

Love's Old Sweet Song

By Jane Tesh

"The opera? Sheesh, Jack, that isn't fair!"

Jonathan MacKensie smiled in vindictive triumph. "Oh, yes, it is," he said. "We had an agreement. I went to your Motown Festival. Now keep your part of the bargain."

Edgar Benedek slumped further down in the office recliner, knowing he was beaten. "Okay, okay," he grumbled. He and Jonathan had had a long fierce battle over their varying tastes in music, which had ended with Benny's challenge that Jonathan couldn't sit through an entire concert of Benny's choosing. To his surprise, Jonathan had accepted the challenge and had actually enjoyed the Apollo Review. Now he had to put up or shut up. "So what's the story?" he asked with a resigned sigh. "Who dies?"

Jonathan brightened. "It's called 'The Tales of Hoffmann' by Jacques Offenbach," he said. "You'll like it. It's a fantasy."

"What, no oversized broads in armor?"

Jonathan gave him a pained look. "No."

Benny folded his arms and assumed a lofty air. "Then I'm not going."

Ignoring this display, Jonathan gamely continued. "It's really quite an interesting story, a man's search for the ideal woman."

"You did say this was a fantasy," Benny remarked, grinning, hoping to distract MacKensie, but the professor was well into his lecture mode and hardly slowed down.

Hoffmann has three loves: Olympia, a doll; Giulietta, a courtesan; and Antonia, a young singer."

"With ya so far."

"In each act, Hoffmann falls in love but loses the girl through the machinations of a villain who is part devil, part evil magician."

"Sounds good," said Benny, interested in spite of himself. "I'll pencil you in, say, a week from Thursday?"

"Tonight," said Jonathan patting the pocket of his jacket. "I've got the tickets."

"Tonight?" Benny yelped. He gave a push and was out of the chair. "Jack, I've got plans! Me and Carlotta were going on a little search and seizure mission tonight."

"Tonight," Jonathan repeated firmly. "I seem to recall no consideration was given to my plans last week."

Benny did some rapid thinking. "Well, when's it over? Carlotta doesn't live far from the Kennedy Center. Maybe I can salvage some of the evening."

"Oh, it isn't at the Kennedy Center," Jonathan replied blandly. "It's in the newly renovated Grand Opera House in Wilmington."

"Wilmington?" Benny repeated, his voice rising. "Delaware? That's a hundred miles from here!"

"Which is why we're leaving after my next class," Jonathan said, still calm.

Benny opened his mouth to protest and then laughed. "Okay. Okay, you got me. What's a trip to Delaware? I guess I should be glad you don't want to go to La Scala. But does it have to be tonight?"

"Yes, I have a particular reason for wanting to go this evening," said Jonathan.

"A particular female reason?" Benny could tell by his friend's elaborate interest in the papers on his desk that this was a fair guess. "A particular opera singer?" he inquired innocently.

Jonathan cleared his throat. "It just so happens that Loren Fields is making her debut as Giulietta tonight, and she has a remarkable--"

"Loren Fields, Loren Fields," Benny broke in thoughtfully. "Would that be the statuesque brunette with curly hair and inviting eyes you were chewin' on behind the reference desk last week?"

Scandalized, Jonathan dropped his papers. "How did you--?" he stopped, too choked with outrage to continue.

Benny's hands made a graceful sketch in the air. "My spies are everywhere."

"You are disgusting," Jonathan grumbled. "Chewing! I never!"

"You oughta try it." Sensing this was a good time to head for the door, Benny started out. "Give me time to polish my sneakers. I'll meet you, what, four-thirty?"

"Four," said Jonathan, still glowering.

"Okay, Jon-Boy, you're on." Pausing in the doorway, he grinned and added, "Just like my old tuba teacher used to say: Out to Lunch. Back soon. Offenbach sooner." On this, he made his exit.

"The Tales of Hoffmann" was all in French, so Benny put on his most interested expression as if he understood. Actually, with what Jonathan had told him and the handy insert in the program, the story wasn't hard to follow, and the music had a sweep and grandeur that carried him along.

This Hoffmann guy had a real problem getting a date. Olympia was a doll, all right, the wind-up kind, all metal and springs, and the good-looking babe in Act II – Jonathan's Miss Fields – was in league with the villain. She had a spectacular voice and a seductive stage presence, perfect for the role of the elegant courtesan, coaxing the love struck Hoffmann to give her his reflection for her magic mirror. Then she sailed away on her gondola and left him.

"Reminds me of the last time I saw Treva," said Benny, and Jonathan said, "Shh!"

By Act III, Benny was almost drifting off, but woke when he heard the audience draw in a collective breath. Hey, neat effect. He sat up. A picture of some woman had come to life and was singing to a startled young girl.

"That's Antonia," Jonathan whispered in reply to Benny's question. "She isn't supposed to sing; her health is frail. The villain has made her mother's picture come to life."

The evil doctor and the eerie portrait of Antonia's mother entranced the young woman. Antonia's fragile soprano, urged on by the villain's sinister bass and the mellow, kindly tones of the enchanted portrait, reached thrilling heights before she sang herself to death. The curtain came down to thunderous applause.

Benny leaned over again. "Some finale," he remarked. "So that's it for Hoffmann and his girlfriends, right, Jonny?"

Jonathan was sitting with his mouth slightly open. He looked stunned. Boy, he really gets into this stuff, thought Benny, giving his arm a shake. "Yoo-hoo. Anybody hoe?"

Jonathan came out of his trance. "Sorry," he said. "I've never heard that sung so brilliantly. It was wonderful."

"If you say so," said Benny. "Can we go now?"

"No, there's another act."

Benny checked his watch. "Three hours isn't enough?"

"You'll manage," came the terse reply.

Benny sat back with a sigh. Well, it hadn't been too bad, really. The sets had been impressive: a fantastic workshop of spokes and gears for Olympia; the canals of Venice for Guilietta and her decadent followers; a delicate silvery blue parlor for Antonia. Some of the arias had gone on a bit long, but overall, not bad. Now maybe Jon would leave him alone.

