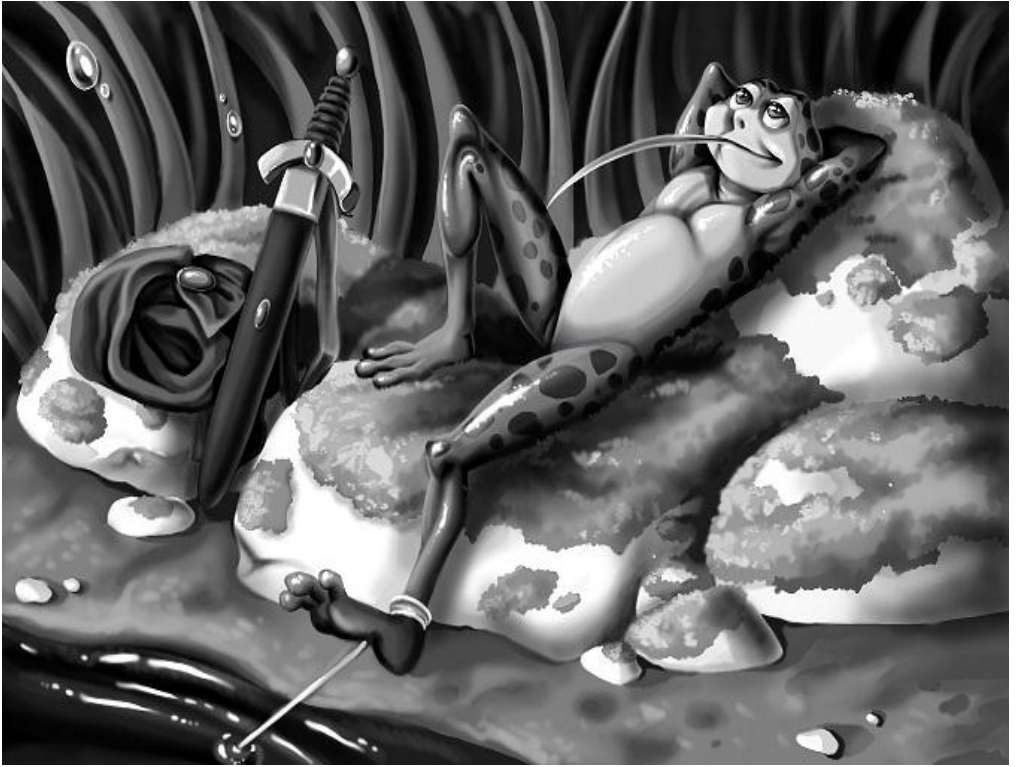


1
A MEETING WITH FATE

Hidden by the tall grass at the end of a fallen log, Bastion the frog, chief watchman of his town, lay on a thick patch of green moss. It was the most comfortable spot he could find with a wide open view of the pond.

A long blade of grass hung from his lips as he watched the clouds pass overhead. His sleepy eyes pictured animals on parade, strolling on the wind before they blew softly across the sky. The smell of wildflowers filled the air as dragonflies buzzed high overhead.

He had no fishing pole, so Bastion tied a string to his foot, which was attached to a float that bobbed on the water. It was a warm summer day, and a good time to sit back and enjoy life around the pond. His shiny sword, covered in its brown sheath and a green cloak that blended with the colors of the grass,



rested by his side. For he was the pond's trusted guardian.

But, it had been many a month since the call to arms had stirred him from his restful place, and today seemed to be another of those relaxing days.

The last time Bastion saw any excitement was when a rat, attracted by the smell of the freshly squeezed apple cider, came to Covington searching for a meal.

The younger frogs would tell of Bastion's heroic deed, sprinting out of the tall grass and jumping onto its back, hooting and hollering as he rode the rat out of town. The others, who were older and wiser, were not so impressed, after they saw the broken fences and trampled fields Bastion caused, just to have a little fun. But everyone still admired his courage.

