

The
Golden Mare,
the Firebird,
and the
Magic Ring

RUTH SANDERSON

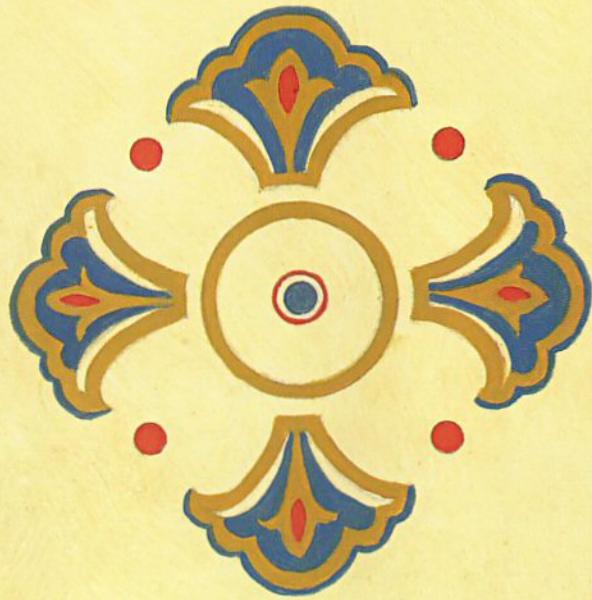


The Golden Mare, the Firebird, and the Magic Ring

Retold and illustrated by
RUTH SANDERSON



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Once upon a time, in a place where magical beasts still roamed the earth, a young man named Alexi left home to seek his fortune and perhaps to find an adventure or two as well.

Alexi was an excellent huntsman, but after traveling for a week he had found neither work nor adventure. One evening, as night descended and the moon arose, he made camp at the edge of a glade.

A noise of hoofbeats in the forest startled Alexi. Thinking it a herd of deer or some other game, the lad readied his bow. Yet the young



hunter did not loose his arrow, for the beast that appeared in the clearing was too wondrous to shoot. It was a golden mare with a silvery-white mane that streamed around her and sparkled in the moonlight.

The Golden Mare stood and gazed at the huntsman, who pointed an arrow at her heart.

"Hold, fair sir, do not shoot," said the mare, to the astonishment of the lad. Alexi lowered his bow and slowly approached the remarkable mare.

"I am at your service for sparing my life," she said. "What is your desire?"

Alexi told the mare he sought work and adventure.

"The Tsar of this region could use another huntsman," said the horse.

"Tomorrow I will take you to his palace. If he hires you, I promise to serve you well."

The next morning Alexi fashioned a rough bridle with a bit of rope, mounted the Golden Mare, and set off for the palace of the Tsar.

The Tsar hired the young man at once, so impressed was he by Alexi's mount. He offered Alexi a princely sum for the mare.

"Thank you, sire," said Alexi, "but I'm afraid she'll allow no rider but me."

Annoyed that his offer was declined, the Tsar ordered a saddle and a real bridle put on the horse, but not one of his men could stay on the Golden Mare's back.

The Tsar glowered at Alexi, for he usually got what he wanted. "I trust that you will serve me *quite* well," he said coldly, not wanting to dismiss him in case he turned out to be a good huntsman.





In just a few weeks, Alexi became first among the Tsar's huntsmen, for he was a good shot and the Golden Mare was swift at the chase. As luck would have it, there came a day that Alexi spied no game but rode on and on until it began to grow dark. He was about to turn the mare around when he noticed something glowing brightly on the path ahead. It was a golden feather, bright as a flame, and Alexi knew it must be a feather from the great Firebird.

