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BORDELAND ANTHOLOGY

EMMA BULL & WILL SHETTERLY

Danceland

Friday night started, for me and for all of us I suppose, in the street outside Danceland. I was sitting in the sidecar, waiting for Tick-Tick. She'd parked the bike outside Danceland and made her usual arrow-like way across the street to Snappin' Wizard's Surplus and Salvage ("More Bang for the Buck, More Spell for the Silver").

Snappin' Wizard's is the only other thing on that end of Ho Street that's still lit up late at night. And oh, is it lit. Pre-Change cartop revolving lights flash rude and red in the windows. Between them, will-o'-the-wisps bop back and forth in rhythm. Signs on the window glass, in paint and fairy dust, shout about solar cells and self-bored stones and logic boards and clock spells, and how they're cheap cheap cheap!

The Queen of bloody Faerie couldn't keep Tick-Tick out of there. She'd left with a mumble about being just a minute, and she'd be right back. Or maybe she didn't say it this time, and I only supplied it from the memory of all the other times she had. Whatever. I didn't expect the Ticker back inside half an hour.

I slid way down in the sidecar so I could prop my head against the back padding, and shook an herbal cig out of its box. They're big stuff with the elves, who don't much like tobacco. I think they like them because it makes them all feel like old vid stars, dragging moodily on a cigarette. I'm not poking fun. Why do you think *I* smoke them?

I rolled the coltsfoot-and-comfrey smoke over my tongue like wine and watched the crowd in front of Danceland. People were milling on the sidewalk, waiting for the band to start. Four elvin Bloods in poet's red clustered near the doors, looking sharp (and aware of it, I'll bet) against the building's black-patent paint job. A halfie woman with a lion's mane haircut dyed black and white was practicing some synched dance step. She was coached by a black human woman with silver bells in her elflocks. An elf kid had his seedybox balanced on one shoulder, and people were dancing to its music. Four members of the Pack pulled up on two cycles, their jackets trailing bright motley streamers. One of them asked the crowd at large if the music had started. One of the Bloods by the door shook her head, not really friendly but not like anyone expected war, and the Pack kids drove off again.

Danceland's double doors were arched over with row after row of white lights that flashed in sequence and seemed to chase each other forever, DANCELAND was written in script over the doors in pink-red neon—the genuine pre-Change article, but the gas was rattled around now with a spell. (I know this only from the Ticker's explanation. The business of How Things Work is her specialty, not mine.) When I squinted, the whole front of the building became a blaze of bright fog.

It's at the very end of Ho, but it's worth the trip. The Factory is older, the Dancing Ferret is trendier, and the Wheat Sheaf is more exclusive. But Danceland has the *old* magic, the kind you don't have to be an elf to make. The old magic is made with loud music and sweat and colored light. But the best thing about it is that stinging feeling at the back of your head that says *anything* could happen tonight.

Which is, come to think of it, the most pervasive magic in Bordertown. But keep in mind that magic doesn't always work the way you expect in the Borderlands.

"Uh... hi," somebody said behind me, breathy and excited-scared.

I leaned my head back a little more and looked up into big round brown eyes under a heavy thatch of brown bangs. Her skin was tan, too, or maybe just evenly grubby. She wore a gray denim jacket and jeans that weren't ruined yet, and a black cap with a pheasant feather tucked in its band. The cap looked new. The whole ensemble was the quintessential Worldly kid's idea of What They Wear In The Borderlands. You could start a mail-order company selling outfits like that and clean up: Halfie Frankie's, Faerie Fashions. I hate runaways. They make me hurt all over, just under the skin.

There's always been places that called to people. Even before the Change, there were cities that shone in the back of the mind like Faerie gold. You knew, *knew*, that if you could just run away to one of those places, you'd become someone else, someone wonderful, and wonderful things would happen to you. I heard a list of those magical cities once. I remember London, Liverpool (interesting name, but a disgusting concept), New York, and something with two words that started with an S. I've forgotten the rest.

"Are... you elvish?" she asked, smiling and biting her lip.

There's nothing ambiguous about the roundness of my ears, and yes, I'm pale, but it's because I hate going to sleep as much as I hate waking up. I remember being her age, though, and being about as long in town. I tilted up one lens of my riding goggles, showing her a dark-blue eye, and said kindly, "No, I'm Jewish."

"Oh," she said, crestfallen. I hoped she'd be gone by the time Tick-Tick came back; one sight of the Ticker and the kid would be offering to lick the Genuine Faerie Mud off her motorcycle boots.

"My name's Orient," I told her, as something of a peace offering, and stuck my hand out. She shook it.

"I'm Camilla." She signed, and wrinkled her nose. "It's a stupid name."

That gave my stomach a little twist. Camilla means "attendant at a sacrifice." There were too many things of value to sacrifice in Bordertown if you were young, scared, and not scared enough.

"That's okay. Everybody in Bordertown has a nickname." She looked hopeful. Oh, I hate runaways. "Yours is..." "I thought for a second. "... Caramel."

She was disappointed, though she tried to hide it. I knew what she'd been hoping for: something like Firebird, or Starwind. The sort of name no one could live with, or up to. So I gave her one of my lopsided grins that Sai says looks rakish even without my eyes to help. I said, "Burnt sugar. Sweet, but smoky, and it's been through the fire."

Okay, it was hokey, but it cheered her up. "I guess that's pretty good," she admitted.

"Where you from?"

"Bellinbroke."

"Pretty faraway?"

"Took me nine days to get here, and I got good rides the whole way."

It was too far; she'd never go back home, even if she wanted to. When she wanted to. I dragged hard on the cigarette to loosen the lump in my throat.

"Want some water?" Caramel asked me, and there was a coyness in her voice that made me raise both sides of my goggles this time. She held out a beer bottle, half full of beautiful, translucent crimson. Mad River water.

I took it from her. I wanted to peg the thing into the alley and hear it shatter. But that would be no help in the long run.

"Have you had any of this yet?" A nice, calm voice—I was impressed with myself.

"A little." She was defiant at first. Then a sheepish look crept across her face, and she shrugged. "It tastes kind of gross."

"This is elf stuff, Caramel. To them, it's just water. The sort of humans who drink river water are... not in style." Which was true enough, if you only counted the Wharf Rats. But there were humans and halfies who thought money was a license to be stupid in public, who wore crystal or silver cups on chains or silk cords around their necks. Maybe this kid hadn't seen any of those yet. "I'll make you a trade," I said, swinging the bottle a little.

She looked at it, and at me. "What kind of trade?"

I balanced the bottle between us on the sidecar's rim. Then I slid one of the silver bracelets, not the thinnest, off my left wrist and held it out. "I'll give you this for it. On the condition," I added, as she reached, "that you use it to pay your way into there," and I nodded at Danceland. "You can keep the change. Whoever gives it to you, tell 'em Orient sent you, and you want to talk to Goldy. Deal?"

Her eyes were practically rolling, from me to the bottle to Danceland's front doors.

"Straight," I said. "It's just a dance club, and Goldy's just a bouncer." Goldy would disagree, of course. "He's a good guy to talk to when you need to."

She bit her lip—no smile this time—and finally took the bracelet. "Why this Goldy? Why not you, if you're so concerned about me?"

I grinned, which was harder than it sounds. "Because I come and go. But I'll find you if I need you." Which was a joke of sorts, but of course she didn't get it.

She turned to go, and we both saw him at once. You might think he was wearing a full-head mask, a good one of the sort that outfits like the Horn Dance wear. And once you wrote off the head as a mask, you could come up with something to explain away the pelt on the rest of him, too, like a fur suit in spite of the weather. But Caramel was new in town, had never seen the Horn Dance or anything else, and hadn't developed that cynical turn for explanations. She not only stopped when she saw him, she stepped back a pace or two.

"Wolfboy!" I called, and his long nose swung our way. He grinned, which can put you off if you've just met him. He headed toward the sidecar, that long swinging walk earning a jealous scowl from one of the Bloods.

When you get used to it, he looks pretty good, actually. He's lean and rangy and muscle-y, and covered all over with short coarse red-brown fur. He shaved his face once, and we all hated it. I think he decided never to do it again when the Ticker said, "It makes you look so... young." That night he wore a black T-shirt with the sleeves ripped out, tight black jeans, and black hi-top sneakers. His ears end in pointed

tufts, the lower half of his face is lengthened, and his canine teeth are... well, about what you would expect. He has claws, thick and slate-colored, on his fingers. When he types, he sounds like a dog on the kitchen floor.

"Wolfboy," I said, "I'd like you to meet Caramel."

Give the kid credit; she held out her hand. Wolfboy took it and inclined his head. Pretty courtly for a guy with a dog nose.

"Pleased to meet you," Caramel breathed. She turned and looked at me sideways. "Guess I should go..."

I gave her a nod. "You don't want to miss the first song."

Wolfboy and I watched her go. I said, "Lord, lord. Perfectly nice Friday night, and I have to get pinned down in the street by some little thing with the dust of the World still behind her ears."

Wolfboy chuckled deep in his throat and patted my head.

"Oh, go chase cats." I shook out another cigarette and held it out. I lit it, too, since paper matches are a nuisance for him.

"You been out of town?" I asked after his first mouthful of smoke.

He grinned like a fiend from hell, and pulled a many-folded leather wallet out of his back jeans pocket. With a flourish, he let the folds fall open in a sort of waterfall. Neatly flattened inside and preserved with a bought spell were something like twenty four-leaf clovers.

"Oh my stars and garters," I breathed. "Well, if I need to borrow money I'll sure 'nuff come to you. You gonna sell 'em inside?" I asked him, pointing to Danceland.

He refolded the wallet with a practiced flip and nodded.

"Offer one to Goldy. He's going to need it." When Wolfboy raised his eyebrows, I said, "I just sent that runaway to him."

He giggled in a voice low enough to make a couple of Packies nervous and shook his head.

"I don't suppose you'd trade one of those little green beauties for the latest copy of *Stick Wizard*, would you?" I squinted speculatively at him.

He looked down at me with an expression that even on his face was easy to read: You've got to be kidding.

I pulled my copy out of the map pocket in the sidecar (after all, what else am I going to use the map pocket for? Not maps, anyway). The stick-figure characters on the cover were block-printed with ink and fairy dust, and moved when you looked at them. On this issue, the Wizard was flying off his beat-up cycle as it hit a trip-wire. At each end of the wire were, of course, his arch-nuisances. Tater and Bert, the cigar-smoking elf delinquents. I could almost see Wolfboy salivating. Tater and Bert are favorites of his. He thinks they should have their own book. I don't know about Wolf boy sometimes.

But he shook his head finally. I didn't really expect him to deal—by the end of the night someone might *give* him a copy, after all. So I smiled and put it away.

"Here's a fine convocation of riffraff," Tick-Tick said behind me.

"Boil me in lead," I cried, and turned. "She's back before morning!"

"Oh, shut up. Hi, Lobo." She smiled at Wolfboy. He smiled back and dropped his gaze. He loves being called Lobo.

The Ticker was loading a paper-wrapped parcel into the bike's top cargo box.

"Goodies?" I asked.

"Well, not that you'd think so. A little replacement stock, wire connectors and that sort of thing. And a toy or two."

"Or eight or ten," I said, but she didn't answer me.

Tick-Tick is pure elf, and looks it. Pointed ears, luminous pale skin, shining silver eyes. Slender and almost oppressively tall. She'd never fit in the sidecar, so it's a good thing she owns the bike. She usually dyes her hair dandelion-yellow and wears it short, with a single long lock at the very front and center of her hairline that hangs fine as milkweed fluff to her eyebrows. In spite of her height, she looks delicate as spun sugar. It surprises people to find that her favorite perfume is Eau de Bearing Grease and Hot Solder.

She was wearing her idea of power dressing tonight: a long gray leather coat and tight pants of the same, low red leather boots, a dark gray suit coat, white shirt, a red leather tie, and three garnet earrings in her right ear. I've tried to tell her that this is *not* what they wear in the boardrooms of the World's corporations, but she points out (and rightly) that I can't be sure, can I, and they might if they had the good taste to think of it, mightn't they?

"So," she said, "anyone here want to rock the moon down?"

"Me! Me!," said I, and leaped out of the sidecar. Wolf-boy, sober lad that he is, let out a yell that made the whole street shudder. I left my goggles in the sidecar, and checked my hair in the rear-view mirror. The Ticker had done my dye job the week before, and I was still nervous about it: the spikes of red around my face showed like lit matches against the natural black of the rest. It's been years since I left the World, but it has its fangs in me yet. There's a limit to how conspicuous I can be and still feel safe.

"Yes, yes, you're just breathtaking." Tick-Tick sighed. "Come along."

The crowd outside had turned into crowd inside, we found. Danceland's insides are all black cinder block walls, from which they wash the fairy dust graffiti every night. "After all," the club's owner, Dancer, says, "this place is supposed to be *different*, for Zeus' sake."

The stage lights were still out, but the band's equipment was set up, and the spell boxes that ran the amps were glowing gently. The Ticker headed for the pool tables to fleece a few unsuspecting Bloods, and Wolfboy and I pushed through to the bar.

Valda was already clunking bottles of beer down on the counter three at a time. "Val, precious Val," I bellowed across three feet of noisy space, "did the coffee come in yet?"

She looked at me as if about to say no, then smiled and said, "You're a lucky boy." I blew her a kiss, and she headed for the other end of the bar to pour me a cup. Not, mind you, that I don't like beer. I adore beer. But I can get that anywhere.

She set the cup in front of me and a bottle of beer in front of Wolfboy. I pried a silver stud out of my wristband and told Valda, "That's for both," before Wolfboy could pay.

He raised his bushy eyebrows at me, and I shrugged. "So pay me back when you've made your killing in good luck," I said, meaning the clovers, of course. He winked and hoisted his bottle.

