

At These Prices

by Esther M. Friesner

Esther Friesner's last story to appear in our pages was "Helen Remembers the Stork Club" (Oct/Nov. 2005). She kicks off this month's issue on a light note.

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The timing could have been better, Bixby thought as he knocked smartly at the door of one of the Hotel Tiernan's rooms. Still, this shouldn't take too long. I've only to inform Ms. Franklin that our other guests have been complaining about the noise since eight this morning. No doubt she'll be happy to cooperate.

From the far side of the door came a monstrous squeaking of bedsprings accompanied by a hostile, exasperated, "Oh, what *now*?"

Or not. Bixby knocked again, more insistently. This produced "Who *is* it?" demanded in a tone of voice that added, *GO AWAY!*

Going away was not an option, not with the ease of so many other hotel guests at stake. He knocked a third time and in a crisp, no-nonsense voice announced, "Management, ma'am!"

"Management?" There was a moment's hesitation, then: "Come in!"

Bixby paused only long enough to check the pocket mirror he always carried. The gratifying reflection of a portly, presentable, fiftyish man, round-faced and ruddy-cheeked, dark of hair and eye, looked back at him. This was no vanity issue. Hotel Tiernan policy dictated that looks *did* matter, especially for face-to-face work with the public. Satisfied that his appearance was a credit to his beloved employer, Bixby pocketed the mirror, touched his master key into the lock, and entered the room.

He was immediately confronted by the spectacle of Ms. Bella Franklin, clad in a tatty blue robe and nightgown, fluffy bunny-slippers on her feet, sprawled prone across the large, unlatched valise teetering on the bed. It took a mere instant for Bixby to deduce what was going on. Obviously the lady had been struggling with the unruly piece of luggage for quite some time, using every trick in the veteran suitcase-packer's handbook. Finally she'd pulled out the big guns, holding on tight and body-slammng it repeatedly, which caused the mattress and box spring beneath to evoke a torrid bout of romantic rapture. She looked to be in no mood for uninvited callers, but too bad about that. He had a job to do, and quickly. Time was passing, and some things couldn't—*daren't*—wait.

"Good morning, ma'am," he said. "My name is Bixby." He tapped the silver name badge pinned to the lapel of his trim gray suit. "There have been four calls to the front desk concerning the untoward level of noise coming from this room. I am here to inquire whether I might be of some assistance in resolving matters to the

satisfaction of all our valued guests.”

Bella gasped, all the while keeping her starfished hold on the green valise. “Are you implying what I *think* you are?”

“Ma’am?” Bixby raised one impeccable eyebrow.

“You thought I was *canoodling!* Well, I *never!*” (Bixby wondered if that were entirely true.) “You ought to be ashamed of yourself!”

“Ma’am, I assure you, I made no such conjecture,” Bixby replied in his most soothing voice. “I merely came to look into the source of the complaints from—”

“The *source* happens to be this suitcase,” Bella exclaimed, her drab brown hair bedraggled, her sallow cheeks dappled with splotches of red as she bounced on the recalcitrant luggage. “And if this hotel were worth even one tenth the outrageous prices you charge, you’d be trying to help me get it locked instead of standing there, making vile accusations!”

“Er, I’ll do my best, ma’am.” Bixby motioned for her to descend from the valise so that he might take a stab at shutting it. She clambered off slowly, her hands exerting constant pressure on the lid. He tried to work around her, but it proved impossible. At last he said, “Ma’am, why don’t you step back and let *me* do this?”

Bella’s face hardened. “It’s *my* suitcase.”

“Ma’am, I’m not arguing the point. I only mean that it would be easier to close if you’d let me—”

“I didn’t ask for your help,” Bella said stiffly.

“Ma’am, you did.”

It was the truth, but that didn’t stop her from snorting it to scorn. “I didn’t *send* for you. I’m checking out this morning. I was trying to pack while waiting for my coffee to brew.” She didn’t dare remove her hands from the suitcase, so a nod of the head was all she could manage to direct his attention toward the little in-room coffee maker, merrily burbling away on the dresser.

“Coffee?” Bixby’s gaze sought out the coffee maker and clamped onto the miniature glass carafe. A disquieting look of yearning crept into his eyes. He licked his lips and inhaled the scent of brewing beans as though he meant to draw the rich aroma into the depths of his soul. “Ahhhh....” His voice quivered. “Yes. Yes, of course. Very efficient of you, I’m sure.”

“It was, until *you* showed up and started making trouble.” Bella was too busy keeping her righteous indignation at full throttle to give Bixby’s odd behavior more than passing notice. “If I weren’t here for the Speranza Storm Cosmetics convention, I’d never stay in this exorbitant excuse for a hotel. A midtown

Manhattan location is *not* a license for price gouging! Even your so-called group rates are ridiculous. The rooms are tiny, the amenities are pathetic, and the only time anyone takes an interest in a guest's needs is when the guest has absolutely *no* need of—”

That was when the suitcase exploded. Despite Bella's unfailing pressure on the lid, the unhappy bit of baggage abruptly succumbed to the even greater pressure from within. It shot out from under her hands, skidded across the bed, and hit the nearest wall, bursting open like a giant milkweed pod and spraying its contents all over the room. The recoil catapulted Bella to the floor.

Bixby regarded the aftermath of the eruption with a look that was equal parts astonishment and begrudging admiration. His unsettling fascination with the coffee maker was gone, blasted to oblivion by the spectacle of what Bella's burst suitcase had unleashed. The first thing he picked up was the hair dryer.

“That's mine!” Bella croaked. Though she was still a little groggy from her recent tumble, her eyes were two slits of steely purpose, focused on the appliance dangling in Bixby's grasp.

“Ma'am, you must be mistaken.” He spoke calmly but firmly. “As you can see, this one has the hotel name clearly marked on the handle. Now, as for the soap dish—” He poked the toe of his perfectly shined Oxford at the aforementioned bathroom accessory where it lay half-hidden under a flutter of hotel stationery.

