

The Kingdom of the Nymphs

A Bulgarian Fairytale by Nicolaj Rajnov from Bulgarian Fairytales¹
Translation by James R. Covington

Once upon a time in a faraway forest, there lived a family of lumberjacks—a man, a woman, and their three children: one boy and two girls. They used to sleep in a simple cabin with a straw roof, and during the day they would walk through the forest. Even when the children were little, they used to help their father with his strenuous work. He would cut the wood, and they would load it on their little donkey and take it back to their cabin, where they would arrange it in neat little stacks. From there, their father would take the wood to the city to sell it.

One day, as the lumberjack was tying up a bundle of sticks with some twine, he was bit by a poisonous viper. His hand swelled up, and he died from the poison that crept into his blood. The mother and her children mourned his death, but after some time—whether they wanted to or not—they had to start working again by themselves, to keep from starving to death.

The good thing is that the young boy and his two sisters already knew their father’s trade. The boy took up his father’s ax and saw, and the girls drove the donkey to the places in the forest where they used to go with their father for wood.

They worked hard, and they didn’t mind it so much. Everything was just like it was before, as if nothing had changed. The work came along nicely. The only thing is that the three children and their mother were sad that their father wasn’t there to help them.

Whenever the boy would set off for work with his two sisters, their mother would send them off and then turn her back to hide her tears, as she quietly said to herself:

“Those poor children! They work just like their father.”

The boy was quick and strong for his age, but he still couldn’t earn as much money as his father did. To keep up the house, the two girls not only had to help their brother, but they also had to find work of their own. They gathered flowers, strawberries, raspberries and mushrooms; they weaved baskets and peeled bark off of the trees; they made wreaths and others trinkets. They carried all of these things to the city to sell. In addition to this, they helped their mother with the housework. She taught them to sew, knit and weave.

By the time that they had grown up, the two girls had already become excellent housekeepers.

* * *

One evening after sunset, the mother was sitting in the cabin sewing with her daughters.

Her son had just returned from the forest and was unloading the chopped wood behind the cabin.

Suddenly there arose a terrible wind.

¹ Texted taken from Български Приказки by Николай Райнов, published by Захарий Стоянов, 2005.

The branches of the trees began to sway and crack, as if invisible hands were bending and snapping them. The fire in the fireplace went out, as if a giant mouth had blown it out. The whole cabin began to shake.

The widow grew scared and jumped up, gathered up her fabric and rushed into the house with her daughters.

Only the boy stayed outside—to finish arranging the wood.

But the boy wasn't having much success. He picked up a log and placed it on top of the others, but it jumped up and fell back to the ground. He picked it up again and put it on the pile—and once again, it fell off the pile, as if the log was alive and was playing a joke on him.

The lumberjack grew angry and shouted:

“What scoundrel is playing a joke on me? Why don't you come out so I can see you?”

Then he heard a thundering, yet smooth and friendly voice.

“It's me.”

The lumberjack turned around and saw that behind him stood a handsome young man, all clothed in golden clothes that flamed like a fire. He was holding the bridle of a red horse, and flames shot forth from the horse's mouth and nose.

But the lumberjack wasn't afraid.

He put down the wood, crossed his arms, just as if relaxing from his tiring work, and asked the golden young man:

“So you're the one who is playing a joke on me? Who are you, and where have you come from?”

The handsome young man replied:

“I am a prince from a faraway kingdom. I come from the Kingdom of the Nymphs. I want to take your sister for my wife.”

“Which sister? I have two sisters. One is called Morning Star, and the other—Evening Star. Which one do you want to marry?”

“I want Evening Star.”

“Fine, but let's see whether she will accept. Come in to the cabin and ask her!”

The prince entered the little hut, but the boy remained outside to finish arranging the wood. Now there wasn't anyone to interfere with his work anymore, so he finished quickly.

When he entered the cabin, he learned that his mother and sisters had already agreed for Evening Star to marry the handsome young prince.

They talked and talked until it was midnight, and the prince bid them farewell, helped the girl onto his horse and disappeared.

But in the morning, right where horse had stood the night before, they found a giant pile of gold coins.

* * *

Time passed.

