

The Frog Wizard

by Lawrence Watt-Evans, 1954–

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Introduction

Ethshar?

Some readers already recognize the name, and can skip this introduction, but if you aren't one of them, perhaps a brief explanation is in order.

“Ethshar” is what we call an invented world that’s been the setting for almost a dozen novels so far. Its inhabitants don’t call it that; they call it “the World.” For readers, though, that’s not specific enough. The dominant nation on the World is the Hegemony of the Three Ethshars, while the largest, richest city, where most of the stories are set, is Ethshar of the Spices, so “Ethshar” is close enough. The name itself comes from words meaning “safe harbor.”

You don't need to have read any of the novels to enjoy the stories herein; each one should stand alone. Here's a little background, though:

The World of Ethshar is rich in magic—several varieties of magic, in fact, each with its own rules, its own strengths, and its own weaknesses. In these stories you'll find wizardry, sorcery, theurgy, and warlockry, but there are others, as well.

About half the inhabited World is the Hegemony of Ethshar, ruled by the overlords of its three great cities: Ethshar of the Rocks, Ethshar of the Sands, and Ethshar of the Spices. To the north of the Hegemony lie the Tintallions, the Baronies of Sardiron, and anarchic lands like Srigmor; to the east are the Small Kingdoms, more than a hundred tiny squabbling states. To the south and west is only ocean, right to the edge of the World—yes, the World is flat and has edges. It has two moons, one pink, the other orange. The greater moon follows a thirty-day cycle much like our own moon's, while the lesser moon goes through all its phases in about a day and a half.

The people of Ethshar measure time from the year the gods first taught human beings to talk—or at least, so legend says. Much knowledge of their history was lost in the course of the Great War, a centuries-long struggle between Old Ethshar and the Northern Empire that ended, in the last decade of the fiftieth century of human speech, with the utter destruction of the Northerners.

The stories in this collection are all set at various times in the three hundred years following the Great War. Ethshar stories are generally not tales of great heroes battling evil, but of ordinary people trying to deal with an extraordinary world.

About *The Frog Wizard*

Okay, this one needs some explanation, as it's never been published in this form before.

Long ago I bought a blank book, wrote and illustrated a story in it, and gave it to my girlfriend for Valentine's Day. Then later, when she had more or less forgotten about it, I stole it back and wrote and drew another story in it, and gave it to her for Valentine's Day. I did this until the book was full—not every year, but most.

They weren't romantic stories; they were silly children's stories. One of them was called "The Frog Wizard."

*Many, many years later, after the book was long since full and she and I were long since married, I read some of the stories to our kids, and it occurred to me that a couple of them might be worth reworking and selling. I proceeded to rewrite "The Frog Wizard" in several versions—six in all. One of them was an Ethshar version. I actually sold one of the other versions, though; it was published in the January 1993 issue of *Science Fiction Age*. The Ethshar version was shelved and forgotten about—until I started assembling this book, when I realized that if I was going to be complete, it needed to be included. So here it is, a technically-never-before-published Ethshar story. And*

yes, it's canon; the wizard's spell is a variant form of Llarimuir's Mass Transmogrification, and Mreghon is in the northwestern Small Kingdoms.

The Frog Wizard

Long ago, in the Small Kingdoms, in the most easterly corner of a land called Mreghon, there lived a wizard whose name is forgotten.

He never used it much in any case, since a wizard's true name gives power to other wizards who know it, and any name used often enough might become a true name. His neighbors were generally content to simply call him "the wizard," and he was content to be called that.

However, as it happens, he was not really very much of a wizard, despite his best efforts. No matter what he did, no matter how hard he tried, no matter how much he studied, he could work only one single piece of real, genuine magic.

His neighbors were not aware of this shortcoming, because he was very good at sleight-of-hand and at all manner of stunts that *looked* like wizardry. He could convince anyone who dropped by that he knew all manner of fine spells, could make small objects appear and disappear, could transform handkerchiefs into pigeons, and so forth.

Sleight-of-hand is all very well, of course, but it's not quite the same thing as true wizardry, and the wizard knew it. True wizardry means miracle-working, not putting a pigeon up your sleeve, and this wizard only knew one genuine wizard's spell, which he had learned as an apprentice—to the utter astonishment of his master, who had been trying to teach him an entirely different spell. The master could not manage anything of the sort himself, and did not understand how his apprentice had ever discovered it.