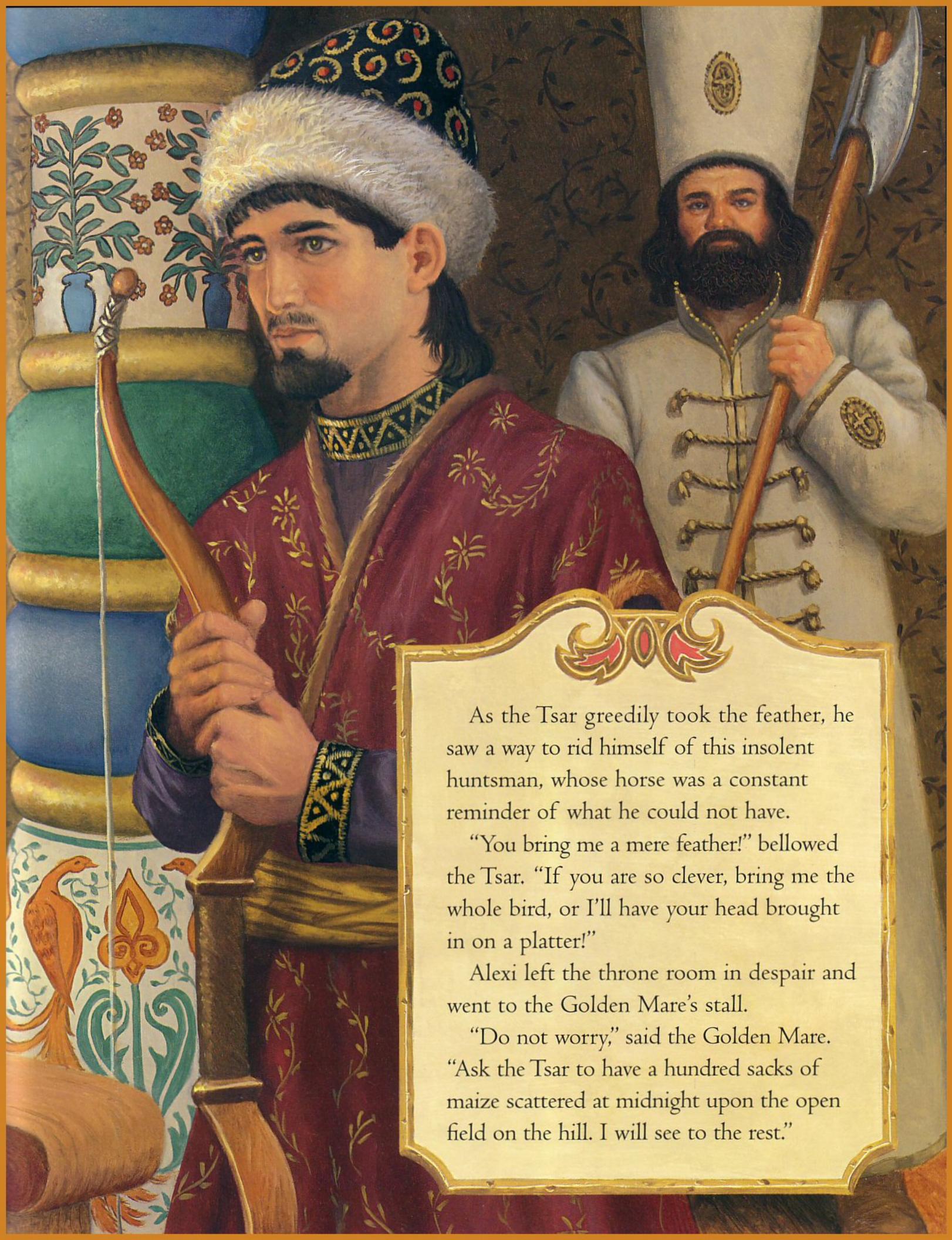


"I will take this prize to the Tsar," said Alexi. "Then perhaps he will look upon me with favor."

The Golden Mare was protective of her kind master. "If you take the Firebird's feather, you will surely learn the meaning of fear," she warned. But so confident was Alexi that he did not heed her words and presented the feather to the Tsar the very next day.







As the Tsar greedily took the feather, he saw a way to rid himself of this insolent huntsman, whose horse was a constant reminder of what he could not have.

"You bring me a mere feather!" bellowed the Tsar. "If you are so clever, bring me the whole bird, or I'll have your head brought in on a platter!"

Alexi left the throne room in despair and went to the Golden Mare's stall.

"Do not worry," said the Golden Mare. "Ask the Tsar to have a hundred sacks of maize scattered at midnight upon the open field on the hill. I will see to the rest."

The Tsar agreed to Alexi's request, and at midnight his men scattered one hundred sacks of maize on the field. Alexi took the saddle and bridle off the Golden Mare and she wandered loose in the field. Then he hid in the branches of a huge oak tree that stood at the top of the hill. All night they waited.

As the first golden rays of dawn lit the sky, from the eastern edge of the world the Firebird came flying, wings aflame with the reflected light of the sun.

