

The Frog Prince

by juniperus

The life and times of a girl and her frog—a fairy tale, re-imagined.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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nce upon a time, a time and a place where lived those who believed wishes could come true and magic was real, a frowning maiden stood atop a castle tower.

There was a very dangerous riddle afoot in the castle. And only this maiden could find the answer...only *she* could save them all from a terrible fate.

Her brow did not furrow because she was not used to everyone relying so heavily upon her...because she surely was. And it wasn't as if she hadn't become accustomed to being thought the *only* one that could find solutions to the most difficult problems...she wasn't called 'the cleverest witch of her age' for nothing.

No, what caused the ever-deepening frown upon the maiden's face was something she *wasn't* used to: she didn't have the answer. She couldn't find the answer. She had leafed through every book in the castle library...twice...and she was no closer to finding the answer than she had been two weeks ago.

Over a fortnight ago a previously unheard of and frightening plague had struck the castle's inhabitants. Well, it had struck the castle's *male* inhabitants.

Children...including those who had long since stopped being children...and adults sat at tables in the Great Hall of the castle, their evening meal barely begun. Suddenly the air was filled with wing'd couriers carrying small, brightly wrapped boxes in their talons. The sound of flapping wings as the owls swooped, dropped their cargo, and quickly ascended was nearly as deafening as the whoops of excitement when the students discovered the boxes to be full of fancy chocolates. They all partook, none questioning the source of the sweet gifts. The time for vigilance had passed, so they thought.

Before dessert had been consumed, the boys clutched their stomachs, moaning in agony.

Before midnight the first symptoms of the malady manifested a croak to the voice and looking green in more than a figurative sense.

Before dawn webbing stretched between fingers and toes, and eyes had begun to protrude alarmingly.

By the end of the third day, the remaining teachers and girls were forced to fashion cages for the hundreds of frogs hopping around the castle infirmary.

Thus began the search for a cure. No book in the castle's extensive library even hinted at an answer; no one could recall ever seeing...ever hearing of...such a calamity.

And so it was that the maiden, exhausted and heartsore, descended from her tower and sought to clear her head by seeking the comforting embrace of the distant forest.

"Blistering, bugging *hell!*" the school's Potions apprentice spat as she stomped out of the castle. "Where is Professor Snape? *He* would have solved the problem by now!" While pointing out my every mistake during each step of the process she mused, feeling curiously sad at that thought.

Unfortunately the renowned Potions master had been missing for four weeks now, since two weeks before the chocolate arrived. She had been concerned for his safety, as there were still evil wizards skulking about who were surely unhappy with his role in the defeat of their master. (If there were other reasons for her concern besides, she was careful not to investigate them *too* closely.) But when the malady struck the boys of the castle, she was forced to shift her attention to clues of a different sort.

Not only rested the fate of the boys in her capable...but still not-fully-trained...hands but also the reputation (hardly spit-shined, as it was) of the professor, whose absence was thought...by some...to point to his guilty hand in the matter. She had been disgusted by that accusation, but her protestations had fallen on deaf (not to mention stubborn and bigoted, if she could be so bold) ears.

She crossed the green and was nearly to the forest's boundary when she noticed a student...not much younger, but (like the rest of her former classmates) unable to pass exams without returning for an extra-year...approaching her with a look of fury on her face, hands balled into fists at her side.

"Pansy!" Hermione said, forcing a smile. "How are..."

"How *am* I? I was...am...*was* to be happily married and the envy of every eligible witch in Britain in three months! Now that's all ruined!" Pansy wailed, interrupting her greeting. "My betrothed is a *reptile*!"

"Amphibian," Hermione automatically corrected, then winced as Pansy's glare fell upon her. "Er, frogs are amphibians." She trailed off, then took a deep breath before primly replying, "I've been reading and trying to find a cure! We don't even know who did this, or what it is, and..."

"What good *are* you, then?" Pansy raged. "You prance around the castle...teacher's pet and Gryffindor princess...and look down on anyone you consider beneath you, but when it's time to solve a problem that only *the cleverest witch of her age* could solve, you give nothing but excuses!"

Hermione stared, struck dumb, as Pansy continued to vent her considerable ire at high volume. Her formerly-inexhaustible supply of serviceable retorts had been running low since the end of the war, and in the face of this new attack, it seemed she had nothing left to say. The time for casual repartee had long since passed.

"Just because none of them wants someone as plain and boring as *you* are doesn't mean you can just let them all...and the rest of us...suffer!" Pansy finished shrilly before she stomped off in the direction of the castle.