Ever since then Bastion spent most of his time sitting by the pond daydreaming. He only pretended to fish so anyone who caught him napping might still think he was awake. In truth he never baited his hook, because he was afraid of what might happen if a fish did grab hold.

Only the rumble in his stomach and an empty cup broke the quiet moment.

"Well, I guess it's time to get moving," he said as he stood and stretched, letting out a grunt while scratching his belly.

"Food! Food is what I need, and maybe a bit of apple cider."

Bastion reached down to grab his cloak when a small sparkle in the sky caught his eye. It seemed to float and dance above the

pond, traveling this way and that. He shaded his dark blue eyes from the bright sunlight to get a better glimpse, but all he could make out was the flutter of wings.

Hmm, it may become a meal if it comes down any closer, he thought, never taking his eyes off the shiny object. Frogs are always in search of tasty bugs, and the pond was a buffet of flying delights.

Bastion moved to get a better look at his would-be meal when a tug on his leg sent him falling to the ground.

“Blasted string!” he yelled, as he rolled over to untie it from his foot. He stood up quickly and searched the sky, but the shiny bug had gone.

“Now you’ve done it, Bastion!” he said to himself. “Some watchman you are; can’t even keep an eye on your dinner.”

He shook his head, disgusted with his clumsiness.

“Oh well, might as well finish my patrol before I head home. I am sure to find some more food along the way.”

Bastion gathered the rest of his things, neatly placed them in a bag, and then slung it

over his shoulder. He strapped the sword around his waist, tied the cloak around his neck, and began to walk around to the far side of the pond.

He did not hop and bounce like a normal frog. Instead, he stood on two legs and walked like a man, but when he did jump, his strong legs lifted him high into the sky.

The grass was good cover for him, his watchful eyes looked constantly from side to side for any type of threat. But it also held dangers for both him and his town, and it was Bastion's job to protect them from anything hiding or searching for food in the grass. He counted on his sharp sight and keen hearing to avoid any confrontation and only drew his sword when escape was not an option.

Many creatures big and small lived around the pond. Occasionally, Bastion would encounter one or more of them. Most of the time, they seemed gentle and kind, like a rabbit or a mouse, but he never took any chances and would scare them off. If one of the larger animals entered Covington they could accidentally destroy their little town.

When Bastion had scouted out an area and felt comfortable he was alone, he would draw his sword and daydream of foul creatures hunting him in the grass. This imaginary game was his way of practicing his swordplay.

“Keeping sharp,” is what he would say.

He would bounce and twist, ducking and dodging from side to side to avoid the sharp talons or horrible fangs of an invisible creature. Sometimes, he would imagine more than one challenging him.

His favorite dream was of being attacked by a band of thieves, and he would swing his sword at sticks and logs, defending himself from other swords and shields. And when he was good and tired, he would end the battle, thumping his chest and flexing his muscles.

Bastion now looked up and noticed the sun was already in the west. It was getting late, so he continued on his patrol.

He walked until he came to a clearing that opened to the pond’s northern end. Lily pads spotted the water. Their brilliant white blooms sat like balls of cotton upon a platform of green. The water seemed calm



and tranquil, and Bastion would have passed on by if not for a hint of pink lying across one of the white blooms.

He listened intently for a moment and then could have sworn he heard someone talking. He quietly waded out into the water and the voice seemed to grow louder. He floated right up to the lily pad and listened carefully.

This is no bug, he thought.

Oh, how silly can I be? When have I ever heard a bug talk?"

Bastion slowly lifted his head out of the water to get a better look. There, lying on a snow-white flower, wearing a pink dress, was a kind of fairy, with large glittering wings and flowing blonde hair. Bastion had heard stories of fairies, but he had never seen one before.

He rubbed his eyes just to make sure he was not daydreaming.

"Oh my!" Bastion blurted out, then covered his mouth with his hands, knowing he had given himself away.