In the short final act, a drunken Hoffmann ironically misses his chance to meet the lovely opera star who is the embodiment of his three loves.

Sheesh, what rotten luck, Benny thought. Looks like all the warbling in the world can't help you, chum.

In the roar of applause and cheers, the performers took their bows, returning again and again to the acclamation of the crowd. The young tenor who had sung Hoffmann was greeted with shouts and a shower of confettied programs, a victor's celebration. Benny joined Jonathan in shouting, "Brava!" when Loren took her bows and accepted bouquets of flowers thrown by her enthusiastic fans.

When the house lights came up, Jonathan said, "I'm going to speak to Loren. If you'd care to go on--"

"Nah," said Benny. "I'm here. Might as well make a night of it. Besides, I don't mind getting a closer look at your prima donna."

The backstage area was crowded with well-wishers and relatives. Cameras flashed. There were shrieks of laughter and cries of congratulations. Benny's gaze traveled up to the dark recesses of the stage, past lamps, wires, and spidery catwalks. "Boy, Eric Claudin would feel right at home," he remarked.

"Eric Claudin?" said Jonathan.

"The Phantom of the Opera."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, don't start with that," Jonathan said, irked by the well known gleam in Benny's eyes.

Benny's hands were already in motion. "Can't you just see him up there, staring down from the lofty heights, deciding which fair damsel to snatch away? Will it be the elegant Loren Fields? The sweet, angelic Antonia?"

His dramatics were cut short by another loud burst of applause as Loren appeared, surrounded by a group of her fans. Jonathan waited patiently until the crowd thinned and he had a better view of the young woman. Her dark ringlets were caught up with golden ribbons and tiny twinkling jewels, and her makeup, dusted with fine gold powder, gave her face an added glow. The close-fitting empire style gown clung to her slim form, and Jonathan wondered again how someone so slender could possess such a huge glorious voice.

She saw him, and her dark eyes, enhanced by thick dark lines and violet shadow, sparkled. "Jonathan!" She waved him closer. "I'm so glad you came!"

"You were wonderful," he said, catching her hands in his. Their lips met in a brief kiss.

"I've got to get all this makeup off," Loren said, "Then I can give you a proper greeting." Before Jonathan could reply, she looked past him, exclaiming, "Edgar Benedek! My goodness! It is you, isn't it? Author of America's Favorite Monsters? This is really an honor!"

Benny grinned at Jonathan's stupefied expression. "Everyone in the opera world calls me Benny," he said, shaking her hand. "Quite a set of pipes you've got there, Miss Fields."

"Why, thank you," she said. "I really enjoyed your last article in Psychic Digest, the one about demonic possession. That's a subject that has always fascinated me."

Benny continued to beam. Jonathan reminded himself he should have known by now that the report's fans were legion and likely to show up in the most incongruous situations, but it was still a shock to find Loren among the believers.

"I didn't know you two knew each other," she said. "Jonathan never mentioned it."

With a sideways grin in Jonathan's direction, Benny nodded wisely. "Didn't want to name drop. Modest, you know."

"Well, this is very exciting," said Loren. "Let me run change. Stay there, both of you."

"You can close your mouth now, Jon," Benny said with a chuckle. "You were right about this opera. I am enjoying myself."

"Hands off," Jonathan warned as Benny's interested gaze followed Loren's exit.

"Maybe yes and maybe no," he replied. "You sure know how to pick 'em, Jack. A beautiful woman who sings opera and believes in spirits."

"None of that," said Jonathan.

Benny feigned hurt. "She started it!"

"Well, don't encourage her."

"Ah, you're just jealous," said Benny. "I'll bet you were Bluebeard in a previous life."

Jonathan gave him a withering glare. "And you, no doubt, were Saint Francis."

"Explains my magical way with animals," he said cheerfully.

Loren returned in a short while, looking fresh and clean, her hair brushed back from her face. She had put on a black dress with a dramatic red shawl fringed in gold over one shoulder. Going straight to Jonathan, she gave him a long lingering kiss.

"Better?" she murmured.

"I think we need more practice," he said, returning the favor, which left Loren smiling dazedly.

Having seen this look many times before, Benny said unnecessarily, "Guess you two want to be alone."

"Oh, don't go," said Loren. "I want both of you to meet Neil."

Neil Rauzon, the tenor, was a slight, ordinary-looking young man with disheveled brown hair and dark eyes. Benny found it hard to believe this was the same man who, as Hoffmann, had dominated the stage only a short while ago, alight with a fierce passion. Loren also introduced them to Belinda Celeno, the young woman who was performing the roles of Olympia and Antonia. She was a delicate blonde with a porcelain complexion and eyes of a clear blue-grey. Jonathan noticed how the young man's arm never left her waist and the many fond glances Neil gave the shy soprano.

"We enjoyed the performance very much," he told the singers. "I was particularly impressed by the third act. Your interpretations are quite moving."

"Thank you," said Neil, his smile brightening his pale face. He gave Belinda a hug. "As you can see, we are living our roles. Belinda is my true treasure. I love her as wildly as Hoffmann loves Antonia." His smile was suddenly mischievous. "However, I try not to stay in a drunken stupor."

"Well, I should hope not," Belinda murmured, blushing a beautiful pink.

Neil laughed and kissed her cheek. "She was splendid tonight, wasn't she? The top notes in the Doll Song – sheer drops of crystal! I could hardly breathe. And your trio, dear, absolutely wonderful."

"Neil, please," she said, pleasantly embarrassed.

"You were in excellent voice tonight, Belinda," Loren agreed.

"You are all very kind," she said. For a moment, she fixed her clear gaze on Benny and then on Jonathan before shyly lowering her eyes.

As Neil kissed her, Loren tactfully made their good-bys, leading Jonathan and Benny away.

"Quite a little romance going there," Benny remarked.

"Actually," said Loren, "it has me worried. I've known Neil for a long time. He's very intense in everything he does. He falls in love at least twice a season, usually with his leading lady. But I've never seen him quite so caught up with anyone before."

"True love at last," was Benny's verdict, but Loren wasn't convinced.

