

Gold on the Doorsteps

By Krysta Denzer

There was gold on the doorsteps—scattered flakes of gold, where the golden-eyed frog had hopped. Dead roses scattered the stairs, a rusty reddish brown on the ivory marble. Dragonflies hummed through the air, tiny and magical in their own sort of way.

But most of all, the water was what you noticed. The droplets that scattered the staircase like dew on the grass. The water that had fallen from her eyes.

She ran away in a long golden dress, too distraught to remember her shoes. The old mansion would never see her again—or so she vowed. Her bright green eyes were rimmed with red from crying. Her dark chestnut curls were still swept into a beautiful updo from the night before—the night that the stars had shone upon her joy.

Hmphff!! Joy no more, she thought bitterly as she sat by the little goldfish pond in the woods. My greatest joy, become my deepest sorrow! How I rue the day I met her!

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It had all begun with a silly little girl in the marketplace. Technically, Joanna was not supposed to be in the marketplace at all. So she called it the town square, and told Marquise that she was going there to visit with the other young people. And then as she meandered through stalls, peeking in the windows of the few fine shops, there was the girl.

She was a few years younger than Joanna, perhaps only fourteen. But she had bright golden curls, rosy cheeks, and a cheerful face. Unfortunately for Joanna, she also had a very provocative personality. Meaning that, by mocking you, she would provoke you to action.

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The goldfish in the pond shimmered with a beautiful orange color, orange as the sunset on the fateful day when she had met the girl in the square. At first it had been only a simple question:

“Have you ever been to see the fortune-woman?”

But then it became a dare.

“If you've never been to see the fortune-woman, then how do you know that she is so bad?”

That was one question which Joanna could not answer. “They say she is evil, because she consults the devil.”

“But what if they lied? How will you know, if you never go to see her yourself? Don't you want to know who you will marry? Which of those handsome boys has already asked your uncle for your hand?”

The sun was setting as Joanna set off to find the fortune-woman's house. She had never been near it herself, but she had seen the signs pointing the direction. All she had to do was follow them.

She reached the weathered wooden cabin just before darkness fell. Inside, the old woman already had a fire burning. The flames took the chill off the cool night air.

Joanna didn't have to knock at the door to get in. Lady Midas was already waiting for her.

"What can I do for you, my young lady?"

"I want to know..."

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"I want to know, I want to know," darn it! The words echoed in her mind as ones of stupidity. *If only I had not gone,* she thought. *Then I would never have worn the shoes to the party.*

They were the shoes her mother had once worn. Small, heeled slippers embedded with ruby crystals on the outside. The crystals cast a blood-red glow on the polished marble patio. Like the reflection of a thousand tiny droplets of blood.

The party was more like a ball—a ball thrown to see who would try for the fair Joanna's hand. And who do you think appeared foremost among the guests? It was *him*.

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Melchivek had always had his eye on Joanna. After all, she was perhaps the most well-bred girl anywhere within a week's journey. But not well-bred because of her looks, although she was pretty, or even because of her parents, but because of her disposition. And also because of her education.

Now, a bookish education was by no means a priority for women, but growing up protected as the only child in a large mansion filled with books, there was little else for her to do. So her head was filled with knowledge and with ideas. Most men would have called it whimsy, and idle dreaminess, but Melchivek was one of the rare men who appreciated it.

So many hours alone with books, reading and learning from the experiences of others written within a printed page, had given Joanna a quiet, thoughtful disposition. This, perhaps, was the most appealing thing of all. Unlike the other girls, Joanna would never bore a boy with mindless, giggling chatter. She was perceived as almost being too good for such a thing.

Joanna was pretty, but not extraordinary. She was an average girl, like you or me. The glory of her tale is not in her beauty, but in the trials of her circumstances. And it is a story of a frog.

Frogs were one of Joanna's favorite creatures. She would go down to the pond in the woods and catch them. She marveled at their webbed feet and their golden eyes.

Sometimes she would even bring one home with her—not that her uncle cared much for *that*.

Marquise prided himself in raising Joanna carefully, in raising her to be an appropriate daughter of God. In addition to the church each Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday, there were the quiet devotions each night before bed. When she was younger he would read to her in bed, before bidding her good night. Now that she was older, she was expected to read the Scriptures for herself. Of course, it did help that she had been assigned her very own spiritual mentor—a lovely old lady with long silver hair, rumored to have been the nurse of Joanna's infancy. The lady had never answered that question for Joanna.

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One day Joanna found a small handsome tree frog with golden eyes. His skin was marbled and resembled the bottom of a crystal-clear, pebble-lined stream, glowing with shades of brown, red, and amber. His eyes shone like pure gold, a color richer than the sunlight.

