

Bob was a frog.

He hadn't always been a frog. Once he was Prince Bobert, Fifth Son of the Sixth Son to the King of the South Kingdom, Eleventh in Line, And Only Called a Prince Because His Grandfather Wanted His Grandchildren to Feel Special. (Yes, that was his actual title.) But now he was Bob the frog.

Why was Bob a frog? Well... that was a bit complicated. But at the moment, he needed to stop a prince from climbing the tower and also getting turned into a frog.

Built of white stone, the tower cast a menacing shadow against the clear sky.

"Hey," Bob croaked. "Don't climb."

The prince ignored him. *Rude.*

Bob launched himself at the prince, and bounced off. "Hey! I'm talking to you!"

The prince began to climb.

Bob jumped onto his head. "I'm warning you. Don't do it."

The prince grabbed Bob, stuffed him into a bag that hung around his waist, and continued climbing. Idiot prince. Thought he could do whatever he wanted just because he was a prince and Bob was a frog. He could hear the prince muttering under his breath.

*Oooo. She wasn't going to like him.*

After several minutes, the prince reached the top of the tower and heaved himself through the window. His bag spilled open and Bob tumbled out under a table.

Gertrude cleared her throat.

She stood in front of the prince, hands on her hips. Her black hair was so thick and frizzy it almost obscured her face, but her fierce green eyes pierced through. She had a wart on the end of her long nose. Bob didn't remember it from last time.

"Who are you?" Gertrude demanded. "Where are you from? What is your favorite book?"

The prince drew himself up and puffed out his chest. "I am Prince Rupert of the Faraway Kingdom. Where is the princess, *you witch?*"

Gertrude smiled and flicked her wrist. "Wrong answer."

All at once, Prince Rupert began to change. First, his face turned green, like he had smelled Bob's Aunt Bernice's socks. Then he doubled over, and his eyes popped out like he had actually eaten Aunt Bernice's socks. Then he was gone, like Aunt Bernice's socks would be if he had eaten them. Only his clothes were left.

Gertrude stalked over to the pile of clothes and Bob sidled further under the table. Gertrude moved the clothes and lifted the former Prince Rupert by a slimy leg, dangling him in the air.

"I *am* the princess," she said, and threw him out the window. When he landed with a satisfying *plop* in the swamp below, she turned on her heel and stalked downstairs.

Bob liked Gertrude, even though she had to be lying about being the princess. She had standards for her men, unlike some of the ladies that hung around his grandfather's castle. And he didn't really mind being a frog. It was better than alternating between doing nothing and jumping out of windows to avoid the fawning girls.

But there were a lot of frogs at the base of the tower, and some of them had things they really needed to be doing. For example, Frederick was the only person in his kingdom who

understood the tax code. And James, the bullfrog, could be fighting the giants that threatened his people. And that was just two of them. Bob had to do something to help.

He hopped after Gertrude.

The room below smelled of rotten cabbage, but he didn't really mind. The stone walls were wet and slimy. This was a dungeon if he had ever seen one. Built for pure evil. Like kidnapping princesses and changing men into frogs.

Gertrude bent over a pot of mossy green liquid, her green robes making her look almost froglike. She sprinkled some mysterious objects from a bottle into the pot.

"Gertrude!" Bob shouted his tiny voice across the *big* room. "Turn us back."

Gertrude turned and frowned. "Didn't I just throw you out the window? Robert or something?"

"His name was Rupert, and no, that was someone else. I am Bob and I demand—"

Gertrude held out a finger. "I'm sorry. Hold on." She took a crystal bottle off the shelf and took a sip. "You were saying?"

"I am Bob and—"

"You look like the frog I just threw out the window."

Bob huffed. "Well, I'm not. He *clearly* was a darker shade of green."

Gertrude shrugged. "You all look the same."

"No, we don't! Look, Frederick has yellow spots on his back, and James has five toes on one foot. Rupert, as I said, is a much darker green than I am."

"What's your distinct feature?"

"I don't know. There aren't exactly any mirrors lying around in the swamp."

Gertrude tossed her head. "There are puddles, aren't there?"