"It's just so obsessive. And this opera doesn't help, all about love and enchantment and death. I can't shake the feeling that something is wrong."

"With Neil?" Jonathan asked. "Or Miss Celeno?"

"I don't know," she admitted unhappily. "I –well –he's a friend, and I'd hate to see him hurt."

"You think she's gonna ditch him?" Benny asked. "Happens every day. Playing this Hoffmann character, Neil should be ready for it."

Loren made a gesture of dismissal. "Never mind. It's all my imagination, I'm sure. Jonathan, dear, I've kept you waiting long enough. I'm famished. Buy me some dinner and I'm yours." Under Benny's amused eye, they shared another kiss. Then Loren said, "I'd really like to hear more about your paranormal experiences, Benny. Perhaps some time tomorrow, that is, if you're staying in town?"

"He's really very busy," Jonathan began.

"Hey, karma never sleeps," Benny interrupted cheerfully. "I'll be glad to chew the fat with you any time you say, Loren."

"We really have to get back to Washington," Jonathan said, adding quickly as Loren's face fell, "but I'm sure we can arrange another visit very soon."

"No time like the present, J.J.," Benny said. "It's late. You call Dr. Moorhouse tomorrow and tell her we've discovered something eerie and mysterious here, we stay a few days and all get better acquainted."

It was clear Benny planned to stay, and Loren's fingers were playing the most tantalizing pattern along the back of his neck. "Well," Jonathan said, "perhaps one more day." He was appropriately rewarded.

"Great," said Benny. "I know a place around here that makes terrific pork rinds and gravy. What say, Jon-Boy? Nine? Ten? When will you be staggering up?"

Momentarily diverted, Jonathan said, "Pork rinds?"

"Yeah, breakfast. Halley's."

"Yes, all right," he said. "I'll meet you there at nine."

Benny gave him a slap on the back. "Nine's fine, buds. See you then. We're even now, right?"

“Even,” said Jonathan, and they shook on it.

The next morning, Benny was pouring a liberal helping of ketchup on his omelet when Jonathan slid into the seat across from him.

“You two have a nice little concert?” Benny inquired.

Jonathan’s answer was a scowl as he reached for the menu.

“What?” said Benny, a forkful of food halfway to his mouth. “Somebody off-key this morning?”

With a disgusted sigh, Jonathan said, “Loren seems to think we can do something about Neil – or rather, you can do something.”

Benny chewed and swallowed. “About Neil? What’s his problem? Looked to me like he was doin’ great.”

“Unfortunately,” said Jonathan. “Loren has your kind of imagination. She thinks something supernatural is happening at the opera house.”

Gleefully, Benny speared another hunk of egg. “Phantom of the Opera, Jack, what’d I tell you? So is Neil a Jekyll and Hyde kinda guy, ace opera star by day, raging beast by night?”

Jonathan raised dangerously narrowed eyes from the menu. He started to speak, decided whatever he was going to say wasn’t worth the effort, and chose a different tact, striving for calm. “Loren thinks he’s bewitched. She thinks Belinda Celeno could possibly be the spirit of Nell Travers, an opera star who went mad trying to sing ‘Lucia di Lammermoor.’”

“Wow!” said Benny, impressed. “What a story! Miss Fields is my kinda gal.”

“No,” said Jonathan. “She’s my kind of gal, which is the only reason I agreed to help her. Something has her worried and upset, and it isn’t the spirit of some insane dead diva.”

“Morning,” said the large cheerful waitress. “Ready to order, sir?”

Suddenly aware his voice has risen, Jonathan unclenched his grip from the menu and sat back. “Oh, um, yes. I’ll have some toast, please, and tea.”

The waitress smiled. “Something else for you, Benny?”

“Couple of cinnamon buns oughta do it, thanks,” he replied. “So what does Loren want me to do?” he asked Jonathan as soon as the waitress had gone. “A séance, maybe? An exorcism? What’s this ‘Lucia Paramore’?”

“Lucia di Lammermoor,” Jonathan corrected. “The mad scene in Act III is considered one of the most difficult arias ever written. Often a soprano’s career is based on how well she sings Lucia, but that has nothing to do with this.”

“How do you know?”

“Because it’s preposterous! Loren just has an overactive imagination. Neil’s her friend, and she’s concerned about him.”

“And you’re concerned about her. Got it,” said Benny. “So what’d you tell Dr. M?”

Jonathan waited until the waitress served his toast and two huge shiny cinnamon buns to Benny before replying. “I said we were investigating a mysterious occurrence in the new opera house and that I’d be back Monday morning.”

Benny could tell by Jonathan’s expression that there was more. “And?” he prompted.

Reluctantly, Jonathan said, “And she wanted to know if it was a phantom.”

“That’s my girl,” Benny grinned and put a whole bun in his mouth.

Devoid of the dazzle and glamour of the night before, the interior of the opera house looked like any large auditorium. A few stagehands in dirty jeans and tee shirts were reassembling a piece of scenery that needed repair, and another man in paint-splattered clothes was touching up the gold trim on one of the gondolas. The orchestra pit was silent and empty except for chairs and a tangle of metal stands. The rows of red velvet seats were shadowy shapes.

For a moment, Jonathan stepped out onto the vast stage. He tried to imagine the hot glare of the lights, the vast rustling sound of the audience. Feeling small and insignificant, he walked back to the wings, hearing the slight echo of his footsteps. If the theater were this intimidating empty, how did anyone ever get up the nerve to come out and perform before the searing eyes of a full house?

"I'm so glad you came," said Loren, slipping her arm through his. "I thought this would be the best place to talk. I didn't want to say very much last night in front of Belinda, but you saw how it is."

Jonathan smiled indulgently. "Loren, all I saw was a young couple very much in love."

"But didn't you see how he looked at her?"

"The same way I look at you." He leaned in to kiss her, but she pushed him away.

"Jonathan, this is serious! Neil is under a spell, I know he is."

Jonathan started to argue, but was stopped by the look in her eyes. "What's happened to make you feel so strongly about this?" he asked.

"Nothing specific." She held her arms tightly around herself. "That's what's so frustrating! It's just a feeling I have."

