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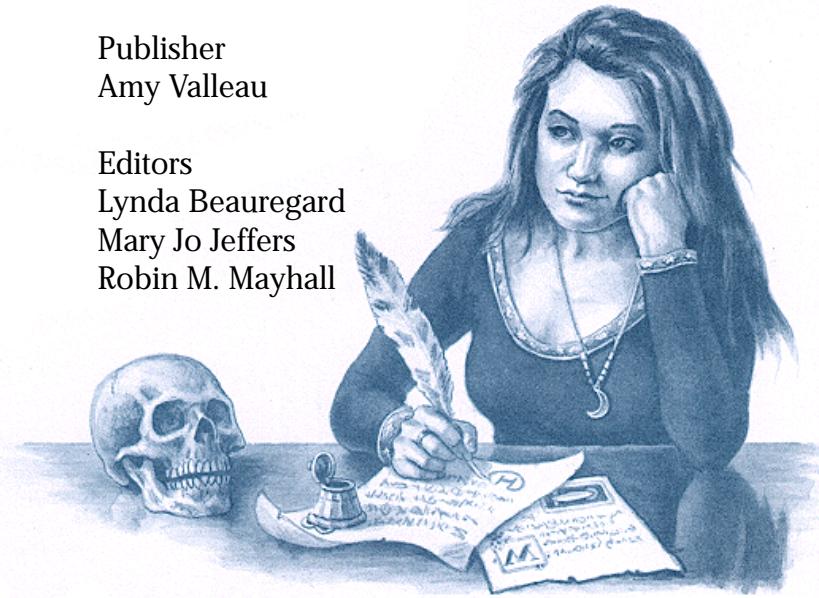
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Issue One

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AS LUCK WOULD HAVE IT

by Lynda Beauregard

The rain pelted her mercilessly, trickling down her neck under the cloak and turning the road into a treacherous river of slick mud. Shanna trudged along indifferently, hardly noticing the rain any more. Her stomach rumbled in hunger, her feet hurt, and she was chilled to the bone. She swiped brown, sopping wet hair out of her eyes and squinted at the road before her. How far was it to that stupid town, anyway?

Her right foot slipped suddenly and she started to lose her balance. She'd never been particularly graceful, and her present lack of secure footing guaranteed disaster. Shanna found herself face down in the mud, her mouth filled with the slimy stuff. She wasn't sure whether to scream or cry, so she settled for just picking herself back up again. Her hands groped automatically for her few remaining possessions. The pouch was still at her waist and she could feel the outlines of her precious tinderbox inside it. In better days, a few coins might have joined it, but these were not better days. The small knife was still in its sheath, securely attached to her belt on the other side. She wasn't very adept with it, but it was better than nothing. She reached for the leather thong around her neck and pulled it out from under her mud stained tunic. Yes, the ring was still there. She clutched it convulsively and closed her eyes for a moment, savoring the memories of happier days.

Mother gave her that ring right before she died. Shanna was 14 then, full of herself and ready to conquer the world. Mother said that her own mother had given it to her, just as she was giving it to Shanna. She said it would bring her luck. Shanna opened her eyes and stared into the milky blue depths

of the stone the ring encircled then snorted in derision. No luck there. It seemed as if everything had gone downhill from that moment on. First Mother died, then came the disappointment of bard school. And that was only the beginning.

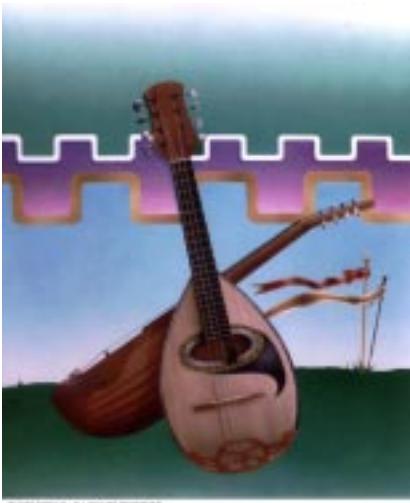
Of course, things didn't appear to be going so badly at first. Shanna was saddened by the loss of her mother, but her death opened new vistas to the girl. She'd always dreamed of becoming a bard and she'd stashed away every copper she could filch from her father over the years, hoping she'd get the chance to follow her dream someday. With Mother gone, there were no more reasons to put it off.

She struggled through four years at the bard school before she was rudely kicked out by the master bards. It wasn't her fault that she was a slow learner! True, her attempts at playing the pipes sounded like a cow suffering a painful demise. And she had to agree with the drum master when he said she apparently heard a different beat than everyone else. And all those histories! How could anyone possibly remember them all? Nevertheless, Shanna was certain that she would have improved eventually, given the chance.

But they hadn't given her a chance, or at least not much of one, anyway. Instead, they deposited her outside the gates of the school with a few silvers to speed her on her way. Shanna made the best of it and traveled without a care until her purse was empty. Then she confidently strode into the nearest inn, introduced herself as a bard, and fully expected to receive the honor due. When her abilities proved to be far below that of a

true bard, she was thrown out the door without hesitation. She tried again at several other inns with the same result. Eventually she lowered herself to begging real bards to allow her to "assist" them, singing in smoky taverns with her slightly better than average voice. This earned her a few crusts of bread and a warm place to sleep, but no more than that. Shanna managed to stay alive but often found herself just where she was now - trudging down a deserted road with an empty belly.

A rustling sound startled Shanna out of her musings. She peered through the rain just catching the flash of a white rabbit's tail out of the corner of her eye. Thoughts of smoked rabbit meat set her stomach to rumbling again. She pulled out her knife and leaped into the bushes, recklessly crashing through the dripping greenery. The rabbit kept darting in and out of sight, drawing her farther away from the road. She was just about to give up when she saw it again, just out of reach on the other side of a large hole. Tightening her grip on the knife, she leaned forward. And tripped.



Shanna tried to grab the branches and twigs around her as she fell into the hole but they were no help. They only joined her in her downward progress. The rabbit, forest, and sky all disappeared as the ground swallowed her up. She was weightless for a few heartbeats, then she hit the ground again so hard it took her breath away. Pain lanced up her leg and she

cried out as soon as she had her breath back. Tears threatened to spill out of her eyes as she turned to look up at the opening she'd fallen through. She could see the the rabbit's head to one side of the hole. The creature watched her for a moment, wiggled its nose, and bounded off. Shanna screamed at it, feeling a little better afterward, oddly enough.

"Well, Shanna," she said when she was done screaming, "it's not going to do any good to just sit here in the dripping water. Better start climbing."

That proved to be easier said than done. No vegetation hung down far enough for her to grasp, and her attempt at scaling the closest wall failed miserably. Her left ankle ached. Shanna briefly considered throwing a fit. She picked up her discarded knife and threw it instead. She regretted her action as soon as the knife left her hand but all she could do was listen for the thump and clatter that would indicate its location. Much to her dismay, she didn't hear a thing. Sighing, she sank to her hands and knees, crawling in the direction of her hasty throw.