When spells for flying or fire-lighting failed regularly, when his love-charms just gave people belly-aches, when a simple geas made a smelly mess all over his carpet without even making the intended victim feel guilty about it, this one feat came easily to the wizard. He could do it instantly, just with a wave of his hand.

It wasn't a simple, ordinary spell, either, like fire-lighting or levitation—he couldn't light a candle by wizardry for all the gold in a dragon's hoard, but somehow he had mastered, without meaning to, a truly spectacular piece of magic. Perhaps some perverse minor deity had been having a joke with him in allowing him the easy use of this major transformation.

He could turn people into frogs.

A simple gesture, and anyone he chose would shrink down, turn green and slimy, and hop away, eager to eat bugs, as much a frog as any frog that ever grew out of a tadpole. He could transform any number of people at a time, too, for that matter—turn whole nations into frogs, if he chose to.

He didn't choose to, however, and for a very good reason indeed. Unfortunately, he couldn't turn the frogs back into people again, and after one or two unpleasant incidents that took place before he fully realized the situation, he swore never to use the spell again. He was too soft-hearted, in the ordinary course of events, to leave even his worst enemy stuck forever in the form of a frog.

He practiced the gesture in secrecy, just in case he ever needed it, but he never used it.

He still wanted everyone to know he was a wizard, though. There were a good many magicians living in Mreghon at the time, wizards and sorcerers and theurgists and a variety of others—the exact reasons for this are unclear, but indisputably, Mreghon had more than its share of practitioners of the arts arcane. These magicians were something of a privileged elite, highly respected by the rest of the population, and deferred to in several ways. A known magician could always count on a fair price at the village market, and no smith would ever miss the promised delivery date on a wizard's or sorcerer's order.

After all, angering a wizard is dangerous. He might turn you into a frog. Everyone knew that, even though in truth, most wizards didn't know that particular spell.

That this one wizard *did* know it, and had mastered it so completely without ever learning any more useful or benign magic, was a source of constant private irritation, but really, the wizard had no choice but to live with it.

And since he *had* mastered this spell, and really *could*, if he chose, turn people into frogs, he played the role of a wizard to the hilt. He wore a fancy hat and embroidered robe, with a silver dagger on his belt; he carried an ornately-carved staff with a cat's skull on top, and lived in a well-furnished cave rather than an ordinary house to add to his mystique. He collected and studied various old books—partly in hopes of learning more magic, but mostly just to keep up his image. He kept strange pets, such as lizards and giant spiders—nothing supernatural, though, since he had no way of manufacturing, summoning, or controlling such creatures. He equipped himself with a full wizard's laboratory, crammed with all the usual bizarre paraphernalia—skulls, stuffed bats, mysterious powders, all of that—even though he couldn't use a single bit of it.

In short, he did everything a powerful wizard did, except to perform any genuine wizardry.

Reasonably enough, everyone in the vicinity assumed he was a great and powerful wizard.

As a sort of private reference to his peculiar situation, he wore green robes instead of the more traditional red or blue or gold, and he had a silver frog emblazoned on his hat. Accordingly, when people needed to distinguish him from the other wizards in the area, they referred to him as “the frog wizard.”

This was all very well, and in fact it was exactly what the frog wizard wanted. He led a quiet, comfortable life, and had the respect and affection of his neighbors. Really, he was quite content with the situation.

Unfortunately, it didn't last, because late one summer Mreghon was invaded.

The first the frog wizard knew of this was when a messenger knocked on the door of his cave one fine morning, carrying a royal summons from King Kelder, the monarch of Mreghon.

The wizard was sitting in the parlor with his feet up, sipping tea and reading a tome on the best substitutes for dragon's blood in assorted fire spells, when he heard a loud, impatient rapping. He sighed, put the book aside, and got to his feet.

The rapping sounded again, and he answered the door, expecting to see one of his neighbors come looking for a bit of advice, or maybe some villager asking after a philtre of some sort.

Instead he found himself face to face with a royal herald, in the full ceremonial regalia of his office.