“Don't you *dare* go through my personal belongings!” Bella clawed her way up the side of the bed. As she gained the summit, her fingers closed upon a little bottle of shampoo, one of about three dozen scattered over the sheets of the unmade bed. (It would stay unmade, in its present condition: The blanket and duvet were across the room, spilling out of the suitcase.) “I suppose now you're going to claim that after the price I've paid to lease this dump, I can't have *this*?” She waved the bottle at Bixby.

“Ms. Franklin,” he said, attempting to pour laudanum on troubled waters. “Ms. Franklin, ma'am, I believe we are both the victims of an innocent misunderstanding as to, er, boundaries. *Small* items that are not reusable, such as soaps and such, are yours to keep with our compliments, although we do prefer you take only the ones left in your room.” He eyed the strewn trove of mouthwash, bath gel, body lotion, and hair conditioner and murmured, “So that's why we found the maid's cart stripped bare.” Then, aloud: “As for larger things such as *this*....” “Holding the hair dryer with one hand, he plucked a plush hotel bathrobe from the wreckage with the other. “They're not yours for the taking.”

With a sound midway between a growl and a whimper, Bella flung herself at the bathrobe and tore it from Bixby's grasp. “That's *mine*,” she said. “I brought it with me.”

Bixby took a deep, centering breath. “Ma'am, perhaps you've *confused* this

robe with your own. Look here.” He reclaimed one corner of the disputed garment so that Bella had no choice but to see the hotel’s embroidered logo.

“I bought this robe the last time I stayed here!” Bella maintained. “I’ve never been so insulted in all my life. Get out of my room this instant, before I call the police!”

“By all means, ma’am,” Bixby replied. His voice had lost its softness. “I have—” a garden of perspiration blossomed all over his face “—other obligations at this hour. Pressing ones. It is almost ten o’clock. That hour is sacrosanct to me, and I will settle this business with you by then, one way or another. Call the police. And the sooner, the better.”

“You’ve got your nerve,” Bella said, but made no move toward the phone.

Bixby permitted himself a brief smile. “Ma’am, I am not your enemy. I agree that hotel prices in New York City *are* rather high, that frugality is a virtue, and that your blind determination to get full value for money spent is admirable, in its own way. However, when misguided frugality oversteps the bounds—”

Bella laid one hand to her bosom. “Oh my God, you’re calling me a *thief!* You’re saying I stole from this glorified flop-house when all I did was take a few teensy little *legal* freebies.” She pointed at her ruptured luggage. The tray that had once reposed under the ice bucket peeked out from beneath the purloined duvet. A matched set of four drinking glasses glinted from their towel-swathed safety inside the ice bucket (tongs included) formerly located atop the mini-bar.

“No *decent* hotel would think twice about something this trivial,” she went on. “At these prices you should be giving me free spa treatments, not false accusations. It’s slander! Libel! I’ll sue you until you’re blue in the face! I’ll—” She paused abruptly and gave Bixby a look of deep puzzlement. Her wrath dropped away, replaced by genuine concern as she asked: “Pardon me, but did you know that you *are* blue in the face? Blue-gray, actually, but—”

An alarm went off in Bixby’s pants. It was his cell phone, chiming the hour of ten. “Curse you, you froth-mouthed wench!” he roared. His abrupt transformation from hotel hireling to slate-faced madman made Bella yelp. “Your endless babblings have undone me! By the blessed Mill, the Holy Hour is upon me, and no hope at all of succor unless I find—”

He paused in midrant. His nostrils twitched. His frantic eyes swept the room, alighting once more on the little coffee maker. He took one unsteady step toward it, reaching out like Galahad vouchsafed a vision of the Grail.

“Ma’am,” he said in a tremulous voice. “Ma’am, forgive my outburst. I—I assure you, all will be well if you will only give me permission to have—to have just one—just one small cup of—”

Bella's gaze followed Bixby's own to the object of his desire. "Coffee?" she said, puzzled at the fuss. With brisk competence she strode over to the carafe, filled the one hotel mug not residing in the wreckage of her suitcase, and thrust it upon him.

Bixby raised the cup with shaking hands that had begun to go ashen and gnarled. A general air of gauntness was slowly creeping over his entire body, but as soon as he downed the first sip, his skin regained its rosy radiance, flesh again amply padded his bones, the shakes fled from his limbs, and a smile of pure contentment lit his face.

Then he took the second sip, and a look of utter horror overcame him. "This—this isn't—*this isn't Tiernan House Blend!*"

Bella rolled her eyes and yanked a handful of brewing packets out of the pockets of the almost-purloined robe. "I suppose you're going to tell me that I can't take the coffee with me, either?"

"If those are *our* complimentary coffee packets, then what in the name of the blessed Mill did I just drink?" Bixby cried.

"*My* coffee. I always bring a couple of extra packs with me, older stuff I picked up on other trips. Trips when I stayed at *good* hotels," Bella added, unable to resist getting in a jab.

Bixby was beyond insults. He had the look of a man steeped neck-deep in Fate. Dismay died, resignation remained, together with the noble resolution to make the best of a god-awful situation. He ceremoniously raised the mug to his lips and drained it dry. He then fell to one knee and offered up the empty cup to Bella.

"Hey, if you want a refill, get it yourself. I'm not your servant!"

"Nay, but I am yours. For behold, you have brought me the sacred brew out of your own possession and stores, and of my own free will have I drunk it. Thus have I wiped out all past allegiances cemented by this selfsame sacred beverage. For in sooth, just as the used grounds, of hallowed memory, are cast away when their purpose is done, so too does each fresh brewing renew and remake all the bonds that unite master with—"

"If I give you more coffee, will you shut up?" Bella cut in.

Bixby raised his eyes to hers. "I will do more than that, milady, if that is what you want."

"What I *want*," Bella said harshly, "is to be out of this loony bin, back in my own home, with no more stupid hassles about a few eensy-weensy, *legitimate* souvenirs." She spread her hands, indicating the filched flotsam that had spurted from her valise.

