

The Fairy in the Bear's Den

The forest rustled, the wind hummed, century-old pines wept and groaned... The old witch Blizzard whirled in a wild dance. Grandfather Frost watched her, clapped his hands, and exclaimed with a satisfied look, rubbing his palms:

— Splendid! Oh, grandmother Blizzard, splendid! And the forest rustled, and the old pines wept and groaned. All around was dark, unwelcoming. The beasts had hidden away in their dens to wait out the fierce storm. They were merry, warm, and cozy. All of them had families, had kind, affectionate little ones, had kin.

Gray Bear had no one at all. Completely alone in the white world was the gray shaggy Bear. And he lived like a hermit, all by himself in the very thicket of the forest, and no one ever visited him.

He was enormous-enormous and strong-extremely strong, so big and so powerful that all his fellow bears seemed like weak infants in comparison with him.

And all the beasts feared him: both hares and foxes, and wolves, and bears. Yes, even bears feared him when he walked through the forest, all disheveled, huge and terrifying, with gleaming eyes; and as soon as he emerged from his den with his clumsy, heavy gait, everyone fled, darting aside out of his path.

Yet he had done harm to no one and was frightening only because he had grown wild in solitude.

And he had been lonely for a long time. Long, long ago he had come to this forest from a deep, black grove and settled here, in a foreign forest, in a new den hastily dug by himself.

People had taken from him his she-bear wife and his bear cubs, killed them, and wounded him himself with a bullet. This bullet was firmly lodged in his thick bear hide and reminded him that people were his enemies, that they had made him unhappy for all his life. And Gray Bear hated people as only the vilest foes can be hated. And he hated the beasts too: he had moved farther away from them into the forest and did not wish to be friends with them. Of course! After all, they were happy in their own way, while he, lonely, wronged, and grown wild, found it painful to look upon another's happiness.

On those days when the blizzard whirled and the wind sang, he felt better, and it became lighter and merrier in his soul. He would climb into his den, lick his paw,

and think about how cruel and harsh people were and how he hated them—he, the big, gray, shaggy bear.

The forest rustled, the blizzard whirled, and the old pines creaked.

Bear lay on his bed of moss and leaves and awaited the approach of night. He wished to sleep soundly in order to forget both anger and hatred and longing.

And suddenly in the semidarkness of his den something flashed unexpectedly bright. Some pink little ball somersaulted in the air and fell right at the bear's feet.

Bear bent down, took the pink little ball in his paw, and brought it close to his eyes, trying to make out the unknown object.

Bear looked and looked—and his brows furrowed, his eyes flashed.

— Could it be a human creature! — he said angrily. — Though tiny, small, still a human creature, a person. Yes, yes, nothing other than a person.

Indeed, what lay breathless upon his broad shaggy paw greatly resembled a human; only it was no taller than a pinky finger, no more, and had radiant little wings behind its back.

It seemed dead, this tiny human creature with glowing wings behind its back, with a lovely face, though blue from the cold.

But the bear looked maliciously at the little being, not noticing how beautiful it was. He wished to destroy it, because the little creature resembled his enemy—a human.

Bear had already raised his other paw to kill the tiny one with it, when suddenly, warmed by the hot bear's breath, the little creature came to life, stirred, opened its eyes, and began to move its radiant wings... And instantly the entire interior of the den was illuminated with bright light, and strange sounds, like those of a silver bell, sounds such as gloomy Bear had never heard in all his life, filled every corner and nook of his dwelling. And it seemed to Bear that his den had become as bright as on the first day of clear May, and that it smelled of flowers, of fragrant spring flowers of the old forest...

And the strange creature with shining wings, having opened its eyes, burst into ringing laughter.

— O-o, what a funny, strange bear, — it chimed, — what a big, wild bear! Do you think to kill me? Ha, ha, ha, ha! What a foolish, foolish Bear! You have raised your

shaggy paw, you roll your fierce eyes and think you have frightened a little fairy with this.

— Are you really a fairy, and not a human? — the bear asked in surprise.

— Well, of course I'm a fairy, you fool! Humans are large and clumsy, while I am small and graceful as a flower. Look at me closely. Are there humans so graceful, so nimble as I? And besides, I do not fear death as humans do! If you kill me, I shall turn into the very flower from which I appeared, and new life will smile upon me. Butterflies will flutter around me, bees will sing their melodious songs, and the silver ray of the moon will tell me such wonderful tales as you, big, gray, clumsy bear, have surely never heard. And when autumn comes and the flowers wither, I shall again become a fairy, radiant and beautiful as now, and fly away for the winter to southern lands.

— But how is it that now, in such freezing cold, you remained here and half-alive found yourself in my den? — the bear asked, interested.

The fairy laughed even more merrily.

