

Voice of the Bard

by Mel Hiers

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Chapter 1

Anna Martin tripped on the sidewalk leading up to the door of 114 Riverside Drive. She suppressed the urge to check for witnesses, and knocked on the door. She waited precisely two minutes, tapping a toe on the cracked concrete step, before confirming the address on the side of the weathered siding to the one on the screen of her lute.

She knocked again. “Molly Bright?” she yelled. “Bard Corps, here. I need to talk to you regarding the incident at the Tara Club last night.” She waited a few minutes more. “I am within my rights to enter without consent if you do not respond. This is your last warning.”

Another minute passed. Anna dug the kazoo she kept in her pocket and put it to her lips, ready to play the tune that would open the locked door when someone did it for her. She balked at the very large, very green individual who filled the doorway. She fumbled for her badge. “Anna Martin,” she said, holding it up. “I’m here to see Molly Bright.”

He responded by inserting his index finger in his left nostril, extracting something slimy, studying it, and wiping it on the inside of the doorway.

“Does she live here?” she prompted.

The troll squinted at her and scratched himself. “She didn’t do nuffin’,”

“That remains to be seen,” she said. “Regardless, I need to speak with her.”

Instead of arguing, the troll turned away and lumbered into the house. All of Anna’s internal alarms were going off. Nothing about this situation was right. Trolls, for instance, didn’t dwell in houses.

They lived under bridges or near other large landmarks and preyed off those who happened by. He seemed to know Molly, but Molly was a fly. A pixie-like being who worked in a group with other flies for the local fairy. Flies and trolls just didn't mix.

She took the open door as an invitation to enter and did so, careful to avoid brushing against the door frame.

Shabby furniture littered the floor in seemingly random positions. Stains spotted the dirty carpet, the walls were dingy with grime and dust and possible remnants of past nasal explorations. A fly would never live in conditions like this. And where were the others? Flies always lived with the others in their hive. In exchange for their loyalty and work, the hive's fairy provided them with a house in which the flies kept their individual dwellings. They were meticulous. They like bright colors and lots of light and this place was a pigsty.

The troll sprawled over the couch, pointedly ignoring Anna. He huffed, settled in and closed his eyes for a nap. Anna walked further into the room and sniffed. The smell. Clean, fresh with cinnamon potpourri undertones. "Illusion," Anna whispered to herself. "It's got to be a spell."

Anna put her hands on her hips and surveyed the room. Nothing untoward in the living room. Anna peeked into the nearest doorway. Kitchen. After a quick perusal, she decided to start her search elsewhere in the hopes she wouldn't have to wade through that particular mess.

She backed away and turned down the hall, peering into every room, each one as nasty as the last until she found what she was looking for in the bathroom. A small spot of air shimmered in the tub, almost invisible to anyone not looking for such a thing. Anna had found the navel, the creation point of the spell. The weakest spot.

Anna bit her lip and considered her options. She could try to disassemble the spell herself. She didn't have a wand, nor was she acquainted with intricacies of this type of magic. It wasn't what she did. She

wasn't a magician, sorcerer, or witch and was limited to the tools of the bardic trade. The majority of those were designed to make magic with words, music, or art.

She could call someone in. There were a few practitioners in Atlanta who could do the job but Anna wasn't acquainted with any of them. She was on temporary duty in Atlanta, a substitute while the city's regular bard was on vacation. They didn't know her. Wouldn't trust her. And she wouldn't trust them. Better to do the job herself instead of relying on a stranger.

She looked down to dig in her bag for her tuning fork when she saw movement out of the corner of her eye. The little hairs on the back of her neck danced and she whipped around to face the troll, towering over her in the tiny room.

Anna hit the floor and slid between the troll's legs just in time to miss the blow from a ham-hock sized fist. Her bag slid from her shoulder, caught on the crook of her arm, and spilled half its contents onto the grungy linoleum. She crawled into the hallway and scrambled to her feet. She dashed into the closest bedroom and slammed the door. No lock.

Anna spun, searching for something to defend herself with. Nothing but a bed in there. No night stand, no closet, no bedside table. She peered into her bag. Kazoo, baton, fork, pens and pencils, everything she could use had been left behind during her flight. Her only hope was the window.

She thanked all the gods she could name that the house was a one-level as she squeezed through the small window out onto the lawn. The bedroom door crashed open and Anna pressed herself against the house, just under the sill, trying to control her breathing. She had to think of something. Fast.

Sing! She could sing! It wasn't her best talent, but that was all she had. She thought hard, trying to remember some of the song spells she'd learned at the academy. "Come on, come on, Anna. Think!" She should have them down pat as many times as she'd had to repeat the class.

Anna sank to her hands and knees and crept toward the side of the house. She rounded a corner and

slammed right into a pair of thick, green knees.

“Oh, crap,” Anna said and got to her feet. She ran back the way she came, stumbling in a hole she’d managed to miss while on her knees. The troll was slow, but he was tall and he was catching up.

“Crap, crap, crap,” she chanted as she ran past the front door.