"Forgive me," said Jonathan, "but perhaps these feelings you have for Neil are deeper than you suspect."

She looked blank for a moment and then her expression softened, and she smiled. "Oh, no, Jonathan. It's nothing like that. I'm very fond of Neil. He's like a brother. I know him so well – that's why I know something's wrong."

"But, Loren," he said. "A spell?"

"I don't know how else to explain it."

Jonathan put a comforting arm around her, just as Benny sauntered up from his inspection of the backstage area, singing, "Hello, young lovers, you're under arrest."

This made Loren smile. "Hello, Benny. See any phantoms?"

"Too early," said Benny. "Your basic phantom doesn't waft about till after sundown. What can we do for you, Loren?"

"Well," she said hesitantly, "I was just telling Jonathan, I don't have any sort of proof or anything. I just feel something's wrong. . ." her voice trailed off, but Benny's bright blue gaze was all sympathy.

"Hey, feelings are nothin' to sneeze at," he said. "If I had my portable Ouija board with me, I'd show you what I mean. You think there's an evil presence here in the opera house?"

She nodded. "I know it sounds crazy, but it's Belinda. Please, if you'll watch the opera from here tonight, in the wings, maybe you'll be able to see what I mean."

"Has anyone else noticed anything unusual about her?" Jonathan asked.

"I don't know," said Loren. "I've been very reluctant to discuss this with anyone. It's – how can I describe it? -- unearthly the effect she has on Neil."

Alarmed by the tears he saw brimming in her eyes, Jonathan said, "We'll do whatever we can, I promise."

But Benny's bright gaze had faded. "Watch the opera again?" he said plaintively.

Jonathan was pleased to get such a close view of "The Tales of Hoffmann." Loren told the stage manager that he and Benedek were correspondents from Opera World, a story Benny went along with whole-heartedly. They were granted permission to watch from an area off stage right.

This close, Jonathan was impressed by the power of the singers' voices, especially Neil's and Belinda's. Neil's ordinary features were transformed, revealing a remarkable range of emotions. He was a creature of light and energy, of highest passions and deepest despairs.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Loren murmured from behind him.

Jonathan turned to see her in her gold gown and ribbons, her eyes huge with makeup. "He certainly puts his whole heart into it."

"He was a sickly child," she replied, "and his parents encouraged him to sing--" her voice caught, and Jonathan looked at her curiously.

"What's wrong?"

"I just realized – it's an odd parallel to the opera," she said uneasily. "Only Antonia isn't supposed to sing. It will kill her." She shivered. "Things keep happening like this."

"You're reading too much into it," Jonathan said gently. "It's just coincidence."

"There are too many coincidences," said Loren. "I have to get ready."

Jonathan watched her graceful form disappear into the darkness. He hated to see her so trouble, but so far, he'd seen nothing that could even be mildly construed as supernatural. His attention was drawn back to the stage. Belinda, in the role of Olympia, was beginning the light clear "Doll Song," while Neil, as Hoffmann, watched with blinding adoration. It was obvious the young man's fervent regard was for the lovely singer as well as her character.

Puzzled, Jonathan watched and listened carefully. He could see nothing out of the ordinary, except, of course, an astonishing vocal performance. How beautifully she sang! Being familiar with the music, he couldn't recall hearing this aria sung so clearly, so radiantly. Effortlessly, Belinda reached the last full golden notes light years above high C. There was an awestruck silence from the audience before the swelling crash of applause. To Jonathan, it seemed like the sound of waves crashing against the jagged spears of a strange island – it was the sound of waves, dark and grey, foaming madly around the rocky edges, while above the sound, angelic voices sang of peace and contentment. . .

What? No, it was applause, furious and full, now dying down as Act II continued. Belinda did not acknowledge the accolade, but stood in character, Olympia's fixed smile on her face. Jonathan realized he was having trouble breathing, and let out a shaky rush of air. The aria had been the most glorious thing he'd ever heard.

"What's up?" came Benny's whisper from behind.

Jonathan shook his head slightly, trying to come back to earth. "I really can't see that there's a thing wrong," he replied, keeping his voice low. "Where have you been?"

"Oh, here and there," Benny said. "Things look normal to me, too, chum, as normal as possible for an opera, I guess." His attention was caught by the action on stage. "What's this?"

"The end of Act II," said Jonathan. "Copelius destroys Olympia, and Hoffmann sees she was only a doll."

Benny watched the villain cavorting with the body of the doll and Hoffmann's grief-stricken reaction as he picked up one of the broken pieces. "I thought that was pretty kinky last night, Jack, and I still do," he remarked.

"Look out," Jonathan cautioned as the cast began to leave the stage. Benny moved out of the way. The partygoers hurried past while the leads returned for their bows. Belinda received a thunderous ovation. This time she bowed and smiled sweetly, holding the folds of her stiff white and silver gown. As she came by Jonathan she gave him a glance so full of unexpected desire, he felt a sudden responsive stab, which he quickly repulsed, alarmed. She brushed against him, the stiff gown rustling, her sweet perfume heavy in the thick air. She paused to give him one last glance. This time he knew he could not be mistaken. It was not the innocent interest she'd shown before, but a strangely calculating gaze, as if to say: I will have you if I wish.

He glanced nervously at Benny to see if his friend had noticed anything and found the man grinning at one of the dancers. Had he imagined that gaze? Was he so caught up in the atmosphere of love and magic that permeated "Hoffmann" he was seeing things?

"Hey," said Benny, poking his arm. "I think she likes you."

"What?" said Jonathan, badly startled.

With a nod of his head, Benny indicated a buxom young woman in the costume of a Venetian courtesan. "One of Guilietta's buddies."

Jonathan gave the woman a wan smile, suddenly in perfect sympathy with Loren. How easily gestures and looks could be misinterpreted. Perhaps he'd been treating her fears far too casually.

Benny's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "What'd you think I meant?" he asked. "Actually, you could have your pick of the dancers."

"If you would keep your mind on business," Jonathan said tersely.

Benny made a rude noise, but he kept his thoughtful look.

