

Princess Icicle

On a high, high mountain, right beneath the sky, amidst eternal snows, stands the crystal palace of Tsar Cold. It is built entirely of the purest ice, and everything within it, from the wide divans, armchairs, carved tables, and mirrors to the pendants hanging from the chandeliers—everything is made of ice.

Father Tsar is stern and gloomy. Gray eyebrows hang over his eyes, and his eyes are such that whoever looks into them is pierced by a stinging cold. The Tsar's beard is perfectly white, and as if sparkles from precious stones are tangled within it, shimmering with gem-like sparks.

But more beautiful than the Tsar's beard, more beautiful than his lofty palace, more beautiful than all his treasures are his three daughters, the three beautiful Tsarevnas: Vyuga, Stuzha, and Ldinka.

Tsarevna Vyuga has black eyes and such a ringing voice that it can be heard far below in the valleys. Tsarevna Vyuga is always exceedingly merry, dancing and singing all day long.

The middle Tsarevna, Stuzha, yields not in beauty to her elder sister, only she is proud and haughty; she will not exchange a kind word with anyone, nor nod her head to anyone, but walks, slender and ruddy, through her tower, fully content with her own beauty, opening her heart to no one.

But the youngest sister, Tsarevna Ldinka, is quite different: talkative, loquacious, and so beautiful that at the sight of her, even grim Tsar Cold's eyes ignite with tenderness, his gray eyebrows smooth out, and a kind, gentle smile glides across his face. The Tsar admires his daughter, loves her, and spoils her so much that the elder Tsarevnas take offense and grow angry with their father because of it.

"Ldinka is Father's favorite," they say with envy.

And indeed, the youngest Tsarevna was born a beauty, such a beauty that another like her cannot be found in all the Ice Kingdom.

The Tsarevna's curls are pure silver. Her eyes are blue like sapphires and sparkling like diamonds. Her lips are scarlet like a rose flower in the valley, and she herself is entirely tender and fragile, like a precious sculpture made of the finest crystal.

When Ldinka looks at someone with her blue, radiant eyes, that single glance makes anyone ready to give up their life.

The Tsarevnas live merrily in their lofty tower. By day they dance, play, and listen to the wonderful tales of the eldest Tsarevna Vyuga, while by night they ride out to hunt leopards and deer.

And then such a rumble and noise rises throughout the mountains and gorges that people, frightened by this clamor, hasten from the mountains and forests back to their homes.

The Tsarevnas may only leave home at night. By day they dare not show themselves from the tower, for Tsar Cold and his beautiful daughters have a dangerous, terrible enemy.

This enemy is King Sun, who lives in a lofty tower higher even than Tsar Cold's palace, and who constantly sends his host against the Ice Kingdom, constantly dispatches his Rays to discover and learn how best and most easily to defeat his unconquerable foe—Tsar Cold. And their enmity is ancient and old. Since the crystal palace was built upon the cliff, since bees began flying in the valleys for honey, since flowers started blooming variegated in the forest and field, since then has this deadly feud arisen between Tsar Cold and King Sun.

Tsar Cold guards strictly lest the cunning King somehow penetrate his royal dwelling, lest he burn with his fatal fire both his daughters and the very palace of crystal ice.

Day and night guards stand watch around the royal palace, strictly ordered to ensure that not a single Ray-warrior of King Sun penetrates here. And the Tsarevnas are firmly forbidden to leave the palace by day, so that they do not accidentally encounter the King.

That is why, all day long, while the terrible King roams his own and foreign domains, the beautiful Tsarevnas sit in the tower stringing pearl necklaces, weaving diamond threads, and composing wondrous tales and songs. But when night comes, golden stars sprinkle the sky and the bright moon floats out from behind the clouds, then they emerge from the crystal tower and gallop into the mountains to chase leopards and deer.

Yet the Tsarevnas cannot spend all their time chasing leopards and deer, counting stars, spinning diamond threads, and composing wondrous songs and tales.

The time has come to marry off the Tsarevnas.