"What good, indeed?" Hermione sighed before breaching the edge of the forest and heading into the bough-shaded gloom.

here was, deep in the forest, a small pond around which lay several felled trees. This was the place Hermione had been retreating to for many months, to escape from the clamor of the students in the castle, from the ridiculous antics of her friends...for, although near her age, they still behaved every bit like *boys*...and from the frustration of being lonely in the midst of such a large number of people. So that was where she was headed once more, to be alone with her thoughts, and her worries, and the weight of her responsibilities.

She sighed in relief as she took in the peacefulness of the copse and began to sit down in her favorite spot.

"I know what you seek," said an odd-sounding voice.

Wand in hand, she whirled, trying to suppress her panic. She heard a splash nearby. "Where are you? Who are you? Show yourself!"

"I am right here, princess," replied the voice.

"Where? And why do you call me princess?" she asked as she continued to look around her for the source of the voice.

"Is that not what the other chit called you?"

"Er... yes, I suppose she did. But that's not quite... I mean, Hermione is my na..*eeurgh!*" She jumped back, startled, when a large, green frog with black spots and black eyes landed in front of her.

"You're a... a *frog!*"

"Obviously," he croaked.

"You can *talk?*" Hermione's voice rose in pitch and volume.

"Obviously," he replied, rolling his eyes. "Now may we get back to the subject? I know what you seek."

"What?! How? *Ostendo sum vestri!*" she demanded, in a near-shriek, as she pointed her wand at the frog.

The frog hopped forward to sit directly in front of her, looking both decidedly bored and undeniably... froggish.

"Well, you aren't an Animagus," she said, scrutinizing him. "So how is it you think you know what it is I seek?"

"The one with a nose like a squashed Brussels sprout, who called you princess, has been wailing about it all morning," he commented nonchalantly before his tongue darted out to capture a passing fly.

Hermione shuddered in disgust.

The frog blinked slowly and hopped forward once more, one hop for every step she took in retreat. Once she backed herself into a tree, he stopped and smirked. "I know that you seek a cure to the malady that has befallen your boyfolk, and I know how to find it. The question is, how badly do you want to save them?"

"H-how *badly* do I w-want..?" she stuttered.

"...to save them, that is what I said," he replied, visibly amused at her discomfort. "If I help you with your task, I expect to be rewarded ~~h~~*handsomely*."

"You mean to say that you expect some sort of *payment* when there are lives at stake?" Hermione went from perplexed at the idea of a mere frog...no, *atalking* frog...having the answer to a terrible dilemma when *she herself* could not find it, to being suspicious and affronted at his cheek.

"*Quid pro qua*, my dear," the frog replied with a smirk.

"Absolutely *not!* You're probably at the bottom of it! How dare you, you... vile, disgusting..." she sputtered.

"You should not act so high and mighty with me, princess. I am a Prince and will be accorded all due respect," he interrupted with a glare.

"You," she snorted, "expect me to believe that you are, in fact, *aprince?*" She doubled over as exhaustion-fueled laughter overtook her. "Oh, this is rich!"

"That is what I am called; take it as you will," he replied as he squared his froggy shoulders and adopted a haughty expression that didn't look quite right on someone

green, spotted, and decidedly moist.

She huffed. "Well, then you must think me a fool!"

"The fact that I find you infinitely foolish, *fair maiden*, has little to do with what I am called," he croaked.

She brought her hands into tight fists and glared as she stomped her foot, but the act lost a certain amount of drama when...instead of a resounding thump...her foot made a pathetic *squish* as it hit the marshy ground around the pond.

The frog's eyes bulged, as if he were attempting to raise his nonexistent eyebrows. From his froggy chest erupted a series of croaks that sounded suspiciously like laughter before he slipped back under the water.

The maiden... no, Hermione...no, the *princess*...stalked off in a snit.

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The next day she stubbornly refused to go to her thinking place and encounter that obnoxiously imperious amphibian. Instead she crawled around in the long-ignored upper stacks of the library...areas that hadn't been accessed in well over a century, judging from the depth of the dust...until well past the dinner hour. Rooting around in the library...alone, as usual...was normally one of her favorite activities, but at the moment it lost a certain charm as the urgency of her quest for knowledge increased in direct proportion to the amount of help she was *not* receiving from those older and, supposedly, wiser than she.

Early-on in her search, she had spotted a very strange and very small book, one that she nearly discarded upon reading the spine *Most Rare and Potente Potions as Found in Popular Folklore: A Catalogue, by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm*. She snorted. *The Brothers Grimm? Fairytales are silly stuff and nonsense*, she thought, *designed to strike fear into children and the uneducated*. There was, however, an appendix in the back that listed potions by transformative effects, so she tucked it in her pocket and kept looking.

