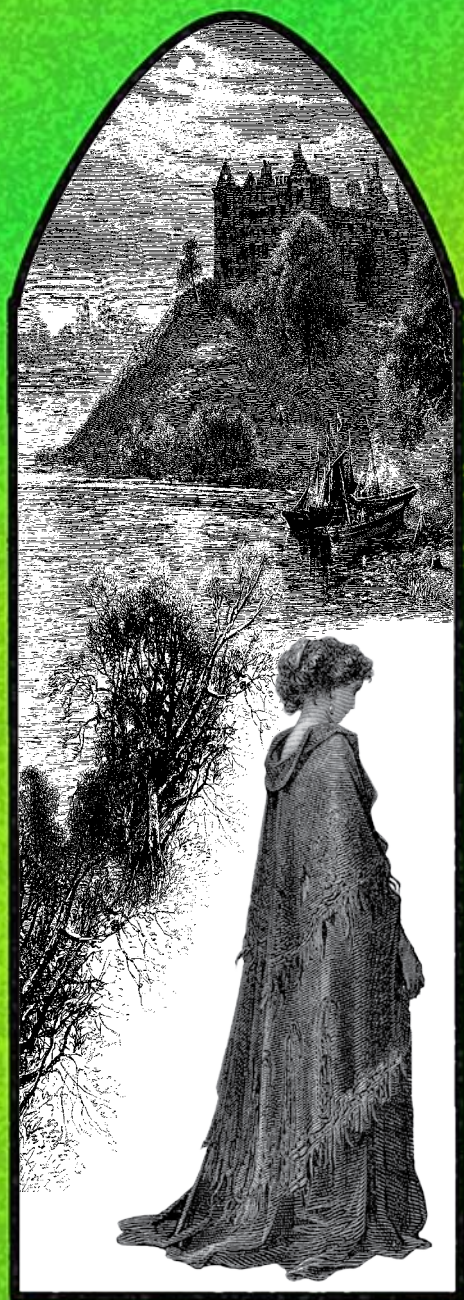


Once Upon a Journey ♦ VII



The
Princess,
the
Frog, &
the
Stranger

SMSSMITH

"Fairy tales are more than true; not because they tell us that dragons [and frogs] exist, but because they tell us that dragons [and frogs] can be beaten."

~ G.K. Chesterton ~

How often I found where I should be going
only by setting out for somewhere else.

~ Buckminster Fuller ~

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**The Princess, the Frog,
& the Stranger**

SMSMITH



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Once Upon a Journey ♦ VII

The Princess, the Frog, & the Stranger

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Dedicated to every soul who was, is, or will yet be a "Yahza" or a
"Zyrguun."

Journey ♦ VII ~ *The Princess, the Frog, & the Stranger*

The daughter of a good king finds herself blending the arrival of a nasty frog in a local swamp with the bedtime tale of a frog prince.



Once Upon a Journey series:

- I *The Wren & the Raven*
- II *A Prince to Crown*
- III *The Day the Rains Came*
- IV *Journey to Welkindorn*
- V *Belle of the Ballroom*
- VI *The Pelican's Gift*
- VII **The Princess, the Frog,
& the Stranger****
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The Princess, the Frog, & the Stranger

AGES PAST, in a land called Hatuu, there lived a fair, young princess named Yahza. Her father, the king, was a wise, good man and together they lived in a modest, yet charming, castle. Their castle was modest because the king refused to hoard riches when anyone was in need; and since someone always was, the king's treasury was mostly empty, but never quite. Thus, everyone lived as happy as they wished.

Now it might seem that goodness reigned in the land of Hatuu—and mostly it did—save for one bog in a far corner. Some had petitioned the king to drain that swampy corner and to destroy all the unpleasant things that must surely

gather in its weed-filled, murky waters, but the king had refused.

Now this refusal seemed foolish to many, because they imagined how swampy creatures might spread into other parts of their good kingdom despite the high stone wall that ringed its hidden dangers. Yet, in their love for the king, the people decided his philosophic reason for letting it be must stand.

Except, after a time, some decided that even a good reason would not suffice. Thus, they determined to transform that far corner into the most beautiful spot in the whole kingdom, whether the king agreed or not; and to demolish that swamp if it was the last thing they did. Thus, they began their daily treks to the far corner to study how best to do it.

It was only days before someone suggested the way would be easier if a tight-fitting gate were made in the high stone wall. That way, they would not have to scramble over which always mussed their clothes.

So it was done.

Now of course, just as many suspected, it was not long before a terrible thing jumped out of the weeds, plopping almost upon their fine shoes. That first time, it so terrified them that before they even knew what it was, they all ran screaming up the winding path and through the new gate.

For quite a time, they perched upon the high wall and watched the path, with their hearts thudding. But when nothing further appeared, a few courageous souls crept cautiously back—to gaze in open-mouthed wonder upon a giant, green frog with horrid copper spots. Their frightful frog was sitting in the mud at the swamp's edge, staring with a fierce countenance. But even more terrifying were the strange, hooded humps above his eyes. But the people said, "We are very brave, and we are going to transform this corner, if it is the last thing we do."

So they tried to kill the hideous frog with sticks and stones, but the giant frog with the

horrid copper spots just hopped out of the way in the nick of every time. At last, the harried watchers hurried home, trembling and unsure if they would ever go back.

But they did.

And as they stared into the clammy, unblinking eyes of the giant frog with the horrid copper spots, they imagined dreadful stories. Soon they began to tell each other their fantastic stories; and soon they were trying to outdo each other in their imaginations, till they would tremble in greater fear and vow to never, ever go back nor to tell any more frightening stories.

But they did.

Now, it was soon inevitable that the fair, young Yahza should hear about the giant frog with the horrid copper spots; and straightway, she recalled that oft-told story of a princess and a frog. And the more Yahza pondered upon it, the more she supposed this frightful frog was just a handsome prince. And the more she supposed,

the more she believed she could turn him back to his real self—just as in that oft-told story.

Now, Yahza knew her father wouldn't approve of her going near the far corner—let alone of kissing a giant frog with horrid copper spots—so she told him she was going out to visit in the kingdom. Then she wrapped herself in her plum, fringed cloak with its ample hood, and followed in the daily trek to the far corner.

When she gazed upon the giant frog with the horrid copper spots for the first time, she nearly screamed, for he was truly terrifying; but when she looked more closely, she saw that he was like nothing, anywhere, she had ever seen or imagined. This is not to say, there were not many wondrous creatures in Hatuu—for there were—but sometimes of late, the kingdom's wonders had seemed boring to her. Though, of course, Yahza didn't really mean that. What she really wanted was to feel really useful; and she thought, *If I could turn this frightful frog back to a handsome prince, then I would feel really useful.*

So for several days, Yahza told her father she was going out to visit in the kingdom, and every day she went and watched the giant frog with the horrid copper spots. Soon the giant frog with the horrid copper spots wasn't as terrifying as at first. Though sometimes, when Yahza was delayed in arriving, others would tell her how the giant frog had been nasty and threatening, but she did not believe them. He seemed nice enough when she was around; and what did it matter if, at rare times, he was cranky? She knew it was because he hated the swamp. He hated being scrunched up in that frog's body—and besides, how would they behave if they lived in a swamp and had such a hard life?

So Yahza began to serenade the giant frog whenever she could. And she began to fiercely defend her dear frog for she was sure—when she got through with him—they would come to love him as much as she did, for then they would see who he truly was, because she was going to transform him.

She imagined how amazed they would soon be to meet her, strolling along the path from the far corner, arm-in-arm with her handsome prince. She wouldn't say a word. She would merely smile as they stared in open-mouthed wonder, and only later would she tell them—the reason the giant, green frog with the horrid copper spots had disappeared was because she had transformed him.

For several days, Yahza arose even before it was fully light, and hurried to be first at the swamp. Early and alone she had gone, mustering every dram of courage, because, if she were truthful, she was, at times, still frightened by her dear frog, especially those few times he had leapt at her with his tongue lashing out.

But since her frog didn't always do that, she knew it must be because she had disturbed his rest, or been too noisy, or because he was tired or hungry, or maybe he was disappointed, or frustrated. Above all, she knew it would be a

hideous life—all scrunched up like that, in such an odd, ghastly-looking body.

Those were her thoughts as she set out, all alone, that eleventh, early morning knowing she was going to touch her amazing frog for the first time. Still, her heart thudded in fear all the way to the swamp. But when at last, she tiptoed near and stroked his strange, bumpy skin, it was not nearly as alarming as she had thought. In truth, her dear frog behaved rather nicely. She gazed deeply into his eyes, and though she felt odd shivers run along her spine, she knew he was her prince and she was going to transform him.

At last, she wiggled her fingers beneath his fat belly, intending to pick him up, but no sooner had she done so, when she heard noises from up along the path. Her rush of fear nearly turned into sobs as she felt her fingers trapped beneath the frog's great belly. Yet somehow, in frenzied haste, she wrenched them free and ran to hide in the rushes. She did not want anyone to know she was there ahead of them. When they

arrived, she would slip quietly amongst them as she had done on several days and no one would be the wiser.