I let the steam and the coffee smell wash over my face for a second before I actually sipped any. Coffee is shortage-prone in the Borderlands, and expensive since most of what passes through is doing just that: passing through to Faerie. But, oh, it's worth the price.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder and said in my ear, "Watch that stuff, young man."

I turned and found Goldy shaking his head at me. Goldy is black and not tall, even for a human. But he's built like a pyramid standing on its head. His hair is plush-short and metallic gold—thus the nickname, of course. He was in uniform, which is a green long-sleeved Danceland t-shirt. It's not that conspicuous, since Dancer sells the things, and there are always a few in the club on any night.

"Goldy. What it is. Watch what stuff?"

He narrowed his eyes at my coffee cup. "That's a dangerous intoxicant. You may get high as the Tooth and tear the place up before the night is out."

I rolled my eyes. "Call me Mr. Coffee Nerves."

"Or perhaps I might toss you out now and save myself a bit of trouble. It'd be no more than you deserve."

"Me? Oh, you got my present, then."

"If you mean your runaway, yes, you snot-nosed little mutant, I did. What am I supposed to do with her?"

"Talk her out of doing all the stupid things we did at her age."

"Except for continuing my acquaintance with you, I've never done anything stupid. I assume you found her?"

I could hear the capital *F* he meant to put on "found." "'Course not. Though I suppose you could say I found her nickname," I mused. I wondered what she would have been called if she hadn't met me.

The colored lights in the ceiling spat and swirled. "Back to the fray." Goldy sighed and disappeared into the crowd. Then the stage lights came up, and Dancer, the owner, walked across the stage. I saw the way she did it, sort of lazy, as if there was no audience at all, and I shot a look at Wolfboy. When Dancer introduces the band, it's something special. But when Dancer walks to the mike like that... Wolfboy gave me the thumbs-up, and we started moving toward the stage.

So did everyone else, of course, but we made it to the middle of the dance floor, at least. Somewhere ahead of us I thought I caught a glimpse of a black cap with a pheasant feather that vibrated with its wearer's excitement.

Dancer stood at the mike for a second, during which you could hear every breath that was drawn in Danceland. Twice she began to move her hands, as if to preface words that didn't come. Then she threw back her head and laughed, and said, "I give up. Ladies and gentlemen, Wild Hunt!"

The roar of the audience shook those black walls, and I helped. I doubt there was anyone in Danceland who didn't know the name. Bordertown had been full of the sound of Wild Hunt all summer. The recordings came out once a week, a song at a time, on mag tape, or in an impression ball, or digitally

coded. But there were no pictures of the band. No one had ever seen them in concert, and nobody seemed to know someone who worked in the studio where they'd recorded—you know the sort of thing. So we'd play the recordings, the tearing, heart-shaking music pouring over us, and we'd pretend that we could tell from the sound how they looked.

We were wrong. All of us. They took us by surprise, and she most of all, because all the poets and painters and visionaries in Bordertown could never have imagined her.

It's not that she was the archetypal elf. Strider, the third of the Danceland bouncers, is the archetypal elf, a real flipping Prince of Faerie sort. No, this was the Snow Queen from out of that old tale, the beautiful White Lady of any romantic ghost story.

She was tall, of course, and pale, paler than Strider or the Ticker or any other elf I'd ever seen. Her eyes were the color of silver in the sun. Her hair was white as new snow, or expensive paper, or the fiery-white highlights on silver. Again the word silver—white as she was, she was a rich-looking white, and demanded rich words to describe.

Her hair was clipped close to her head on the left side, lengthening as it went over her head until it looked like a white wave cresting over her right ear. Her left eye was caught up in a bar of light blue paint that ran from her nose to her hairline, where it became a streak of pale blue dye across the short white hair. The dye ended in a curling tail above her left ear. It's difficult for a human to judge elvin features—by human standards, there's no such thing as a homely elf, I think—but I would swear that hers was the most beautiful face that Bordertown had ever seen.

She wore white leather leggings and a white sleeveless thing that shimmered like the silk that comes from the Elflands. She played a Fender Witchfire bass the blue of midnight. Fairy dust swirled in the paint job in galaxies and nebulae, suns that formed and flashed and died as you watched. Light strobed off the rings on her fingers as she chorded and slammed down on all four strings, then scraped her pick down the E. It was the opening riff of "Shake the Wall Down," and suddenly everybody was dancing.

Wolfboy got snagged by an elf-girl with pale green hair, a wicked grin, and a red jewel on her cheek like a birthmark or a tear. He picked her up by her waist, whirled her around, and they were both gone into the crowd.

The hyperharpist played a Fairlight, one of the Sorcerer series judging from the stuff he got out of it. Waveforms so clean you could have eaten off them. The lead guitarist had a topknot of burgundy hair, an eight-stringed ax, and six fingers on each hand to play it with. The drummer was insane, but drummers often are. They just aren't all as precise and tasteful in their madness as this elvin woman was. I won't even try to describe what the halfie on elfpipes did with that instrument, but it wasn't anything that an Elflands elf would have thought of, or approved of. The total effect was wonderful and impossible and, all right, magical.

And they sang, of course. All of them, in close, twisting harmony; or just her, the White Lady, with a pure clear voice that made every word a projectile into the head and heart. They segued straight into "Heart's Desire," a modified version that was somehow as creepy as it was driving.

Suddenly Sai appeared before me. She was grinning and shaking her head, and I realized that I'd been dancing by myself, gaping at the band ever since the music started.

"What are you doing, letting your tongue dry?" she yelled.

I gave her my best I'm-an-idiot shrug.

Sai is another Danceland bouncer, the middle member of the Terrible Trio. She's a halfie, tall, plump, with a round pink face and rainy gray eyes. She has Oriental hair, uncompromisingly straight, heavy, and black. She wears it shoulder-length to show it off. Not that she liked her father, mind, or even knew him. She just hopes that someday some elvin bigot will smart off about it, and she can loosen his teeth. When an elf makes trouble in Danceland, Goldy and Strider let Sai throw him out, whenever possible. It makes her so happy.

"When did Dancer score this coup?" I shouted at her, and pointed at the band.

"Two days ago. She was half crazy with it, I tell ya. Didn't know whether to bless her luck, or cuss it for not leaving time to advertise."

"Poor baby."

She shrugged and grinned at the same time. "Word gets around." And it was true that the place was full. Advertising would have only meant the Terrible Trio would have to turn away tourists.

Strider slid gracefully through the crowd and put an arm lock around Sai's neck. She rolled her eyes and pinched his thigh.

"Owoo! Halfie scum," he said affectionately, loosening his grip and giving her a quick kiss behind the ear.

"Pointy-eared creep," she replied in kind, and put her hand in one of his back pockets.

Strider, as I said, is a veritable Lord of Elflands. He has the fine mane of silver hair to the middle of his back, the regal carriage, the elegant long-fingered gestures that melt the hearts of human girls.

Someday I'm going to ask how such an unlikely pair as Sai and Strider became sweethearts. Not anytime soon, mind you—but someday.

"Dance with this jerk," Strider told her, nodding at me. "He looks brain dead standing there by himself."

"I'm on duty," Sai protested.

Strider shrugged. "Nothing's goin' down. Goldy and I can handle it for half a song, girl."

"You can't handle your—"

He stopped her by smacking a kiss on her lips. "You've got the dirtiest mouth on Ho Street."

I didn't hear her response, but I think he blushed. Then he smiled lazily and drifted off through the dancers.

Sai dances well. You wouldn't think, looking at her, that she'd have that elvin grace, but she does. She says it comes from her boxing days. I put some effort into trying to match her, and ended the song pleasantly winded.

Wild Hunt swept on into "Running on the Border." It's not really a dance number, but it has too much intensity, too much a sense of headlong motion, to be a ballad. It's a showpiece for the guitarist and lead vocalist. They're out in front for the whole song, weaving in and out of each other's work with only breathing space between verses.

People stayed on their feet and on the dance floor, swaying in place and singing along, doing double handclaps just like on the tape.

Then someone pushed past me, so hard that I would have fallen if Sai hadn't caught me. I got a ragged view of him as he went by, and a better one from the back once he was past: an elf, and from the clothes not a Bordertownie. He wore a full-skirted coat that fit close to his waist and stopped at mid-thigh, in a brocade of some magical weave that changed pattern restlessly. His hair was uncolored, and worn in a moon-white braid that reached his waist.

"My, my," Sai said happily. "Weeds of Elfland he doth wear."

I hung on to her upper arm. "Calm down, he hasn't done anything."

"Couldn't I just warn him a little?"

"No."

I realized a moment later that Sai might get her chance yet. The elf in brocade pushed his way to the edge of the stage and shouted something at the band. It might have been a name; the Elflands accent throws me off until I get used to it.

Wild Hunt tried to keep going, but you could tell they were all rattled. When he shouted again and pounded a fist on the stage, the White Lady faltered and stopped, and the rest of the band came to a ragged halt behind her.

She turned off her mike, but I could still hear her in the silence that followed the music's death. "Leave me alone," she said. She had the Elflands accent, too, but not as thick.

The elf down front balled his fists and said something furiously in Elvish.

"No! I told you no. I am not—I *will* not go." She was hanging on to the neck of the bass as if she was afraid someone would try to take it away.

Sai had begun moving forward, which was tough. The crowd had pressed itself away from the stage and back toward us, and they were packed as tight as a new brick wall. I followed along behind her as best I could.

More Elvish from the guy in brocade; I recognized the words for "clan" and, I think, "Border."

The White Lady was turning away from him, as if to walk offstage, but she stopped when she heard his little speech. "Are you, now?" she said with scorn that would crack metal. "Well, not me. Maybe all *those* pretty sheep—"and she pointed in the general direction of the Elflands—"—but not me." And this time she did walk away, taking off her bass as she went.

The elf grabbed the edge of the stage, to vault onto it. Then Strider was there, a defending knight in a ragged Danceland t-shirt, as if he'd appeared out of the air. He set those long white hands of his on the guy's shoulders, spun him around, and gripped his lapels.

Suddenly Strider let go and took a step backward. For a moment I felt a dropping feeling in my guts, wondering if he was hurt, if the Elflander had done something to him. But they each took a step sideways, and I could see wariness and surprise in Strider's face, but no pain.

The Elflander had a long, angular face, with thin lips, a high-bridged nose, and slender eyebrows that winged up at the ends. He was looking at Strider as if the latter were something found growing on the floor of a public rest-room.

Strider spoke an elvish name, rather cautiously. I won't try to transcribe it.

The Elflander raised his chin a notch and let his upper lip curl just a little. "You are not permitted to be free with my name," he said.

"You're over the Border now. That name doesn't mean piss-all here." Strider was usually politer than that, especially in a situation like this, where he's supposed to be just doing his job. I don't know whether the Elflander had meant to insult Strider or if the man was naturally arrogant—or naturally foolish. But Strider *always* knows exactly what he's said.

After a quick up-and-down look at Strider's habitual attire—the green Danceland shirt that looked as if someone had driven over it several times (which, in fact, Strider had), the blue jeans that seemed to be held together with patches and optimism—the Elflander said, "Little more than a savage. It is pitiful to know you are an elf."

"Yeah, well, you set a fine example for the race, rich boy. Go make trouble in somebody else's place." Strider took a step toward him, to make his point a little plainer.

The elf drew something from under the skirt of his coat. At first I thought it was one of the retractable metal antennas that gang members duel with sometimes. But he snapped it to its full length and slashed the tip across Strider's face with one quick motion, and it didn't leave a welt. It left a gash.

In front of me I heard Sai cry out, and I wondered where Goldy was. Trapped in the crowd, most likely. People were scrambling away in that mad, mindless fashion that tells you something has happened and no one knows what. Strider stumbled back against the stage, blood on the lower half of his face like a bandit's kerchief, and the Elflander pressed the attack grimly. A lunge caught Strider in the upper arm. Another pass sliced his t-shirt through the middle of the Danceland logo. It was too precise to be coincidence. I caught a glimpse of the bloody stripe across the skin beneath.

I was sticking my elbows into people, trying to get through to help. What I intended to do when I got there, I don't know. My motions seemed horribly slow, and the Elflander horribly fast. I had an awful vision of reaching Strider only to find him in bits on the floor.

He was, in fact, on his knees, one arm clutched over his middle, his other hand in a fist. Sai had broken through and was nearly in reach of that damn Faerie blade when Strider gasped, "No."

Sai stopped instantly, to my surprise, and looked to Strider for an explanation. The Elflander drew back a pace and lowered the tip of his blade just a little. Behind him Goldy stepped out of the crowd like a black phantom, ready to nail the stranger if he didn't like Strider's reason for not doing so. He had snatched a baseball bat from under some counter, and it hung loose at his side.

Strider shook the hair out of his face and turned cold, narrowed eyes on the Elflander. "This is an honor fight. Nobody gets this son of a bitch but me."

Sai stiffened and looked as if she would have objected, but Strider ignored her.

"And I *will*," he spat out.

The Elflander turned his back (a fine gesture of contempt, but *I* wouldn't have turned my back on Sai just then, whatever Strider's stated preference was). He saw Goldy for the first time, and was obviously startled. But Goldy smiled evilly and bowed him through the crowd, which parted grudgingly. Every face I saw among them was turned to the Elflander, hard with hate. Strider is not always easy to like, but he's one of *ours*.

Just before the door, the Elflander turned. He had returned his cutter into his gaudy jacket, and he drew

himself up with, I'll admit, a certain elegance. Addressing Strider, the stage, or us all, he said, "We shall continue this matter sometime soon."

"Damn straight," Strider grunted.

The two locked eyes. Then the Elflander glanced away and smiled thinly. He bowed as though we had all come to pay court to him, swirled, and was gone.