Fascinated, she carried the creature quickly back to the house to show her uncle. She had never seen such a frog before. Her uncle could only give a grunt of laughter and shake his head when she brought it into his study. “Joanna, no, I have never seen such a frog before. But neither have I ever seen such a girl as you.” He spoke it warmly, with a smile upon his face. He loved her as his own daughter, though she had been born to his sister.

“Oh, and Joanna,” he had added as she walked from the study. “Remember that your ball is tomorrow!”

Joanna took the frog back to the woods and let it go. But then she spent the next four hours following it through the undergrowth. By nightfall it finally led her back to the pond. The creature hopped onto a lily pad, hopped again, and was gone in the grass. For once, she did not try to follow.

Instead, she sighed and looked down into the still, glassy water. The reflected lights of a thousand stars shone up at her. *How beautiful.*

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Her ball began well, the finest party that any girl could hope for. She had invited several of her closest girlfriends, and of course there were plenty of fine suitors as well. It was very much a young person's party, although Marquise had invited several of his friends, and also despite the parents of more than a few respectable young men. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to have a part in Joanna stepping into womanhood. No one wanted to miss the opportunity to become her husband or in-law.

Melchivek arrived fashionably late, as always. There were more people there to hear your arrival announcement if you happened to arrive late. By coincidence, he also had golden amber eyes.

The first thing Melchivek did was to greet the lady of honor, none other than Joanna herself, with a bow and a kiss of the hand. Manners of all proper noblemen, of course. He mingled well with the crowd, although he knew few of them well. He lived a good five days' journey from the mansion, so it was understandable for him to be unfamiliar with the less-wealthy locals. He only knew Joanna because his father had always done business with Marquise. He had known her for a very long time.

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During a break in the music, Joanna took a moment to herself on the edge of the balcony. She was not long alone, however, for Melchivek soon approached.

"I was just noticing how beautiful your shoes are. They cast a glow upon the floor."

"Thank you. They were my mother's. They were made for her wedding."

"Well, I am glad that they have been saved to be worn again."

"Indeed. Would you like to dance? This is one of my favorite songs."

She had a wonderful time dancing with Melchivek. She even took her shoes off to dance a few high-spirited folk-dances. She was excited and happy.

It was not until later that things took a turn for the worse. She and Melchivek were walking together along the side of the house.

"Joanna, I would like to ask you something. Would you marry me?"

Before she could answer, one of the very young men shouted. "Look, a frog! Kill it!"

Joanna blinked and gasped. She rushed to the ground and scooped up the tiny frog, drawing it protectively away from the wild boy. It was the same frog which she had followed before.

"How can you try to kill this poor frog? What has it ever done to you?"

The boy stared in shock. "I thought girls were supposed to be afraid of frogs."

"Are girls supposed to be afraid of *everything*?" Joanna cried.

"Joanna," Melchivek said.

"I forbid you to harm this frog!"

"Joanna!"

"What?!"

"Will you marry me?"

"What?"

"Put down the frog and marry me!"

Joanna stood, stunned. Now she was distraught, at a loss for words. *I wanted what the fortune-woman said, but—so soon?* She felt a hand on her shoulder, and looked around to see the lady standing on the doorsteps, long silver hair swept behind her

shoulders.

"I—I cannot," she stammered. "I am not ready, I still have a nurse."

His face was set, his golden eyes were glowing. "I can remove the nurse for you."

"What—remove her?"

"Joanna. Come here."

She stepped closer and stared up into his gaze, meeting his bold eyes. Too bold, such piercing gold. She looked away.

And when she looked away, she heard a sound. She looked back to see her mentor lying dead upon the ground. His blade was in his hand.

Joanna gasped and fell to her knees by the side of her beloved lady. She still held the frog in her palm, and her first shower of tears drenched it. And then it leaped from her hand. It jumped onto the stairs, where the roses had fallen from Melchivek's hands. It hopped up one, and down. The frog with the golden eyes was gone.

Author's Note:

I hope you paid careful attention as you read this story. The little details here and there come together and interconnect like strands in a spider web. This is a mysterious fantasy story tying in elements from Cinderella and other fairy tales. The golden-eyed frog represents Joanna's dreams, while Melchivek and the other suitors represent expectations, especially the pressure we all feel from society. The frog hopping away at the end is symbolic of her dreams escaping away. But it is up to you to choose what will happen afterwards. Will Joanna become another expectation-bound prisoner, or will she rise again to find her dreams and God-given purpose?