Growing up in the Muggle world, she was certainly *aware* of the stories compiled by the Brothers Grimm and H.C. Andersen, but her parents...being made of upright, responsible, and practical stuff...populated the bookshelves in their home with encyclopedias, atlases of the world, and sober works of history. Not to mention, after her experience the previous year with the bard Beedle's tales, she was hardly in the mood to further increase her personal folklore collection. Nor did she still believe in happy endings (if she ever had).

But however difficult it would be for her to believe, and harder for her to admit, it was the key to *everything*.

After not one ancient and weighty tome in the musty (cough!), dusty (a-choo!) stacks had displayed one whit of usefulness, she carefully made her way down three perilously placed ladders. She sighed in frustration, then went back to her chambers to retire and to wash a century of dust from her...once brown, now grayish...curls, the small book in her pocket forgotten.

Later, when she sat before the fire carefully combing out the wet tangles of her hair, she thought again of her missing mentor. Grudging mentor. *Very* grudging mentor, who only had taken her on as an apprentice because she had turned eighteen within weeks after the beginning of term, because her NEWT scores were near-perfect (despite spending her seventh year hunting Horcruxes with her two best friends), and last but not least, because the Headmistress had required that as a term of re-employment after the former Headmaster, spy and hero, had been discovered...after antivenin and blood replenishing potion left him scarcely able to Apparate to a pre-prepared safe house...ailing and weak, but very much *alive*.

Hermione had endeavored to impress him in ways that...despite her best efforts...had never succeeded before. And apparently wouldn't succeed this time, either. She kept her mouth shut, she treated him with respect (not that she had ever not), she performed every task asked of her and never complained once (well, not once again after the punishment for rolling her eyes, week two), and hoped she might eventually be seen as the adult she was (despite the company she kept). But all to no avail. For *months* did she try her best to be what she *thought* he would want in an apprentice.

That is, if he *wanted* an apprentice. Which he certainly *did not*. And he most definitely *did not* want an apprentice he spent the first month alternately accusing of spying for the Headmistress and making him her new "crusade" (since she had, full of embarrassment, admitted that house-elf culture was simply beyond her comprehension). While she understood...and secretly shared...his mistrust of the motives of the Headmistress, she was terribly insulted by the very *idea* that she could consider him a *mere pet project*.

There was nothing *mere* about the man, and she felt fairly certain that any project having to do with him would amount to a full-time job (or two).

Eventually, after he'd berated her for wishing him a happy St. Valentine's Day, she'd given up trying to impress him. She had given up trying to get to know him and to earn his trust. She had given up doing more than what he told her, when he told her, and reading her way through the Potions texts remaining in the Restricted Section that she hadn't had time to get to before.

Which was how it had come about that...despite the fact he seemed to be forever shadowing her...she hadn't known that he'd slipped out of the castle, as April waned, to pick up an order at the apothecary. An order he never arrived to collect. An order she might have offered to get for him, herself, since she had been already on an errand for the Headmistress. But she had stopped being inquisitive: she had stopped trying to be nice. And, now, she had effectively stopped being an apprentice, since she no longer had a Potions master to apprentice under.

A Potions master who would already have solved the dilemma she found herself unable to unravel.

Her sleep that night was fitful, her strange dreams filled with sounds of croaking and fleeting glimpses of a man in black.

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In the morning, unwilling to face the still-human inhabitants of the castle without an antidote *yet again*, she let herself out the great doors not long after sunrise and wandered the grounds aimlessly before finding herself on a familiar path in the forest. She spied a log at the edge of the clearing and took a seat.

She barely flinched as she heard a familiar *splash* followed by a soggy *plop*.

"And have you considered my offer, princess? Have you considered what you might give me in exchange for my aid?"

She looked down from where she perched and then inspected her hands. "No. I can do this."

"Really? And what, pray tell, have you discovered? What secret lurks inside that bushy head of yours?"

She glared at him and stubbornly lifted her chin before tucking it to her chest and muttering, "Nothing."

"What was that?" He hopped closer.

"Nothing!" she cried. "Not yet, anyway."

"You *do* realize that once one full moon cycle has passed they can no longer be freed by a mere potion, don't you?" he asked with a smirk.

"Yes," she sighed, "I gathered that from the reading I've done."

"You're running out of time," he pointed out, helpfully.

She frowned, setting her jaw. "I bloody well know what day it is!"

"Temper, temper," he drawled.

She stared at him and quickly changed the ever-so uncomfortable subject. "So *prince*, if you aren't an Animagus, *what are* you?" She paused, then squinted. "And how do you know so much about this curse and how much time I have left before a full moon cycle has passed?"

It was the frog's turn to inspect his webbed feet and look decidedly disinterested in continuing the current line of discussion. "I, er, could hear the commotion on the grounds after the boys began to transform the girls had been shoed outside, and they were as loud as a hysterical gaggle of geese. That was a fortnight ago, was it not?"