Sai and I helped Strider to his feet. I remembered the band only then, but they had left the stage. I was glad of it.

Wolfboy was holding the door to the back hall open for us. He looked impassive, even for him. We got Strider into the office and made him sit on the couch, but he refused to lie down. Sai got the first aid kit.

Strider pulled the shirt off over his head, with a fair quantity of teeth-gritting. The Elflander had gotten in a few licks that I hadn't seen. It always looks bad when an elf is wounded; it's the combination of gore on that pale skin and elvin blood's tendency to clot slower than human. And of course, it looks worse when the elf is a friend.

I filled a bowl with water at the office sink and brought it, with a couple of towels, to Sai. She started with Strider's face. The water in the bowl changed color quickly. There was a lot of silence, broken only by Strider's occasional swearing. I wanted to say something cheerful. Plenty of things came to mind, all of them abysmally stupid. I kept quiet.

Goldy stuck his head in. "Is it as bad as it looks?" he asked.

Sai frowned, but Strider shook his head. "I'll live. Mostly slashes, and none of them deep. The bastard knew what he was doing." He grinned suddenly, which was almost frightening. "When he drew on me, he'd lost it for a second. But when he started cutting..."

"What was that objectionable little tool of his? Any idea?"

"It's a goddamn dueling toy in the Elflands," Strider replied.

I think we were all equally startled. After Strider's near-silence on the subject of his life in Faerie, a sentence like that one sounded like the whole Alexandrian library.

Sai rummaged in the first aid kit, found a tube of Gold-N-Rod Creme, and began to streak it across the slashes on Strider's skin. Though she was careful, he said some remarkably inventive things, and when she did his face she had to hold him by the hair to keep his head still. I watched the stuff draw the edges of the skin together, appreciating that miracle more than I ever had. In the Elflands, of course, it works instantly and prevents scars from forming at all. That probably explained the Elflander's perfect face, given his habits. But maybe he was just very good with his fencing gadget. Lucky him.

Goldy looked helplessly at Wolf boy and me. We shrugged, about in unison. "Strider, my lad," he said finally, "are you quite sure you don't want me to find him, cut off his pretty braid, and see that he eats it?"

"The hell you will!" Sai said, and her voice made us all jump, even Strider. "If he doesn't want to do it himself, I'm gonna, you hear me? Oh, shit." She turned away and banged her fist against her thigh.

Strider squeezed her shoulder. "Hey, all of you, why don't you take a walk? I don't exactly feel like talking right now. Okay?"

Sai looked up at him.

"Yeah," he said gently, "you too."

She nodded and stood. Wolfboy and I were already on our way out. Sai followed, closed the door behind her, and we all stood in the hall feeling useless.

At last Goldy said, "Ah, well. Friday night, a band that will draw half of Bordertown when the word gets out, and only two of us on the floor. Nothing we can't manage, yes?" He looked at Sai.

Sai pursed her lips, then shook her head slowly. She held up one finger.

"Oh dear," said Goldy.

"Please, Goldy? I gotta get out of here. I'd just take this out on some poor jerk out front."

Goldy sighed. "Very well. Don't do anything foolish, will you?"

Sai grinned wearily at him, and went down the hall toward the back door.

As we went the other way, back to the main room, Wolfboy tapped his chest, and Goldy said, "You'll fill in?" Wolfboy nodded. Goldy shook his head. "If there's any more trouble, wait for me, hmm? You may look like Captain Fangs'n'Fur, but you're a pussycat in real life." Wolfboy growled at him, and we all felt a little bit better.

Dancer had obviously held things together in the aftermath. The crowd had stayed, the band was onstage powering up and tuning, though the White Lady wasn't back on yet. I wondered how *I* would feel, knowing that someone who'd sliced up Strider with no great provocation was very, very angry with me. I began to wonder if she'd like someone to walk her home...

Tick-Tick met us by the door. "I'll buy," she offered.

"Thank you, but no." Goldy said. "I'm going to need every wit I have left. And as of this moment, all my breaks are canceled." He gave us a little salute and went back to work. Wolfboy glanced at Goldy's back as if thinking how rarely the Ticker offered to buy, then shook his head sadly and left us to get a shirt from Val so everyone would know he was on duty. I think Wolfboy likes uniforms more than the rest of us.

"Well, *I'll* let you buy me something," I said. Maybe I should've offered to watch the place, too, but I look bad in green.

"Good. I refuse to get drunk alone, just now."

We didn't actually get drunk. Valda set dark bottles down for both of us and let us drink some before she asked, "Is he okay?"

I thought about it. "That depends on your definition of 'okay.' Emotionally, no comment. Physically, he'll be fine in a while, though he'll have a peachy dueling scar."

"Dueling," Val spat. "That wasn't goddamn dueling." she wiped a glass with a furious motion. "He cut up Strider the way you'd cut the head off a weed. And Strider without even a pocket knife on him..."

That was when my body and mind caught up with each other. I found myself tight all over and inclined to shake.

"Drink up," the Ticker said solemnly. "We're all alive, and in a year this'll be nothing but an anecdote."

"Only if something worse happens in the meantime," Valda muttered.

The White Lady came back onstage then, and the band started up. Even Wild Hunt couldn't get me to dance any more that night. But I let the music erode the tension in me, and clear my head a little. Watching that white elvin woman helped me too; the very sight of her was like a cold compress to the forehead.

I was halfway through my second bottle before I said, "Ticker?"

"Mm-hm?"

"Why are the Trio the way they are?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Which way?"

I struggled with the answer—I hadn't had quite enough beer to loosen my tongue. "Goldy and Sai have suddenly gone a little bloodthirsty. And Strider, for that matter. If someone cut you up like that, how would you react?"

"I'd lie down and moan for a week."

"Well, of course. But would you..."

"Swear vengeance, and insist that I be allowed first crack at the beggar? I don't *think* so."

"Would you expect me to do it for you?"

"Heavens, no!"

"Good. Though I don't know what I *would* do. And yet, we're as close as Goldy and Strider are."

"Closer." She finished her beer. "Where is all this going?"

I shrugged. "I'm not sure. But I don't like the Terrible Trio's reaction any more than I like what they're reacting to."

Tick-Tick thought about that for a while. "I think it's just steam. They've been playing their parts for so long—you know, Borderland's baddest—and this reminds them that they're mortal." She looked at the empty bottle. "My, two beers do make me profound."

"Chatty, anyway." I beamed at her. She slugged me.

After a minute, I asked her, "You think he knew him?"

She blinked. "Strider and the pretty boy?"

I nodded.

"You think he didn't?"

I hated not knowing what had really gone on out there on the dance floor. I hated worse knowing that I probably never would. If Strider didn't want to talk about it, he wouldn't. We all have secrets in Bordertown; I suppose everyone has secrets in the World and in Faerie, but their secrets are smaller—and maybe more desperate. At least we can think of ourselves as—well, what's that line from the song by Locas Tambien? "We're tragic, romantic figures / We're so much cooler than you!"

From then until closing, we did nothing more demanding than listen to the music and spend the Ticker's money.

Wild Hunt came back for an encore, and then had to come back for another one even after Dancer turned the lights on. They finally got people settled down and ready to go home by resorting to a ballad, "Jenny on the Hill." The White Lady put down her bass and sang it, in a style that was brutally simple and wonderfully effective. It took the melodrama out of the ending and made it seem that lost love and premature death were simply the way of the tragic world. I had to pretend to sneeze when the song was over, so I'd have an excuse to blow my nose.

Tick-Tick went to help herd people out the door.

"Orient!" Valda called.

I turned and found her holding up a push broom. "So you want to stay after closing like the employees?"

"Oh, lord," I sighed, and took the broom. Wolfboy joined me in stacking chairs—all except the one Goldy dropped into and refused to leave.

He looked more drained than I'd ever seen him, and a little tense around the mouth.

"That bad?" I asked him.

"I doubted I'd live to see this moment. I don't suppose you'd be so kind as to fetch me a beer?"

"The dying bouncer's last request," I said, and handed Wolfboy the broom. He snarled at me.

When I came back with the sweating bottle, Goldy said, "Seen your little runaway lately?"

I'd forgotten Caramel, frankly. "No."

Goldy shook his head. "We may have lost her, then. I'm afraid that the events of the evening scared her away."

"Can't blame her for that." I remembered my last sight of her jaunty, foolish pheasant feather. I'd felt a sneaking smug pleasure, one I hadn't admitted to myself then, that thanks to me she'd gotten into what might prove to be the concert of the year. I felt dreary suddenly, and very, very old.

Wolfboy looked up then, and Goldy and I followed his gaze. The White Lady was crossing the dance floor toward us. She was even more of an apparition in the dusty setting of Danceland with the houselights on. Once there were angels, and they must have looked like that.

She smiled, a lovely curving of her carved alabaster lips. "May I sit?" Her right hand moved in a fluid arc toward the stacked chairs, and her rings all flickered.

Wolfboy grabbed a chair and set it out for her with a little bow. "Thank you," she said with a grave smile. I wondered if she'd like one to rest her feet on. Hell, why use a chair? I'd get down on all fours and she could rest 'em on my back.

"You—all of you—were wonderful," I said, and felt like an idiot.

She laughed. She had the kind of laugh that made you want to say a lot of amusing things. "That's very sweet of you."

"And very true," Goldy said solemnly.

She smiled and tucked her chin. It was a charming gesture. "We don't often play in concert, and it's difficult for me—I feel very shy in front of an audience. But everyone here was so excited, so kind to us..." She fluttered her white hands. She had three rings on her right hand, all of elf-silver and sapphires, with only her middle finger and thumb bare of them. She wore none on her left hand; they're hard on the guitar neck. A sapphire swung from each of her earlobes.

"There was a little too much excitement tonight, I'm afraid," Goldy said, "for which I am heartily sorry."

The smile fell off her face, chased away by something that might have been fright. She looked down. "I'm sorry, too," she said softly. "The one who made the trouble... he was my fault, I think."

"Your fault?" I asked. It was startled out of me, I suppose.

"He... we were lovers, for a short time. He is not willing to leave it at that."

So that was half of the night's mystery solved. I felt a little sorry for the Elflander, even as I felt alarmed for her. It wouldn't be easy to accept the loss of the White Lady with anything like grace.

We all fell silent, not wanting to pry, but not sure how to change the subject. In Bordertown, even more than in the World, you tread very lightly around personal matters—your own or someone else's.

The pressure was relieved when Dancer came up to us, Tick-Tick dawdling along behind. "Good show," Dancer said to the White Lady. "Damn good show." Then I realized that she was carrying the bag that held the night's receipts. Business with the band leader, of course. We all scattered to various jobs.

I managed to be the one by the door, though, when the White Lady was ready to leave.

"Will you be all right?" I asked her.

"What? Oh, yes, of course. You mustn't worry about me." She offered me a lovely smile, a little tinged with sadness. I don't care if she *was* half a head taller than me. I felt protective.

"If he's out there waiting for Strider, you could be in trouble."

She shook her head. "He won't hurt me. But I'll watch for him, and be careful." She touched my hand lightly, and added, "You are very kind."

I was struck quite dumb, of course, in both the original and the more corrupt sense of the word.

"Perhaps I will see you again?"

"I'd like that," I said finally, getting my tongue loose from the roof of my mouth. "People around here usually know where I am."

She looked amused. "But who would I ask them for?"

Oh. Right. "My name's Orient."

"Orient. And mine is Linden." She touched me again, a fingertip to my hand, and slipped out into the street and the dark.

I leaned against the door for a moment to catch my breath. Wolfboy was watching me from the bar; he grinned when I met his eyes.

I walked over to him. "I was only asking if she'd be all right," I muttered. He treated me to one of his

hair-raising giggles.

Valda called down the counter to us. "Guys? One more favor? Can you take the bottles back to the alley?"

Wolfboy spread his hands out, as if to imply that we would do anything for her. I wasn't feeling quite *that* generous, but I wasn't above hauling a box or two.

Val had already loaded the empties into the crates. The brewer would pick them up in the morning from the alley. Wolfboy and I shouldered a few each and headed for the back.

The way led past the office door, and I wondered if I should knock, see if Strider was all right. From the way Wolfboy slowed down, I suspected he was wondering the same thing.

"Oh, hell," I said, "why not? If he objects, he'll just break my face, right?" I knocked. There was no answer. I tried again, a little louder, and when nothing happened, I opened the door a little. Then I stuck my head in.

The room was just as we'd left it, but Strider wasn't in it. I pulled my head back out and shut the door. "He must be all right," I said. "He's gone."

Wolfboy thought about that for a second, then shrugged. We went on, through the door at the end of the hall that opened into Danceland's private garage, and through that to the alley door.

All right, it's not really an alley, it's a very small cul-de-sac, with the building's back door located near the closed end. So it's black as the inside of an intestine out there on any night except when the moon is bright. Tonight, unfortunately, the moon was bright.

He was lying in a grotesque parody of ease, hands folded over his stomach, legs straight. He looked like a tomb statue in white marble. It was a long and horrible moment before I realized it was not Strider. Then I saw the braid and recognized it, and knew whose corpse it was in Danceland's alley.

I've been staring at that last sentence for fifteen minutes. I've tried to go on and describe the body, and failing that, to simply recount, in order, who did what. After all, this is why I'm writing, this is the event I'm trying to make some tentative sense out of. But even though I can see, in my mind, the Elflander's body—all too well, in fact, which may have as much to do with why I haven't slept yet as this narrative does—I can't write it down. It makes me shake.

