“So the legend is true!” declared the king. “Whoever brings me the firebird will inherit half my kingdom.”

Right away, Prince Dimitri set out the find the firebird. He rode on and on until he came to a crossroads at the edge of the kingdom. There he saw a huge rock on which was carved a warning:

Take the middle road and you will suffer hunger and cold.

Take the right road and you will live, though your horse will die.

Take the left road and you will die, though your horse will live.

“They all sound too dangerous,” said Prince Dimitri, used to the sheltered life of a prince, and he galloped back to the palace.

The next day, Prince Vasili set out to catch the firebird. Not having any of his advisors to do his thinking for him, he was also scared by the warnings on the boulder and returned home to his father.

Then Prince Ivan said to the king, “Papa, may I go in search of the firebird too?”

“Why should you succeed where your older brothers have failed?” said King Vaslav. “Do not bother me, Ivan.”

But Ivan saddled an old horse and rode out into the night. At the edge of the kingdom, he came to the boulder and read the warning.