No news came from the fiery prince or Evening Star. The mother along with her son and daughter grieved and worried about the girl. No matter what they talked about, she was always on their minds.

Whenever twilight came and the evening star began to shine in the evening sky, the mother would say:

“I wonder where our Evening Star is now? I wonder whether she is shining, too, or if she has already faded and gone to join her father?”

Morning Star would reply:

“Mother, you always assume the worst. She’s probably doing well, and that’s why she doesn’t send us any news. When you’re doing well, it’s easy to forget about others.”

And the boy would reply:

“I can only imagine what golden stockings Evening Star is knitting right now in the Kingdom of the Nymphs!”

And then one night right after sunset, as they were going on in this manner, once again there arose a vicious wind.

A horse appeared like before, but this time it was black. Riding it was a large old man—with white hair and a long silver beard. His clothes were golden, too.

“Good evening!” he greeted the family, which had gathered in front of the cabin.

“Welcome!” replied the mother. “Come into our hut, old man, and have a rest!”

The old man went in.

“I bring you many greetings,” he said “from my son and daughter-in-law—Evening Star. They now have a boy. We christened him Blaze. Do not worry about them: they are all doing fine. Evening Star often thinks of you. She sent me—to bring you news. She loves you very much and always speaks of you.

And before they could ask him anything, the old man got up, mounted his black horse and flew off.

And this time, too, there was a pile of gold coins right where the horse had been.

* * *

One evening when they sat down to dinner, Morning Star sighed and said:

“Lucky Evening Star! She is a princess in the Kingdom of Nymphs. I’m sure that nymphs serve her. They all honor her and bow down before her. Whatever she asks for, they bring it. I wish some prince would come from there or some other kingdom—to ask for me...”

“Don’t talk like that!” said her brother. “Do you really want to leave mother and me here all alone? At least we’re rich now: we have everything we could ever want. We aren’t worn down by toil like before. If you get married, too, there’s not going to be anyone to sit by mother and comfort her when she misses Evening Star.

“Since you care about mother so much,” said Morning Star, “why don’t you get married and bring her a daughter-in-law: she will surely make her happy and keep her company. She’ll even sing to her all day long.”

Mother silently listened to them fighting and shed tears. Finally she spoke up:

“Your father died and left me a widow—to look after three children. Your sister found a husband and got married. But she went far, far away—I can’t send her news or see whether she is happy or not. And

you two will leave me, too—I know it. You will leave me, in order to find your own happiness somewhere else. I will be left all alone in this cabin—here I will die from grief and from worrying about you. For that is a mother’s fate.”

“No, mother,” said the son. “I swear that I will never leave you alone. Getting married hasn’t even crossed my mind. Let Morning Star get married, if she wants. But I will stay by you.”

Morning Star signed once more, but didn’t say anything.

The next morning she got up even before sunrise and started to work around the house: she was a hard-working girl and couldn’t just sit still with her arms crossed. But her brother and her mother saw that the girl wasn’t happy. And her work didn’t help comfort her. From time to time she would look off into the distance, then sigh, and then mumble something to herself...and then start working again.

* * *

One morning the boy had gone out to bathe in the spring. It was just starting to get light outside. The morning star was still twinkling up in the sky.

The lumberjack spotted it and was reminded of his sister, and thought to himself: “Morning Star can’t just stay at home. Her eyes are always turned away. She, too, will leave us soon.”

As he bathed, he noticed that a light breeze began to blow. It was very nice, because the breeze carried with it the far-off sweet smell of herbs and wildflowers.

“How wonderful!” the boy said to himself as he lifted his head.

But as he bent over the spring once again, something strange happened.

The water began to disappear under the ground, as if some giant mouth was sipping it up. After a short while, it had vanished to the last drop. Even the sand at the bottom of the spring dried up quickly, as if water had never even flowed from beneath it.

“What’s going on?” said the boy amazed. “Who drank up the whole spring and didn’t leave any for me?”

“It was me,” answered a friendly voice.

The lumberjack turned around and saw that behind him stood a young man—handsome, blue-eyed, wearing clothes of silver and grasping the bridle of a white horse.

“Why are you playing with me?” the lumberjack asked him? “Let me guess: you’re from the Kingdom of the Nymphs.”