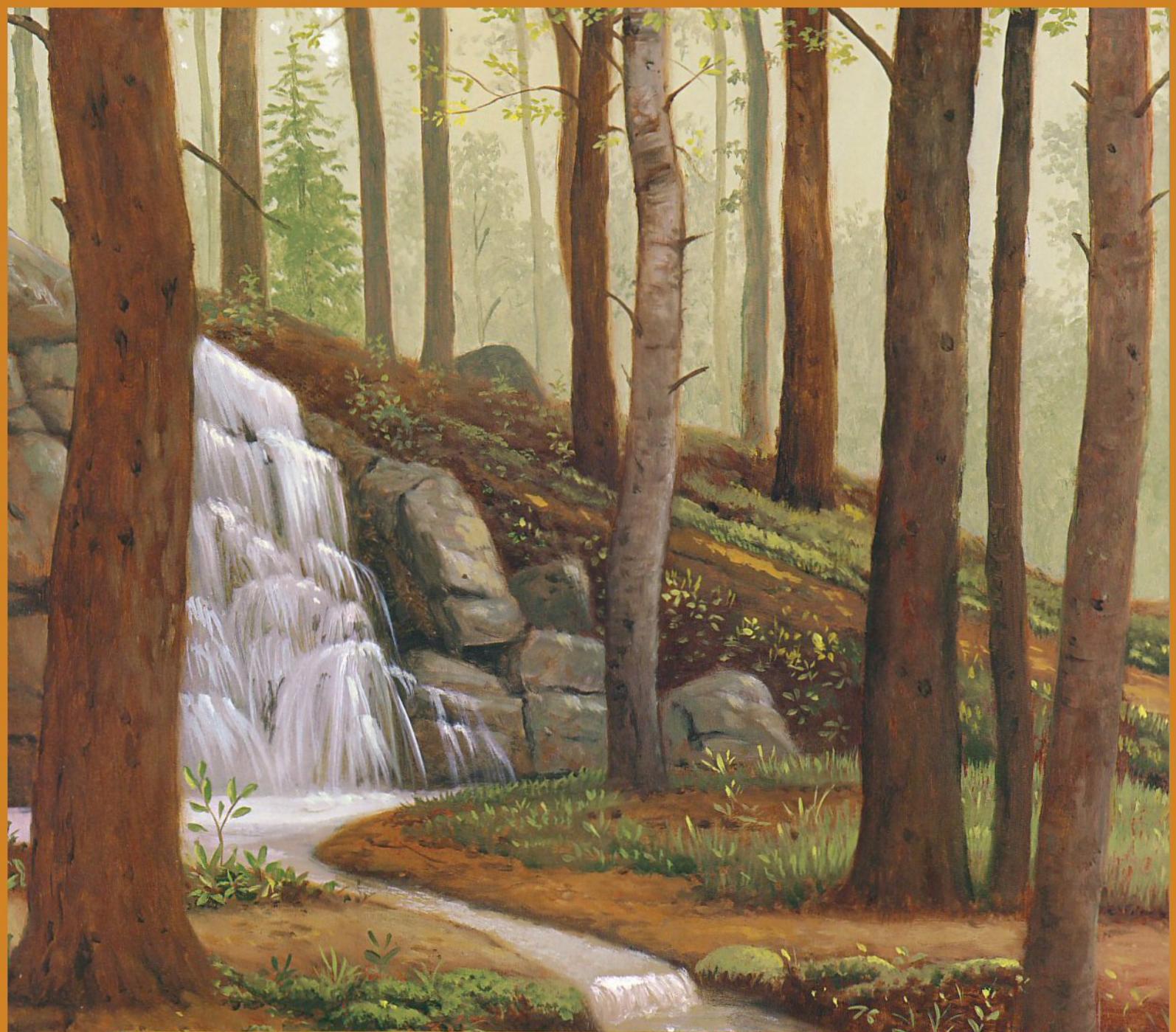




The mighty bird landed in the field and began to eat the maize. As the Golden Mare grazed nearby, she wandered closer and closer to the Firebird. When the bird was close enough, the mare placed a hoof upon its tail, pinning it to the ground. The Firebird tried in vain to fly away, but the mare held fast. Alexi jumped from the tree, tied the struggling bird securely with rope, and placed it carefully in a sack.