The wizard blinked, startled, and before he had time to do any more than blink the herald had unrolled a scroll and begun reading. The wizard stood there, feeling rather foolish, and listened.

The herald proclaimed in a deep, rolling voice, "Whereas, Our Realm has been attacked, without provocation, by certain Enemies, and..."

The herald took a deep breath, and the wizard started to say something, but before he could get a single sound out the herald continued, "Whereas, Our normal methods of defense do not appear to provide a complete assurance of Victory against this foul invader, and..."

Again a deep breath, and a continuation.

"Whereas, supernatural methods needs must be employed against this Desecration of Our Borders, and..."

Another deep breath.

"Whereas, Our enlightened rule has provided all alike, commoner and noble, mortal and magician, with great benefits and fair treatment..."

The herald paused dramatically, one hand raised, and the wizard waited politely.

"*Therefore*," the herald announced, "We call upon all those with any skills in arcane practices, be they in wizardry, sorcery, theurgy, witchcraft, or other practices, to recognize their obligation to the Crown, *and...*"

The wizard really wished that the herald would forget about the dramatic pauses and get on with it.

"*Therefore*, all practitioners of Magic are hereby summoned forthwith to the Castle Royal, by Command of His Majesty Kelder, First of That Name, Heir to the Ancient Lords of the Holy Kingdom of Ethshar."

The herald nodded for emphasis, and began rolling up the scroll as he concluded, "Signed, and with Our Seal, this fourteenth day of the month of Harvest, in the Year of Human Speech Five Thousand and Sixty-Eight."

The wizard was very impressed by all this, which sounded quite majestic, and when the herald had finished reading the wizard asked him just exactly what it all meant.

"It means that you're to come with me to the castle, immediately," the herald explained.

The wizard considered that for a moment, and then asked, "Why?"

"You're a wizard, aren't you?" the herald asked.

The wizard promptly agreed that yes, he was indeed a wizard.

"Well," the herald explained, "all the magicians in Mreghon are being summoned to the castle to help fight off the invader."

The wizard was not at all sure he liked the sound of that, and he said so.

The herald insisted, and made some rather nasty threats about what the king might do to uncooperative magicians.

The wizard remarked that it was all very unfair.

The herald argued that the invasion was unfair, and it wasn't the king's fault, and it didn't really matter whose fault it was or whether it was fair or not, because it all came out the same in the end—the wizard had to come to the castle if he didn't want to be in a very great deal of trouble.

The wizard continued to argue for awhile, but the herald was relentless in his insistence.

In the end, the wizard gave in on the major points, but he did a little insisting of his own and was allowed time to pack a bag and finish his tea.

While he was packing, and on the walk to the castle, he asked the herald more questions, and got more of an explanation of just what was going on.

It seems that the exact reason for the invasion was not entirely clear to the Mreghonians, but it appeared to have something to do with an insult the Mreghonian king, Kelder the First, had unintentionally directed at the king of Lassuron, a surly fellow by the name of Bardec who had a reputation for turning every little incident into a war, and who had thus enlarged Lassuron considerably at the expense of its neighbors—such as tiny Mreghon.

Although the insult was completely inadvertent, King Bardec had chosen to take umbrage—he had probably been looking for an excuse. He had led an army of some four hundred men into Mreghon, marching them through the peaceful countryside, burning farmhouses and trampling crops and in general making life very unpleasant for the citizenry.

The year had already been a bad one for the Mreghonians, as the wizard well knew. Some quirk of the weather had cursed the kingdom with a veritable plague of gnats and mosquitoes, the crops had been poor, several wells had gone dry at midsummer, and then a few sixnights later heavy rains had caused flooding along the little river that trickled through Mreghon on its way to the Gulf of the East.

After all this, most people were not really surprised by the attack. As everyone knows, bad luck often comes in streaks. Some people had wondered if they had offended some god or other, but most just put it down to chance and accepted it as another nuisance to be tolerated.

To some, it was rather more than just a nuisance. Naturally, King Kelder was quite upset by the invasion. The kingdom had been at peace for years, and the minuscule standing army was out of shape, out of practice—and out building levees against the floods.

