The Baba Yaga

Somewhere in the eastern part of Europe, where it gets bitterly cold in winter, there is a dark forest. If you are ever brave, foolish or ignorant enough to go wandering through that forest, there is a good chance that you might come across a peculiar house. It’s a wooden hut, but it’s like no other that you have ever seen, for it stands on giant chicken legs – and quite often it walks about, just like a monstrous farm yard bird. This hut is the home of Baba Yaga. I don’t advise that you knock at the door of Baba Yaga’s hut, no matter how much you have lost your way through the forest – for Baba Yaga is a witch.

On the edge of Baba Yaga’s forest, there is a little village, and everyone who lives there knows about the strange hut and the lady who lives inside it. They know her, and they fear her, for it has long been rumoured that she likes to eat children.

A long time ago, a man lived in this village with his beautiful daughter, who was called Vasilisa. The girl’s mother had sadly died some years before the start of this story. Before she died, she gave Vasilisa a wonderful gift – It was a little rag doll that did not look so different from any other. The girl’s mother told Vasilisa that she should take special care of the doll. Every night she must feed it a little milk and a little biscuit, and so long as she did so, the doll would always be ready to help her – no matter how much trouble she found herself in. Vasilisa did just as her mother bid her. Every night the little rag doll sat up and drank a little milk, and ate a little biscuit before smiling at Vasilisa and then going back to sleep.

As time went by, the girl’s father decided to marry again. His second wife had two daughters of her own, neither of whom could touch Vasilisa for beauty or sweetness of character. In fact, they were jealous of Vasilisa and they hated her terribly. So long as Vasilisa’s father remained at home, the stepmother and stepsisters had to pretend that they liked her, but every now and then one of the sisters would whisper in Vasilisa’s ear, “Just you wait until your dear papa leaves us alone with you. Then you’ll see!”

When Vasilisa had recently passed her sixteenth birthday, her father said that he had to go away on a journey that would last at least a month. Vasilisa begged him to take her with him, but he just laughed and said he was travelling on business, and the girl would find the journey tiresome and dull.

The first night after the father had left, the stepmother gathered the three girls together in the parlour and spoke as such: “Now my dears, I have a little task for each of you. “Tanya,” that was the oldest, “go in my room, please my dear, and sew a button on my red dress. Katya,” the youngest, “go to the kitchen table and roll some pastry so that it’s nice and flat. And Vasilisa dear, go to Baba Yaga’s hut in the forest and ask her to lend us some lights. Now run along sweetheart. Don’t waste any time. We don’t want you to get caught in the dark now do we.”

The stepmother shooed Vasilisa out of the house so fast that she hardly had time to put on her hat and gloves. She walked forlornly to the corner of the street and took the little doll out of her coat pocket where it had been sleeping.

“Oh little doll,” she said. “My mother told me that if I fed and looked after you, you would be ready to help me if I was ever in trouble. Well I have fed and looked after you. Now I’m in terrible trouble. I must go to Baba Yaga, and everyone knows that she is a dreadfully wicked witch. So please tell me – what am I to do?”

The little doll looked up at Vasilisa and said: “Be as brave as you are beautiful. Go to Baba Yaga’s hut and no harm will come to you.”

Vasilisa mustered up all her courage and walked down the path that led through the woods to the hut of Baba Yaga. After a while, the young girl heard the sound of galloping hooves coming up behind her, and she stepped off the road to let a horse ridden by a rider in a blazing red cloak shoot past her.

“I wonder who that was?” Thought Vasilisa before setting off on a her way once more. A little further on, she once again heard the sound of galloping hooves, and this time a rider in a cloak of dazzling white sped past her and down the road that led to Baba Yaga’s hut.

Some time later, a third horse shot by. Its rider wore a cloak that was as black as night. After about an hour of walking, Vasilisa came to a clearing in the forest. Although it was now getting quite dark, she had no trouble seeing – for this neck of the woods was lit by skulls with blazing eyes.

The skulls were mounted on top of a high fence. Beyond the fence, she saw the strange hut that stood on chicken legs. It turned around to face her, and it seemed to Vasilisa that the hut was looking at her. Then the chicken legs began to kneel and the hut lowered to the ground. The door creaked open.