From her hiding place, the princess watched the crowd arrive for the day's study. Suddenly, she saw a stranger amongst them! Everyone was telling the stooped, old man about the frog—how horrible it was, and how they would have to kill it if ever the swamp was going to become a nice place.

The stranger had a long white beard and walked with a limp, but the princess did not give his curious appearance too much inspection, for she was too concerned for her beloved frog.

Why was a stranger here? Had someone asked him to come? Did he have special means to get rid of strange frogs?—for he looked mysterious enough to do her frog serious harm and that would be terrible.



Yahza knew—she must transform her dear frog before anything terrible could happen.

So all day, she listened and worried. Even when the mysterious stranger spoke to her, she could scarcely reply, except to say, that whatever anyone said about that poor frog, she did not believe them and neither should he.

She saw how the curious stranger looked at her several times, all worried like, but she did not care. She loved that odd, giant frog with his horrid copper spots, and no one was ever, ever going to make her believe he was dangerous or mean or nasty.

At last, it was dusk and everyone headed home. Yahza doubted there was anything she could do in the dark. Besides, if the truth were told, she was afraid of the dark—swamp or not—so she followed along, up the path leading away from the far corner. But as she listened to others tell the stranger what he should do to help them kill that giant frog, she knew what she was going to do—indeed, what she now felt driven to do.

That night Yahza tossed and turned and tossed, and waited for the long night to end. Up she got at the first crack of dawn, wrapped her plum, fringed cloak about her, and hurried out of her modest castle toward the path that led down to the far corner.

There, at the end of the path, her dear frog was waiting. When she bent to pick him up, his tongue lashed out two or three times, but she said to herself, "I shall not be afraid, for I know what I must do, and I shall do it."

But despite what she said to herself, she was still afraid, so she thought to wait just a bit, for no matter how much she loved her frog, it was not going to be easy to kiss that strange, rude mouth. But since her father, the king, had told her many times that the most valiant things were often not easy to do, Yahza knew—however hard it was—she was going to do it.

She stroked her frog's copper-spotted, bumpy back. She held him and sang to him. She told him how she knew he was a handsome prince,

and how she was determined to save him, and how they were going to live happily-ever-after.

In singing and talking so long, she forgot the time till she heard noises from up along the path. Quickly, she closed her eyes and shaping her little mouth just right, she held her giant frog with the horrid copper spots right before her puckered mouth and leaned forward.

But, of a sudden, before she could plant her saving kiss, she felt a piercing pain betwixt her eyes. In that moment, her beloved frog surged from her hands and PLOPPED to the ground.

Yahza squeezed her eyes tight, afraid to open them for all the shivers and pains in her head and limbs. Finally, when she could bear it, she opened her eyes—only to see, smack in front of her, right on level, two huge, staring, unblinking eyes. This frightened her so terribly, she tried to jump away, and she did, sort of, with a strange plip. This frightened her even more, so she jumped again—plip, plip—and still those huge, unblinking eyes were on level with hers.

She tried to cry out, but all she heard was a squeaky “tzee-keyge.” Again, she tried to jump up, but she could not get off the ground! The pain in her forehead was making her terribly dizzy! She could not stand up. She shook her head, but everything seemed the same.

It was then that she saw them. The people of the kingdom were standing, gigantically tall! huddled at the path’s end—their faces pale and their eyes staring. The stranger from yesterday was standing in the center and his eyes looked very sad.

The princess ran toward them—plip, plip, plip, plip—but to her stunned surprise, everyone rushed screaming up the path; everyone, that is, except the stranger. Plip, plip—plip, plip, she went.

But suddenly, with one huge PLOP the giant frog with the horrid copper spots was blocking her way. He seemed monstrously huge! and in his eyes she saw the strangest reflection of a small, frightened frog.

She jumped away—plip—and the image in his eyes receded. The giant frog leapt toward her—PLOP—and the image grew bigger. She jumped away again—plip; and the giant frog scrunched round and leapt forward—PLOP; and thus it went three or four times.

Yahza was so confused. “What is wrong here?” she cried, but another squeaky “tzee-keyge” was all she heard.

Oh, this is dreadful, Yahza thought. *I must be having a frightful dream. I just have to wake up!* But she knew, she was not dreaming.

Suddenly, the giant frog reached out with one powerful, lime-green leg and flipped the princess high into the air. She sailed higher and higher, and then, with a terrifying nosedive, she plummeted, KER-SPLASH, into the swamp. Down, down—down into its depths she went, all the way arching her back and kicking to turn. At last, she made it and thrashing her arms and legs in terror, she shot upwards, bursting from the surface of the swamp in a frenzy of limbs—

to sprawl, amazingly, upon a most fortuitous floating, waxy dock! At the edge, where she had sprawled, she looked down into the terrifying waters and looking back at her was that same frightened frog—exactly like the one she'd seen inside the eyes of the giant frog with the horrid copper spots!

This little frog must have got knocked in here too, Yahza thought. Why it looks as scared as surely I feel!

Oh, I must get back to my friends, Yahza said to herself, for who knows what else, besides a small frightened frog, lies lurking in these waters.

But how do I do it? she asked herself. I'm too scared to jump into this terrifying swamp.

"What can we do?" Yahza said to the small frog, but all she heard was a tiny, frightened, "tzee-keyge."

Then she thought, I'm even more scared to stay on this nice dock because here, I'm all alone—but if I jump in, at least I'm doing something and maybe going somewhere where I can get help.

So, in she jumped and started swimming. And oh, my! what a good swimmer she was; better than she ever remembered. In and out of the weeds, she swam and swam and swam till suddenly, she felt mud beneath her feet and up she jumped. Plip, plip—plip, plip, right to the edge of the weeds; and there she was—almost back where she had started.

Ahead of her, the giant frog sat facing the oddly tall stranger and that huddle of more oddly, gigantic people.

Yahza stopped dead still. She didn't know what to think now of her princely frog, for he had not acted princely at all. She didn't know what to think of anything.

She could see that the old stranger and the people were arguing. She wanted to hear what they were saying, but she was afraid to make a sound. She didn't want to face her princely frog while she was feeling so low. Besides, she needed time to think. Even more, she wanted to get as far away from this scary swamp as she

could. So quietly, with the greatest of care, she tiptoed round the edge of the clearing toward the huddle of gigantic people. Plip, plip—plip, plip, she went.

Where are these silly noises coming from? Yahza thought. Maybe that little frog is following me.

She looked around, but she could not see any little frog. Again she tiptoed: plip, plip—plip, plip.

This is crazy, Yahza thought. That little frog is making too much noise. But just as she turned to shush him, she heard someone shout, “LOOK OUT!” as with one enormous PLOP, the giant frog with the horrid copper spots landed smack in front of her, though not close enough quite yet to reach her with his powerful, lime-green leg. But she could read the intent in his huge, unblinking eyes, so when he jumped again, so did she—as far sideways as she could. PLOP, plip, they went. The giant frog wiggled around to face her and jumped forward. She jumped too—sideways again. PLOP. Plip.

Oh, this is working, Yahza thought. If I can just outmaneuver this huge frog once or twice more! But the giant frog seemed to sense what she was intending as he scrunched down to survey a plan.

He seems to jump three times as far as I do! Yahza thought, *so if I can just get near enough to my friends, perhaps they will help me understand what is happening here.*

She glanced quickly in their direction. Her friends were again standing with their eyes staring and their mouths open—except for the stranger, who had moved a little apart.

Quickly, Yahza looked back just in time to see the giant frog leap high into the air. Instantly she did the same. But they had both jumped sort of sideways, landing PLOP, plip, scarcely one hop apart from each other.

Oh dear, Yahza thought. Whatever am I going to do?

She did not dare take her eyes from the giant, awful frog, so they sat staring at one another,

unblinking. Then the princess heard one of the huddled group say to another.

"Look, they're so busy with their dizzy jumping, here's our perfect chance. Let's sneak up on them and WHAM; they'll both be goners."

Both! Yahza thought. *What do they mean BOTH?! I am the princess.*

But the other citizen was speaking. "I don't know?" the citizen said. "Didn't you hear what that stranger said—what he swears he saw? What I think I saw?!"

"Oh, come, come," the first citizen said. "A princess turning into a frog?!"

A princess into a frog? Yahza exclaimed in her head. *What are they talking about?*

"Well, why not?" the second citizen said. "Why not? If a prince can be a frog—?"

"Why not?" the first interrupted. "Because there's no such story in Hatuu. There's no speck of history for it. It's just not proper."

"Well, I say, it's not proper to smash her flat till we know for sure," the second citizen said.

"Like where is that girl in the hooded cloak—and you know what the king told us—to keep an eye on her as best we could."

Keep an eye on me? Yahza thought. *Oh, dear.* But still she dared not look away from those moist, unblinking eyes of the giant frog.

The first citizen continued his argument. "Oh, the princess is just like all those other girls," he scoffed. "Probably went chattering home with some scary story, so being vanished, does not mean she is this weird, purple frog. Of course not! It means she went—"

"Purple frog!" the second citizen exclaimed with indignant interruption. "What are you saying—I mean seeing? This little frog is mauve."