Even in the best of times, the Mreghonian army was probably no match for King Bardec's force, and as it stood, defeat had appeared certain. From King Kelder's point of view that was completely unacceptable; King Bardec had announced that his honor had been impugned by poor Kelder, and that only a direct personal duel to the death between the two monarchs would satisfy him. As Bardec was young, fit, and famous for his skill with a broadsword, while Kelder was aging, fat, lazy, and inept, this was the same as stating that he intended to kill the Mreghonian king.

Ordinarily, the Small Kingdoms being as small as they are, King Bardec and his army could have reached King Kelder's castle in a few hours' march, and the war would have been over within a day. In this particular case, however, Mreghon was blessed with an ally. Serem of Fileia was the father of the current queen of Mreghon, and did not care to see his daughter widowed. He had distracted King

Bardec with elaborate diplomatic maneuvers that had been ultimately unfruitful, but which had gotten the Lassuronian army marched off in entirely the wrong direction for a day or two as an honor guard for the ceremonies.

King Kelder had taken this respite as an opportunity to review his situation, and to realize just how pitiful his defenses were. He saw plainly that if he wanted to survive, he had to find some way to defeat King Bardec without an army. Obviously, that would take a miracle—and that meant magic.

Accordingly, King Kelder had sent messengers out, and posted proclamations, and did everything he could to locate and gather every magician in Mreghon. When they had been located, he summoned one and all, however powerful or puny, to his castle.

And that, of course, included this frog wizard.

The wizard had been staying inside lately, because of the mosquitoes, and had missed all news of the invasion—until now.

He really did not want to be involved in a war, but he did not see any practical way to back out, so he went along with the herald without any serious argument.

It was a beautiful sunny day, and the worst of the summer's heat had passed, leaving a gentle breeze that blew the clouds about like gamboling sheep, but the frog wizard was unable to enjoy any of it while worrying about what lay ahead.

Soon enough they reached the royal castle, and hurried across the drawbridge into the great hall, where the wizard was introduced around, checked off a long list of magicians who were expected, and then generally made welcome by the castle staff.

He wanted none of this welcome. He promptly found a quiet corner and did his best to stay there, out of the way, while the messengers and heralds brought in magician after magician—witches, sorcerers, wizards, magicians of every sort.

The frog wizard recognized several of them, while others were total strangers, but he said nothing to any of them. He just sat and watched them arrive—and they kept on coming, and coming, and coming.

He was quite amazed. Really, he had had no idea that there were so *many* magicians in Mreghon! They kept on arriving, off and on, for the next two days.

Throughout that two days the frog wizard generally stayed in his corner, trying hard to be inconspicuous, and succeeding, for the most part. He slept on a mat in a magicians' barracks that had been improvised in a gallery, and he ate the bread and cheese and ale that the castle servants distributed three times a day, but other than that he simply sat quietly and watched and waited.

On the third day the magicians stopped coming. Instead, the invaders appeared and surrounded the castle.

By this time, though, the castle was full of magicians, dozens of magicians, magicians of every description, marching about and boasting of their prowess.

King Bardec's army arrived at the castle about midday and, as expected, found the drawbridge up and the battlements manned—they had no way of knowing that the defenders were the castle servants, rather than soldiers, nor that the place was crammed with magicians.

The invaders spread out and settled in for a proper siege, setting up tents and pavilions, bringing up a battering ram, and so forth.

Meanwhile, inside the castle, the magicians were milling about, unsure just what was expected of them. After the initial round of silly boasting, most of them found they had little to say to one another, and nothing at all to do.

Around sunset King Kelder finally appeared in the great hall, in his best royal robes and wearing his crown, and announced to the gathered magicians that they were to use whatever magic they had at their disposal to destroy the besieging forces.

“When?” someone called from the crowd.

“Right now,” the king replied, smiling. He waved a dismissal, and retreated to his apartments.

The magicians looked at each other, shrugged, and began making magic, each after his or her own fashion.

The noted sorceress Rudhira the Red, for example, brewed up lightning in a kitchen cauldron, balls of crackling blue-white lightning that hissed and spattered sparks across the floor while they waited to be flung at a target.

The demonologist Kiramé of the Blue Hand etched a pentagram on an anteroom floor with blue chalk, and set about summoning a few cooperative demons.

