In the age of magic, a young woman lived in a remote village in Ngari Prefecture of Tibet. Her poor village was in the shadows of Mount Kailas. Although she lived far from the king's fort, she was famous throughout Tibet. She possessed the skin of a magical bird. When she wore the skin, she became a heavenly bird that could fight evil spirits. She was known as Puchawa Selzong, or, the girl who wore the skin of a bird.

The king who ruled over Puchawa Selzong’s village was fond of holding horse races. Every year, he invited brave men and powerful kings from as far away as Samarkand and Bhutan to race against his horses. Spies from empires in Afghanistan and India also attended to see who raised the best warhorses.

In those days, rival kings and merchants sought the help of witches and evil spirits to harm their enemies. To protect the festivals and the races, the king sent a messenger to Puchawa Selzong.

‘The king wants you at his fort,’ the messenger said. After consulting with the village elders, Puchawa Selzong agreed to travel to the king’s fort. She put on the shimmering skin of the heavenly bird. Her feet grew talons, her neck became slender and sleek, and her arms changed into broad wings. With a mighty leap and flapping of her wings she
reached the sky and blocked out the sun. She reached the
ing’s fort four days before the messenger returned.

‘You can fight witches and demons, so you will
watch over the races and keep away evil forces,’ the king
commanded. Puchawa Selzong bowed obediently.

On the day of the race, a hundred kings and thousands of
soldiers gathered with villagers, monks and children to watch
the races. Bets were made and liquor was drunk. At such
times, when greed, anger and cunning thoughts multiply in a
crowd of men and women, evil creeps out from every corner
and enters the hearts of men and women. When evil triumphs,
friends fight, brothers steal from brothers, children disobey
their mothers, and lovers think of betraying each other.

But the king had asked Puchawa Selzong to watch
over the crowds. When evil spirits tried to enter, Puchawa
Selzong saw them from her place on top of the roof of the
king’s fort. She would quickly don the magical bird-skin and
swoop down from the sky. She would pick up an evil spirit
and fly so high that the brightness of the sun would chase it
away. Or, she would tear it apart with her talons. The kings,
soldiers, men and women in the audience would cheer for
Puchawa Selzong.

The king’s races became very successful because of
Puchawa Selzong’s presence. Year after year, the king’s
treasury grew richer and richer, until his fort bulged outward
at the walls from the weight of the precious stones, gold and
ivory in his stores. But a new worry ate away at the king’s
heart: Puchawa Selzong was more famous now than the king
or his races. Emperors and brave men traveled across frozen
grasslands and cold deserts to catch a glimpse of the quiet
maiden who wore the bird-skin to battle demons. Amazed
young children in the farthest corners of the earth heard
stories about the beautiful Puchawa Selzong.
As the king dozed off after a large meal a few days before the annual race, a witch appeared to him in his dreams. ‘What do you want?’ the king asked her.

‘I want the same thing that you want,’ the witch said. ‘Help me destroy the arrogant Puchawa Selzong, and I promise to protect your races from other witches and evil spirits.’

When the king awoke, he found a flint-stone and steel in his left fist. He understood that the witch had really visited him.

On the day of the race, Puchawa Selzong climbed to the roof of the king’s fort and reached into her bag for the bird-skin. But she found only ashes in the bag. Someone had burned her bird-skin and, with it, taken away her magic. She looked around puzzled and afraid until she saw the king smile.

From the shadows under the feet of the crowd a foul murmur rose as a sound and solidified midair as the outlines of an ugly witch. A strong, rotten smell filled the air. Puchawa Selzong tried to escape into the fort, but the witch plucked her off the roof of the fort, tore out her beating heart, and cast her down to the ground.

‘I will not let you die yet, Puchawa Selzong!’ the witch cackled as she flew round and round above the terrified crowd. ‘For three years you have hunted my people. I will eat your heart on the third year. But, until then, you will suffer in unimaginable pain,’ the witch said before flying away.

When the sun set and everybody went away to feast with their friends, Puchawa Selzong cried in pain and asked the gods for help. A young archer who had watched her fight evil year after year couldn’t ignore her cries of pain and helplessness.

‘Princess of the skies,’ he knelt before Puchawa Selzong with respect. ‘Please tell me how I can take your pain away!’

‘The witch has my heart, yet she won’t let me die. The king burned my bird-skin, and with it my magic. Unless my heart is returned from the witch, I will die.’ She brought the
young archer’s ear close to her mouth and told him the secret about where the witch’s heart was hidden.