"As if!" another exclaimed. "Lavender is what I see."

"Well, I say lilac," a fourth cried in irritation.

"Come, come," the second citizen soothed. "Let's not quarrel over insignificance. Maybe we're just seeing shades of feelings. It's not like—"

"Well, all I know," the first interrupted again, "is if this knobby, purple frog gets within a stick's length of me, it will not be a mauve frog for long."

"Mauve!" the stranger said with a chuckle. "I thought you just insisted purple."

At that, the strident quarrel abruptly ended in confused silence.

Mauve frog?! Yahza thought. What is all this crazy talk of a mauve—purple frog?

Then it struck her. Looking down, she saw her small, lavender webbed feet.

"Help me," she cried, "Help me, I'm the princess!" but all she heard was a long, wailing "tzeee-keeeeygee."



When her cry ended, she saw the legs of the giant frog twitch and she knew what he planned. He was trying to frighten her into making the first move. If she jumped forward so would he; if she jumped sideways so would he. Either way,

he would be close enough to flip her so far into that terrifying swamp, she would never, never get out—ever.

She blinked back tears, for her eyes must not be clouded, but how long could she endure such suspense?

Just when all hope was fading, she saw a broad paddle come slowly into view, precisely behind the giant frog; and before she could say, “plip,” the paddle dipped under the rear of the giant frog and sent him spinning end-over-end, way over her head and out of sight into a huge KER-SPLASH.

Yahza sat trembling, unable to move, even when a citizen came galloping toward her with a great stone raised above his head.

As Yahza hunkered and closed her eyes, she heard a loud thunder as the ground shook, but incredibly, nothing touched her! Slowly, she opened her eyes. There, protecting her body was the broad paddle that had sent her princely frog spinning to such a far distance. And in front of

her she saw the gigantic boots of the stranger.

She heard his calm voice say, "I told you—this little plum frog is no threat."

"You're crazy," the citizen said. "Everything in this swamp needs destroying. So if you'd kindly move, I'll smash this violet thing flat."

"I know what you intend," the stranger said, "but I intend to help this lavender frog, if the king and the little frog should so agree."

"You shan't house that weird thing in our good kingdom," the citizen exclaimed.

"She has no poison like the giant one," the stranger said. "She was just poisoned—see."

He bent down and scooped the princess into his hand. "See," he said again. "She doesn't have those nodules of poison on her head. She's just a mauve tree frog for now and we have to figure out how to get her back."

"Back?!" the citizen scoffed. "Back from what? She is a plum frog and there is no such proper thing as a lavender frog and even more—there is no such thing as a princess turning into a frog."

Or for that matter, a frog turning into a princess. There is just no history for it."

"Well," the stranger said, "then we can make history. Why not a princess from a frog?"

"Because it's not proper!" the citizen snorted.

In that moment, a huge, burping "BLEEE-BECK" filled the air. Everyone started in fright—everyone, that is, except the stranger.

As for the startled princess, she leapt straight up out of the stranger's hand and nosedived to the ground with a breath-knocking, PLOP. Now, of course, being on the ground was the second worst place Yahza could imagine, but in her fright she had done it and now she did not know what to do. She knew the mean, giant frog with the horrid copper spots was returning and in her terror, she went hopping all around at the feet of the stranger and the citizen. The citizen thought the weird purple frog was after him, so he danced and shouted to keep away from her.

Even in her fright, Yahza thought, *This would be terribly funny, if it were not so horribly scary.*

But it was.

At last, Yahza saw the stranger place one end of the broad paddle on the ground and in a flash she leapt along it—plip, plip—plip, plip, plip—up into the waiting hand of the stranger.

Quickly, he tucked her into a big, but cozy, pocket right over his heart; and just as quickly, Yahza snuggled deep down, with her little, lilac webbed feet spread as big as they could spread to cover her eyes and ears; but it did not help. She could hear everything.

She heard the PLOP, PLOP, PLOP, that meant the giant frog with the horrid copper spots was back.

“Let’s kill that ghastly frog,” someone cried, and everyone took up the chorus—everyone that is, except the stranger. “Kill that horrid frog. Kill that horrid frog,” they cried.

Yahza could feel the stranger begin to walk. “Where are you going?” someone shrilled and then everyone took up that chorus, “Where are you going? Where are you going?”

"There is nothing left here for me to do," the stranger said, as he kept walking.

"Nothing left!?" everyone cried. "Why that gruesome frog is sitting right there and we have to kill him."

"He doesn't die," the stranger said.

"Doesn't die?!" the citizens cried. "Of course, he can die. We just smash him flat."

"It won't happen," the stranger said. "All you can do is try to keep him confined in this far corner—unless, of course, someone puts him in their pocket and takes him into the kingdom."

"Put him in our pocket!" they scoffed. "We shall smash him flat."

The stranger kept walking. "I'm sorry to say," he said, "it will not happen, but I assure you—he cannot harm, except as I said; or unless, of course, with this little path, if someone forgets to close that gate some of you made in the king's fine stone wall."

Yahza listened as the voices of the citizens, at first loud, grew steadily fainter.

"Who says we can't smash that horrid thing flat?" they were saying. "We'll just have to study better how to do it. And what does this stranger know about frogs? And who does he think he is, telling us what we can and cannot do? This is our kingdom and where does that stranger come from anyway?"

At last, the strident voices faded entirely as the snuggled princess pondered her dire circumstance. *Did the old stranger know something that might help?* she asked herself.

Driven by anxiety, Yahza crept toward the opening of the big pocket, clutching the heavy cloth of the stranger's tunic with her knobby, mauve feet. When she peeked out into the downward gaze of the stranger, he spoke.

"Well, princess," the stranger said, "what do you now think of all this?"

Yahza did not know what to think, except that perhaps the giant frog with the horrid copper spots was not really a prince after all. Having no answer, she just stared at the stranger.

"So, what do you suggest we do to get you back?" the stranger asked.

Oh, my goodness, Yahza sighed, if he hasn't any ideas, whatever am I going to do?

She waited for the stranger to tell her something—anything—but he just walked on. She kept staring at him, but he was humming now and paying no attention to her. Slowly, she sank down inside the pocket. She had never felt more alone in all her life.

The more she thought, the more she knew that the giant frog with the horrid copper spots was the cause of all her troubles. And the more she knew he was the cause of all her troubles, the more she wished something terrible might happen to him; and the more she wished, the more terrible were the things she imagined; and the more frightened she got about what would become of her.

Then, just when she knew she was going to burst into tears, a brilliant thought came flashing in. Maybe—just maybe—well, of course, why

had she not thought of it before?! If she could find a real prince to kiss *her*, why it could all be over! Well, maybe, not quite—but it would be when her real prince had locked that giant frog in a very small box. That would teach that nasty frog what a hard life was really like; and when that was done, she and her real prince could live happily-ever-after.

Yes, a real prince is the answer, she thought, except where, in Hatuu, do I find a real prince?

She thought and thought, If I don't know a real prince now, how shall I ever find one if I have to live the rest of my life "plipping" from place to place.

Suddenly, another thought came flashing in. Clutching at the heavy tunic with her knobby feet, she pulled herself once more to the opening of the pocket and said, "Excuse me, but would you happen to know a real prince?" But all she heard was a long, squeaky "Tzeeee-keeeeyge."

Oh, no, Yahza groaned. It really is true. I can't talk. Whatever am I going to do?

Slowly, she began to slide back into the big pocket, but the stranger said, "Wait, wait."

With desperate hope, Yahza clutched again with her little, knobby feet. She pulled herself back to the pocket edge and hung her elbows over as she stared up into the warm, speckled eyes of the stranger.

"I suspect," the stranger said, "that you want to know if I know a real prince."

Yahza clapped her lavender feet in delight. He had somehow understood.

The stranger continued. "Well, the answer is: Yes, I'm looking for a real prince, myself—my youngest son. You see, it's a long story, but I was once a king and some bad things happened and my son was taken, and now it's some forty-nine years that I am looking to find him. So, if my experience is any measure, it might take a while to find a real prince."

Forty-nine years! Yahza exclaimed in her head. *I cannot bear it. What am I going to do?*

She looked pleadingly into the stranger's face

for some suggestion, but it made her feel even more discouraged, for he looked as old as surely she would look when finally she found some real prince; and then she would be too old for him to want, or even think, to kiss her.

But again, Yahza had a flash of brilliant thought. Perhaps it works both ways?! Perhaps if *she* kissed a real prince?! It wouldn't need to be her one and only prince. Maybe any prince would do. If she did it surreptitiously, she could transform herself back and no one need ever know, and it wouldn't take forty-nine years!

Again, the impatient princess had another brilliant thought. *Why not try an experiment!* If this old stranger was once a king, why, in all likelihood, he was once a prince. And since kissing a small, plum frog would be the last thing on his mind—with him so old and all; and with him being a king—or once a king—he could scarcely be expected to go around kissing frogs; and since she was in no position to ask, it was up to her to sort it all out.