Tsar Cold summoned all three daughters to him and said:

"My children! You cannot sit forever in your native tower under your father's wing. I shall marry you off to three handsome princes of our land, three own brothers. To you, Tsarevna Stuzha, I shall give as husband red-cheeked Prince Frost; he possesses untold riches of pendants and precious ornaments. He will endow you with countless treasures. You shall be the richest princess in the world. To you, Tsarevna Vyuga, I shall give Prince Wind as husband. He is not as wealthy as his brother Frost, but he is so mighty and so strong that there is no equal to him in power and strength in the world. He will be a good protector-husband to you. Rest easy, daughter. And to you, my favorite," the old Tsar turned to his youngest daughter Ldinka with a gentle smile, "I shall give a husband who suits you best of all. True, he is not as powerful as Prince Wind, nor as wealthy as Prince Frost, but he is distinguished by unspeakable, boundless kindness and meekness. Prince Snow is your betrothed. Everyone loves him, everyone honors him. And not without reason does he caress everyone, covering all with his white blanket. Flowers, grasses, and blades of grass feel in winter under his blanket as if beneath a warm, downy quilt. He is kind and gentle, meek and tender. And a kind, gentle heart is dearer than all powers and riches in the whole world."

The elder Tsarevnas bowed low, low before their father, but the youngest pouted her lips, frowned her brows, and hissed through her teeth in a displeased voice:

"You have devised poorly, Father-Tsar. You have found for me, your favorite daughter, the least desirable groom. What good is it that Prince Snow is kind and gentle if he cannot gift me precious adornments like Frost did for sister Stuzha, nor fight to the death like Prince Wind against enemies and overcome all by his strength? Moreover, his elder brothers have taken such power over him! Wind whirls and twists him at his whim, and Prince Frost can pin him to the spot with a mere wave of his hand; without his permission, poor Prince Snow cannot even move.

"That is precisely what is good!" declared the Tsar, frowning his gray eyebrows. "Prince Snow is the youngest of the brothers, and obedience to elders is one of the finest virtues of a young prince."

But the Tsarevna insists on her own way:

"I do not love Prince Snow, Father; I do not wish to marry him!"

Tsar Cold grew angry, enraged. He blew to the right, he blew to the left. The glaciers creaked, the earth grew cold. All furry beasts hid in their burrows from

fear, and the old mountain eagle flapped his wings, only to freeze instantly in mid-air.

And Tsar Cold thundered with his грозный voice at his youngest daughter:

"What do you understand, Ldinka? You yourself could not find a better husband. And do not dare to be stubborn! Go to your tower and prepare properly to meet your groom this evening. I have invited all three princes to the ball at the palace today."

Bitterly wept the Tsarevna, but she dared not disobey her Father-Tsar and, hanging her head, trudged off to her tower.

The Tsarevna sat in a corner, dropping silver teardrops from her blue eyes, and immediately these teardrops turned upon her cheeks into beautiful diamond drops.

Gathering the diamond teardrops into her cupped hands, the Tsarevna looked at them and thought: "Here are the treasures I must now collect, for my groom has nothing, and I must create my own wealth with my own tears."

Foolish Tsarevna! She did not know that wealth does not constitute the true happiness of any being.

And suddenly the Tsarevna saw that the diamond teardrops in her palm began to play with wondrous fires. Frightened, she raised her head and saw that a handsome boy was looking through her tower window, so bright and joyful as she had never seen before.

"Who are you?" cried the Tsarevna, jumping from her place and running to the window.

"I am a servant of a young King who is as handsome as day, as mighty as a mountain eagle, and as wealthy as three Tsars Cold taken together."

"Wealthier than my father and even Prince Frost?" cried the astonished Tsarevna.

"Where is your Prince Frost compared to him!" the boy said mockingly. "Prince Frost is simply a beggar before our master."

"And what is your King's name?" the beauty asked with interest.

"His name is King Sun!" the boy declared proudly.

Hardly had he uttered these

words, as the princess screamed and shrank back from the window, covering her face in horror with her hands, she cried out:

—Go away! Go away! I know who you are! You are Boy Ray, one of those whom King Sun sends to wage war upon our kingdom. How dared you and how did you manage to penetrate here, when guards stand all around our palace?

Boy Ray only smiled in response with his sparkling eyes.

—All your people are now busy preparing for the ball. Your guards, the Zephyrs, have flown off in every direction with invitations for guests. I took advantage of this and, as the smallest among my king's servants, penetrated into your bower. What do you say to that, Princess Icicle?