Act III went smoothly. Loren's duet with Neil was graceful and passionate. She sailed away on her gondola, her mocking laughter floating behind her, and the audience went wild.

"Carlotta had the same reaction," Benny said gloomily. "Didn't believe I broke our date for the opera. Can't say I blame her."

In Act IV, Belinda as Antonia, shy and demur in her light blue gown, sang sweetly and calmly, a complete change from the clipped, precise bell-like tones of Olympia. Jonathan watched carefully, but could detect no trace of the blatant sexuality he was certain he'd seen. The trio: villainous bass, enchanted portrait, and Antonia singing her last, was again the highlight of the opera, but whether its spellbinding force lay inherent in the music or in some bizarre unknown power, he was at a loss to explain. So many odd things had happened since his partnership with Benedek, he was beginning to believe in strange occurrences far more readily than he ever thought he could.

Antonia sang herself to death. Hoffmann grieved. The villain laughed maniacally, and Act IV was over. This time, as Belinda passed Jonathan, her smile was sweet and radiant. Breathless, she accepted a glass of water from a stagehand and patted her damp face with the clean towel he offered. Murmurs of congratulation surrounded her.

Benny went over to speak to her, and the expression she turned toward him was positively angelic.

No wonder Neil is crazy about her, thought Jonathan. I've never seen anyone so enchanting. I must have misinterpreted that look. She must have still been in character.

But Olympia is a doll with a fixed smile. The look she gave you was that of a predatory animal, wanton, savage. In that moment, you wanted her.

This is nonsense! He argued with himself. Even if you were attracted to her, she belongs to Neil, and you belong to Loren. You've been attracted to women before. There's nothing supernatural about that.

Still, the look disturbed him. After the final act and curtain calls, he avoided Belinda. He congratulated Neil and then went to Loren's dressing room.

Like the rest of the opera house, the dressing rooms had been remodeled. Loren's room was small but brightly colored, with modern furnishings and filled with flowers from previous nights and fresh tributes from this evening's performance.

Jonathan made himself at home, carefully putting aside her long spangled cape and sitting down. Cards, telegrams, and pictures decorated the large lighted mirrors, and an array of powders and lipsticks lay scattered on the counter. He found himself wondering if Belinda's dressing room looked the same and shut off those thoughts with an angry shake of his head.

Loren entered, tugging at the gold ribbon that held back her artfully arranged curls. "Whew! What a crowd!" she said. "I loved it." She looked at him anxiously. "Well, what did you think?"

Jonathan spread his hands in a gesture of bewilderment. "It was a terrific performance."

"What about Belinda?" she insisted.

"Belinda. . ." he paused, troubled by Loren's intense stare. How to explain? If anything, Miss Celeno had just been flirting with him. Did Loren want to hear that?

"Yes?" she said expectantly.

"Sang like an angel," he finished lamely.

Loren sank down before the mirror and regarded her reflection forlornly. "I suppose it was too much to hope for. I was so certain – oh, well," she sighed and began wiping off her make up.

Jonathan came and put his hands on her shoulders. "I can't believe she's possessed by anything except a remarkable talent," he said, "but if something odd is going on, Benedek is bound to find it. Let's go have dinner and relax."

She caught his tie and pulled him down for a kiss. "You always have such good ideas."

But even as his pulse raced, Jonathan thought of Belinda's unsettling gaze.

Benny strolled around backstage, already friends with half the stagehands, having joined in the on-going poker game that evening during intermission. He stood admiring the smooth computer-controlled lift of scenery as Guilietta's Venice was put back in place behind the doll workshop in readiness for the next performance. The tavern for the prologue was set, so he wandered out among the wooden tables and large kegs and was greeted by Alberto Donetti, the bass.

"How about that interview now?" he said, and Benny, recalling he was supposed to be from Opera World, gave the large man a quick grin.

"Sure thing, Al."

Alberto thumped the nearest bench and made room for Benny to sit. "What did you think of the performance tonight, eh?"

"Just great," Benny said. "This is the second time I've seen it."

Alberto's thick eyebrows went up in pleased surprise. "And?" he inquired.

"Terrific stuff," said Benny. "I love it. We're gonna do a double page spread in the next issue, big pictures of all the leads. Which reminds me, I need some of you." He dug into his

pocket for his camera. Alberto posed theatrically as he took a few quick shots. “Y’know,” he remarked casually, “sometimes too much is made over the tenors of this world. They get a lot of press. But your basic bass – now there’s the man who holds the opera together. I want to do a story about the basses. Something like ‘Low Men Rise to great Heights,’ or maybe ‘Bass is Beautiful.’ I dunno. Just a thought.”

“But that is an excellent idea,” Alberto said eagerly. “If I may be so bold as to put myself forward as an example, I could give you many stories. It is all too true that the tenor gets the lion’s share of the glory. Always Pavorotti, Domingo – one never hears of the real power.

Benny had already taken out his pocket recorder. “This is great stuff, Al. Let ‘er rip.”

Alberto proved to be an inexhaustible source of behind the scenes intrigue with himself as much maligned underdog. Benny sat back and let him talk, trying to reconcile the petulant, almost whining man with the evil villain whose rich dark voice had so enthralled the audience.

Things aren’t what they seem in the old opera world, he mused. The fiery tenor’s an ordinary Joe, the powerful bass is an old sourpuss, and just what exactly is our fair Antonia? Something gave Jonathan a start back around Act II, and it wasn’t somebody hitting a wrong note.

Alberto had stopped for breath, so Benny said, “Any problems with Rauzon?”

“Neil? No, no. I have nothing but praise for our Neil. A bit of artistic temperament now and then, but he never lords over anyone. Besides, he’s too caught up with his leading lady.”

“Yeah, she’s quite a dish,” said Benny. “Wouldn’t mind a duet with her, myself.”

Alberto wagged a warning finger. “Ah, ah. Neil will take care of you as easily as he dispatches his rival in Act II.”

“True love, huh?”

The large man leaned forward to whisper. “Obsession, pure and simple – if obsession can be considered pure or simple.”

