

## The Frog Princess

Once upon a time in an enchanting, green land where the fairies sang, there lived a king with three sons. He admired all of his sons equally and wondered how to choose which should rule after him.



"I will set them challenges," he thought, "for that is how it's done in lands like ours. Now what will be the first one?" After some thought, he said to his sons, "A king needs a queen, and to keep his word. A good bow arm doesn't go amiss either. Each of you will shoot an arrow and, wherever it lands, there you will find your bride."

The first prince, who loved to hunt, carefully shot his arrow at the feet of a beautiful young woman, whose father was a nobleman. Luckily, she was pleased.

The second prince, who loved archery, shot his arrow through the window of a rich merchant's house and into the chair of the merchant's daughter. She was not best pleased but thought it would be a good idea to marry the prince, even if he gave her nasty shocks like that.



The third prince, who was worried about his sick dog at the time, absent-mindedly shot his arrow into a swamp, where a frog caught it in her mouth. The prince was aghast – he had never imagined a frog bride. But it is important to keep your word and, in a land where the fairies sing, such matches are possible. So married they were – in a quiet little family ceremony. The frog did not say what she thought of the match but the prince's brothers were pleased. They did not think the king would choose a frog to be the next queen.

A little while later, as the warm sun ripened the wheat in that enchanting, green land, the king announced the next challenge.

"A king needs to be able to inspire loyalty and marshal resources," he said. "A handy wife doesn't hurt either. Each of you will have your wife produce a loaf of

bread. Bring them to me tomorrow.” And the king licked his lips, for he was particularly fond of crusty bread for breakfast.

The oldest prince's wife tried her best, really she did. However, she had never baked in her life and the kitchen staff had all gone home by the time she started, so there was no one to teach her. Her dough was grey with kneading and it did not rise well.

The second prince's wife didn't even try. “He said produce, not bake,” she said and she hammered on the door of the nearest shop until they opened up and sold her one of their loaves. Unfortunately, she was in a hurry and left part of the wrapper on it.

“What will we do?” the third prince asked his wife sadly. “Beautiful as you are in a froggy kind of way, your froggy fingers are *not* designed for baking.”

“Do not worry, dear prince,” said his wife. “I have hidden talents. You are tired after helping your mare foal last night. You go to bed and leave it to me.” The prince, whose name was Ivan, did as his wife said.



So he did not see her cast off her frog skin as the stars came out to play. He did not see the lovely young woman she really was or hear her call out to her fairy maiden friends. He did not hear them sing, as they lightly tossed good wholemeal flour, delicious seeds and creamy butter together and kneaded in yeast and friendship to make a perfect loaf of bread, such as they eat in fairy castles.

Well, there was no question who had won that contest. The two older princes were not pleased.

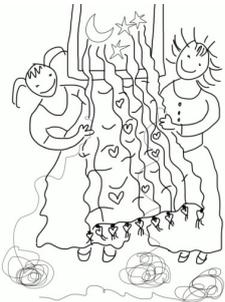
A little while later, as the leaves began to turn and the air became crisp with cold in the mornings, the king said, “A king needs to know about the industry of his country and a clever wife does not go amiss. We produce many fine fibres, so the third challenge is for you and your princesses to weave a rug, as warm and beautiful as you can.”

The first prince said to his wife, "What do I know of fibres? I am a huntsman and a warrior. I do not do fibres." And he left it all to her, which would have been fine if she had known any more than he did.

The second prince said to his wife, "It's lucky your father deals in fine linens and silks. We will have the best materials to work with." And they set to, weaving the fibres together to make a colourful rug.

Ivan went to see his friend the shepherd, whom he had helped many times with the sheep. He came home with warm wools of various shades, spun by the shepherd's wife. But still he worried. "What are we to do?" he asked his wife. "We have warm wool to use but I do not know how to weave and - beautiful as you are in a froggy kind of way - your froggy fingers are not made for weaving either."

"Do not worry, dear prince," said his frog bride. "Remember, I have hidden talents. You are tired after spending all your day out on the moors. You go to bed and see what I have ready in the morning."



The prince did as his wife said and so did not see the princess cast off her frog skin and reveal the lovely young woman she really was. He did not hear her call her fairy maiden friends and he did not hear them sing, as they wove the wool into a warm and beautiful rug, made even more beautiful by the strands of starlight, moonlight and friendship they wove it on.

In the morning Ivan was proud to take the beautiful, warm rug to the palace. Again, there was no question, who had won the challenge. The first rug was a sad botch. The second had many bright colours but was not very warm, while the third was beautiful and warm and wonderfully made. Prince Ivan's brothers were not pleased.

