

Ruslan and Ludmila

In days long since past, Prince Vladimir of Kiev held a magnificent feast in honor of the marriage of his daughter Ludmila and the knight Ruslan. Three jealous suitors looked on--Rogday, Farlaf, and Ratmir. The festivities lasted for hours and when they were over, Ruslan led his beautiful young bride to the waiting nuptial bed. Suddenly a light flashed through the night sky and a clap of thunder shook the ground. A strange mist appeared and from somewhere inside it a strange voice spoke. Ruslan turned to embrace his bride, but she had vanished without a trace.



After learning of her disappearance, Prince Vladimir was angry and sick with worry. He immediately annulled the marriage and offered Ludmila's hand to anyone who could find her and bring her home.

Without delay, Ruslan, Rogday, Farlaf, and Ratmir mounted their spirited horses to search for the kidnapped maiden. For awhile, the four rode together, but eventually they separated.

Rogday was rather high-strung and could be heard muttering under his breath, "I'll murder the kidnapper. I'll kill him!" Once he thought he had found the guilty man and pursued him as he fled on horseback. In no time at all he chased him down and threw him into a ditch. To his chagrin, he discovered that it was his rival Farlaf whom he had caught. He left the scene without saying a word.

Farlaf, the most cowardly of the four knights, was counting his blessings in the ditch when he was met by a wicked old witch named Naina. She told him to let one of the others rescue Ludmila. Then, when they were returning home, Farlaf could snatch her from the rival.

Ratmir, meanwhile, was taking a southern route in his search and one evening came across a castle inhabited by beautiful, attentive maidens. He was never heard from again!

Ruslan was making the most progress in the quest to find the beautiful Ludmila. Early in his search he found a cave where he met an old wizard who said that he had become a wizard to win the love of a beautiful girl he knew when he was a

youth in his native country of Finland. With the aid of magic, he finally won her heart many years later, but by then she was evil, decrepit, and hunchbacked. (In fact, this old woman was none other than the wicked witch Naina.) Since that time, the Finn had lived in solitude.

The wizard said that the wicked sorcerer Chernomor was the one who stole Ruslan's bride, but he gave Ruslan his assurance that everything would work out in the end.

Encouraged by this, Ruslan took to the road again. Soon he ran into his jealous rival Rogday and was forced into a battle with him. On horseback, the two fought each other tooth-and-nail for some time. Finally, Ruslan managed to throw Rogday off his horse and to his death into the raging waters of the Dnieper River.

A short while later, Ruslan found a giant head in his path! With mad laughter, the head would blow at Ruslan, creating a powerful gust of wind that almost toppled both Ruslan and his horse. But the mighty knight managed to thrust a spear into the head's tongue, taking away its powerful breath, and then knocked it on its side with his heavy glove. Ruslan was ready to deliver the final blow with a shining sword he found underneath his foe, when the head surrendered completely and promised to be obedient to Ruslan.

It happened that the head knew Ludmila's abductor, Chernomor, very well--he was his brother. The sorcerer had cut off his head in a dispute over the shining sword that Ruslan had just found. The head told the knight that all of Chernomor's power was contained in his beard. Cut off Chernomor's beard and his power would be gone as well. Ruslan went on his way again, leaving the head in peace.

Where was Ludmila all this time? Indeed, she had been abducted by the evil Chernomor, who wanted her for himself. He took her to his castle where she could live comfortably. Outside her room, she could walk freely in an enchanted garden amid fantastic trees and fairy birds. But she missed Ruslan and could never be happy there.

At one point, Ludmila repelled Chernomor's amorous advances and, in the process, took his hat, which she discovered made her invisible when she wore it backwards. Naturally, she kept wearing the magic hat so that Chernomor didn't know where she was! But the evil sorcerer was relentless in his pursuit of the beautiful maiden and changed his form to disguise himself as Ruslan. When Ludmila saw him, she took off the hat and rushed into his arms. Realizing she had been tricked, she fell to the ground, unconscious.

An instant later, the real Ruslan arrived and the showdown began. First, he put the hat back on Ludmila so that she would be invisible and safe again. Then for two days Ruslan and Chernomor battled. Chernomor used the magical powers of his beard to force the fight hundreds of feet in the air. But Ruslan hung on and finally sliced off the sorcerer's beard with the shining sword. The two descended back to earth since Chernomor had lost all his powers with his beard gone. He was now no match for the mighty Ruslan.

After subduing Chernomor, Ruslan frantically searched the grounds for his young bride. Suddenly, a chance swing of his sword dislodged Ludmila's hat, exposing the pretty maiden, who was still unconscious. In his head Ruslan heard the voice of the old Finn wizard who said that Ludmila would awaken once they were back in Kiev.

On the journey back, they met the giant head, now near death from the wounds suffered in his earlier struggle with Ruslan. After seeing that Ruslan had emerged victorious over his brother, the head took one last breath in peace, content that justice had been done.

Leaving the head and drawing closer to Kiev, Ruslan and the others set up camp for the night. While they were sleeping, the cowardly and evil Farlaf, aided by the ugly witch Naina, plunged a sword three times into Ruslan, leaving our hero there to die. If only the old Finn wizard was there to do his magic now...

Farlaf then carried Ludmila back to Kiev himself and was greeted with much jubilation by the people there. Ludmila, however, remained unconscious. Not only that, the city of Kiev itself was besieged by enemy nomads.

But as the battle for Kiev raged on, a powerful warrior was seen in the distance cutting down everyone in his path. It was Ruslan! The wizard had discovered him earlier at death's door and magically brought him back to life using special "life and death" waters. In no time at all, Ruslan practically singlehandedly managed to defeat the enemy attackers and save the city.

It was now time for him to see about his lovely, but still unconscious, Ludmila. Ruslan went to her room and tried to wake her with a magical ring given to him by the wizard. After a few anxious moments, Ludmila finally opened her eyes, and

*Marveled at the long night.
Suddenly she beheld the sight
of her knight. Ruslan she faced
and passionately her hero she embraced.*

Ruslan and Ludmila were together again and lived happily for the rest of their lives.

-- Written by Aleksander Pushkin