

A Time to Croak

By John C. Tremblay

Lavender pushed her ear against the wide-planked floor.

“It’s the girl’s fault!” someone shouted downstairs. “You saw what she did to that other one.”

As if on cue, a throaty sound rumbled from the beast in the corner of Lavender’s room.

“I know,” she said softly and then made noises similar to his own to comfort him.

Downstairs the madness continued: more anger, more arguing, more threats.

“There’s no other explanation,” another voice growled. “Your daughter’s up to her old tricks again; and if she isn’t stopped, the Queen will make us all participants in the next *Death to the Heathens* purging.”

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Lavender knew her parents would be furious about her sneaking out, but what choice did she have? If she couldn't prove her innocence... well... best not to think on it.

A noxious cawing caused Lavender to look up. Reaper, the queen's pet crow, soared away from Fawnwick Forest back towards the castle. Lavender didn't have much time; if she'd been spotted, the guards would be quick to follow. She crept through the brush, keeping her senses attuned for unfamiliar scents or sounds. As she neared the stream, she heard a croak.

"It's ok," Lavender whispered as she inched towards a frog. It was sitting on a rock, bloated as if scared. She didn't blame it. Until recently frogs were a protected species—in case they were princes in disguise—but now they were being hunted in direct defiance to the queen's orders.

"I won't hurt you," Lavender continued.

She could almost touch it.

KRRRPLIP.

The frog burst, squelching bits of slime and goo onto Lavender's dress.

"I told you it was that brat!" a voice shouted from the woods behind her.

Without looking back, Lavender ran.

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"Thank the Creator, Annūté, I know the forest so well," Lavender mused.

She'd barely managed to sneak past the watchful eye of Reaper, who was circling overhead. Her only chance was to get to Grandma Goodwitch's cottage undetected, and hope that her friend could help her.

Lavender's heart thumped furiously as she reached the clearing. It was still... ominously still. Taking a deep breath, Lavender raced past the well, down the stone-lined path, and up to the elm-wood door.

But when she knocked, there was no answer.

Lavender tried again; still nothing.

Maybe Grandma was searching for a cause for the frog deaths herself?

Knowing there was no way to enter the cottage without the witch's blessing, Lavender looked for a place to hide until Grandma returned.

RUUURRRRRRTTT.

Lavender scurried quickly towards the sound, scooping up another frightened frog. Though it swelled a bit, it didn't react like the other one had. What in Ratrilpot was going on?

As if to answer her, Reaper let out a cry and dove towards her. There wasn't time to flee. The bird was too swift. Lavender dropped to the ground and curled into a ball, while the flutter of wings and stomach-churning cawing surrounded her from all sides. Reaper attacked again and again with its beak, tearing her dress, piercing her arm, and causing the frog to squirm uncontrollably. Then with a final SNAP that just missed her, the bird took flight.

Lavender didn't need to open her eyes to guess why. The guards must have found her. And worse, the frog had just exploded in her arms.

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Lavender looked up from the marble floor of the Great Hall, where she'd been thrown. Ratrilpot's Monarch sat at the head of the table with the other nobles, eating the season's bounty.

"She caused two frogs to explode before our very eyes, Your Majesty," one of the guards announced. "And we found her trying to break into Grandma's cottage—no doubt to steal more potions! She's the witch we're looking for."

The Queen chuckled. She dipped a piece of bread into the pâté and held it out for Reaper, who snapped it up eagerly.

"This isn't the first time that you've caused me grief, Lavender Pie," the Queen said with a scowl sharper than Reaper's beak. "But this time, it WILL be the last."

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Lavender struggled as the guards poured pitch onto the makeshift platform. Her mind raced faster than her heart. There had to be a way out of this; there just had to be. But why couldn't she think of it? Her mind was telling her she had all the clues. She needed only to arrange them properly.

Then it hit her.

"RRRRUUUURRRRTT."

The guards chuckled, but it wasn't them she cared about.

She continued to croak, louder and louder. Frogs crept out of the forest towards the platform.

"She's going to do it again!" somebody shouted. "Quick, start the flames."

"No," Lavender yelled back. "It's not me. Look!"

Reaper plummeted from the sky, a dark specter of death. It bolted towards a frog, struck like a viper at the tiny beast's midsection, and ripped out what appeared to be an organ. Then it flew up to a nearby branch and gobbled down its prize.

As before, the frog swelled up in fear and burst.

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Lavender sat in her room; while animated conversations took place downstairs—mostly apologies.

With a sigh of relief, Lavender turned her attention to the bird that was squawking up a storm from her headboard. As punishment for proving Her Majesty wrong, Lavender was charged with breaking Reaper's taste for frog's liver.

She opened her closet door, and a three-foot high frog waddled out. The rumbling sounds it made shook the floor, and its tongue cracked across the room like a whip, snatching one of Reaper's feathers from his wings.

The bird froze on its perch.

“Reaper, I'm afraid I have to teach you a difficult lesson about what will happen if you attack another frog,” Lavender said with a mischievous grin. “And I suspect if you don't learn it, my friend here won't be the only one that croaks.”

The End