"I have no neck." Bob said flatly. "And my eyes are on the top of my head. How am I supposed to find the right angle to see myself in a puddle?"

The witch waved her hand. "My *point* is: I threw you out the window, yet here you are." She raised one of her thin, black eyebrows. "How did you climb the tower? How did you get in here?"

Bob let out the frog version of a sigh, which was a slow ribbit that sort of sounded like hiccuping.

"Persistence." He paused for what he hoped was dramatic effect. "And pain." He blinked his bulging frog eyes at her.

"Ah, hm." Gertrude let out a snort and turned back to the brew. "I threw you out the window for a reason." She poured some of the liquid from the crystal bottle into the pot, and stirred it in with a giant spoon.

"Honestly, you shouldn't have returned." She turned back to Bob, bent over, and squinted in his face, her nose a mere inch away. "Because I will throw you out the window again."

"That would be wonderful." Bob croaked.

Gertrude's smile faded. "I'm sorry. What?"

"You can throw me out the window. I like it. It's like flying." Bob let out a happy little ribbit. "After you turn the other princes back, of course."

"Those snobs?" Gertrude laughed. "You plan to get me to turn them back so they can come up here and rescue you? Do you really think I am that stupid?"

"No." Bob hopped on her head, which she didn't seem to mind much because she just stood back up and tinkered with her potions. "You successfully lured princes here with rumors of a captured princess. You have standards, even if you only ask three questions. You can turn princes into frogs and you're making who-knows-what in that pot. So you can't be that terribly stupid. In fact, you're probably pretty smart."

Gertrude froze. She froze like the princesses that visited the castle would freeze when they had a frog in their hair. Those princesses would start thrashing their arms about and panicking. Sometimes they screamed. Bob braced himself.

"What?" Gertrude whispered.

Bob swallowed the fly in his throat. "I said you're smart."

"Oh." Gertrude was quiet again, and Bob waited for her to scream, or grab him, or turn him into something that had even less chance of flying than a frog. Like a snail. But she didn't do any of those things.

"I'm not going to turn those princes back," she announced.

"But...?"

"But... I think I'll keep you around."

Over the next few days, Bob tried his best to get Gertrude to turn the other frogs back. He jumped on her face while she was sleeping. He hopped into her pot when she made potions. He told her really bad jokes. Normally when he told those jokes, the gaggle of ladies surrounding him would disappear and started following one of his less awkward brothers.

But Gertrude laughed at his jokes, and scooped him out of the pot when he tried to hop in. And she was a really heavy sleeper.

Bob was running out of ideas.

He hopped along the shelf in the potion room, hoping to find a turn-into-a-human potion. The glass bottles reflected his bulging features disproportionately. They weren't labeled.

"What's this potion?" He put his foot on a blue bottle with creamy swirls inside.

Gertrude glanced up from the mossy green potion she had been working on when he arrived. The sound of the boiling liquid was louder than it should have been and there weren't many bubbles.

"Dust removal. Sprinkle it over the room and all the dust will disappear. It stains clothing, though."

"And this?" Bob pointed to a black potion that looked like it was moving.

Gertrude wrinkled her nose. "That's in case a really nasty prince comes along and I can't deal with him on my own."

"This one?" The third was pink and shimmered slightly.

"Beauty potion."

"Why don't you drink it?"

Gertrude stared at Bob, and what he had said slowly sank in.

"Not that you—uh— *need* it or anything—"

"Shut up," Gertrude said.

She walked over to the shelf and picked up the bottle, swirling it. It glowed softly, bathing her face in pink light.

"Why should I drink it? To woo some stupid prince and be the most beautiful witch in the realm? But I don't need to be pretty in order to follow my dreams. Sure, it isn't fun that every prince who climbs the tower thinks, '*She must be a witch! No princess would look like that!*' I just..." She sighed, and glanced at Bob. "I should probably just drink it, shouldn't I."

Bob opened and closed his mouth before answering. "No."

"You just implied I was ugly." Gertrude gave him a flat stare.

"I wasn't thinking. I like you the way you are." She really wasn't bad. Now that he was thinking about it, he couldn't imagine her looking any way other than how she did now. He liked her the way she was now.