She crawled a good distance before the knife's dull gleam beckoned to her. She scooted forward and snatched it up, scolding it for abandoning her. Then she stood. Or rather, she tried to. Her head banged against rough rock before she'd even straightened her legs. Cursing, she dropped back down to hands and knees. A tunnel, she was in a stupid tunnel now! She'd lost all sense of direction in her attempt to stand, too. Shaking her ringing head, Shanna crawled until she found another rock wall, then started to follow it. She kept one hand above her head to keep track of the tunnel height and eventually it widened enough to let her walk upright once more.

Sometime later, Shanna was close to tears again. She was hopelessly lost and hungry, darkness surrounded her, and her ankle throbbed abominably. She flopped down to the ground, determined to have herself a good cry before she tried to go any further. Her mother's ring thumped against her chest as she sat down. If only Mother hadn't died! Shanna would be home, wrapped safely in her arms right now, instead of crying in a darkened tunnel, covered in mud. The thought comforted her, and she fancied that the ring was growing warm with her mother's love. She pulled it out of her tunic again, and was astonished to see a glow emanating from it. Shanna glanced around as the dim light grew. Rock, rock, more rock, and....Shanna shrieked and scrambled away from the skeleton she'd been sitting right next to.

Shanna stayed motionless until her heartbeat returned to something close to normal. The skeleton watched her the whole time, the light from her ring reflecting eerily off its empty eye sockets. No flesh remained on the white bones, only tatters of clothing and a leather bag slung over what was once a shoulder. A glimmer caught Shanna's attention and she peered at the bag more closely. Something shiny winked at her from within it. Curious enough to swallow her fear, she crept forward and gingerly opened the flap. She kept one eye on the skeleton, half expecting it to suddenly come to life and imprison her in its bony embrace at any moment. Her hands closed around a large object and she pulled it out without looking, scuttling back to her place of safety, just out of her bony companion's reach. Then she examined her prize.

It was a harp. Not just any harp - it was the most beautiful instrument she'd ever seen. Fashioned from the finest silver, she was certain. Flowing designs covered every inch of it, sometimes forming runes and letters in a language she couldn't

read. As with everything else, languages lessons had defeated her at bard school, but this didn't even look like anything she'd struggled with there.

"No matter. You're a treasure anyway, now aren't you?" Shanna smiled and hugged the instrument to her chest. She couldn't play the thing, of course. She'd only touched a harp once before, and the harp master quickly snatched it away before she could do any more damage. Shanna looked down at the silver harp again. Ah well, she could always sell it if need be. It would break her heart, but better a broken heart than a starved body.

But how to carry it? Shanna glanced at the skeleton once more. She had to have that bag. Carefully placing the harp on the ground beside her, she screwed up both her face and her courage, then reached out to grasp the leather bag. She sucked in her breath, and yanked on it. The skeleton collapsed into a heap of bones as the bag came free, the milk white skull rolling between her legs.

"Eeewww!!" Shanna danced away from it, catching up the harp as she went. She slipped it into the bag and slung it over her shoulder, conveniently forgetting what the bag had recently been attached to. Turning her back on the pile of bones, she marched away with confidence, now that her glowing ring enabled her to see where she was going. Besides, it was fairly pulling her in one direction, making the choice easy.

Her elation had hardly begun to fade when she rounded a corner and was greeted by a patch of sunlight far ahead. She ran toward it, limping only a little now. The sunlight streamed through an opening at shoulder height, dimmed only by a few

branches that covered it. She pushed them aside impatiently and scrambled up the side of the rock wall. Without waiting to see what was on the other side, she pushed herself through the opening. No ravening beasts met her, fortunately, and she stood to look around. The rain had stopped, the sun was shining brightly, and the road was only a few paces away. Judging by the condition of the road, she guessed that the town was close by. Her stomach growled and she was coated in mud, but things were definitely looking up.

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Her luck held out, for once. A small town was nearby, and it boasted a modest inn. Even better, the inn had no bard in attendance. Shanna presented herself to the innkeeper's wife, who looked quite skeptical of this muddy and bedraggled visitor.

"Look here, good woman," Shanna wheedled, "I'm a bit travel stained, but I can still bring you custom. Wouldn't your neighbors be glad of a song or two?"

The plump woman sighed and rolled her eyes. "Right then, but clean yerself up out back, hear? I won't have ye trailing mud on my clean floors."

Shanna bowed extravagantly and strode around the outside of the inn. She made good use of the well she found in the back and was soon feeling herself again, if a bit damp still. Grey-green eyes gazed out from her reflection in the water as she rebraided her hair. Not bad, she decided. A nearby door led to the kitchen where her damp clothing steamed slightly in the heat from the fire. The innkeeper's wife bustled by, gifting her with some bread, cheese, and ale as she passed. Shanna

gulped the fare down without even tasting it. There would be time for tasting later.

A young man burst into the kitchen just as she was licking up the last crumbs. A stable boy from the looks of him. His eyes darted around until he spotted the innkeeper's wife, then hurried to her side. He whispered urgently into her ear and Shanna could see the woman's fire-reddened cheeks grow even more brightly colored. She flung down the pan she held and began to pace back and forth, muttering furiously.

".....thrice-damned.....the serving wench again.....what can I do....."

Shanna knew trouble when she saw it and judiciously edged her way toward the door. The movement caught the woman's eye, however, and she descended on the girl like a thundercloud. Shanna was grabbed roughly by the shoulder and propelled out the door in a most inconsiderate way.

"Out with ye!" The innkeeper's wife yelled. "Another temptation! That's all we need! I won't have me husband cheating me with more than one wench a night!"

"Wait!" Shanna pleaded desperately. "I can help!"

The woman folded her meaty arms and frowned. "And just how does ye intend to do that?"

"I.....I can make your husband hunger for no woman but you. Just give me a chance. You'll see." Shanna held out her hands entreatingly. The innkeeper's wife continued to frown, then she shook her head, her shoulders slumping in defeat.

"Don't matter much, I s'pose." The woman mumbled as she turned and shuffled back into the Inn. "Shouldn't be taking me troubles out on ye, anyway."

Shanna rubbed her shoulder, which was sore where the woman had gripped it. That's right, she thought. It wasn't her problem, so why should she suffer for it? All she wanted was a good meal and a place by the fire, and she was willing to perform for that. She'd be long gone by the time the woman figured out that she hadn't changed the husband a whit, and it would serve the woman right for treating a bard so harshly. She pushed the door open and strode through the kitchen to the common room, not even favoring the innkeeper's wife with a glance.

The sun had set and the common room was already filling up with thirsty farmers. Shanna spied a bench near the fire and claimed it. She settled herself, then opened the leather bag and brought out the silver harp. A few faces turned toward her and she made a show of pretending to tune the harp, even though she hadn't a clue of how go about it. After she'd fiddled around with it a while, she drew her hand across the strings experimentally. A heart-rendingly beautiful chord resulted, rippling out of the harp like water over a fall. A collective sigh passed through the crowd and every head turned her way. Shanna blinked in surprise and tried again. Another incredible chord floated across the room. She grinned confidently and started to strum. A complicated melody poured from the instrument, seemingly of its own will.

This was easy! Now why hadn't they tried teaching her this instrument in school? She was obviously good at it. And look how happy these simple folk were to hear it!