—I shall say but one thing!—the princess cried, stamping her foot angrily.—I shall say but one thing: your king is our sworn enemy, and this very hour I shall call the guard, who will run to seize you.

—Do not hurry, Princess!—Boy Ray replied in a calm voice.—Well, suppose you seize me, and then what? You will whirl like a silly little goat at the ball with your betrothed Snow, and that only if the elder princes allow him to whirl: Frost and Wind. And afterward they will give you in marriage to the poor prince, their younger brother, and you will live out your long life seeing neither luxury nor power nor wealth, you, the most beautiful of all princesses. Meanwhile your sisters will gain fame through their husbands. Wealth and power await them.

—Ah, you speak the truth, Boy Ray,—said Icicle,—the very truth.—And she sadly bowed her lovely head.

Boy Ray silently gazed at her for a long time. A cunning smile flickered across his face.

—Do not grieve, beautiful Icicle!—he said in the gentlest of voices.—I did not penetrate your bower in vain. I flew here with the purpose of wooing you for such a noble bridegroom, so rich that your sisters will burst with envy upon hearing of it. Do you wish to become the wife of King Sun himself, my master?

Princess Icicle even froze with horror upon hearing this. For a long time she could not utter a single word, and when she finally spoke again, her voice trembled with agitation and fear.

—No, no. King Sun is our enemy. Not in vain does my father, Tsar Cold, hide all of us from him in every possible way. Sun seeks only an opportunity to destroy us,—she concluded with a shudder.

—And you believe this, little princess?—Ray laughed ringingly.—All this is nonsense: King Sun is the best of all kings in the universe. He is caring and tender

like a gentle mother. If Tsar Cold did not wish for you to become acquainted with him, it was only so that you and your sisters would not see that he himself, your mighty ruler and father, is far weaker than the great King Sun...

—So that is it!—the princess said thoughtfully.—And I thought... Why then does he wage war against my father?—she suddenly voiced the thought that had flashed through her mind.

—Why? Ah, you shall learn that right now!..—the sunbeam laughed ringingly.—King Sun loves you and wishes to take you as his wife, but your father opposes this. It is not to his advantage that his son-in-law should be more noble than he.

—Now I understand,—the princess whispered softly,—I understand everything... And if I truly marry Sun, will he provide me with ornaments and garments just like those Frost will make for sister Chill?

—My king will attire you a hundred times more beautifully and richly, Princess!—Boy Ray declared confidently.

—Well, then I am ready to become the wife of your king,—Icicle said cheerfully.—I can just imagine how my sisters and even Father Tsar himself will envy me when they see me as the richest and most noble queen in the world!

And Princess Icicle proudly straightened herself and cast such a glance upon Boy Ray as though she were already his queen and he her subject.

—Excellent then, Your Highness, my future queen,—Ray said with a low bow.—I thought as much, that you are the cleverest princess in the world and would soon understand those who sincerely wish you well,—he added with a subtle smile.—And now, would you kindly follow me?

—Where?—the princess asked in fright.

—To the kingdom of King Sun, my sovereign!—Ray replied with another bow.

Princess Icicle greatly liked such respectful address. She loved flattery.

Boy Ray clapped his hands, and instantly a light chariot the color of morning dawn, woven from rose petals, appeared before her. Two gigantic hairy bees drew it.

—Seat yourself quickly, Princess,—Boy Ray urged, taking his place on the driver's seat in an instant,—otherwise our steeds, children of sunny days, will freeze in your cold kingdom.

Icicle did not need to be invited a second time. The nobility, power, and wealth smiling upon her in the very near future made her leap lightly and joyfully into the rosy carriage, and they sped away.

The astonished guard of Tsar Cold's ice palace saw with fear the princess fly past them, but before they could raise the alarm, Icicle and Ray were already far away. They encountered Granny Blizzard ahead, wrapped from head to toe in her white veil.

She threatened them with her cane, trying to block the princess's path, and shouted:

—Beware, Princess, do not listen to flattering speeches! Be obedient to your father. Return! Return!

But Ray only laughed as he glanced into the old woman's face, and she, with a loud curse, fled at full speed into the mountains.

Meanwhile the white glaciers and snowdrifts disappeared. Warmth and fragrance wafted toward the princess. Before her appeared a luxurious garden.