The Tsar was amazed to see Alexi bearing the mythical Firebird. He ordered a huge, ornate cage built for the magnificent bird. People came from miles around to see the captive Firebird, and all the neighboring tsars were quite jealous of his prize possession. Alexi, however, felt sorry for the bird and wished he had never seen its feather shining in the forest path.



Alexi remained the Tsar's best huntsman and brought him much profit. But no matter how well Alexi did, he could not please the Tsar, for the Golden Mare still obeyed Alexi alone.

A few weeks later, the Tsar called Alexi to him.

"Since you seem to have a talent for impossible tasks, I have another one for you," said the Tsar. "In a distant eastern land, Yelena the Fair sails in her golden boat upon the Lake of the Sun. Find her and bring her back to be my bride. It will mean your death if you fail."



With a heavy heart, Alexi went to the Golden Mare, certain that this new task was hopeless. "Ask the Tsar for a brocaded tent and all sorts of sweetmeats and delicacies," the mare said, "and I will take you to her."

The Tsar supplied Alexi with a beautiful tent and fine foods, which Alexi packed into saddlebags upon the Golden Mare's broad back.

As they set out, it seemed to Alexi that the mare's feet barely touched the ground, so swiftly did she run. For seven days and nights she ran, through green forests, past waterfalls, up and down mountains, until on the eighth morning she stopped.



Silhouetted against the blazing sunrise, the boat
of Yelena the Fair sailed upon the Lake of the Sun.