“Yeah, but the feeling’s mutual, right?” said Benny. “She seems to be nuts about him, too.”

“Apparently. She’s an odd one. Very sweet, but. . .” for the first time during the conversation, he was hesitant. “It’s hard to explain, but every now and then, she gives me such a look.”

“A look?” said Benny. “What kind of look?”

Alberto reached over and turned off Benny’s recorder. “A look that says, ‘I’d like to eat you alive.’”

Benny had been expecting a number of replies. This had not been one of them. “Belinda? That sweet little angelic-looking baby doll?”

Alberto nodded. “I didn’t believe it, either – the first time.”

“You mean she goes around shooting killer sex looks at you?”

“You mention a word of this to Neil, and I’ll do you a damage,” said Alberto in all seriousness. “If he even suspected! I shudder to think. Got a terrible temper, our Neil.”

Benny shook his head in amazement. “He’s bound to know. If it’s as obvious as you say--”

Alberto disagreed. “He’s completely blinded by love. The girl’s an actress, an accomplished flirt. What else could it be?”

What else, indeed? Benny wondered. He thanked Alberto for his time and his information, promised the man he’d make basses look good, and went in search of Neil. He

though the young tenor must have already left with Belinda, so he was surprised to find him in his dressing room.

"Mr. Benedek," he greeted. "Come in, come in. Loren told me you were from Opera World. I hope you enjoyed the performance."

"Had me on the edge of my seat," Benny replied, his quick gaze taking in the man's appearance. Neil was pale and worn, his hands not quite steady as he pulled on a clean shirt. "Takes a lot out of you," he remarked.

"Oh, no," Neil replied with a grin. "I'm charged up and ready to go. Belinda and I are going dancing. You're welcome to come along. I can fix you up with some very attractive altos."

"No, thanks. I'll take a rain check." Benny propped himself on the counter next to a large uneaten pizza and a basket of fruit. "Thought you guys were ravenous after a show, or is this the second course?"

Neil gave the food a cursory glance. "Help yourself. I'm not hungry. I'll probably get something later."

Choosing a large apple from the basket, Benny said. "I take it you and Miss Celeno are making serious plans?"

The man's expression softened and the inner light he possessed as Hoffmann shone in his eyes. "She's the most enchanting girl I've ever met," he said. "And her voice! I could listen to her forever. Sometimes on stage, I forget where I am. I just lose myself in that glorious sound."

"Yeah, I've never heard anything like it, either," said Benny. "Where's she from? Has she been on the scene long?"

"Oh, didn't anyone tell you?" Neil looked surprised. "This is her debut. When word of her talent gets around, she'll have her pick of roles in opera houses all over the world. I hope you'll put in a good word for her in your magazine."

"Sure," said Benny. "And she's from where?"

"Her family's from Capri, but she grew up here, went to school here." He made some attempt to straighten his wayward hair. "If you'll excuse me, I'm meeting her in a few minutes. Sure you won't come along?"

Benny waved him off. "You two kids go have fun." He hopped down. "Just one thing. Get some tenor chow. You look peaked."

Neil laughed. "I will."

Jonathan turned the corner and felt the soft hand on his arm.

"Jonathan," a sweet voice whispered.

A young woman was in his arms, her lips pressed against his. Her mouth was soft, her breath like the fragrance of flowers, almost too sweet, but infinitely desirable. He found it difficult to catch his breath, as if she were pulling it from him. The woman clung to him, her small hands oddly like claws in his back. When he was able to let go, he was gasping, dark spots dancing before his eyes.

"Wonderful," she murmured.

He reeled, finding her supporting hands on his chest. What was going on? Who was this? He stared at the pale porcelain face with its pink triumphant smile. He could manage only a whisper. "Belinda."

"That is what I am called here," she said, "but I've had many names." She slid her hands up his neck and pulled down his unresisting head. "Kiss me."

Once more there was a terrible insistent force tugging at him, a great inrush of power. Images of fierce storms raged before his closed eyes, waves crashing against stone, and above all the noise, an eerily sweet song, promising unimaginable delights.

When she released him, he fell to his hands and knees, heaving in gulps of air. As he coughed and gasped, Belinda's small alarmingly claw-like hand stroked his hair. Pushing himself unsteadily to his feet, Jonathan caught a glimpse of her face and almost lost his breath again, startled by the inhuman features, sharply avian, the eyes glazed with an animal lust. Just as quickly, the sweet girlish face reappeared, soft cheeks, pink petal mouth, wondering grey-blue eyes.

"Are you all right?" the gentle voice inquired, concerned.

Baffled by this abrupt change of character, Jonathan could only stare, still gasping. There were other voices now and movement beyond the range of his clouded sight. Other people, he realized dimly. That's why she changed back.

As if sensing his thoughts Belinda put her hand on his arm. For a painful instant, the soft white fingers were razor claws. "They won't believe you," she hissed, and was gone.

"Jonathan?" Loren's face came into view. "Jonathan, what's wrong?"

Benny's voice sounded near-by. "What's with the hyperventilating, Jonny? Whoa, easy, big fella. Let's park it somewhere."

Jonathan found himself in Loren's dressing room, looking up at their anxious faces. He was finally able to speak. "Belinda," he gasped.

"What's she done?" Benny asked.

Jonathan shook his head, trying to clear the fog. "I'm not entirely sure it's a she."

"Killer sex looks," said Benny, pleased to have made the connection.

Jonathan's eyes widened. "You knew about that?" he exclaimed. "I-I thought I was mistaken. I thought--" He paused, embarrassed, and Benny obligingly filled in the gap.

"You thought it was just another in the continuing series – no offense, Loren."

She had been trying to follow the conversation. "Wait a minute. Are you saying Belinda attacked you?"

"Like most women," Benny grinned. "Only this isn't a woman, right, Jack?" He leaned forward, anxious for details. "What is she?"

"I don't know," he answered. "For a moment, she looked like some sort of animal. I couldn't catch my breath." I could hardly breathe. Wasn't that what Neil had said? And earlier tonight, during her aria, it was something more than just being caught up in the music. It was a power –an enchantment?