Baba Yaga’s nose was so long and bony that it appeared through the door before the rest of her. A moment or two later the nose was followed by a tall, skinny old woman holding a broom stick. Vasilissa was so frightened that her legs would not obey her when she told them to run. The old lady came towards her – but she did not walk – her feet flew just a few inches above the ground.

“Well child,” she said, “Did the cat get your tongue? Or are you just badly brought up? Speak Child! Spit out your name and your business here! I haven’t got all night to hover around while you tremble and gibber like an idiot!”

For a few moments Vasilisa’s lips quivered so much that no proper words would come out of her mouth, just a kind of “ah, ah-ah,” but she then remembered the doll’s words that no harm would come to her, and eventually she found courage to speak clearly.

“Good Ma’am,” she said. “It is only me, little Vasilisa. My stepmother sent me to the forest to borrow a light from Baba Yaga.”

“Did she now?” Said Baba Yaga thoughtfully. “Well I am Baba Yaga, but you may call me Babushka.”

Vasilisa brightened a little at this, for Babushka is a kindly name that means “Grandma.”

Baba Yaga went on: “Now come with me into my hut. I will give you some simple tasks to do. If you are not lazy and you complete your work like a good girl, then I will give you the light that you ask for and let you go free. But if you do not manage these simple tasks I shall cook you in my oven and eat you for my dinner! Ha Ha Ha!” She cackled. “How do you like that for an offer?”

To tell you the truth, Vasilisa did not like it at all, but she had faith that all would be well, that she would complete the tasks, and return with the light, and so she curtsied and said, “I like it well, dear Babushka,” and she followed the old lady as she floated back to the door of her hut and called out: “Locks, unlock!”

The doors creaked open, and then shut again behind Vasilisa as she stepped inside. The hut was surprisingly roomy, but a large part of it was taken up by a huge oven. Vasilisa had to hold in a scream, because the house started to rise up on its chicken legs and move about. She realised that there would be no escape unless Baba Yaga let her go.

The witch sat down at the table and gestured to the larder. “Fetch me my supper, dear,” she said.

“Yes, Babushka,” replied Vasilisa, and she brought over some bread and cheese for the old lady.

“Ah well,” said Baba Yaga. “Soon I shall be enjoying a nice plate of roast meat, thinly sliced and pink in the middle.” With those words she pinched Vasilisa’s arm. “Now tomorrow my dear, you must complete my little task. When I am away from the hut, you must tidy the yard, clean the hut, and cook pumpkin soup for my supper. Can you manage that?”

“Why yes, Babushka, I can.” said Vasilisa, who was relieved that the task did not sound by any means beyond her ability.

“That is good,” said Baba Yaga, “and when you have finished doing that you can sort out all the kitchen pots and pans.”

Baba Yaga ate her bread and cheese and drank a tankard of frothy brown ale before falling asleep on top of a thick fur which was strewn above the stove, the warmest place in the hut.

The hut continued to move around and Vasilisa felt queasy. She certainly had no appetite herself, but before she lay down for the night, she did not forget to feed her doll a few crumbs of bread and some drops of milk. When the rag doll had finished her supper, Vasilisa asked her: “Oh dear, what have I done? How shall I ever get out of here?”

The Doll replied: “Have courage and keep faith and all will be well – for Baba Yaga is unable to tell a lie and she is bound to keep her promise.”

The next morning, Baba Yaga arose from her bed on top of the stove, and drank another tankard of ale before flying up the chimney and onto the roof. Vasilisa looked out of the window and saw the witch flying away above the trees, but this time she was riding what looked like a giant mortar. A mortar, by the way, is like a strong wooden bowl, and you can use it for cooking. You put some herbs or spices in there, and crush and grind them with a stick called a pestle. This is what the witch was flying in – only it was much bigger than a usual mortar. A giant pestle was what the old lady was holding in her hand, and using as a rudder to guide her flight.

Vasilisa gazed at the witch until she was out of site, and then she started to clean and to cook. She managed to get everything spick and span, and get the soup on the cooker by midday, but now she faced an impossible task. How could she possibly pick the black peas out of a sack of white ones? Why, there must have been thousands, if not millions of peas in the sack.

She heard a noise outside the hut. “Oh, Baba Yaga must be back early. Now I’m done for!” She exclaimed – but when she looked out of the window she saw not Baba Yaga, but the white horseman who had over-taken her on her way to the hut. He galloped around the fence of the compound and then was off again into the woods. Vasilisa sighed and wished that he would only come and rescue her, whoever he might be. Then when she turned around from the window she saw that all the peas had been sorted into two piles – one black and one white. Her task was done.