The king clapped his hands. "A king and queen must know how to behave at big public occasions," he said. "Tomorrow night we will have a banquet and you will present your wives to all the nobles of the land." And he sent out messengers in every direction with invitations.

The two older princes were pleased. Their wives were used to big dinner parties. They had beautiful dresses and knew how to behave.

Prince Ivan went home to his frog bride. He was sad. He was fond of the little frog and did not want to see her laughed at. Knowing how his brothers could tease, he did not look forward to their comments either.

“What are we to do?” he asked his wife sadly. “Beautiful as you are in a froggy kind of way, a banqueting gown will not suit you. And the chef does not usually serve flies for dinner.”

“Don't worry, dear prince,” said his wife. “Remember, I have hidden talents. You go on to the banquet alone and I will follow. When you hear a great noise, you must say, ‘Do not fear. That's just my wife arriving.’ And there I will be.”

“Couldn't you face bringing her?” teased his brothers, when Ivan arrived at the banqueting hall alone. “Or is she hiding in your pocket?” Ivan did not reply but looked distractedly round the beautiful room. The tables were set with white cloths and shining cutlery and glass. The walls were covered with the finest tapestries in all the land. An orchestra was playing and the nobles were chatting noisily about the splendid dresses of the two older princesses.

Suddenly there was a crashing and a banging in the air outside the door. Someone screamed.

“Do not fear!” said Ivan, remembering his bride's words. “It is just my wife arriving.”



The doors swung open and in walked a lovely young woman in a dress as exquisite as the dancing stars. She glided up to Ivan and laid her hand upon his arm. Looking up into his surprised face, she said, “Here I am, dear prince.” Dazed, he led her forward to meet his father, who roared with laughter. He thought it a great joke that the daughter-in-law who had made the tastiest bread and the warmest and most beautiful rug should turn out to be the fairest of the fair and not a frog after all.

But he was not as surprised as you or I would be: these things happen in lands where the fairies sing.

The other princes and their wives were not so pleased. They had thought Ivan would never be king but now anything was possible, and even likely. The princesses were jealous of the third princess's success and wondered what her secrets were. They decided to watch her and copy what she did.

During the meal the fairy princess (for such she was), poured some wine into her right sleeve. As she finished eating her meal, she dropped swan bones into her left sleeve. (They ate swans at those banquets, you know.) The other two princesses did the same, though they didn't like the way their dresses felt soggy. As Ivan and his princess - whose name was Vassilissa - got up to dance, she swept her right arm out and a spray of fresh, pure water flew out and formed a lake in front of the orchestra. Then she swept her left arm out and beautiful swans flew out and landed on the lake. Everyone clapped and cheered.

The other two princesses also got up to dance and tried the same moves. Unfortunately, red wine and bones were not welcome, as they landed on the best dresses of the ladies around them.

The fuss was somewhat forgotten amidst the music and dancing, acrobats and singing. Ivan gazed and gazed at his beautiful wife. While she was watching the acrobats, he stopped being dazed and started being resolute and he slipped away home.



Finding the frog skin on the floor of the bedroom (even fairy princesses can be a little untidy), he threw it in the fire.

"There!" he said and he went back to the party.

They got home as the stars began to fade.

When she saw the skin was not where she had left it, Vasilissa exclaimed, "Oh, where is my skin?"

"I got rid of it for you," said Ivan, taking her in his arms. "Beautiful though you were in a froggy kind of way, I prefer you beautiful in *this* kind of way. Don't you agree?"

"Oh no, what have you done?" wailed Vasilissa. "And with only three days to go too."



Suddenly Ivan found he was holding nothing but air. Outside the window, he could see a white swan flying into the sunrise.

Ivan was heartbroken. He spent the night weeping and praying. In the morning he went to his father and said he was going on a journey to find his beloved Vasilissa. His family was sad for Ivan, though his brothers couldn't help being a little pleased the clever frog was gone. Ivan's father gave his blessing to the quest. The oldest brother gave Ivan his second-best hunting bow, so he would not starve. The other brother gave him a knapsack for his clothes and Ivan started out.

After many days travelling east through the enchanting, green land he met a wizened, bent old man.

"Good morning, sir," said Ivan politely.

"Good morning, Prince Ivan," said the man. Ivan was surprised to be recognised but the man went on, "I know your story, Prince. You destroyed the frog skin of Vasilissa just three days before the spell on her was to end. You should never have meddled so. Now she has been sent to the castle of Kotshei the Deathless, a powerful and terrible man. He lives in a land to which no mortal knows the road."

Ivan's face grew sadder. "How am I ever to find her?" he wondered.

"I will help you," said the old man. "No mortal knows the road but this magic ball will lead you there." So saying, he handed over a heavy ball with strange markings etched into it.