Dancer sent Val to alert the coppers, and Tick-Tick to Strider's and Sai's place to warn them. The Ticker came back and reported that they weren't there. Just as we were trying to decide if we were relieved by that, Strider came in the front doors. I wish now that one of us had thought to ask what he'd come back for, but I don't suppose the answer would have been of any use. It's just a loose end, like where he'd gone in the first place, like where Sai had gone when she'd left the club, like whether anyone could swear that Goldy and Wolfboy had been inside Danceland *all* night, like whether Linden was bothered enough by her old boyfriend that she'd want him dead. Even the Ticker's alibi is low-grade. Hell, maybe they all did it. The only person whose innocence I'm certain of is me. And if this goes on, I'll be asking people to corroborate my memories.

So the cops arrived and did all the investigative things we'd done and a great many more besides, and finally took Strider away with them to the lock-up. It was the obvious thing to do, but it didn't make it any easier to watch.

The sun's been up for three hours. I'd forgotten this particular time of day existed. I went back to

Danceland after writing the last paragraph. I wanted a cig, and I wanted my damn copy of *Stick Wizard*, because I knew I wasn't going to sleep. Both things were still in the sidecar. The Ticker had parked the bike in Danceland's garage for safekeeping and gone home with Sai, to keep her from being alone and from doing something stupid.

I went to see if someone was around to let me in, or if I could get in by myself. I had to go through the cul-de-sac, of course. I didn't get in the garage, didn't even try, because I found something on the ground near the street end of the cul-de-sac, and it distracted me.

So I don't have my cigs. I have a pheasant feather with a distinctive nick out of one edge, dirty now from lying in the mud. I've been picking it up and twirling it or sliding it through my fingers, as if it's an impression ball, ready to pour out its stored song at a touch. I'll sleep now. I have to, whatever I might dream. But I want to know what it means. Caramel, where are you now?

Doesn't seem right to scribble in Orient's diary. I look at my writing on his pages, and it's like I came to Orient's grave to make a speech (pretty silly idea, huh?) and found myself puking on the funeral flowers. Too late now. Should've tried this in pencil maybe, and erased it if I didn't like it. Sorry, Orient.

I want to say that this is Lone Wolf's writing that you're reading now, but Orient calls me Wolfboy, like most people. Could be worse. Guess I'm grateful I don't have to say it's Dogbreath writing this.

It's not easy. I look at all those pages Orient wrote, and I'm jealous, and I'm sad. He began with last night, but I'll begin earlier. Orient's my friend, or maybe, was my friend. That's why I'm doing this, continuing what he started. Even if my written words aren't much better than my spoken ones. Orient and I are a bit alike, you see, so it's more than just finishing something a friend began.

That looks stupid: Orient and I are a bit alike. But it's true. Maybe he's not as quiet as I am, but he watches more than he talks. He likes to read, 'cause he thinks there's more to living than most people do. He—

I hate writing this. God, I hope he's all right.

He and I, we've both been changed by the Change. I don't know who had it worse. Orient's fey. That means "touched by Faerie." He grew up in the World, and people always thought he was strange 'cause he could find things. Things he'd never seen. All he needed to know was that something existed, and—

Shit. I'm writing about him in the past tense. I won't do that anymore, until we know something. And if he's dead, I'm sorry. This stupid journal will be my tribute to him. Maybe I'll burn it, or throw it in the Big Bloody, or see if I can get it published. Something. If he's alive, he'll get to read this. If he gets to read this, I want him to know that he's a pissbrain and the only reason I wrote this was to mess up his stupid diary. The Human Compass writes about me as Wolfboy. What a pissbrain.

I hope he's okay.

All Orient needs to know is that something exists, and he can find it. He told me about driving through some strange city with his Mom when he was eight. She wanted Greek olives for some reason. Maybe she was taking salad to a family get-together, or something. Orient pointed off in the distance, saying, "There." She laughed at first, but he got mad. I can imagine it: "There, Mom! There!" And she got mad at his insistence. And she followed his directions to prove that he was wrong, 'cause he had never been in this city, he could not know where to find Greek olives, he did not even know what Greek olives were since she had never made this salad before. She would prove her point to him, then she would spank him, and he would never mention this nonsense again.

Orient led her to a Greek grocery that had the most beautiful olives you could imagine. Big, purple. All right, I'm making that part up. Maybe they were tiny, dried, bitter olives. The point is, they were there.

And the point is, she stared at Orient like he was what he wasn't.

And the point is, that's when he quit thinking of himself as a person and started thinking of himself as a freak.

And he never mentioned that nonsense again.

'Course, that didn't do any good. He couldn't stop finding stuff. People couldn't stop noticing. People don't like what they don't understand. People don't know that the trick is to try to understand what they don't like. Orient was a freak, and in spite of being a handsome, bright kid, he was fey. Everyone whispered it. Some people shouted it. Some people laughed at him. Some people beat him. After a while, he got tired of pretending he didn't hear and he didn't hurt. He did what almost all fey kids do. He ran away to beautiful Bordertown. Just like the kid last night, I imagine, and if it's different, it doesn't matter.

Started off completely differently for me. I wasn't bright and I wasn't unusual and I wasn't fey. I was a little geek with zits who wanted all the pretty girls, and none of the pretty girls wanted me. Not because I was fey. Because I was nothing special. What I would have given then to be fey...

So I did what all kids do who want to be special. I ran away. Just like the kid last night, maybe. And I ran with a couple of gangs in B-town, and I found that one way to be special was to develop a rep for a smart mouth. I was extremely high one night in the Dancing Ferret and some elf woman was talking too loudly about short-lived humans and their habits. So I said, "Yap, yap, yap. What a—" Well, you can guess what I called her by what she turned me into.

She stared at me at first. She obviously expected something more. Even elves forget sometimes about the way magic ebbs and flows in the Borderlands. Then she laughed, and everyone else laughed, even the Packies I had come with. I turned and ran. Loped, maybe. I could see my hands and arms, and I felt my body hurting and changing. I got my lifelong wish then. Even in Bordertown, I was no longer like anyone else.

There's a million stories in the big city, and... Nah.

The thing is, Orient and I went through the same things, even if we did them in reverse order, for different reasons. The same past. We both knew too much about being outsiders. Maybe that's part of the reason he became friends with me. Doesn't explain the rest of our friends, or maybe it does. Orient said I liked playing dress-up better than most of our crowd, and that's true so far as it goes. I like feeling a little less like something waiting for a silver bullet and feeling more like part of a community. But I could join any of the thousands of little gangs that form the greater gangs of the Pack, the Rats, the Bloods. Or even one of the independent gangs: Dragonfire, the Horn Dance, Commander X's Kids... I don't want it. Orient forgets that he was the one who once suggested we pick a name for ourselves, and I was the one who vetoed it with a chopping motion.

I'm not writing about it. I ought to. Somebody reading this is going to wonder what the hell happened, so I'll be nice.

The early part of Friday night went pretty much like Orient told it. He was a little more taken with the White Lady, Linden, than I was. I thought she was too fond of playing tricks with her voice, and I've seen elf and human and halfie women who did more for me. I thought the real talent in the Wild Hunt was the drummer and the hyper-harpist and the halfie on elfpipe. Big deal. The band's good and deserves its

fame.

I heard a little more of the argument between the Elf-lander and the White Lady than Orient did. I hear a lot better than I did before I was changed. And I know a little more Elvish than Orient, so the argument was clearer to me. The Elflander wanted Linden to come back with him, he wanted her to come back now, it was important, and her life in Bordertown wasn't. I'll bet that really endeared him to her.

I can't add anything else up until the end. Orient went into the alley first, moving awkwardly with three crates of empties. I knew something was wrong first. I smelled blood. I'm not as good as my rep; I didn't know what kind of blood it was. I smelled a lot of things, most of them alley things, and some of them things that the Elflander did as he died. I attributed those to the alley, too, at first.

It was the stupid Faeriecloth coat that tipped me off. It caught the light from the back door. I wondered why the stranger ditched it, then I grinned, thinking someone had swiped it from him to teach him a lesson about Soho. I was still grinning when I saw that he was still in his coat. I was still grinning when I saw what had been done with him while he was in his coat. I made a grunting sound and set down my load of crates.

Orient turned. Then he saw what I was looking at, and we both stared for a little longer, then he went to the side and threw up. I don't think he left that part out because he was ashamed. I think it wasn't important to him.

The Elflander's coat was in ribbons, like his skin, and the light made him all shiny with elfblood. I don't know why I didn't vomit. Maybe dogs can vomit for emotional reasons. The Elflander's long white braid had been stuffed into his mouth, and a part of my mind was saying that wasn't very original while another part stared in horror. His dueling toy was still in his hand.

Orient and I went into the back room without having to suggest it to each other. Neither of us wanted to have to look at the corpse. Orient leaned against a stack of whiskey kegs and brought up both hands to push back his black, red-tipped hair. Or maybe just to massage his temples. He said, "Strider's in trouble."

I grunted.

"Can we cover it up?" That was phrased as a question more out of habit, I think, of being considerate of me. He answered it himself. "No way. Might get Dancer in trouble with the coppers, if we wait. Might get Strider in more trouble. Shit." He looked at me then, face pale and controlled. "I'll tell Dancer. It's her alley, after all."

I nodded. I was as happy to pass on the decision. Now I wish to god I'd sat down with Orient and talked about what we saw, him babbling, me scribbling on something. Maybe he wouldn't be missing now if we had.

Having read what Orient wrote, I can guess what thoughts were going through his head as we went to tell Dancer. Strider did it. No, Strider'd meet the Elflander near the river or in a bombed-out house or in a deserted theater, and they'd fight until honor was satisfied or Strider was dead. That's how Strider thinks, the simple git.

Sai did it then, to protect Strider from the stranger who had cut her lover for fun. No, Sai wouldn't jump someone in the alley, and Sai wouldn't go after him until she knew Strider was fine. Then she'd arrange for the stranger to be without his little dueling toy—have some friends surround him, or something. And she'd show him why she was SoHo's middleweight champion for a season and a half, until she decided she was too pretty to stay a boxer. Sai wouldn't kill. Not like this, anyway.

That meant Goldy did it, because he was frustrated that he couldn't do anything else to show he cared for Strider, because he felt that he should have stopped the stranger sooner somehow, because he stepped outside to grab a breath of fresh air and saw the Elflander waiting for Strider—And that didn't work either, because Goldy's not like that, no more than the rest of us are. In fact, Goldy might take a certain delight in tossing the Elflander to the cops for a night in the B-town jail. Wouldn't do that with a local, but with a Faerie lord in a silly coat...

And that left Orient with one last suspect, his White Lady. He wouldn't like that, 'cause he had a crazy crush on Linden. But Orient's smart. He'd weigh the possibility, and it wouldn't work any better than any of the rest. You don't carve up a crazy boyfriend. You just wait patiently until he finds someone else to pester. No wonder Orient seemed so frustrated in his last notes.

We stepped into the main room and Orient said, "The elf that made trouble tonight..." I was the only one who knew why he stopped, but everyone could tell something was wrong.

Val came over and put her arm around his back. "What?" she said.

"He's dead. In the back alley. He's all..." Orient winced. "... cut up."

"Fuck," Goldy said. Goldy never swears.

Dancer and the Ticker went back to look while Orient tried to describe it to Goldy and Val. His words didn't do much to tell it, but his tone did. I was actually glad I couldn't talk, myself.

"We call the cops," Dancer said when she came back.

"No," Goldy whispered, and I thought there was going to be worse trouble.

Dancer didn't hear, or maybe she's wise enough to know when to pretend she didn't. "Val, go tell Strider and Sai what happened. Tick-Tick will go tell the cops." She glanced at the Ticker. "Better take the avenues to the cop shop, 'cause the short cuts might not be safe this time of night. And I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't even leave for another five minutes or so. Bikes can be so hard to start, sometimes."

The Ticker smiled a tiny bit, more in recognition than in humor. Goldy nodded, said, "Yes. That's right."

Dancer brewed a pot of coffee while we sat around, not really talking about anything important, people saying things like "Good band," and "Bastard deserved it," and "Fuckin' *hell!*" and no one bothering to answer any of the things. Dancer poured coffee for us all, and I realized that was another first. Not the freebies, 'cause Dancer can be so generous I sometimes wonder how she stays in business. But she never worked behind the counter. Val usually made decent coffee, and Goldy brewed great coffee. Dancer's tasted like she was the one who taught Goldy, but even Orient's "good coffee" seemed perfunctory.

Val came back and said Sai and Strider weren't home. I didn't like that. Then Strider came in. I liked that less. He was pocketing his key to the place and saying, "Anybody seen Sai?" He stopped, stared at us staring at him. "What'd I say?" And when no one answered immediately, he added, "Hey, if my part's crooked, I'm sorry, I lost my comb." His hair, as usual, was a perfect white mane.

Goldy shook his head.

"That's a joke," Strider said, moving toward the bar where we had gathered. Then he stopped and said quietly, "Something happened to Sai."

"No, Strider," Goldy said. "Not that we know of."

"It's that elf," Dancer said. "He's dead back by the empties. Cut up bad, like someone hated him." That was obviously a warning, not an accusation. "Tick-Tick's gone for the cops. I told her to. If I didn't, they'd shut me down."

Strider's pale face went paler, which is some trick. The new scar was like a lightning flash on his cheek. He sat on a stool and whispered, "Oh, to sail a sunless sea." It took me a minute to realize that was a Faerie oath, and before I did, Strider sounded more like himself. "It's all right, Dancer."

"I told her to stall. You could get out—"

He shook his head. "And go where? This is Bordertown. I'm Strider. I don't want anything else."

"Don't be a bigger fool!" Goldy hit the table with the flat of his chocolate-brown hand, and our cups danced.

Strider smiled slightly. "Hey, Goldy, don't give me that. You know."

"Yeah, you bastard." Goldy turned his back on us all. His broad shoulders shook, and no one spoke for a minute or two.

"He's dead," Strider said, not quite asking.

"Yes," Orient said.

