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# TRANSFORMED

*The Perils of the Frog Prince*

*Tyme #3*



ARTHUR A. LEVINE BOOKS

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-11392-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 19 20 21 22 23

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, April 2019

Book design by Baily Crawford

## CHAPTER ONE



**F**IFTEEN months.

Fifteen months, one week, three days, and about two hours. Syrah had felt every minute. Every minute that he hadn't spent hibernating, anyway.

He sat on a large, wet leaf, staring up at the rain and regretting, as he often did, the night that had brought him to this pass. It was Deli's fault, he thought bitterly for the hundred thousandth time. If Deli hadn't been such a witch, then he never would have ended up like this. He would never have been thrown out by his family or tricked by that rotten well — he would've stayed human, like he was supposed to.

He sighed, just barely, as he thought of being human. He had never appreciated how wonderful it was. He'd had hands. A voice. He'd worn clothes and eaten cooked food.

Out of the corner of his bulging eye, Syrah noticed the scuttle of a shiny red bug. Instinctively, he turned his head and unrolled his tongue. It still surprised him how efficient this method of hunting was. The bug was in his mouth in an instant, and Syrah swallowed. His eyes retreated into his skull and pressed the food down into his throat. He settled his belly and the undersides of his thighs into the

rainwater that had collected in the leaf he was sitting in, and he absorbed a long cool drink through his skin.

It was strange, what a person could get used to. He could never have imagined drinking through his skin, and the idea of swallowing live bugs would have once made him gag, but he did it all the time now, and it wasn't anything, really. He preferred catching those tiny fish he sometimes managed to grub in a stream, but bugs were easier to find, definitely more appetizing than snails — and one did what one had to do to survive.

Fifteen months as a frog had taught Syrah plenty.

“Come here, Prince Frog.”

Syrah hopped in a circle and looked up at the blond teenager who had been his protector for the past eight months.

“Ribbit,” he said fondly, and Rapunzel smiled down at him.

She was a good kid. Not perfect — she'd nearly let him freeze to death, once — but she cared about him, and in her possession, Syrah felt safe. Much safer than he'd been without her — and much safer too, now that he was normal-size. During his first few months as a frog, he had remained as tiny as the wishing well had made him, so minuscule that even minnows could have eaten him. Certainly enough of them had tried. Fish, birds, kittens — these were now the creatures of his nightmares. During the first months of his ordeal, mouths had lunged for him, claws had swiped at him, beaks had swooped to pierce him — and worst of all, enormous spiders had pursued him, their crazed, clustered eyes shining, their pincers raised like monstrous daggers. Syrah had never been afraid of spiders, but being the size of a thumbnail had altered his perspective. When he was human again, he would crush every spider he encountered. He would be the mad spider crusher of Tyme, exacting his

revenge on every eight-legged creature. His sister Bianca would give him one of her speeches about how all creatures exist in balance. He would eat a bowl of live spiders in front of her face to shut her up.

Several strokes of good fortune had finally landed him in Rapunzel's pocket — though they hadn't felt like good fortune at the time. He hadn't felt lucky at all when a brook had washed him into a line of irrigation, which had carried him to a river, where he'd nearly been dinner for the fish. He hadn't felt lucky when he'd finally washed up on shore and overheard a pair of hunters discussing the best game in the Redlands, which meant that he was a terrible distance now from Cornucopia.

On the other hand, it *had* seemed like luck when he had accidentally found his way into the glade of the Red fairies. Surely, he'd thought, they would notice him. They would recognize that he was human, and they would help him. But the Red fairies had been consumed in their war against the witch Envearia. They had been haggard with fear, their magic had been weak, and they had paid no mind to the spellbound frog in their midst.

And then Rapunzel had come to the fairy glade — and so had Jack, who noticed Syrah, and scooped him off the ground, and gave him to Rapunzel as a birthday present. The best moment of his frog life so far had come when the Red fairies restored Rapunzel to her human size. Inside her pocket, Syrah had grown into a frog the size of a fist, and his relief at the change was still fantastic. He was big. He was visible. He could crush most spiders with a single, vicious hop. Still, even as a normal-size frog, the world was too treacherous for him to risk traveling alone. He'd been biding his time all these months, and now he was close. So close.

Rapunzel crouched before him now and extended her hand.

Syrah hopped into it, and when his belly touched her palm, he felt and heard the thoughts inside her mind. *I wish Witch could see me at the ATC, I miss her and it hurts, it hurts — Why can't I work this stupid ring? I don't want to miss the tournament.*

This too was something Syrah had gotten used to — or almost. It was still strange, absorbing people's inner lives just like he absorbed water to drink. He doubted it was something all frogs could do — magic had made him a frog, after all, and so magic had also made him a little bit magical. It was a handy gift. It had allowed him, the first time Rapunzel ever touched him, to discern that he would probably be safe in her care.