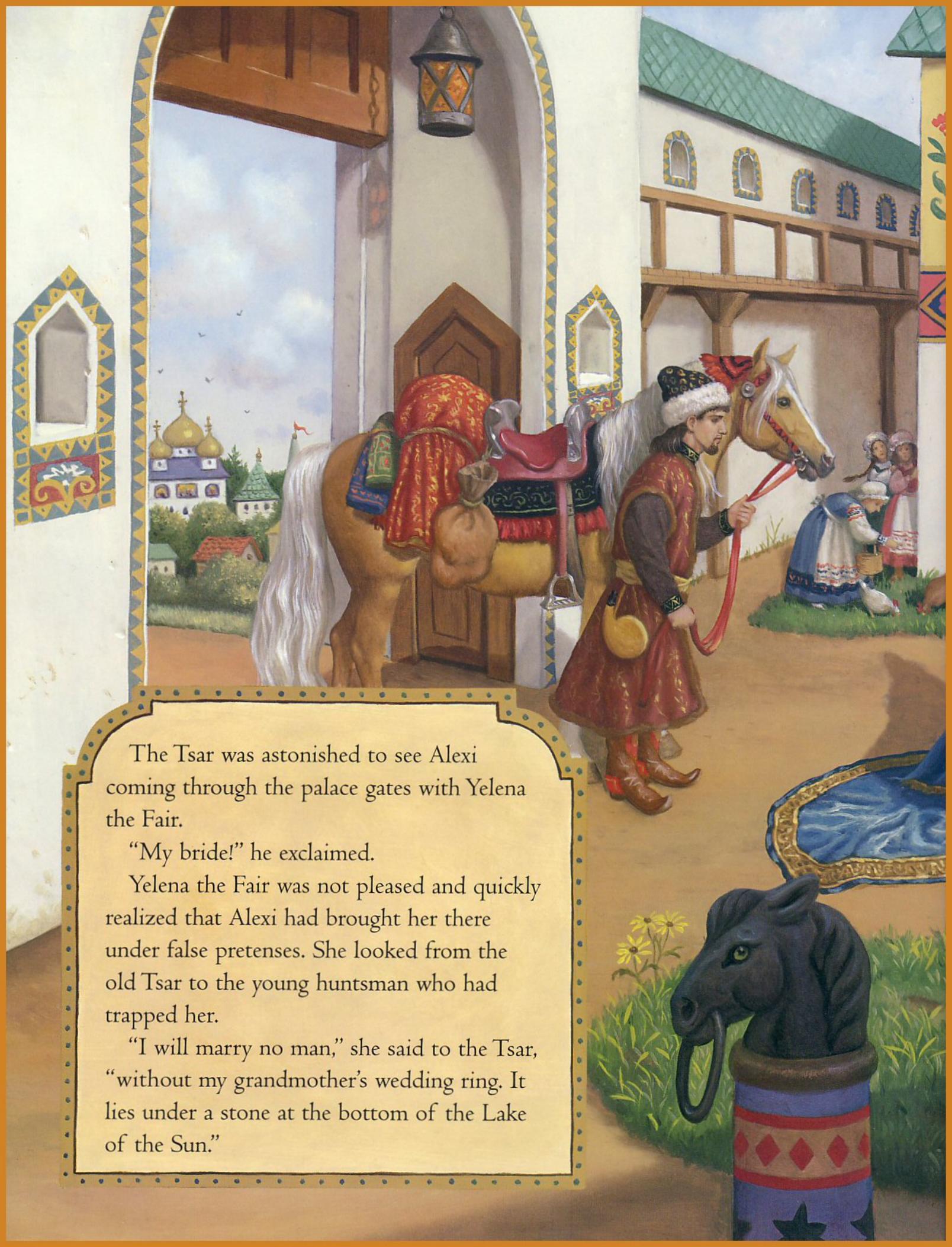


Alexi set up the tent and arranged rugs and cushions inside along with the fancy foods he had brought. Then he sat inside and waited for Yelena the Fair. Before long the boat sailed closer and closer to the shore until finally she lowered sail and landed upon the beach. Stepping out lightly, the maiden approached the regal-looking tent and saw the feast that Alexi had laid out.

Yelena and Alexi had a merry time, eating and talking of many things.