"Fine. Then I don't have to see him." He glanced at Dancer. "Coffee, please?"

"Yeah, sure." She slid him a cup.

"Goldy?" he asked, lifting the cup to his lips.

Goldy grunted, sounding like me, I suppose. He didn't turn around.

"Tell Sai I love her. Tell her not to do anything stupid. And don't you do anything stupid, either."

Goldy's bright head bobbed in a nod.

"Got any poems for me, Wolfboy?"

I shook my head. I hadn't written anything in three weeks, but I knew I'd write something soon.

"You're innocent," Orient said, and his voice was accusing and angry.

"Maybe."

Orient looked upward in exasperation. "You could say so, then."

Goldy said, "He doesn't have to."

"No," said Orient. "I guess not."

Tick-Tick came back with the cops soon after that. I didn't recognize them as cops, not immediately. There's not a lot of law in B-town, and you almost never see the Silver Suits in uniform in SoHo. Law only comes in for important things, like an ugly killing that too many people will hear of. The woman was about Dancer's age. Her hair was a sun-bleached brown with flecks of white, combed straight back from

her forehead. Her skin was lighter than Goldy's and darker than Tick-Tick's. She wore a loose cotton jacket cut from a pattern of tropic flowers, black slacks, and black loafers. Her eyes were hidden behind silver glasses, probably Night Peepers. She kept one hand in her slacks pocket, maybe 'cause there was a weapon there, maybe 'cause it made her jacket hang better. The elf was less conspicuous, with his white hair cut very close to his skull and dressed in a sea-green suit.

"Name's Rico," the human said, not smiling. "My partner's Detective Linn. Anyone want to see a copper card?" I've always wondered about that name, 'cause the only c-card I ever saw was brass.

"It's all right, Sunny," Dancer said, and Goldy snickered.

"Good," Rico replied, looking at Dancer. "Sorry you're in this." Her head didn't move at all as she asked Goldy, "Something amusing?"

"Yeah," he said. "Sunny." Once we had a talk about why cops were called coppers. Goldy said that was because you could buy them cheap.

"For my cheerful disposition," Rico said. So far her face hadn't been any more expressive than her silver glasses. "Think it's funny, Walter?" Goldy didn't answer. At another time, the whole exchange would have been amusing, but it wasn't now. I think Rico agreed. She said, "Everyone stick around, okay? You—" she pointed at me. "—show me the body while Linn takes statements."

I can't say that she did anything more significant than we did. She lit the place with a torch spell, which impressed me until I saw that it only made everything more obvious, and more ugly. Rico whistled a low note as she looked at the Elflander. She walked around and studied things, not touching anything. Then she stood quietly, and I figured she was doing what I was doing: trying to imagine it.

When she was ready to go, I stepped in front of her. I pointed at the body, pointed at the alley, and shrugged. Rico's about my height, so she looked straight at me in that way they must teach at cop school and said, "Aren't I going to do something more? What do you want? I should take fingerprints? I should try a spell to sense what happened here?"

I nodded.

"Right. Look, Lobo—" I realized it must have been the Ticker who told her my name."—even if we had the murder weapon, we probably wouldn't sense anything more than rage, quick heartbeats, and a real sick pleasure. And that last is a guess, so don't quote me. As for fingerprints, make me laugh. No murder weapon. In an alley, anything else is circumstantial. The whole case would probably end right here if it wasn't for two things." She held the back of her hand toward me and lifted her index finger. "Your friend made some crazy threats in front of three hundred people." She raised the next finger. "Someone killed Tejorinin Yorl."

I tucked my chin slightly, showing her I didn't understand.

"I don't know either," Rico admitted. "Not exactly. Some elf kid who just inherited something important in Faerie. Don't know why he came out here; maybe on vacation or something. But he was rich and important, and we've gotta get someone for his murder."

I almost hit her.

"I don't like it," Rico said. "Not at all. Dancer's told me about most of you, and I asked questions of your friend at my office. Sounds like you're all okay, for B-town kids. But facts are facts, Lobo. If we can find who's responsible, everything'll be fine. If we can't..." She shrugged and headed back into Danceland.

I stood there and thought about it, until she called back.

"C'mon, Lobo. I know you write. Linn'll want your statement too."

I just realized one of the reasons Orient might have started writing this account. It's a testimony. I thought it was a diary, or what he said: he couldn't sleep. Then I thought maybe he wanted to publish his version of the story in one of the street papers, maybe try to sell a book to one of the World presses: *I Ran with a Bordertown Gang* by "Orient." Yeah, sure. Orient's smarter than that.

Consciously or subconsciously, Orient was thinking about the same things Rico made me think about. Questions are being asked, and the answers have to go a long way. This Yorl was an Elflander, so there'll be reports going to Faerie at least, and maybe to the World as well. Which means, just maybe, this thing we're writing is going to be read by people who don't know dick about B-town.

I went in and listened to the last couple of stories. The elf cop had a notebook, and he wrote everything in. Strider claimed to have been walking around, just thinking. Goldy was moving around the floor all the time, he said, but the cops knew he could have ducked out for a few minutes while claiming to be in a back room or on the balconies. They wrote down the names of the members of Wild Hunt, but didn't seem too excited about getting anything from them. About the only time no one was watching them was while Yorl was slicing Strider, and Yorl was still alive when the band reassembled.

"What about Sai?" asked Rico.

"She went walking, too," said Goldy, not too happy.

Rico nodded. "It's a houseful of great alibis."

I sat there, scribbling on some paper that Dancer lent me. I could have interrupted the statements, I suppose, but I wanted to write out my theory in full. So I did, and it was short, only a paragraph like the following:

The killing was the work of a gang, three at least and probably more. I saw Yorl when he was cutting Strider on the dance floor. Yorl was good, like he'd studied that dueling gadget for years. He was too good to let himself be carved all over, even by Strider. And this work was done mostly for the fun of the carvers. You saw that. The business with the braid. Even if Strider killed Yorl, Strider wouldn't do that. Yorl had to have been surrounded, and as one kid distracted him, another cut him. Some sickies probably heard talk about Strider and the Elflander and decided to kill an outsider for fun, figuring Strider would get the blame. Everyone on Ho Street had to be talking about what happened in Danceland.

"A gang," Rico said, when she joined me at a table.

I nodded.

"You're the only one with this gang theory."

I nodded again and gestured for her to give me back the paper. When she did, I wrote something like:

Orient doesn't know much about knife fights. He didn't think about the cuts. Or about what it means, doing that thing with the braid to a corpse. You blame him?

I think she smiled a tiny bit, and that was worse than the absence of expression.

"No, I don't. You want to pin this on the Bloods, the Pack, or the Rats?"

I snorted in disgust and wrote:

You think there's only a few gangs here ? There are hundreds. There are some really twisted bunches that hide within the bigger gangs. They wear the colors of the Bloods or the Pack or the Rats. They claim allegiance to the bigger gang and act like the rest of that gang is behind them. Could be any of them.

That little smile came back. "Dancer and I ran with the Go-boys when I was your age. We were part of the Pack. So, who do you favor?"

That made me stop, not because of what I wanted to say, but because of the fact I was writing this for a cop. Then I wrote: *You hear of an idiot named Fineagh Steel who styled himself the leader of the Bloods?* Fineagh built a little army of elf morons—they may live longer than us, but they can come just as stupid—then jackbooted around Soho for all of a week or two. Some kid took him out in a duel. I imagine a few of the bigger Blood gangs would've done something about him if the kid hadn't.

Rico nodded. "I hear he's dead. I hear his gang's scattered. You think this was the work of one of his lieutenants maybe?"

I shrugged.

"Doesn't work, Lobo." She took off her glasses and grinned at me. Her eyes weren't any friendlier than the glasses. "Why carve a strange elf? If they were jealous of him, they'd rough him up and steal his money, that's all. No need to get the cops down on everyone."

I nodded, wishing I had someone better to point at.

Rico folded up the page I'd written on and replaced her glasses. "Nice theory," she said. "No evidence to back it up." When she said that, it was like she'd kicked me, even though her voice sounded kind, for her. "Sorry." Then she tore up my statement and handed me the shreds. I stared at it. She said, "If I convinced anyone that Strider couldn't have done it by himself, we'd just have to lock up a couple of his friends, too." She patted the back of my hand and left me sitting at the table.

I decided not to tell anyone about it until I knew more. Maybe Orient would still be around if I'd showed the pieces of my statement to him.

Rico and Linn left with Strider when a van and a few Silver Suits showed up. The Silver Suits poked around and fingerprinted us all and did some mystical juju that obviously had as much effect as Rico expected, but now their report would be nice and fat. When they were done, one of them said none of us should disappear. Goldy laughed at that, but it's a little ominous, now that Orient's gone. The Silver Suits took away Yorl's body in a shiny black bag, and finally, Dancer said, "To hell with it. Good night, everybody." And we all wandered out into the good night.

It's Sunday. Still no Orient. I woke, went away, heard some interesting news, drank a whole lot of coffee. Now I have to do something while I wait, so I'll keep abusing Orient's journal.

I woke up around noon Saturday and didn't want to get out of bed. I lay there, thinking it was time to change the sheets and wishing I lived with somebody and wondered if maybe Strider did it. Time does that, lets you see things differently, sometimes in ways you wish it didn't. Whether he did or didn't, I like Strider. But what do I know about him? What do I know about myself? Maybe the killing was an accident, and then Strider had to figure out how to cover it up. If you accept that, it's not too hard to imagine him doing the rest, forcing himself to do something so atypical that no one would believe he had

killed Yorl. Under normal circumstances, all he would need was a reasonable amount of doubt in the situation and charges would probably be dropped. He may never have known that he'd killed someone as important as Tejorinin Yorl.

Or maybe he knew exactly who he'd killed. What was Strider in the Elflands, before he was Strider?

The day was cooler than the day before, but that doesn't bother me. I found my other jeans and a corduroy jacket and decided not to bother with shoes. There's enough broken glass in B-town that that isn't the smartest thing to do, I suppose, but it makes people think I'm tough. The fact is I tended to run from trouble before I was changed. Now that I'm stronger and more perceptive, I run even faster.

I went to Sai's. She makes great huevos rancheros without the least provocation. And if she didn't feel like cooking for a stray, she might need some company.

She had company. Tick-Tick was there, sitting a little stiffly on a purple beanbag, maybe aware that it clashed with the red leather outfit that she wore. Sai wore a faded man's undershirt and cut-offs. Under her black bangs, her eyes were almost as red as Tick-Tick's leather. I made a little circular motion with my hand, and Sai smiled a tiny bit, saying, "Hi, Wolf boy. C'mon in. The Ticker toasted bagels, but I'm not too hungry."

I suppose I should mention that Sai was almost always hungry, but you probably get the idea that Friday night's events had everyone acting out of character.

Tick-Tick said, "Rico and her faithful elvin companion came by earlier."

I nodded and stuffed a bagel in my face.

"They didn't have anything useful to say," she said, and shrugged. "We didn't have anything useful to tell them."

"She said I could visit Strider," Sai said. "You want to come, too?"

I grabbed two bagels and followed. Sai took her bike, a beautiful blue thing that she called the Bat-cycle for some reason. I hopped into Orient's usual place in Tick-Tick's sidecar, which made me wonder where he was. I pointed at the seat and frowned, and the Ticker said, "I haven't seen him around. We were supposed to meet. We can swing by his place after seeing Strider."

The B-town Jail isn't particularly better or worse than most jails, I imagine, but I wouldn't want to stay there. Rico had left a note at the front desk, so we didn't have any trouble getting in. I wasn't too crazy about the man at the front desk, who shook his head as he looked at me and said, "You kids are getting weirder every year."

A couple of Silver Suits walked Strider into the waiting room and leaned up against the wall as if they were bored enough to sleep. One was bored by each door, and they both had three-foot sting-rods dangling from straps around their right wrists.

"Nice place," Tick-Tick said.

"You should try their breakfast," Strider answered.

"You're such an asshole," Sai said.

"I'm glad to see you, too, love."

They kissed, and the Ticker and I tried to pretend we were as bored as the guards.

"We're getting you out of here," Sai said quietly.

"No whispering," one guard called. "Besides, you aren't."

"He's innocent!" Sai said.

"You're confessing?" the guard asked. Before Sai could say anything more, he said, "Look, kids. Behave yourselves, and we won't bug you."

"Yeah," Strider said, seconding the guard's advice.

"Okay," Sai said. "Okay. But I don't like this, Strider. I want you out of here."

"No chance for bail," Strider said. "I just hope I don't lose my tan."

"Don't be a pain," Tick-Tick said. "You just make it worse for Sai when you act like that."

Sai quickly shook her head. "No. I understand."

"Hey," Strider said softly, and he stroked her chin with his forefinger. "I'm okay. Maybe I'll get a lot of reading done."

"Rico said the charge is Murder One," Sai said. "I don't want you to get that much reading done."

Tick-Tick's elvin features were very grim as she said, "You won't get any reading done if they opt for a memory-wipe, Strider. Not until you learn how again. And if they pick death—"

Strider turned away suddenly. "Trial's weeks away. 'Sides, they'll do what they'll do, okay? You guys better leave now."

"No," the Ticker said.

"I can go back to my cell anytime," Strider said.

"You certainly could," the Ticker admitted. "That won't help you, and it won't help Sai. Is that what you want?"

"I want out," Strider said.

The Ticker nodded. "I know. We have to find who did it. The cops need someone to hang for this one. Maybe literally."

Strider glanced at Sai. She looked at her lap, and I suddenly knew why Strider was being so stupid. I suspected it earlier, but I knew it then. He thought Sai did it. He was too stupid to realize that if she had and he'd been arrested, she would've confessed immediately. I wondered if she'd already considered confessing anyway, just to save Strider. I decided to ask Tick-Tick or Orient later. No point in giving Sai the idea.