“That is where I am from,” answered the silver young man. “How did you know that is where I come from?”

“You always work the same way. Why have you come? Do you want to marry my other sister?”

“Yes, I do.” replied the young man. “I am a prince from the kingdom you speak of. I came to ask for your sister Morning Star’s hand in marriage.”

“Fine. Let’s go back to the cabin. But who are you? You’re not the brother of my brother-in-law, are you?—the one who married my other sister Evening Star? You sure look like him.”

“No, you’ve guessed wrong,” said the silver young man. “I am, indeed, from that other kingdom, but I rule over a different land. I know the fiery prince, and I know his wife and his son, too.

“Who do you mean? Are you talking about Blaze?”

“Yes, him. He’s already a boy like you.”

“No, you must be mistaken,” said the lumberjack. “Blaze isn’t the one you’ve seen. The boy is only a year old, and I’m older than his mother. Are you sure the boy you’re thinking of is called Blaze?”

“Blaze is his name, and you’re right, he is only one year old. But in our land, a one-year old boy is bigger and stronger than a twenty-year old boy here. We grow up quickly and grow old slowly. We live to be a thousand years old, and some live even longer.”

“Do you die, then?”

“We do die, yes, but not from sickness, but from growing tired of carrying around our aging bodies.”

“You’ve got it easy,” said the lumberjack. “But here we labor, we get sick, we suffer...some die just when they’re reaching the prime of their life, while others are about to breathe their last breath, and yet death passes them by.”

As they were talking, they reached the hut. The silver prince explained why he had come.

Morning Star was ecstatic when she heard that he wanted to marry her, but her mother grew sad.

“I only have one daughter left,” she said to their guest. “And you have come to take her away from me, too. Why don’t you two get engaged, as we do here, and leave her here with me, so that I can enjoy her yet another month or two?”

“I can’t,” said the prince. “This is our custom: if a young man and a young woman give each other their word, they get married at once. There is no engagement among us. If you give me Morning Star, I will have to take her away with me to the Kingdom of the Nymphs right away.”

The mother consented: what mother doesn’t want what is best for her children?

The silver prince caught Morning Star up on his white horse and disappeared with her.

And there, where the horse had been, they found a pile of diamonds that shone like the stars.

* * *

Mother and son continued to live by themselves in their forest hut.

The widow was starting to get old. She didn’t let the boy go out for wood: she wanted another person nearby at all times. Only on market day did the son go the city to buy the things they needed.

They lived a life full of sorrow in the forest, and rarely did another soul pass their way. Even when someone did come by, he didn’t stop.

And it was quiet in their little cabin: no longer could you hear the sweet voice of Morning Star.

Sometimes the boy would say to his mother:

“What if I travelled around the world, mother, to look for the Kingdom of the Nymphs? I would love to see how my sisters live and to bring you greetings from them.”

“Oh, son, don’t say such things!” his mother would reply. “I’ll die of sorrow if you leave me, too. As soon as you go, you’ll never see me alive again.”

But the lumberjack was only kidding.

He wouldn’t think of leaving his mother all alone in the forest to seek the Kingdom of the Nymphs.

* * *

One morning at about sunrise, someone knocked on their door.

The boy got up to answer it.

In front of their hut had stopped a man on a horse. The rider was old with white hair and a beard all the way to his belt.

He greeted the boy and said that he came from the Kingdom of the Nymphs.

“Come in at once, old man!” said the boy. “Mother will be delighted when she sees you.”

The old man went in.

“I am the father of the silver prince,” he said. “My son got married to Morning Star. She has given birth to a daughter, and they named her Rosie. The little girl is very beautiful. All are alive and well, and they send you many greetings. Don’t worry about Morning Star: she is as happy as can be. And her sister is well, too. She also sends you greetings.”

After they had spoken yet awhile longer, the horseman vanished.

And this time, right where the horse had been, there was a heap of diamonds.

But the widow wasn’t consoled by this present. She just wanted to see her two daughters and her two grandchildren. But how could she find them? Who could tell her where the Kingdom of the Nymphs even was?

* * *

One day the boy went out into the forest to hunt.

The rain began to pour.

The hunter took shelter in a small cave.

The rain then passed.