So pursing her little frog lips, she smacked them upon the heavy cloth of his tunic. Smack. Smack. Smack, she went.

But nothing happened, except that the old stranger burst into choking, crying laughter till he doubled over and had to put his hand to his heart, it was heaving so. As it was, Yahza nearly fell out of his pocket.

Well, he's not the one in such dire straits, she thought, So let him laugh—and when he sees how it works, he shall not laugh so hard.

So she waited while he laughed—but still nothing happened.

Well, let me see, Yahza thought in her practical way, perhaps it cannot work through such heavy cloth, so if I could just—

But before she even finished her thought, the stranger, still laughing, scratched her under the chin. In less than a blink, she grabbed his bare finger with her knobby feet and went “smack, smack” upon his knuckle with her puffy, little frog lips.

It effected the stranger so, he collapsed upon a nearby stump and laughed till he could laugh no more. Still nothing happened.

Yahza slid to the bottom of the pocket and started to cry, trying hard to conceal it.

At last, the stranger wiped his eyes, stood up, and started again on the upward path.

"I am so sorry to disillusion you," the stranger said, "but kissing a frog doesn't always transform it, my dear little frog. It's just an old story. Now mind you, a prince *can* be a frog—and so now, it seems *can* a princess. But kissing a frog or even a kissing frog—"

Here the stranger seemed to catch one in his throat. When he got it cleared, he continued, "You see, it doesn't make the difference you think. Someone got it confused and now all you princesses go around thinking you can kiss frogs and live happily-ever-after. Well, my dear, it just does not seem to work as you think it will. And if you hang around with some of those frogs too long—well, I guess, I don't have to tell you."

His little speech did not help Yahza one bit. Now her sobs came in huge hiccups.

"Now, now," the stranger said in a kindly tone, "I'm sure there is a way out of this, though I am quite sorry to say, I don't yet know what it is. I rather think you might have to figure it out and then find it for yourself."

Find it myself! Yahza exclaimed in her head. *How? Plipping around Hatuu?! It is impossible. I shall be a plum frog forever, and soon everyone will forget about me, and maybe even one day, someone will step on me when they're not looking. Oh, I shall be so unhappy; and it is all the fault of that horrible frog.* In those thoughts, she sobbed even more.

"Well, I suppose first things first," the stranger said. "We shall go to your father. Then you and he can decide what to do. It is sad your mother is gone these many years, for she would be of great help, from what I've heard. Thus, I shall be willing to help in whatever way I can, if you should want it."

What I want, Yahza cried in her head, is to be a person. That is what I want and I want it more than anything in this whole, whole world.

Those were her sobbing, pleading thoughts as they arrived back at the modest castle.

The old stranger carried the princess to her father, just as he said he would. And to Yahza's surprise, she found they had already met the previous day when the stranger had apparently asked questions relating to his own journey.

Now, at this second meeting, the stranger told the king most everything that had happened at the swamp—well, as much as the stranger knew, which seemed an awful lot to Yahza. And what the stranger didn't know seemed close enough that the princess did not wish to argue the finer points, even if she could have, which she couldn't—for every time she opened her mouth, out came a squeaky "tzee-keyge," and that was all.

She heard her father sigh deeply as he spoke to her. "Yesterday evening, my dear, I decided

that Hatuu should assemble this coming eve to review why the bog is there and why it is ringed with stones. As things have progressed, it seems you and nigh everyone has forgotten why, so it is now time for a review.”

He tapped the edge of the old heirloom soup bowl that had graced the center spot of the royal dining table since antiquity. He pulled it closer. It now held a small, plum frog clutching its stone rim. “Your invitation to attend, my child, is in your room,” the king said, “but now, too late.”

Yahza dropped her plum forehead upon the edge of the bowl. She had seen the invitation late last evening, but had decided to wait and open it after transforming her princely frog. She had been afraid of what the note might say and she had thought that a few hours would make no difference.

She remembered now why the bog was there. It had to do with the preservation of choice, and she had, without thinking enough, made a choice that had landed her—

She stopped and banged her head against stone. She didn't want to think it and it wasn't funny in the slightest—but she knew why her father had chosen the old soup bowl for her accommodation. Carved into its base were words that generations of her ancestors had read: "When some bad choice lands you in the soup, your next choice is to make better choices."

And so it was—while the stranger and the king debated what could best be done to help Yahza, she decided for herself. With one great surge, she leapt from the ancient soup bowl and grabbing the edge of the stranger's pocket, she tumbled inside. If she had to do something to get herself out of this fix, then she decided she should best begin a journey. The stranger's pocket seemed the safest place for that. He'd said he was on a journey himself, to find his son; that he would help in whatever way he could; and she was sure it would prove far safer than plipping about this kingdom that now contained a nasty frog with horrid copper spots.

Yahza heard her father say, "Well, my friend, it seems my daughter has made a decision, though I do not mean to bind you to it, if it's not in your wishes."

The old stranger replied, "She shall be no bother, I venture. Maybe even a joy, for most of the company that has attached to me during assorted travels has been much too verbose. I think I shall enjoy the peace and quiet."

Her father laughed and said, "She has always been an inquisitive, resourceful girl, so I suspect that even if she cannot talk, she will have you talking, answering thousands of questions which she will surely find a way to ask."

The stranger smiled as the king continued. "But before I give consent to Yahza's choice, I would ask a few questions of you—if you will be so kind as to join us for lunch."

Over lunch, they heard a greatly abbreviated account of their guest's life. He had descended from a long line of kings, he said, and had been known as King Zyrguun till, in a brutal coup, his

entire family had died—save for an infant son, whom he believed had been stolen away. After a miraculous rescue and prolonged recovery from almost fatal wounds, he had begun the quest of his life, to find his missing son.

Yahza, who had always been a sensitive soul, could feel Zyrguun's reluctance to recall the pain of that time, and soon, he deftly turned the sad conversation to his travels. As the talk drifted above her, Yahza began stashing in her mind those myriad questions—questions she would have to figure a way of asking.

She could tell her father was impressed with the old stranger and when Zyrguun promised to personally ensure Yahza's return to Hatuu whenever she wished, her father gave his consent to her journey in search of transformation.

"We shall keep in touch," Zyrguun said. "Here is the direction to my home port." He took a square of paper from his pocket. "The ship's quartermaster will ensure our missives reach their destinations."

Her father's parting words to old Zyrquun were in praise of his daughter. "Despite what may appear to you in this unfortunate event, my daughter is one of the wisest and kindest of people in my kingdom, though sometimes her kindness has clouded her wisdom, as we have seen. But I shall miss her beyond expression. And though you are old and wise yourself, remember that there is none so young that we cannot learn even from them."

So it was decided, and so Yahza set forth from Hatuu—travelling in Zyrquun's pocket; or sometimes in a little pouch when it was stormy or cold; but the best place of all was on the brim of Zyrquun's hat. It offered fantastic views.

Yet, even with all the good care and all the wonderful sights, Yahza still endured many hardships; and she thought, maybe one-hundred times a day—maybe more—that all she wanted was to be a person and that she wanted it more than anything in the whole, whole world.

But one of Yahza's great joys and distractions was in developing a language of signs. In the beginning, her questions had been asked with expansive gestures, and then confirming wags of a lilac finger—up and still for yes, sideways for no—as Zyrguun tried to guess her intended question from creative pantomimes. It was her first amusing efforts that sparked the idea for their own special sign-language. They developed it together, and Zyrguun soon became so adept at understanding her signs that Yahza's lack of speech was hardly an impediment.

"So much for peace and quiet," Zyrguun had said, with a grin, after one of their extended discussions—this one on the fanciful topic of whether tree frogs aged faster or slower than humans. They had plenty of time for all kinds of discussions. In truth, there seemed no end of fascinating topics.

This is better than a thousand classrooms, Yahza decided. I have a teacher who knows almost everything there is to know.

Zyrguun even admitted, once—after they had been journeying for about a year—that he had learned a thousand times greater wisdom in his travels than he would have ever learned sitting on a king’s throne. And he was still learning, he said.

It was in those words that Yahza decided to ask about the coup that had reduced Zyrguun to a life of wandering. She didn’t know why her thoughts kept returning to that brief account she had heard him tell the afternoon of her own tragedy, but she wanted to know the memories he had carried now for fifty years.

On a quiet evening, after they had left the bustle of another city, without any words of hope about his missing son, Yahza mustered the courage to ask. As Zyrguun sat pensive, before a dying fire, she tapped his hand and signalled her question.

“What happened at the coup?” she asked.

He sighed. “It is too awful to remember,” he said and sighed again.

"But still, you do remember," she signed. "I hear it in your voice. I feel it in your body as I ride beside your heart. Perhaps if you spoke of it, it would dislodge from its frozen place."

"It is too awful to tell a child such as yourself," he said. "No one should have to know or hear such things."

"But I am not a child. I am eighteen years," she signed. "And how can I know you, my best friend, now, if I don't understand your sorrows or the pains that you bear. You have taught me so much—for one thing, to let go of my silly imaginations—so if I can know and bear some of what you bear, then I can feel greater purpose in this journey. My father always told me that sharing was a way of bearing the unbearable."