"My master the Tsar is rich and powerful, and famous, too," Alexi boasted. "And he has in his possession the legendary Firebird. Perhaps you would accept the Tsar's invitation to be an honored guest at his palace."

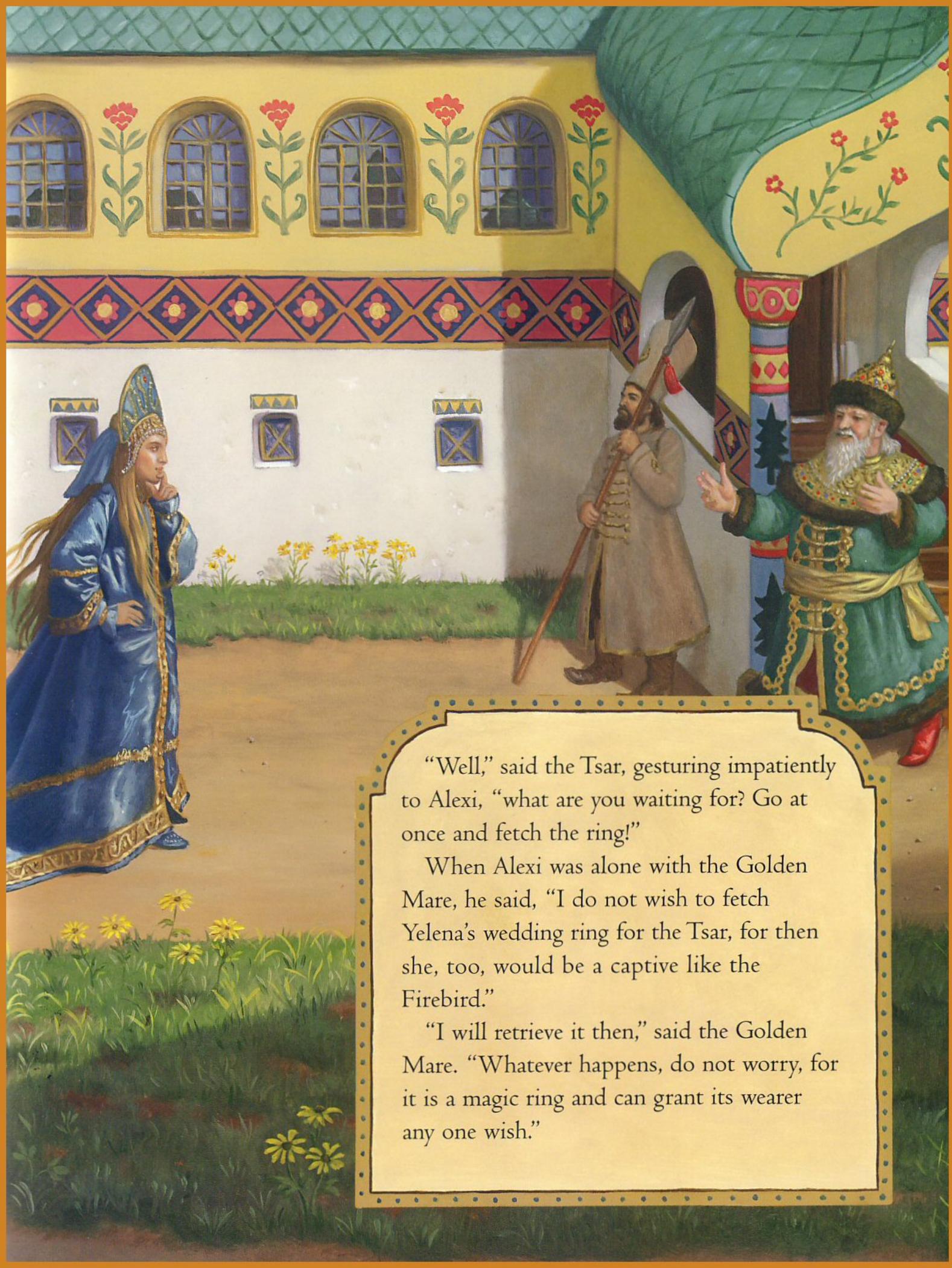
Yelena the Fair was so impressed by Alexi's persuasive words and gracious manner that she agreed to accompany him. When Alexi lifted the beautiful young maiden upon the Golden Mare's back, he felt a pang of guilt for not mentioning the old Tsar's true intentions to make her his wife.