"An animal," Benny said gleefully. "She's a werewolf?"

Jonathan was trying to remember. "No, it was birdlike. Her hands were like talons."

"Jonathan, what is going on?" Loren pleaded. "What is she? What is she trying to do?"

"A weresoprano," Benny answered excitedly. "Bird Woman of the Opera!"

"Will you stop?" Jonathan said, irritated. "There was a sound like waves crashing on rocks, a--" Then he stopped, a strange look dawning on his face.

Benny recognized this expression. Jonathan was about to be brilliant. He repressed his high spirits and gestured for Loren to be quiet.

“Half woman, half bird,” Jonathan was murmuring. “An amazing singing voice, waves crashing on an island. . .”

“Got something, Jack?” Benny inquired hopefully.

“I think so,” he answered. “It’s impossible, but everything fits. I need to look up more information.”

“Okay,” said Benny. “You check into the nearest library, and I’ll go after our little canary.”

Jonathan disagreed. “No, Benedek, you and Loren come with me.”

“I appreciate your cultural endeavors, chum, but the opera and the library in one day? You’re pushing your luck.”

Jonathan wasn’t fooled. “You aren’t as thick as I’d like to believe, Benedek. This is your area. Come on.”

“My area?” said Benny. “We’re gonna look up ghosts?”

“No,” said Jonathan. “Monsters.”

After a futile search for a library or bookstore open at the late hour, Loren remembered she had a myths and fables dictionary in the small apartment she was sharing with a friend during the opera’s run in Wilmington.

Three heads bent over the large reference book as Jonathan’s finger slid along the tiny rows of print.

“You wanna clue me in to what you’re lookin’ for?” Benny asked.

“I really don’t want to find it,” Jonathan admitted, “but I’m afraid it’s – ah, here. ‘Siren. A mythical monster, half woman, half bird, said to entice seamen by the sweetness of their song to such a degree that the listeners forgot everything and died of hunger.’”

“Died of hunger?” Loren’s voice was barely audible.

Benny was practically dancing with delight. “So we got ourselves a real live siren here?”

Jonathan took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “What we’ve got is some sort of malevolent force that has taken over Belinda Celeno.”

“The same evil that was in these ancient creatures?” Loren said. “Still alive after all these centuries?”

“Another plus for possession,” Benny put in.

She looked at both men askance. “You actually believe this?”

Jonathan sat back, folding his glasses into his pocket. “Several months ago, I would have thought the whole thing ludicrous,” he admitted, “but I’ve had first hand experience with Miss Celeno. Whatever she is, she isn’t human.”

“Neil,” Loren said faintly.

“We’ll get him away from her, I promise,” said Jonathan.

Benny had been reading further. “Says here the sirens killed themselves when they failed. Sounds good to me. I thought sirens were sea monsters, Jack, you know, like really tough mermaids.”

“In some sources, they are,” said Jonathan. “I would imagine this – this whatever it is could take on many forms. . .” He paused as another thought occurred. “It could have been Medusa, the chimera, all those so-called mythical beasts.”

"Whoa, hold on here," said Benny signaling time out. "One monster at a time." He shut the book with a thump. "The opera's a hit, isn't it? Gonna run for weeks, maybe months? We don't have that kinda time and neither does Neil. How did the Greeks get rid of the sirens, Jon?"

"I remember only one story," he said. "When Ulysses and his men were sailing past the island where the sirens lived, Ulysses had his men put wax in their ears and told them to tie him to the mast so he wouldn't jump overboard to swim to the island. They didn't get rid of the sirens. They managed to get away, that's all."

"Well, we're gonna get rid of this one," said Benny. "The hard part will be convincing Neil his sweetheart is Hawk Woman."

"Liar!"

Neil flung himself away from Jonathan, his face tight with anger. "How dare you make up such a horrible story?"

"It's impossible to believe, I know." Jonathan tried to explain, but Neil would have none of it. The young tenor had arrived at the opera house just before the next afternoon's performance, pale and unsteady.

"You're after her yourself, aren't you?" he said in a furious undertone. "That's it, isn't it? I'll kill you if you touch her!"

"Neil!" Loren said, aghast.

A few people backstage paused, listening to the outburst with mild curiosity. Neil was trembling. For a moment, he seemed to recover himself; then his anger resurged.

"She's mine, do you hear me? Keep away from her."

"Neil, please," said Loren. "We're trying to help you. Belinda isn't what she seems to be. She's dangerous."

"Dangerous?" He laughed sarcastically. "Loren, I didn't think you'd be so jealous." When she opened her mouth to protest, he said, "Just leave me alone, all of you!" and strode off to his dressing room.

Loren fought back tears. "I was so glad to see him, so happy he was all right. What can we do to convince him?"

"He hasn't seen the real Belinda," said Jonathan.

Benny had been watching thoughtfully. "Well," he said. "Let's show him."

"Think you're hot stuff, don't you?"

Belinda Celeno swerved, her stiff doll gown crinkling. Her wide-eyed innocence was enhanced by Olympia's over-long eyelashes and round circles of pink on her cheeks. For a moment, Benny had severe doubts. Then he sauntered closer. "Taking over Miss Celeno – if there ever really was one – sucking Neil dry, having a go at my partner. Pretty clever for a gal who must be a couple of thousand years old."

She smiled bemused. "Mr. Benedek, what are you talking about?"

"Oh, you're good," he said. "Real good. You can snare all these music lovers, but not me. Go ahead. Give it your best shot."

She eyed him. "If this is some sort of joke, I'm afraid I don't understand."

"No joke, sugar. I'm dead serious. You won't catch me with your little siren song, no way. Try it. I dare you." Almost certain he saw an angry glint of yellow fire in those perfect grey-blue eyes, Benny pressed harder. "You can sing your heart out – in fact, I wish you would. I'm on to you, Miss Tweetie Pie, and there isn't anything you can do about it."

She drew in her breath with a sharp hiss, but before she could betray herself further, the stage manager interrupted, calling, "Places, everyone!" With an unmistakable snarl of fury, she turned away, immediately greeting one of the prop men with a sweet hello.