The old man sat silent for a time. Then he spoke, "Maybe you are right."

After another long pause, he continued. "It was springtime—my JaBella's favourite time of year. Our baby, Jonun, had just turned two that very day. We'd had a family party and he was

napping on a window cushion behind the heavy drapes. His two brothers and one sister were still seated, eating the fruit and cake of our happy celebration when the great door burst asunder and within mere moments my family was no more—even before fear could transform their startled looks. The last I remember was Jonun's cry, muffled by the curtains."

The old man choked back sobs as he said, "I was told the rest of the story, as much as anyone knew, by an old friend of mine—a sea captain. My little Jonun was named for him—for our brawny JoNun of the sea."

Yahza could see a fleeting joy cross Zyrguun's face as he remembered his old friend. The story continued.

"But that day, JoNun was passing port and thought to call on me—to bring his namesake a gift. He was sauntering up the port road, he said, when a ragged, crazed man, driving a horse and wagon too good for his poverty, careened toward him. My friend recognized the sobbing

driver as one of the port and palace beggars. He'd been kind to the poor fellow on several occasions, and seeing his distress, JoNun had thundered in his seaman's voice for the man to halt. He said, it was a wonder the beggar was not killed as he leapt from the racing wagon, but he tumbled at JoNun's feet and commenced a gibberish that was almost unintelligible as he gestured wildly toward the horse and wagon. Without the frenzy of the whip, it had halted some little ways beyond."

As the memories flowed, Zyrguun choked back more sobs as he said, "What my friend gathered later was that the beggar had been told to drive the wagon to the sea cliff and push it over. One of the palace knight's—the lead one I presume—had made him swear an oath not to look within the cover—it was infested, decaying garbage, the knight had said. After dumping the ruined wagon into the sea, the poor fellow was to return with the king's horse—to receive a silver coin for his troubles."

Zyrguun bowed his head as he spoke. "Well, the beggar was not a man of his word. He was a man of poverty and the habits of poverty, so he stopped a short ways from the fork that would turn him up toward the sea cliff to see what he might salvage. He knew instantly his reward would never be a silver coin. In the trauma of his broken oath, he determined to drive everything, himself included, over the sea cliff. He had barely begun his frenzied flight when he encountered my friend."

Here again, Zyrguun choked back sobs as he spoke. "The frantic beggar tried to prevent JoNun from looking, but JoNun persisted and understood instantly the beggar's frenzy and the danger to them all. As you can suppose, that wagon held the jumble of my lifeless family—the house of Irimon, a house that had ruled with justice and goodwill for generations. I still, to this day, cannot comprehend the horror of it."

After regaining control, he spoke on. "My friend said he was never so close to retching

madness as when he obtained his own witness. But as a man of action and discipline in the most frantic of times, he returned immediately to his ship. There, he entrusted the gibbering beggar to the quartermaster's care and speedily hoisted the wagon to the deck. He said, they freed the horse to wander back as it may."

After another silence, the story continued. "JoNun knew his crew would be no match for the usurper's power, so they moved our bodies to a hidden space as they set sail, and ordered that the wagon be broken up and tossed into the sea as they passed beneath the cliff. Things must appear as nearly as they were ordered."

Every word seemed an effort as Zyrguun spoke. "They buried my family on the backside of a small island that evening—my dear JaBella, my two sons and my only daughter. It was not till the burial that JoNun realized his namesake, my precious Jonun, was not amongst the dead. He had been so occupied with other urgencies that others had prepared our bodies. But it was

too late and impossible to return. Too many lives were at risk. He could only pray for my little son. But I knew nothing of any of this. I was barely alive—so like death I, too, was being prepared for burial until the ship's surgeon said no. With me, they must wait a day or two. But waiting was not an option in the circumstance, so they sailed on, expecting to give me an ocean's burial."

He shook his head as he spoke. "Neither the surgeon or JoNun had an explanation, nor do I, but for twice forty days and nights, I lay between life and death, neither eating nor drinking—not being capable of either because of my wounds. My only medicine, the surgeon would later say, was just rocking on the bosom of the sea. And so I sailed for days on end, utterly unconscious of everything about me. I awoke but once they said, only to immediately lapse into a second span of oblivion. Yet when I finally awoke for good, my memory was of being fed and tended by those whom I was told were buried on an obscure island. It made no sense, yet the thing

that gives me hope and drives me on this quest of mine is that my infant boy was not amongst those they buried nor those attending me."

Tears trickled down his cheeks. "When I made it back to Irimon, the year of my recovery, the usurper had been likewise usurped, but I did not have the desire to rule again. My only desire was to recover my son. And I had to be so careful for I did not know how many Irimon knights were involved in those ghastly deeds."

He sighed deeply as he stirred the glowing embers with his walking stick. In the light of the bright moon, Yahza signed, "Have you ever had sure word of your son's survival?"

Zyrguun replied, "I don't know. After many years, I stumbled onto the strange story of a young slave who may have been him, and traced him to the mines at the Olphus Mountains, but from there I lost all leads. That was perhaps twenty odd years ago. But I just keep travelling and asking. My dear friend, JoNun, made it all possible. When he died, he bequeathed a partial

interest in his ship to me, and so I travel by sea at times, and other times, I go by land. JoNun's son has been as good to me as he was."

He smiled suddenly, though tears moistened his eyes again. "And I give thanks every day for that poor beggar. He has never said a word since that day—more mute even than you. But he still serves on JoNun's ship, almost obsessive about its cleanliness. The best, most loved deckhand they've ever had, and whenever he sees me, he smiles from ear to ear and signs in gesture, not unlike you. He says, 'Because you lived, I too can live.'"

He cleared his throat and firmly turned the topic away from his tearful memories. "Curious, isn't it, that I should be on land and passing through your Hatuu at the very time when that infamous frog should be discovered there. I've seen him, you know, off and on, in various parts, always provoking some form of suffering."

"You said, he couldn't be killed; is that really true?" she signed.

"Yes and no," he said. "No, in the way your people in Hatuu or others have wanted, but yes, in someway that I dreamt about—a way that I think might presage the finding of my son at last."

Yahza began to sign, but Zyruguun interrupted with a smile. "I'll tell of that dream some other time. Now it's time for peace and quiet."

"One more question, please?" she signed.

He shrugged his smiling acceptance.

"You've told me of many dreams you've had of various things, but have you ever dreamt of Jonun?" she asked.

His eyes brightened at the memory. "I did for a time, as he must have been as a growing boy, but then the dreams stopped. And then, maybe twenty or so years later, or maybe more—the time seems to run all together now—I began to dream again of him, only he was back to being as one might imagine at four or five years of age. But strangely, he was then always with a sister, like a twin, but not my young daughter who was

buried, but another, somewhat like her, but not. I couldn't make it out. I dreamt of them several times—that I met them on some road and they were family, but I couldn't hear what they were saying. But I felt such joy. I would wake and find myself weeping."

The tears spilled again at the memory.

Yahza raised her little feet to sign, "Thank you for telling me," but Zyrguun, thinking she had one more heart-rending question, raised his hand and wagged a finger side-to-side in sign for "No, no, no more questions."

In reply, Yahza signed, "I shall pray, you will dream of them again."

After that evening, Zyrguun seemed reluctant to talk much of Jonun or the many possibilities of his life that Yahza thought might help. It was as if Zyrguun couldn't get past the fear that his son had been sent to the mines at Olphus. "Such would not bode well," Zyrguun had said. "But I cannot give up hope. Not after fifty years."



And so their journey progressed: new moon upon new moon; city-state upon city-state; kingdom after kingdom. But never any word of hope for either of their quests. Yet somehow, together, their hope endured as other's lives went on. A letter from her father reached them, telling of his marriage to a good woman whom Yahza knew and loved already. It eased her mind. Then later, another letter—they'd had a baby son. It was thrilling news, yet little seemed to change for Yahza and Zyrguun.

Except one day, Yahza realized how much she had changed. The thing she most desired now, in the whole, whole world, was that Zyrguun would find his son. That prayer had completely replaced the first that had begun her journey. That is not to say, she did not desire to become a person again, for she did; but that desire was now in second place. She recognized too, that she had come to love Zyrguun as if he were her own blood grandfather. She saw all the quiet, anonymous deeds he left in his wake, everyday.

Deeds only a curious frog on the brim of his hat would be privy to. She sometimes pondered what impact fifty-odd years of compassionate deeds had had upon the kingdoms of Zyrquun's travels. She could only imagine, for he would never tell nor, indeed, could ever know.

It was late autumn, third year of their travels—back again on land after a season upon the sea—when Zyrquun woke one morning with tears streaming down his face. They had camped the previous night in a sheltering grove not far from the road. As usual, at the first hint of dawn, Yahza could be found, perched on a nearby rock, watching the sunrise. That's where she was, when she heard Zyrquun vigorously blow his nose.