The sun began to shine.

The boy left.

But when he went out of the cave, he saw that in the sky there shone a beautiful seven-colored rainbow. He stopped to look at it. And entranced by the sight, he quietly said:

“How beautiful! There is nothing more beautiful than the rainbow!” But behind him he heard a voice—smooth and sweet like the song of a nightingale.

The voice said:

“Whoever has not seen me doesn’t know what beauty is.”

The hunter turned around to see whose voice this was. But he didn’t see anyone. He only heard the sound of dry leaves crunching, as if invisible feet were running along the path.

The boy returned home to his cabin and told his mother what had happened. His mother began to laugh and said:

“And so it has happened to you, too, son.”

* * *

Another time the lumberjack was wandering in the deepest part of the forest.

It was almost dusk, right before the sun was about to set.

He sat down to rest beneath a waterfall.

The sun's rays fell against the trickles of water that formed from drops on the cliff. It smelled of wild herbs. The coolness was so refreshing, and the sound of the waterfall overtook the boy, so that he wanted to fall asleep right there sitting on the rock.

But look! There was another seven-colored rainbow, but this time there were two, right there where the water was falling.

The lumberjack again couldn't contain his joy.

* * *

"How incredibly beautiful!" he exclaimed. "I've never seen anything so beautiful in my entire life!"

As soon as he spoke these words, once again he heard the sweet, sing-song voice behind him:

"Only when you see me, boy, will you understand what beauty is."

The lumberjack sprung up and turned around, but this time he didn't see anyone, either. He only heard a laugh in the wind and the sound of steps running down along the rocky path.

This greatly perplexed him, but he didn't say anything to his mother—he didn't want her to find out and laugh at him again.

* * *

From then on the boy didn't spend much time at home.

Something drew him toward the forest where he had heard that enchanting voice twice. He really wanted to hear it again. But the voice wasn't heard.

His mother looked at her son sorrowfully whenever she saw that he was getting ready to leave, and she would ask:

"To the forest again, son?"

"Where else would I go, mother? If I always stay here, I'll go mad. Don't worry: I'll be back soon!"

But the mother's heart sunk, as if someone were saying to her that something awful was about to happen to the boy.

And something did happen.

* * *

One day the hunter was climbing along a cliff—to catch wild goats.

The path was narrow and slippery: it had just started to rain. He got up near the top and lay down behind a large boulder—to lie in wait for the goats.

After awhile, some goats appeared above and behind him.

The boy took his aim, but he didn't manage to hit the goat.

He then started to move behind another boulder, but when he had crouched down and begun to crawl toward the crag—his leg slipped, and the boy tumbled down into a pit.

Where he fell, that's where he stayed.

There wasn't anyone in sight to help him.
He lay unconscious with broken legs and broken arms.
It got dark.
The boy didn't open his eyes.

* * *

At that time, his mother was sitting in their cabin waiting for him.
When it got dark, she began to grow worried: her son had never been so late.
She went out onto the path along which he had left that day and began to call him. But no one replied.
She entered the forest and reached the cliffs. There, too, she called her son, but there, too, no voice sounded in reply.
The widow fretted and returned to her cabin; she didn't know where else to look for her son.
She huddled over the fireplace—to wait for him.
It came to her mind that he might have gone to the city without telling her.
If he was in town, he could just be late.
I'll wait.

* * *

As she sat next to the fire, the mother dozed off.
And she saw a dream.
She was going along a path—to look for her son.
She was going along and knew that she would find him somewhere near the rocky peak. No one had told her that her son was there, but she knew: that's where he is, right near the top.
She passed along the steep heights and wondered where she had gotten such strength—to climb without growing tired.
She went around a rock-face and suddenly spotted the boy lying at the bottom of the rocky pit.
He lay there and wouldn't open his eyes.
She began to try to wake him.
“Get up, son!” she told him. “Get up, because you're going to catch a cold! Come on, let's go back to the cabin!”
But the boy didn't hear her. He didn't even move. He lay there and slept deeply, very deeply.
Then out from the cliff came a girl: very beautiful, blonde, blue-eyed, wearing clothes with the seven colors of the rainbow. Her clothes shone and cast sparkles all around; they were made of the finest silk.
The girl smiled and gently said to the boy's mother:
“Don't wake him! Let him sleep! He will be my husband—your son. He's been searching for me for a long time now. I will wake him up after he has slept, and I will take him with me to the Kingdom of the

Nymphs. That's where my palaces are with their many towers. There your son will live with me. After one year's time, we will take you to live there with us, too.

