

Fantasy

The Frog

By: M. Frost



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went away.”

The girl with red hair sobbed into

her pillow. Her tears weren’t pretty—her cheeks were blotched and snot streamed from her nose. When the ghost tried to comfort her, she glared at him. *“I hate you.”*

Given how clever the girl was, he always had expected she would uncover the truth of his identity. *“I’m still the boy you knew, Princess.”* He deliberately used the moniker she despised.

“You hurt my mother.”

This was true. He once thought the girl’s mother his destiny, the partner in magic his visions had promised, but she had denied her power. He never had understood why she couldn’t accept her magic and his attempt to convince her had left scars.

On both of us.

“She hurt me too.” The ghost felt the need to point out.

The only response he got was a flick of the girl’s eyes. Eventually, she got out of bed, pulled on a robe against the spring chill, then produced a quill.

“What are you doing?” He asked.

She gave him a wicked look as she reached for her best parchment, scratched ‘Narduc’ at the top.

“But you know my real name now.” He pointed out.

“This is your real name. It’s the one

your mother gave you.”

He could hear the warning in the tone of her mindvoice. It gave him a thrill.

What is she planning?

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He was surprised when the girl and her family left for Dragon’s March. He had not been back since he destroyed the Keep—shattered its walls, hauled the tower down stone by stone—unmaking the heritage that he, off a bastard line, had been denied.

The tower had been rebuilt. The girl climbed to the top, startling a flock of crows into the pink glow of sunset. *“I know what you did here,”* she assured him.

He was curious what the girl would do with her revenge, since his own had been so satisfying.

But when the girl’s mother came before dawn, when her eyes swung to him like coals gone to ash, he was concerned.

He reminded himself. *The mother cannot kill me twice.*

The ghost had not returned to the village since he was a boy. When the girl pushed open a door, he was surprised that he barely recognized his own mother. She hardly could leave her bed, but she talked to the girl about the boy who had been Narduc.

“He found a frog once. Must have been flushed out of the mountain by a storm, then dried up when the water

"How sweet." The girl said. "Do you still have the frog?"
 His mother scoffed. "Disgusting thing. I made him bury it in a box."
 "Your son is here." The girl said next, which surprised the ghost. "Do you want to see him?"
 She held out her hand to the frail woman.
 "No. He's been dead to me for a long time."
 The ghost was disappointed in the girl. *Did she think that would bother me?*

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When the girl was done, she made a ceremony of it, unrolled the parchment to read the words out loud. Because she had been so secretive, using magic to hide her work, he did not know what to expect.
 When the Seven—the council of mages he once called his colleagues—summoned fire to consume his lifeless body, they recited only a prayer to Usendi.
 The ghost found the girl's homage to be far more beautiful.
 She talked about what a handsome boy he had been, with red hair and cunning eyes. How he had cared for the mummified frog for weeks, using magic to reanimate it before his mother intervened. How he had brought his mother wildflowers when he came down from the place on the mountain he had picked for the grave. She described how they met years ago near the cliffs. How they would watch the seabirds nest on the sheer walls above the Sunder, shout in horror when the parents launched the chicks towards the dangerous waters below. How some of the chicks flew before

they could be dashed on the rocks. The girl was crying by the end. "My friend Narduc is dead."
 She cast the parchment into the hearth. She used wax in her ink, so the words melted before the parchment torched. He felt like a part of him really was dying.
She's a strong mage and has the althemere, it might be possible. He knew the trait did more than let you see ghosts. *With the althemere, you can touch souls.*

When she turned to the ghost, her eyes were hollow. *"I do not allow strangers in my room."*
 The ghost had not anticipated the danger. The girl first cast a spell of binding so he could not flee.
 Then the door opened to admit her mother. In horror, the ghost watched the woman who had killed him pull a stained arrowhead out of her pocket. *I didn't know she kept it. It still has my lifeblood on it.*
 When the girl began to chant the next spell, the ghost recognized what was to come. *This is not mere banishment.*
 As the dried flecks of blood on the arrowhead began to glisten, he felt pulled. The girl placed a tiny bone beside the weapon and raised her hands.
 He realized too late the bone was the phalanx of a frog.

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The box was small, but ghosts have no dimensions, so the magic convinced him he could fit. The mummified head of the frog towered over him. He could enter the hollow cavity of musty flesh through rents in the dried skin.
 He found the appendage where the girl had removed the bone. When he touched the empty socket, he felt stretched, felt the blossom of pain in

his neck from the arrowhead again. He thought about the parameters of the spell the girl had cast. *I had no grave, so she found me one. So clever. Worthy of the woman she will become.*
 He had seen his future and hers when he was just Narduc. He had haunted the mother for years, thinking her the destiny his dreams had foretold. When the girl was born, something turned in his soul and he finally understood.
 The ghost stepped into the frog, then sat down to wait, uncertain how long it would be, but confident in his future. *The Princess does not fear her power as her mother did. When her magic joins us, I will live again.*

