

# THE HOPPERNOTS



DEBORAH BLAKE DEMPSEY

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Cover Art by Jet Kimchrea



PUG PAW PRESS



table of  
**Contents**

Cover  
Chapter 1: Luna Light Night  
Chapter 2: The Sighting  
Chapter 3: Great Daring ... or Simple Foolishness  
Chapter 4: Croak Blowing  
Chapter 5: The Hoppernots  
Chapter 6: Ribbit What?  
Chapter 7: Mobilbeast or Burden  
Chapter 8: Sprocket Destroyer  
Chapter 9: Closer ... Closer  
Chapter 10: The Attack  
Chapter 11: The Concord Pact or What Do You Do When Your Elders Can't Get Along?  
Chapter 12: The Agreement  
Chapter 13: The Box Shaped Box  
Chapter 14: ... In the Act  
Chapter 15: Skulking  
Chapter 16: A Box is Just a Box  
Chapter 17: Hide and (Reluctantly) Seek  
Chapter 18: The Watchers  
Chapter 19: Oh No, She Didn't  
Chapter 20: The Fury  
Chapter 21: Decisions, Decisions  
Chapter 22: A Secret Revealed  
Chapter 23: The Stance  
Chapter 24: Retreat of the Beasts  
Vocabulary  
Acknowledgements  
About the Author

The Hoppernots

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Summary: When Max, Cristobel, and Spyder discover legendary creatures they believed were the figment of the Elders imagination, they vow to discover why they have returned. Catching the evil creatures destroying their home and attacking an Elder, the trio must make everyone forget their troublemaking past and trust them to lead them in a fight for the lake they call home or risk losing it...and their lives.

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*Lovingly dedicated to*  
Shelley Molina Maas  
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**I**t was the beginning of the evening festivities on Lake Fibian. The last of winter's chilly fingers loosened their grip, as early spring transformed the earth from barren and leafless to budding and lush.

All around the lake clusters of frogs gathered at the edge of the murky green water. Above them night-dewed trees rustled and swayed. The warm evening breeze swirled the scents of the lake through the air - the damp smell of the earth, old fallen leaves and the lingering salty-sweet scent of late afternoon rain. Through the trees and dancing above the glistening water, lightning bugs buzzed around the crowd, casting shimmer and light on the water.

Some frogs found their favorite spots and remained rooted while others pushed and slipped into tight-knotted groups. The rest found any place they could cling to or burrow under, leaving only their curious eyes above ground.

The noise level grew and the earth sounded like a symphony tuning up.

Nearing the large trunk of an oak tree, three young frogs rushed to join the crowd.

"Hurry! Hurry! We're late." Cristobel yelled back to her two friends hopping behind her.

"But, we're almoth there," Spyder said. His large blue belly heaved rapidly. "Do we have to leap the whole way, Crithobel?"

"The beginning is the best part," Max chirped. He hopped past them, a wide grin spread across his green face.

"I think the food is the best part," Spyder grumbled, which reminded him of the feast to come. He sped up.

"I can't wait to get to the lake," Cristobel squealed. She sprang forward and caught up to Max. They entered the clearing and arrived at the mouth of Lake Fibian.

Cristobel and Max stopped and leaned against a squat purple mushroom to catch their breath while they waited for Spyder to catch up.

When Spyder arrived, huffing and puffing, they hopped forward and looked for a spot close to the water's edge. Their laughter joined the cacophony of frog voices as they watched the band, The Spadefoots, tune their instruments.

Cristobel hopped up and down, then chirped. "Can you feel it?"

“Feel what?” Max asked.

“You can feel my belly gwwmbling, can’t you?” Spyder asked. His belly was demanding, always rumbling with its need for food.

“Not your stomach, silly.” Cristobel raised a hand and rubbed her flat fingers against her ear. “Something exciting is going to happen tonight. I can feel it.”

“Maybe there will be new appetizers,” Spyder said. “I’d love some worm puffs or snails wrapped in crispy beetle legs.”

Cristobel puffed out her cheeks and continued to hop in place. Max gazed around and noted a few missing frogs.

“I wish one of us lived closer to the lake.” Max grumbled. “We could have stayed home and watched from the windows.”