* * *

With these words, the old woman woke up.

The fire had gone out. It was cold in the cabin.

She lit the fire again and sat to wait for her son.

The night passed, but the boy never showed up.

Then the old woman realized that her son hadn't been untrue to his word.

"My son is dead," she moaned and cried. "Now I know where the Kingdom of the Nymphs is: it's there where you go after you die, from where there is no return. Oh, you wretched son. Oh, my dear boy!"

But he didn't remember anything of the past: not his mother, not why he left that place, not that he fell and lay unconscious.

He followed the girl.

After they reached a sheer black cliff, the nymph struck it with her hand. The cliff opened up. Inside it was bright. A golden carriage appeared, to which were harnessed winged horses.

The girl and the boy got into the carriage, and it flew away. It moved so quickly, that after just a short while they found themselves in the Kingdom of the Nymphs.

* * *

When it got light, the old woman ran to the city in tears, calling people to come and help her search for her son beneath the cliffs where she had seen him lying in her dream the night before.

The whole day the men searched here and there, but they couldn't find the hunter. They only found his weapon and gave it to his mother.

She wept and said:

"I now know that he has gone and isn't going to come back. The nymph has taken him from me. She appeared to me in a dream last night and told me that after a year she will take me to the boy. Why must I live here yet another year? Let her come now to take my soul, so I don't have to suffer. I am left alone in the world—without my child. When I die, there will be no one to close my eyes.

* * *

But the hunter wasn't dead.

While he lay unconscious, around midnight the same girl that had appeared to the old woman in her dream came to him. She truly was a nymph. She bent over the boy and breathed onto his face.

Suddenly he opened his eyes and looked up at her.

In the dark of the night, the girl shone like the moon. And her clothes shone as if they were made of moonsilk.

"Get up!" the nymph said to the hunter. "You are now well. Come with me! I will take you to the Kingdom of the Nymphs. Aren't I beautiful? Aren't I the most beautiful woman in the world?"

The boy was still in a kind of trance. He stood up.

And then he felt fresh blood coursing through his veins, and in his body a great strength he hadn't ever felt before.

* * *

When they reached the nymph's palace, thousands of attendants and nobles came out to meet them, all richly dressed.

They all bowed down to the nymph, raised their hands to the sky and yelled in one voice:

"Welcome, princess Rainbow!"

The voices that greeted them were smooth and friendly like music. When the hunter got out of the carriage, the nymph said to the nobles:

"This man is my husband. His name is Brilliance. He will be your prince from this moment on."

They all bowed down to the hunter, raised their hands to the sky as a symbol of their loyalty and lined up behind the carriage.

The golden doors of the palace opened, and the carriage proceeded into the yard, which was covered in diamond-sand. Along the decorated trees that lined the main road stood smiling dwarves—to see how the nymph would return with her husband. They were as round as oranges.

* * *

When he became prince, Brilliance didn't remember anything of what had happened to him when he was in the human world. It was as if he had been born again.

And the Kingdom of the Nymphs was completely different—not like ours. Its beauties can't be adequately expressed in any human tongue.

There all the rocks and cliffs were shiny and transparent like diamonds. Their copper was like our gold, and their iron, like our platinum. There they had all kinds of other riches that we don't even know about. Their flowers were like butterflies. Their trees sang and talked to each other. The animals were gentle; there were no wild beasts. The air itself was colorful and shiny. Giant stars twinkled in the sky, the sort that we haven't ever seen.

And the inhabitants of the Kingdom of the Nymphs didn't look like people. In that kingdom, they didn't know sickness, poverty, or misfortune. No one had ever heard crying or moaning. There everyone was happy, even those who weren't princes.

Brilliance often met with the other princes and princesses, but he didn't know any of them. He didn't even recognize his own sisters, or his own brothers-in-law, and neither did he recognize their fathers or their children.