I pulled out a sheet of scrap paper and wrote out something like what I'd written for Rico about my theory, then added: *Problem is, we don't have anyone likely. Any ideas?*

One of the guards read it before letting Strider have it. Strider read it and his eyes flicked wide from their usual squint. "You sure about this, Wolfboy?"

I held my hands wide, like: Who's ever *sure*! Then I nodded.

Sai and Tick-Tick read the note together. Tick-Tick said, "You should've said something—Oops."

I waved downward to show I'd let that pass, then grabbed the note back and scribbled: *Rico didn't like it. Where's a suspect? Who'd want to carve a stranger, even one as bad as Yorl?*

"Wharf Rats, perhaps," Tick-Tick mused. "A chance for fun, and a chance to blame someone else."

"Not all the Rats are like that," Sai said. Her brother's a Rat.

"It only takes three or four like that," Tick-Tick said.

"There were five Rats in Danceland last night," Strider said, and we all got very quiet.

"Is it my turn to call you an idiot?" Tick-Tick asked.

"No," Strider said. "Hers." He pointed at Sai.

"I'll save it for later," Sai said. "What about these Rats?"

"They had a table up on the left balcony. Near the worn-en's room. I was watching them before Yorl decided I was a fencing dummy."

I lifted my hand. Tick-Tick glanced at me, then told Strider and Sai, "After you two left, Lobo filled in on the floor."

"Did you see the Rats?" Strider asked, surprisingly hopeful for Strider. "One was a little brown-haired guy with tiny round glasses. Wire rims. The rest were, well, Rats."

Rats aren't usually distinctive as anything more than Rats. Sai's brother is a nice guy, but he's a River addict like most of them, and he dresses poorly and smells a little funny... I didn't think about any of that. I just shook my head.

"You went by that corner," Tick-Tick said to me, 'cause she likes things very clear. "After Strider and Yorl fought. And the Rats weren't there." I nodded. I'd remember Rats. The Ticker added, "Was this when you and Goldy first made the rounds?" I nodded again. Tick-Tick smiled. "Rico might like your theory a little better, now."

"Yeah," said Strider without any emotion at all. "Some Rats did it. She'll love that."

"Still..." Tick-Tick said.

"We'll find them," Sai announced.

Strider nodded, not particularly hopeful, and said to Sai, "I thought..."

"I know," she said, and the Ticker and I looked away again. We talked for another couple of minutes about nothing particularly promising. When it was time to go, I gave Strider a poem I wrote late the night before. It was a stupid thing about owls flying over dark forests, but he read it and said, "Nice. I'll put it on my wall."

His own damn wall. That was when I could've cried.

Tick-Tick watched me give him the poem, then suddenly began patting her pockets. She came up with

the new *Stick Wizard* and passed it on, saying, "From Orient and me."

Sai looked sad. "I didn't bring you anything."

"Yes, you did," he said, and kissed her lightly on the lips. Then his mouth quavered a fraction, and he turned and said to the guards, "Let's go."

Sai watched him leave, then said, "Where to?"

"Orient," Tick-Tick announced.

"He can find a Rat with round glasses?"

"I don't know," the Ticker admitted. "But it's worth a try."

And it would have been, if we could have found Orient. We went to his flat, then to Danceland, where we told Goldy and Dancer and Val what we'd learned. None of them had seen Orient. Val was annoyed because he'd promised to buy her lunch at Taco Hell. So we went back to Orient's apartment. The Ticker had a spare key, so we went in and bitched about him being out of anything worth drinking. Then Sai saw his diary open on the kitchen table.

"You shouldn't read that," Tick-Tick said.

"It's about last night," Sai replied.

"Ah," Tick-Tick said, and she read over Sai's left shoulder while I read over Sai's right. Tick-Tick finished first. She moved away and said, "Why didn't he come get me?"

"He didn't want to wake you," Sai said hesitantly: "Maybe he didn't want to wake me."

Tick-Tick didn't answer. She looked out the window, then said, "I'm spreading the word. I'll tell Horn Dance, I'll tell Scully, I'll tell Commander X's Kids. Somebody must have seen him somewhere."

"I'll go too," Sai said.

"Someone should wait here, in case he returns."

They both stared at me until I volunteered with a nod. I reread Orient's entry, then began my own. No Orient. I woke up this morning on his rug—which needs to be swept or beaten. Goldy came by with a turkey sandwich and a quart of orange juice. He brought coffee beans. (I write that hoping Orient will read this and suffer a little for troubling his friends.) Goldy made a big pot of coffee and told me that the gangs are turning B-town inside out. Everyone was calling in favors. Sai has her brother's friends cruising the wharfs. Goldy talked to a few Pack leaders who hope he'll join their gangs someday. Tick-Tick spread the word among the Bloods; what with the ones who like her and the ones who admire Strider, there'll be a lot of elves in red leather cruising B-town. She even made a run up the Tooth to speak with Scully and some of the Hill kids, Dancer and Val went to talk with Farrel Din and other old-timers. Goldy says the streets are alive. We'll find Orient and we'll find the Rats who were in Danceland Friday night, and maybe we'll even find who killed the Elflander. Sometimes I'm rather proud of this stupid town.

Reading Wolfboy's entry, I almost felt as if I *was* dead. Are there ghosts? If they walk, do they suffer from the guilty looking-over-someone's-shoulder feeling that I got from Wolfboy's introduction?

There's a lot of comfort, for me, in reading his account of what happened. The knowledge that Wolfboy

and the Ticker were at work on the other end of the puzzle and that we eventually met in the middle—it puts everything in context. I wasn't alone, I wasn't isolated; I was helping to solve the larger problem in my own inimitable nitwitted fashion. But that's not what it felt like in that room.

As soon as I'd written, "Caramel, where are you now?" I felt the pull. It's not as if it grids itself out nicely in my head: here's all the compass points marked with little red letters, and here's the dotted line drawn over the street map with the big star at the end marked "You win!" I'm a finder, not a cartographer.

"Pull" is the best description I have for it. When I'm trying to find something, whether it's running water or someone's glasses, I can feel it drawing me toward it as if I was on the end of a string. The string, unfortunately, can go straight through furniture, buildings, or a dozen feet of solid earth, which is more than can be said for me. I also don't know where the thing is until I've found it, which is why you can't walk across town, knock on my door, say, "Orient, I've lost my pink socks," and expect me to tell you they're on the floor of your closet. But if you ask me to find them for you, I'll feel the pull, and if I follow it, I'll be led eventually to your place, your closet, and your socks. Payment in advance, please.

So Caramel felt like Thataway, and I left the journal and the feather behind and followed my feelings.

I dodged around a lot. The way led through Soho, where fallen buildings or contumacious gangs will sometimes block off streets or even whole neighborhoods. There are also a few gangs who wouldn't dream of keeping strangers out—the local economy would collapse if they did. I triangulated around anything I couldn't walk through, and ended up near the river.

Caramel was in what remained of a warehouse-loft a few blocks from the wharf. It had been brownstone once, with a frosting of terra-cotta details: garlands and vases and things, and elaborate moldings around the windows. Some of the terra-cotta remained, though much was either scavenged or broken. The whole building had been painted by the simple expedient of getting on the roof and pouring cans of paint down the walls. No one had thought to mask the windows, apparently.

I could hear harsh-voiced bells from a distant boat. I smelled fish, machine oil, and the sweet-and-musty odor of the Mad River. An orange cat slid from a windowsill and into hiding as I watched. Nothing else moved. It was too late in the morning for the fish markets, and too early for anyone else in this neighborhood. Hell, it was too early for me. I was hungry, and raw all over from lack of sleep. I felt as if I'd left my eyeballs in talcum powder overnight. My finding talent, which doesn't turn off and fades only slowly, had begun to feel like a rhythmic yanking, mostly at my back teeth. And, of course, I was solidly in the middle of Wharf Rat territory. My day was made.

I circled the building once, just to make sure Caramel was in it and not in something past it. The possibility that she'd done the murder had crossed my mind. It must have been on its way to someplace else, because it didn't stay long. But it made me nervous to find her in Rat City. It reminded me of that bottle of river water I'd taken from her. The water of the Big Bloody can, among other things, produce multiple personalities in a human being, all with a remarkable talent for disguise. Many of the Rats are raving psychotics in lamb suits.

If she didn't kill the Elflander—which, nervous or not, I was betting—then the evidence pointed to her as a witness. If I could get her out of hiding and convince her to talk... well. I was counting on her clearing Strider. But if she convicted him instead, then that was right, it was justice, and I'd see it done and get the hell out of town because I wouldn't be able to stand the sight of the place anymore.

There was no security on the front door, of course. I followed my talent up the stairs, through a hall whose walls might have been held up by the binding action of the spray paint on them. Then in midhallway I stopped, and stepped back into an alcove where a radiator had once stood.

The Ticker would have had my skin, I realized, long before that. She's tried for years to instill a sense of self-preservation in me, and after all her work, it's only rudimentary. In this case, for instance, it kicked in much too late.

Sin Number One: I'd arrived unarmed, unprovisioned, and unaccompanied. I could just hear her. Orient, my dear boy, we have a *body count* already. This is Condition Red. I don't care if you're only going down the hall to take a *leak*...

Sin Number Two: Having already committed number one, I'd compounded it by walking into a strange building in hostile territory without noticing what was, literally, right under my nose.

There are a lot of ways for an inhabited building to smell. Infants. Boiled cabbage. Sex. Disinfectants. Lamb chops. Perfume. Wood stoves. I haven't got the Wolf's nose, but I didn't need it. This building was lived in by a group of people with nasty personal habits. Drinking river water gives human sweat and urine a characteristic odor, and that odor haunted the halls and clanked its chains at me. Oh, I knew those chains.

I stood in the alcove cussing myself out for maybe three-quarters of a minute. Then I continued down the hall. What else could I do? If they had a sentry hidden, I'd already been seen, and there'd be someone waiting for me on the stairs. If there wasn't a sentry, I had nothing to worry about anyway.

There were only two doors in the hall, and one of those was a rusty sliding one for an old dumbwaiter system. My trail led through the wall between them. I put my ear to the clammy plaster and heard voices, but none of them was Caramel.

I heard a sound behind me and turned. I was just in time to see that the rusty dumbwaiter door hid a nice renovated *quiet* lift mechanism, and that the woman stepping out of it had a tire iron. Her first swing caught the wrist of the arm I'd blocked with. Her second landed where the first had been meant to: the side of my head. Lightning flash. And nothing.

Coming back was slow, and I suspect intermittent. That last is hard to be sure of, since I wasn't a reliable observer through much of it. But I know when I woke up more or less in earnest.

I didn't know where I was. I don't mean I didn't recognize it—I'm talking about with my eyes still closed. I couldn't find north. I couldn't find anything.

It was like waking up to discover you're lying on the ceiling. A scream worked its way into my throat and stuck there.

I don't know if it was the vertigo or the blow to the head—I haven't had a lot of experience with being knocked out—but stage two involved being violently sick. I got myself propped up on my elbows afterward, in the process discovering the grinding pain in my wrist. I was cold and sweating and trembling, and I wanted to wash my mouth out with something. I lifted my head, very carefully, and saw what the Welcome Wagon had left.

A big glass jar of water. In red.

A little despairing noise got out of my mouth before I could stop it, and I rolled over and covered my eyes with my good arm. Welcome back, Orient.

I heard a door open; then someone kicked my foot solidly. The little seismograph recently installed in my skull went to the top end of its scale. When I dared open my eyes, I found a brown-haired man in wire-rimmed glasses bending over me. He smiled kindly when he saw I was conscious. All his teeth were

bad.

"Hello. Are you feeling better now?"

I felt much worse. He had the gentle voice and sweet manner that I associate with genuine maniacs.

"Good. You know," he said with a birdlike turn of his head, "if you meant to ride in like The Borderland Kid and rescue your little friend, you didn't do a very good job."

His eyes went quickly to the other side of the room, and I got my head up enough to look there. Caramel was sitting hunched in the corner staring mournfully from under her tousled brown hair. Big miserable brown eyes. I lowered my head. "Thank you. I know," I said. I felt very much like hell.

He smiled meditatively down at me, massaging his fingers. "Well, you'll have to stay here now. She'll pull her weight just fine, once she gets used to things—" and he grinned at the jar of river water next to me. "You—we'll find a place for you too, I'm sure. Make yourself comfortable." He nodded and left the room. The bolt slid home.

I heard Caramel scramble across the floor to me. "Are you—" she began in a whisper. "Oh, shit, of course you're not okay. Can I do anything to help?"

"No. Thanks." I wasn't whispering to keep them from hearing us. I was whispering to keep *me* from hearing us.

A moment later she lifted my head, very carefully, and put something soft under it. "My jacket," she explained.

The cloth smelled like soap and clean cotton. And I'd thought she lived in a building like this?

"When they brought you in... I thought you were dead. There's blood on your face." She paused, then said, "I know you shouldn't drink this stuff, but is it safe to wash in?"

"Yeah. Better wash it now, though, before we get desperate."

"Desperate?"

"Before long we're going to be very thirsty. That's why it's there."

"Should we throw it out, then?"

"They'll bring us more."

She didn't answer that. After a moment I felt damp cloth against my cheek and smelled the water. I opened my eyes finally.

She looked older than she had last night. That's not quite true; she still looked sixteen. It was just an older sixteen. Ah, Bordertown, with its little rites of passage.

"You have a concussion, I think," she said.

"How do you—"

"Your right pupil looks a little bigger than the left. What are you doing here?"

That last sentence sounded yanked out of her. I smiled, sort of. "I told you I'd find you if I needed you."

"How?"

I told her about my talent. It was a little perfunctory, since I felt out of breath the whole time. But when I finished, her eyes were round and wondering.