Bixby sprang to his feet, tugged his forelock, and said, “At your service, milady.” With that, he scurried to the broken suitcase and fixed it in a breath, using two paperclips and a keychain. He then repacked it quickly and skillfully, even prying two framed art prints off the wall and adding them to the plunder.

Bella gaped as Bixby shut the suitcase. It wasn’t so much that he got it to close with all that swag inside, but *how* he closed it: No-hands. All he used was an alien word of power and a snap of his well-manicured fingers. “What did you—? How did you—? Did I just see—? Am I going nuts or what?”

“Nay, milady, you are not mad; I swear it by the blessed Mill which grinds the beans of bliss exceeding small.” Bixby was back on one knee again, his head bowed low. When he lifted it, his face had changed from that of a middle-aged man to something out of the Middle Ages, no man by any means. Such a face belonged outside a great cathedral, with a rainspout in its mouth. Bella took one look at Bixby’s cloud-gray skin and grotesque features—goggling eyes worthy of a purebred Boston bull-terrier, lips that stretched from ear to pointed, flapping ear, a nose like a healthy young eggplant—and exclaimed, “What the hell are you?”

“Your humble and obedient servant, milady,” Bixby replied. “A brownie by birth and breeding, and entirely at your command. Speak, and if my small magics or my strong arms can fulfill your desires, it shall be done.”

To Bella’s knowledge, brownies were either pastries or troops of cookie-flogging pipsqueaks, but she was a quick study. “Does that mean I get three wishes?”

“I’m no genie, milady,” Bixby replied with a shake of his head. “We brownies are domestic sprites whose powers are limited solely to keeping our masters’ homes and hearths in good working order.”

“If you’re a house-thingie, what are you doing in a hotel?”

“Ah, my lady is as wise as she is ... interesting looking,” Bixby said. “In days of yore, in the Old Country, the family Tiernan ran an inn out of their own home, as was the custom. They were good folk, and wise as well in the ways of the Little People. They knew enough to court our favor with a saucer of milk on the doorstep and the occasional barrel of beer set out on Midsummer’s Eve.

“But times do change, if loyalties do not, and when the last of the Tiernan deserted the Old Country for these shores, swearing to open an inn in the New World, we could not bear to be parted from him.”

“More like you couldn’t bear to be parted from the free beer,” Bella remarked.

Bixby shrugged shoulders as curved as the side of an earthenware pot. “If only our bond to the Tiernan had been limited to beer! But once in this land, the world turned upside-down. One night, a mere two hundred years ago, our master

was moved to sit upon his doorsill with a cup of the sacred brew in his hands. In an absent-minded moment, he left it there when he went in to bed, and there, alas, we found it.” Bixby sighed.

“Wait a minute,” Bella held up one finger. “Are you telling me that you got hooked on coffee after *one* cup?”

“One sip,” Bixby corrected her. “I was not the only one to whom our master owed the bond of nightly tribute. We all of us partook, and so became enslaved to the sacred brew.”

“All? How many of you little buggers are there?” Bella asked. Bixby said a number. “*That* many? Jesus.”

“Of course I am counting the staff in all the hotels in the Tiernan Group chain,” the brownie clarified. “For in time, our master’s business thrived, growing from a simple wayside inn to a lodging empire.”

“All for the price of a cup of coffee per worker per day?”

“Well, we prefer cinnamon lattes. And a nice piece of cherry danish now and then never killed anyone, but the sacred brew is enough to retain our services.”

“Now *that’s* what I call getting value for money.” Bella glowered at the brownie. “You’d think those Tiernan Group greedheads would pass the savings on to the guest, or at least not make such a stink when a poor, hard-working woman takes one or two insignificant little items from one of these overpriced broom closets.”

“As milady says.” Bixby fell naturally into his the-provider-of-the-caffeine-is-always-right mindset with his new mistress. “Shame to the Tiernan! Hail to the Franklin!” He leaped to his feet and swept Bella’s bulging suitcase onto his shoulder as if it weighed no more than a used tea bag. “Shall we go?”

“Not so fast,” Bella said. “I’ve got to get dressed first. *And* pay that miserably inflated bill.” She gave him a cunning look. “I don’t suppose you can make it go bye-bye?”

Bixby hung his head. “Alas, the workings within these walls are no longer within the scope of my powers to affect.”

“Damn. Well, tell you what: You go let your boss know that you’re working for me now while I get dressed, pay the bill, and—”

“There will be no need for me to give notice, milady,” Bixby said. He twitched, and his otherworldly appearance was once again swallowed up by the rather unglamorous glamour of his chosen human form. “I assure you, that as a humble brownie, no one will miss me at all.”

* * * *

Though Bella Franklin possessed the piranha-like ability to strip a hotel room to the bones while simultaneously justifying the garnered loot as “Just getting my money’s worth,” her own apartment suffered for want of similar minimalizing treatment. It was an Aladdin’s cave of clutter, showcasing some of Bella’s prouder trophies from previous Speranza Storm conventions. Notepads, pens, coffee mugs, and assorted décor accessories including that endangered species, the ashtray, littered all available surfaces. Plates, cutlery, and mini-ketchups from ransacked room service trays crammed the kitchen. Home goods liberally decked with the logos of every major lodging chain in the United States were everywhere.

All of that changed once Bixby arrived. The first thing he did was to shed his human glamour. The second was to junk all hotel-plundered toiletries whose seniority had become gloppy senility. The third was to do a spot of Dumpster-diving to retrieve what he’d trashed after Bella yowled that he was trying to reduce her to penury by throwing away decade-old shampoo. The fourth was to stow the remaining clutter, then give the entire establishment a thorough scrub-up, from floorboards to soffits. All this took a week. It would have taken longer if he’d been allowed any downtime, but Bella was adamant about getting the full value of his indentured services. She did not permit the harried brownie one moment’s rest, save the unavoidable necessity of letting him observe the Holy Hour (or, as mere mortal unbelievers would term it, a daily coffee break). He told her early on that without it, he would die.