Max looked over at a nearby tree and saw frogs from different species clinging to rough bark like autumn leaves. He sighed when he saw mushroom-topped roofs and tall twig condos covered with squirming excited bodies.

Chirping in revelry a rushing group of Spring Peepers pushed Cristobel aside.

“Hey, watch out!” Cristobel cried. She bumped into Spyder’s stomach, bounced off his round belly and landed on her bottom. Max and Spyder laughed and helped her up.

The boys stood on either side of Cristobel. She looped her arms through theirs, linking them together. It was harder to get knocked down this way.

Once a month, on Luna Light Night the Anura —the entire frog nation —gathered around Lake Fibian to celebrate the unity of the lake. The bright, circular orb suspended high in the air, lit the lake, and lured frogs from every tree, burrow, or lily pad together to swap stories, share a laugh or sometimes to discuss problems or concerns, but mostly, it was to celebrate.

Cristobel looked out over the water, then at her two friends. “It’s hard to believe we wouldn’t be friends if the Anura still fought each other.”

Lake Fibian’s history, to the shock and delight of the leaplings, was a mixture of battles, secrets, and misdeeds. It wasn’t only the frogs who fought. All the animal species that lived at the lake fought each other, but the worst battles were between the different species of the Anura.

Cristobel, Max, and Spyder, affectionately known by all the animals of Lake Fibian as *The Three*, were from different, and previously warring, species. If the battles existed, they would not be friends today.

Among the Anura, the trio were an odd sight to see. While the other species of the Anura got along well enough, they tended to have friendships within their own species, but seeing *The Three’s* strong bond, many of the other frogs were encouraged to look past colors, spots, stripes, and croaks.

Cristobel gazed fondly at her two friends. “Who would have thought members of the Red-Eyed Tree frogs, the Strawberry Poison-Darts, and the Polka Dot Tree frogs could be friends like we are.”

“And we are the vevy best of friends,” Spyder said.

“We have an unbreakable friendship,” Max added.

Max hailed from the Red-Eyed Tree frog species. He blended in with lakeside flora, which was good...when he was up to no good. Seen from above, his head and back were bright green. Seen from below, his golden belly usually quivered with laughter. His strong arms and legs were blue and

his webbed hands and feet were bright orange. His eyes were a delightful shade of red that usually held a twinkle.

Being an only sib-leapling, Max thought of Spyder as his brother-frog and couldn't imagine them not being friends. They met as tadpoles and had seen each other every day since they lost their tails.

Spyder was a Strawberry Poison Dart frog. His real name was Bates, but Max nicknamed him Spyder because his head, upper back and arms were bright red and his lower body and feet were brilliant blue with thin black lines that ran around his body like a spider's web.

They became fast friends when Max stood up for Spyder when other tadpoles made fun of his tangled tongue. Spyder also had a speech snag that twisted his words, but made listening to him fun.

Cristobel was a Polka-Dot Tree frog. Max and Spyder didn't like girl frogs very much since most were squeamish and giggly, but they thought Cristobel was cool for a girl frog. Her skin was bright yellow with gentle shades of green and red. Her expressive white eyes and air of innocence usually got them out of trouble.

To the Lake Fibian community *The Three* were a wonderful sight. The trio was usually seen bounding and leaping by with their bright colors and constant laughter. They reminded everyone, and not only the Anura, of the importance of keeping the peace and working together.

On this particular evening, the air was electric. A strange hum tinged the oncoming night. Every frog felt the buzz in the air like industrious bees making honey.

The Spadefoots finished tuning up their wooden, leaf, and stone-made instruments and were ready to play the Lake Fibian anthem. Rows and rows of frogs prepared their throats, expanding and contracting their fleshy underbellies in preparation to sing the opening song of Luna Light Night.

Mister Webster, one of the oldest and a well-respected member of the Anura, was the conductor of The Spadefoots. He lifted his long arms and tapped two thin reeds together getting everyone's attention. They settled down and prepared to sing.