But they knew and recognized him, although they didn't say a word.

* * *

One day, the king gave a great feast for the princes and princesses in the garden of his palace, which was found on top of the highest mountain.

Everyone came—both young and old—with their whole families. Of course, Brilliance and Rainbow, Evening Star and her husband and her son Blaze, and Morning Star and her husband and her daughter Rosie were all there, too, along with their closest relatives.

While everyone was having a wonderful time, the king began to give a riddle to his guests:

He said:

“Once in another place, there was a dry tree. It had three branches: two smooth, and one knotty. Two hunters passed by and broke off one smooth branch each. They took them into their gardens and planted them in the ground. And the two branches bore fruit: the first one—a pear, and the other—an apple. Lightning struck the tree and broke off the third branch: the knotty one—and brought it back to the sky. The lightning planted it in the ground there, and there grew a silver tree. But the other tree—the one on earth—began to dry up, because it didn’t have any more branches. Now tell me: where is this tree and what will happen to it?”

Everyone thought to himself.

Evening Star’s husband spoke up and said:

“I don’t know where the tree is, lord, but since you say that it’s dry—either lumberjacks will cut it down, or its roots will rot and the rains will carry it away.”

When he heard the word “lumberjack”, prince Brilliance thought to himself.

Something turned over in his soul.

It seemed like a dream, that he had lived somewhere else in a faraway forest, and that he had been a lumberjack there. But he couldn’t remember anymore. And what he did remember seemed to him like a fuzzy dream.

Then Morning Star’s husband spoke up.

He said:

“This tree, lord, has lived its life. It’s only good for one thing now: for some lumberjack to strap it to his donkey as he’s loading it with wood. What else could it possibly be used for?”

At these words Brilliance thought to himself again.

He remembered that he had dreamed he once went with a donkey for wood in the forest, and that his two sisters went with him, and an old man, their father. But this time, too, he couldn’t remember where that forest was.

After this, the remaining guests spoke up one after another—all the princes and princesses. One said, that the tree would will be eaten up by worms, another—that an owl will build his nest there, a third—that lightning would burn it up.

Last of all, Rainbow began to speak.

She said:

“I know this tree, lord. You heard what the two hunters said. Now I will have my turn. I broke off the third branch—the knotty one, but I promised also to bring the whole tree here, where the branch is. When the time comes, I will bring it. But now it is still early.

The king smiled to himself. He understood what the princess wanted to say, but the others didn’t.

One of the older ones spoke up:

“We don’t understand a word you said, princess. The lord gave the riddle in a clear manner—and likewise you have to answer it in a way that we can all understand.”

Then Rainbow said:

“This tree is the widow who lives in the human world deep in the forest. The two smooth branches are her two daughters—Morning Star and Evening Star, who came to live here in our kingdom. The hunters are the two princes who married them. The knotty branch is the son of the widow—Brilliance, whom I saved from death and brought here. If he had stayed in the human world, he wouldn’t have survived, and his mother would have died from misery on account of him. But I promised her to bring her here where her son is. When the time comes, I will stand by my word.

When he heard these words, Brilliance remembered everything: his mother, and the cabin, and the days of poverty, and the hard work of a lumberjack, and the two princes, and the rainbow, and the voice, and falling from the high cliff.

He then recognized his sisters and they smiled at him.

* * *

From that day, Brilliance began to think more and more about his old mother.

She was probably still sadly missing him in that faraway forest. The old woman had probably grown quite old. She might even be lying in bed sick.

Maybe deep despair had overtaken her. Did she even have anyone to bring her a glass of water?

Once Brilliance said to the nymph:

“Even though I live in the Kingdom of the Nymphs, I am a human—and my heart is a human heart. I very much wish to see my mother. Didn’t you promise you’d bring her here? When will I get to see her?”

And Rainbow answered him:

“When a son is born to us, then I will bring your mother here. Just wait until then! It will not be long. Don’t be in a rush!”

But Brilliance couldn’t wait. He said:

“I will go and bring her here myself. I will tell them to prepare the carriage, or I’ll mount a horse.