— O, o, that is my little whim! — she cried cheerfully. — I wanted to see winter, the blizzard, the snowstorm, I wanted to hear the wind's song, so that afterward I could boast to all my friends about what I had seen! And I hid in the hollow of an old pine, thinking to admire everything from there. But it became cold, so cold that I froze stiff. I am accustomed to warmth and light, to the joys of life and the fragrance of flowers. And then the old woodpecker, the master of the hollow, drove me out of his dwelling. The foolish woodpecker does not understand at all how to treat politely such pretty fairies as I. The wind caught me up, the snowstorm whirled my head around and... and I do not know how I ended up in your den, on your shaggy paw, gray bear.

— And are you not afraid that I might eat you? — Bear inquired again.

— No, I am not afraid... I am the prettiest fairy that can possibly be found in your forest, and you will regret eating me, — the strange creature laughed and chimed once more. — And besides, I will tell you tales, and you will be merrier with me than alone. Oh, you do not yet know what tales the fairy Liana knows how to tell.

— Your name is Liana? — the bear asked.

— Yes, my name is Liana! Pink May, my godfather, gave me this pretty name. Well, do you still wish to drive me out of your den? Or do you want to eat me, foolish gray bear?

The bear frowned and vigorously sucked his paw. He was loath to part with the ringing and tender laughter, like a silver bell, and with the bright light in his den, and with the fragrance of spring flowers that had filled it upon the fairy's arrival.

But she, this little fairy, so resembled a human, and he, Bear, hated humans and had vowed to take revenge on them for making him lonely. Should he not take revenge at once on the little fairy too?

While Bear pondered what to do, the fairy, without waiting, began softly, in a half-whisper, to tell him a tale, such a tale as surely even the mighty green-bearded master of the forest, the Forest Spirit, did not know.

And when Liana finished her tale, the stern, gloomy expression vanished from the bear's muzzle, the wrinkles on his forehead smoothed out, and his eyes ignited with a friendly, soft light.

— You may remain in my den! — he graciously permitted Liana. — It will be warm, good, and cozy for you here!

And Liana remained.

"I had a she-bear wife and three bear cubs, affectionate and playful. Wicked people took them from me, and I remained a lonely, gloomy bear. The beasts fear me. But Liana does not fear me. She trusts me. She sits upon my brow and tugs at my ears, she touches my sharp, huge teeth with her tender little fingers, blows into my eyes, and when I wince at this, she bursts into ringing laughter at my involuntary grimaces. She does not fear me, does not shun me, she has grown accustomed to me and wishes me no harm. Wicked people took from me my she-bear and three fine bear cubs, but fate in return gifted me with Liana. I will care for Liana for her kindness and tenderness toward me," — thus reasoned the bear, stepping through the forest, while the beasts with

They watched him depart in bewilderment.

"It is amazing what has become of our boor. He looks much friendlier and kinder!" said the gossiping fox to the young forest wolf.

The latter squinted after the bear and, wagging his tail, hissed through his teeth:

"Do not be surprised. If your den had become as bright, cozy, and wonderful as his lair, you too would change just as he has."

Fairy Liana had completely transformed the harsh, unwelcoming lair of Mishka.

Together with the bright light of her little wings, together with the scent of flowers and the murmuring of fairy tales, she brought merriment, life, warmth, and joy into the corner of the poor, lonely bear.

And for this, Mishka repaid her with boundless devotion and faithful service to the little fairy.

He strove in every way to please her slightest whims, to guess her every desire.

And the fairy Liana had no small number of desires and whims.

Once she wished to have that rose flower which she had once seen in the window of a village neighboring the forest.

Mishka went to the village and stole the flower, risking his own hide. But it turned out the plant was merely a pitiful little stem with leaves; the flower itself was no longer upon it. The rose had long since bloomed and faded.

Liana stamped her little feet in vexation and calmed only when Mishka, instead of the rose, fashioned for her a tiny chariot from pine needles, harnessed to it a squirrel he had caught in the forest, and Liana could ride about in her new carriage throughout the entire lair.

But most interesting of all was that Fairy Liana taught the gloomy, gray Mishka how to dance.

When she grew tired of telling fairy tales or whirling about the lair with her squirrel, she would command the crickets in the corner of their dwelling to sing and order Mishka to perform one of those clumsy, comical dances which only bears know how to execute.

And Mishka danced solely to please his little guest. And when he grew weary and sweat poured in streams from his heavy fur, Liana would flutter onto his head and wave her light wings above him, making the bear feel cool and light. Thus time passed merrily and well in the bear's lair. The gray bear had long forgotten his sorrow. He had grown to love Liana dearly and, without hesitation, would have given his life for her.

Spring arrived. The snow in the forest melted. Swift brooks flowed in the hollows. A white snowdrop peeked forth lonely from the green grass.

Mishka saw the snowdrop, plucked it, and brought it to Liana. At the sight of the first spring flower, the cheerful fairy suddenly turned pale and became whiter than the snowdrop she had been given. Hopeless sadness reflected in Liana's little eyes. She folded her wings and sank down, growing dark.

"What is wrong with you, Liana?" the bear asked, leaning toward her in fright.

"Oh, nothing, nothing..." she replied in a voice that made the bear's heart ache painfully.