Gertrude eyed him and set the bottle down. She turned back to her bubbling pot, and there was a spring in her step that wasn't there before.

Thoughts of a human potion forgotten, he jumped down after her. Something she said stuck out at him. *No princess would look like that!*

"So you really *are* the princess?"

"Um, yeah." Gertrude tossed him a look, and seeing him on the floor beside her, scooped him up and placed him on a stool next to the pot. "I'm pretty sure I mentioned that. Right before I threw you out of the tower? I usually mention it at that point."

"I didn't think you were serious!"

"Because I'm ugly."

"Because you turned me into a frog!" Bob settled in his seat and turned the idea over in his mind. "You must be special."

Gertrude grinned, and added a lizard tongue to the pot.

By the next week, things had settled into a routine. Bob woke up before Gertrude, hopped on her head until she awoke, then set off in search of flies while Gertrude made her own breakfast. Sometimes while he was exploring, he would write: "Turn the princes back" in the slime of the dungeon and leave it there for Gertrude to find later. It kept things interesting.

Then Gertrude would work on her green potion in the potion room, and Bob would search among them for a human-potion. They ate lunch together, and afterwards Gertrude would read—sometimes to herself and sometimes to Bob. Bob hopped around the room. Sometimes he shouted, "Let the princes free!" and jumped on Gertrude's head, but he hadn't really done that lately.

Late one afternoon, Bob pushed through the last of the bottled potions. There wasn't a human potion. His heart sank. His annoy-Gertrude-until-she-gives-in plan wasn't working, and now his find-a-potion-and-do-it-himself plan had failed. Bob could enjoy being a frog for the rest of his days, but the others...

"Done!" pronounced Gertrude.

Bob looked over at her. She stood proudly over the pot, which had turned from mossy green to lime green with dark swirls. "What?"

"I finished the potion!" Gertrude beamed. She was happier than Bob had ever seen her.

"Oh. Good job!" He hopped off the shelf. His problem could wait. "What is it?"

"A turn-frogs-into-humans potion."

Bob gaped at her. "Really?"

"It's not that you convinced me or anything," Gertrude added hastily. "I had started it because I thought it might be good to have leverage over the frogs if they tried something. But now... It's getting pretty noisy at the bottom of the tower and I'm losing sleep. It's time for the princes to go home."

Bob knew for a fact that she was not losing sleep over the frogs at the base of the tower, but that wasn't the point. He had succeeded! Frederick would be able to file tax returns, and James could save the village! He hopped a happy hop.

Then Gertrude waved her hand, and Bob found himself eye-deep in swamp water outside the tower. Gertrude stood beside the pot, lifting her robes out of the water.

"I always forget about the water," she muttered, then raised her voice. "Princes! Jump into the pot and you will turn back into a human!"

In an instant, they were mobbed by frogs. They swarmed into the pot, there was a series of blinding flashes, and Bob blinked several times. When he could see again, he was surrounded by human princes, royal robes and all. Thankfully.

The princes eyed Gertrude, and she bowed without a word. They ran off in all directions, and Bob watched them jump from tussock to tussock through the swamp. Perhaps the frogness took a while to wear off.

"Aren't you going to jump in?" Gertrude asked.

Bob looked back at her. He hesitated. He liked being a frog. More than he liked being human, in fact. But there were advantages to being human, and they included a certain green-eyed witch.

"Don't you want to be human? Isn't that what you have been bugging me about?"

"The human stuff wasn't for me," Bob said. "I like being a frog."

"Oh." Gertrude looked disappointed. "I thought..."

"In fact, there is only one reason I would consider being human."

"What's that?"

Bob looked into Gertrude's eyes. "You."

Gertrude gasped. Then she smiled.

"Right answer," she said, and flicked her wrist. Her face began to turn green - just as if she had smelled Aunt Bernice's socks.

In another moment, the witch's robes had fallen to the swampy ground, and Gertrude hopped out with a muffled croak.

"Human stuff isn't for me either," she said.

"Really?" Bob gaped at her. He felt like jumping and spinning and shouting and laughing and crying all at once.

"Really." Gertrude confirmed. She croaked happily, and it was the most beautiful thing that Bob had ever heard.