Many years ago  
On the Lake of Fibian  
*Lake Fibian . . .*

Frog upon frog  
Would not give in  
*Lake Fibian . . .*

To the beauty of our kinship  
Or the comfort of a friend  
*Lake Fibian . . .*

Where frog against frog  
Fought to the bitter end  
*Lake Fibian . . .*

We were grouped against each other  
With problems all around  
*Lake Fibian . . .*

But we found a way to listen and  
Turned our problems upside-down  
*Lake Fibian . . .*

Now we help when it is needed  
We give counsel when we can  
*Lake Fibian . . .*

We grow and work together  
For a positive Anura end  
*Lake Fibian . . .*

We love like a family  
We are very good friends  
*Lake Fibian . . .*

Now that we all live  
Happily, on . . .  
*Lake Fibian*

After the last note was played, loud applause—*chirps, snorts, croaks* and *cracks*—rippled around the lake. The moon's beams shined so bright, the colors of each frog species looked like flashing jewels.

Max chirped and looked around. After all the stories he'd heard about the battles that happened long before he'd hatched, he was filled with happiness because everyone got along.

Every frog was told Croaklores in the early tadpole years. Tales of when Lake Fibian was a dangerous place. A time when a fabled creature called the Hoppernot lived amongst them and frogs did not trust each other, unless they came from the same species. Max's grandfather used to tell him stories of the great battles that took place like the War of the Water Way, the Lily Pad Revolt and of his own near misses with the Hoppernot.

Half of him believed the tales, but the other half could not imagine he and his friends—the frog and the other animal species—could be mortal enemies.

The band played another tune.

"It's the Frog Salsa," Cristobel yelled. She grabbed Max's arms and swung him around in a hopping, bouncing, leaping motion. Max laughed, then wheezed when she picked up speed and twirled him. The lake and the other dancers became a blur.

While the band played and the frogs danced and talked, the Luna Light Night caterers slipped between frogs handing out seaweed poppers and cricket-in-a-blanket appetizers to the hungry crowd.

Spyder hopped up and down to see if a server was near.

"I hope it's a fwoggy we know. Maybe I can talk them into giving us a whole platter full of cwicket-in-a-blanket. I'm so vewy hungwy," he said, rubbing his belly.

"I don't know how you can eat so much," Cristobel mused. "You always have a fly-pop or earthworm water taffy with you. Don't you ever get tired of eating, Spy?"

Instead of answering, Spyder darted over to a Luna Light Night waiter who also happened to be his cousin Harold. Cristobel and Max watched as Harold looked around, and then shoved a tray

into Spyder's hands and dived back into the crowd, distancing himself from his always hungry cousin.

"I got it." He wiggled his body and laughed. "That's my favowite cousin of all time," Spyder said, through a mouth full of crunchy crickets. He held the tray out to his friends.

"I thought thing-a-ma-frog was your favorite cousin," Max said. He picked up a fat wiggly blanket, threw it high in the air and darted his tongue out to catch it.

"Oh Max, haven't you figured it out yet?" Cristobel asked, giggling as she turned to him. "His favorite cousin is always the last cousin who put food in his hands."

"It's twue. My stomach is a family curse. We all love to eat-eat-eat."

"I'm amazed you haven't blown up yet." Max laughed and stuffed his mouth with as many seaweed poppers his cheeks could hold.

"Not yet, but I did hear about a gweat-gweat-gweat-gweat-gweat-gweat uncle—" he stopped to count on his sticky fingers, "—who exploded after he ate a bunch of slug sandwiches." Spyder beamed after that bit of news.

"Crithobel, are you going to eat any more?"

"How many is a bunch? Nine? Ten?" Max asked.

"About twenty-six . . . or was it thirty-two," Spyder pondered. He scratched the side of his nostril. "I can't wemember, but he's a legend in the family."

"The only legend in my family was my cousin Tessera," Cristobel said.

"What'd she do?" Max asked, his mouth full of crunchy crickets. He swallowed and burped his appreciation.

Cristobel grabbed a handful of seaweed poppers before they disappeared. She tossed a couple into her mouth before she answered.

"Cousin Tessera was the only member of my family to leave Lake Fibian." She chewed slowly as she thought. "She was one of the few Anura who ever left. When she came back, she told my aunt and the Elders crazy stories about frogs with two heads, six legs, missing eyes and water that burns when you jump into it. Of course, they didn't believe her. They tried to get her to see Doctor Tom, but she insisted she was telling the truth. When no one believed her, she left. No one has seen her since."

Max and Spyder's mouths hung open. Spyder didn't even attempt to snatch the low flying mosquito out of the air.