“Well, we can’t have that,” said Bella. “I’ve hardly begun to get my money’s worth out of you.”

“Milady is too kind,” said Bixby.

On the seventh day, when the brownie looked ready to drop from exhaustion, his new mistress commanded him to change his glamour to her specifications, just for giggles. Soon Bixby stood transformed into a poi-and-passion Romance hero, bronzed body glistening with coconut oil, blue-black hair streaming past his waist, skimpy sarong holding on by a literal thread, and one hibiscus blossom for garnish. Bella was still licking her lips in approval when there came a knock on the door.

“That had better not be old Mrs. Kenmore from across the hall,” she muttered. She opened the door with a loud, “No, you *cannot* borrow a cup of sugar!” but instead of finding that aged pest dithering on the doormat, she confronted a quartet of uninvited callers.

Radiating suspicion, Bella frowned at the two women in their cheap cotton dresses, the two men in their white, short-sleeved shirts and plain black trousers. “What do *you* want?” she demanded.

“Bixby, ma’am.” The reply came in four-part harmony, as if it were the most natural request in the world.

“Bix—I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Bella said quickly.

“The hell you don’t!” the smaller woman snapped.

“Selina, such language!” The other female clapped her hands to her ears.

“Ahhh, get over it, Mel,” Selina replied. “We didn’t come here to play pattycake with this brownie-stealing bimbo.” She scowled at Bella. “We watched the hotel surveillance tapes so we know he left with you. Cough ‘im up, Toots!”

“Sorry, not interested, got all the crazy I need, ‘bye now.” Bella shut the door swiftly, only to be thwarted by a size 14-EEEE foot wedged between the panel and the jamb. Naturally enough, it belonged to the bigger of the two men. She gave him an icy look. “All right, what are you?”

The shorter man stepped forward. “Good day to you, ma’am. My name is Berry, and these are my friends and associates, Tom, Selina, and Melusine.”

“I didn’t ask *who* you were,” Bella replied tartly. “I asked *what*. I know all about the *special* staffing arrangements at Tiernan House hotels.”

“Do you, now.” Berry’s pleasant smile turned sour. “Ma’am, we’d be happy to remove our glammers. We’re not ashamed of our natural forms. However, your neighbors might not react well to seeing us as we are. May we come in? Merely to talk, I assure you. We’ll do you no harm. You have my oath as an engineer.” Berry snapped his fingers and an ancient slide-rule appeared in his hand. He kissed it reverently before banishing it to realms invisible.

“Just a second.” Bella ducked back inside her apartment for a moment. “Swear on *this* and I’ll believe you.” She held out a small electric coffee bean grinder.

The four exchanged a look of wide-eyed apprehension. In a faltering voice, Melusine asked, “How did you know about the blessed—the blessed—?”

“The blessed Mill?” Bella chuckled. “I’m a fast learner and Bixby’s a good teacher. Swear on it, or stay in the hall.”

The larger man scowled. “Can’t say as I favor yer attitude,” he said. “Like my old Dad used to say t’ me, he’d say, ‘Tom, seeing as how we’re trolls, Bad Attitude’s kinda Standard Optivating Proceed-thingie for us. But that’s no reason you got to take it from a dab o’ mortal meat you can smash into paste ‘thout a second thought, mostly cause us trolls got enough trouble layin’ hands on a *first* thought.’ Good ol’ Dad!”

With that, Tom dropped the glamour upon him and stood revealed in all his monstrous glory. His street clothes vanished. Every hulking muscle, wart, and tusk, every talon and square inch of skin the color of a lichen-crust boulder, all blossomed on Bella Franklin’s doorstep, topped by a spiffy blue cap embroidered

with the words hotel security. A monumental roar broke from his leathery lips. It shook the floor, curled and crispy-fried the edges of the cheap hallway carpeting, and brought down a shower of plaster from the ceiling.

It also fetched Mrs. Kenmore from across the hall. The old lady took one look at Tom in his natural state, squealed like a mouse in a hamburger press, and slammed the door hard enough to cause a second blizzard of plaster flakes.

Bella clucked her tongue. “*Now* look what you did.” Unfazed by the troll, she turned her head and called over one shoulder: “Hey, Bixby! I’ve got another job for you.”

The sarong-clad brownie appeared at Bella’s side before the last word left her lips. He dragged himself past the four visitors without so much as a nod to any of them, including the fully manifested troll, and set his hand-held vacuum cleaner to work on the fallen plaster.

“Bixby!” Berry exclaimed over the roar of the motor. “Don’t you know us?”

Bixby snapped off the vacuum and turned his head slowly. “Of course I do. Very kind of you to come seeking me, my dear comrades, but I’m afraid it’s no use. She’s laid the bond of bean and brew upon me. I am hers.” He finished the job and mumbled a feeble “Aloha,” as he shuffled back into the apartment. The four visitors watched his broken-spirited retreat with grave dismay. Tom the troll sniffled mightily as tears of sympathy streamed down his craggy cheeks, and he blew his nose in his Hotel Security guard cap.

“Let’m go!” he cried, shaking one boulder of a fist under Bella’s nose. “Let’m go now, or else I’ll—I’ll—I’ll pop you a good ‘un!”

Bella grinned. “What, not grind my bones to make your bread? As if you could do either! Save your threats, lummo. I’ve only been toying with you. I know you needn’t swear an oath on this thing—” she wagged the coffee grinder in the troll’s face. “—to ensure my safety. The holy rule of hospitality forbids a host from ever doing harm to his guest. Well, *I* was a guest of House Tiernan—at obscenely high prices, might I add—and since I paid my hotel bill in full, *none* of you can lay one grubby finger on me.”

Berry sighed. “More of Bixby’s teachings, ma’am?”

“Exactly. So, now that we all know where we stand—” She stepped farther back into the apartment and made a highly sarcastic bow. “—care to come in?”