Startled, the creature sat up and ducked behind the flower.

"Don't go!" Bastion pleaded. "I'm sorry I scared you. It's just that . . ." He searched for the words.

"You are so beautiful." Bastion paused, looking carefully.

"What are you?"

The creature poked her head above the flower, giggling into her hands. She lifted her head high, looking like a princess.

"I am a sprite!" she said in a pompous manner.

“My name is Larien. And you are?”

Bastion bowed his head before her and then sat up, also proud.

“My name is Bastion, chief watchman of this pond, and I am at your service, my lady.”

“Well, it’s good to meet you finally,” Larien said with a chuckle.

“I have been looking for you all day and had almost given up hope of finding you.”

“Looking for me?” Bastion said, puzzled.

“Yes, sprites are attracted by magic, and this pond is brimming with it,” she said, as she looked deep into Bastion’s blue eyes and smiled.

“But, I am not magical. I am just a frog,” Bastion replied.

“Just a frog!” Larien said, laughing. “When have you known a frog to talk?”

“Well, all the frogs in Covington talk. And I have never met any other frogs.”

He then realized none of the other creatures he knew could talk, except. . .

“The snakes,” he said angrily, “they speak, those foul creatures. What about them? Are they magical?”

Something drew Larien's attention to the tall grass. She watched as she spoke.

"Yes! Created by dark magic, they are," she said, nervously looking around.

"There are animals and there are animals touched or created by magic. The ones that have been touched usually can speak, and the others—well, they are just normal."

An uneasy look came over Larien's face.

"You don't know, do you?"

"Know what?" Bastion asked.

"Who you truly are?"

A loud rustle in the grass followed by a couple of birds taking flight, flapping their wings fast, grabbed both of their attention.

"Oh no, I've said too much," she said in a panic. "I may have endangered you all if they find out."

Larien spread her wings and with a quick flutter, began to fly into the sky. She stopped and paused in midair, looking back at Bastion.

"Please forget you ever saw me," she pleaded. "Now go! Go before it's too late." She turned, and like a flash, flew out of sight.

“Well, that’s something you don’t see every day,” Bastion muttered. “Magic? Heh, me? I think not!”

Bastion floated beside the lily pads, trying to convince himself that the encounter with the sprite was real. He thought about telling the rest of the town what had happened, but he already knew what they would say and how crazy his story sounded.

So he decided to keep this little secret to himself. But before he could paddle back to shore, he heard a sound that sent shivers down his spine.

“Thissssss way! She went thissssss way!”

“Fool ssssserpent! You have lossssst her again!” said another voice.

Bastion remained motionless, for he knew those voices. It was Voltar and his sister, Morgana. That was what Bastion had named them. They were serpents, four feet long and black as night. The two of them were always together, slithering around the pond, hoping to catch something or someone unaware.



Bastion had confronted these snakes on a few occasions. He never spoke to them, but he would draw their attention, stomping his big webbed feet or rustling the grass and lead them far away from Covington before escaping. Of all the creatures around the pond, they were the ones Bastion feared the most. Many a frog had met their untimely end by the likes of those two.

To fight even one would be a daring feat, but to fight both—well, Bastion thought it to be crazy. Even though he was brave and skilled with a sword, he could not challenge both of them together.

He remained in the pond until he knew for sure that they were gone. Slowly, he made his way back to shore, carefully watching in case they returned.

“Quickly now,” he whispered to himself. “Don’t want to be caught in these parts come nightfall, especially with those two around.”

Bastion cautiously walked through the high grass and along the way he would encounter fallen logs and broken branches along his path. Bastion would stop to listen to see if anything was following him. When he

believed it was safe, he would squat and leap his way up and over as quickly as possible, so not to be seen.

Just before dusk, he reached a hill with three large stones upon it. He climbed to the top, sat upon one of the stones, and peered over the other side of the hill.

“Covington,” he said, with a smile. “It is good to be home!”