A stout man in an innkeeper's apron appeared next to the kitchen door. So that was the cheating husband, eh? Shanna couldn't see what the woman valued in the lout. But again, she wasn't much of a prize either. Then she spied the woman standing not far from him, a hopeless look creasing her face. She actually loved the man! Shanna repented her indignant attitude and took pity on the innkeeper's wife. She resolved to help her, if she could. But how? Shanna kept strumming the lovely harp, but turned her thoughts to the problem at hand. She tried to imagine the innkeeper totally besotted with his wife, not even noticing other women. And she could picture his wife's delight at his change of heart, but still had no idea how to accomplish it. She pondered the problem throughout the night, coming back to it as a tongue worries at a sore tooth.

Shanna played until her fingers bled, then put the harp away. The crowd protested, but she could not be swayed. It seemed quite late - shouldn't all these farmers be home, in their beds? Without her music to enthrall them, they slowly wandered off by twos and threes. The stable boy elbowed his way through the thinning crowd, carrying a bowl of thick stew and more ale.

"For you." He handed them to her and smiled shyly. "You earned it. Did what you said you'd do."

"Of course," she answered around a mouthful of stew, "I told her I was a bard."

The stable boy shook his tousled head. "No, I mean about the 'keep. Didn't you see him carry the missus off like they was 20 years younger? Ain't seen 'em since, but you sure can hear 'em."

Shanna stopped chewing long enough to listen. Sure enough, muted sounds of passion echoed from somewhere above the common room. She gulped down the mouthful of food and glanced at the harp where it rested peacefully in its leather bag. What was going on here?

"Well, glad I could help." She muttered. The stable boy handed her a blanket, then tugged at his forelock and skittered away. Shanna puzzled over the harp a bit more, until she decided that her head was just too tired to think. She wrapped the blanket around herself and curled into a ball next to the fire, asleep even before her eyes closed.

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Cheerful humming roused her from a sweet dream of home. Shanna opened her eyes to see the innkeeper's wife dancing about the sunlit common room, broom in hand. She saw Shanna lift her head and stopped, laughing in embarrassment. Then she scurried into the kitchen and returned with a wonderful smelling packet and a wine flask. She helped Shanna to her feet, handed her the packet and flask, and shepherded her to the door. Shanna was barely awake enough to grab at the leather harp bag as she was escorted past it.

"Here ye are then," the woman was chattering, "Blessings on ye fer all your good works and a good journey to ye." She had Shanna out the door now, and blocked the way back in with her plump body. "Oh, and here's a coin for ye. Thank ye!"

Shanna stared down at the silver coin in her open palm, then back up at the innkeeper's wife. "But.....can't I stay? Play again tonight?"

The woman laughed, her ample body quivering with mirth. "Oh no! I'm not taking any chances, not me! Be on your way, little bard!"

She closed the door between them, and Shanna clearly heard the thump of a bar being lowered into place. She stared dumbly at the door for a while, listening to the birds singing in nearby trees. Then she shook herself, and looked around. She put the food packet and flask in her waist pouch, and tucked the coin away in her boot. She settled the harp more comfortably on her shoulder, turned around, and picked a direction at random. Ah well, she thought as she marched away, at least she knew she could earn some coppers now. Perhaps the next town would show more promise. And have folk that made more sense, gods willing! •



COLD BLOODED

by Robin M. Mayhall

Olla lay stretched out on the warm deck next to the sandbox, eyes closed, enjoying the feel of the sun on her back. The weather was just right, not too hot or too cool. The afternoon was blissfully silent.

She opened one eye and peered at her chrono, splaying her claws slightly as she turned her hand to better see the time. She sighed. He'd be home soon and there would be hell to pay if he found her lazing on the deck. She sat up and glanced around her, making sure none of the human servants were watching from the windows, then slid into the sandbox, rolling over several times to scour her scales thoroughly. When she was clean she moved to the edge of the sandbox, then paused. With one more glance at the house she quickly plunged one hand to the elbow in the sand at the corner of the box, twisting her fingers until she found the smooth surface of the egg. When she had reassured herself it was still there, warm and safe, she climbed out of the sandbox and reached for her wrap.

She arranged the light cloth carefully around her waist, draping it just so over the base of her tail, and brushed the last traces of sand from her legs before entering the house. He would kill her if he found so much as a grain on the polished floors. Olla consoled herself by thinking of the egg. It would not be long now before it would be ready.

The egg was not her offspring. Her husband was of a different species, and they were not able to reproduce. If they did have a family eventually, the children would have to be adopted, or perhaps he would choose to sire children with

surrogate mothers of his own race. Olla could only hope she would not be with him long enough for that. The egg had come to her as such things always did, from the underground network of Audrians that functioned beneath the colonial surface of the city. It was the key to her freedom — and in a sense, the freedom of all her people.

Olla's heart started pounding as it always did when she thought too long on her husband and his conquering race. She flinched when she heard the sound of the front door slamming and hurried toward the bedroom to try to pull on something more presentable before he actually saw her. Her claws made a nervous clicking on the hard, gleaming floors.

She reached the bedroom and dove into her own closet. She shed her wrap and reached for a more formal dress that was nevertheless easy to slip into. The fabric caught on her long, slender tail as she tried to shrug into the dress. Breath whistled slightly through her nostrils as she reached around quickly to free her tail and then belted the dress around her securely with its colorful sash.

"Olla."

His voice was always an imperative. "Yes?"

"What are you doing? Come out here." She emerged from the closet, smoothing the folds of her dress, and gave him a smile. He was a good two heads taller than she, with the smooth pale skin of his kind, bare of scales but furred in

random places that mainly showed when he was undressed: head, upper lip, upper chest, groin. His fur was a deep brown several shades darker than the bark of the nut trees that grew on the estate where they lived, the estate that had been stolen from the Audrian whose family had worked it for generations. Of course, he was dressed now in an expensive suit of silvery grey. The suit, his pale skin and pale blue eyes contrasted nicely with his dark hair. She had found him very exotic and handsome when they had first met. Just as he had, no doubt, found her exotic and beautiful.

"I wasn't sure about this dress, darling," she said, trying to mollify him before he could even think to become agitated.
"Do you like it?"

His dark brows drew together. "You're lying. You're hot as the driveway outside. You've only just come in."

"Teggis, I was..."

"Shut up!" he exploded. He lunged forward, and before she could duck he'd punched her squarely in the torso, just under her ribs. She staggered back into the closet, half-falling against a row of brightly colored dresses. Like any cold-blooded creature, she had naturally slow reflexes, and the temperature in the house was cool enough to make her even more sluggish. He kept the house cold to keep her in line.

Olla remained where she was, half-hidden in a drift of clothing, palm pressed flat against her chest. She gasped for breath. Teggis knew better than to hit her in the face or anywhere else visible, especially when they were due tonight at a party for an influential local magistrate who just happened to be one of her kind. She stayed as still as she could, listening

until Teggis became disgusted with waiting and left the room abruptly. Only then did she drag herself out of the closet and over to the bed, where she stretched out on her side, holding her bruised ribs and listening to the breath whistle through her nostrils.

One of these days he would go too far and kill her.