A wizard named Kalthen the Fat found his way up the the battlements, where he began chanting a long, complicated spell intended to draw the floodwaters up from the river and wash the invaders away in a great wave.

Another wizard, Sancha the Foul, collected assorted leavings from the kitchen midden, sat down in the courtyard, and began assembling and animating homunculi, nasty little man-shaped creatures the size of your hand that he said would sneak out of the castle and torment the enemy with poisoned hatpins and whispered curses.

And all the various others set about their various fearsome magicks, while the poor little frog wizard just sat there in his corner, looking scared and nervous.

Amid all that terrible magic, it certainly looked as if King Bardec’s army were doomed. The frog wizard saw no need to get involved.

But then things began to go wrong.

Kalthen’s great wave swept up from the river just as Rudhira’s lightnings spilled out of the castle, and the two collided with a great hissing roar; the water put out the fire, while the fire boiled the water away into steam, steam that drifted harmlessly up into the night sky.

Kiramé’s demons sprang from the pentagram, hungry and ready for the sacrifice they had been promised. The invocation had directed them to devour all those who did not belong in the area, and they obeyed that—but instead of the enemy soldiers they snatched up Sancha’s homunculi and gobbled them down like squirming candy. Homunculi didn’t belong in the World at all, of course, and to a demon that was far more obvious than any human’s nationality. Most demons, the legends of treachery notwithstanding, are not really very bright.

Their hunger satisfied, the demons then vanished, and could not safely be conjured again until the next time the greater moon was full.

Nor were these the only disasters as the magicians, accustomed to working in solitude, got in each other’s way. Man-eating plants bloomed by moonlight and consumed witches rather than soldiers; spells of sudden death became entangled with spells designed to send the invaders dancing helplessly and harmlessly away,

and sorcerers died in jigs and gavottes; fearful illusions overlapped each other in grotesque juxtapositions that caused more laughter than fear among the besiegers.

Demonologists were sent flying to the moons. Theurgists were swallowed by the earth. Spells backfired, misfired, and crossfired, and the castle filled with smoke and strange light, while unearthly howls echoed from the stone walls. The servants fled in terror, taking refuge in the cellars and towers, while the frog wizard cowered in the corner and waited for it all to be over.

Some of the spells worked properly—but not very many.

By dawn, the castle was still surrounded by about three hundred Lassuronian soldiers, and the magicians were all gone, banished or slain by spells gone wrong.

All, that is, except the frog wizard, who had stayed crouched in his corner, never even considering any attempt at magic.

As the sun rose, and the smoke cleared away, and the last eerie echoes faded, the castle's inhabitants crept out of hiding. The king, still in his regalia, emerged from his chamber and looked over the aftermath. His gaze swept across smeared pentagrams, spilled potions, and scattered scraps of wizards' robes, and fell at last on the frog wizard, curled up in the corner.

"You!" he called. "Come here!"

Reluctantly, the frog wizard got to his feet and came. He bowed deeply, and then knelt before the king.

"You're one of the magicians, aren't you?" King Kelder demanded.

The frog wizard nodded.

"You're a wizard?"

"Yes, your Majesty," the frog wizard replied.

"You can work real magic?" the king persisted.

"Yes, your Majesty," the frog wizard said, with only the slightest hesitation.

"Then *do* something about those soldiers out there!" King Kelder demanded.

"But, your Majesty..." the frog wizard began.

"*Do* something, wizard!" the king shouted.

The frog wizard had never liked being shouted at; it made it hard for him to think.

"*Do* something about those soldiers!" the king insisted, pointing out a nearby window and leaning over until he was yelling right in the wizard's face.

Without really meaning to, the frog wizard *did* something. He worked his one and only spell, directed at the soldiers outside, and all three hundred of them were abruptly transformed into frogs—very large, hungry bullfrogs, all rather startled by their sudden change.

At first nobody realized what had happened, and the king continued to shout for several minutes before somebody tugged at his sleeve and pointed out that the invaders were gone, and had been replaced by a horde of amphibians that were now hopping about in mad confusion.

The king stared out the window, and, forgetful of the royal dignity, most of the other people in the room crowded around him and peered out over his shoulders.