"I dreamt of him," Zyrquun said, his voice filled with emotion, "the first in a long, long time. At the start, I wondered if someone had died, he seemed so melancholy, but then—"

He broke off, turning to his satchel. "Here, let me show you," he said as he pulled a record

book of his travels from the pouch and turned to a blank page. As he drew a face, he spoke. "It's a pensive face, yet features so like mine all those years ago. But when he saw me and spoke, I saw his face light up and heard his voice fill with joy. 'Call me KinDur,' he said. 'Call me KinDur. I am looking for you.'"

He hurriedly sketched on as he spoke. "It must mean they changed his name. I was sure they had, but I did not know, so I kept asking for Jonun, just in case. In my dream, he even wrote his name for me as smoke upon the air. All these years, I should have been asking for KinDur."

He turned the beautiful sketch so Yahza could see.

She saw instantly the resemblance, even in Zyrguun's



old and weathered features. Yet there was something not quite right. She signed her confusion.

"Zyrguun, this face is not much more than twenty years or so, and Jonun must be double that now, and more. Why would he appear as—" She broke off signing. She didn't want to imply he might have died so young. She stood still as her knobby fingers curled down in silence.

Zyrguun sat quiet, staring at his drawing. At last he spoke. "I hadn't thought of that," he said. But then he brightened. "But why should he ask me to call him KinDur? Why would he say, 'I am looking for you'?"

Yahza made a tiny motion with her hand. And Zyrguun understood. "You think that I may die and you will be left alone! Oh, my child, I hadn't thought of that either; and we shall not think of it. Except, now that I have, we must make a plan for you, if anything should happen to me. How short-sighted I have been. And yet, I sense there is something wonderful I am not understanding in all this."

At that moment, an incredible thought flashed into Yahza's mind. She signed as fast as she could, pointing to the sketch. "What if this is not your son, but your son's son? What if that boy and girl of your dreams those twenty years ago are your grandchildren? And this, your grown grandson?" She pointed again at the drawing.

Zyrguun began to sob. When at last he could speak, he said, "If such were so; twice, no, three times these fifty-two years, I would count as nothing to such a gift."

In that moment, Yahza's desire to become a person again, was once more displaced. Her first prayer remained that Zyrguun would find his son; her second now—that Zyrguun would also find living children of that son.

With anxious haste, Zyrguun gathered their few things and began to retrace his steps to the city they had left the evening before. With excitement, he said, "I will ask for KinDur. Maybe that will make all the difference."

Yahza quashed a momentary fear that it would make no difference as she remembered Zyrguun's oft-repeated words after oft-repeated disappointments. "We're two tough old birds, my young friend, even if we are a weathered old man and a knobby, plumish frog. We shall always endure whatever the news."

But just as Zyrguun had predicted, so it was.

To the guard at the city gate, he asked. "Would you know a man, age fifty or so years, who goes by the name of KinDur?"

The guard replied drowsily as if he were tired of always answering questions. "Well, I wouldn't know the age and all as I've never met the man, but I suspect you must mean King KinDUR. He—"

The guard broke off as he grabbed Zyrguun's arm to prevent him from toppling over. "Whoa, old man. Here, I'll fetch a stool." He motioned for his companion across the gateway to fetch a stool from the guardhouse. When it was fetched, he said. "Sit here. Sit here a spell."

By then Zyrguun was sobbing and trying to speak at the same time. The guards exchanged puzzled looks.

"What did you say?" the second guard hissed accusingly to the first.

"I just answered his question," the other defended. "He just asked if I knew King KinDUR."

"What! You say, KinDur? This is so odd!" the other exclaimed. "Prince KinDur leaves, out this very gate, yesterday—early it was. And that very afternoon, I overhear an old woman say, a Prince KinDur had lodged in her guesthouse and mistakenly overpaid her, or so she thought. Odd, odd, odd. I don't hear the name KinDur in years and then, two days—three times. Must mean something of import—three times and all, you know, as they say!"

By then Zyrguun had retrieved his record book and turned to his drawing of the morning. He held it up to the second guard, his hands shaking so uncontrollably, their heads shook too, just to keep the picture in focus.

"Whoa," the first guard said again. "Did you draw that? It's very good."

The second guard said. "This is more than odd. That's the spittin' depiction of him—the Prince." He turned to Zyrquun. "You know him?"

As Zyrquun struggled to speak, the first guard spoke again. "By the way, old man, did you know there's a purple frog jumping on the brim of your hat."

The other startled guard added. "Not just jumping. Waving like a— like a—"

The other guard finished. "Like a circus act!"

In those words, Yahza suddenly remembered that Zyrquun was the only reader of her sign language. Here she had been, during the whole episode, frantically trying to get their attention: madly pointing and signing, "King. Grandfather. Grandson. Fifty-two years searching. We can't believe this! Can you believe this?"

When she realized what she'd been doing, she became almost hysterical. But as she and Zyrquun had always tried to be cautious about

her appearances and uniqueness, she thought it best to retire quietly like a pet frog and not give further display of manic hysteria upon the brim of an old man's hat.

She dropped to a squat and with humble, downcast eyes, plipped down Zyrguun's arm and into his deep pocket—into a corner covered by his long beard, where she gave vent to the full range of her emotions.

When Zyrguun spoke at last, Yahza could hear the caution in his voice. "I am so sorry to come apart like this, but I have been lost for many years and I was told this KinDur would be the one to help me. And I've been searching for a long time. I'm sorry for your trouble, but is he far from here?"

"What would you say?" the first guard said to the other. "Maybe two kingdoms past this. Tribbles, I think they call it."

"Yeah," the other replied. "I was there once. Nigh on twenty-odd years. Maybe more. In my younger days. 'Twas the night of their last

knightly ball, as I recall. Never been back. But what a story. I'll have to tell you sometime."

Zyrguun tapped the first guard on the arm to draw his attention back to the question. "Is it far?" he asked again

"Oh, not so much," the guard said. "Maybe, six, seven days walking. Couple or three bigger cities on the way, if you follow the road. But you shouldn't have any trouble. The laws are pretty just and fair these days."

The second guard laughed. "Yes sir, as many say, it's not much trouble getting to Tribbles if you strike due east. Run right into it."

Zyrguun gave a hurried, tearful thanks for their kind help—unbearably anxious now that he knew his destination; so anxious that he set out at a trot as Yahza scrambled back up to the brim of his hat.

Had his ears been as good as hers, he would have heard the guards as they chuckled and spoke almost together. "Didn't mean, run right to it." "Don't suppose he'll keep that up for long."

It was true, but when Zyrguun slowed back to his normal, walking pace, there was a spring in his step that had never been there before, and he was whistling. Yahza declared her own joy in wild, abandoned dancing upon the brim of the jaunty hat, while signing to the sky.

Their third day headed east, they came to the first city the guards had spoken of. They found it vastly different from the last. When Zyrguun asked at the gate whether a Prince KinDur had passed that way, the guard barked, "Maybe. Maybe not. How badly you want to know." He rubbed his fingers together, half hidden behind his other hand, in subtle emphasis to his words.

Zyrguun shook his head and began, "I don't—" only to be interrupted.

"Then, 'tis not princes that concern us this day," the guard rasped. "You go to the city square and you'll see what concerns us." He snorted in disgust and added, "I'm for killing every last frog in this place."

At those words, Yahza flattened herself into a curl of Zyrguun's hat and lay still. Had this irate man seen her? Had that spurred his remark? She wasn't going to ask, but Zyrguun did.

"What do you mean?" he said, as he gently patted his pocket trying to remember where Yahza had last stashed herself.

Instead of answering, the guard pointed to another approaching guard and said, "Here comes my relief, so I'll take you there myself as that's where I'm headed. It's not a pretty sight, but that foul frog has got everyone stirred up. If you ask me, it's not going to end pretty either."

By then, Yahza was trembling so violently, she was afraid Zyrguun's hat would dislodge.

Zyrguun now knew where she was, but had no sure way of transferring her without possible detection. And if frogs were so abhorrent here, then Zyrguun knew they might both be at risk, if he were found to be carrying one. Yahza would just have to ride it out and hope for the best till she could dive into the safety of a pocket.

When they got to the city square, all was in confusion and utterly confusing. There was no frog in sight, but what Yahza saw was something she had never seen before! It wasn't a swan or an ibis or an egret or any other kind of bird she had ever seen—though it seemed like a bird—but not really a bird, and yet— Well, Yahza did not know what to think it was, except that it was lovely beyond everything.

"That is a tiripz!" Zyrguun exclaimed. "I have never seen one in this world before, but I have heard them described. They are exceedingly rare. Seen only, I've been told, sometimes just before the appearance of a poisonous frog. In truth, there might be only one."

"That is not a tiripz!" the guard sputtered in indignation. "That is a frog. And we have people who can swear they saw it first as a frog—that it changed before their eyes to connive its way back into our good city, but its presence we will not tolerate."

To Yahza, the tiripz was the most beautiful,

shimmering thing that could ever be. Yet there was a dreadful thing, too—for the exquisite tiripz was squeezed into a horrible, rusty, dirty, ugly cage which hung from the limb of a twisted tree. Even worse, there was a mob of all kinds banging sharp, pointed sticks about the cage and chanting words Yahza could not understand. Hooded falcons were everywhere, perched on posts and leather-wrapped wrists, as if a hunt was intended. It was horribly dreadful.