"That's marvelous!"

"Not always," I said.

She was startled. Then she looked down and seemed very intent on wringing out her scarf. "I guess this is one of those times."

"No!" I reached toward her with my right hand. She was on my left side so it didn't quite make it. "That's not what I meant."

I now know what a searching look is; she fastened one on me. "You're a nice guy," she said, as if it was not a compliment but a simple observation of fact.

My conscious mind was beginning to go out with the tide. "Not always," I repeated, and went off into the dark again.

Waking up was much simpler the second time. I shifted position in my sleep, and my left wrist hit the floor. I made some noises, some of them profane. I had the good sense to raise my head to look at it, rather than raising the arm. My wrist was plum-colored where the tire iron had connected, and impressively swollen. "Should splint it," I muttered to myself.

"Working on it," Caramel said. She sat down next to me and held up two pieces of wood. "Dividers from the desk drawers," she said cheerfully.

Neither of us really knew how to apply a splint, but I helped by lying still and gritting my teeth. When she was done, I felt like a seal with a wooden flipper, but the joint was immobile.

I hadn't known there *was* a desk in the room until then. I got my right elbow under me and checked out the cell.

It had been someone's library once, high-ceilinged, with tall windows and decorative plaster friezes at the tops of the walls. Most of the wall were fitted with built-in shelves, all of them empty now. There were water stains on the plaster from leaks in the roof. One window had been in-expertly bricked up, probably right after the Change. The other window was barred, and the light came dimly through a layer of pea-green paint. There was a fireplace between two tiers of shelves, closed up with a sheet of plywood wedged into the opening. The floor must have been handsome once, but damp and neglect had weathered the planks gray. A heap of what looked like bedding occupied one corner, and the aforementioned desk, one drawer missing, stood in another.

"All the comforts of home," I muttered. Caramel didn't answer.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She snorted. "Yeah."

"They... didn't hurt you, did they?"

She shook her head, then realized what I was really trying to say. "No. A couple of them thought about it, but I talked them out of it."

"You talked them out of it?"

She grinned. "This is kind of embarrassing."

"I won't laugh. I'm not sure I can."

"Well, I told them something from an old story I heard once. I told them I was fey, and that everybody in my family turned into tigers when they lost their virginity, and ate their lovers. And that I was still a virgin."

I had to laugh after all. "That's really dumb."

"I know." She was laughing, too. "But they were all pretty high. I don't think they'd have swallowed it otherwise." She folded her knees up under her chin. "I hadn't been in here long before they brought you in."

"Did they bring you here?"

She shook her head. "I followed them from Danceland. I managed to get myself locked in the garage downstairs. That's where they found me."

"You shouldn't have followed them."

Caramel fell silent for a little, then said, "They killed that guy."

That was hard to reply to. So I didn't.

"I think they were waiting for him. I saw him turn the corner into the alley, walking with one of them, and when I got to the corner, the rest were there. The guy with the glasses held out something in his hand and said, 'Looking for this?' and the elf went for his sword thing. Then they closed in on him and started sticking him, and... and cut off his braid. And..." She covered her face with both hands. I thought she wouldn't go on, but she said, "The one with the glasses said something about the river, that it was the blood of Elfland. And that if it was good, what would the blood of an elf be like?"

Then she stopped. I was glad of it.

I wanted desperately to know where Wolfboy and Tick-Tick were. Wanting should have been enough to give me a bearing on them. Nothing happened.

The jar of river water was beginning to stick in my thoughts. I wondered how Caramel was feeling. My mouth was dry and still sour-tasting, and my throat scratched a little. When *had* I last drunk something? At Danceland? I'd had coffee and beer there, both good for drying you out eventually.

"Why did you follow them here?" I asked Caramel.

"What was I supposed to do, go home and stick my head under the pillow?" she snapped.

"I would have."

She looked at me for a long moment. "Would you have? When they started splitting up to leave, and you knew you were the only person who could find out where they were going?" She looked like an empty-handed person who wanted something to throw. Then her eyes got wide and a little bleak and she turned back to me. "You could have done it, couldn't you?"

"What?"

"You could have tracked them down. You could have found them."

"No. Not unless I'd seen them. Otherwise I wouldn't know who I was looking for, and I couldn't do it."

"Really?"

"Really."

She rubbed her face and swept her hair back. She had a very high forehead. "Well," she said, "Well. Like I say, they split up when they left, to cover their tracks, I guess. The guy with glasses had a bike, and he drove off on that. But before he left I saw him put whatever it was he held out to the elf in his saddlebag. So I followed one of the ones who were on foot, and got here. I snuck into the garage, to find that thing. It seemed important, and I was afraid that if I didn't take it, the glasses guy would get rid of it before anyone could get back here. And I found it, and hid it—and then they caught me."

"But you said you hadn't been here long before they brought me in."

Caramel looked rueful. "It took me a long time to get up the nerve to break into the garage."

That made me laugh a little, which made her do the same. "So what was it?" I said. "The thing in the saddlebag."

She nodded and began to unlace one of her sneakers. That puzzled me, until she pulled it off and shook something out into her hand. "I don't think he knows it's gone yet," she said, and held it out to me.

I didn't take it from her. It was temporarily beyond me to raise my hand and reach for it. Such an unassuming little object, however valuable it might be...

It was a ring of elf-silver set with a sapphire. My teeth chattered.

"Hide it again," I said, when I could. "It's important."

Linden was never offstage long enough to have done it. No, we knew who'd done it—Glasses and Friends. But if the deed had been bought... ? Oh, I wanted something cold to drink, and I wanted a nice herbal cig with it, and I wanted to bang my head against the wall until all my problems went away. I had a witness, and a missing puzzle piece, and no way in the World or elsewhere that I could deliver either of them.

The pea-green light grew steadily weaker. I crawled across the room and propped myself against a wall. Caramel took a nap, curled up on the heap of bedding. I looked at the jar of river water. I tried to remember every band I'd ever seen play. I counted the number of times I'd seen Tick-Tick blow something up. I looked at the jar of river water. Caramel shifted position. I looked at the jar of...

The door lock made noise, and I tapped Caramel's ankle to wake her up. Glasses came in with a flashlight and blazed it at us. None of the kindly light of a Faerie lamp here. I doubted there had ever been magic in this room, beyond the twisted magic that the river worked on humans.

I couldn't see him in the glare, until he turned the beam on the jar of water.

He made a clucking noise. "Maybe I should leave you some crackers," he said. He turned the flashlight back on us. "It's not so bad, you know. They'll tell you out there that it's dangerous, but they always say that. That's wisdom in that jar, strength, inspiration. They don't want you to be smart or strong or great. They want to step on you. That's why they're afraid."

I blinked and shook my head, and the light came closer.

"Really?" his sweet voice came out of the flashlight beam. "I'm stronger than you, right now. And you're afraid of me, aren't you?"

I could see him, finally; he squatted companionably next to me. He took my chin in his fingers. Then he drew his hand back and slapped me casually. A lot of little bells rang in my head, and I slid further down the wall.

"Leave him alone," said Caramel, in a surprisingly steady voice.

He looked at me, then toward her, as if considering the merits of her suggestion. Then he got to his feet. "All right, dear, I can do that for a little while. But you can help, you know. Just get him to drink up, and all the unhappy times are over, okay?" He smiled at her, and went out the door.

"D'you think you could knock him out the next time he comes in?" I said thinly.

"Hmm." A moment of silence. "I could hit him with a desk drawer... No, I don't think I could hit him hard enough. I'm not very big."

True, she wasn't. I sat in the dark and remembered what she looked like. Once, in the World, they would have called her elfin. That was before they discovered that the elves were a lot bigger than they'd made them out to be.

I wanted something to goddamn *drink*.

"You want to sleep?" she asked.

"No. I want to talk. What's Bellinbroke like?"

She chuckled a little. Have you ever noticed how much laughter can sound like crying? Bubbles of air coming out, and a little inhalation at the end like a sniff? "I'll get homesick, and it'll serve you right."

But she told me about her father, who taught at the university; and about her mother, private and self-possessed as a feral cat, who left her husband for one of his younger colleagues. Caramel told me how her father seemed to forget that his daughter existed, except when she forced him to remember. There are a lot of ways to get your father's attention forcibly, most of them unpleasant. Caramel had worked her way through, she figured, about half of them before she realized that the effect was never permanent. So she ran away to the Borderlands.

"What about you?" she said at last.

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. Come on, I told you mine."

So I told her, which is a measure of how out of touch I'd become. There was a terrible pain in my head that made all of my thoughts rattle around loose, I didn't know where anything was, and I was so dry I was afraid I'd crack if I moved. No, let's be honest. I was too far gone for witty descriptions. Drink the damn water, I told myself. Drink it now, get out of here, and you can kick it later. I wasn't so fuzzy-minded that I couldn't spot the two basic errors in that sentence.

I told Caramel almost all of it. I told her about the stupid olives, I told her about my mother watching me out of the corner of her eye when she thought I didn't see. Believe me, you can live with getting beat up in

the parking lot at school dances. You can put up with opening your locker and finding a dead cat in it. You can even bear it when the next-door neighbor, usually distant but kind, gets drunk on night and tries to run you down with his car. But when you realize that your mother never touches you except when she has to...

I think I was semiconscious some of the time. I discovered that Caramel was holding my hand at one point, and couldn't remember when she'd first taken it.

I didn't tell her about my early life in Bordentown. I told her I did some pretty despicable things, and left it at that. Safe enough, since I know I've forgotten many of them. The river will do that. It *does* make you feel strong and smart, but only because it takes away all the things you've ever measured strength and smarts by. Everything, even your own well-being, is set at a distance and devalued. You can do the most appalling things and forget them a moment later, because they simply aren't significant. And then even the river begins to slip away and forsake you, and you need more and more of it to make you strong and smart, to make you forget your freakish talent that's the real cause of your fall, not the river, not your own asshole self-pity. That much I remember.

And I remember not being allowed to sleep, being stuck under cold running water until I was awake enough to scream and claw, being made to walk, walk, walk with a fierce voice alternately cursing me and bursting into tears.

If we didn't get out of there soon, I would drink that water, I would take my faithless mistress back. In the dark of that room where magic never came, I was certain that this time no one would be there to make sure I kept walking.

I should have told her about some of the good things. I didn't. I fell asleep.

When I woke up, it was still dark. Caramel had her head on my knee, probably napping again. My mind was full of the exquisite clarity that is often the leading edge of hallucination. My mouth felt glued shut.

I thought, reveling in the ability to do so. Escape. Not for me; I wouldn't get a block away in this condition, even if every Rat in the building went to Faerie on holiday. For Caramel. Camilla. Attendant at a sacrifice. In hiding behind Danceland, watching five Rats let the blood out of a fairy tale, for the greater glory of whatever they worshiped. I'd taken away her name, but the destiny seemed to have stuck. Well, she wouldn't have to attend mine.

The door was no good—solid, locked, raving lunatics on the other side of it anyway. Neither of us was strong enough to get the bars out of the window. The floor was old, but in good shape—Glasses had crossed the room with nary a creak. The ceiling was also solid, and fifteen feet away. How to get one small girl out of a top-floor room...

The fireplace. Oh, god, the fireplace.

I shook Caramel awake and pried my lips apart. To her eternal credit, she woke up fast and without a fuss.

"Go see if you can get the plywood out of the fireplace opening," I whispered. Even that made me feel as if I'd been breathing thumbtacks. "If you can't do it without making a racket, come back here and tell me."

I waited alone in the dark while she made scrabbling noises at the other end of the room. "Can't," she said finally in my ear. "Not without a noise."

"Help me over there."

I worked on one end, with my one good hand, and she worked on the other. I felt all my fingernails break and bleed, and kept clawing away. Finally I got desperate enough to give the bottom of the plywood a kick. With a scraping sound that nearly made me swallow my tongue, it tilted. We grabbed the now-grabbable top edge and pulled the board free.

Maybe they were asleep. Nobody came in. I stuck my head into the fireplace opening, trying not to think of all the things that might accumulate in a disused fireplace. Far above me I saw a square of dark blue shot with stars. The flue had rusted and fallen out, along with an ominous lot of crumbling firebrick. Still, if I hadn't been so dehydrated, I would have cried.

"Take a look," I whispered. "Can you get up that?"

She brushed by me; I felt her hair against my face. "I think so."

"Careful. There'll be loose brick. Watch out for a guard on the roof." It was staccato and disconnected, but I knew I couldn't keep talking for long.

"Where do I go for help?"

I shook my head, which, of course, she couldn't see in the dark.

She grabbed the front of my shirt and hissed, "Where? Come on!"

I didn't know where. I didn't know where anything was. Or anybody. People might be at Danceland; more likely it was closed. She could try a dozen different places and not find anybody. I couldn't find anybody. Delirium was setting in.

"Please!" I could hear her crying. "I don't know people in Bordertown, and by the time I get help, it could be too late for you. Where can I find help?"

And it came, like a couple of notes from a familiar song, just enough to recognize it by. Thataway.

Not enough. What the hell was it? Where was north? I felt for it and called for it, until the dark in front of me was shot with colored sparks. That was north. There.

Still not enough. This time I couldn't just follow until I got there. I had to figure it out from here.

I found them all, in the midst of pain and madness—Danceland, Tick-Tick's place, Wolfboy's. They were all too far south to be the trace I'd gotten when Caramel asked me to find help. Then I tried my place. It matched.

I told her. She sobbed, and kissed me on the mouth, and lowered me gently to the floor. Then she scrambled around me and went to work.

I reconstructed it later, with no small quantity of admiration. She piled the bedding up to look as if she was in it, all except a couple of pillows. Those she put in the bottom of the fireplace, so any loose brick that she dislodged would make no sound when they hit. Then she leaned over me again.