Sure enough, the invading army was gone.

King Kelder turned to the wizard and demanded, "Did you do that?"

The wizard, too miserable to speak at the thought of what he had done to all those men, merely nodded.

“Is it permanent?” the king asked.

The wizard nodded again.

“You’re sure?”

“I’m afraid so, your Majesty,” the wizard replied.

The king’s face broke into a broad grin; he whooped with joy, and his crown fell from his head.

He caught it and tossed it in the air, then danced for joy in a manner not at all consonant with proper castle protocol, but quite understandable from a human point of view. After all, he had just been saved from certain death.

The wizard was nowhere near as happy, but he managed a weak smile in response to the king’s obvious delight. And after all, he hadn’t killed anyone, and for all he knew frogs could live long and happy lives, and soldiers faced death regularly as an occupational hazard. He tried to convince himself that it was all for the best.

In fact, it did seem to be all for the best, at least from the Mreghonian point of view. The war was clearly over, and had ended in an unmistakable Mreghonian victory.

The castle servants were sent out to investigate and to collect the spoils, and by sunset that day the royal armory was jammed to overflowing with captured weapons. The frogs had been chased away, scattering in all directions, and the entire army’s supply train had thus been abandoned, completely intact, to the victors.

King Kelder and his councillors had spent the day alternately thinking up insulting terms to impose on King Bardec, if it should develop that he had not been among those transformed, and planning for a massive celebration of this miraculous deliverance.

The frog wizard sat in his corner, listening to all this, with no very clear idea what he was supposed to do other than feel guilty and miserable.

Nobody else seemed to think he had any reason to feel guilty and miserable, but he certainly thought so.

In all the excitement he was quite ignored, and both breakfast and lunch were somehow forgotten, so that around mid-afternoon he grew very hungry, so hungry that his stomach was making more noise than his conscience. Finally, he got up the nerve to approach the king and ask what was expected of him.

“Should I go home now?” he inquired.

“No, of course not!” the king replied. “You’re my honored guest, at least until after the celebration!”

Servants were called, and the wizard was given a hearty meal and a pleasant room for the night, but he still didn’t really know what to do with himself. All his books and belongings were still back in his cave, after all, and he didn’t know anyone in the castle. He spent much of the time sitting on his bed thinking about all those poor frogs, or staring out the castle windows, or aimlessly wandering the castle corridors.

This went on for the three days it took to organize the victory celebration.

At the feast, the frog wizard was dragged out in front of the rowdy, half-drunk mob of peasants and petty nobles, and was declared the kingdom's Royal Magician. He was given the tallest tower in the castle for his own exclusive use, and servants were sent to his cave to fetch back all his belongings.

Everyone told the wizard that he was a hero. He tried very hard to feel like a hero, and to act like a hero, but he couldn't quite manage it. Failing that, he at least tried not to dampen anybody else's enthusiasm, and he had rather more success at this limited goal.

Indeed, everything in Mreghon seemed just fine for a time; the invading army was gone, and there were enough frogs to eat up all the extra flies and mosquitoes around the castle. The floods receded, the army returned to its usual duties, and life went on.

After awhile, though, unusual things began to happen.

Frogs began to turn up in odd places.

The weather was starting to turn colder, and ordinarily all the frogs would be burrowing down into pond-beds for the winter, but this year, instead, frogs were slipping into people's houses to stay warm. Peasants would come home from a day in the fields and find a couple of huge bullfrogs sitting on the hearth—big, determined bullfrogs that did not flee when chased with a fireplace poker, but merely ducked in a corner and waited for the poker-wielding peasant to give up and go away.

Frogs even began slipping into the castle.

And not only were these frogs getting in where they weren't wanted, but having consumed all the available insects, they were getting into the food, as well. Finding a frog on one's plate, licking at a pork chop or a leg of mutton, could ruin a man's appetite, and sent many a woman running for the poker.

Worst of all, the frogs seemed to recall enough of their human origins to have a rather warped sense of humor. Several people reported finding frogs in their beds and bathtubs, grinning lewdly—until now, nobody had realized that frogs *could* grin lewdly, but everyone agreed that that was exactly what the transformed Lassuronians did.