The four trooped into Bella’s apartment in hangdog single file. Tom remained trollish, and the rest cast away their mortal glammers at the threshold, like so many overcoats. Berry the self-confessed engineer shrank by about a foot, becoming a burly dwarf, though dressed more in keeping with the boardroom than the whole woodland cottage/underground kingdom/dig-dig-dig-heigh-ho hoo-hah. Only a

mustard yellow pocket protector took his ensemble from chic to geek. He clambered onto Bella's sofa with some effort, sparing Tom a cautionary word *not* to sit on anything, lest it be smashed to tinder.

Sharp-tongued Selina shrank even more than Berry, down to the size of a sparrow. She buzzed under Bella's nose on lacy pink wings and left a sparkling contrail in her wake. Bella licked her lips and tasted confectioner's sugar, which made sense in view of the pixie's minuscule chef's tunic and *toque blanche*. Selina alit on the lip of a garishly painted vase, booty from Bella's one hotel stay south of the border, and idly twiddled a needle-sized wooden spoon.

As for Melusine, her dowdy dress became a clean, utilitarian pair of overalls girdled by a well-appointed tool belt. She patted one of the wrenches fondly with a webbed hand the color of ripe honeydew melon.

Bella's gimlet eyes zeroed in on the rosy frill of external gills framing Melusine's serene face. "Hey, little mermaid, where's your fishtail?"

Melusine blushed pale mint. "Oh, I'm no mermaid, ma'am. I tend to the Hotel Tiernan's plumbing, and I couldn't do that from a fish tank. I'm an ondine." Bella gave her a blank stare, so she added, "A water-sprite." This only evoked further visual *Variations in the Key of D'uh*. "I'm kith and kin to nixies and naiads and—and—Oh, hang it all." Mel slumped in one of Bella's tatty armchairs, fiercely muttering, "Bloody mythological illiterate."

"I suppose it's no use offering you coffee?" Bella's smug, too-sweet question was a taunt, not a proposal of hospitality.

Selina the pixie made a gesture as rude as it was nigh imperceptible, but Berry simply said, "Tea will be fine, ma'am. Herbal, please. Very good of you to go to the trouble."

"Oh, it's no trouble for *me*." Bella barked orders into the kitchen where the captive brownie languished. While Bixby brewed and served some prime chamomile (hand-picked in Massachusetts, hand-swiped from the Sheraton in Boston), Bella told her callers, "Now, listen up, you refugees from *Better Gnomes and Gardens*, once that tea's ready, you've got ten minutes to drink up and get out. If you've got anything to say to me, say it now."

"Ma'am, as you know, we've come for our comrade," Berry said calmly.

"And as *you* know, fat chance," Bella returned. "This is the best freebie I ever brought home from a hotel stay, and that's a fact."

"Y'know, ma'am," Tom the troll said in his gritty voice. "If you c'n see fit t' let Bixby go, outer th' kindness o' yer heart, we'd be more'n willin' t' pervide th' selfsame services fer you as he's incumbently doin' 'round this place. We'd come by twice weekly, reg'lar as th' Holy Hour, and tidy yer home up a treat. I might not

look it, but I've a good paw fer wipin' winders."

"Wiping *out* windows, you mean," Selina said. Melusine shushed her.

Bella curled her lip. "Twice weekly cleaning? Instead of household chores done twenty-four seven by someone at my beck and call? I don't *think* so."

"Please, ma'am, have pity," Mel implored. "If Bixby's kept apart from his Seelie kinfolk for too long, he'll waste away."

"He's related to seals?"

"Not seals, but the Seelie," Mel said, and ran right back into Bella's amassed lifetime ignorance, head first. But the plucky ondine was nothing if not a tryer. "The Fair Folk. The Little People. The Fey, the Good Neighbors, the Hidden Helpers, the Underhill Posse, the Goblin Marketeers, the—"

"Hey, think Santa's friggin' elves, okay?" Selina broke in before poor Mel burst a water vessel in frustration.

Bella was enlightened but unmoved. "What's that to me?"

"Nothing, apparently," Berry said dryly. "Ma'am, in all my life as a dwarf and an engineer, I've run into some tough problems, but you make building the Hoover Dam look easy as letting two beavers loose at a Christmas tree farm."

"Spare me your beavers," Bella said. "I'm willing to bet you your weight in pure Kona coffee that you've got some completely self-serving reason for coming to Bixby's rescue. Nobody does good deeds for nothing, not in this world. I wasn't born yesterday."

"I'll say you weren't," Selina declared cheerfully.

"Ma'am, if that's what you believe, I pity you," Berry said. "No wonder you cram your sorry little life with hotel freebies. It's empty otherwise."

Bella laughed so hard she spritzed Tom with tea. While the troll dabbed at his dripping face with a tissue (from a box Bella had wrested out of the wall dispenser at a Hilton in Baltimore), she subjected Berry to a double helping of scorn. "Oh, that's rich! I'll tell you what, you sanctimonious twerp, how about a little wager?"

She fetched a bag of whole-bean Jamaica Blue Mountain from the kitchen and slapped it down, appropriately enough, on the coffee table. "See this? I didn't take it from any hotel, motel, or bed-and-breakfast in existence. It's *mine*. I bought it with my own hard-earned money, and at the price that money-grubbing grocery store chain charged for it, I had every right to take that double handful of butterscotch drops from the bulk candy bin!"

"Ma'am, if you think we're about to risk our own freedom by drinking a drop of that, you've mistaken us for fools," Berry said solemnly.

“In other words, fat ass!” Selina put in.

“Don’cher mean ‘fat *chance*’?” Tom the troll asked, always helpful.

“I call ‘em like I see ‘em.”

Bella ignored the barb. “I don’t want you to drink it, I want you to swear on it.”

“You’re free and easy calling for oaths, ma’am,” Berry said, his eyes narrowing. “First on the blessed Mill, now on the beans of bliss. Don’t trifle with our faith for your own amusement.”

“Not this time. If you’ve honestly come to free Bixby just because it’s the right thing to do, it honors the sacred ties of friendship, it’s all a part of the brotherhood of the seals—”

“The *Seelie!*” Mel shouted.