"Was your cousin Madcap Tess?" Max asked, awed by the news. Madcap Tess was a frog who, it was said, lost her froggy mind.

"That's her," she said.

Max asked, "Why didn't you tell us?"

"We don't talk about her. It upsets my aunt. Anyway, I never knew her. She left long before I was hatched. She's probably dead by now and . . . hey, watch out."

Cristobel hopped to the side as she was almost knocked over, this time by two reveling Hourglass Tree Frogs, with overflowing cups of Chipmunk Delight—a special brew made from wild plums, worms, fly legs, and blueberries—bounced by. "Anyway, I doubt she had half the adventures we've had."

"That's twue," Spyder said. "We've had some goo—" he burped, "—good times."

Max's tongue lolled out of his mouth while he thought about this. They had some cool adventures under their sweetgrass belts, most of which no one but the three of them knew about. Like climbing to the top of Archibald the Redwood tree, and escaping BlooBlaq, the grumpy Black Vulture every amphibian and rodent was careful to avoid.

"I still can't believe we tried to go to Barrier Lake," Cristobel whispered.

"I can't believe we didn't get caught," Max replied.

Barrier Lake was a forbidden place where the rules of living didn't exist. Since most of the Elders were distracted with preparing for the first Luna Light Night of the season, the trio snuck off just that morning. A hundred leaps before arriving there they almost lost their lives when they jumped into the snake pit of the notorious Limmon and his snake den. It was early spring. Who knew they'd be there already?

Luckily, Limmon and the rest of the snake nest were still too groggy from the Deep Sleep, so Max, Spyder, and Cristobel escaped before they became snake food.

"We get too caught up in the fun and this time we almost learned the hard way to pay attention to our surroundings," Cristobel said.

The protection under the Lake Fibian Collaboration Agreement did not extend as far as Barrier Lake.

"The predator species over there are not obligated to *not* to attack other animals," Cristobel added.

"Close call, that one," Max said.

"I guess Madcap Tess isn't vewy big news after Blooblaq and Bawwier Lake," Spyder said. He sighed and licked his hand.

"I think it's just another Croaklore to keep us in line," Cristobel said. "I doubt Cousin Tessera left the lake. I bet she hid out for a while to get away from . . ."

Cristobel didn't have a chance to finish as Max laid his hand on her arm and croaked, "Listen."

In silence, Cristobel, Max, and Spyder listened to the odd grunting sounds coming from behind them. They turned their bodies around to face the direction of the noise and watched as frogs swayed and fell as if a heavy wind blew.

What they saw was not a natural force knocking frogs over, but two very real and very frightened Anura Elders.



“**M**ay I have your attention, please?” Mister Wally Fowler’s voice quivered. Most of the crowd, still excited by Luna Light Night, did not hear the Mayor’s trembling voice. The Spadefoots continued to play. The music grew louder as the voices of the crowd intensified.

“Please, may I have your attention?” he asked again, this time louder, but still unheard by the majority of the frogs.

“Let me try,” said Titus, a brown and black bullfrog whose voice could travel across the entire lake, and whose color changed from black to brown depending on his mood. As Chief of Security, Titus knew exactly what to say to get everyone’s notice. “Attention! We need the attention of the entire Anura to discuss a dire concern.”

Dire. That one word stopped all conversation.

The Spadefoots, noticing Mister Webster no longer paid attention to them, paused in the middle of their song.

“Dire?” Miss Milly repeated.

Miss Milly, known around the lake as a nervous Elder frog, enjoyed fainting at the smallest thing. “Dire?” she bellowed louder, caught her breath, and then crumbled to the ground like a fallen leaf.

“Someone pick her up and lay her on the nearest lily pad please,” Titus bellowed. The frogs closest to her leapt to her side and hoisted her onto their backs. As one, they hopped to the edge of the lake and laid her down on a lily pad. Cristobel hopped over with a handful of moss to place under her head.

Max realized something monumental was about to happen. He leaped over the heads of two curious frogs and landed next to Cristobel who was closer to Mister Fowler and Titus. Spyder reluctantly crept closer to his friends. His eyes darted around as he looked for an easy escape route.

“I have distressing news to tell you.” Mister Fowler addressed the group. He wrung his quivering hands together. “There’s been some strange activity happening at Sprocket Point House.”