She thought of the egg.

Her breathing gradually slowed, and she sat up straight, tail curling forward to wrap around her knees. She knew he would return, most likely with some peace offering to ensure her cooperation at tonight's important event. He still needed her to make nice with the Audrians who held a sliver of power in town because of their superior knowledge of the climate, geography, agriculture and mineral deposits that the native population inevitably enjoyed. She would, of course, cooperate. She was biding her time, just as innumerable Audrian females in this city were biding their time ... just as what remained of her race were biding theirs.

After a few minutes she got up, intending to go to the closet to choose yet another outfit — this one more suitable for the grand occasion. She paused by the dresser, drawn by the enormous framed wedding photo that sat there. She felt a somewhat bitter satisfaction as she gazed at it. When she had agreed to marry Teggis, she had had no idea she would end up being with him for so long. She had understood that there was no guarantee how soon a suitable egg would be produced, but in her naivete, she had believed the marriage would be a brief fling, something exciting, exotic and slightly dangerous. It had thrilled her to be part of the resistance, and it hadn't hurt that

Teggis was a rich and handsome businessman of his kind. It also hadn't hurt that her sisters in arms had learned quickly that Audrian females and human males made a particularly pleasurable combination in bed.

Teggis had insisted on a human-style ceremony, and of course she had gone along with it; her family, what remained of them, had been only too eager to cooperate if it meant making Olla a good match. It was essential to their plans that she marry an influential man, a leader in the community. In the photo, Teggis, his family members and Olla were dressed in human-style formal clothes. Teggis had several brothers and a sister, and all of them were standing at his side.

On Olla's side were only her mother and their family servant, Eym. Olla's father and brother had been killed in the resistance when the humans had colonized Audria, just as had most of the males of the species. Olla had been raised mostly by Eym, as her mother had spent her days trying to cultivate favor among the new ruling class of the planet. It had been Eym, not Olla's mother, who had revealed to the youngster the secret she and all females of their race carried: the secret of transformation, the secret that would keep them strong, the secret that would enable them to survive and even triumph. It was this secret that had given the women the courage to watch their fathers, brothers and husbands go out to be slaughtered by the superior military might of the invasionary force. Olla understood that her mother could never replace her father, or get over losing him, just as no one would ever replace him in Olla's heart, or replace her brothers. But the species would survive; Audria would survive.

Olla mustered a smile for herself as she turned away from the photo and went to finish dressing. She could hear

Teggis's footsteps in the hall as she came out, but she suspected by this time he had cooled down. She was right; he re-entered the room a changed man, smiling, warm, charming. "That's a lovely choice, my sweet," he said, taking her hand and twirling her around so he could admire her dress. Either he didn't notice how she winced when he lifted her arm, or he ignored it. "I'm sorry we quarreled. Why don't you wear this tonight?" He handed her a small slender box, and she sat on the bed to open it, head down. The box contained a gleaming necklace made of interlocking audrine links.

Olla looked up at him and smiled. "It's lovely, thank you," she said. Teggis smiled and nodded. He took the necklace from her and made her stand and turn around so he could place it around her neck. She watched in the mirror across the room. The silvery, almost liquid audrine — the metal for which her planet had been conquered — shone marvelously against her neck, looking like nothing so much as a collar. How appropriate.

The one good thing that came of being beaten was that Teggis was always absurdly tender toward her for hours, even days after each time he hit her. He squired her into their car and escorted her to the party as if she were a new teenage mistress, not his dull, drab and rather middle-aged official wife. He kept one hand in the small of her back just above her tail throughout the evening, as if he couldn't bear to be parted from her. Olla knew better. He worked the crowd with his usual mastery, paying special attention to the Audrians in the room, introducing her deferentially and keeping quiet while she made small talk about matters of interest: local politics, marriages, hatchings, the weather. Fortunately, Teggis and his friends were oblivious to the codes their Audrian wives and mistresses used, and much information was effectively communicated. The plan

was in motion, it seemed. Many eggs were close to hatching.

One Audrian male eyed Olla with more than just polite interest, but she ignored the glance rigidly, feeling a renewed surge of terror as she remembered the night she had been caught near the bar, talking — just for a moment — with the young ambassador from Ketch. She could only thank the heavens that there were so few males left.

She shivered a little, and her husband leaned in. "Cold?" he asked, showing a brief flash of white teeth through his facial fur. Unlike hers, his fangs were so small as to be almost indistinguishable from his other teeth.

"No, I'm fine," she demurred. He nodded cheerfully and startled her by lightly brushing the base of her tail with his fingers. She felt a brief shock of intense pleasure and glanced at him nervously. He seemed in a high good humor. The whole evening had gone well. They spoke with the magistrate, and she asked Teggis to call on her at her office, which was of course what Teggis wanted, but he would not have asked in such a setting. Teggis whistled softly to himself in the car on the way home, and the sound was soothing to Olla. It reminded her of her mother's soft breathing, and that made her think of the egg, and that helped her to forget her tiredness and the low but insistent throbbing in her chest where he'd punched her just a few hours earlier.

She acquiesced when he wanted to make love, but without the intense pleasure she had enjoyed when they had first married. She was just glad when he was finally asleep and thus slightly less dangerous. She lay on her side, tail draped over her thighs, and stared through the sheer curtains out the window at the necklace of moons she could see adorning the

night sky. Audria had thirteen moons, seven of which she could see tonight from her vantage point. They were lovely. Olla's vision blurred somewhat and she blinked, surprised to feel tears wetting her eyes. It had been a long time since she had cried over any of this.

She turned slowly, carefully, and glanced at his sleeping face. He looked peaceful, and she edged away from him carefully, easing her way out of the bed. She crept across the floor, keeping her tail high so as not to drag or catch on anything, and doing her best to still the clicking of her claws until she was out of the room. She moved through the house on her heels, silently, finding the door to her sundeck, the one concession on this entire estate to her inhuman physiology, and slipping out into the night. It was cold; she wouldn't be able to stay out for long without falling asleep, and he'd beat her half to death if he found her out here naked in the morning ... but as soon as the chilly night air hit her, she also understood why she had felt compelled to come out here. She heard the song of the egg as clearly as if it had been her own offspring. It was time!

She dove toward the sandbox, plunging her hands in and feeling for the egg. She trembled all over as she touched it, wrapping her fingers around it and pulling it toward her. She cradled the egg in her lap, feeling it rock a little as the creature inside made its small but insistent movements toward freedom. She burrowed in the sand, making a slight depression to lay the egg in and tapped it with her claws, making a small crack. Immediately a tiny claw thrust aggressively through the crack and widened it. After only a moment she saw a miniature beak, which would eventually fall off if this creature were allowed to survive to maturity. Olla slid her own claws into the crack and pulled the egg open very carefully, setting half the shell, filled with fluid, aside to keep, then drawing the other half toward her.

The creature inside looked up at her with knowing gimlet eyes. "Hello, my little love," Olla whispered. "Welcome." It burrowed into her lap, emitting tiny squeaks. She held a bit of the eggshell and let the creature suck some of the fluid from it. That would be enough to sustain it until morning, when the rest of her plans must fall into place.