"And?"

He huffed. "And, what?"

"And you know I have only one moon cycle to free them, *how?*" she wheedled.

"How do you *think*, idiot girl!" he sneered, insomuch as a froggy face can manage the expression.

"Oh, right," she muttered. "Sorry. Er, who..?"

He frowned and offered her as much of a shrug as his froggy shoulders could manage. "I don't know." He hopped closer. "So tell me, princess, why is it that you are working on this conundrum *alone*? You seem hardly qualified to..."

She leapt up in a fury. "I am the Potions apprentice! I certainly *am* qualified!"

Qualified, perhaps, she thought, bitterly, *but clearly unsuccessful*.

"Then," he slyly inquired, "where is your esteemed master? Too busy being an ugly, miserable git to..."

"He is not!" Hermione interrupted loudly, then cleared her throat. "Well, he *can* be a git...not that I don't blame him, at least some of the time...and certainly seems somewhat close to miserable when he's around *me*, but..." She swallowed and began to pace the clearing.

"Hmmm?" the frog encouraged, clearly curious.

Her brow furrowed as she paced, thinking of the way the professor had used to watch her. For weeks she had moved nervously around the lab, certain he would erupt in admonitions and insults at any moment, like he had when she was a student. When no eruptions had occurred she'd lain awake nights wondering... even *hoping*, before chastising herself for being an over-imaginative fool. She'd considered her folly well and truly confirmed by the one-sided row on St. Valentine's Day.

She sighed sadly, then remembered where she was and primly sat down.

"He's also not *ugly*, not that it's any of your concern. He may be a bit prickly, sometimes even a mite unpleasant, I'll grant, but he's bloody *brilliant*. And," she hurried on to what she hoped wasn't a complete untruth, "unfortunately he is out of the castle working on something, er, *important*." Hermione shot the frog the same look she used to give her friends when they spoke disrespectfully of the professor.

As if this foul-tempered amphibian was in a place to point fingers...er, webbed finger pads...*at anyone* for occasionally displaying a less than cheerful disposition. Well, more than occasionally. Often. Most of the time. She shook her head before glaring at him. That was hardly the point.

As Hermione opened her mouth to launch into a monologue fueled by the sort of righteous indignation only a Gryffindor could produce, the canny frog saw his opening.

"What is that in your pocket?" he asked, gesturing at a book-shaped lump in her dress.

"Oh that. I thought it might be helpful, but all it has is useless children's stories," she replied, pulling the book out.

He gasped. "The Grimm text! Do you not know what you have in your *hand*, you silly chit? Have you even *looked* at it?" His next hop landed him squarely in her lap, and he alternately peered at the book and her look of utter befuddlement.

"What does it say about frogs in the appendix?" he demanded.

She shook her head. "Well, it discusses frogs and wells a bit, but doesn't really give specifics. Oh, and it makes mention of a long lost spell called *sum rana, fuit mas* and goes on and on about someone's wicked stepmother and her golden cauldron, but that sort of thing is just nonsense," she concluded.

"Is it?" the frog asked.

"Nonsense? Of *course*! Not every stepmother is wicked, nor is every wicked person a stepmother!" she exclaimed. "And I have never seen a golden cauldron! How impractical! What would be the point of a cauldron that could misshape so easily? Do you *know* how soft gold is?"

"No, no, *no!*" he snapped. "Pay attention to the *details*! Think! What does the spell *mean*?"

She frowned at him for so rudely interrupting her before reciting, primly, "Latin. *Rana*, noun, meaning frog. *Sum* is the present indicative singular of... oh. Oh!" Her eyes widened as the import of the translation hit her. "Is this it? This is it, isn't it?"

"Correct," he replied.

"But if the boys are under this spell, it's not lost, is it?" she mused.

"That would seem to be the case," he responded drolly.

She squealed and ran back to the castle without waiting to see if he had anything else to say.

He stared after her, then sighed before slipping back into the pond.

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"Have you come to waste my time yet again, princess?" the frog asked as she made her way through the trees, five days later.

"No. I... I have found nothing on the spell in the library, and time is running out. I have considered your offer, and... I need your help," she stated quietly.

"What was that?" he asked, holding his webbed forefoot to his nonexistent ear.

She closed her eyes against the heat of her humiliation creeping up her face and said firmly, "I cannot find the answer on my own. I need help. I need *your* help."

"What is to be my reward, then?" he asked, his black eyes glittering.

She stared at him, wide-eyed, as his long tongue slipped out to lick a path across his mouth and between his round eyes before speaking. "You have been interested in this book, you c-could have it, or perhaps another from the library?" she offered. As she noticed his not-eyebrows creeping heavenward, she quickly continued, "I could bring you a warm, woolen cloak to protect you..."