There strolled fairies, airy and tender as a dream. Their long hair shimmered with gold, their scarlet lips smiled; their light dresses, woven from rose and lily petals, were of the most delicate shades. Light and airy, they floated, dancing in the air, rustling slightly with their light wings, which seemed silver in the brilliance of a May day.

In an instant, seeing the princess appear among them, they began chattering in thin voices clear as a flute:

1st fairy: What a pretty little girl!

2nd fairy: Not pretty at all! Wrapped up in such heat and looking like a piece of snow!

3rd fairy: She has eyes like a blue lake!

4th fairy: Our multicolored eyes look far better!

5th fairy: She is good for nothing. In beauty she is nothing compared to us!

6th fairy: She is heavy and clumsy and cannot whirl in the air like we can.

7th fairy: Simply an icicle, who has no place in our wonderful kingdom.

8th fairy: An ugly icicle, and nothing more.

And then all the fairies cried out together:

—Icicle! Icicle! Icicle!

Poor Princess Icicle wished to weep from grief and offense. But her blue eyes knew no tears. Her heart only grew colder still. It was now filled to the brim with proud contempt for the little fairies because of their unkind attitude toward her. And she proudly and loudly proclaimed:

—Aha, you laugh at me now, I seem ugly and ridiculous to you, but when I become your mistress, the wife of King Sun, you will bow low before me and find everything about me beautiful.

And as if already savoring her victory over the mocking fairies, Princess Icicle proudly strode before them, enveloping them in cold from head to toe.

—Ah, nasty icicle, what is she saying?—the tender fairies cried out and threateningly advanced upon Princess Icicle, waving their little wings right before her face.

Suddenly a dim rumble swept through the bright kingdom. Thousands of multicolored butterflies fluttered in every direction. A flock of larks rose into the blue air and began singing in chorus.

Ah, what a song that was!

Such a song Princess Icicle had never heard in her life among her mountain glaciers. Sister Blizzard sang worse, a hundred times worse than the ringing larks.

Boy Rays appeared in enormous numbers and formed two rows upon a lush flowery meadow.

—King Sun is coming! King Sun is coming!—the merry fairies whispered and began preening themselves in anticipation of their young sovereign.

And suddenly everything simultaneously shone wondrously in the bright kingdom. Princess Icicle even involuntarily squeezed her eyes shut. There was so much brilliance and light all around that it hurt the eyes.

Unexpectedly there appeared upon a golden chariot a golden-haired youth of such beauty as Icicle had never seen before. And he radiated light; even his hair, eyes, and clothing gleamed. Upon his luxuriant curls rested a golden crown, from which the dazzling brilliance proceeded, painfully striking the eyes. A whole retinue of Boy Rays crowded around him.

All the fairies fell to their knees at the sight of the king. Only Princess Icicle stepped forward proudly. Casting an arrogant glance over the crowd of fairies, she boldly looked upon

the handsome king and said:

"Foolish, tiny, insignificant daughters of the air have dared to laugh at me, the mighty princess, their future sovereign. Punish them, King Sun, punish them at once!"

The King gently raised his eyes to the princess.

"Just you wait! Just you wait!" proclaimed triumphant Icy Flake, turning to the fairies. "I am the bride of King Sun, and you must bow before me as your queen and sovereign."

She wished to add something more but suddenly stopped.

A whole sheaf of rays burst forth from the golden eyes of King Sun. Like red-hot needles they pierced Icy Flake's face.

A loud cry tore from her breast, her legs gave way, her eyes closed, and she fell backward, pale as death.

And under the scorching gaze of King Sun, Icy Flake quickly melted, melted...

On the mountains, in the glaciers, the old Tsar Cold wept in despair upon learning of his daughter's demise. Frost and Blizzard echoed him, mourning their beautiful little sister.

But Icy Flake melted, died completely, died, burned by the Sun, by his golden eyes.

No trace of her remained when King Sun commanded the mocking fairies:

"Weave your round dances and sing your songs. I am setting out to war against Tsar Cold and soon hope to triumph over my enemy."

And the fairies, with joyful songs, flew off in different directions with the glad tidings, while people greeted with happy smiles the blessed news of the approaching Sun, their beloved, radiant king...