

# FROGKISSER!

by  
GARTH NIX



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of the librarian Gotfried (who turns into an owl when he is upset), and the  
Royal Dogs, she must find away to defeat Rikard, save her sister, and  
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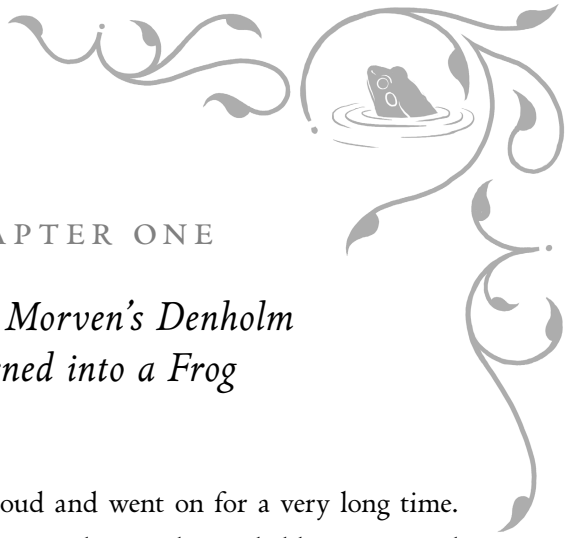
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## CHAPTER ONE

### *In Which Morven's Denholm Is Turned into a Frog*

The scream was very loud and went on for a very long time. Princess Anya, who was reading in the castle library, ignored it at first but eventually lifted her head from her book to listen.

"That sounds bad," said Gotfried, the librarian, in his quavering, high-pitched voice. Disturbed by the sound, he immediately turned into an owl and began to vomit up a nicely packaged parcel of bones from the mouse he'd had for breakfast. It was something he did when under stress. Turning into an owl, that is. The vomiting just came with the shape.

"It does." Anya frowned. It was her older sister Morven screaming, which was not unusual, but the intensity and duration of this particular scream were quite out of the ordinary.

Anya shut her book with an emphatic thump and latched it closed, since it was a copy of *The Adventures of a Sorcerous Typesetter's Apprentice* and the words inside would otherwise climb off the page and go wandering around the library. In fact there were still several words missing from an earlier reading, including the particularly troublesome pair of *instantly* and *forthwith*, which Gotfried now believed had escaped the castle altogether . . . or had been eaten by one of the dogs.

The screaming continued as Anya hurried out of the library, across the inner courtyard to the main part of the castle, and up the private stair to her sister's rooms. Morven was the heir to the kingdom—at least theoretically—so she had more space than Anya's little room. The sisters had not one but two stepparents, so the matter of lineage was a complicated one.

This was one of the most frequent questions Anya was asked later in life: *How is it possible to have two stepparents and no actual parents?* The answer ended up being rather straightforward: Their mother, who had been the ruling queen of the little kingdom of Trallonia, had died when Morven was six and Anya was three. Their father remarried a year later, to Countess Yselde.

So they had a stepmother, who was expected to be quite evil but mainly turned out to be a very enthusiastic botanist. She was not interested in the children at all, for good or ill. Only in plants.

But then their father died a year after his marriage to Countess Yselde, and their stepmother married Duke Rikard.

So the girls had two stepparents. Their stepmother the botanist wasn't a huge problem, but as it turned out, their stepstepfather *was* evil and wanted to be the king. Though Morven should by rights be crowned when she turned sixteen, in three months' time, it was fairly certain Duke Rikard would somehow prevent this from happening.

*Perhaps he already has,* thought Anya as she knocked on Morven's door. Not waiting for an answer, she went straight in. As expected, her sister was lying on a lounge in her receiving room, screaming at the ceiling and kicking her legs. Her maid, Bethany, was sitting on a stool nearby knitting. Large strands of the wool she'd stuffed in her ears hung down her neck.

Anya leaned over her sister and waited until two things happened at the same time: Her presence was registered through the veil of tears and Morven needed to take a breath.

“What’s happened?” asked Anya.

Morven stopped screaming and started sobbing.

“Ste . . . ste . . . step—”

“Stepstepfather,” guessed Anya. It was far more likely to be *stepstepfather* than *stepmother*. Anya hadn’t even seen Yselde for the past month. She’d gone somewhere far-off to collect a rare shrub or a sapling.

“Tur . . . tur . . . tur . . . tur . . .”

Anya raised an eyebrow. She could normally translate Morven’s sobbing speech but this was beyond her.

“Turned,” said Morven at last.

“Turned?”

“Denholm.” Morven started crying even harder, so hard the tears were flying horizontally out of her eyes. Anya stood back a bit, impressed that this was even possible.

“In . . . in . . . into . . . a . . . a . . .”

“Rikard has turned Denholm into something,” translated Anya.

One of the greater disadvantages of having Duke Rikard as an evil stepstepfather was that he was an accomplished sorcerer. Prince Denholm was the latest total-amazing-love-beyond-any-possibility-of-measuring of Morven’s life. The son of one of the kings from the petty kingdoms near the coast, Denholm was a thoroughly nice young man, one of the better princes in the continuous cavalcade that came to the castle to woo Morven.