"Your books and fine clothes are of no use to me," answered the frog. "In case you haven't noticed, I am *á*rog." He smirked.

Hermione despaired and began wringing her hands in agitation. "What, then?" she whispered with trepidation.

"A kiss?" he asked as he attempted to look innocent and failed miserably.

"A bit cliché, isn't it?" She rolled her eyes.

"I thought you knew naught of fairytales, oh wise one," he quipped.

"I don't," she replied quickly, hoping that her feigned breeziness would not seem as forced as it felt. "But my cousins are very fond of American animated cinema...it's amazing, the number of magical maladies that are cured with a *single kiss!*" She laughed at the very thought, before pausing as a shadow crossed her features. "I hardly think a kiss from me will move mountains."

"Unpracticed, are we?" he retorted with a smirk.

"No! Er, well, yes. Not exactly. *I've been busy with more important things!*" She blushed. A few snogs with her redheaded just-a-friend could hardly be described as *practiced*, especially since the years of anticipation were far from eclipsed by the reality, but she was hardly going to share *that* embarrassment with the infuriating creature.

"There are more important things? And to think, I would have pegged you for the type to have your own, doting, male harem," he continued, his smirk growing ever wider. "Isn't that why you are so keen to turn your *dear* friends back to their *handsome* selves?"

She snorted. "Hardly. Boys don't chase after smart girls, and / don't chase after *anyone*," she huffed, raising her chin proudly. "My friends are like brothers, and the rest of the lot are just... boys."

"*Handsome* boys..." the frog insisted.

Hermione snorted again, rather indelicately. And paced. "Not really, not to me. If I can't talk to them, what they look like hardly matters...and if I find someone intelligent and interesting... Why am I telling *you* this?" she exclaimed, shaking her head.

"Oh, surely there is *someone*," he prodded, narrowing his eyes.

"No..." she replied haltingly.

"You were quick to defend your master," he continued, relentlessly. "Perhaps *she*..."

"No!" she shouted and hoped the blush she felt aflame on her cheeks wasn't noticeable. "He, I? No, he could barely stand to be in the same *Potions lab* with me, he'd never..." She abruptly cut herself off...there were many thoughts whirling in her head at that moment, and she'd be damned if she was going to blurt them out to a *frog*.

Or to *anyone*, for that matter.

He looked at her consideringly.

"Well then," the cagey frog continued, "if you won't kiss me, perhaps you'd consider giving me something else, something that doesn't strictly require you to touch my ugly form..."

She narrowed her eyes. "Like *what?*"

"I think that if you would agree to have me for your companion, to let me sit by you at supper, to eat from your plate and drink from your cup, and to sleep in your soft, warm, bed..." As his long tongue darted out to capture an errant dragonfly, the princess shuddered. "If," he croaked, after swallowing the tasty morsel, "saving your friends means that much to you, if you would promise all this, I will help you find your answer."

He puffed his throat, clearly annoyed at the horrified look on her face. "You needn't act so appalled...I didn't even ask to share your pillow."

Her mouth opened and closed, much like a frog herself, as she searched for words that didn't come.

"And the *pièce de résistance*? I know where a golden cauldron can be found. In fact, I will dive below the water and fetch the golden cauldron that I've been living in at the bottom of this very pond. It's a *bargain*," he concluded smugly.

"And you expect me to take a frog at his word?" she asked with a huff.

"Am I to gather, then, that you regularly associate with compulsively lying amphibians?" he asked.

"What? No! That's not what I meant!"

The frog rolled his large, dark, eyes and uttered a half-hearted croak that almost sounded like a sigh. "What *expect*, dear princess, is that you will continue nattering on long past the point at which you began to bore me." And with that he jumped back into the pond.

Her jaw dropped as she stared at the ripples left in his wake.

The pond lay placid before her. Tears pricked her eyes...she had failed. *Again*.

Where was the professor when they needed him... when *she* needed him? In years spent fighting (oft blindly) against terrible and powerful dark wizards, she had never felt this *insufficient*. She had a niggling suspicion that this was a not-unimportant detail, but she was exceedingly uncomfortable with the feeling, nonetheless.

As she moved despondently to return to the castle, she noticed a disturbance under the water at the edge of the pond. Wide-eyed with wonder, she watched the green, dark-spotted form of the frog shoving a round, muddy object up the slope of the shore with his shoulders. With each rotation the water lapped at the object, washing away the mud. By the time he reached solid ground the object was nearly clean. It gleamed in the dappled sunlight.

A cauldron. A *golden* cauldron. She gasped.

