The Petrified Kingdom

Once upon a time, in a certain kingdom, in a certain realm, there lived a soldier; he served long and impeccably, knew his duty well, and came to inspections and drills clean and in good order. He began his final year of service — and, as ill luck would have it, his superiors took a dislike to him, not only the high-ranking ones but the low-ranking too: now and then he had to take a beating with the sticks.

Things grew hard for the soldier, and he decided to desert; he slung his knapsack over his shoulder, his rifle over his shoulder, and began saying goodbye to his comrades, who asked him:

"Where are you going? Or does the battalion commander want you?"

"Don't ask, brothers! Tighten your knapsacks well and don't speak ill of me!"

And off he went, the good fellow, wherever his eyes led him.

Whether he walked long or short, he found himself in another kingdom; he spotted a sentry and asked:

"Is there any place where I could stop and rest?"

The sentry told the corporal, the corporal the officer, the officer the general, and the general reported to the king himself. The king ordered the soldier to be brought before his bright eyes.

The soldier appeared — properly, in uniform, presented arms with his rifle and stood stock-still. The king said to him:

"Tell me honestly, where are you from and where are you going?"

"Your Majesty, do not order my execution; allow me to speak."

He confessed everything to the king honestly and asked to be taken into service.

"Very well," said the king, "hire yourself to guard my garden. Things are not well in my garden now — someone is breaking my favorite trees — so do your best and protect it, and for your labor I will give you no small pay."

The soldier agreed and began standing guard in the garden.

He served a year and two — everything was in order with him; and now the third year was drawing to a close, and once when he went to inspect the garden he saw: half of the very best trees were broken.

"My God!" he thought to himself. "What a misfortune has befallen us! If the king notices this, he will immediately have me seized and hanged."

He took his rifle in his hands, leaned against a tree, and fell into deep thought.

Suddenly there was a crackling and noise; the good fellow came to his senses — lo and behold, a huge, terrible bird had flown into the garden and was knocking down the trees! The soldier fired at it with his rifle; he did not kill it, but only wounded it in the right wing; three feathers fell from that wing, and the bird itself fled along the ground. The soldier went after it. The bird's legs were swift; it quickly ran to a chasm and disappeared from sight.

The soldier was not afraid and rushed after it into that chasm: he fell into a deep, deep abyss, battered himself badly, and lay unconscious for a whole day.

Afterwards he came to, got up, and looked around. What did he see? — there was just as much light under the ground.

"So," he thought, "there are people here too!"

He walked and walked — before him was a big city, at the gates a guardhouse, and by it a sentry; he began asking him — the sentry was silent, did not move; he took him by the hand — and he was completely stone!

The soldier entered the guardhouse. There were many people — some standing, some sitting — but all turned to stone; he set off wandering through the streets — everywhere the same: not a single living human soul, everything just stone! And there was the palace — painted and carved. He marched in, looked — rich rooms, on the tables all kinds of snacks and drinks, and all around quiet and empty.

The soldier had a bite, drank, sat down to rest, and he heard as if someone had driven up to the porch; he grabbed his rifle and stood by the doors.

Into the chamber entered a beautiful princess with her maids and nurses. The soldier saluted her, and she bowed to him kindly.

"Greetings, soldier! Tell me," she said, "by what fate did you come here?"

The soldier began to tell:

"I had hoped to guard the king's garden, and a big bird took to flying there and breaking the trees. So I lay in wait for it, fired my rifle and knocked three feathers from its wing; I rushed after it in pursuit and found myself here."

"That bird is my own sister; she does all kinds of evil and has brought disaster upon my kingdom — she has turned all my people to stone. Listen: here is a book for you; stand right here and read it from evening until the roosters sing. Whatever terrors may appear to you, keep your own counsel — read the book and hold it tighter, so they cannot tear it from you, or you will not stay alive! If you endure three nights, I will marry you."

"Very well!" answered the soldier.

As soon as it grew dark, he took the book and began to read.

Suddenly there was knocking and thundering — a whole army appeared in the palace; his former commanders came up to the soldier and scolded him and threatened him with death for deserting; now they were loading their rifles and taking aim. But the soldier paid no attention to that, did not let the book out of his hands, and just kept reading.

The roosters crowed — and everything vanished at once!

On the next night it was more frightening, and on the third even more so: executioners ran in with saws, axes, hammers, wanting to crush his bones, draw out his sinews, burn him on the fire, and all they could think of was how to snatch the book from his hands. Such terrors there were that the soldier could barely endure.

The roosters sang — and the apparition vanished!

At that very hour the whole kingdom came back to life, people bustled in the streets and houses, the princess appeared in the palace with generals and her retinue, and everyone began thanking the soldier and proclaiming him their sovereign.

The next day he married the beautiful princess and lived with her in love and joy.