She took the time to look over her shoulder. The troll was close. She tripped over a rock and went down, her right knee protesting with a sudden, brilliant pain.

She rolled over, determined to face the troll when he slaughtered her. He stopped short. Looked down at her. Raised an eyebrow. Anna remembered a song.

She opened her mouth, afraid of croaking but not afraid enough not to try. The words were in Gallic. She couldn’t even remember what they meant. The troll stood there, staring at her during all of it and when she was done he blinked. Nothing happened.

Anna froze, staring back at the troll. She scooted away and whimpered when her knee throbbed. She couldn’t understand why he wasn’t coming for her. He certainly seemed insistent enough moments before.

She squeezed her eyes shut, holding back tears she wouldn’t admit to herself were there and when she opened them, the troll was levitating, spinning lazily in the air. The confused look on his face would have been comical if the situation had been different. Anna heaved a mighty sigh and muttered, “Thank you,” to whichever god was listening. She struggled to her feet, grunting through the pain, and limped to the house, determined to take advantage of the temporary reprieve.

Anna struggled into the house, walked directly to the bathroom and gathered up her things. She perched on the edge of the tub and regarded the navel. Its near imperceptibility hinted at a level of magical expertise far beyond the witch or sorcerer norm. “Stupid fairy,” Anna said. “Duped by his own hive.”

She touched the prongs of her tuning fork to the navel and waited for the note. When it sounded, she raised her kazoo to her lips and hummed the same note. She hoped this would do the trick. She really didn't want to call for help. She would much rather be soaking in the spacious, clean bathtub at the bard house than spend any more time with the mildew in this one.

Anna was almost out of breath when the bathroom started to dissolve from the navel out, revealing its true appearance. Clean, pastel, gilded, light. This was the theme throughout the entire house.

The pieces of furniture changed to the flies' tiny personal dwellings, no bigger than doll houses. The transformation was slow. Long enough for Anna to retrieve the cat carrier she'd brought for transportation of the suspect. She limped over to the troll, waited for the siding to change from its dirty, cracked disguise to clean, trendy brick and the lawn from brown dead grass to lush.

Eventually, the dissolve reached the troll. When it did, the creature began to glow, then crack. It exploded into dozens of tiny, winged women. The air was filled with the sound of little bells as the flies all started talking at once. Anna held up a hand and yelled over the din, "Ladies! Molly Bright!"

They all stopped and pointed to one near the center of the group. "Come here, Bright. Don't make me walk."

The fly flew over to Anna, and when she got close enough for Anna to see clearly, gave her a sheepish smile. Anna plucked her from the air, locked her in the cat carrier and said, "Molly Bright, you are being detained by the Mythic council for questioning in a matter of human endangerment. I am authorized to take you to the closest security house for said questioning. You will be provided with details in the matter at that time."

Anna limped to her truck and drove away, ignoring the furious tinkling on the seat beside her.

Anna stopped at a traffic light and resisted the urge to beat her head against the steering wheel. Out of her peripheral vision, she could see Molly's glowing body zipping around in the cat carrier beside her. Molly hadn't stopped whining since they'd left the flies' house, and fly whining is usually accompanied by assorted jangles, ding-dongs, and bongs making it that much more annoying.

"I'll make a deal with you," Anna said.

The bells paused.

"You shut it and I'll let you loose in the holding room instead of keeping you in the carrier."

Molly hovered at the side of the cat carrier, her tiny arms dangling through the holes in the side. "You mean it?" she asked.

"Just don't give me any reason to regret it."

The light turned green and Anna hit the gas, riding the bumper of the slow car in front of her.

"This is a bum rap, you know," Molly said.

Anna sighed. Which was worse, mindless ranting or endless chatter? "Ms. Bright, three *separate* cameras caught you distributing Monkey Business powder to unaware humans at that club by way of the heating and cooling system."

"Come on. That stuff is harmless. Those stick-in-the-muds needed a little brightening."

Anna made an angry left turn. "It's been three days and there are still casualty reports coming in. Bar fights resulting from pranks involving whoopee cushions and joy buzzers for instance. What about the guy who scorched all the hair from his rear after lightning his flatulence on fire? Or the group of businessmen who climbed the billboard downtown, lined up, and dropped their pants simultaneously, mooning most of Atlanta during rush hour traffic?"

Molly sighed, a gentle tinkle. “Oh, yeah. That was a good one.”

Anna spared an instant of attention to flash a dirty look Molly’s way.

“But nobody was killed. Nobody was seriously hurt, even!”

Anna snorted. “Tell that to the guy with the smoldering ass.” She slowed and pulled into the driveway.

Like all bardic houses, this one was huge with large common areas on the ground floor and several bedrooms on the second and third floors that were used as guest rooms or holding cells, depending on the situation.

Anna unlocked the front door by deactivating the bead and yarn ward she’d set before she left. She stuffed the remnants of it in her pocket and went inside, bypassing the common rooms to limp up the stairs and down the second floor hallway.

She’d taken the last room on the right for her own, leaving the resident bard’s master bedroom alone. Anna stopped at the second-to-last door and entered.