“—then swear so on these beans and *I* swear I’ll let him go, here and now. But if you can’t do that, you’ve got to grant me one wish, something beyond Bixby’s powers, something I’ve always wanted with all my heart.”

“A winning personality?” Selina suggested.

“A party, you flying glob of snot,” Bella replied coldly. “A *fabulous* party, so I can finally brownnose the top brass at Speranza Storm Cosmetics in style. Kissing up to those hairsprayed hags is the only way to get ahead in this business, the straight road to earning all the top salesmanship awards, the cruises, the cars—”

“The ultimate freebies,” Mel murmured, demurely eyeing the droplets of anticipatory drool forming at the corners of Bella’s mouth.

“I’d think a salesmanship award was based on merit alone,” Berry remarked.

Bella sniffed. “Shows what you know, Peewee. It’s a hard world, and the only way to get ahead is to take what you can, help yourself, and above all ... *think fast!*” She hardballed the bag of coffee beans right at the dwarf’s face. Mel gave a cry of alarm, but before Berry’s nose met a dark-roasted doom, his hand shot up instinctively and intercepted the missile. Bella did her impression of a cream-stuffed cat. “The consecrated caffeine’s in your court now, big boy, so how’s about that oath?”

“I am an engineer. I do not fear truth, merely statistics.” Berry cradled the coffee reverently in his cupped palms. “By all we hold most dear, I freely swear that we’ve come to rescue Bixby out of purest friendship.”

“Oh.” Bella had the stricken look of someone who’d not only backed the wrong horse, but had done so at a dog race.

“And also because if we don’t get him back for our weekly poker game soon, we’ll have to replace him with *Lyndon*.” The dwarf shuddered.

“Lyndon?” Bella echoed.

“Lyndon the ogre,” Tom volunteered.

“Lyndon the blood-drinking, bone-crunching, flesh-rending, lousy poker-playing, sore-losing, vicious-tempered, troll-punching, dwarf-crushing, ondine-squishing, pixie-swatting ogre,” Selina elaborated.

“The designer from the independent florist shop in the lobby, yes, *that* Lyndon,” Berry said. “Our poker game is the envy of all the other hotel employees, both for the camaraderie and the chance to pick up some serious winnings.”

“Like Bixby was doing for the past six weeks before you captured him,” Selina said hotly. “The son-of-a-kobold was *way* ahead, and we all want the chance to win some of our own back.”

“Ahead by how much?” Bella asked.

“Coupla thou’.”

“Mmmm, big money.” Bella was impressed.

“Not money. Starbucks gift cards.”

“Our co-workers know we play honestly, no magic-enhanced cheating allowed, and they don’t trust one another enough to start up games of their own,” Berry said. “They all want in, so we maintain a waiting list, in case one of us should drop out some day, for whatever reason. Lyndon’s name tops that list. One more week without Bixby and we’ll have to let him join the game.” Berry clasped his sturdy hands around the coffee beans in a gesture of supplication so tight that a third of the bag was rendered into a fine espresso grind. “Ma’am, for the sake of friendship, for the sake of compassion, for the sake of poker, I implore you, let our brownie go!”

“Ask me after my party,” said Bella, and burst into cackles of victorious laughter.

* * * *

Bixby stood beneath the familiar green and gold awning that sheltered the main entrance to the Hotel Tiernan, a sheaf of papers in his hands. The doorman on duty was a gnome named Hork. A huge smile broke across his face as he recognized the errant brownie.

“By the blessed Mill, lad, you don’t mean to say you’re free again?” he cried, holding the door wide in welcome. “Mel told me of your sorry trials. Ah, dreadful doings, that, just dreadful, but here you are, home again, so all’s well that—”

“Shut the door, Hork,” Bixby said, glum. “I’m not free, I’m only here to deliver milady’s list of demands for the party she’s won on a wager. I fear that if I went through those beloved doors, knowing I’ll be forced to leave once more, it would break my heart. Be a good bogle and summon one of my poker chums to take this.” He rattled the bunch of papers.

Hork set two fingers to his lips and blew a whistle so shrill and commanding that taxis came flocking from blocks away, like seagulls to a garbage barge. The piercing sound also fetched Melusine, lovely in her plumber’s uniform. Bixby handed over Bella’s list wordlessly and turned to leave.

“Oh, Bixby, I wish there were something we could do to save you!” she called after him.

He paused and looked back. “And what might that be?” he replied. The expression of total defeat on his face brought seaweed-steeped tears to the ondine’s eyes. “I’m caught fast in the grasp of a greedy mortal with fingers stickier than spiderweb strands. She fancies herself the victim of harsh times, but never once has she shown a wisp of the compassion she demands from the world. She feels no hurts but her own. I’ll die in her service, Melusine.”

“Bixby, you mustn’t talk about such things!”

“What, death? At this point it would, as Clint Eastwood says, make my day.” He trudged off.

Mel wiped her eyes, then looked down at the list Bixby had given her. Berry had told Bella Franklin to be specific in her desires for the party, implying that she’d get exactly what she asked for, no more and no less. It wasn’t typical behavior for the otherwise generous-souled dwarf, but the mortal creature had gotten his dander up to stratospheric levels. Bella in turn had set her shrewd mind to beating him at his own game. The law profession would never know how much it had lost when Bella Franklin turned to hawking lipsticks instead of litigation. The list of party specs showed the master hand of a highly gifted and vindictive nitpicker. Everything was there, from appetizers and aperitifs to desserts and décor. There was only one thing that she seemed to have missed.

“Stupid dust-muncher really dropped the ball on this,” Melusine said to herself. “What a thing to overlook! She knows we’re not obliged to include anything left off the list, but I’ll bet she’ll fly into a snit if *we* don’t take care of this. Ah well, it’ll be easy enough to fix.” Mel pulled out a waterproof pen and scribbled an addendum to the list. “I’ll just go visit Lyndon and—”

The ondine stopped short, pen hovering a hair above the page. “Ooooh!” A radiant smile of inspiration lit up her face and she ran a chartreuse tongue over sharp, fishy teeth. She raced back into the Hotel Tiernan so fast that Hork the door-gnome was left puzzling over whether he had or had not actually heard an ondine utter a throaty, gloating, *Mwahahaha*.