The frog leaned on the cauldron and looked up at her. He blinked twice before speaking. "Well, my princess? What is your answer?"

She paused. She thought of the clammy body of the frog on her nice, white linens, and she winced. She thought of him sitting with her at table and of long days of insult-filled companionship, and she grimaced. Then she thought of all of her friends at the castle who, just the night before, she had carefully tucked into cages for their own protection.

"Yes," she said, fighting her ever-increasing trepidation. "I will."

A faint glow shimmered in the air between them. Oh,*no*.

She had never seen a frog smile before, but she swore this one positively*grinned. Wickedly.*

"Well, then, my dear princess...let us begin," he replied before his eyes followed the form of a passing fly and his tongue darted out to capture it. "Do you have something upon which to take notes?"

"Er..." she mumbled, fishing around in her pockets. "Yes, yes, I do!"

"I will recite a list of ingredients for a potion. You will take very exact notes, and you will acquire the ingredients."

"Wait! How is it that you know all of this?" she exclaimed, suspicious. She had no idea how a frog might have sent chocolates, but there was no such thing as coincidence.

He sighed. "Many years ago I researched the potion, searched for its roots... and once I realized what I had found, I developed the antidote and then hid away my notes lest they ever be found by the wrong kind of wizard...or witch. Clearly the seeds of my research fell into skilled enough hands to make sense of them and, it appears, make alterations. If the changes I suspect have been made, then this first stage is hardly the worst of what lies before them."

Her sharp intake of breath echoed in the silent clearing.

"Now, are you prepared to begin and to do what is necessary? This is not an easy potion to brew."

He waited until she nodded once curtly before he began to speak. "Fine. First, you must set out a bucket...one made of wood...to catch rain that falls during the waning moon. It is waning now, and rain is in the air." He looked at her. "You will need one sester. There is a sextarius measure in the castle kitchen, is there not?"

She nodded again and quickly scribbled the measure.

"Good. Second..."

He continued reciting ingredients and their preparation, in great detail, until her hand was cramped and the page was filled with her tiny scrawl. Then he took note of the waning light. "Come back in three days and tell me your progress. 'Til then, my dear princess, I bid you farewell," he croaked, then disappeared beneath the water.

She stared at the place where he had sat, then stood and stretched.*It is getting late, nearly sundown*, she thought before scooping up the cauldron and returning to the castle.

As she walked, she opened and closed her cramped and sore writing hand, lost in thought. Despite the oddness of the situation, she had actually enjoyed her afternoon with the frog and had learned a great deal. He had paused often and allowed her to ask questions, get clarifications, and explain the principles behind the potion in great detail. He lost his ill-temper while he was patiently reciting ingredients and instructions and was nearly pleasant company.

She wondered who he had been and who he had offended so to be dealt such a cruel hand. She wished she could apprentice under someone such as he, rather than her brilliant-but-cold (on his best day) professor. So taken with thoughts of a very different sort of apprenticeship under a very different sort of Potions master, she didn't wonder, as she had each day since his disappearance, what had become of him.

Her dreams, however, still spoke volumes.

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After the requisite three days, she returned to report the successful gathering of the rainwater and most of the other ingredients.

This was followed by a baffling, but not unpleasant, discussion of everything from her academic interests to Muggle literature. She took note of his appreciation for Ovid and Shakespeare and Donne, but disenchantment with Dostoevsky and Pope. She would send for select tomes from her private collection and read to him in the evenings, she decided. She suspected he might like Hugo.

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Another two days passed before she again sat on the felled log at the edge of the clearing. "I have a problem," she admitted, her brows knit in worry.

"Oh?" the frog asked, tilting his head. "And what problem might that be?"

"I have everything on the list," she began.

"Splendid!" he interrupted.

"Everything," she sighed, "except the head of a black-spotted frog. There is only one frog native to Scotland...the common frog...and it's not really spotted... it's usually brown, or black, or red. Most of the boys turned brown."

"That is correct," he replied, looking unconcerned.

She stared at him. "I don't know where to find one! I found a book in the library...it says they live in Asia!"

"That is correct," he agreed.

Her panic rose. "B-but the full moon is tonight! You said this needed to be completed at moonrise! It takes precisely three hours..."

"That, too, is correct," he nodded.

She clutched handfuls of her dress as she fought the urge to scream. Through clenched teeth, she forced out, "I. Have. No*Black-sp...*"

"You can be such a foolish young woman," he interrupted gently, then shook his head. *I*'m a black-spotted frog, as you can clearly see. There is nothing to stop you from beginning the potion in," he looked at the sky, "a little over an hour. I suggest you run back to the castle and gather everything."

Hermione stared at her amphibian helpmeet, aghast. "No! I can't!"