Even royalty was not spared. Queen Edara scandalized the castle by running out into the corridor shrieking and totally nude after discovering a frog crouched between her legs in the bath, grinning up at her and licking about lasciviously.

The last straw was when the king himself, while dispensing high justice in the throne room, realized that something was wrong. Everyone seemed to be staring at the top of his head.

Puzzled, he reached up and found a frog, perched atop his crown and leering over the gold and jewels at the gathered courtiers.

Furious, he flung the crown to the floor and charged from the room, his councillors at his heels. Shouting imprecations, he marched up the stairs to the castle's highest tower, where he barged into the wizard's chamber without knocking and demanded, "Do something about these damned frogs!"

The wizard, startled, looked up from the book he was reading, blinked, and said, "What?"

King Kelder turned an interesting shade of purple as he stood in the center of the wizard's chamber, speechless with fury, trying to think of something suitably scathing to say.

At last he burst out, "These damned frogs are all your fault! *You* turned those soldiers into frogs! You couldn't sweep them away with a whirlwind, or make the earth swallow them up, or turn them into something harmless like rocks or daisies, no, *you* had to turn them into *frogs*! And now we've got frogs coming out of our *ears*, frogs in the bath, frogs in our beds, frogs simply *everywhere*!"

At that moment, the frog that had been on the crown stuck its head out of the back of the king's collar, where it had fallen when the crown was snatched off, and croaked loudly.

The king could take no more; he began shrieking wordlessly at the wizard as his councillors watched in horror from the doorway.

The wizard simply sat on his bed, the book on his lap and a baffled expression on his face, trying to figure out what he was supposed to do.

At last, the king had to pause for breath, and the wizard asked mildly, "But what do you want me to *do*, your Majesty?"

"Do your damned *magic*, wizard! Do *something*!" the king said, as he marched forward and reached out to grab the wizard by the throat.

The wizard shrank back on the bed, but to no avail; King Kelder was a big man, and despite his age and his fat he had long, strong arms. He closed his hands around the wizard's neck and shouted, "*Do something! Do something!*"

The wizard had never liked being shouted at, and he discovered he liked being grabbed by the throat even less. It made thinking very difficult indeed.

So without any thinking, he *did* something. His hand came up in a magical gesture, and he *did* it.

He turned the King into a frog.

Instantly, as the hands shriveled away from his throat, he regretted it, but it was too late.

The councillors stared from the doorway as their sovereign shrank down inside his robes, turned green, and hopped out of his collar as a bullfrog.

This was no ordinary, placid frog, either. This was a big, fat frog, and this was a *very angry* frog. It let out a loud croak.

The other frog, the one that had been sitting at the back of the king's collar, croaked as well, and seemed to smirk.

The wizard looked at the two frogs, at the half-dozen courtiers jammed into his doorway, at the book on his lap, and then back at the two frogs sitting on the king's empty robes.

The situation, he saw, had gotten totally out of hand.

The wizard didn't think it would be a good idea to stay around. Not only would it not be a good idea to stay around for any extended period, but any stay *at all* seemed unwise.

In fact, he thought that the quickest possible departure would be a very good idea indeed. He hurriedly closed the book and put it aside, then got to his feet and raised a hand threateningly.

"Step aside," he said, "or I'll do the same to you!"

The king's councillors immediately stepped back, squeezing against both sides of the narrow hallway as the wizard marched past them and down the stairs.

Once he was out of sight he began running, because he knew that the councillors would not stay cowed for long. Sooner or later they would come after him, and the wizard did not want to know whether he really *would* turn more people into frogs if threatened with capture. He hoped he would not, but he wasn't sure.

He was safely across the drawbridge and out of the castle before he saw any signs of pursuit. Some simple little sleight-of-hand tricks sent most of the hunters off in the wrong direction, and he was able to slip safely away, across the border into Klathoa.

He made his way down to the highway, where he turned west and departed the Small Kingdoms for the Hegemony of Ethshar. By the middle of Newfrost he had reached the gates of Ethshar of the Spices itself.

In the city he found himself an honest, if humble, position as a scribe in the overlord's palace, copying out proclamations to be posted in the city's markets. He lived there in peace for the rest of his life, and he never again turned anyone into a frog.

Well...

Almost never.