“Stranger than normal?” asked a chuckling voice in the crowd.

Sprocket Point House was the summer vacation spot used by most of the animals living around

the lake. In summer, the house was loud and crowded with frogs and birds, lizards and squirrels, turtles and ducks and all the other types of animals of Lake Fibian. On hot summer days, they clamored to find a prime spot to relax, have fun, and stay cool.

“This is no time for jokes,” Titus bellowed. “There are creatures there I have not seen for many years.”

He looked around to make sure he had everyone’s attention. “Not since the *Hoppernot* left.”  
Frightened gasps and whispers circled the lake.



The Hoppernot.

The legendary two-legged creature that had lived in Sprocket Point House, the old abandoned house up the hill from the lake’s edge.

The Hoppernot used to walk around the lake upright as if sticks were stuck to its legs. It grabbed and terrorized frogs who did not move fast enough to escape its quick grasp. The Hoppernot was usually seen poking and prodding frogs and then muttering to itself in its harsh guttural language of grunts and sighs, none of the animals could understand.

Sometimes the Hoppernot entered the water and carried a long stick with a dangling string from its tip that would mesmerize the fish. In this trance-like state it was almost impossible for the fish to escape the Hoppernot’s lure.

The animals became even more frightened on the few occasions the duck and pheasant flying species lost another member of their flock. Sad and nervous eyes watched the Hoppernot walk back to the house with their avian friend dangling lifeless from its hand.

That was years ago, before many of the frogs gathered now were hatched. Lake Fibian was safe now.

The Hoppernot was gone.

The last time the Hoppernot was seen, it entered a floating vessel that looked like a hollowed out, misshapen tree trunk. Scared eyes watched as it glided up the lake coast and disappeared. Never to return.

The Hoppernot appeared to have abandoned the house, and after many years of absence, Sprocket Point House was turned into a popular vacation spot for the animals.

The presence and constant threat of the Hoppernot forced the warring Anura to agree to unify as a species. Banded together, they could defend themselves.

While the Anura agreed to harmony amongst them, the leaders from the other animal nations approached the governing frogs and asked them to join in the newly created Lake Fibian Collaboration.

The highest-ranking members of each species would be a part of the council that made up the Collaboration. Every species would have a say in running and protecting Lake Fibian.

Joining different, and sometimes unfriendly, species together was a radical idea, but the Hoppernot’s presence and its preying on the animals of the lake forced them to find a way to protect

themselves.

Many of the animals were opposed to the idea—the Blue Poison Dart frogs, those persnickety pests, were the loudest frogs who argued against banding together, but the stories and pleas from family members of the missing bird and fish clans, and the few frogs who lost their croak, convinced everyone.

Everyone feared the Hoppernot's return and never wanted to be vulnerable again. To seal the unity deal the Concord Pact—warning calls using notes and distinct sounds each animal species could mimic—were created to alert each other to danger.

Once the Collaboration leaders agreed to a truce between species, they decreed Lake Fibian a neutral territory. To prevent issues with the more aggressive predatory animals in the area, they declared all hunting, stalking, and feeding to be done at any of the other surrounding woods and lakes.



Mister Fowler took a deep breath. The skin beneath his chin drew in tight.

“Earlier today, we saw f-f-four Hoppernots at Sprocket Point House,” he swallowed the lump in his throat.

“They appeared to be looking for something,” Mister Fowler told the gathering. The growing crowd heard the fear and confusion in his voice.

“What were they looking for?” Cristobel asked.

“I don't know. They were speaking in a funny language. I couldn't understand them, but they didn't look happy. They kept shaking their heads like wet mice, but slower and moving their shoulders up and down like this.” Mister Fowler demonstrated by pushing his body up and down as if he were doing push-ups.

“What did they look like?” Max asked.

“Where are they now?” Miss Milly croaked. She looked around to the frogs closest to her. Like theirs, her eyes widened with anxiety.

“Are the Hoppernots declaring war?” Cristobel asked.

Spyder raised his hand. “Is that why it brought more Hoppewnots?”

Max turned to Titus and repeated his question. “What did they look like?”

Mister Fowler looked bewildered as more and more frogs asked questions. He kept swallowing, trying to form words, but nothing squeezed past the tightness in his throat.