"Why? Do you not want to save your friends?" he asked.

"But!" she gestured at him, "the potion requires a head...*your* head!"

He considered her a moment, then reminded, "You haven't much time. Go." And with that he disappeared into the water.

Hermione took off at a dead run.

○○○○○

She returned out of breath from her labors and her haste. In one hand was the bucket, and in the other the cauldron filled with packets of ingredients, a chopping stone, and... *a silver knife*.

After setting a fire for the cauldron, she measured the sester of rain water gathered during the waning moon. Then she placed her stone upon a fallen log and arranged her packets in an orderly line.

"Is everything in order?" the frog croaked, startling her.

She stared at him, eyes filling with tears.

"None of that," he ordered. "Are you not a well-trained Potions apprentice and an adult? Begin mincing the dried pease-blossoms." When she didn't move and had to suppress a sniff, he snapped: "Now! Before the rainwater begins to boil!"

In this fashion, he sternly directed her every move for nearly three hours.

Until the moon could be seen appearing on the horizon...

Until he supervised one last counter-clockwise stir...

"It is time."

As the moon climbed the height of the castle ramparts, a sobbing maiden held a silver knife in her shaking hands and brought it down with a quiet *crunch*.

The fire was extinguished.

It was done.

In her mad rush to finish the potion and get it back to the castle, she did not notice when the frog's body slipped back into the water. Blinded by tears, she also did not notice that the pond began to glow, faintly, as if lit from within. And even if she had, Hermione Granger had never lowered herself to reading mere Muggle fairytales and would not have given them a moment's credence had she done so.

Instead, she sprinted up the grassy slope that led to the great doors of the castle, let herself in, and hastened up the one-hundred-and-one steps that led her to the room full of cages containing every male in the castle.

When she opened the door, the noise inside was deafening. She quickly grabbed a pipette and...one by one...opened each cage and fed each cold and slimy inhabitant three drops of potion before setting them, one by one, on the floor. By the time she was through, two hours had passed and the floor was entirely covered in frogs.

Hermione looked around in disgust. "Well, nothing for it...they can hardly be expected to return to their normal forms in tiny cages!" She gingerly tiptoed through the hopping, croaking, bulge-eyed mass teeming around her and nudged several former-classmates out of the way with her foot as she slipped, carefully, out the door.

The first to receive the potion would transform in less than an hour, but she found she didn't care to wait and welcome her friends back.

As she looked at the now-empty golden cauldron still in her arms, she found that she no longer cared if the potion worked, she no longer cared that she'd found the answer, and she certainly no longer cared about being called 'the cleverest witch of her age.'

She trod back down the one-hundred-and-one steps, fighting back the tears that threatened to overwhelm her again.

Once she reached the landing, she slumped dejectedly on the bottom stair and stopped fighting. Tears coursed down her cheeks as she pictured the dark eyes and quirky amphibian smirk of her savior and (strangely enough) mentor, the frog. She had made a good and true friend, she realized, and now knew she certainly *would have been* willing to share her plate and cup, and even to let his clammy body rest on her pillow. He had been willing to sacrifice himself for the greater good, and all she had offered him was time wasted by her insufferable stubbornness, churlish arguing, and girlish rejection of his unattractive, froggy form. Too late realized, and now he was gone.

Her frog was gone. Her professor was gone. Her apprenticeship was gone. She seemed quite clearly unable to keep hold of *anything* that mattered. She sobbed harder as her grief grew with each realization.

She thought, then, of what may have become of her friend at the pond and set her jaw. "I can't just leave him there, all alone," she whispered to herself. "I'll bring what's left of him back to the castle and lay him to rest in the garden outside my window. It's the least I can do."

She wiped her hand across her wet face and looked down at her robes...sodden, slimy, and covered in spilt potion. *After* I change out of this mess," she muttered with a sharp nod of her head. So she stood and strode purposefully down the long hallway that led to her rooms.

After Hermione let herself into her room, she carefully set the golden cauldron down next to the door. Frowning, she brought her wrists to her face as she fumbled with the buttons there and bumped ajar the door to her bed chamber with her hip as she twisted and reached for the buttons behind.

"Allow me," a dark and silky voice murmured behind her, even as she felt warm hands rest on her shoulders. She trembled as those hands moved across her shoulders to brush at her neck before dropping to the top button and slowly, deftly, sliding it through the hole.

She whirled around to come face-to-face with the owner of that voice. Before her stood a tall, thin man with long, black hair that framed his long, pale face. She took in his handsome (Slytherin!) green cloak slung over voluminous black robes, and his noble, Roman nose before stopping at his bottomless black eyes that had always drawn her so...