She scrambled to her feet, holding the hatchling in one hand and the half-eggshell in the other. She re-entered the house, ignoring the spill of sand she left across the threshold behind her. She moved to the kitchen and through it to the hallway that led to the servants' quarters. She scratched ever so softly on Eym's door. The woman answered so quickly that Olla suspected the elder had heard the song, just as she had. "He's here at last," Olla whispered.

Eym nodded, her own eyes shining. "You just let me take care of everything, lady," she answered, reaching for Olla's treasures. "All will be done as it must." Reluctant as she was to let the hatchling go, Olla trusted Eym, who had been with her own family until she had married Teggis, and had been part of her dowry to him.

"Are you sure it will work?" Olla whispered, even though she knew the answer. The Audrians had discovered quite by accident that their transformative power would work as well on humans as it did on species native to the planet. The news spread like wildfire among the surviving females, and the plan formed almost of its own accord.

"Yes, lady," Eym answered patiently. "Go now. He must not suspect until it is done."

As hard as it was to leave the egg and its former inhabitant with Eym, it was harder still to return to Teggis's bed and lie down next to him as if nothing had happened. Olla remained awake throughout the night, trembling occasionally in anticipation and fear — what if it went wrong? What if it didn't work? — and staring out at the moons as they strung a slow caravan across the sky. She got out of bed before he did. He didn't like for her to lie about, but more than that, she couldn't stand the tension a moment longer.

She dressed and glanced at herself quickly in the mirror, only then realizing she had never removed the collar he had placed on her the night before. She reached up and touched it gently, smiling. The tip of one claw made a faint ticking sound as she tapped the audrine surface.

Not long now, my darling, no.

Olla proceeded to breakfast without waiting to see if he was stirring. Eym and the other servants were there, cooking the usual hearty meal for the lord of the manor. Olla herself ate little in the morning. She took a drink that Eym handed her and sat down at the table with the newspaper, trying to ignore the small cage that now decorated a previously empty corner of the kitchen. The hatchling was curled inside, sleeping sweetly. It seemed best to keep him out in the open, rather than trying to hide him, since Teggis might take it in his head to inspect the servants' quarters. But hiding the hatchling in plain sight, as it were, was difficult. She found it terribly hard not to look at him, drawn to him as she was. But she must pretend, for at least a little longer.

Teggis finally made his appearance, irritable as always in the morning. He sat down, reached for the section of the

newspaper he wanted, and unfurled it between himself and Olla, which satisfied her. He did not acknowledge Eym when she approached the table with a tray loaded with food, including a huge, stuffed omelet, grilled potatoes, toast with jelly, fruit, juice and coffee. Most of the food was grown here on their estate, but some was imported at great expense just so that he could have the food he was used to.

Olla sipped at her drink and watched him out of the corner of her eye. He picked up his coffee mug and sipped from it, then set it down and absently nudged it back and forth with his fingers while he read the front page of the newspaper. After a few agonizing minutes, he set the paper down, picked up a slice of toast, and spread jelly over it in a thick layer. She averted her eyes while he ate it, glancing toward the cage where the hatchling slept. She could smell the deliciously appetizing aroma of the omelet. Her stomach muscles tightened and she sipped again from her drink, knowing she was no longer keeping up much of a pretense, and that it was only a matter of time before he noticed her unease. His kind was terrifyingly acute at reading emotion.

Finally he reached for his fork. Olla held her breath. She glanced across the room and met Eym's eyes. The older woman nodded once, very slightly. Teggis speared the omelet with his fork and lifted a bite to his mouth. He chewed for a moment and then grunted in satisfaction and took another bite. "What is this?" he asked Olla through his mouthful.

"What, darling?" she asked in a strangled voice. He lowered his newspaper and looked at her narrowly.

"This," he answered, gesturing peremptorily toward the omelet. "Is this something different?"

"Perhaps the cook tried a different spice," she said. "Is it not good? We'll send it back—"

"It's fine," he answered, and attacked the rest of the omelet with relish, dismissing her ineffective replies. Olla watched and felt her tension slowly ebb as each bite disappeared between his dark-furred lips. When he was finished, he drained his coffee mug, shook out the paper, and continued to read in silence until he had made his way methodically through the day's news. Eym did not distract him even when she reached under his elbow to remove his tray and then to bring him a fresh mug of coffee. Not until he was good and ready did he fold the paper meticulously, set it down next to his tray and stand.

He spotted the cage immediately. "What in God's name is that?"

Olla smiled with genuine warmth. "It's a gift from Magistrate Sjo," she lied. By the time he discovered the lie, it would no longer matter.

Teggis peered more closely at the cage and shook his head. "It looks like one of your children," he muttered. "You people are such barbarians. I can't believe you keep your own kind in cages." Olla didn't dare respond, but she sat back in her chair and sipped serenely at her drink as he left the room. This time she did not let her eyes stray to meet Eym's. She didn't need to.

Teggis went to work that day as usual, but he arrived home far earlier than was his habit. Olla anticipated this, and had long since returned the hatchling to his cage and cleaned all the sand from her glowing scales. She was sitting in the house's

main "family" room, dressed in her best, pretending to watch an imported video with rapt attention when he arrived. He didn't speak to her as he crossed the room, which was fine by Olla. She watched him carefully, trying to note if there was anything different about his steps. He seemed to be fine, but when he came back through the room, instead of sitting down he opened the doors that led to her sundeck and went outside.

She followed him as far as the door. "Teggis?"

"What?" he asked irritably, his back to her as he stood at the edge of her sandbox. His head was tilted back as if he was lifting his face to the sky. In fact, as Olla moved nearer, she saw how the last rays of the setting sun lit him warmly, flattering his pale skin. Something around his eyes was definitely different.

"Are you all right?" she asked him.

"I'm fine," he muttered. "Why do you ask?"

"You're home early," she said. It should have been obvious; he was a creature of most meticulous habit.

"I was tired," he said in that same terse, weary mutter. Olla had to work to keep from crowing out loud; the very fact that he would admit tiredness to her confirmed that something was very wrong. "Just leave me alone," he added, and Olla quickly complied.

She continued to watch him surreptitiously, though. The next day he overslept and went into work late, complaining again of fatigue. He continued to be irritable and tense, keeping the house in a state of constant uproar with an undercurrent of

anticipation that even the human servants seemed to feel. After three days he went to a doctor, who took some blood and promised to get back to him in a few days with the results. He fretted about losing weight, but he lost his appetite and couldn't seem to eat enough to make up the weight loss. He took to sleeping almost all the time, and when Olla raised the temperature in the house, he didn't even appear to notice. She left it where she felt comfortable.

She also began spending as much time on the sundeck as she wanted, basking in the sun's rays with the creature from the egg, which was rapidly growing too large to be called a hatchling anymore. She watched him roll in her sandbox, sparkling grains raining from his glowing scales, and laid her head on her arms and smiled.

The doctor's calls after a few days went unreturned. No one else called. Olla suspected that most of Teggis's friends were in much the same shape he was, and had little interest in doing business or making social calls.