Noticing Mister Fowler's difficulty, Titus cut in. “I didn't see the Hoppernots myself, but I did hear strange noises behind Sprocket Point House. I went to investigate, but the Hoppernots were gone,” he said. Titus paused as something niggled at the back of his mind. “You know, the area around the house looked odd, but I can't put my finger on what was different.”

“We wanted to get here as soon as we could to warn you since the entire Anura are gathered,” Mister Fowler added.

“Do you think they will return?” Cristobel asked. She glanced over at Max and saw his

enthusiasm deflate a little.

“I don’t know, but we must be careful. Pay attention no matter where you are or how safe you feel. We do not want any frogs to go missing. We’ll need everyone’s help watching out for these creatures in case they return,” Mister Fowler said, his voice squeaked at the end.

“Of course they’ll return,” Miss Milly said, with a thump of her green hopping shoot. “That *thing* was always going to return.”

“We never thought there would be more than one Hoppernot though,” Mister Fowler said. “We should have known more of those creatures existed.”

“I knew,” Miss Milly sniffed. “I always said we were too complacent.”

Her words brought no comfort to the crowd, who stepped closer together and glanced around as if a Hoppernot would appear at any moment. Titus glared down at her and Miss Milly promptly fainted.

In one powerful leap, Mister Fowler soared through the air and landed on a large elephant ear leaf. As he swayed, he clapped his hands together and announced, “I need everyone’s attention. It is time to tell the Hoppernot Croaklore. This may be the most important telling of this Croaklore you have ever heard. So listen carefully.”

A stern expression settled on Mister Fowler’s wide face when a slight groan pierced the air. His mouth tightened as he watched the frogs and leaplings squirm with impatience as if the threat of Hoppernots wasn’t real.

Glancing up through tree limbs to the full moon, he sighed.

After the Deep Sleep—the long hibernation during the cold winter months—the start of spring was challenging. Everyone was excited to come together again but they took for granted they were safe because the Hoppernot had been missing for so many spring cycles. That is why the telling and re-telling of the Hoppernot Croaklore was important.

Taking a deep breath, Mister Fowler began as he always began.

“The Hoppernot Croaklore is the most important lore of all the Croaklores,” he bellowed.

He went silent after this announcement, letting his words sink into the minds of the frogs and leaplings gathered around him. Mister Fowler stood still, his body wide and squat, on the elephant ear leaf bouncing gently from the slight wind. He waited until most of the Anura quieted down, then pushed himself up taller and sat back on his hind legs. He folded his thin dark green hands together and scowled at three little leaplings when he heard whispers.

“Here we go again,” Max muttered.

“Shh, you’ll get us in trouble,” Cristobel whispered.

Spyder opened his mouth to say “again” but Mister Fowler’s stern expression made him snap his mouth shut.

As his eyes swept across the rest of the crowd, Mister Fowler took a few extra seconds to glare down at the three little leaplings, who continued to whisper.

Feeling the Elder frog’s glare, Max pushed himself lower to the ground and out of Mister Fowler’s line of sight.

“If you remember only one of these Croaklores,” Mister Fowler continued, “*this* is the one you must commit to memory and heed. It may save your life.”

Every year, Mister Fowler performed this lecture on the first Luna Light Night. It was one of

his most important duties as Mayor of Lake Fibian, but tonight his recitation of the Hoppernot Croaklore was the most significant moment in his life.

Filling his lungs with the earth-scented air he warned, “The Hoppernot is a fiendish beast that preys on the small and defenseless. It lives on the land, but can survive in water.”

Hearing a whisper, Mister Fowler darted his gaze to Cristobel, Max, and Spyder. Their innocent unblinking eyes stared back at him.

Mister Fowler cleared his throat. “The Hoppernot can climb trees as easy as a squirrel. It does not fly, but it knows the secrets of the wind. The Hoppernot can swim, and when it does, fish—and even frogs—disappear.”

Max opened his mouth but quickly covered it, pretending to stifle a yawn when Titus looked his way.

Mister Fowler expanded his throat and let out a long, loud, annoyed *croak*. He glowered and waited until he had the leaplings’ undivided attention.

“Listen to me,” he shouted. His already large eyes became even larger as he leaned over and pierced the leaplings with a sharp and desperate demand. The chatter stopped. “The Hoppernot has an evil weapon – a cold, ugly thing that makes a noise so loud you want to hibernate. A weapon so powerful it can—and has—dropped birds in flight.”