"Thank you, kind sir," said Ivan, his expression lightening. He rolled the ball down the road and hurried off after it.

There was, though, many a weary day to come.

"Will I never get there?" he asked the ball but it just rolled on down the road.

One day an enormous brown bear blocked his path. Frightened, Ivan drew his bow.

"Please don't shoot me," growled the bear. "You never know when I might be of use to you."

Prince Ivan dropped the bow and waited for the bear to shamle off. A talking bear surprised him - but not as much as it would you or me. After all, he had had a talking frog for a wife and such things happen in lands where the fairies sing.

A little further down the road he saw a duck flying in the sky. Ivan was very hungry and thought it might make a good meal. He drew his bow and aimed.

"Please don't shoot me," quacked the duck. "You never know when I might be of use to you."

Prince Ivan lowered the bow and found he was pointing it at a sleek, brown hare quivering in the grass.

"That will do for a meal instead," he thought.

"Please don't shoot me," said the hare.

"I know, I know," said Ivan. "I don't know when you will be of use to me." And he let the hare hop off and ate some berries that were growing there instead.

Not long afterwards the ball rolled out of the woods and onto a beach. As Ivan paddled along in the shallows, soothing his poor, tired feet, he saw a large fish flapping on the sand.



“Please help me,” it gasped, “and I will help you whenever I can.”

“I don’t know when that might be,” said Ivan, “but I am happy to help you.” He lifted the fish and carried it into the water. With a silvery flick of its tail, it swam away into the depths of the sea.

At the end of the beach, where the shore became rocky, there was a small shack with curious carvings on the door. The ball rolled right up to this door and stopped.

An old, old woman came out. It was the good witch Baba Yaga.

“Come on in, young man,” she said. “You look famished.”

Ivan trusted his magic ball and entered the house. Baba Yaga gave him delicious soup with crusty chunks of bread. This reminded Ivan of the bread that his Vassilissa had made all those months before. Soon he was telling Baba Yaga all that happened and how he must find the castle of Kotshei the Deathless and discover a way of releasing his beloved Vassilissa.

“You are not far off now,” said the witch. And indeed, when she pointed out of the back window of her little house, Ivan saw a turret in the distance. “What you need to know is that Kotshei’s powers depend upon a magic needle. When the needle is broken, he will be no more deathless than you or me.”

“Where will I find the needle?” asked Ivan, breathless with hope that he was finally ending his quest.

“Ah, that is well hidden. It is in an egg which is still inside its mother duck, which is in a hare, which is in an old chest, which is hidden high in the branches of the oak tree you can see across the meadow there.”

Leaving the magic ball as thanks, Ivan hurried off towards the oak tree. When he got there, however, he stood frowning. The tree towered above him. How would he reach the branches?

Just then a large bear lumbered out of the forest. It stretched its arms round the tree and heaved. With a great crack, the tree's roots were pulled free of the ground and the tree tipped over on its side. Out fell an old brown chest. As it hit the ground, it burst open and out ran a hare. Ivan started after the hare but it was very fast and soon outdistanced him. From a nearby meadow shot another hare, which chased the first one. Then ensued a great battle between the hares until the one Ivan had helped gashed the one from the chest and out flew a duck.

"Oh no," cried Ivan, as he saw the duck fly into the sky. "How will I catch it now?" Just then he saw another duck chasing the one from the hare. It flew up behind it and, with a squawk, the first one laid an egg - right there in the sky!

Down, down, down fell the egg with Ivan running after in the vain hope that he could catch it, or at least see where it landed. He groaned as he saw it plunge into the sea. He threw himself down on the sand, wondering if this would be the sad end of his long quest. Just then a fish swam up on to the beach with the egg in its mouth.

Joyfully, Ivan took the egg from the fish and helped it back into the water again.

"I will remember you all, my animal friends," he called out. "You have indeed helped me." Then he cracked the egg and inside he found the magic needle, just as Yaga Baba had said. With fingers made strong by his hard journey, he snapped the needle in two and buried the ends in the forest, so that his good fortune would not become another's bad. Then he set out for the castle.

As he drew near, he could hear a great commotion inside. People were hurrying across the courtyard, calling to each other. No one knew what to do. Kotshei had always been a tall, imperious man. Now he had fallen to the floor, his face crumpling into many creases. He had been alive for one hundred and eighty years. When the magic needle was broken, he suddenly looked his age and died.

Ivan slipped in through the gate and searched the castle. He went upstairs and downstairs, into dungeons and turrets until he found Vassilissa. They were overjoyed to see each other. They agreed that, whether they got to be king and queen or not, they would live happily ever after.

And that they did, one day at a time, as everyone must.

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