Now he stayed near her wrist and carefully avoided touching the fairy ring that flowed around one of her fingers. More than once, he had scraped his belly against the ring by mistake, and it had overwhelmed his mind with visions he could hardly bear. The birth of the Olive Isles as they burst from the sea. The first stars, flung violently into the night sky. And a great blackness — a living, breathing, unknowable blackness, hidden beneath a hill. Tyme's oldest secrets were in that ring, and he wanted no part of them.

"Are you ready to go?" Rapunzel asked.

Syrah replied with his most affirmative croak, and Rapunzel set him on her shoulder, where he settled comfortably and surveyed the world from a proper human height. He was more than ready to go. He could scarcely wait another moment. Rapunzel and Jack were on their way to the All-Tyme Championships in Yellow Country. There, Syrah would finally find people who remembered him as a man. People who would help him.

"You're still using that ring wrong," said Jack. "Let me see it." He

shoved his black hair to no avail. It fell down again immediately, shiny and straight, half obscuring his black eyes.

“The Woodmother gave it to me,” said Rapunzel, rubbing the ring. “And Glyph said the trees would teach me where to go. If I just keep trying —”

“Come on, you’ve had a thousand chances,” said Jack. “Let me try.”

Syrah clung to the last scraps of his patience. He had never been long on patience, but his time with Rapunzel and Jack had forced him to build some.

“Just wait!” Rapunzel cried, flipping her long braid back over her shoulder and nearly smacking Syrah in the face with it. He pressed closer to her neck and avoided the slap. He was attuned, by now, to her hair-throwing fits; he almost never got hit anymore.

“Here’s a map,” said Jack, shoving a Ubiquitous one into Rapunzel’s face. “Here’s where we want to go.” He thumped the town of Plenty in Yellow Country, on the shore of Lake Tureen. “And here’s where we are now,” he said, crumpling the map into a useless wad and shaking it at Rapunzel. “We have no idea! The opening ceremonies are going on right now, and the delegates’ feast is *tonight*. I told you we should have taken that carriage when we were in Smoketree. At this rate, you’ll miss the whole competition.” Jack shoved the map into his rucksack.

Rapunzel held up her hand in front of her eyes and turned it back and forth. The ring glinted. “I don’t *want* to miss it,” she said. “Purl is traveling all that way to see me play jacks.”

“And Tess and my mother.”

“But I need to figure this out by myself. Without any help. It’s important, Jack.”

“Why?”

“Because it *is*.” She dropped her ringed hand to her side.

Jack sighed. “Let’s just walk until we find a town,” he said. “Then we’ll take a carriage.”

“Wait — where’s that book you brought?” Rapunzel asked suddenly. She made an impatient gesture with her fingers. “The one you borrowed from your mother.”

“Why?” Jack asked, but he was already digging in his rucksack. He found the tattered little book and handed it to Rapunzel. The lettering was so faded that Syrah could barely make out the title. *Edible Plants ~ An Illustrated Guide*.

“This says where different plants grow,” Rapunzel said, flipping through it. “We’re in the middle of the woods somewhere, so if we can figure out which plants these are, can’t we figure out *where* we are?”

Syrah croaked appreciatively and bounced on Rapunzel’s shoulder. Yes. A reasonable idea.

Jack looked impressed. “Sounds good,” he said.

Rapunzel had already found a useful page. She put her finger on the picture and peered at the nearest patch of flowers. “Does this look right to you, Prince Frog?” she asked.

Jack rolled his eyes, but Syrah croaked his agreement anyway. The flowers in the woods and the flowers in the book were the same. Marigolds.

“And they grow in . . .” Rapunzel squinted at the page. “Well, in summer, they grow all over the place,” she said, disappointed. “Orange, the Redlands, the Crimson Realm, Yellow Country, the Blue Kingdom, the Lilac Lakes, Commonwealth Green . . .” She turned the page. “Never mind, this doesn’t help.”

“Yes it does.” Jack had come to stand next to Rapunzel, and he



peered at the book alongside her. “Pick another plant — there are tons around here. We’ll keep identifying them until we narrow it down to the place where all of them grow. Like that mushroom there. My mother warned us not to eat those.”

“Huh,” said Rapunzel. “I’m sure I’ve eaten mushrooms that look just like that.”

“You’d be dead,” Jack replied. “Those might look like morels, but they’re not.” He reached over and flipped pages until he reached a page toward the back of the book. It listed several poisonous plants that were easy to confuse with other, edible plants.

“Bluepeace,” Rapunzel murmured, dragging a finger down the page. “Hemlock, juggetsbane, moonseed . . .” She pointed to a drawing of a mushroom. “This one? Slumbercap?”

Jack peered at the drawing. “Yep,” he said. “See? The inner lining has a silver cast, it says.” He plucked one of the mushrooms from the ground and turned it over. Sure enough, its inner folds shone faintly silver.

“Crumble the dried mushroom into hot liquid,” Rapunzel read aloud. “Slumbercap will dissolve, emitting a silver curl of steam. Even a small amount of slumbercap may cause extreme difficulty breathing. A few mouthfuls of the poison will result in paralysis of the lungs. Death by suffocation will occur within minutes.” She shuddered. “Well that’s not very nice.”