“The Hoppernot is a sneaky creature. It disappears for long hours, but always returns – silent and unexpected. We, the Anura and all of the animals of Lake Fibian, dread those days the most. When the Hoppernot is here, it can be watched, but when it disappears—” Mister Fowler shuddered. “We never know when it will sneak up and snatch one of us away. That is why we tell this Croaklore. That is why we must be careful. We do not know when the Hoppernot will return. If it will return. The Hoppernot is a master predator and one we do not understand.”

Gripping the edge of the leaf, and with all the strength and persuasion he could muster, Mister Fowler impassioned, “A Hoppernot should never, ever, *ever* be approached or trusted.” His large eyes blinked rapidly. “Our survival depends on it.”



At the front of the crowd, a lone shaking hand rose up in the air. It was Benny, a leapling who recently lost his tail.

“Is it *really* that bad?” Benny asked. He glanced over to *The Three* hoping to catch their attention with his brave question, but they were whispering again.

Benny looked up at Mister Fowler and nearly swallowed his tongue when he saw the Elder frog’s fierce frown. Benny lowered his eyes and glanced around, noticing the strange looks from the older frogs, especially the stern frown from his mother. He became even more uncomfortable when he saw the unsmiling faces of *The Three* who were staring at him now and clearly not impressed.

Benny hunched his body downward and wished he was a burrowing frog rather than a tree dweller.

Mister Fowler bit his tongue to prevent the angry retort he wanted to make. He understood

the young frog was excited and eager to make a good impression with the other leaplings, but he needed to impress upon him, on all of them, the need for caution. With a single leap of his short legs, Mister Fowler landed on the ground.

He laid his hands on his wide hips and looked over at Titus with a quirked eye. He needed help and no one was better at it than Titus.

Titus' eyes swung left and right. He was scared, but he had to ensure the safety of his community instead of succumbing to his own fears.

"We must come together and protect Lake Fibian," Titus bellowed to the crowd. As Chief of Security, his word was law. The response to his announcement was quick and loud. *Claps, chirps,* and *croaks* sounded off all around the lake in agreement.

"Maybe they've left already," Mister Webster said. He was a peace-loving frog and hoped to calm some of the more excitable frogs.

"We can't take that chance," Mister Fowler replied, and then muttered, "As it is, they may have been here before today and we never knew."

Some of the frogs closest to Mister Fowler heard the strange thought, but before the crowd could spread the words or ask more questions, Titus spoke.

"We must have lookouts in place to know when they return. Once we know why they are here, we can figure out how to get rid of them."

Max perked up and started to bounce in place. There was a twinkle in his eye. Spyder bit back a croak. He knew that look well and hoped Max wasn't getting any ideas that would get them into trouble.

"Critho . . ." Spyder was about to warn Cristobel, but one look at her and an unhappy croak escaped when he realized she too sniffed adventure in the air.

Cristobel stared straight ahead ignoring her friends and the crowd. Her white eyes widened as her horror and excitement grew.

Max bounced into Cristobel. He stepped on her toes and brought her attention back to her surroundings. She became aware of Max's excitement and the fact that Spyder tried to slip away. Cristobel grinned and listened carefully.

Mister Fowler raised his webbed hands to the crowd to stop the flood of questions.

"What about the Concord Pact? Should we sound the alarm?" Spyder asked, taking one step, then another away from the crowd.

"No, not yet. Most of the other animals have not returned from the Deep Sleep and we, the Anura Elders, do not want to cause unnecessary panic until we have all the facts."

Mister Fowler's eyes sought out as many of the Elders as he could see to ensure they all agreed. The last thing he wanted was wide spread panic. He didn't want to think of what could happen if the entire Anura panicked.

He scratched his throat. "I hope we have a day or two before we have to do anything as drastic as sound the alarm. By then, the Hoppernots will either be gone or the majority of our allies will have returned. Otherwise, I don't know what we will do."

"That's all we know right now," Titus spoke up. "The Elders need to gather and talk. When we come up with a plan we'll sound the Anura alarm and meet back here. Until then, be careful. Remember, we are family. We need to watch out for one another."