"Could I speak with your witnesses?" Zyrguun asked.

The guard rounded on him with anger. "Who are you? One of them? Think we don't know what is right for us?"

"No," Zyrguun said quietly, "but I'm wondering how such a beautiful thing—so peaceful in this chaos—can be as foul as you say?"

"Because we have been battling this frog for years," the guard sputtered again. "We know. He comes in all shapes and sizes. And now, as this fraud—leaving feathers at the doors of our own

people who have betrayed our ways. Would that not make you angry, too?—if you were told your ways had become corrupt when they have not? This frog has divided our great city and must be destroyed and we are set to do it.” With that, he turned and marched off into the frenzied throng, joining in their chant of destruction.

Yahza whimpered in dismay. *They are going to let that tiripz go and then, with those falcons and sharp sticks, they are going to kill it—the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.*

Yahza and Zyrguun watched the awful frenzy swell around the tiripz.

Yahza became aware that her little frog lips were moving and knew that her prayer, whether first or second or third was that she wanted this clamouring mob to let the tiripz go free without harm; that if they did, she felt she could remain a plum frog forever and be perfectly happy—if only she could have her wish.

But what could she possibly do? In a flash, she had a thought. Tap, tap, tap, she went on

Zyrguun's hat till he cautiously reached up and took her into the palm of his hand, cupping it to conceal her. Standing on her passionate, purple legs, she pointed desperately toward the tiripz and then to herself.

Over and over, she signed that Zyrguun was to trade her—a rare, plum frog—for the life and freedom of the tiripz.

Zyrguun shook his head and carefully dropped her into the foul-weather pouch and pulled the drawstrings tight, as he said, "It is no use—they would just take you and probably kill you and still have their hunt. And anyway, I don't think there can be substitutes here. In some things, we are not to interfere."

Being put safely in the drawstring pouch made Yahza very upset—because now she had no way to take things into her own hands—so to speak.

She thought it cowardly of Zyrguun to say, they should not interfere. If she had her way, they would interfere and they would interfere

big. But now in the drawstring pouch, it didn't matter what she thought; and in that pouch, thinking was about all she could do. So she thought and thought as the noise grew louder and louder.

She shouted and shouted, but her squeaky "tzee-keyges" could not be heard—what with the noise and commotion going on all round.

Yahza didn't think it could possibly get louder till it did, with one humongous roar. She knew the tiripz was freed; that the hunt was on. It sounded to Yahza like a monstrous raging.

She hid her eyes, even though in the dark pouch she could see nothing except what was in her imagination—but it was too hideous.

All I want, Yahza sobbed, is for that lovely tiripz to be free and safe. That's what I want more than anything else in the whole, whole world. But she knew it was not happening. More than that, she knew, right to her heart, that there was nothing she or Zyrguun could have done to have stopped or changed anything.

After what seemed a long, long time, the shoutings died away. She felt Zyrguun move. He seemed so tired; and by the sounds of him, she could tell he was weeping.

She sat quietly—wishing not to disturb him. At last, she felt him draw open the strings of the little pouch. The light shone in, obscured for a moment as his hand reached in to pull her out. In the bright sun, it took a moment for her eyes to adjust. She was surprised to see the blazing sun for before all the commotion, storm clouds had been rolling about the skies. Now they were vanished to a brilliant, blue expanse.

When at last she could see, and when she had the courage, she looked toward where the tiripz had been. There were pools of blood upon the ground—more blood than seemed possible.

“They think it’s finished,” Zyrguun said.

Yahza signed in weeping despair. “Where are its beautiful feathers? Why so much blood?”

Zyrguun began to explain, “A wind gathered the feathers and—”

But his words were interrupted by an awful, burping "BLEEEEE-BECK"; and from beneath the twisted tree, a monstrous, greenish-greyish frog with horrid copper spots bounded into sight and into a puddle of blood. With dreadful slurpings, he sucked it dry.

Yahza froze at the shocking sounds, scarcely breathing, for it looked like the same giant frog with the same horrid copper spots that she had once thought to kiss into a handsome prince. But now, it was hugely bloated and vastly more horrible.

She forgot her signing as she pointed at the awful sight and cried in disbelief, "Tzee-keyge, tzee-keyge?"

"Yes, it is the same," Zyrguun said, guessing her meaning. "It always is."

"Tzee-keyge, tzee-keyge?" the princess cried again, but signing too, with her knobby feet, "Why? Why?"

"He has so many invitations," Zyrguun said. "I didn't tell you before, I didn't want to worry

you, but I saw him the same morning my family was taken from me. I didn't recognize him for what he was, but I have learned since then. And now, you see—some things do not kiss better, however much we would like."

"But some things do," Yahza signed in wide, emphatic gesture, thinking of the compassionate deeds that had been planted like kisses wherever Zyrguun went. And remembering too, many of the hurts and bruises of her childhood.

Zyrguun said, "Yes, but most things require something more, if they are going to change."

As the enormous frog pursued his dreadful way amongst the puddles, Yahza sat, pondering the thing required of her, till, like a sudden burst of sunlight, she knew.

Crying "TZEE-KEYGE" as loud as she could, she startled the frightful frog from his awful course. With grotesque, sloshing PLOPS he leapt toward them, but not too close.

"BLEEEEE-BECK," the awful thing cried, and with an enormous burp, sat waiting.

"I forgive you for turning me into a purple frog and I forgive myself for being so foolish," Yahza signed as Zyrguun spoke her words aloud.

Yahza meant exactly what she said, despite all she had endured, and despite the malevolent thing that had been done in this place. And for added emphasis, she cried in her loudest voice, "TZEEE-KEEEYGEEEE—(Be gone)."

In the faint echo of her cry, Yahza felt a sharp, shuddering sensation in her fragile, plum body. The pain of it reflexed her into a spasmodic leap that spun her towards the ground, yet in the same moment, she found herself looking down upon that bloated thing as it leapt away with an awful, sloshing PLOP.

"I forgive you and I forgive me," Yahza said again, and this time she heard her own voice.

The horrid frog's eyes bulged till it seemed they would burst clean from his head. He screeched out a terrified croak, and then with gigantic, sloshing leaps, he disappeared into the roots of the twisted tree.

Yahza looked down and saw her modest shoes and the plum, fringed cloak she had worn to the far corner those three years before. What she saw was wonderful, but her gaze was suddenly drawn to three shimmering feathers that come floating down in front of her.

I would have been happy to remain a frog, if only I could have saved the tiripz, she thought. Catching the three feathers, she wrapped them in her linen hanky and slid them carefully in the long pocket of her skirt.

"We finally did our part," Zyrguun said.

"But I wanted to do so much more," Yahza said.

"I know," Zyrguun said, "but all we need do is what we must—and we did."

At those words, a recent memory flashed into Yahza's mind—the memory of what that second guard had said about how things sometimes came in threes. She seemed to hear the words, "Your three prayers and your forgiveness were the things required of you."

"Are there other things we must do here?" Yahza asked, turning to Zyrguun.

"Yes," Zyrguun said. "It comes out of that dream, I had. You are to take those feathers out of your pocket and let them go."

"But, they're all that's left," Yahza cried.

"They were settling to earth," Zyrguun said. "Perhaps, you should let them settle and see what will come of it."

"I don't know," Yahza said. "Why should we lose them?"

Zyrguun said. "I don't think we will lose them, if you let them go."

After a pause, Yahza said, "All right, if you are sure."

"I am sure," Zyrguun said.

Yahza took the feathers out of her pocket and held them for a long moment.

"I promise you," Zyrguun said.

Yahza let the feathers go and cried out as the wind lifted them up and away—but she stood where she was.

Slowly the feathers drifted, shimmering in the light of the setting sun—down, down, down, perfectly together. When they touched the earth, they caught a ray of brilliant sun, and as with a mirror in the midst of day, Yahza was blinded for a moment. When next she could see, she gasped, for there was no mistaking what she saw. The tiripz was standing alive and shimmering in the spot where the feathers had drifted.

As she heard the rushing of a wind, she thrust out her hands and cried, “Wait, wait,” but in her cry, she saw the tiripz lift off. Flapping its great wings, with its tail spread in an immense fan of iridescence, it lifted high against the rays of the setting sun and vanished into the east.

In its wake, Yahza saw something reappear in the path of its ascent—a single glimmering feather. It floated down in front of her.

“That one is for you to keep,” Zyrguun said.

Yahza took it from its gentle rock upon the breeze and wrapping it tenderly as before, she slipped it into her pocket.

"There now, you have an enduring memory," Zyrguun said. "And now, somewhere close will be my son or grandson, I know not which."

Yahza raised her hands to sign and then laughed as Zyrguun signed in wide gestures, "You have a voice, my friend."

"It might take awhile to remember," she said, hearing the strangeness of her voice after three long years. She spoke on. "What I meant to ask, is how you know he is somewhere close."