She put the cat carrier on the bed and knelt on the floor facing it. She looked Molly in her tiny, beady little eyes and said, “I’m letting you have the run of the room. No funny business. I’ll be watching.”

“Oh, come on. This is stupid.”

Anna stood, favoring her injured knee. “No, making your hive masquerade as a troll to evade arrest was stupid.”

“Eat pixie dust and die.”

“Watch it. I can always change my mind.”

Anna unlatched the carrier and exited the room before Molly could add any more to the

conversation.

Anna felt ragged. She went to her room, stripped, and, in the interest of time, showered in the tiny bath that connected her room to Molly's in lieu of the soak she really wanted. She knew she should put some ice on the knee, but couldn't bring herself to face the stairs again. She dressed in panties and an oversized t-shirt before pulling her lute from her bag.

She flipped through a directory until she found the entry she wanted, then dialed the number. A delicate male face framed by silvery lavender hair appeared. "Yes?" he asked.

"Balin. I'm Bard Anna Martin, temping in Atlanta. I've got one of your flies in custody."

Balin closed his grey eyes and sighed. "What did Molly do this time?"

"Flooded the Tara Club with Monkey Business."

He covered his mouth with a hand to hide his snort of mirth. "Oh, dear."

"I looked at her file..."

"She's got a *file*?"

"This isn't the first prank of this caliber we've picked her up for. The council's asked me to deliver her to them for sanctions."

"I see," Balan said eyes shifting from amused to wary. "Will you keep me informed?"

"Of course, unless the council says otherwise."

"Thank you, Bard. Goodnight."

Anna disconnected and stowed the lute on her bedside table before sliding under the covers and falling fast asleep.

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Anna woke to Greensleeves. She fumbled the lute but answered it on the second try. “Umph.”

“Good morning, Annie Bell!” It was Jeremy, the new librarian and Anna’s boss. He kept the bardic records and handed out assignment and moral support in equal quantities. Although she missed Griffin, his predecessor, she loved Jeremy. But not so much at 4 a.m.

Anna groaned. “’S still dark,” she mumbled.

“Come on, Anna. Hold up the phone so I can see your shining face.”

She rolled over so the mattress would support her arms. “I hate that song.”

“Oh, come on. It’s a classic.”

“Everybody in the known universe can have new ring tones. Why can’t we?”

“Because I said so.”

Anna sighed and pushed her shaggy hair from her face with her free hand. “What’s up, Boss?”

Jeremy paused, squinted and said, “Geez, you look like hell.”

“Thanks, Jer. A girl needs a little flattery once in a while.”

“I know the flies didn’t do this to you.”

Anna smirked and propped up her chin with her hand. “Actually, they did. When I got there, they’d spelled themselves into a troll and grunged up the house with an illusion. Chased me around the yard. I fell a couple times, banged up my knee.”

“But you eventually prevailed, I take it?”

“Of course,” Anna said. “Got Molly Bright in the next room.” Anna paused and said, “But you

didn't call me at 4 o'clock just to chat about the assignment. What's going on?"

"Time to pack your bags, Annie."

Anna frowned and sat up. "But Vickie's still out for another week."

"We're sending a replacement in the morning. We're sending you to the Wabash Valley region."

Anna groaned. "Indiana?"

"I just talked to John Redman. He's been diagnosed with lung cancer. Terminal. He put off going to the doctor. There isn't much more they can do for him but make him comfortable."

"Oh, man." Anna knew Red. She'd worked with him, liked him. He was an oldie, a mentor to many new and training bards. "That sucks."

"Mildly put."

Anna sniffed, wiped away a stray smear of drool she'd only just realized was on her chin. "I'll get down there right away. Keep the region until the replacement gets there."

"Actually," Jeremy said with a grin, "We're planting you."

"Planting?" Anna repeated in a dangerous tone.

"We want to get you out there while Red can still do it."

"Planting. Like, permanent?" Anna was wide-awake now. She was overly aware of the pounding in her chest, the rush of blood in her head, the throbbing of her knee. "You can't be serious."

Jeremy sighed. "Anna, it's time. You've been temping for over a decade. You're good at it, yes, but we're afraid you're going to burn out."

"We?"

"The council agrees with me."

Anna lowered the lute and mouthed a dirty word before composing herself. “This is ridiculous, Jeremy. You know I don’t do permanent. We had an agreement.”

“You had an agreement with Griffin. I’m not bound by that. I have to take everyone’s best interested into account and I believe a permanent assignment is in *your* best interest.”

“It’s not.”

Jeremy stared at Anna, his friendly face serious. “What are you running from, Anna?”

Anna disconnected. She threw the lute across the room but that made her more frustrated because the sturdy spelled plastic kept it from breaking. She kicked at the mattress and yelled when pain of her forgotten knee shot up and down her leg.

The pain brought her back to herself. She had never been good at tantrums anyway. Suddenly tired, she limped to the lute and retrieved it. She tossed it on the bed, grabbed some jeans from her duffel, and pulled them on.