Mister Fowler and Titus stared at each other for a moment. They hopped away, speaking in low, worried voices. The rest of the Elders followed behind. The crowd around the lake fled to their homes.

All except for three small frogs.



“Worry Wart Wally is at it again,” Max announced.

“What do you mean, Max?” Spyder asked.

“I doubt he saw anything at all,” Max chirped.

Max hopped side to side. His eyes scanned the area. “How many times has he said he saw something no one else has seen? He’s the nervous type and he’s been hanging around Miss Milly lately; maybe she’s rubbing off on him.”

“I don’t know about that Max,” Cristobel responded. “He told the entire Anura. I think this is serious.”

“Serious smerious. I don’t believe it.” Max sat back on his hind legs and crossed his arms. “Mister Fowler was the only to one to see them. Titus was with him and *he* didn’t see the Hoppernots.”

“I think—” Spyder began.

“Not only did Mister Fowler claim to see them,” Max interrupted, “He said there were four of them. How come no one else saw the Hoppernots? Not a single frog sounded an alarm. If Hoppernots are here someone should have sounded an alarm.”

“It’s the beginning of spring so there are few animals around Sprocket Point House,” Cristobel answered. “Mister Fowler has to inspect the house before everyone comes back from the Deep Sleep since he’s the president of the Sprocket Point House committee.”

She looked around, then focused her eyes upward and searched the shadows. “Hardly anyone hangs around there before the leaves bloom. Frogs were either here at the lake or on their way here for Luna Light Night, and most of the other animals haven’t come back from their winter retreats yet.”

“That’s twue,” Spyder nodded. “My mother likes to swim in the waters around there and twies to get there early to avoid the cwoowds.”

Max and Cristobel stared blankly at Spyder. Neither of them understood what that had to do with anything.

“What about the birds or the squirrels? Why didn’t they send out the alarm?” Max asked.

“Most of the birds haven’t come back from their other homes and we all know how lazy squirrels are after winter,” Cristobel replied.

Spyder nodded, “That’s twue, too.”

A sly look crossed Max’s face. Spyder took a step back hoping to leap away in the opposite direction toward home before Max could make a suggestion he knew he wouldn’t like. Max grabbed Spyder’s arm before his back foot touched the ground.

“Why don’t we go to Sprocket Point House tomorrow morning, early, and look around for ourselves? I bet we don’t see any Hoppernots,” Max suggested.

Spyder slumped. “I hate when you sniff out a new adventure.”

Max stuck his tongue out at Spyder.

“Well,” Spyder grudged, “Maybe not hate, but I don’t want to go to Spwocket Point House. I don’t want to see any Hoppewnotes. My gwandmother told me they’re big and scawy.”

Max nudged Spyder with his elbow, then taunted, “Aw, come on scaredy. If it’s true, which I doubt, but if it is, we can figure out what they’re doing and tell the others. You heard what Titus said and you know how scared everyone is. No one will try to get close enough. They’re too afraid of getting tadnapped and taken away.”

Spyder scrunched his face and crossed his arms.

Seeing Spyder’s uncertainty Max wheedled, “Aw, come on Spyder-man. I doubt we’ll see anything at all.”

Cristobel turned and put her hand on Spyder’s shoulder. “We have to help, Spy,” she said gently. “We have to. That’s what Luna Light Night is all about. We take care of each other. We might be in danger, all of us.”

“The Anuwa needs us.” He sighed and rubbed the pads of his fingertips together. “Ohh, alright. I’ll go, but I weally don’t want to.”

“Come to my house in the morning,” Max said. He bounced back and forth before he hopped toward his home, then stopped and called out to them.

“Don’t let anyone know where we’re going.”

“Goodnight Spy,” Cristobel said as she, too, hopped toward home.

Spyder stayed where he was, twisting his fingers together. “Why is it every time we do something that gets us into big twouble he always says those words?”

He stood on the lake’s shore for a few seconds more. He looked up at the moon and closed his eyes against the bright light. Sighing deeply, he mumbled, “I hope we’re not making a big mistake.”

With another belly-deep sigh, he turned toward the moonlit path that would take him home, but he stopped in mid-hop. An uneasy twitchy feeling crept over his right leg. It felt as if he was being watched and his leg never lied. Looking around one last time, he hopped toward home.

The Hoppernots will be available for purchase on August 5, 2014.