She gasped. "You? He? Professor? *How?*" She felt faint...and not a little nauseous...with sudden comprehension. *I killed you!* she wailed.

"*Severus*...I think events of the past two weeks have taken us past formalities, Hermione." He chuckled and tucked a loose curl behind her ear. "You didn't kill me...you *released* me. Don't you know your fairytales?"

She blinked.

"No?" he asked, mouth quirked as one eyebrow rose in question. He leaned forward to whisper in her ear. "Then you aren't the cleverest witch of your age, my dear. So much useful information hidden in layers of the storyteller's art."

"But, this is no fairytale!"

He shook his head before responding. "Even *you* must realize the most wonderful fairytales grow out of reality. And, silly girl, so can that reality grow from the seed planted in a fairytale." He frowned as she stared at him, clearly perplexed. "It's mid-level magical theory fully supported by Arithmantic equations! Did you, or did you not, receive the school's highest honors in more than a score?"

She flushed with anger, eyes flashing. "I received a *perfect* score on my Arithmancy NEWT! I've read every book on the subject in the library!" She managed (just barely, mind) to stop herself before stomping her foot in righteous indignation.

"*Theoretical Magics: Their History and Constructs*" he drawled, somehow managing to look both smug and bored. "Chapter Nine: 'The Role of Popular Folklore in Theoretical Discourse.'"

Hermione's flush turned to blush as she suddenly discovered something very interesting on the hem of her gown. "Er... I skipped that chapter. I thought it sounded too much like children's stories and guesswork." She raised her chin slightly and looked up at him sheepishly.

He raised one eyebrow and tried to look disapproving as he fought a twitch at the side of his mouth. He compromised by smirking and then gazed at her through his newly human eyes and from his newly human vantage point. As he took her in, the warmth in that gaze turned to smoldering heat, and his eyes traveled slowly over her form.

Leaning forward, he whispered in her ear with a voice of darkest treacle, "I have but one question, my Gryffindor princess. In exchange for my help, you agreed to have me for your companion, to let me eat from your plate and drink from your cup, and you agreed to welcome me into your bed...do you intend to keep your promises?"

"I do," she breathed, then turned her head 'til their lips were... so... very... close.

Dipping his head, he closed the gap, gently caressing her lips with his own before worrying her bottom lip until she gasped. He deepened the kiss, tongue darting to ghost over her parted lips, and she moaned into his mouth as she swooned forward into his arms. His hands came back up to deftly release the remaining buttons before slipping the garment from her shoulders and scooping her up.

"Oh!" she exclaimed as she felt his strong arms lift her, and he strode to the bed.

He laid her gently on the bed and straightened as his hands deftly flew down the fastenings of his own robe. His eyes remained locked with hers as he slowly divested himself of the rest of his clothing, smirking as her breathing grew more ragged with each patch of skin uncovered. Her eyes grew wide as she took in the sight of the last of him before he crawled up the bed and purred in her ear, "Do you welcome me, Hermione?"

"I do." The air surrounding them shimmered in response.

His fingers nimbly unlaced her shift, his mouth trailing kisses after them: down, down, until her shivers were not from the cold air on her heated skin. Before her cries finished echoing off the stone walls, he surged forward, and his mouth met hers as she cried, once more, at the loss of her maidenhood. He held her until she gentled, his rumbled words in her ear and the whisper of his lips on her neck a music that first soothed her, then filled her with the urge to move against him and with him, learning a rhythm long-since ancient and never forgotten.

As the princess and her Prince reached completion together, their shouts of joy were echoed elsewhere in the castle as boys streamed down the staircases, newly transformed and hungry for meals not consisting of insects. They filed into the dining hall and filled the air with celebration and praise for the cleverest witch of her age.

And after, he held her plate and she her goblet as they supped each other's fruit, cheese, and wine *Once*.

As the great clock in the tower struck midnight, and the last of the cursed had retired for the first peaceful night's sleep they'd had...as humans...in three weeks, two of the castle inhabitants were still awake, wrapped tightly in each other's arms. The two...their entwined bodies moving in slow and sinuous tandem...glowed palely in the moonlight. The rustle of sheets, the whisper of skin against skin, and breathy moans led to shuddering gasps and, after, mumbled endearments before slipping into sleep's warm embrace. *Twice*.

And on the morrow, two voices rose with the sun entwined as head and heart, as hopes and hearth. *Thrice*.

Although Hermione did not know her fairytales, this narrator is certain that you, intrepid readers, *do*. Third time lucky...third time's the charm. 'Tis done...she is his, and he hers: they are one. The moral of our story is not merely that promises made must be promises kept...it is that passion, as well as *compassion*, leads to a *truly* happy ending.

For they lived snarkily ever after.