* * * *

Bella Franklin's party was a small yet sumptuous brunch, the tasteful confines of the Hotel Tiernan's Oberon Suite contrasting nicely with the primped and polished vulgarity of her guests. The higher-ups of Speranza Storm Cosmetics crowded around the buffet table as though their lives depended on building up a layer of shrimp-based flesh to see them through the winter. When a waiter emerged from the kitchen with a tray of crab-stuffed mushroom caps, he almost perished in the stampede. The chef manning the prime rib carving station clutched his knife with dew-browed desperation as he begged the ladies to give him a break; he was flinging slabs of dripping red meat onto their plates as fast as he could. High above the guzzling, gulping crowd, Selina hovered unnoticed. The pixie chef had every right to look pleased; she'd outdone herself with this spread. There was even a whole roasted pig up for grabs, complete with obligatory apple-in-mouth and gratuitous tattoo of Bella Franklin's face across the porker's left buttock.

As for the lady thus immortalized, the insult rolled off her like *sauce à l'orange* off a Long Island duckling's back. She leaned against the open bar, sipping a dry martini and surveying the scene. A leer of triumph crawled across her lips as she topped off her glass with the last dribble from the individual cocktail shaker at her elbow. Then, habit being habit, she wrapped the shaker in a napkin and stuffed it into her purse, a be-sequinned behemoth she'd acquired precisely for its stowage capabilities.

"You look happy, milady," Bixby said dully. He was still hermetically sealed in his Hawai'ian hottie glamour, but for tonight he'd been tricked out in a tux.

"And why shouldn't I be?" Bella plucked the bar clean of matchbooks, dropped them into her abyss of a bag, then added two peanut bowls (peanuts included) for good measure. "So far, *six* Speranza Storm vice presidents have made it a point to talk to me. They reeked of free oysters Rockefeller. They'll surely remember my name when it's time to hand out the big rewards at next year's convention."

"Bully for you, milady."

Bella showed her teeth in a panther's smile. "Poor Bixby, *you* don't look happy at all. Maybe a drink would cheer you up." She called for the bartender's attention. "Another dry martini for me and an Irish coffee for my friend over here." She fattened avidly on the light of hope that kindled in Bixby's eyes, then extinguished with a quick, cruel: "*Hold the coffee.*" She patted Bixby's stricken face and cooed, "Tsk, tsk, wasn't that a near thing? You almost got to drink some Tiernan House Blend again, and we both know what *that* would do. Lucky I saved you just in time."

"Whatever you say, milady." A lone tear trickled down Bixby's cheek.

Berry and Mel approached the bar, glamoured to the nines as

Eurotrash—sleek, chic, bored, and black-clad. “I trust everything is to your liking, ma’am?” the dwarf asked from an unusual (for him) height.

“It’ll do,” Bella replied languidly. “But whose stupid idea was it to make the centerpieces *that* big?” She gestured at the towering thickets of day lilies, orchids, and roses on every table.

“That would be Lyndon, ma’am,” Berry replied. “He likes to think big. It comes naturally to an ogre.”

“An ogre who’s also one heck of a shrewd businessman,” Mel put in.

“What’s so shrewd about cramming half a garden onto every table?” Bella’s gesture swept the room. “It’s wasteful!”

“Not when he can reuse the same arrangements at several events.”

“He can?” Berry seemed genuinely surprised by this news.

Mel nodded. “No *shrinkage*, you see. None of the floral arrangements can go walkabout between the one o’clock bridesmaids’ luncheon, the four o’clock tea party, and the seven o’clock testimonial dinner. Who’d want to take home something this big? Who *could*?”

“You mean that after *my* party he’s going to recycle *my* flowers at someone else’s affair?” Bella began to seethe.

“To be honest, ma’am, they’re not your flowers.” Mel produced Bella’s detailed list and handed it back to her. “You’ll notice you forgot to specify centerpieces of any sort, big or small. The fact that the Hotel Tiernan provided them anyway—”

“Your halo’s in the mail,” Bella snapped. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to see to my *invited* guests.” She pushed her way past Berry and Melusine, Bixby bobbing in her wake.

Tom the troll lumbered up behind his friends. Like them, he was in human guise. He looked quite dashing in his security guard uniform, and quite ill at ease with the unwanted attention it attracted from the Speranza Storm crowd. “Mind if I stick close t’ yer?” he asked, casting nervous glances at the predatory females. “Brrrr! They looks ready t’ gobble me up like I was a nighty-night mint onna pillow.”

Selina zoomed down from the chandelier to perch on his shoulder. “Can’t blame ‘em if you’re irresistible, Tom,” she said. “It’s those rock-hard abs. Pity the girls don’t know they’re *real* rocks.” She laughed so hard that she fell into the troll’s ear.

“Selina!” Without pausing to think what such a spectacle must look like to the casual observer, Berry stuck two fingers into Tom’s ear and saved the pixie from a

waxy fate. “Burnt beans, look at the mess you—”

“Eeeeeuuuuwwwww!” The shriek of utter horror and disgust that burst from the throat of the Speranza Storm bigwig who’d just witnessed Selina’s rescue caused every eye in the Oberon Suite to latch onto the four poker buddies. “What *is* that thing?” the woman yowled. “A cockroach? Stuck in his *ear*?”

“Hey! I’m no cockroach!” The very idea infuriated Selina beyond all measure. Her tiny wings vibrated with such violence that all traces of her recent sojourn down Tom’s ear canal liquefied and were flung everywhere. More of the women squealed in revulsion as droplets of trollish ear wax splattered their best polyester bib and tucker. They fled the party *en masse*. In less than a minute, the only sign that the room had once been packed with women was a scattering of peel-and-gorge shrimp carapaces, the skid pattern of high heel marks on the parquet, and the cloud of excess eye shadow and blusher slowly settling over the abandoned tables.

