyone in your Village is so afraid of him."

The dark woods of Ruebezah's valley were stranger than anything Red had ever seen. Old man's beard hung everywhere and giant glowing eggs swung amongst it. When Red put her eye to a hole in one of the eggs she gasped at what she saw. Reeling with vertigo, she fell back right into the arms of the man himself and screamed, more out of surprise than fright. Releasing her with a great exaggerated bow, Ruebezah said, "Welcome to our world, Red. We have been awaiting you." She stared at him in wonder - this giant of a man, his red hair and beard flying in the wind, his cloak made of thunder and wild weather wrapped around him like a shroud. Ruebezah's eyes crinkled and he said, "I am pleased to see your Grandmother was so very right about you. Shall we?" He gestured to the path that snaked through the woods and followed her as she boldly stepped ahead.

They passed a full moon rising, darted behind it to dance and cast shadows on its face. A spiral path led them to the Center of the Universe where they looked up and saw themselves continuing over the Event Horizon and on to the furthest reaches of the Galaxy, beyond which lay the land of the White Wolves. Icy spires thrown down from the sky by Aurora, in fits of wild exuberance, were impaled along a ridge that stretched as far as the eye could see. White wolves ran through the spires in a weaving dance, stopping from time to time to circle, gather, and howl at the moon. And then she saw him! The King of the Wolves against the indigo sky, the most dangerous one of all, the one she feared and loved the most of all the creatures in the forest. Ruebezah had brought her to this, but he would go no further. "This is your journey" he said "not mine. I have others to frighten and reward." Then he turned away in a clap of thunder and left Red to meet her destiny alone. Although the King of the Wolves did not come to her at first, his eyes never wavered from hers. In his eyes she saw her past receding, her future before her, and this moment exploding in her mind and heart.

The fear that had risen in her throat vanished, a joy and excitement growing in her belly until she felt she would burst. With a wild laugh, Red threw back her head and howled at the moon as she had seen the White Wolves do. At that, the King of the Wolves lost his regal composure. He held out his hand to this girl who dared to meet his gaze, joined in her playful howl, and with that, brought her into his fold, the Company of Wolves. Together they walked over the ridge and greeted the winter creatures of the northern forest, blue jays and magpies, squirrels and white weasels, coyotes and owls, moose and deer and others too numerous to mention, all lining the path leading to the most wondrous sight of all.

At the very top of the ridge stood Baba Yaga's house, its chicken legs folded around a giant nest of eggs, which glowed from within as if they were on fire. Baba Yaga was placing embers from her fire into the skulls on top of the fence posts of her garden. The skulls were the beautiful remains of every creature that had ever died in the forest. The embers kept their souls warm and their memory alive. Baba Yaga, the fiercest of all the witches, looked up as the pair approached and said, "So you have come at last..." Red and the King of the Wolves fell into step with the aged crone as she continued her work and listened as she told the stories of all her creatures large and small.

When they came to the last fence post, Baba Yaga sat on a toadstool and, motioned everyone to do the same. Then she asked Red to tell her story. Red fondly spoke of visits to Grandmother's house and the ways of the village, but when she described the citizens of Comfort holding a festival to Manifest their Fears by building giant wooden effigies in the town square, Baba Yaga laughed so hard tears came out of her nose. "I suppose the statues of me are quite ugly!" she chortled. "Oh yes!" exclaimed Red with a wicked grin. "They even make sculptures of Ruebezahl and him too" she said as she waved at the wolf. "They are most frightening." "So what do they do with these statues once the festival is over?" Baba Yaga asked. "Well, they take them down and use the wood to build new houses for the young people who are about to be married. They believe nothing should be wasted", Red replied. "Not even a good fear, eh?" Baba Yaga laughed. "Especially not a good fear", Red agreed."

Well, you know what this means, don't you?" Baba Yaga asked the Wolf. "Oh yes", he said. "I think it's time." They told Red their sudden idea and she clapped her hands in glee. "It's absolutely perfect", she laughed. Baba Yaga, Ruebezahl, and the King of the Wolves would gather all the creatures of the forest. Red would return to the village, and gather all the children who were not yet too frightened to enjoy a real adventure and they would all meet at Baba Yaga's house. There, they would make firebrands with Baba Yaga's Magic Fire, awaken the Mythic Fire Dancers from their winter sleep, dance a thousand fires in a fantastic procession, and burn down the statues of fear in the village square.

This they did. It was a grand sight to see all those ugly Fears go up in flames. Even the villagers forgot themselves and had some fun, but when they awoke the next morning and saw the blackened statues standing stark in the snow, they were in horror at what they had done and were filled with regret. The Wild Ones, Baba Yaga, Ruebezahl and all the rest, greeted them from the warm ashes where they had partied all night long. They laughed at the villager's fears and reminded them of what they had discovered the night before. They invited them to sit amongst the ashes and listen to the real tales of the forest. Surprisingly, this is exactly what they did. As the sun was setting on that wonderful day, Baba Yaga told them the best story of all - the one that was about to happen. "It was no accident" she said, "that your Red Riding Hood would leave all this and find her way to the most magical part of the forest. Red's Grandmother was my sister and a gentler creature than I. She offered to leave the beauty of the forest and the promise of immortality to bring magic to the people of the world. But her ways frightened those of you who were frightened of yourselves, so you banished her to the woods at the edge of the meadow and allowed only one person to visit her and bring her what she needed. You know that person is Red Riding Hood and you know now that she not only took care of her Grandmother until she died, but followed in her footsteps. She lost her fear of The Great Unknown through the Bravery of Disobedience and has now brought you the Magic Fire to free you from your fears. Tonight we will gather the remaining embers from this fire and go into the forest to witness and be a part of the greater return of magic to your village and to the world. And so they did. Children, parents, grandparents, lawyers, mayors, and councilmen, made firebrands and led by the Mythic Fire Dancers followed Red Riding Hood, Baba Yaga, Ruebezahl, and the King of the Wolves through the land of Old Man's Beard; behind the hill where they danced their shadows on the moon, found the spiral path that wound into the Center of the Universe and out again to the Event Horizon; over the ridge of Aurora's luminous shards of ice, past the icy Company of Wolves, and creatures of the forest; all the way to Baba Yaga's hut where the glowing eggs were about to hatch.

Baba Yaga ran ahead and knelt among the eggs in their nest. She called the children to gather round. The eggs, she said, contained the seeds of fairies that had decided to return to the world. The seeds had sprouted into baby fairies inside the eggs and were ready to be born. With that, the first egg cracked open and spilled hundreds of baby fairies onto the ground. One by one the children came to take a tiny fairy baby into the world. Hundreds upon hundreds of fairy babies in the hands of children went off into the night with their parents. Hundreds and hundreds of others flew off on their own and landed in the grasses of the meadows and the glades of the forest. Magic was returning to the village. Magic was returning to the world. Red Riding Hood stood with her Company of Wolves, holding a tiny fairy baby in her hand, and shed a tear for her Grandmother who did not live to see it all happen. Baba Yaga shook her head softly and pointed to the sky where Aurora was beginning to flicker and dance in the cold dark sky. "She is there, sweet Red." ""She is here", and pointed to the light in Red's hand, "and She is here", and she touched Red's heart.

On dark nights, you too can see the tiny fairies dancing in the meadows and woods near your own home. Your parents and teachers might call them fireflies, but you will know what they really are.