The Tsar was astonished to see Alexi coming through the palace gates with Yelena the Fair.

"My bride!" he exclaimed. Yelena the Fair was not pleased and quickly realized that Alexi had brought her there under false pretenses. She looked from the old Tsar to the young huntsman who had trapped her.

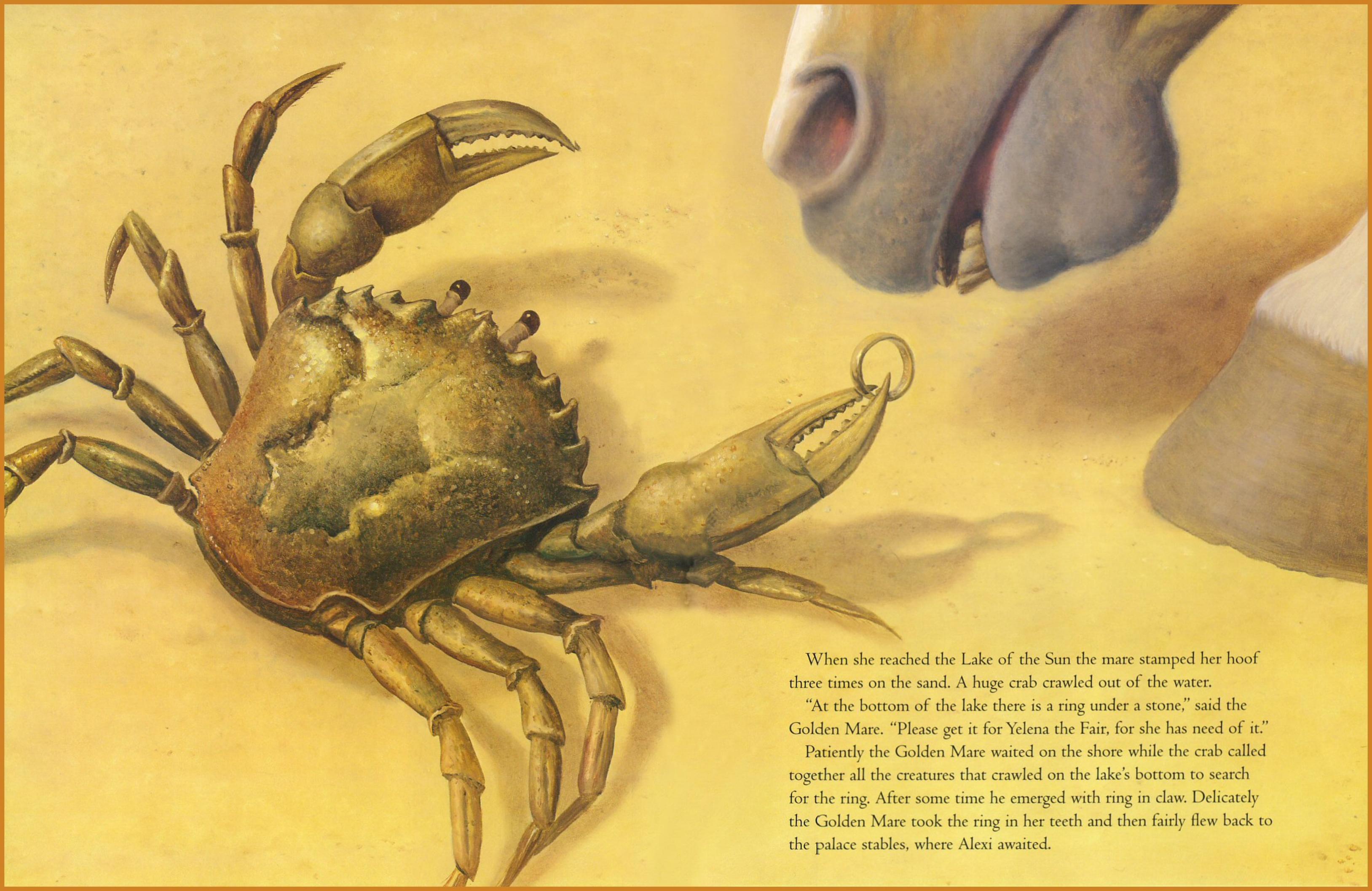
"I will marry no man," she said to the Tsar, "without my grandmother's wedding ring. It lies under a stone at the bottom of the Lake of the Sun."