The young archer memorized the year, month, day and hour that the witch had taken Puchawa Selzong’s heart and ran towards the towering mountain to the south of Kang Rinpoche. He walked for a week, climbing walls of ice and wading through frozen lakes. At night, snow leopards sniffed his face to see if they could eat him. But the brave archer’s heartbeat was strong with purpose, and that scared away all misfortune.

A week later, in an opening in a pine forest, the archer saw a tent of yak wool. He remembered the smell from the day of the race and realized that he was before the witch’s tent.

‘Mother!’ the archer shouted from where he stood. ‘Mother! I am your son! I have returned home!’

A woman came out from the tent. She looked puzzled for a minute. It seemed she couldn’t remember if she had a son or not.

‘I have never given birth!’ she said suddenly, taking a long stride towards the archer.

‘Mother!’ the archer repeated, ‘I am your son!’

The witch hovered an inch away from his face and looked into his eyes. She couldn’t remember if she had always been an evil spirit that killed and drank blood, or if she had once been a mother.

‘If you are my son, come and drink my milk until your heart and lungs burst in your chest!’ she challenged.

‘Yes, mother!’ the archer said. He took the witch’s bared breast and closed his eyes like a baby with its mother. The witch first thought of how much fun she would have skewering the archer’s heart and roasting it over a low fire, rubbing rock-salt on the cooked flesh, and eating it in the evening, picking meat from her teeth as she watched the sun set over the mountains.
When the archer kept suckling like a satisfied child first for an entire day, then for a whole week, then for a month and a year, the witch’s eyes became wet with tears and she became convinced that she was indeed the archer’s mother, and the archer indeed her son.

The archer collected firewood and fetched water for the witch, and the witch cooked for her son and fed him lovingly. When he went out to hunt, the witch watched over him, making sure that no harm came to him. He carried his bow and arrows everywhere, and the witch helped him keep his arrows sharp and straight. They sat together in their tent through the long winters, and when the first butterflies appeared in the spring, they sat out in the sun and chatted. The happiness of motherhood and human company made the witch bearable to look at. The second and third winters passed, and the third spring approached. ‘The king will hold his race in two days,’ the archer told himself.

He searched the forest around the witch’s tent and found a pouch made of sheep-stomach hanging from a high branch on a pine tree. It was beating from within. He remembered what Puchawa Selzong had told him: the bag had the witch’s heart!

The archer pretend to sleep soundly that night, but his mind was in turmoil.

‘Wake up, son!’ the witch said the next morning. She gave him a bucket. ‘Fetch some clean water,’ she said. ‘I will clean this before cooking it!’ In a pretty ceramic bowl a heart was beating steadily. The archer knew from the soft light around the heart that it belonged to Puchawa Selzong.

‘Yes, mother!’ the archer said obediently, took the bucket and ran towards the spring. The pine tree with the sheep-stomach bag was between the tent and the spring. Without breaking his stride, the archer shot an arrow through
the beating heart inside the sheep-stomach bag. He turned right around, shot two more arrows into the heart, and raced towards the tent.

In the middle of the tent, with a sharp knife, the witch was crawling towards Puchawa Selzong’s heart. She twisted with pain to turn to look at him with hatred.

‘You are not my son!’ she growled. The knife in her hand shook. The archer quickly pulled Puchawa Selzong’s heart away from her reach. The witch’s teeth fell from her mouth; her hair fell on the ground where she crawled. Her skin wrinkled and her breasts ran dry of milk.

‘And you are no mother of mine!’ the archer said quietly. Just before noon, the witch’s heart bled dry in the sheep-stomach bag and stopped beating. The witch died with a horrifying grunt as the breath of life escaped. The archer grabbed Puchawa Selzong’s heart and raced away from the mountains towards Ngari.

Far away, in the king’s court, the cries of pain that had been ringing out for the past three years suddenly stopped. With the witch’s death, Puchawa Selzong’s pain had ended, and her magic had been restored. She appeared before the king, who was entertaining his guests. The king trembled when he saw the fierce look on Puchawa Selzong’s face. The beautiful maiden once again reached into her bag, and there, instead of ashes, was her shimmering, magical bird-skin.

After tearing the ungrateful king into little pieces, and after ripping out the roofs of the king’s treasury and scattering his wealth all over Tibet, the magical bird that was Puchawa Selzong raced away towards the mountains. She knew that a young archer was hurrying towards her, carrying her heart.