

# THE FROG'S PROMISE

Once upon a time, there was a young maid named Zuda who did washing for a great lord in a castle. She had been born into slavery, and her supervisors were very cruel and demanding. She lived in constant fear of making a mistake so bad that her supervisors would banish her to work the rest of her life in her lord's salt mines.

In spite of her enslavement and terrible working conditions, Zuda had a few hours to herself once every few days and she would spend these hours outside the castle, near a small creek in a forest. Zuda often dreamed of being able to spend all her time here, but she knew the lord would never hear of it. Lords and ladies could live by brooks: they knew freedom. Slaves such as her and her supervisors could never have a choice about how they spent their lives.

Or so she thought.

One day, at the side of the creek, Zuda heard a voice. "Young woman! Look down here!"

Intrigued, Zuda looked at the water's edge. She saw a small frog.

The frog spoke. "Yes, yes! It is I who spoke! Pardon me for being so fantastic, but I know of no other way to appear to you, young woman."

Zuda felt as though she were dreaming. The world around her swirled at the edges and time seemed to take on an odd mannerism.

"Tell me your name, young woman."

"I am called Zuda."

"That is a very plain name for such a beauty as you."

Zuda blushed. She had been told she was comely, and had been arranged to marry a stable hand in a few months. She had no idea what he looked like, but her lord's supervisors did not need her to approve. As a slave, she would do as she was told or perish in the mines.

"Truly! I could share my whole kingdom with you, if you would do what every other woman has refused to do."

"Kingdom?"

"Yes, kingdom. Zuda, you see a master of a great realm before you! A victim of sorcery, my people think me gone and a council of regents rules in my stead. If you but break the spell cast upon me with your kiss, I could return to my lands and have you as a wife on my side."

"But I am a slave, from a slave people. I am not fit to be seated next to the race of masters and lords."

"Then let your charity to me gentle your condition and make a lady of you!" The world swirled more and time stretched in strange directions to accommodate the warps of reality. Zuda believed the changes had to do with the spell on the frog-lord.

"Do you promise to make me your lady?"

"I promise with all my heart!"

Zuda put all her faith in the words of the enchanted creature and bent forward to kiss him. As her lips touched his, the swirls of the world and the vortexes of time multiplied and amplified so intensely that she could not tell where her dreams ended and her reality began.

Somehow, she regained her ability to see solid forms in actual moments of time such as she was used to experiencing and opened her eyes.

Before her, she saw several men with goat-like haunches. They had horns protruding from their curly locks of hair. They leapt about with some sort of wicked anticipation.

One said, "That ought to teach you to trust a frog's promise!" The man-beasts all laughed at this cruel joke of magic.

Zuda crawled backwards away from the man-beasts, but it soon became clear to her that she could not escape them. They advanced, leering and jesting about what they hoped to do to Zuda. Of all

the things they threatened, their promise to roast her and devour her at the end of all their sport seemed the least terrifying.

Zuda kept backing up, not knowing what else to do, and finally came up against a solid barrier. It felt like a rock against her back, but in this strange world, she could not be sure until she saw it. The trees all grew in a tangled, thorny manner, with leaves of purple and blue. The grasses and bushes had similar dark foliage, complimenting strangely the yellow of the sky. Against the stone-thing, Zuda prayed to the gods of her people that if they had any power in this realm, that they spare her from perishing in such a bizarre place.

The man-beasts formed a half-circle around Zuda. One said, "Now, good woman, if you promise to cooperate with us, we'll let you live and be our slave. None of what we said will happen to you. What do you say?"

Zuda had no desire to trust the leering, evil thing. She felt a loose rock under her right hand. She tightened her jaw and swung the rock upward, into the face of the man-beast who taunted with his false promise. The thing howled like an animal and his fellows staggered back, baring their teeth.

Zuda stood up, slowly. She realized a new use for the strength she'd acquired in her many years of washing and carrying massive loads of washing for her lord's castle. The howling beast backed away, hiding his bleeding, smashed face from Zuda's resolute visage. The unhurt beasts did their best to look threatening, but it was clear who the greater threat was.

Zuda lunged at the nearest beast and smashed his chest with her rock. The others leaped upon her, biting and gnashing her left arm and leg. Their bites were no harder than the whips of the supervisors, though, and she felt next to nothing. The foolish creatures were now vulnerable to Zuda's powerful smashing blows and hard kicks. They could not break her skin but she managed to break their bones with ease. Soon, Zuda stood victorious over six broken man-beasts.

A part of her thought to bind them in thorned vines and roast them alive, as they had threatened her. Another part of her thought to bind them only and leave them to the beasts of whatever forest this might be.

*Perhaps that would keep them from preying upon me,* thought Zuda. She bound them. Some pleaded with her to be merciful and let them go. Others begged that she kill them outright. She heeded none of their requests: her sense of justice would not permit it. Her sense of survival agreed: unbound, they could still pose some sort of threat if they struck from behind. *Best to leave these lying beasts here for others to feast upon.*

Zuda looked about the enchanted world she now stood in and saw nothing to indicate any sort of shelter or even safety nearby. The grass did feel soft against her feet and the air warm around her torn clothing - at least there was no danger of freezing in the elements.

But where to go? What to do? How to get back to her place in her lord's castle?

*Wait a moment... Why go back?*

Why go back, indeed? What awaited her in the world she once knew?

Here, even if only for a few more moments, Zuda could live free and choose how to spend her fate. Terrible and strange though this magical world was, it at least offered the one thing her old world did not: freedom.

Zuda made her home in the magical world and although she struggled terribly, particularly at first, she remained undisturbed in her calm purpose of securing freedom. She learned to harvest food, hunt, and prepare shelter. She found company in the whispers of the forest spirits, who eventually guided her to a settlement of beings who, even if not human, were human enough to be good company for a long while.

And as she lived her life freely, she began to be thankful for the trickery of that frog by the creek. Had he not deceived her, she never would have escaped her slavery. And though she struggled on in her life, she lived gratefully and peacefully ever after.