Yet he dared not question her about her sorrow, for he feared disturbing the little fairy even more.

Another month passed, and the forest meadow became speckled with flowers. Handsome May peered out from his ornate cradle and greeted nature with the holiday. A lark answered him with a melodious and ringing trill. This trill reached Liana's ears. She trembled and quivered at the tender sounds of the bird's song. Her eyes opened wide; tears appeared within them.

The bear saw these tears and said with feeling:

"People, I have heard, weep much and strongly, but fairies—never. Only great sorrow can bring tears to the cheerful eyes of a fairy. You likely have some sorrow. You wish for freedom, Liana, to join other cheerful, little fairies like yourself!"

But upon hearing these words, the fairy wept even harder.

"No, no, I will not leave you! Liana regrets leaving you alone again," she said. "You will miss me, for I have managed with my fairy tales, my cheerful chatter, and my laughter to make you forget your sorrow. No, I will not leave you; I do not wish to be ungrateful: you gave me shelter in your dwelling when I had nowhere else to go, you saved me from the cold and death... No, no, I will not abandon you! Be at peace, my Friend!" Mishka's heart beat joyfully and warmly. He understood that not everyone in the world is unjust and cruel. And he loved his friend—the little fairy—even more dearly for her words.

Everything returned to how it had been, except that Liana no longer peeked out from the bear's lair and constantly stopped up her little ears so as not to hear the trills of the lark pouring forth in the forest.

And then suddenly, one day, while the bear dozed on his fresh bed of moss and Liana, sitting near his ear, whispered her lovely fairy tales to him, a pretty blue moth flew into the lair. Upon the moth's back sat a wonderful little fairy, resembling Liana as two drops of water.

"Greetings to you! Greetings to you!" she chirped, throwing herself into Liana's arms. "At last I have found you, sister! I have searched for you throughout the entire forest to tell you pleasant news. Tomorrow, at the first new moon, we, the forest fairies, celebrate the selection of our queen. Each of us shall recount what

interesting things we have seen during this winter. And she whose tale is the best of all shall become our ruler. I flew here to inform you of this because a forest mouse told me you could be found in the bear's lair. See that you do not forget to fly to our celebration tomorrow."

And, ringing all this out with her bell-like voice, the guest fairy sped away once more upon the back of her driver—the moth.

Mishka looked at Liana. She lay, entirely curled up, in the farthest corner of the lair. Her eyes, opened wide, expressed such hopeless anguish that the bear could not endure it and spoke in a dull, crushed voice:

"Go, Liana! Go back to your May kingdom of greenery, songs, and flowers! You will appear among the cheerful little fairies, tell them of the friendship and devotion of the harsh, lonely bear, and they will choose you as their queen, for your tale will be the most interesting of all. Farewell, Liana, fly to your kingdom! Fairies must be free, must live and rejoice among flowers, and they have no place in the dark and stifling lair of a beast." And with these words, he bowed his shaggy head in loneliness.

Liana started. It was infinitely painful for her to leave the good, noble Mishka, whom she had grown accustomed to and whom she had made forget his loneliness; yet at the same time, she was irresistibly drawn to the kingdom of the little fairies, of greenery and flowers, to the kingdom of merriment and joy from which she had come. The little, rosy fairy did not hesitate long. She cast one last glance at the bear, nodded her pretty head to him, and, spreading her shining wings, tenderly rang her farewell greeting into his ear. Then, with pain in her heart but with the consciousness of regained freedom, she flew away like a swift bird from the bear's lair.

She arrived with the speed of lightning upon the flower meadow silvered by moonlight just at the moment when, to the sounds of a nightingale's song, one of the fairies, sitting upon the throne of the future queen, finished her tale.

Around the queen's throne, upon the cups of night violets, sat tiny fairies applauding the storyteller.

"Her tale is better than all the others!" they chimed with their bell-like voices. "And the lovely storyteller must be our queen."

But then Liana appeared and, alighting upon a wild stock flower, told them the true story of how an evil, terrifying, gloomy, wild bear had become kind and gentle ever since a tiny fairy appeared in his lair, and how he had loved the fairy, how he cared for her, and how unwilling he had been to part with her. And in conclusion,

she recounted also how sorry the fairy herself had been to leave lonely Mishka with a broken heart...

This tale was so beautiful that even the nightingale fell silent, listening to the lovely narrative.

And the little elves wept, listening to Liana's tale; they wept listening to the tale of the broken bear's heart.

And when she finished, the flowers and fairies, the nightingales and night moths applauded her.

And all with one voice chose her queen. Fireflies ignited in the grass and illuminated the scene of the nocturnal May festival. Liana was seated upon the throne, and the numerous retinue of airy little fairies strove to anticipate every desire of the new queen.

But the queen looked sadly upon them all with her beautiful eyes.

Before her mind stood the distant, dark lair, the humble bed of old leaves and moss, and the lonely, poor, sorrowful bear, thinking with

with longing for her—the queen...