“You will get there with great difficulty,” the nymph gently objected. Between the human world and ours, there is a great abyss. In order for the nymph horses to jump over it—they have to listen to you, and you have to be able to control them. If I’m not with you, the horses won’t listen to you: they still don’t know you. Just wait! As I told you, we’ll go there together to get your mother.

* * *

But Brilliance’s human heart longed for his mother.

He went to see his brother-in-law, Evening Star’s husband.

He told him everything and asked him to give him a horse—to take him to the human world.

His brother-in-law said:

“I have horses enough for you and myself. If you ask, I’ll give them. But none of them will listen to you: they only listen to my father and to me. No one else has ridden them, and that’s why they don’t listen to anyone else. But there’s something else: you don’t know the way there or the way back. How are you going to get there, and how will you return?”

Brilliance grew very distraught.

He went to his other brother-in-law—Morning Star’s husband.

And he told him the same story, and he got the same response.

“These nymph horses are dangerous,” the prince said. “They don’t submit to anyone except their own master. They can even kill a man. And where are you going to go, when you don’t know the way? The horse will throw you into the abyss that divides one land from the other, and then no one will be able to find you. It’s a good thing Rainbow warned you: just wait, she’ll bring your mother here!”

* * *

Brilliance returned to his palace desperate.

Once again, he thought to himself.

Finally, he found the head stablemaster—a healthy old man, who could tame even the wildest horses.

He told him that he would make him a great noble if he gave him a horse—to take him to the human world.

The stablemaster stroked his beard and began to think.

After a long time, he said:

“God has given us horses, lord. We have many: the fastest and most beautiful anywhere. Any of them could take you wherever you want. But what can we do, since you don’t know the way to the human world? I don’t even know how to get there. I’ve never been there. Ever since I was born, I’ve always ridden here in the Kingdom of the Nymphs. But I’ve thought up something else. I’ll give you a silver mirror and a golden whip. They will help you. When you look into the mirror, you will see the path to the other world where you want to go. In this way, you’ll be able to guide the horse. Just remember one thing: you have to mount the horse backwards with your face toward its tail, and not toward its head; otherwise you’ll not be able to see the way. When the horse starts to stop or bend over, strike it with the whip—and it will take off again.

“Great!” said Brilliance. “Bring me the horse!”

“Right away,” said the stablemaster. “But there’s one other thing: don’t try to give this horse sweet water or bitter water. If you do, it will die.

“Fine, fine,” said the prince. “Now bring me the horse, because I’m in a hurry!”

* * *

Brilliance’s desire to see his mother was so strong, that he didn’t even think to ask what kind of water to give the horse, since it couldn’t drink water that was sweet or bitter.

He grabbed the mirror and the whip, mounted the horse with his back toward its head and took off without even saying goodbye to his wife.

The horse flew like the wind, just like all nymph horses fly. It reached the great abyss that separates the Kingdom of the Nymphs from the human world.

There it stopped.

The prince struck it with the whip. The horse jumped over the abyss, but on the other side it once again came to a stop.

Brilliance hit it a second time, but the stallion just stood firmly in the same spot.

When the prince hit him ever harder, the animal spoke:

“Give me some water: I’m dying of thirst, lord! A thirsty horse can’t go.”

The rider looked around him—he didn’t see water anywhere. He peered into the silver mirror—and he spotted a spring far off. He directed the stallion that way. When they reached the spring, the horse bent down and tasted the water, but didn’t drink.

“Drink!” said the prince. “Drink! Aren’t you thirsty?”

But the horse shook its head and said:

“This water isn’t for me, lord. We nymph horses don’t drink this kind of water. It’s sweet—it’s human water. I’ll die if I drink it. Find me some different water!”

The rider drove the horse on—to search for other water. He saw a path in his mirror that led down to a great body of water. He pushed the horse in that direction. The stallion ran and ran—until it reached the sea.

“Drink!” said the prince. “Drink up, so we can hurry on to the forest! We still have a long road ahead of us.”

The horse bent down again to drink, but once again it shook its head.

“Why aren’t you drinking?” Brilliance asked. “This water is seawater. Seawater isn’t sweet.”

“This water isn’t right for me either,” the stallion replied. “It’s bitter: it will poison me. I don’t want it. Find me other water quick, or I’m going to die of thirst!”