Zyrguun replied. "I didn't want to reveal to that hostile guard why I knew it was a tiripz. But do you remember the time you asked me if that frog could be killed and I said, not in the way most people think, but in another way? And that I would explain something at a later time?"

Yahza nodded.

Zyrguun continued. "Well today, we both killed that frog in our own way. I do not know how your wishes have changed these past three years, but I know how mine have and the return of the tiripz was a witness that we had given

enough. In my dream, after the tiripz rose up, I followed it and—”

Yahza interrupted. “But it’s gone.”

Zyrguun spoke as if she had not interrupted. “I followed it to a bench by a river. I sat down and waited. And as the sun set, a tall man, whose face I could not see, came and sat beside me and said, ‘I’ve been looking for you.’ So, my good Yahza, let us go find a bench beside a river. It’s getting late.”

They hurried down a maze of untidy streets with the setting sun at their backs. As they neared the city’s east wall, they came upon an enclosed park beside a river—one that by all appearances bisected the city. Lamps were already lit, and as they crossed the bridge into the lush beauty, Yahza thought of the contrast between this quiet place and the violent city square of short hours before. In this city, it seemed as if all its goodness had been squeezed into a far corner, enclosed, yet open—connected only by a bridge, inviting all into its peaceful beauty.

As they entered in, Zyrguun said, "This is what I saw and this is the bench. This is where we wait."

Yahza said, "I think it best, you wait alone. My presence might confuse things. I'll wait nearby."

Zyrguun did not object. He was brimming with emotion from all the events of the past few days, such that he couldn't trust himself to speak. After fifty-two years of searching, he could scarcely believe, the end might be near. Yet, he was also prepared to wait as long as a lifetime.

They had hardly seated themselves in their separate places when they saw a tall, slender man approaching. His face was in shadow with the sinking sun at his back. He came on as if he knew his purpose.

Yahza felt her heart pounding and imagined that Zyrguun's must be near fatal pace.

Without hesitation, the man came and sat beside Zyrguun. Yahza could hear him say, "My name is KinDur. I've been looking for you,

though I do not know why and I do not know your name."

At those words, Zyrguun began to sob again. After fifty-two years of hope and disappointment, he was bereft of words.

KinDur looked on, puzzled, yet infinitely compassionate. He laid his hand on Zyrguun's back and patted it like one would to comfort a child, but Zyrguun sobbed on. Yahza thought he would gain control, but the sobs just seemed to intensify with every pat on his back. At last, she approached.

"KinDur?" she said.

He looked up startled, not having been aware of her presence.

She began again, choking back her own tears. "KinDur, this man is your grandfather. I suspect you are a dreamer as he is, or you wouldn't now be here together. But for fifty-two years he has searched for his son, your father. Can you understand why he is so overcome?"

KinDur looked almost as if he would join his

grandfather in unending sobs, but he gulped them back with difficulty.

"How is this possible?" he exclaimed, as tears glistened. "My father was assured by one who knew firsthand that the entire family was gone, save for my father; even extended family had been slain to prevent other claimants."

"Your grandfather will tell of the miracle that saved him," she said.

"It could be nothing but a miracle," KinDur said as he continued stroking his grandfather's back. He waited, then spoke again. "We have never known our family name or even the place of this tragedy. My father said his informant seemed afraid such knowledge might ignite acts of revenge, so he refused to reveal the place."

The sound of their quiet voices seemed to give Zyrguun strength. As he gained control, his hand reached out to grasp that of his grandson.

KinDur turned his grandfather's face toward his own, as he spoke on. "My father remembered nothing, not even his own name."

He paused, searching the old man's tearful face. He felt a shock of recognition, as if looking into the future—exactly as his father would look in thirty years or so; as he would look in double that. Even without the dream that had brought him here, there could be no doubt; they were blood kin of three generations.

KinDur continued, filling the silence as his grandfather gained control. "Several times my father's name was changed by his overlords. When he took up the way of the shepherd, he began to call himself KinDur. When I was born, they changed the writing of it to KinDUR—the last three in capitals—as my mother wished to call me after him, yet still distinguish us."

"His childhood name was Jonun," Zyrguun said, speaking at least.

Then, as grandfather and grandson sat, tightly holding hands, Zyrguun told the story of the coup and an abbreviated account of fifty-two years. There were renewed bouts of weeping—joined in, at times, by KinDur and Yahza.

Much later, KinDur told of his own dream, scarce three days before, instructing him to go in search of a nameless, old man with a long, white beard. He had become disoriented and gone to a city that had no river running through it, only to turn back and find the right one.

They laughed at the strange confusion that had proven to be no confusion at all.

It was very late when KinDur finally turned to Yahza. "How do you fit in?" he asked. "I don't remember you in my dream."

Zyrguun spoke, ever so casually, "In your dream, did you happen to notice a purplish frog perched on my hat—gesticulating?"

KinDur gave a start. "Now that you mention it—why yes, I did. It was—" He broke off, not knowing how to phrase the oddness of it.

"That was Yahza," Zyrguun said.

"What!?" KinDur exclaimed, staring at Yahza.

"That's a whole other story," Zyrguun said. "A story for tomorrow—I mean, I guess, for later today."

KinDur blinked and shook his head, trying to digest the bizarreness of what he'd just heard.

"It might make sense if your mother ever read her children bedtime stories," Yahza said, feeling a heat begin to creep up her neck.

"She always read to us," KinDur said, "so I'm tempted to insist on hearing your story now."

Zyrguun sighed and spoke in weariness to his grandson. "KinDur, your grandfather is something more than eighty-seven years, and has had a past day like no other, so I was—" He stopped and spread his hands in a plea for compassion.

"Of course, come," KinDur said. "I have room sufficient for you and an adjoining one can be arranged for Yahza. And even if we get a late start, if we travel cross country instead of the road, we should be home within two days."

Arm in arm, with the weary Zyrguun between, they walked back to KinDur's lodgings, where a room was arranged for Yahza.

As they stood, strangely reluctant to part, yet in great need of rest, KinDur took Yahza's

hand, "Thank you for helping my grandfather," he said, and leaned from his height to kiss her forehead.

"You're a day late, my lad," Zyrguun said with a grunt.

Again, KinDur gave a start. "A day late?!" he croaked. His eyes widened in amused surprise at the unexpected croak. He cleared his throat.

Zyrguun and Yahza had no strength to hold it. They burst into hysterical laughter, desperately trying to smother it so as not to disturb other lodgers or to offend their dear KinDur.

But KinDur was not offended. He ushered them quickly into his room to contain the sounds, laughing almost as much as they, at the guttural croak that had escaped his throat. But also, as much in witness of their uncontrollable mirth.

"That's part and parcel of the coming story," Zyrguun said, when he could speak. "And when you hear the whole of it, my boy, you'll discover what an utterly perfect end and beginning your croak was to our dear Yahza's odd adventure.

KinDur saw Yahza blush.

He spoke with a grin. "I venture later today will prove a most intriguing day." He paused; then spoke hesitantly. "Actually, I'm wondering if—"

Zyrguun interrupted. "I'm getting the drift," he said. "If you two want to talk awhile, I'll lay me down in the next room. I'm not so old I don't remember being young and laying awake, a time or two, imagining things when I should have been asleep. So, if you're set on doing that, you might as well stay up and hear the real story instead. Am I right?"

KinDur laughed and Yahza blushed again.

"Yes, I am right," Zyrguun said as he ambled off to well-earned rest.

So it was that KinDur and Yahza spent much of the remaining night talking—sharing stories and thoughts and dreams; and pondering odd, mysterious roads. Yahza shared too, the many things Zyrguun would never reveal—his acts of patience, his countless deeds of kindness.

The sun was just beginning to colour the sky when Yahza and KinDur finally parted, feeling as though they had known each other forever. But despite the late, or more accurately, early hour of parting, Zyrguun's exhaustion gave them a few more hours than expected of dream-filled sleep. It was late morning when Zyrguun arose, thoroughly refreshed, and now, beyond anxious to end his quest.

As they finished breakfast and plotted the shortest possible way home, Zyrguun began calculating the hours to seeing his son. "Within twenty hours, I shall see him. Within twenty hours! I can scarce believe it," he kept saying. "Not even two days and I shall see him."

KinDur choked up as he pulled Zyrguun close and said in a trembling voice, "Yes, Grandfather, in two days time, a day will dawn like no other that ever was in the land of Tribbles. It will be remembered forever. Yet none shall ever be able to tell it like it was."

Prince KinDur was right.

There are not words sufficient to describe the reunion of King KinDUR and his unknown father; but suffice it to say, Zyrguun's supreme blessing, in the eighth decade of his life, was not just in finding a trio of blood kin, but there was a double bonus: Belle, once known as Belle of the Ballroom, and Yahza, soon to be consort of KinDur.

To his granddaughter JaBella, Zyrguun said, "Your name and face, I know—incredibly, the name and face of your grandmother."

To Yahza, he said, "No better end could I have wished for our journey."

To Belle, his one and only daughter-in-law, he announced, "From henceforth and forever, my kin may call me KinZYZR."

And so it was and is—forever.

The end
(& the beginning)

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