On the tenth day she found Teggis sleeping in her sandbox. She touched his shoulder with her claw and he hardly moved. She shook him, and he turned toward her, one hand lifting in an instinctive warding-off gesture. His fingers splayed and she saw that small, proto-claws had ruptured the tips. "Teggis," she said. "Teggis."

He tried to answer, but produced only a whistling sound through his nostrils, all that was left of the nose that had flattened against his face. Olla went in the house and called for Eym and some of the other Audrian servants. They came and helped her strip the human clothes from Teggis's nascent scales, no difficult task since he was already shrinking. One of the

servants went into the garage and returned with the large, but lightweight cage that had been hidden there, and with little sign of struggle or even interest from the lord of the house, they lifted him into it and arranged it in a bright corner of the sundeck. The hatchling watched it all with interest.

"You'll make sure he's fed," Olla murmured. Unlike humans, her kind were not cold blooded killers. She smiled slightly. Just cold blooded.

"Of course, lady," Eym answered dutifully.

"What of the human servants?" Olla asked.

"They're gone, lady," Eym answered. "They've been leaving one by one since the master became unwell." Her face was guileless, but Olla actually laughed. She threw open the doors to the sundeck and walked into the house. She tore the curtains from the windowed doors, then went from room to room doing the same to every window until bright sunlight streamed into every corner. The Audrian servants threw off their drab clothing and raided Olla's closet for the bright dresses Teggis had bought her. An atmosphere of celebration reigned in the house, just as it did in many other houses throughout the city and on the great estates.

Two days later Olla came to her bed and found the hatchling lying upon it, tail twitching excitedly. She slid eagerly into his arms, wrapping her own tail around him, letting her claws trail deliciously down his sleek scales. "My love," she whispered. "You are ready?"

"Yes," he answered eagerly.

She woke in his arms on a hot morning. The windows were open, and little breeze found its way into the room. She slipped out of the bed and walked, claws clicking, through the quiet house to the doors that led to the sundeck. She glanced at Teggis in his cage, now smaller than the length of her own arm, slumbering peacefully in the lulling warmth. Perhaps she would take him for a walk later, if she could find a suitable leash. In the meantime, she crouched at the edge of the sandbox and reached out to rake its surface delicately with her claws, looking for just the right place, the right weight and warmth of sand to cradle her own egg. •



THE STORY OF RHYE

by Lady Rhye

Long ago on the dark shores of Rhye
Where the night dwellers crept
And the day creatures strolled
There descended a lord from on high
Demanding "Bring before me what is mine,
The seven seas of Rhye."

And the lord and lady preachers of the land
Saw power in the words of this one
Who commanded their very souls,
Held fast in the palm of his hand
Standing proudly, posessing all,
Standing on the sands
Before the seven seas of Rhye.

"Bring me all for all is mine,
These creatures and this land
Before me bring the chosen ones,
Those chosen by my high command
To rule this land of Rhye,
To guard my seven seas of Rhye."

And I was such a one,
So very long ago
To please this faerie queene,
To this tyrant's demanding side we go,
And embrace fast night's lordly son
On the shores of the seven seas of Rhye.

Three great ladies and four great lords
Called he to the sands
Crowned them each and every one
In diadems and coronets of night's bright
bands
Binding them fast to darkling lands with
blood and melting words
For love of his seven seas of Rhye.

Years and years we've dwelt upon
These shores of the seven seas
Bound by words and bound by oath to the
darkling lord,
The faerie queene with love so great for all
he sees,
And here we dwell forever, aye anon
On the shores of the seven seas of Rhye.
...

No more the day creatures dwell.
Only night within the lord's demesne
Day-wights long since vanished, shrivelled,
starved,
For the daylight never relieving night which
never wanes.
And more and more the darkling hosts arrive
on my shores upon inky swells
Under darkened skies before the seven seas
of Rhye.

And here we dwell fast dusk to dawn
Below the vales, 'bove pit that yawns
Bound fast to honor Rhye's dark song
Along the seven seas of Rhye. •



BEANS

by Lynda Beauregard

Oh my darling angel! I just knew this day would come, but I tried not to think about it. This is going to be so unpleasant! Why must those beastly children at your school be so cruel? I'll speak to the headmaster about it tomorrow, I promise. Now then, you don't look much like your Papa because, well, you have another Papa. Or rather, you did. This is so distressing! Mother needs to sit down before she can tell you about this, sweetie. Be a dear and fetch my pills, there's a good boy. I just know I'll be needing the little pink ones before this is over.

Where to begin....where to begin? His name? Ah yes, his name was Bloo Kalla, and he was the finest giant I ever did see. Gorgeous blue eyes, light brown hair, shoulders a mile wide. And his smile! He swept me quite off my feet. Mother has some giant blood in her too, sweetie, so even though he called me his little china doll, I was still big enough to....well, never mind that. We fell in love at first sight and were married before I knew what hit me. He built a charming little place by the sea for us, and I was so pleased! Oh, it wasn't half as big as my Papa's house, and I couldn't spend nearly as much money on clothes and such as I used to, but I just knew Bloo would make it big someday. Ha ha! Isn't that funny? A giant making it big? Never mind, lovey.

So there we were, happy as can be. Bloo was making good money at the construction company, and I contributed as best as I could with my paintings. Oh yes, Mama was painting back then. Of course, nobody realized just how talented I was. I practically had to give my masterpieces away before you were

born. It was so distasteful! Bloo was such a dear about it all. I was spending more on paints and canvas than I was earning, but Bloo just smiled and nodded. He would say, "As long as you're happy, dear." Oh, how I loved that giant!

But our happiness wasn't meant to last. A child disappeared, and all the neighbors blamed Bloo. No dear, it's not true that giants eat children. Your Papa never ate a child in his life! The whole idea was simply preposterous. Bloo was so upset. He didn't sleep for days. The accusations distressed him enough to cause an accident at work. He hurt his back terribly, poor dear, and there went his hope of advancing in construction. Then the neighbors started to throw rocks at him every time he left the house. I wasn't invited to a single party after that. I was so embarrassed, I hid my face every time I went out.

After a few failed attempts to win those dreadful neighbors back over to our side, we decided that we should move. I heard they were building a new development in Saberbiaw, up in the clouds, and it was THE PLACE TO BE, dearie. I just had to live there. So I brought it up every time we talked about moving. Bloo was hesitant about buying a house there, since it was so expensive and he didn't have a job. I managed to convince him that he would find a nice office job nearby and he didn't have to worry about it. It wasn't hard - that giant would do anything to please me, I swear! So we signed all the contracts and moved into our big, beautiful new home in the clouds.

Now I was just as comfy as a 5 carat diamond in a well crafted setting, lovey, but I'm afraid your Papa didn't see things the way I did. That nice office job I promised him turned out to be a bit elusive. He looked high and low, but there wasn't a decent job to be found. And the bills just kept piling up. It was about this time that I decided I wanted to have a baby, but Bloo wanted to put it off for a bit. He said he wanted to wait until we had our heads above water, but you know me, dearie. Once I get an idea in my head, there's just no getting it out. So I went to a magic farmer and asked him for the leaves of a plant that would improve my chances of making you, my little darling. Why magic? You had to use magic to get anything to grow in the clouds, lovey. Anyway, this farmer looked me up and down, from my Arden hat to my Gucci shoes, and let me have the leaves on credit. I tucked them in my purse and hurried home.

