“All we need is very simple,” she proclaims. “What is required to lift this curse isss…” She reads the label on the back of the bottle. “True love’s kiss,” she reads.

Callum doesn’t even croak.

“Oh,” the love of his life says. “Do you have one of those?”

“Oh no,” Claudia despairs. She’s holding the empty bottle of weird glowy green stuff she’d accidentally spilled on him, and she’s suddenly very tall.

Callum tries to say something, but only a weird croaky sound comes out.

“I turned the prince into a frog,” she wails, and falls to her knees in front of him. “I’m going to be hanged. No, burned on the cross. No, decapitated!”

*Turned the prince into a frog* raises a lot of alarm bells, but so does Claudia putting her face in her hands and making upset noises. *More* alarm bells. Claudia’s always so cheerful, he immediately wants to help fix this.

He hops (hops!) towards her, overshoots, and lands in her lap. He makes a panicked noise that comes out like a balloon deflating. Claudia peeks from between her fingers down at him and her mouth twitches up into a grin. It’s a deep relief. He might be unable to talk and small enough to sit in Claudia’s lap, but at least she’s smiling again. Things can’t be too bad, then.

She carefully picks him up, cradling him in her hands. She looks at him with an intensely studying
expression that she usually levels at books or spell ingredients. Another strange mortifying noise escapes him. She’s never looked at him like that before. That much of her attention being turned on him feels like a chef’s captured him and is trying to boil him alive in a pot of water.

“Okay,” she says. “Okay okay okay okay. I’ve got this. Claudia’s got this! I’m gonna fix this, don’t you worry, Callum! I know just what to do to get you from your cute frog form back to your cute human form.”

He croaks, for lack of anything else to say. He’s glad frogs can’t flush.

“All we need is very simple,” she proclaims. “What is required to lift this curse isss…” She reads the label on the back of the bottle. “True love’s kiss,” she reads.

Callum doesn’t even croak.

“Oh,” the love of his life says. “Do you have one of those?”

Callum continues not to be able to speak the human language, which is convenient considering that he’d just be stammering and wildly trying to deflect at this point.

“Croak once for yes and twice for no,” she tries.

Callum can’t bring himself to answer her.

“Oh god,” she says, panic dawning on her again. “You can’t even understand what I’m saying!? Oh, Callum, I’m so sorry!” And then she’s squishing him against her warm chest. He does a croak-squawk sort of thing.

“What’s going on?” Ezran asks, swinging open a portrait in the castle wall.

“Oh, Ezran!” Claudia says. “Just, ummm, nothing to worry about!”

Ez, Callum tries to say, but of course it’s hopeless--

“Yes?” Ezran says, looking at him politely.

Wait what, he croaks.

“Wait what?” Ezran asks.

You can really talk to animals!?

“Yes, of course I can! Has someone been saying that I can’t? Was it the racoons? You can’t trust racoons, you know.”

Ez, it’s me! Callum!

“Um, last time I checked, Callum was a lot taller. And less green.”

“Um?” Claudia asks.

“That frog’s saying that he’s Callum,” Ezran says, pointing at him.

I am!

“He is!” Claudia says, so astonished that it apparently just plops out of her mouth without a second
thought. “I turned him into a frog. On accident! And now I’m trying to turn him back but only true loves kiss will do it and--”

“Oh, well that’s easy,” Ezran says, “Just do--”

EZ NO, he croaks, loud and panicky. DON’T.

“Why not?” Ezran asks him confusedly. “You don’t want to stay a frog do you?”

Of course not, but you can’t just tell Claudia that I like her!

“But I’m pretty sure she’s the only one who doesn’t know yet.”

And she’s the most important one! Don’t do it, Ez, please!

Ezran frowns thoughtfully at him for a long while, while Claudia out loud muses about the ability to speak to animals. Callum can’t believe that he was actually telling the truth about that one. He’ll never live this one down. Oh, and the frog thing too. He won’t live that down either. Today is not a particularly dignified day for him.

“Callum says…” Ezran says slowly. “He says that, uh, it isn’t just true love’s kiss that can cure him. If the mage who cursed him kisses him then that’ll cure him too. He can feel it, cos of magic!”

“… Huh,” Claudia says. “Really?”

“Really!” Ezran says.

… Callum has a pretty great little brother.

“Well, I suppose it can’t hurt to try it,” she says, and then she lifts Callum to be on eye level with her. Her eyes are somehow even prettier, seen up this close and on such a large scale. “Do I have your permission, Callum?”

He croaks.

“That’s a yes,” Ezran says helpfully. “I’ll leave you guys to it.” And then he’s shutting the portrait shut in front of him. It’s absolutely ridiculous how well he knows this castle, but he can’t think about that right now because Claudia’s closed her eyes and she’s leaning in and down.

Callum squeezes his eyes shut tight, frozen, and lets her kiss him. Her lips are very soft and warm, and not just because he’s cold blooded right now. God, he must feel so cold and slimy--

And then suddenly he’s all limbs and clothes and hot blood rushing through his veins as Claudia kisses him and he sits in her lap. He squeaks. Claudia draws away with an ecstatic smile.

“I knew that didn’t sound like a croak!” she says victoriously. “Callum! Thank Katolis, I fixed you!”

“Um,” he says, his voice breaking. “You sure did.” She doesn’t seem to notice that he’s still in her lap. She holds onto him happily.

“This can be our secret, right?” she asks a little anxiously. “Since I fixed it up so quickly? Pretty please? It’s like it never even happened!”

Oh, he wishes. And at the same time not. Claudia smells like herbs and smoke. He wishes he could tear his eyes away from her so he could break the overwhelming eye contact. “S--sure. Sounds good, fine, okay! That’s great!”
“Yay!” she cheers, and then happily pecks him on the cheek. He thinks his brain maybe just short circuited.

She helps him onto his feet, and he hurriedly stumbles along. She leans down to whisper into his ear: “Oh and by the way, I know that that stuff Ezran said wasn’t true.”

When she leans back, her expression is terrifyingly unreadable. He opens his mouth and closes it, helplessly. She suddenly breaks out into a blinding grin. “As if a human could just be born with the natural ability to talk to animals! He must have just been spying on us for a while before he revealed himself.”

“R--right,” he wheezes, his heart jackhammering away in his chest.

“Do you… remember anything from when you were transformed?” she asks. “Anything I might have told you, like for example how the spell could be broken?”

He has no idea why, “Nope,” pops out of his mouth, but it sure does. Maybe it feels easier to act like he doesn’t remember her kissing him at all, no siree. God, he can already tell that his mind’s going to run that memory over and over in his brain more times than he can count.

Something in her relaxes, and she smiles again. “Okay! I did it with chanting and the blood of a virgin cow, by the way. Toodles!”

And then she skips off like nothing had just happened, empty bottle and spell book in hand.

Callum gapes after her as the realization dawns on him: he’s not the only one in this hallway hiding a crush.

He has no idea what to do with that information.

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