

Mother Knows Best

By John C. Tremblay

“It goes against nature,” Lavender Pie said defiantly, hiding Phoenix in her cloak and hoping that he wouldn’t set any more of her on fire.

Old Mother Haggard snarled and pointed a bony finger. “Insolent child. Surely you weren’t taught to be so saucy towards your elders? Now hand him over!”

Lavender inched backwards.

Leave it to her to befriend the one bird in Ratrilpot with a thing for the fireberries that grow in the Fearsome Forest—the place where the crusty old hag made her home.

“You can’t escape,” the hag rasped, her voice like fabric tearing.

Lavender continued moving, but stopped as something sharp dug into her calf. She turned around. Briars ravaged the landscape in every direction. There was no place for her to go.

The hag closed in.

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Lavender hmped as she tugged at the chain that bound her ankle to the hearth, doing her best not to knock her wig loose. The only advantage to wearing the stupid thing after Phoenix burnt off her hair with a nasty burp was that it meant the hag's spell wouldn't work properly.

Phoenix let out a wail from a small wire cage nearby. Silly bird must have pooped again. The smoky scent of roasted fowl wafted through the air.

"Oh to be young again," the hag said upon entering the cottage. She closed the door with her right shoulder and rotated her arm until the joint cracked. "Ahh much better. Now where was I? Oh yes... today's the day I reclaim the beauty that time stole from me. And what luck! Not only do I find a new host for my crafty mind, but also the final ingredient for the spell: a phoenix chick. The dark one smiles upon me."

Given that Lavender was a devious child who didn't quite grasp the concept of fear, she rolled her eyes. "People are meant to get old; it's all part of life."

"That's the problem with children nowadays," the hag bristled through clenched rotting teeth, "always blabbering like they know more than you do."

She unsheathed a pewter-handled dagger. Lavender held her gaze.

"It will take more than courage to save those pretty chestnut locks."

Lavender feigned terror, holding her hands over her head as though to protect herself. With a sneer the hag lurched forward, snatched at the wig, and tore it off, revealing what little there was of Lavender's real hair.

“Nice try, little one; but a witch of my prowess is not about to be fooled by a simple child.”

Lavender looked away. So much for that plan.

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“It’s not going to work,” Lavender repeated as the hag held Phoenix’s cage above a cauldron bubbling with putrid inky goo. Time was running out.

“What’s the matter? No more clever ideas on how to escape?”

Lavender folded her arms. This witch was as bad as her mother. It was no wonder children got so good at lying; no one believed them when they told the truth.

“You can’t take over my body by brewing a potion with my bird. He’s not even a real phoenix. You’re just going to end up making yourself sick or worse: dead.”

The hag cackled and ignored her.

“I mean... why would I name him Phoenix if he were really a phoenix? It’d be like calling a dog, Dog,” she continued, trying to think of something...anything...that could save him.

“You’re wasting your breath,” the hag grumbled as she turned towards Lavender, filmy eyes opened wide.

Lavender took one last look at her pet, remembering how yellow he was before he started eating the fireberries, wishing that his plumage had stayed that way and hadn’t turned so crimson. Her eyes welled up and she mouthed goodbye.

With a maniacal grin, the hag tossed the cage into the slop.

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“Perfect!” the hag shouted gleefully as she scooped a ladleful of the sludge.

“How does it feel, girl, to know that in a few short minutes, I will be dancing around in your supple body?”

Lavender sighed. “Drink up if you must, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

The hag gulped down the brew. Her eyes darkened. She coughed briefly as her coarse silver hair sparked; and then her body rippled and her skin sizzled, filling the room with a briny sour stench.

“What’s happening to me?” she shrieked.

Lavender shrugged. “Beats me. You’re the witch with all that prowess. Maybe you should have spent more time listening to this simple child instead of trying to become it.”

The hag wailed as the potion ran its course, until she didn’t have a voice to scream with.

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“What happened to Phoenix?” Lavender’s mother asked desperately, after being introduced to Lavender’s newest pet.

“Would you believe that a witch kidnapped me and threw him into her cauldron in an attempt to possess me?”

Her mother pinched the bridge of her nose, obviously exasperated but unwilling to hear the long version; fairly typical behavior when Lavender returned home at day’s end.

“Just try to take better care of this one. Bad things happen to people that don't respect Mother Nature.”

Lavender looked down at the slime eel in the fishbowl with a mischievous grin.
“You know, Mother, for once I'd have to agree with you.”

The End