"Well," said the Tsar, gesturing impatiently to Alexi, "what are you waiting for? Go at once and fetch the ring!"

When Alexi was alone with the Golden Mare, he said, "I do not wish to fetch Yelena's wedding ring for the Tsar, for then she, too, would be a captive like the Firebird."

"I will retrieve it then," said the Golden Mare. "Whatever happens, do not worry, for it is a magic ring and can grant its wearer any one wish."



When she reached the Lake of the Sun the mare stamped her hoof three times on the sand. A huge crab crawled out of the water.

"At the bottom of the lake there is a ring under a stone," said the Golden Mare. "Please get it for Yelena the Fair, for she has need of it."

Patiently the Golden Mare waited on the shore while the crab called together all the creatures that crawled on the lake's bottom to search for the ring. After some time he emerged with ring in claw. Delicately the Golden Mare took the ring in her teeth and then fairly flew back to the palace stables, where Alexi awaited.





Alexi presented the ring to the Tsar, who gave it at once to Yelena the Fair.

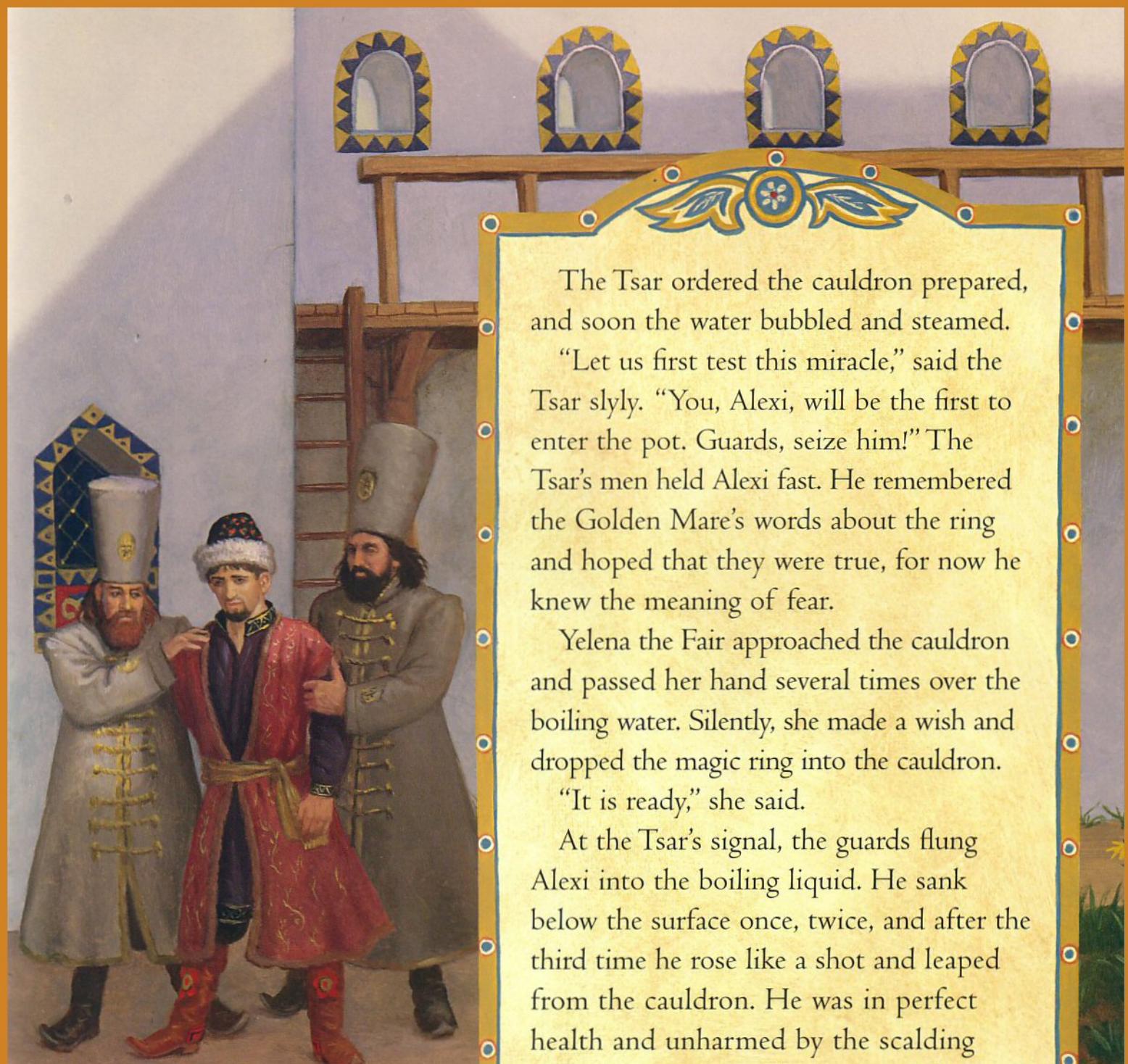
"You have your ring," he said. "Now let the wedding bells be rung! Let the feast be prepared!"

"Wait," said the shrewd maiden, who saw the remorse in Alexi's eyes. "I cannot marry a man as old as you, for you are surely four times my age."

"But what can I do about that?" asked the Tsar.

"Indeed, you can do something...with my help," said Yelena. "Prepare a cauldron of boiling water, and with my magical power I will turn it into the Water of Youth. If you bathe in it you will become young again."





The Tsar ordered the cauldron prepared, and soon the water bubbled and steamed.

"Let us first test this miracle," said the Tsar slyly. "You, Alexi, will be the first to enter the pot. Guards, seize him!" The Tsar's men held Alexi fast. He remembered the Golden Mare's words about the ring and hoped that they were true, for now he knew the meaning of fear.

Yelena the Fair approached the cauldron and passed her hand several times over the boiling water. Silently, she made a wish and dropped the magic ring into the cauldron.

"It is ready," she said.

At the Tsar's signal, the guards flung Alexi into the boiling liquid. He sank below the surface once, twice, and after the third time he rose like a shot and leaped from the cauldron. He was in perfect health and unharmed by the scalding water. No one but Yelena noticed the golden ring on his little finger.

Hoping to be as young and as strong as his huntsman, the Tsar jumped into the cauldron. At the same instant, Alexi made a wish on the magic ring, for he did not desire the Tsar's death.



To everyone's surprise, Alexi reached into the cauldron and lifted out a little baby, smiling and unharmed. The Tsar was indeed young again!

Since the Tsar was now too young to rule, the people made Alexi the Tsar in his place. And Yelena the Fair consented to become his bride. So she did marry the Tsar after all. And as for the baby Tsar, he was given a new name and raised as their own child.

As his first official act as Tsar, Alexi ordered the release of the Firebird, for such a bird did not belong in a cage. In a joyful blaze of light it flew to its home in the eastern sky. The Golden Mare ran free once more, but she continued to advise Alexi until the end of his days.