Anya liked Denholm, and thought he was unlucky to have soft, wavy blond hair and blue eyes of the sort that made Morven

fall in love with people. As Morven was remarkably beautiful herself, with her raven hair and snow-white skin and warm chocolate eyes, young men she fell in love with usually fell in love back, at least until she decided she liked someone else better.

The spurned princes usually retired to their homes to write bad poetry and brood by the fire. Or they went on a quest and in the process discovered that they also liked someone else better. Or they got eaten by a dragon. Whether at home writing poetry, embraced by a new love, or in a dragon's stomach, they didn't come back.

Getting turned into something was unusual. Denholm must have been foolish enough to try to talk to Rikard over breakfast, or maybe even ask for Morven's hand in marriage, which to the Duke would have been the equivalent of volunteering for immediate transformation. If Morven was married, she would have allies and it would be even more difficult to get rid of her. And with her around, Rikard could never become the king.

"What has Rikard turned Denholm into?" asked Anya.

"A fr . . . fr . . . fr . . . fr . . ."

"Frog," said Anya. "How unimaginative. Typical. Stop crying, Morven. It's not the end of the world. Just kiss him and turn him back."

Morven turned her great tear-swamped eyes to Anya. Her plump rose-petal lips quivered as if she had a fever. She made a choking noise.

"Can't," said Bethany, who had pulled the wool out of her ears when Anya had started talking. "He jumped out the window into the moat."

"Go and fetch him," said Anya. "Then kiss him."

"Thousands of frogs in the moat," Bethany pointed out cheerfully.

“Morven will recognize him,” said Anya. “Princess. True love. All that.”

Bethany rolled her eyes.

“The Duke has decreed the princess is not to leave her chambers for a week,” she said.

“You . . . you . . . you,” sobbed Morven.

Anya rolled her eyes too, and sighed.

“I know, I know. You want me to do it, right?”

Morven sobbed, hiccupped, and nodded.

“How am *I* supposed to find him amongst all those frogs? I’m not in love with him,” Anya went on . . . in the process answering her own question, which was just as well, for Morven would have no idea. “I’ll have to get a dowsing rod and tune it with a lock of his hair. I suppose you’ve kept one?”

Bethany snorted. “Tufts and tufts. Locket.”

Morven continued to sob, but she managed to lift a chain from her neck and pull a crystal locket out of her bodice. It was heart shaped and had so much hair stuffed in it that some was escaping around the edges.

“I’m very busy right now, though,” Anya prevaricated. The last thing she wanted to do was to go and find a transformed prince in the moat.

“Puh . . . puh . . . please,” sobbed Morven. “*Please.*”

“Stop crying, Morven!”

Morven held out the locket mournfully, her shoulders shaking.

“Pro . . . promise me you’ll find my Dennie. I’ll duh . . . duh . . . die without him!”

Anya sighed, reached forward, and took just a few hairs out of the locket, carefully placing them in the belt purse of her kirtle.

“All right! I *promise!*”

“Sister promise?” asked Morven. She tilted her head to one side and blinked her large tear-filled eyes beseechingly.

“Yes! Sister promise. I’ll find him and you can kiss him and . . . all will be well.”

*All* would *not* be well, but Anya knew there was no point in tasking Morven with the larger political situation. If Morven’s current love was back in human form, she would be able to forget their stepstepfather was planning to do something horrible to both of them. Duke Rikard would have long since turned them into swans or maybe even geese if it hadn’t been for the protective devotion of everyone else in the castle, from the stable girls to the kitchen boys.

And, of course, the Royal Dogs. Rikard wasn’t a powerful enough sorcerer yet to go up against the dogs. They were intensely loyal and largely immune to his magic. Dogs were so very confident of their own identity they resisted transformation magic.

One legend told the story of a dog who *had* been successfully transmogrified into a duck, but simply refused to believe it and carried on as a hunting dog. After a few days with the hunting pack, the duck brought down a small deer and the spell broke immediately.

“Thank you!” Morven smiled. “You are the bestest sister. The bestest!”

“There’s not much competition,” muttered Anya on her way out, but she didn’t say it loud enough for Morven to hear. It might start her thinking about their dead parents, or her lack of more siblings to help her out, and then she might start screaming again. Quiet sobbing was much to be preferred.

“I do hope Gotfried is back to normal,” Anya said to herself as she returned to the library. She would need his help with the dowsing



rod and it was very difficult to keep his attention when he was an owl. Despite what she had said to her sister, Anya was rather worried about finding Denholm. There were thousands of frogs in the moat, yes, but there were also hungry frog-eating pike and ravenous frog-eating storks . . .

The more Anya thought about it, the more concerned she got. There was also the man from the village who gathered frogs to eat . . . and the snakes that liked to devour frogs in one gulp . . . and though it was an outside chance the moat monster would bother with a single frog, it might swallow a dozen or so just by accident . . .

A frog's life was much riskier than Anya had ever considered. But now a *prince's* life was at stake.

That frog had to be found and kissed immediately!