"Can you get the plywood back up once I'm in?" She had a hand on my face, so I could nod in answer. "Okay. Hold the fort, Orient."

I heard her at first in the chimney, until I fought the plywood back into place. I think anyone who was looking for something amiss would find it—but that was my job, to keep anyone from looking. Just long

enough for Caramel to get away.

I dragged myself away from the fireplace and let go of consciousness for a while.

I have large, merciful gaps in my memory where the rest of it should go. I remember waking up to find the window an oblong of gray-green in the shadowed room, and discovering that I'd dragged myself most of the way to the water jar. Instinct is a wonderful thing.

I remember Glasses coming in, casting a cursory glance toward the pile of inhabited-looking blankets, and giving me the benefit of his conversation for a few minutes. He drank some out of the jar. I could hear him swallowing, seeing his throat working. A little of it trickled down his chin and shone there, until he saw me staring at it. He wiped it away very slowly. I tried not to cry until the door closed behind him.

Many gray intervals later, something boomed, not far away. The second time it happened, I identified it as an explosion. It happened a third time.

These, I knew, were significant. I decided to stay awake, on the off chance that I'd remember why.

The gunshot brought me fully conscious, though. It came from the next room. Then the door burst inward, and Glasses stood in the opening, eyes wild. He had a sawed-off shotgun, and he was leveling it at me. The whole scene seemed remarkably clear, and I had time to wonder why, after years of haphazard observation, I should suddenly be able to count the hairs on the backs of my murderer's hands.

I thought the roaring noise was the sound of the shotgun, and me dying. But some of Glasses' chest blew into the room, and so did he. A second later the Ticker came through the door, all scarlet leather and bared teeth, an immense handgun in a two-fisted grip.

She looked to me, saw the water jar, and stooped on it like a hawk. It broke against the wall with a splash, and I whimpered.

"Shh, shh," she said, and held me against her. It was Tick-Tick, you see, who wouldn't let me quit walking and die all those years ago.

I felt her start to shake, and remembered that, for all her skill with things that go boom, I'd never seen her do what she'd just done. "Lobo!" she shouted. "All clear. Get your ass in here!"

He had the water, a cloth soaked with it. They'd known I wouldn't be able to swallow at first. Wolf's brown-furred face was contorted, as if he'd be crying if his tear ducts worked that way. They carried me out between them, through the smell of fired weapons.

Someone had thought to bring a stretcher, and it was waiting in the hall, along with Goldy and Sai and—dear grinning god, was that Scully, from up the Tooth? The wet cloth had given me back the use of my tongue and lips, if not my throat, exactly. I whispered to the Ticker, "How big a party is this, kid?"

She shrugged as best she could, carrying me. "We had to get you back. We've all lost our house keys." And then, for only the second time in as long as I've known her, I saw her cry.

No point in going over the rescue. There are enough pieces of it in Orient's part of the story. It was your basic arrival of the cavalry, I suppose, but none of it was fun. Too much worry about what could go wrong, for us and for Orient, and whether we could free him before the Rats realized that we were there. The worst part was when their sentry spotted us from the roof, right after Tick-Tick's first smoke bomb went off. The Rat had a gun, and we were all pinned down until the Ticker said, "We need to lower the

technology level around here." She closed her eyes and mumbled something, and there was an explosion from the roof that was almost as loud as one of hers. She nodded grimly, and we went in. Afterwards, there wasn't much happiness in our success. Orient was a mess, and we all knew we wouldn't have found him at all if Caramel hadn't escaped. Still, we thanked everyone who had shown up and watched the Gathering of the Gangs disperse.

We took Orient home while a couple members of the Horn Dance fetched Doc. Doc cleaned and splinted and bandaged as Orient gasped and winced and looked extremely unhappy. He wrote out a short version of his stay at Glasses' place. I wanted to make a joke about having two mutes in our little group, but I couldn't think of anything funny. People had died. Nobody important enough that the cops would come around, but people nonetheless. Orient drank a lot of water while he wrote it. The Doc said, "That's enough. You got your story from him, now go away and let him sleep."

"What do we owe?" Tick-Tick asked.

"Ah, forget it. Wasn't interesting enough to charge you for."

I fetched Doc's coat. Next time she puts her hand in her pocket, she'll find seven four-leaf clovers.

We all went out and sat on the steps so we wouldn't disturb Orient. No one spoke. Tick-Tick's face was drawn and tired, almost gray under her dandelion hairdye, and one pointed ear was bruised and slightly bloody. Sai squinted in the distance, her eyes very Oriental and very elvin at the same time. She wasn't watching anything that I could see. Goldy rubbed his strong, brown hands over his metallic hair and stared at the sidewalk. It was just after noon of a beautiful day, we'd saved Orient, and I expected us all to pass out from exhaustion.

Caramel stood nearby, looking like she didn't know whether to stay or leave. Sai noticed her and said, "Hey, c'mon. Sit and rest. You could use it. We all could."

"Thanks," Caramel said as she sat cross-legged beside me. She glanced at Sai, then at the rest of us. "What're you going to do now?"

"We're going to talk too much," Goldy said. "As usual."

Tick-Tick nodded. "And maybe we'll figure it all out. What have we got?"

I held up the ring that Caramel had found. A sapphire set in Faerie silver. Orient had winced when he said who wore sapphire and silver rings.

"We have the ring," Tick-Tick said. "And a witness." She nodded at Caramel. "That'll clear Strider."

"It's not enough," Sai said.

"It'll free him," Tick-Tick said.

"It's not enough," Sai repeated with a shake of her thick, black hair.

Goldy nodded. "The singer would've let Strider die for her. The Rats were just Rats, but she's the one who used them."

"We could go to Rico with what we've got," Tick-Tick said. "Maybe Rico could help."

Goldy said, "Rico can't do a thing. Linden will say the ring was stolen by the Rats, and that'll be that."

"Even if we do nothing," Tick-Tick said, "Linden will have to live with it." I wondered if she was thinking

about the Rat she shot, or the one whose rifle had exploded in his grip.

I raised my hand, then started scribbling while they waited: *Why the ring? Why was it important to Yorl? Why would Linden kill someone who meant little to her? Why were the Rats at Danceland that night?*

"Very good questions," Goldy said. "But do you have very good answers?"

Why did Yorl come here from Elflands? Who is Yorl? Who is Linden?

Goldy said, "No, no, no, my friend. Good *answers*."

No one laughed.

"I doubt Linden's in Rico's files," Tick-Tick said. I agreed with a nod. Records in B-town are pretty thin. The coppers get reports on runaways sometimes, and they're building a file on people they've arrested, but that's about it. Rico would need a better reason than "we think she hired some Rats" to go through the trouble of tracing a SoHo musician.

Where's Linden? I wrote last, and Tick-Tick shook her head sadly. "We're going to have to wake poor Orient."

Orient woke violently, scattering his bedcovers. Tick-Tick put her hand on his brow and he settled down.

"Sorry, kid," he whispered.

"It's all right. Lobo's got some questions for you."

Orient nodded sleepily. "You guys can't do anything without me." He looked bad, pale enough to be an elf, but he sounded pleased. I was still sorry we woke him.

I wrote: *Where's Linden?*

He closed his eyes, which turned into a wince. After a second he pointed toward the hotel area in SoHo. "That-away," he croaked.

Then I wrote the tricky one. *Where's an elf named Yorl, a relative of Tejorinin Yorl?*

Orient frowned at me. I wasn't sure he understood, and even if he did, the question might be too vague for him. A worse possibility occurred to me: what if there were as many Yorls among the elves as Joneses among us? But Orient grinned weakly.

"If there's more than one of them, I'm gonna have a migraine, Wolf." He bit his lip and closed his eyes. Then he opened them again, wide. "Same way," he whispered, nodding toward the hotel area. "Same damn way."

We talked a lot more after that, sitting in the street. Everyone liked my theory and no one like my plan. No one came up with a better one, so finally we scattered to the various bikes. The Ticker stayed with Orient because someone had to—and because she thought this last part was unnecessary, I think. Or maybe she didn't want to get in a position where she might have to hurt someone else. Caramel was willing to play the part I wanted the Ticker to take, so the B-town Players were ready for their first bit of improv.

Finding Linden wasn't hard. We asked at a couple places for the lead singer of Wild Hunt, and

somebody said she was staying at the Roses of Elfland. Sai and Goldy weren't happy about waiting in the street, but they agreed. They thought they were there in case the plan fell apart. They were there because I didn't trust them to keep to the script with Linden.

Caramel and I knocked at Linden's door. She answered, opening it enough that we could see sunlight and expensive furniture behind her. The room smelled of herbal cigarettes, perfume, and something tart that was her own scent. She wore a sea-green dress with billowing sleeves.

It was cut on one side to reveal golden stockings set with tiny diamonds. Her hair fell over her right shoulder like a moon-lit avalanche of virgin snow. I understood why Orient was so taken with her. I thought she was reasonably attractive, even. "Yes?" she said, and then, catching my gaze with her silver eyes, she said, "You helped pack up after the gig at Danceland. We appreciated that." She smiled kindly.

I wanted to bow and say something gracious. Caramel and I looked odd in the clean hall of the Roses of Elfland. My jacket and jeans hadn't looked good before this morning's adventure, and Caramel's gray traveling clothes were smudged with grease, mud, soot, and half-a-dozen things less easy to identify. Then I almost laughed, realizing that the clothes were the least of our oddness. Caramel seemed very shy and very young as she stood before Linden, and I was hardly the boy-next-door. I nudged Caramel, who said, "Uh, we have something you'll want."

"I beg your pardon?" asked Linden.

"A ring," said Caramel, growing more sure of herself. "Belongs to Ms. Yorl. Is it yours?" She showed the silver and sapphire ring. It was almost identical to the three on Linden's right hand.

"No," Linden said, blinking at us. "But it looks just like mine. Your Ms. Yorl and I have remarkably similar taste." When neither of us said anything immediately, she smiled thinly and said, "Good day." She began to close the door.

Okay, it was a stupid plan. I had an impression ball in my pocket, recording since we came up the stairs. Nothing we recorded would be proof, not in court, but I'd hoped we'd get something that would convince Rico to probe into Linden's past. That was shot now.

Then Caramel said, just before the door closed, "So you won't care if we take it to the cops." Something about the way she said it reminded me that she'd watched Tejorinin Yorl get cut up.

The door stopped swinging. Linden's face was framed in it, a porcelain face haloed in sunlight. "Why should I?" she said, sounding suddenly short of breath. I almost felt sorry for her.

"No reason." Caramel stroked the ring between her thumb and forefinger. "What do you think a wizard could learn from this? Betcha one could find its owner at least. Betcha we'd get a good reward."

Linden's lips pressed together, and she shook her head slightly. Silver strands of hair drifted freely, and I suddenly knew we'd won. She said, "What do you think you're doing? What do you want from me?"

I grinned at her. I doubt I could've put my whole face into it. Baring the teeth was probably enough.

"Do you want money?" she said quickly, her voice going up the scale. "Is that it? It is a nice ring." She reached for it, and Caramel stepped back. "I had nothing to do with it!" Linden cried. "Nothing!"

I nodded and looked at Caramel until she asked the obvious question: "Nothing to do with what?"

Linden stood in the doorway and stared as if she was seeing something besides us. Then she slammed the door.

Rico liked the impression ball. Linn preferred the ring—he coaxed all the magic out of it and found not just Linden-as-owner, but a little trick that made it seem that where the ring was, Linden was, too. Just in case somebody being led into an alley should need a little magical reassurance that this was a safe place to go. Combined with Caramel's statement, it made Linden look bad.

Rico looked for female members of the Yorl family. I had wondered why someone with a new inheritance would suddenly come to Bordertown, especially someone who seemed to despise B-town the way Yorl had seemed to. I expected that Yorl had a sister. Rico found that Yorl had a wife who had left him a couple of years before his mother died. Mom's death left him the head of the family and a rich guy. Now that he was dead too, the missing wife stood to inherit a nice piece of whatever it is that elves consider valuable, if only she would reappear in Faerie. There were no photos or fingerprints of this wife; elves don't photograph, and they don't seem fond of the latter. But, amusingly enough, her elvish name translated into English as Linden.

The rest was easy to put together. Yorl must have arrived inconveniently in B-town and insisted that Linden abandon the band and be a proper wife and lady because he had a position to uphold now. When Linden heard that the mom was dead, the temptation must have been too much. So the Rats came to Danceland to meet with her, and during the confusion between Yorl and Strider, she gave them their commission and the Yorl-decoy off her finger. Whose idea it was to do it in back of Danceland to frame Strider, we'll probably never know. Me, I bet Glasses thought the chance was too good to waste.

Today we all went to the Border to watch a couple of elvin Silver Suits escort Linden Yorl through the gate to Faerie. No matter what happened to her there, she wouldn't come through the Gate again. Rico told us that she was officially Not Welcome in Bordertown.

We dressed in our best, of course. Orient was up and around, maybe a little too pleased with the effect of his arm in a black sling. And Caramel stayed close to him; Tick-Tick thinks Orient doesn't need any more nursing, but Caramel is very protective of him still.

Linden saw us. We'd meant her to. I saw her give a quick look to Orient, but he didn't move an eyebrow.

As Linden went across the Border, Strider called out something in Elvish.

"What was that?" Sai asked him.

"Jealous, love? Never you mind."

But I know enough Elvish to recognize the proverb. At least, I'd always thought it was a proverb. Now I'm not sure. Loosely, it's "Love wealth above life itself, and starve in splendor." It might be a curse. My other suspicion I don't want to think about: that it might be part of Faene's penal code.

We went back to Danceland, Goldy made coffee, and Orient found Dancer's lost receipt book. And I wrote this.