That evening, after Baba Yaga flew back home from whatever business she had been on, the old witch could not hide her surprise at all that her guest had managed to achieve the task in one day.

“I see that you are good little worker my dear,” she said. “Well in that case, tomorrow you can make pea soup and fetch water from the stream to fill up the tank. Here, use this bucket.” What she handed to Vasilisa was not a bucket, but a sieve, and the poor girl wondered how she would ever manage to use it to fetch water. Still that night, when the little rag doll urged her not to feel despair, she knew in her heart that something wonderful might happen to help her – and it did. For as she stood by the stream holding the sieve in her hand, the red horseman rode by, took it from her and swept over to the hut where he hurled it through the open window. When Vasilisa returned she found that the tank was filled with fresh water.

That evening Baba Yaga dipped her bony finger in the tank and tasted a drop of the fresh water. She said, “Indeed you are a hard working girl. Let’s see if you are clever too. Tonight you can stay up and count the number of stars in the sky. If you tell me the right number in the morning, you can take your light and go free, but if your answer is wrong, even if you tell me one star too many or too few, then I shall have you for my breakfast.”

That night Vasilisa gazed out of the window at the sky and tried to count the stars – 1,2,3, 5… But by the time she reached 100 stars she was no longer sure whether or not she was counting the same ones again, and she had to start all over again. It did not help that the hut kept moving around so that the view kept on changing.

Eventually, Vasilisa began to sob quietly. She took out her doll and said: “Oh dear little doll, who will come to the aid of poor little Vasilisa this time? I cannot guess the number of stars in the sky, and in the morning the witch shall surely eat me.”

“Do not worry said the doll. Have courage and keep faith, and all will be well.” And it was – for at the midnight hour, the black horseman came riding up to the window where Vasilisa was sitting and he whisper a number to her as if in a dream. It was a very big number, but I cannot tell you what it was, for it is a secret, but it was the exact number of stars in the sky that he told her, and in the morning, when Baba Yaga stepped with her bony legs onto the floor, Vasilisa said: “Good morning Babushka, shall I tell you the number of stars now?”

Baba Yaga yawned and said: “Go on child, tell me. But you had better not be wrong – for if you are, I shall eat you.”

Vasilisa told the number to Baba Yaga, who let out a terrible cry like: “Ha!” Her eyes blazed like those of the skulls on the fence surrounding her hut.

“Who told you that?” She demanded so fiercely that Vasilisa sank back. Baba Yaga picked up a plate and threw it across the room so that it smashed against the wall. Then she picked up a knife and Vasilisa was sure she meant to kill her.

“But Babushka,” she said. “You promised that if I told you the number correctly I could take a light and go free.”

Baba Yaga froze for a moment, and the fierce glare of her eyes lessened somewhat.

“Ah yes,” she said more calmly. “So I did. I suppose it was morning and day that helped you with the other tasks I set you?”

Vasilisa nodded, for she now understood that the three horsemen were morning day and night.

“Then you are a good girl,” said Baba Yaga. “For if Morning, Day and Night choose to help you, that means that your spirit is in harmony with the universe. I will do you no harm. Wait here while I go on my business. I have no tasks for you today. Tonight you shall return home with a light.”

That evening, after Baba Yaga flew home on her mortar, she took Vasilisa out into the courtyard and gave her one of the skulls with blazing eyes.

“Take this,” she said. “It will light up your stepmother and your two stepsisters very well.”

Vasilisa took the skull and returned back down the path to her village. She expected that her stepmother would have found a light by now, but in fact the house was not lit. Instead her relatives were sitting in complete darkness.

She stepped into the house. The skull lit up the inside as bright as day.

“I’m home,” called out Vasilisa. But she received no reply, for as soon as the light fell on her stepmother and sisters, they turned to dust.

Vasilisa went to live with a kindly old lady in the village until her father returned from his business. When he came back, he thought that his wife and stepdaughters must have run away. He did not miss them much. He lived happily with his beautiful daughter, Vasilisa, until one day a prince came riding by and caught sight of her. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, and he had no hesitation in asking her to marry him, which she did, and they lived happily ever after.