“Whoa,” the pixie remarked, scanning the echoing, evacuated space. “What crawled up *their* bloomers?”

“You ... *monsters!* Look what you did to my party!” Bella Franklin sailed across the floor, her rage leaving Bixby abandoned on the far side of the room. “Is *this* how you honor your bets?”

“Ma’am, the wager specified only that we’d give you a party,” Berry said.

“There wasn’t one word uttered about how long it had to last,” Mel added, her words all the more aggravating because they were true.

Bella was in no mood for logic. She roared an obscenity and slapped Berry and Mel across their faces before they could react. Selina was quicker and easily soared out of the maddened mortal’s reach. Bella cursed the elusive pixie and turned on Tom in her frustration. A howl of pain followed the hearty smack she dealt across the troll’s chops. It did *not* come from him.

“Bloody mythological illiterate,” Mel said again, this time with a smile. “*Some* people know that trolls are made of stone.”

“You *ruined* me!” Bella shouted, tenderly holding her injured hand. “You humiliated me in front of every Speranza Storm V.I.P. in existence! Do you know who *first* saw that miserable cockroach?”

“Hey!” Selina objected from on high.

“Only the *president* of Speranza Storm Cosmetics, that’s all. You destroyed my future! I’ll *kill* you!”

“Beggin’ yer pardon, ma’am,” Tom said. “But I’d like t’ see yer try.”

Bella gritted her teeth. “Oh, you’ll see. When I get home, I’m working your

pal Bixby to death, once and for all! It won't take long. Not once I revoke his percolator privileges."

The four friends gasped. "Ma'am, you can't mean it!" Melusine cried. "To keep him from the sacred brew is unbelievable cruelty, even for a mortal."

"Also, real stupid," Selina put in from on high. "If you whack Bixby, there goes your housekeeping slave."

"I survived without him before," Bella retorted. "It'll be worth it."

"Ma'am, I beg of you, *think*," Berry said. "We'll mourn Bixby's loss, but it won't kill us."

"It won't. Lyndon the ogre will." Bella leered nastily through the pain from her self-mangled hand. "Lyndon the troll-punching, dwarf-crushing, ondine-squishing, pixie-swatting, *sore loser* ogre. Think I wasn't paying attention? With Bixby dead, you'll have to bring him into the game right away, and then you'll either have to let him win every hand or face a world of hurt. You'll end up broke or broken, I don't care which. Maybe he won't kill you outright, but you'll wish you were dead." She turned her back on them and bellowed, "Bixby!" The brownie came running. "We're going home. Say goodbye."

"Yes, milady," Bixby replied sadly. "Farewell, Tom, Selina, Melusi—"

"*Not* farewell," Bella interrupted. "*Goodbye*." Her smirk was pitiless. She headed for the door without a backward glance. She knew Bixby had no choice save to follow her, even to his death. She only paused long enough to scoop up one of the towering centerpieces and stuff it partway into her purse. It must have been agony to accomplish with her wounded hand, but as always, greed overruled every other aspect of Bella Franklin's life.

"Ma'am, you can't take that. It doesn't belong to—" Berry began.

"After all I spent to stay in this fleabag, it damn well *should*," Bella shot back, and stalked out of the Oberon Suite, slamming the door behind herself and Bixby.

* * * *

The reverberations were still fading when Berry, Tom, Melusine, and Selina ditched their expressions of shock in favor of wicked smiles. "Nicely coordinated, friends," Berry declared. He flipped open his cell phone and turned to Mel. "Now?"

"Now."

The dwarf hit a number on his speed dial and spoke a few choice words. Within the space of two heartbeats, the peace of the Hotel Tiernan was shattered by a gut-knotting shriek of pain and terror. Then there was silence, soon followed by the sound of heavy, ominous footsteps approaching the closed door of the Oberon Suite.

With a thunderous kick that sent the door flying across the room, Lyndon the ogre made his entrance. One massive paw held the floral arrangement that had left the premises in Bella Franklin's swag-engulfing handbag. He replaced it carefully on its table and left without a word, nonchalantly picking some stringy, sticky, crimson bits out of his fangs. Bixby sidled in just under the departing ogre's elbow, his mortal glamour gone, his whole body shivering with distress.

"He ate—he ate—*he ate her!*" the brownie cried, with a fearful backward glance at Lyndon's retreating form.

"Well, I should hope so," Mel said. "That *was* the plan."

"Praise the blessed Mill, it worked." Berry dabbed his brow with a wadded pocket handkerchief. "If the Franklin woman hadn't taken those flowers—"

"Pass up a freebie like that? *Her?*" Mel waved one hand in a cavalier manner. "It was only a matter of *when* she'd rise to the bait, not *if*. And believe me, I know bait. Personally."

"But how could he *do* it?" Bixby protested. "How could he harm a guest? The bond of hospitality—"

"—does not apply to the florist shop, unless the guest has actually purchased flowers," Berry said.

"Lyndon has certain standards, for an ogre," Mel added. "One of them is zero tolerance for petty filchery, especially when he needs every last one of these arrangements for the Siegelman *bar mitzvah* later today."

"*Mazel tov!*" Selina concluded. She clapped her hands and a goblin busboy appeared, bearing a tray laden with a steaming coffee pot, four cups, and a thimble for the pixie. "Tiernan House Blend," she announced gleefully as her minion pressed a filled cup into Bixby's hands, then served the others. "Welcome home!"

Bixby gratefully gulped the brew that renewed the ancient tie, then took a deep breath and said, "My dear friends, how can I ever thank you?"

"Try losing a hand now and then," Selina proposed.

"Or just thank Melusine," Berry said. "This was all her idea."

"Don't mention it." The ondine gave Bixby a warm, somewhat damp hug. "Hey, coffee and a free brownie? There are worse ways to start the day."