“None of these are,” said Jack, tossing the mushroom away. Syrah watched it fall and made a mental note not to hop on any of those. He didn’t want to go absorbing that stuff. “But the point is, these mushrooms grow in Violet, and then down across the central belt of Tyme.” He pointed to the book. “The Republic of Brown, Yellow Country, and southeastern Blue.”

“Between that and the marigolds, we’re either in southeastern Blue or in Yellow Country,” said Rapunzel, looking hopeful. “That’s closer to Lake Tureen than we thought.” She flipped through the book until she came to a drawing of a tree, and she looked up at the ones that shaded them. “These are birch trees, aren’t they?”

Syrah hopped. They definitely were.

Rapunzel laid her palm against the peeling white patches of the nearest birch tree trunk. “Birch,” she said, consulting her book again briefly. “Now, where do you grow?”

The ring on Rapunzel’s finger began to glow.

Syrah’s eyes bulged. He hopped repeatedly on Rapunzel’s shoulder, but she was too busy reading to pay attention, so he leapt from her shoulder to Jack’s. Jack turned his head, caught sight of Rapunzel’s ring, and gasped.

“Your ring,” Jack said urgently. “Look.”

Rapunzel stared at her finger, then lifted her chin and looked up into the slim, leafy branches of the birch they stood beneath. Syrah looked up too in fearful wonder.

“My ring is warm,” Rapunzel murmured. “Jack, hold my hand.” She leaned toward the tree, keeping her ringed hand pressed to it. “Birch?” she said, almost shyly. “Hello there, Birch.”

There was no wind, but the birch leaves rustled musically. The ring glowed brighter.

“We’re trying to go to Plenty,” said Rapunzel. “Could you show us the way? Please?”

Silvery fog rolled swiftly toward them. It enveloped them, so thick that Syrah could not even see Rapunzel’s neck in front of him. The fog coiled into long, dense funnels of silvery whiteness, then burst silently into smoke and dissipated. When the mist cleared, the

landscape had changed. They were still beside a cluster of birch trees, but these ones grew along the side of a wide road that descended into a valley. Beautifully tended farms nestled together like a great pastoral quilt on either side of the road, rolling toward a bright blue lake that shimmered in the distance. Syrah began to bounce on Jack's shoulder. He knew this vista. He'd traveled this road. They had reached the ATC. Here, he would find his family. Deli's family. Nexus Burdock. Somebody who knew him.

"These are birches too," said Jack, looking around.

"Is that how it's done?" Rapunzel looked up at the leaves. "I can travel from birches to birches, or maples to maples, or willows to willows?"

"We could make a map," said Jack. "A tree map."

"Yes! And then we really could go everywhere!"

Syrah barely listened. Too ecstatic to stay perched, he bounced into the dry grass and boinged in jubilant circles. His misery was nearly at an end. After fifteen months of grueling patience, somebody was going to make him human again.

Rapunzel touched the nearest tree trunk.

"Thank you, Birch," she said.

The branches overhead gave a satisfied rustle. The ring's glow dimmed.

"We still have to hurry," said Jack. "The invitation says the feast tonight is formal. You need to get changed."

Rapunzel looked down at herself. "I can't wear this?"

"It's an official event. They expect you to get fancy."

"Then you have to get fancy too."

"Fine."

Rapunzel and Jack eyed each other for a brief moment, and then

Rapunzel blushed. She pulled her hand from Jack's and strode off down the hill. Syrah bounced frantically after her, croaking as loudly as he could. If she forgot about him now, if she left him behind and some family of weasels popped up and ate him —

“Come on, Prince Frog.”

Jack scooped him up, and Syrah's panic ebbed. For a moment, pressed against Jack's palm, he experienced his mind as well. *She's getting better at all this — She didn't need my help at all — She held my hand.*

There was a lot of Rapunzel in Jack's mind lately.

Syrah rode on Jack's shoulder until they reached the bustling streets at the center of Plenty, where he gazed delightedly around, beaming as much as his frog face would let him at the wonderful noise of it all. People eating, kids laughing, babies crying, and the *Town Crier* box pealing over the top of it all.

“Hear ye! Hear ye!”

Jack walked up to the box, put a coin in the slot, and pulled out the tightly scrolled *Crier* that dropped into the undertray.

“Uh-oh,” he said, frowning as he opened the scroll. “There's some kind of sickness going around the villages east of here. Five people have died of an unknown fever, and there are a dozen others unconscious. . . .” He shook his head. “This *Crier* is all bad news. Listen to this: ‘Ubiquitous Productions has refused the Exalted Council's request for a meeting, though several recent deaths have been reported. . . .’” Jack trailed off, shaking his head. “Crop rot. This thing says that some kid fell from a rooftop when her Ubiquitous rope crashed ten hours early. And some other family's house burned down because they got an acorn that sparked — just like the one that started that fire in Quintessential.”