Bloo was waiting for me when I got there, and he was smiling! He'd heard that the superintendent of weather, a man by the name of Meaty O'Rolloggy, was looking for someone to help him make thunder. Bloo knew he could stomp better than anyone, so he hurried over to see Mr. O'Rolloggy right away. The pay wasn't quite enough to keep me in the style I was accustomed to, but it was a start. Bloo had gotten a call from the superintendent just before I walked in, and Bloo got the job. I was so excited, I nearly told him about the leaves. But I knew Bloo would rather wait until we had some of the bills paid off, so I kept my fuchsia shaded lips firmly shut, dearie. Bloo was better off not knowing until there was nothing he could do about it.

Your darling Papa had only been working for two days when that awful magic farmer, Ceke VanGans, came knocking on our door. He told Bloo that I made a purchase on credit that wasn't any good. I tell you, sweetie, my heart just stopped! But

Bloo didn't ask me what I'd bought. He calmly told the farmer that he wouldn't have any money until the following week, and he would be happy to pay him off then. Oh, things got ugly after that! Ceke's face flushed bright red. He shouted that he wanted his money now, and if Bloo didn't pay it, he'd be sorry. Poor Bloo just shrugged his shoulders and pulled out his empty pants pockets to show the farmer he had nothing to give. Ceke shook his fist at us and stomped down the path, batting at little cloud wisps as he went. That was the beginning of the end, I tell you. The beginning of the end.

We didn't realize it, at first. Bloo liked his new job, and we both anxiously awaited his first payday. I had my eye on a lovely, absolutely perfect peach suit with matching pumps, while your Papa had the utility bills in mind. My goodness, did we ever get a surprise when the day finally came! Mr. O'Rolloggy didn't pay your Papa in nice cold cash, like we expected. He paid him with some of the tribute that people offered up to the rain god. No dearie, there's no such thing as a rain god, but the ignorant folks down below didn't know that. So poor Bloo came trudging home with a small bag of gold pieces that night. We knew we could trade it in and all, but it was so inconvenient! Bloo counted them carefully, then checked the paper for the latest gold prices. He scribbled furiously on a piece of paper, then sighed.

"What's the matter, snookums?" I asked.

Bloo put down his pencil and wearily rested his chin on his upturned palm. "Nothing, Iwana dearest. This will be enough to get some of the creditors off our backs. It will keep the lights on and the water running, but the farmer and Inovayahed Mortgage will just have to wait. Have you seen any vultures yet?"

"No dearest, why?"

"That's how Inovayahed let's you know they're serious." Bloo sucked in a deep breath, then wrinkled his nose. "What's that smell? Is that an Englishman?"

"An Englishman?" I exclaimed. "Nonsense, lovey-bunch. I've just been cooking broccoli, that's all. Honestly, ever since 'the incident,' you smell Englishmen everywhere! We won't be persecuted here, sweetums. This is a GOOD neighborhood."

Bloo just sighed again and popped the top off a beer bottle. I was always trying to get him to drink something more dignified, like scotch, but he liked his beer. He liked it a little too much that night, and I ended up helping him to bed. Oh, I cursed him then, but I can look back with pity now. Poor Bloo!

I came down to the kitchen the next morning and found him counting that gold again. He turned and gave me the oddest look, sweetie. Then he shook his head and walked away. I never did find out what all that was about.

Pour Mother a glass of wine, will you, dearest? This story is so dreadful, it makes me want to cry. But I mustn't, I mustn't. Mother's little angel must know the truth, as horrifying as it is. Now where was I? Oh yes. The next payday. Your Papa was working just as hard as he could, but the Inovayahed vultures started circling anyway. Bloo came home with his pay at the end of the week, but it was even worse than before. It wasn't even gold this time. O'Rolloggy paid your father with a goose!

"What are we supposed to do with that?" I demanded, the perfect peach suit vanishing quickly from possibility.

"That's what I asked Meaty," Bloo replied, "but all he did was shrug and walk away. I nearly strangled him, I tell you. But he closed his door and locked it, so all I could do was give up and walk home. About halfway here, this goose starts to squawk and flap its wings, so I set it down. It squawked once more, then quieted down, so I picked it up again. And look what I found underneath it."

Bloo held out his hand, displaying a large golden egg, about the size of a grapefruit. I snatched it out of his hand and scurried over to the window, where I could see it better.

"Is it real gold?" I asked.

"I think so. And judging by the weight, I'd say it's solid. Let's see how much it weighs."

I surrendered the egg long enough for him to put it on the bathroom scale. It was a full five pounds, which seemed to satisfy Bloo.

"How often do you think that goose will lay these?" I asked breathlessly.

Bloo pursed his lips and cocked his head. "I imagine she'll lay one a day, if we treat her right. Did you cook broccoli again?"

"Broccoli? No. Oh Bloo! This is wonderful! We'll have all those nasty bills paid off in no time, and I can buy all the clothes I want, can't I, snookums?"

Bloo laughed and hugged me tight, and everything seemed right with the world again. We, ah, celebrated that night, dearie, in an adult way. And when we were done, we fell into a deep sleep. Then, at some outlandish hour in the morning, we were awakened by that goose, squawking away as if decent people shouldn't be sleeping. I told Bloo it was just laying another egg, but he insisted on getting up to check. I heard him stumble into the kitchen and let out a positively bloodcurdling yell, dearest. Then I heard a terrible crashing sound. Oh, I didn't know what to think! I wanted to hide under the covers until whatever caused Bloo to yell went away, but then I thought about all that lovely gold the goose was likely to produce for us. I hopped out of bed and dug my trusty mace canister out of my purse, then crept down the stairs. I found Bloo sitting on the floor, shaking his head. There was blood seeping from his forehead and the goose was gone.

"What happened?" I whispered. I wasn't entirely sure that it was safe, you see.

Bloo held up a cherry red sling-back sandal and didn't say a word. I remembered that I left that sandal and its mate sitting in the middle of the kitchen floor during all the excitement when he came home from work. Bloo apparently tripped over it in the dark and pitched forward, cracking his head against the kitchen sink. I gulped guiltily and changed the subject.

"But where is the goose?"

"An Englishman!" Bloo thundered. "A little boy! He stole it. I saw him running out the door with it. I thought you said this was a GOOD neighborhood!"

I was so shocked, I dropped the mace, sweetie. Bloo never talked to me in that tone of voice! I realized later that he must have been very, very upset. But at the time, all I could do was cry. In fact, I managed to work up quite a case of hysterics over it all. The goose was gone, taking my lovely peach suit with it, and all Bloo could do was blame me for wanting to live in a nice house. Bloo tried to comfort me, of course, but I wouldn't have anything to do with him. I ran back up the stairs, locked the bedroom door behind me, and consoled myself with the help of some handy blue pills that my therapist had given me the day before.

Now don't you fret, my angel. Papa and I made up in the morning. I had to, you see, because Mother had some very important information to give him after she went potty. I found out I was pregnant with you, my dearest! Your Papa didn't take the information as well as I'd hoped he would. He didn't get angry again, but his shoulders slumped and he went out for a walk. It was so disappointing. He could have at least bought me some flowers, or something.