The horse stopped along the shore—it wouldn’t move. It wanted water. It couldn’t take another step because of its great thirst. It neighed and kicked. It was very, very thirsty.

The prince got off.

He looked around him, and his heart began to sink deep in his chest.

Where could he find water—not sweet and not bitter? And to see such a beautiful horse dying from thirst was awful.

Brilliance leaned his head against his steed and began to stroke it and cry. Great big tears flowed out of his eyes.

The horse looked at his lord and started licking up his tears.

“This water is just right for me,” it said. “It’s neither sweet nor bitter. It’s salty. It gives me a lot of strength. Come on, that’s plenty: I’ve drunk my fill. Get on—and I’ll carry you!”

Brilliance mounted his stallion again.

The horse flew on—like a storm it whirled onward. It ravaged everything in its path. It jumped over boulders—nothing got in its way. It even leaped over the sea like a bird.

* * *

They finally reached the forest where Brilliance had been born.

He got off the horse and started toward the cabin.

Everything seemed dim, black and dead to him.

The human sun was more like a candle.

The trees looked like straw, and the rocks—like tiny pebbles.

Everywhere it was cold, gloomy, and full of sorrow.
Is this really where he was born?
Had he really spent twenty years in this cold prison?
He almost wanted to hop back on his horse without delay and return to the Kingdom of the Nymphs.
But Brilliance remembered his mother.
Where is the cabin?
He walked around for awhile until he found it.
He finally spotted it.
But the hut he had been born in seemed rickety and rotted-out, more like a dung-heap than a home.

He entered the cabin without knocking.
A pale and dried-out girl met him: she was taking care of the old woman.
But she was on her deathbed—sick, powerless, just skin and bones.
Brilliance took a look at her: he couldn't recognize her. But when his glance met hers, he saw that those eyes were the eyes of his mother.
When she saw him, the sick, old woman yelped from joy:
"My son! My boy! Where have you come from, son?"
And she raised herself up to hug him.
Brilliance leaned down and held the old woman in his embrace.

* * *

They talked for a long time—mother and son,—because they had a lot to talk about.
She told him about her hardships, and he—about the Kingdom of the Nymphs with its wonders, about Evening Star and Morning Star, about their children, about his good, beautiful, and faithful wife, about their kingdom, and then about the horse that only drinks tears. He told his mother:
"Get up, so I can take you back to our kingdom! Rainbow will cure you at once. There it's very wonderful. Nowhere is as beautiful as it is there. The sun is enormous. It always shines: there is no night there. And as much as it shines, it doesn't wither the grass, or the flowers, or the leaves on the trees. It's never cold, or hot, and there's no sickness. Everyone is healthy, strong and always smiling. I've never heard anyone crying, or speaking an evil word to anyone else, or cursing anyone. And here, in the human world, it's very dark and awfully cold. If I stay any longer, I'll freeze."
"It may very well be that way, son," said the old woman. "But if you ask me, it's nice here. Here I was born, and here I gave birth to you three. Here I raised you, and here I buried your father: I've always been here in this cold and dark world. I couldn't go anywhere else. And I'm sick, son: don't you see me? I'd die on the way. I've gathered that it's a long journey, from what you've told me. Just leave me here to die in peace!
But the son wouldn't hear it.
He caught her up on his horse, mounted it himself, and they flew off.

The stallion now knew the way. It went faster on the way back than it had in coming. They quickly reached the Kingdom of the Nymphs. The palaces of princess Rainbow could be seen from far away.

* * *

The nymph sensed that her husband had left to fetch his mother, but she didn't get on to him for not telling her that he was leaving.

She met him happily, with a smiling face.

It was only when they had entered the palace that she called him aside and said to him quietly:

"I know that you love her: she's your mother. But you rushed things. You didn't listen to me. You brought the old woman here before her time: she will die."

And just as Rainbow had said, when the mother saw her daughters, who had come to visit her, she grew faint from ecstasy and died.

And then Rainbow the nymph turned her into a clear river—and that river ran all along their palace, through the green meadows.

And it still runs there today.

The nymph horses drink from it, because they don't like water that is sweet or bitter.

The water that flows in that river is salty, and the mother's tears aren't poisonous to them; they give strength, because they are tears of love.