Satisfied, Benny strolled back to watch the preparations for the matinee, pausing when Jonathan arrived. "You get them?" he asked.

Jonathan dug into his pocket and pulled out the package of ear plugs. "If it worked for Ulysses--"

"Oughta work for us." Benny took the pack and shook out two, which he handed to Jonathan. "I almost had her, Jack. She is definitely an ugly customer. Made her good and mad."

Jonathan cautioned him to be careful. "I'm sure you did, Benedek, but watch your step. She's very powerful."

"Yeah, but stupid. Thinks she can get anybody she pleases. How's Loren?"

"She's still upset, but she'll be all right."

"Well, you go give her another kiss for luck, because in a few minutes – Act II, to be precise – Neil is going to see his Belinda as she really is."

"Here? Now? During the opera?" Jonathan exclaimed.

"Why not? That's when she sings, right?"

Jonathan caught his arm. "Benedek, what are you planning? There are people out there, a whole audience! And the singers on stage with her and--"

"Relaxovision, pal," said Benny, unconcerned. "I got it all figured." I think, he added to himself.

The house lights began to dim.

"Can Belinda see you if you stand over here," Benny asked, positioning the protesting Jonathan. "Keep it down, will ya? The show's about to start."

From the moment she took the stage as Olympia, Belinda commanded full attention. Not only was Olympia the doll the centerpiece of the scene, Belinda Celeno the singer was completely aware of the impact her voice had on the listeners this afternoon, on two listeners in particular.

Neil stood transfixed, his mouth open, eyes glazed, all vitality being drained away with each note. Standing in the wings, Jonathan was similarly affected, although the ear plugs offered some protection.

"I can still hear her – a little--" he panted. "It's stronger than before."

"Yep, she's pulling out all the stops," Benny agreed, leaning close enough to hear him. "You gonna make it?"

Jonathan nodded, but his expression was gradually growing slack.

"Watch this," said Benny. He stepped in front of Jonathan, and, with a bright grin, took out his ear plugs, held them aloft where Belinda could see, and casually tossed them away.

"Benedek!" Jonathan gasped in horror. "No!"

Benny put his hands in his pockets, his expression plainly saying, "Big deal," to the creature on stage, whose wrathful eyes sparkled with an alien color. As Belinda directed the full force of her song his way, he insolently stuck out his tongue.

There was a deafening shriek, high notes sliding up into a painful clash of sounds. Neil, freed from his trance, stumbled back in terror as Belinda's doll-like features hardened, her eyes

glazing into cruel yellow beads, her hands curving into claws. A rush of wind flattened the chorus and toppled the scenery, sending the giant gears rolling in all directions.

As the discordant screams grew in intensity, Benny made a grab for the nearest stagehand. "Get the curtain down!" he shouted. The sudden explosion knocked him off his feet. When he was able to see again, Belinda lay in scattered pieces across the stage.

The curtain rolled down. After a moment of shocked surprise, there was thunderous applause. Benny scrambled up. Jonathan was already running to Neil's side. The young man was trying to get up, gasping faintly, "Olympia. Olympia."

"No," said Jonathan. "It wasn't real. She wasn't real. It was all a trick to fool everyone, just like in the opera." He was afraid the strain would be too much, but, summoning some inner resource, Neil gulped and nodded. He tried to say "Belinda," but the name died in his throat.

"Not real," he managed in a hoarse croak.

The other singers were picking themselves up, murmuring in shocked voices as they avoided the bits and pieces of what appeared to be a life-sized china doll.

"So there was no Belinda," Benny remarked. "It was just a shell the siren used and animated, just like this Olympia character."

"What the hell was that?" Alberto demanded. "Why didn't Fanchon tell us he was trying some new special effects today? Somebody could've gotten hurt!"

"Yeah, but listen to that applause," said Benny. "Better get out there, Al. They're cheering for you."

The audience was still clapping and calling for the singers to appear. Backstage was a madhouse of confused angry performers confronting a baffled stage manager. Leaving the, to sort things out, Benny and Jonathan assisted Neil to his dressing room. Still weak and disoriented, the tenor sank into a chair, his face in his hands, drawing shuddering breaths. When Loren came in, she took him in her arms.

"It's all right, Neil. It's over."

"What you need is a large pepperoni pizza with extra cheese," said Benny. "My treat."

Neil raised his head and stared at them. "This is going to sound amazingly callous," he said, "but I'm extremely hungry."

Loren laughed in relief. "Of course you are!"

He shook his head, bewildered. "I don't understand."

"There never was a Belinda," Jonathan said. "Just an evil force, a very ancient one, who used a human form to fool everyone."

"H-how can that be?" he said. "She was so real, so perfect. I loved her. . ." His voice stopped.

Benny gave the man's shoulder a pat. "You got your own tale to tell now, pal. All in a day's work for Hoffmann. I'll go get the pizza."

Loren sang Act III with Neil's understudy, but by Act IV, Neil felt strong enough to return to the stage. Loren protested worriedly, but he insisted on singing.

"I have to," he said simply.

She sang Antonia, sweetly and radiantly. Not, Jonathan thought guiltily, as brilliantly as Belinda or whatever the creature had been, but then, what human soprano could? Neil's anguish over the death of his Antonia was doubly poignant, for Jonathan knew the young man grieved not only as Hoffmann, but as himself, pouring out his soul for his lost love.

"That's three times I've sat through this," Benny whispered accusingly from somewhere behind him. "You owe me big time."

Jonathan sighed. "Are we starting this again?"

"Nah." Benny reconsidered. "I'm used to it now. Not enough to buy the album, but it doesn't set my teeth on edge any more."

"I don't think I'll ever hear the Doll Song quite the same, myself," Jonathan admitted.

"Yup, she just about had you."

Jonathan gave him an appraising look. "In this case, it's a good thing you're not an opera lover," he said, "though I find it hard to believe you weren't affected, at all."

Benny grinned. "Fooled you, too." he made a motion by his ears and appeared to pull out two ear plugs. "My best sleight of hand. I had on spares."

The roar of applause for Act IV shook the rafters, and Benny took a bow.