Well, another week passed, and along came another payday. The vultures landed and settled in the garden. Bloo started to sweat every time he saw them. We knew we would have just enough money to get Inovayahed off our backs until next month, assuming Bloo got paid something negotiable that day. I crossed my fingers and started to imagine myself strolling into a fancy restaurant in that beautiful peach suit.

But it was not to be, angel. Papa trudged home dejectedly, carrying a golden harp. Once again, we knew could trade it in, but Mr. O'Rolloggy really was an inconsiderate boss. I mean, hadn't he ever heard of direct deposit? Bloo set the

harp down on the table and we both just looked at each other. This was getting ridiculous.

Right at that moment, the most extraordinary thing happened. The harp began to play music, all by itself! No, dearest, it wasn't a special effect. It was magic. And the music! It was the most wonderful thing I'd ever heard. It made me forget all about that silly suit and think only gentle, peaceful thoughts. I sank down into a kitchen chair and looked deeply into my dear husband's eyes. "Oh, Bloo...."

Needless to say, we decided to keep the harp. How could we possibly sell it? Bloo said he'd find some other way to make the mortgage payment. There we were, my darling boy, with a baby on the way and vultures breathing down our neck, but we didn't care, because we had the most glorious harp in the world. We carried it up to the bedroom where it would be safe, and let it lull us to wondrous, peaceful sleep.

Oh, my angel, I don't think I've had a decent night's sleep since! Once again, in the middle of the night, we were awoken by a sound. It was the harp, crying out to us. We opened our eyes and spotted a boy, not ten feet from our bed. In that neighborhood! He was stealing the harp, and it was trying to warn us. Bloo jumped up out of that bed so fast, the mattress barely creaked. But the boy heard him, and made a mad dash for the window. We had foolishly left it open, since the warm night air seemed to be a perfect accompaniment to the strumming of the harp. Let that be a lesson to you, sweetie. Never leave your window open at night!

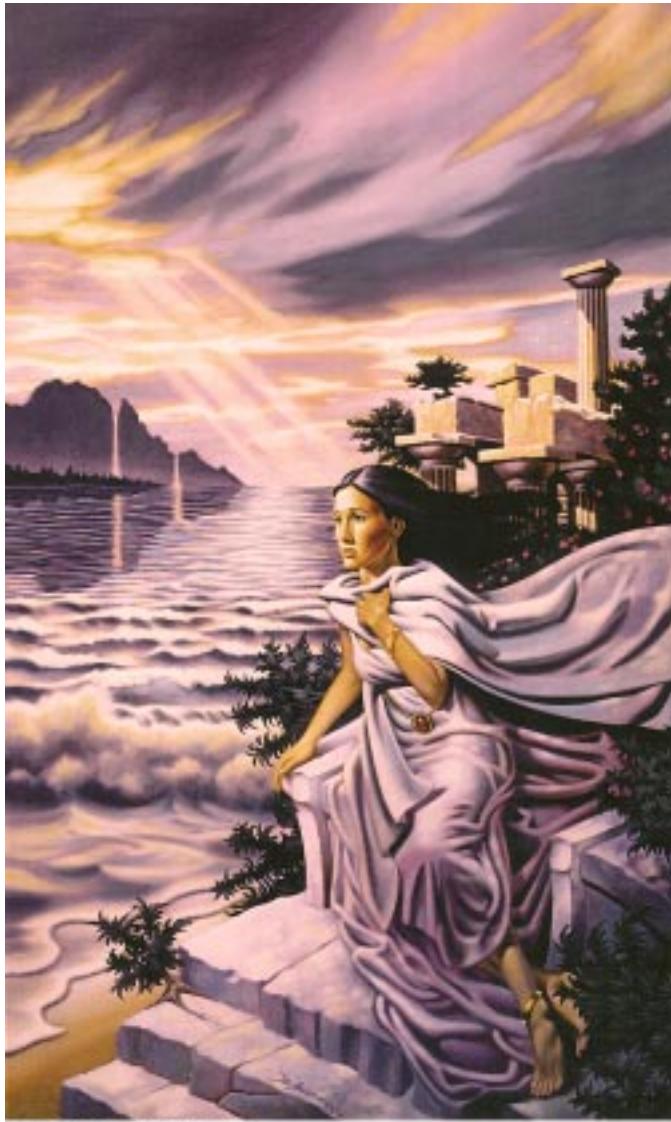
Bloo rushed to the window as well, but he was too late. The boy had wriggled through and jumped to the ground. It just wasn't possible for Bloo to get out that window, and what a

horrible scene that would have made if he had! Imagine what the neighbors might think, seeing Bloo jumping out a second story window. So he dashed down the stairs and out the front door. I snatched up my robe, slippers, and trusty mace canister as I followed him. This just couldn't be tolerated! Someone had to teach that boy to stay out of our neighborhood. I paused to make sure I was decently covered, then rushed out the door after them.

I could just make out Bloo's retreating form as he hurried down the street. There weren't any other houses in that direction, and the street meandered off into wilderness. I followed as best I could, but I really wasn't dressed for the occasion. Satin and silk, dearie. They just aren't suited for wild excursions. So I fell even farther behind, but I was close enough to see Bloo disappear down a hole next to some sort of plant. I pushed myself just a teensy bit harder, sweetums, and collapsed at the edge of the hole. The first thing I noticed, when I got my breath back, was that the plant extended all the way down to the ground. And Bloo hadn't fallen down a hole - he was climbing down the plant. I squinted my eyes, which I really shouldn't have done - it causes frightful wrinkles, you know - and I could barely make out the form of that wretched boy. There was an old woman next to him, and she was holding the harp and our dear goose! Then I heard a horrible sound, something like a 'thunk'. I focussed on the boy again, and I could see that he was holding an axe. Oh, my sweet angel, imagine my horror! That beastly boy was chopping down the plant that your dear Papa was clinging to, and he was nowhere near the bottom. I couldn't do a thing about it. I wanted to warn your Papa, but I was absolutely breathless with dismay. The plant started to sway, and I got one last glimpse of my darling Bloo as he glanced up at me entreatingly. I covered my eyes - I just couldn't look! I heard the crash as he hit the

ground, then cheering and laughter. I lowered my hands to gaze down once more. Oh, it was horrible! Those ignorant beasts were cavorting about your dear Papa's person, delighting in his demise. How dare they! They could have at least had a little consideration for my loss.

Oh, oh my. Where are Mother's pills, sweetling? I feel an attack coming on, I really do. Such a miserable existence I've had. The only bright spot of the whole affair was that Bloo had some decent life insurance. In fact, Mother ended up quite well off. I had to engage the services of a darling investment counselor and, well, it just so happened that he was attracted to women of large stature. He consoled me in my time of need, dearest. And with you on the way, my little angel, I needed to find a new Papa. So that's how everything came to be. I've done my best to live happily ever after, despite the odds. There's only one thing that bothers me now. I just can't bring myself to eat beans again. Odd, isn't it, lovey? •



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