

The Story of a Royally Overgrown Tadpole:

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We have all heard of the monsters. They are tall, they say, their eyes bulge and in their skin the moon shines like a warty kaleidoscope.

Not too long ago, there was a woman who was invited for tea by such a monster. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary at first, if not for the monster's hand seeming practically stuck to the small of her back, like a fly to a lamp. After a while, she noticed a chilly ooziiness spreading across her skin, and, shivering, she gradually realised her muscles were becoming too weak to move. Closing in, the monster's longing tongue embraced her, wrapping her in a slimy, skin-like webbing. The monster held her for several days like this, until finally piercing the pearly sac and devouring her, defenceless.

The woman's sisters searched for weeks until one day, they happened upon the monster's lair. They waded through the dank cave, swatting swarms of flies as they went, until they came to a chamber. Their sister's bloodied chemise was strewn to one side, beside a strikingly ornate China tea service. One teacup sat empty and discarded, but the other was still full, untouched, with spores blooming over its surface like a cluster of lily pads.

In a land far away from here, there lived a handsome prince, whose charm had captivated an entire kingdom. He was tall and clever and strong, with beautiful big eyes and sleek, smooth skin, and the only thing he was missing was an equally perfect wife. Rumour had it, when he found his bride, he would present her with his jade ring, enchanted to bring prosperity to its bearer.

On the outskirts of the kingdom, in a sweet little manor, a young girl had become quite besotted with the charming prince. Her house was the last by the woods, and she would often gaze out of her window, hoping to spot the emerald-green banner that signalled a royal hunt. Her heart would leap on the days he rode past, clad in armour that sparkled in the sunlight, but she was never quite brave enough to venture outside. Instead, she imagined all the clever, witty things she could say, so he would be captivated by her, and whisk her away to his palace.

So, when an invitation to a royal ball arrived at all the respectable houses in the kingdom, equally charmed girls rushed to dress shops, to hair salons and to beauty parlours, sure that they would be the prince's perfect bride. The young girl was no different, filled with excitement and wonder, and just as determined to finally win the prince's affection.

The full moon marked the day of the ball. The young girl donned a strikingly beautiful blue dress, as gentle as it was composed, as enchanting as it was cautionary. As she made her way to the carriage waiting outside, she bade goodbye to her mother, whose eyes were filled with both joy and a maternal, knowing fear.

Peering out the window, a winding river of carriages ran from the silver palace gates, illuminated by the moonlight, which curiously seemed unable to reach beyond their bars. Impatient to escape the aged creaking and the croaking of her carriage, the young girl finally stepped outside and was met by the imposing mahogany doors of the palace.

One by one, the endless streams of beautiful men and women were welcomed by the handsome prince. He leapt from guest to guest, all smiles and clever compliments and charming apologies for the wait. In turn, all the guests knew extending their sincere thankfulness for their invitation was the least they could do. Then, composed as the young girl could be, she greeted the prince, who kissed her gentle hand. There, she caught a glimpse of the curious jade ring, championed on the prince's slender finger.

He leant in and whispered in her ear, "Though I have ventured far and wide, never before have I seen a blue whose beauty was matched by its bearer, not even in the most sacred pools or the most mesmerising ocean. I would love nothing more than to speak with you later tonight."

She immediately blushed and couldn't help but feel flustered by his long-awaited attention, though something nagged at her that his charms seemed so very practiced. Inside the grand ballroom, women danced and twirled like waterlilies upon a pond, their dresses floating as if made of petals. The young girl gazed upon the suspended chandeliers that cast a dappled effect on the sea of dressed up faces, and the soaring music of the orchestra muffled the murmurs of the crowd, as if she was underwater. She discerned a few whispers and mutters of the many ladies in attendance paired with piercing glances towards her direction, but she paid no matter to them: after all, it was she who would capture the affections of the prince. Tonight was her chance, and she pondered what she would say to him when the promised time came.

A sudden hush fell over the grand ballroom as the prince paused at the top of the steps leading into the ballroom, his gaze fixed upon the young girl. He took her by the hand and led her away, his hand resting on the small of her back. The other maidens watched with envy, but the girl only smiled, her heart fluttering, what a pleasure it was to again be noticed by the prince!

Through looming doors and down a dimly lit corridor, the air grew colder. His hand pressed firmer against her back, as if bound to her by glue. Eventually they arrived before a set of doors painted a deep green, with gilded carvings of waterlilies.

"How pretty these are," the girl exclaimed, tracing the delicate carvings with her hand. But the Prince gave only a slimy smirk. Without a word, he pushed the doors open and led her inside. The moonlight shone in through a solitary window, creating a pool of silver light in the centre of the floor and glinting on the gilded edge of a lone teacup.

"Dance with me," the prince commanded, as he took her hand and guided her into a slow waltz. The girl gazed into the prince's eyes, she had always longed to find true love and here she had found it, in the prince no less!

Yet, as she gazed into his eyes they began to bulge, and his skin grew slick beneath her fingertips. She tried to step back but she was stuck in his embrace. She quivered in fear as he lunged towards her, his face less than an inch from hers. Before she could cry out, he pressed his lips to hers. But they were no longer the lips of a man. They were cold. Wet. Slimy. His hands, now webbed and covered in warts, began to clutch at her dress as she struggled. A single tear slipped from her cheek, falling onto his arm.

The moment it touched his skin the prince gasped. His hands, once clinging to her, slipped away as he fell to the floor. Where he once stood, a small, slimy green frog now croaked. At his feet, all that remained of the once charming prince was his jade ring, gleaming in the moonlight. The young girl snatched up the ring and fled the castle, her heart pounding.

When she arrived home, she dared not breathe a word to her mother, who was already anxious at her dishevelled appearance. That night, she slept with the jade ring beneath her pillow, desperately trying to think of what she should do.

The next morning, she headed straight into town and sold the jade ring to a jeweller who she knew would ask her no questions. With her earnings, she placed an advert in the papers, asking for any woman who had met the prince to come forward and share her experiences. The following day, she sat herself at a stall right in the town square, and by noon, a hundred women from all kinds of places were lined up to speak to her. There were a dozen women who had visited the palace, and dozens more who had worked there.

Each story began the same: piercing eyes, charm, and hands all too curious. All afternoon, she listened as each woman's tale turned disturbingly sour, diligently writing every word, and invariably, the prince's unmistakable cruelty emerged from behind his charming veneer. Finally, three women approached the table, and told her of their sister, who had taken tea with the prince, only to never be seen again.

A chill rushed down the young girl's spine, and she suddenly understood the true monstrosity of the prince. She returned home; her bag full to bursting with stories. She worked tirelessly through the night, assembling every account in order, and rushed to the printers just as dawn began to break. As the morning sun poured over the kingdom, every doorstep was lit up with the headline: **The Story of a Royally Overgrown Tadpole.**